

Thank you for inviting me to speak, and thank you all for turning up in such good numbers. At last, the people have stirred.

I'm here because I'm deeply distressed by the way we continue to fail to properly carry out our obligations towards the natural world. As the great American conservationist and forester Aldo Leopold told his countrymen and women in the 1940s, we live in 'a community of interdependent parts', and we ought to 'Sing our love for and obligation to' the land. I'm sure Leopold was aware of what Chief Seattle said in a letter to the President of the United States in 1854: 'The shining water that moves in the streams and rivers is not just water but the blood of our ancestors.' We should all be saying this to our politicians.

Let me say a few words about where I come from. I was born in Dunedin in 1944. My brothers and I had the great good fortune to have parents who liked spending time in the outdoors and I grew to love the rivers, streams, mountains, forests and grasslands of the South Island. I fished, climbed, wandered, ruminated. It was often exhilarating. By the time I was 20 I thought, how lucky we are here; our's is a place as close to paradise as any left on earth. And I said to myself, Ah, given New Zealand's geographical location, its climate, its relatively small population when compared to other countries, we have a wonderful opportunity to learn from others and not engage in the sort of environmental misuse and desecration increasingly evident elsewhere. Surely, I said, we won't be that irresponsible, that stupid. Well, hello. If you'd have told me then, in 1964, that we would be in the position we are in today, would have been responsible for such thoughtless destruction, I would have said you were mad.

Of course there are some notable exceptions, thankfully, to the general trend, but they are too few.

One of the most distinctive and naturally appealing things about the south's landscapes is that they're not all an artificially-produced vivid green, and nor should they be. We don't have a God-given right, nor duty, to modify and convert everything in nature to suit our perceived present-day requirements. Which is why there's a desperate need to convince the wider public that watertight environmental protection is an urgent priority and a major long-term benefit, not a cost, to society as a whole.

Up until, say, around the mid-eighties, nearly all the rivers and streams between Dunedin and Christchurch were fairly clean and healthy; nearly all had a decent flow in them. But in the last 20 years especially, what has happened to the rivers and streams within, say, an hour's drive from Christchurch, is tragic and deeply wrong. It is wrong when opportunistic private interests in effect steal, or look to steal, what rightfully belongs to the public.

This whole developing affair – in effect a minority intent on thieving from the majority - would be farcical if it weren't so serious on several counts. Some things should be sacrosanct, Water Conservation Orders among them.

Why and how has all this happened? You can't say you weren't warned. You can say that some of those who drew attention to it, and objected, were labeled 'extremists', and still are. They're not extremists at all. The real extremists in our society are those whose practices have been responsible for New Zealand having one of the worst environmental records in the western world.

But why have we so relentlessly attacked nature, violated the body of the earth, and hence our own bodies? To answer that I ask that you consider what a retired principal judge of the Planning Tribunal, Arnold Turner, (no relation of mine), said in 1993. I quote: 'It is necessary for every community to have a common ethic governing its relationship with the natural world. If the community does not have a common environmental ethic, its debates about the environment will be reduced to a Darwinian struggle of special-interest groups, where power, not morality, rules.'

Precisely. This is what you've seen happen in Canterbury, a shonky 'Darwinian struggle of special-interest groups, where power, not morality, rules.'

Judge Turner was likely aware of the old Inuit credo: 'We do not inherit the earth from our fathers, we borrow it from our children.'

New Zealanders make the right noises, often, but as a country, as a people, we don't yet have a common environmental ethic. And that is a terrible pity.

We have to stop pretending that overall we have been, and still are, good stewards of our lands and waters. I often tell farmer friends of mine, what the writer and Kentucky farmer Wendell Berry said, which was, 'All good farmers are conservationists, and all farmers *ought* to be.' Of course Berry wasn't

thinking just of farmers, he meant we all ought to be.

This is what Bill McKibben was getting at when he spoke of the 'surpassing glory of our right habitation of a place.'

McKibben may have been alluding to a parable David Brower, the founder of the Sierra Club, often delivered. Brower would invite

'his listeners to consider the six days of Genesis as a figure of speech for what has in fact been four billion years. On this scale, a day equals something like six hundred and sixty-six million years, and thus "all day Monday until Tuesday noon, creation was busy getting the earth going." Life began Tuesday noon, and "the beautiful, organic wholeness of it" developed over the next four days. "At 4 p.m. Saturday, the big reptiles came on. Five hours later, when the redwoods appeared, there were no more big reptiles. At three minutes before midnight, man appeared. At one-fourth of a second before midnight, Christ arrived. At one-fortieth of a second before midnight, the Industrial Revolution began. We are surrounded with people who think that what we have been doing for that one-fortieth of a second can go on indefinitely. They are considered normal, but they are stark, raving mad."'

There's no escaping the fact that we keep using up our natural capital at an alarming and unsustainable rate. As Margaret Atwood said not long ago, 'Nature is calling in her debt.' It's as if we prefer to live with delusion. Do those behind the colossal Central Plains project honestly believe that a scheme that requires vast amounts of energy, huge amounts of water, and hefty applications of fertilizer, is really sustainable in the long-term? Don't they know what that does to the natural environment, to bio-diversity, to aquifers? These are costs that aren't factored in; they ought to be.

Again and again we're told that more dams and big irrigation schemes are necessary if we are to 'progress' and 'survive'. We're told about 'win-win situations' and that environmental effects will be 'less than minor'. About 'balanced development' and 'wise use' when in reality what we get, more often than not, is imbalance and misuse.

It's time to embrace what the philosopher Kathleen Dean Moore calls an 'ecological ethic of care' and stop continuing to see ourselves as 'apart from and superior to plants and animals.'

We would all do well to consider Jonathon Porritt's question, 'If people aren't getting any happier as they go on getting richer, why do we continue to trash the planet and turn people into consumptive zombies in pursuit of economic growth? There is a conspiracy of silence about all this which simply has to be broken.'

I'll finish with a short poem of mine from my most recent collection: it's called, simply, 'Sky'

*If the sky knew half
of what we're doing
down here*

*it would be stricken,
inconsolable,
and we would have*

nothing but rain

Now it's time for others to have their say.
Thank you for listening, for being here.
Fight for your rights, for nature's rights.
Fight with all your might.
Future generations will thank you
from the bottom of their hearts.

Brian Turner

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