

Our coastline is under attack! Subdivisions, reclamations, rubbish tips, sewage discharges, over-fishing, industrial and agricultural pollution — you name it and it's happening right now all along New Zealand's precious margins between land and sea.

Our coastal waters, the most biologically productive and diverse of ecosystems, are subject to rampant abuse and neglect.

Despite the damage done and the unabated continuing destruction, coastal management remains one of this country's most complex, confused, overlapping and ineffective sectors of government administration. There are more than 42 different acts of parliament covering foreshores and coastal waters.

In the words of 'Environmental Administration in New Zealand — An Alternative

Discussion Paper' (Group of Six, January 1985) —

'No other area of environmental planning is so complex or so ineffective under the present system . . . The whole field of coastal zone planning and management is crying out for rationalisation and effective co-ordination . . .'

The government agencies charged with managing foreshores and coastal waters have been inept and grossly devoid of commitment to the conservation ethic. It has been virtually open slather for the past 150 years.

Thankfully, change is in the wind.

Endangered phenomenon

New Zealand's coastline is one of the most beautiful in the world. It is a mecca for tourists and holidaymakers, and much loved by those who live there, especially in the northern part of the country. Public access to unspoiled beaches and bays is taken for granted.

Every year more and more of our finite coastal land is subdivided and built upon. Yet virgin coastline is an endangered phenomenon. That is happening despite a planning imperative that since 1953 has urged as a matter of national importance:

'The preservation of the natural character of the coastal environment and the margins of lakes and rivers and the protection of them from unnecessary subdivision and development' (section 3(1) (c) Town & Country Planning Act).'

The burgeoning tourist industry — a potential ally in the conservation cause — threatens in some areas to destroy the very qualities that attract tourists in the first place. In the Bay of Islands, where development-conservation tensions are greatest, there is no statutory planning, no attempt to establish what constitutes wise development. It is all systems go for all-comers!

Elsewhere, short-sighted local authorities, often assisted by a development-oriented Planning Tribunal and lured by the prospect of more rating income, pander to the ambitions of coastal developers. Their proposals are more sophisticated than the 1950s and 1960s when fibrolite batches sprang up in ribbon developments along easily accessible stretches of the coast. The new coastal subdivisions are for a wealthy elite — yet the effect is the same: virgin coastline contracting by the year.

The system, it seems, is incapable of saying no. This island nation is losing its unspoiled coastline.

Under the new environmental administration, marine mammals will be in the care of the Department of Conservation. Dusky dolphin, off Kaikoura. Photo: Martin Cawthorn

Below: New Zealand's unspoiled coastline needs to be zealously guarded if it is to remain pristine. Pohutukawa at Northland's Houhora, looking out to Rangaunu Bay. Photo: Gerard Hutching

