National Wetland Policies -- New Zealand

This reprint of the New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy, 1986, was scanned from a photocopy of the original, with permission from the New Zealand Department of Conservation. The Department of Conservation has asked that the following note be added: "As the first National Wetland Policy by a Contracting Party, this document is becoming outdated in terms of both the evolution of the Convention and the changes in legislation and governance structures in New Zealand during the past thirteen years. Accordingly, a stock-taking of implementation is currently under way, which may lead to a formal review of the policy."

New Zealand Wetlands Management Policy

Commission for the Environment

PO Box 10-241, Wellington

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Foreword

The wetlands of New Zealand have always been an important part of the New Zealand environment. It was around the coastal estuaries and lagoons that the earliest Maori settled and harvested the shellfish, fish and eels that abounded. It was from the flax swamps that material for weaving was collected and waterfowl snared. To the early Pakeha the swamp brought an export product - flax fibre stronger than any fibre yet in use in the world - to help establish the settlement on a firm economic footing. And it was the enormous flat swamplands that yielded fertile soil when drained, sustaining farmers and supporting sheep and dairy cows. Drainage became

a major cultural activity, like the bush clearance a symbol of the "great work" of turning New Zealand into an economically productive land.

Today, however, times have changed. With few of our lowland wetlands intact the many other uses are being recognised - habitats for rare plants and wildlife, landscapes in sharp contrast to the more uniform image of farmland, water storage systems and filtration plants for managing floods and water quality, recreational pursuits like hunting waterfowl and fishing.

But it is hard to reverse a trend. There is little legislation for protecting wetlands, and a lot of policy, equipment and expertise ready to facilitate destruction. The agencies of government responsible for wetlands are scattered so that a coordinated policy for protection is difficult to achieve. Information about wetlands is scattered and usually incomplete so that priorities for protection are difficult to recognise.

It is the extent of wetland depletion, the many positive values they have as intact ecosystems, the fragmented administration and conflicting policies, that have led the Government to ratify this New Zealand Wetlands Policy. It is a policy designed to show the way, rather than to specify particular actions. It foreshadows the establishment of the Department of Conservation which will clearly become the major advocate for wetland protection. Armed with this policy and WERI (the national wetlands inventory which will serve as the data base for the implementation of the policy), the new environmental administration will be in a position to foster the sensitive management of remaining wetlands: as beautiful, complex productive ecosystems, rich in unique plants and animals, rich in historical memory of how our culture developed. Just as the indigenous forest policy has served to enlighten and lead forest protection on crown lands, so will this Wetlands Policy help us find an ecological perspective for one of our most characteristic natural features.

Minister of Conservation **Minister for the Environment**

Wetlands Policy

In approving the policy, the Cabinet Policy Committee noted "*that the policy is intended to indicate that in broad terms the Government regards the protection of representative important wetlands as being desirable, rather than to bind the Government to any course of action or to justify restrictions on the actions of the private sector".*

The Policy

In the context of this policy, wetlands is:

> *A collective term for permanently or intermittently wet land, shallow water and land-water margins. Wetlands may be fresh, brackish or saline, and are characterised in their natural state by plants or animals that are adapted to living in wet conditions.*

One hundred and fifty years ago the wetlands of New Zealand were widespread. They supported very large populations of birds, a prolific range of plants, and were an integral part of the life cycle of many species of fresh and salt water fish. Like the indigenous forests and tussock grasslands, many wetlands were subsequently developed for productive economic uses.

The various wetland types in their wide range of location (mountain top to estuary, snowfield to mud pool, swamp to braided river) are valuable for many reasons. Hydrologically, they may assist in reducing floods, in maintaining minimum water flows and in recharging underground aquifers. Biologically, they are habitats for a wide array of fauna and flora, including some that are in danger of extinction. Economically, they are essential for some inland and offshore fisheries. Recreationally, they are enjoyed by many thousands of fishermen, shooters, naturalists and those engaged in other water sports. Educationally, they form excellent examples of the functioning of ecosystems and the study of biology. Scientifically, they offer a storehouse of information on climate, vegetation, vulcanology, archaeology and other events enabling a better ability to manage future events. Culturally, they are of great historic and current importance in Maoritanga. Scenically, the New Zealand landscape would be sadly depleted without them.

Because past and current development and modification of wetlands has greatly reduced their former extent, emphasis in wetland management has to be given to preservation, with development only when there is an overwhelming balance in its favour.

The need to preserve representative natural ecosystems already has public support and has been embodied in legislation.

Society's recognition of the need to preserve representative natural systems is embodied in international conventions and within legislation. New Zealand, as a signatory to the International Convention on Wetlands, shares the international concern for loss of wetlands as a habitat.

> *"Being convinced that wetlands constitute a resource of great economic, cultural, scientific and recreational value, the loss of which would be irreparable . . .* (Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. IUCN Bulletin April/June 1971.)

It is now accepted internationally as well as in New Zealand that there are values in wetlands that have been too often neglected in the past and lost through lack of appreciation and knowledge.

New Zealand as a society has expressed in legislation its desire to preserve representative samples of natural ecosystems (Reserves Act 1977).

Wetlands are a diverse group. Generally diminished, some kinds of wetlands are very scarce indeed. Immediate and continuing action is therefore necessary in order to protect them.

Wetlands are depleted. It is not only the overall quantity that has been reduced. There are many distinctly different types of wetland, all with their special values, and some are now scarce. Policies and management must recognise these differences both of scarcity and kind.

Wetlands continue to be modified. The Government is concerned that many of the rarest wetland types may be developed and lost.

Wetland management must consider causes and consequences beyond the wetland boundary.

Wetlands can be seen as distinct natural systems but are affected by and have effects on other systems. Management must go beyond the 'wet' land to encompass the greater system of which the wetland is a part. Such management may not necessarily mean reservation of the whole catchment, but particular care of sensitive areas.

The long term benefits lost by modifying wetlands frequently do not justify the short term benefits gained. The government must act as advocate for wetland preservation because of the less tangible benefits from unmodified wetlands which accrue to the general public. Government also has an important role in wetland management promoting research and fostering awareness of wetland values.

It may not be easy to identify and characterise some of the benefits that flow from wetlands. Such direct and indirect benefits tend not to be valued in monetary terms and may accrue to large numbers of people over a long time period.

For example, unmeasured hydrological benefits include protecting downstream water quality, preventing excess flooding, maintaining water flows in summer and recharging aquifers and maintaining water tables. By comparison, the benefits obtained from modifying a wetland tend to be more tangible (for example, revenue from grazing stock). As these usually flow to one definable group, modification often has a strong advocate.

As trustee of the public interest the Government has the responsibility to retain wetlands because of their *"economic, cultural, scientific and recreational value"* (IUCN).

The Government acknowledges its further role in the management, promotion, enhancement and creation of wetlands.

Wetland modification may cause irreversible changes. Such changes reduce choices available to future generations. This risk is heightened by the lack of knowledge about wetlands themselves as well as wetland catchment interactions.

Once a wetland has been significantly modified it can rarely if ever be returned to its original state. Some of the values lost may be irreplaceable. A wetland may contribute benefits that are not appreciated until they have gone. Possible future benefits may not be recognised at the time of development.

The Government acknowledges a responsibility to future generations. If more of our unique wetlands are irreplaceably lost, the quality of life available for future generations will be diminished.

Accordingly, this statement sets out Government policy as a guide to all agencies and individuals who manage and make decisions in relation to the use of wetlands throughout New Zealand. The provisions of this policy are to be reflected in local, regional and national policies and legislation that relate to wetlands and their management.

Objectives

1. **Preservation and Protection**

1.1 To act urgently to protect by reservation additional wetlands that fulfil the criteria of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) for Wetlands of International Importance.

1.2 To protect wetlands of national importance, and where appropriate, wetlands of regional and local importance.

1.3 To gain adequate permanent protection of representative examples of all types of wetland in private and public ownership. Priority will be given to preservation of the least modified and most ecologically viable examples of each kind.

1.4 To retain or re-establish wetlands significant for the protection or enhancement of aesthetic, scenic, recreational and tourism values.

1.5 To protect and manage habitats important for native flora and fauna, giving priority to rare and endangered species and habitats of importance to migratory bird species.

1.6 To protect, enhance, or re-establish wetlands and their access ways which are important for fish.

1.7 To promote the concept of managing all wetland catchments so that the complex relationships that exist within a wetland, and between a wetland and surrounding ecosystems, are taken into account.

1.8 To protect and manage wetlands that have an important hydrological role in such a way as to maintain or enhance that role.

2. **Wetlands Inventory**

2.1 To maintain an inventory of the most significant wetlands.

2.2 To link the national inventory for wetlands with other related government resource inventories to ensure optimal compatibility of the inventory.

3. **Public Awareness**

3.1 To promote public awareness of wetland values and encourage public participation in the planning and management of wetlands.

3.2 To preserve and enhance the opportunities afforded by wetlands for education, scientific study and recreation.

3.3 To promote the tourism and recreational potential of wetlands.