

THE PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT CONFERENCE— 1970

R. K. USMAR*

Foresters should derive both satisfaction and some uneasiness from the Physical Environment Conference, the Johnny-come-lately of the National Development Conference. The satisfaction comes from the recognition of the place of the physical environment as an accepted facet of this nation's development, and also, from the role played by the Forestry Development Council in leading the NDC into environmental aspects. Not only was the Forestry Development Conference the only sector of the NDC with a working party on the environment, but also the FDC Production Working Party strongly advocated an independent Land Use Commission, and this focused attention on the way in which the physical environment should be evaluated. Lest we be too smug, though, the FDC initially had to be convinced that aspects other than economics were important in creating the national forestry environment to which we aspire.

Foresters have long been concerned with managing and manipulating the rural environment and with evaluating and integrating biological, physical, economic, social and political facets of resource management. Our unease centres around the adroitness with which administrators with less ecological training have mounted the environmental band-wagon and taken over the reins.

At the Physical Environment Conference held in May 1970, 130 recommendations of the Physical Environment Committee were discussed; all but one were endorsed. Significant and worthwhile changes were made to many of the recommendations, despite the amount of work and the expertise of the working parties which formulated them. Predictably, there were clashes between administrators and the academics, most of which were worth while in clarifying that decisions must be made and that past decisions have not always been acceptable to many concerned with the environment. Absent from the Conference was the business orientation so prominent in the Forestry, Tourism and National Development Conferences which preceded it. Thus this Conference suffered in some degree from a shortage of decision-makers; the majority of those present were more at home in an advisory or watchdog role.

Because of the breadth, emotional connotation, or opacity of the concepts and issues under discussion, and a lack of basic information, there could be few clear-cut recommendations for immediate implementation. The general findings were that improvements could be made in most aspects of the "quality of life" without much difficulty. However, choices would have to be made between economic and environmental

*Principal Forester, N.Z. Forest Service, Wellington.

benefits, between private profit and public interest, and between higher levels of personal affluence and greater public expenditure. Sir Richard Wild, the Administrator, noted some salient points. First, as among the last nations to taste the fruits of marching civilization, New Zealanders still have a valuable time advantage to tackle the problem of preserving their natural environment. Secondly, we have a wide variety of official and private bodies and organizations whose general functions are germane to the management of the physical environment; in stressing the need for more co-ordination, he argued that too much initiative left to government, be it central or local, could result in technical effort being misplaced or wasted. Thirdly, he argued that legislation and regulations by central or local government need to be sufficiently comprehensive, and supported by appropriate legal sanctions for control. He pointed out that our pioneering forebears brought English common law to New Zealand, the keynote of which was the right of the individual — it contained no thought for posterity. Conversely, Sir Guy Powles later stressed that reference to the rights of the individual citizen in control of his environment had been noticeably lacking at the Conference. He argued consideration be given to statutory revision to give the citizen first a more direct representation on the bodies charged with protecting our environment, and secondly a simpler and more effective right to call public bodies to account before the courts. Thus the Conference, and its offspring the Environmental Council, will have to consider whether advisory or persuasive powers are enough.

A report by the Forest Service, endorsed by the Forestry Development Council, entitled "Conservation Policy and Practice", was prepared for the Conference. If the aim of this paper was to prove the responsible attitude shown by the Forest Service and its predecessors to conservation in the long term, then the objective was well achieved. This report highlighted the consistency with which conservation policies had been pursued for a century, the creation of a large exotic forest estate as a positive conservation measure, and the growing accent given to environmental forestry and broad aspects of forest land management. The lighthearted banter by the chairman of one forum about "this public relations job" perhaps emphasized that the Conference, and the Forest Service, would have benefited had the paper concluded with a hard-hitting statement of the Government's future policy and aspirations for conservation on forest land.

This review of the Conference purposely stresses rural aspects. However, a large section of the work of the Conference was devoted to the urban environment. This dichotomy, with cross-linking of urban and rural requirements, was good. Strength was given to the urban aspect by the amalgamation of the "Countryside in 1980" organization, sponsored by the Institution of Engineers, with the NDC framework to constitute the Physical Environment Committee. The "Countryside in 1980" Conference aimed at investigating the setting up of a national body for the care of the

environment. Through the fortunate timing and integration that has occurred there now exists an Environmental Council with wide representation from private enterprise, government departments and various administrative, advisory and parochial bodies. Quite divergent viewpoints emerged during the setting up of the Council before the decision was made that it would function under the aegis of the Ministry of Works.

What does all this mean to forestry? At best it is the recognition of the importance of the physical environment, and the role forestry has played in pointing out what needs to be done and, in many instances, with doing it. It means that many useful recommendations have been passed, and that a Council has been set up to implement them. It has resulted in the establishment of a Cabinet Committee for Environment. The areas on which we still need to be convinced are whether foresters have a large enough role in administering and making decisions about the environment; whether an advisory body without teeth will achieve its aims; and whether, as Lance McCaskill pointed out with telling effect at the first session of the NDC, the needs of the environment could be set aside by the more powerful interests concerned with production and progress.

The Council is made up of a lawyer, two accountants, a farmer, a palaeontologist, two local body chairmen, a geographer, a mining executive, a doctor, a land administrator, a university woman and a forester. Highly competent and respected though these people are in both their own fields and their interests, the overall dearth of ecological training is cause for unease. The Council is expected to make practical recommendations especially on broad environmental policy issues; therefore it needs a balance of lay opinion and technical knowledge with experience in environmental administration. The lack of adequate ecological and environmental administrative background will become even more marked if mooted attempts to unseat the forester, the sole ecological professional, are successful.