



Report 03.700
Date 17 November 2003
File ENV/08/01/01

Committee Environment Committee
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RMLA Conference: 9-11 October 2003

Councillors Turver and myself, together with Dr Bradbury, Nicola Shorten and Murray McLea represented Greater Wellington at the annual Resource Management Law Association (RMLA) Conference, held at the Marlborough Centre, Blenheim, from 9-11 October 2003.

The RMLA brings together resource management practitioners – lawyers, consultants, local and central government agencies, environment court judges and academics. It is an opportunity to interact with and learn first hand about other resource management perspectives and experiences. The theme this year was “Aqua Vitae: Water of Life”.

The conference took the form of a series of presentations from the podium, with a limited time for questions. This format relies heavily on the skill of the presenters and the magnetism of the topics. This year, presenter skill was variable and the overseas speakers provided the most thought provoking and in depth presentations.

The keynote speaker was Bjorn Lomborg, Associate Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Aarhus, Denmark. Lomborg challenges widely held beliefs that the global environment is progressively getting worse. Using statistical information from internationally recognised research institutes, he has examined a range of major environmental issues and states that the global environment has actually improved. He also criticises the way many environmental organisations make selective and misleading use of scientific data to influence decisions about the allocation of limited resources.

Many people in the scientific community and in environmental organisations have taken issue with his findings and in January 2003, the Danish Committee on Scientific Dishonesty found that his book *The Skeptical Environmentalist* was “systematically one-sided”, a claim that Lomborg has refuted. He has also received widespread support for his findings. Either way, I was very impressed with him as a speaker, and he gave us all something to talk about during the break!

Another speaker I was interested in was Kevin Goss, Deputy Chief Executive of the Murray-Darling Basin Commission in Australia. The Murray –Darling Basin covers one-seventh of Australia and the rivers flow across four state boundaries. For years, the economic benefits derived from the surface water resource have meant that over-allocation and environmental decline have generally been accepted. Today, key issues

for the Commission are returning water to the environment and clarifying water property rights through a cap on diversions, interstate water trade and a salinity management strategy.

Afternoons at the conference were taken up with workshops and field trips. Between us we tried to cover as many of the workshops as we could. The topics were:

- Landscape and the lifestyle leap (landscape)
- Viticulture and water use
- Ports and marinas
- Waterways and wetlands
- Aquaculture
- “Sounds Ethic” – the tension between development and preservation
- Oceans Policy

The conference touched on important topics relating to water but, on the whole, I felt that the issues could have been explored more fully. This could possibly have been done through workshops for information exchange rather than the field trips. While the field trips were very enjoyable, they were not necessarily learning experiences.

I understand that Nicola Shorten has copies of most of the conference papers if Councillors are interested in receiving copies.

Recommendation

That the Committee receive the report.

Report prepared by:

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