

Canterbury's water fight

“Water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink!” Coleridge’s Ancient Mariner certainly had a “water resource” problem - oceans of the stuff around him but none of it consumable!

The South Island’s most populated region, Canterbury, has a “water resource” issue too, but while the Ancient Mariner railed against God “that ever this should be”, Cantabrians have been falling out among themselves over their problem.

It is an internecine conflict of deep concern to Lincoln University’s Professor of Environmental Planning and Management, Ali Memon, who, over the past decade and a half, has watched with alarm the steadily mounting competition and conflict between different stakeholders for access to the region’s “scarce” water resource.

He reminds us that conflict over Canterbury’s “liquid gold” is an example of a “wicked problem with no easy solutions”. He warns that a “crisis is pending” in Canterbury if the current and expected growth in demand continues over the next few decades. He describes the problem as “acute” and says it will only be resolved through a “new approach capable of reframing stakeholder decisions in support of water resource sustainability for the long haul,” and through “engendering sustainable communities.”

Professor Memon and academic colleague, Professor Ed Weber of Washington State University, believe that only through collaborative governance of water resources can the crisis be averted. Professor Weber has examined similar water conflicts in the USA.

However, in reaching out for this goal they warn stakeholders to expect “intense ideological conflict” along the way. They also stress that it is important first to redesign processes of dialogue to develop an understanding of the origins of the positions held by the conflicting parties and to generate policies that address multiple concerns. Otherwise, a change in stakeholders’ deeply held core beliefs is unlikely.

Given the history of conflict, antagonism, misinformation and mistaken understandings about Canterbury’s water resource issue, how realistic is it to expect a move to collaborative governance of the resource and, furthermore, what is meant by the term “sustainable communities”?

Professors Memon and Weber say that



Rakaia River – a major Canterbury water resource.

by “sustainable communities” they mean an approach to governing in which economic vitality, ecological integrity, civic democracy and social well-being are all connected complementarily, thereby fostering a high quality of life and a strong sense of reciprocal obligation among members.

This approach to sustainability stands in contrast to the more traditional top-down, expert-led processes.

Collaboration barriers

“The road to collaborative governance and sustainable communities won’t be easy,” says Professor Memon. They identified five obstacles to collaboration in Canterbury.

1) Some stakeholders have little or no incentive to cooperate, much less cooperate for the sake of sustainability given the current global economic climate, the institutional inertia that

Professor Ali Memon says a shift in attitude is key to tackling the water issue.

works to reinforce the status quo slide towards unsustainable water use, and the fact that many do not know that widespread water resource scarcity is a problem.

2) Stakeholders and experts lack the scientific information necessary to develop an effective strategic, integrated water management system.

3) Stakeholders in Canterbury are currently operating in a low trust environment grounded in weak social capital.

4) The kind of leaders needed to move collaboration and, by extension sustainability, forward have not been in evidence, although this may now be changing.

5) The complexities and uncertainties associated with the incorporation of Maori customary water rights under the Treaty of Waitangi.

Overcoming the barriers

Before embarking on conclusions about whether or how the barriers to collaboration might be overcome, Professors Memon and Weber point out the serious hurdle of defining the problem. Defining water scarcity is not straight forward, they say. In Canterbury there is no broad appreciation of the idea that water is a scarce resource or that there is an impending crisis.

This is partly because the perception of the water “problem” across the region is unevenly distributed, they say. “What is a problem for some is not a problem for others.”

“A commonly held view is that water is plentiful in Canterbury, but it is simply in the wrong place at the wrong time!

“Christchurch’s main primary water supply comes out of the under-allocated Waimakariri River via groundwater while the rest of Canterbury, especially the vast rural areas, are tied to more stressed water supplies.

“This spatially uneven distribution of the problem only enhances the existing rural-urban conflict and ever-present distrust of many natural resource policies,” he says.

“The lack of consensus on problem definition means that any push to change the existing water resource allocation and management regime falls on some deaf ears.

“At the same time, the classic divide and lack of trust between government and citizens is alive and well in Canterbury. ECAN, the regional governing body, in coping over the years with trying to find a workable balance between environmental protection and economic growth, has earned the enmity of virtually all the major stakeholders, from environmentalists to farmers to developers. Many stakeholders see ECAN as representing the traditional hierarchical top-down approach that uses in-house expertise to decide matters and then tells people what to do.

“Equally there is distrust by many stakeholders of Federated Farmers and the aggressive, private property-rights rhetoric of the leadership of that organisation is seen by many as suggesting that no one else can be trusted to represent farmers’ interests effectively,” says Professor Memon.

However, Professors Memon and Weber suggest that this type of approach may be “wearing thin” inside many agricultural communities in Canterbury.

“Key stakeholders on all sides of the water issue sense that some rural landowners and farmers may be growing tired of such “overheated, unhelpful rhetoric” and are far less recalcitrant when it comes to working with others to resolve legitimate water resource issues.”

Attitudinal Shift

This emergent shift in attitude coincides with a trend in water resource management in New Zealand identified by Professors Memon and Weber as a “cautious move away from hierarchical, top-down, regional council directed decision processes, towards a collaborative governance approach of negotiation and problem solving.”

They refer to this as the **network model of water governance**.

They say that in this environment of incipient attitude change it is “imperative that a robust foundation should be laid to embed formal and informal collaborative practices in rural and natural resource governance institutions, such as ECAN, to sustain such collaborative efforts.”

The two professors make 16 suggestions on how barriers to collaboration might be overcome, but they warn that collaborative approaches are not “magic bullets.” They should be used appropriately and are not justified in situations where existing institutions are already adequate. The suggestions range from recommendations for increasing trust to ways of dealing with scientific uncertainty and they include -

- Improving trust and encouraging a culture of cooperation through focusing initially on important but non-controversial areas of engagement and information exchange.
- Monitoring progress towards social, economic and environmental goals by developing institutional milestones and measures.
- Not being afraid of intense ideological conflict. Handled strategically the conflict can be guided towards increased peer understanding.
- Engaging applied researchers with procedural and scientific expertise in the watershed collaboration process.
- Ensuring that the leaders of collaborative efforts fit desirable skill and ability sets to manage a multi-faceted, often difficult negotiating environment.

Summarising their position, the professors believe that too much reliance has been accorded by regional councils to formal hierarchical approaches to managing water, based on Resource Management Act plans and the related practice of allocating water on a first come, first served basis, as in the past.

Beating the ‘squeak’

The freedom and independence of office to prioritise and select projects that can significantly improve stewardship of the environment is a responsibility taken seriously by New Zealand’s Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Dr Jan Wright.

Delivering Lincoln University’s 10th annual State of the Nation’s Environment address on the campus this year, Dr Wright said that in a world of increasingly numerous environmental problems and issues it was essential to prioritise them for attention and the allocation of human and financial resources.

“The fundamental problem addressed by economists is the allocation of scarce resources. And our resources for addressing environmental problems are scarce. Dollars are scarce, technical capability is scarce, political will is scarce. All are limited.

“Environmental decision-makers need to understand that the dedication of resources to solving one environmental problem often takes away the opportunity to work on another and delays its solution.

“If we don’t prioritise consciously we will do it by default - and that is ‘squeaky wheel’ allocation,” she warned.

The Commissioner said that it was tempting to think that simply reporting on the state of the environment would do the prioritisation job; that measuring the state of the environment with a set of indicators would “rank our environmental problems and tells us where to focus our efforts.”

Dr Wright examined two high profile Canterbury environmental problems - water quality (specifically, excess nutrients) and air quality (specifically, particulate levels).

After analysis, she concluded that “If you ask me to rank these problems, I would - and do - rank the water problem far above the air problem.

“Although this doesn’t mean that I am saying nothing should have been done about air. And I am ranking the two problems from an environmental perspective not a health perspective.”

Dr Wright said that one of the key things she hoped to achieve during her term as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment was to help people understand the importance of getting beyond perceptions about the environment and “carefully and systematically prioritise our environmental challenges.” She said she wanted to get people thinking analytically and systematically.

