

One billion trees – the elephant in the room is a cow

Murray Parrish

Rotoroa Island in the Hauraki Gulf is being reforested at considerable cost to generous philanthropists. Native birds are returning, carbon is being mopped from the atmosphere, and the public has gained a valuable recreational asset. The environment is gaining because someone is willing to accept less than optimal financial return on investment. Prior to restoration, Rotoroa was a sanctuary for those with an alcohol addiction. In its past and current uses, Rotoroa is a metaphor for New Zealand's agrarian economy.

Are New Zealanders addicted to consumption? Like most things in life, consumption in moderation ranges from essential to desirable. In excess, consumption fuelled by borrowing from the bank and the planet is economic binge drinking and 'unsustainable'. Infinite economic expansion based on borrowing from a finite planet doesn't compute. An alcoholic's first step to recovery is admitting they have a problem. Public debate over the state of our waterways is an acknowledgement that there may be a problem with New Zealand's prevailing 'expanding agriculture' economic model and the regulatory framework that facilitates it.

That many of our waterways are 'munted' is beyond dispute, attested to in numerous scientific studies, Commissioner for the Environment reports and in legislation such as the Waikato Settlement Act. Increasing public commentary is that the 'she'll be right' management of land and water is a recipe for things continuing to go wrong. Most New Zealanders now accept that 'peak cow' is upon us, at least using farming systems that are fundamentally the same as those practised by our grandfathers. What may be less understood is how New Zealand's economic addiction to dairy is a problem for forestry and every other alternative land use. Forests are the 'unwilling enablers' that have allowed regulators and some in the dairy sector to ignore that 'we have a problem'.

Selective application of the RMA by regional councils is common. Some councils' regulatory premise is that the unacceptable adverse effect of non-point source nitrate discharged by a cow on land planted with trees becomes acceptable (permitted) when the cow is added to an existing herd. Such grandparenting of diffuse source nitrate pollution maintains and increases the capital land value of those who have done the least in terms of environmental management.

Climate change policy is similarly selective. Releasing carbon dioxide taken from the atmosphere by trees photosynthesising on land that was used for forestry before 31 December 1989 is deemed bad and is taxed. Carbon in this situation is a landowner liability and a cost of doing business. The same tree planted on land that wasn't in use for forestry on 31 December is deemed

a good thing and is rewarded. To add to the confusion, the contribution of greenhouse gas emissions from ruminating livestock is a significant cost to New Zealand taxpayers rather than the cow owner. A consequence of these arbitrary distinctions is seen in the price of land. The subsidy enjoyed by owners of cows is arguably artificially high returns. These translate into artificially higher prices for land where cows are a permitted use.

Costly regulations are imposed where the choice of land use has inadvertently generated valued biodiversity and improved water quality. Land uses without biodiversity and with diminished water quality escape sanction on the premise that regulations apply to maintain rather than improve the situation. The news that land use is differentially regulated against the interests of those using land less intensively, including for forestry, is not new. Economically rational landowners focused on return on investment will ensure the afforestation rates in New Zealand remain more or less zero, a figure attained in 2008 about the time the Climate Change Response Act came into effect.

Directly and indirectly taxing the provision of privately-generated public benefits leads to less of them. Current settings have achieved stagnant afforestation rates, declining water quality and illusory net greenhouse gas reduction goals for New Zealand.

What's the conclusion? The commitment shown by those responsible for restoring Rotoroa and many similar philanthropic and farm forestry projects serves as a reminder that 'grandfathered' land use patterns are not sacrosanct, whatever the prevailing political and regulatory predispositions. There are many examples of dairy management achieving good financial returns at significantly lower environmental cost. Those who have failed to materially reduce their impact on the environment have good practicable examples to follow, whether willingly or by regulation. The Government's coalition agreement includes commitments to address New Zealand's declining water quality, burgeoning greenhouse gas emissions and regional economic malaise. As such, it is a commitment to address the symptoms of New Zealanders' addiction to unregulated dairy sector expansion.

One definition of madness is doing the same thing while expecting a different outcome. So it is with traditional dairy farm management. Regulations based on past assumptions and practices being sacrosanct are no more justified than many of the other social and environmental assumptions that were the norm in our grandparent's time but considered entirely unacceptable today.

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