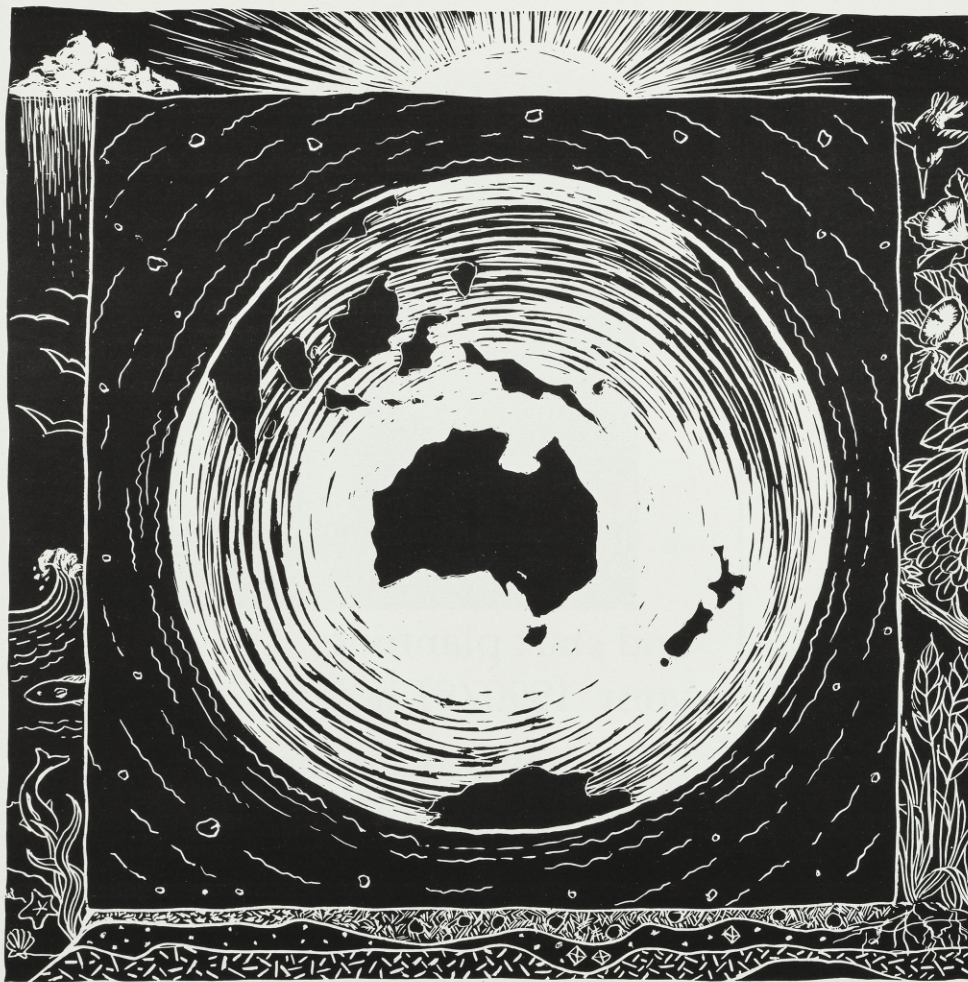


The brave new world of SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

By Gerard Hutching



Graphic: Ministry for the Environment

Around the world, many eyes of the conservation community are focusing on New Zealand. What is exciting their attention is the comprehensive reform of all laws governing land, air and water, a reform which has taken up much of the time of Ministry for the Environment staff over the last two years. Sustainability is widely viewed as the cornerstone of the new resource management law. But what is sustainability? How can it be put into effect? And will the new Resource Management Bill in its present form really protect the environment? Gerard Hutching reports.

AT THE BEGINNING OF 1989, Alan Miller from the Department of Conservation and Resource Studies of the University of California told a Ministry for the Environment seminar that New Zealand's attempt to establish in law the principle of sustainability "is utterly unique amongst the nations of the world." For that reason, he said, other countries were closely watching New Zealand's much vaunted legislation to see if it could give them a lead.

Spurred on by the deliberations of the Brundtland Commission which published the much heralded *Our Common Future*, governments around the globe are pondering on how to deal with what has been described as the ultimate crisis – the state of the world environment which threatens the continuation of life itself. The phrase the Brundtland Commission coined as the key to heading off ecological catastrophe – sustainable development – has become the environmental buzzword of the decade and generated heated debate over its meaning.

Sustainable Development – A Contradiction in Terms?

In an ecologically finite and entropy-bound world, belief in sustainable development has been likened to a belief in perpetual motion. Scientist and ecologist Paul Erlich has neatly summed up the blinkered vision of humans: "Economists are the only major group of scholars who believe in perpetual motion. They believe in an infinity of resources."

The Brundtland Commission's definition of sustainable development, more or less adopted in the Resource Management Bill, states:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

Or, in the words of a Canadian speaker at a recent conference in Ottawa, sustainable development means "do unto the next generation as you would have the past generation had done unto you."

According to the Brundtland Commission, then, growth will be sustainable only if it is environmentally sound. However the Brundtland Commission's recipe for raising the living standards of the Third World appears on the face of it to be a recipe for ecological disaster – a five to ten percent increase in world industrial output by the middle of the next century. In his call for an annual growth rate of 3 percent, Prime Minister Geoffrey Palmer is one world leader who appears to believe that growth does not conflict with environmental sustainability.

Professor of Urban Planning at the University of British Columbia, Bill Rees, points out that the Brundtland Commission's definition has become in some quarters a justification for the status quo. Business especially has seized upon the concept to continue the business as usual approach. The better notion, according to Lees, is "sustainable environment."

"It becomes a real question whether the ecosphere can sustain even a doubling of the current rates of economic activity. I really do not think that a five to ten fold increase in the rate of material consumption by a much more massively demanding economy is on the ecological cards," says Lees.