

Statement/Submission by:

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To:

The Commissioners hearing the applications for 110 resource consents to take, use and discharge water, and to modify land use in the Upper Waitaki Catchment.

I wish to record my total objection to the proposed dairy and irrigation developments in the McKenzie Basin area for which resource consent applications have been lodged.

I am a proud South Islander. I have spent 35 years as a professional artist attempting to give some permanent form to my deep emotional connection to South Island landscapes, notably those of Central Otago and the Upper Waitaki/McKenzie basin. I believe I know these landscapes well, and know also of the capacity of these particular landscapes to hold significant meaning and resonance for many New Zealanders, and of their immense appeal to visitors to this magnificent Middle Island.

The Upper Waitaki- McKenzie Basin is a beautiful and unique region, unlike anywhere else in this nation. Nature has shaped and coloured this rain-shadowed basin over many thousands of years; its peculiar qualities have established and settled according to the dictates of weather and geomorphology. Man's tenuous occupation of this rare environment has only occurred within the last 150 years – a mere blink of time, a tiny fraction of the formative years to which this landscape has been witness.

I believe the land-use changes proposed and for which these consents are being sought are wholly inappropriate. They will be permanently detrimental to the special qualities of this landscape, and will further result in the loss of a priceless asset for the large majority of New Zealanders and those who visit this country,

in order that a very few private individuals may profit. The proposals are abhorrent to the values I hold dear, values which may not figure prominently in any cold cost/benefit analysis, because I believe strongly that certain essential elements are beyond superficial monetary valuations, and are therefore never factored into any such analyses. To pretend that they do not have any value, however, is totally mistaken: how does anyone put a dollar value on a view, an experience, an indelible memory?

I believe that landscapes have a power and a meaning far beyond any temporary economics. Landscapes, the natural theatres of our personal experiences and dramas, perform a symbolic and emotional function miles beyond their economic or geographical rationale.

It does not surprise me that I frequently hear people confessing – often with some bewilderment – that they “feel at home” in a particular landscape, for reasons they themselves cannot explain. And the number of times one hears this “feeling at home” and love of particular South Island landscapes expressed by those who have spent very little time amongst them, is, if I can employ the obvious pun, remarkable.

The experience of the McKenzie Basin/Upper Waitaki holds a particularly powerful grip on the imaginations, emotions and memories of untold numbers of New Zealanders and tourists alike. Being there is an experience incapable of replication anywhere else this country, and the world.

Why is it we so often cling to the significance of one special PLACE, one special spot, one particular view, and hold that to our hearts for comfort, for a clearer sense of “where we come from” and for confirmation of our identities? I believe that everyone has a deep secret spot, a special place, a landscape, which brings them a profound and mysterious contentment, whether they carry it only in their memories, or can access it frequently.

We seldom know why it contains such power over us – it is mystical and complex, and we sometimes only recognise its anchoring in our private depths when it is changed, spoiled, or ruined, and then the sense of affront and anger we feel gnaws away at us incessantly.

In short, we feel spiritually connected. The RMA reflects acceptance that this spiritual resonance is vital to Maori culture, and it is past time the law recognised it has a similar depth of meaning to Pakeha New Zealanders too.

This New Zealand was once, and still may be, best known for its magnificent variety of markedly differing landscapes, all packed into a land area half the size of France. We were once a magic little handbook of geographically separate and unique zones, perhaps unequalled on the planet.

That's why so many tourists come here: continental variety in a compact little cluster of islands.

But as we stand watching, the patchwork of colours and regional differences is dissolving into one: green is the proverbial colour of money, and it is the colour of what those in command believe to be progress, expressed primarily in the artificially irrigated and fertilised fields of pasture for the dairy industry.

What not so long ago was golden, or bleached brown, altering subtly with the seasonal extremes – and had been for thousands of years – is now too often, and too suddenly, a sickly, and I think finally unsustainable, year- round green.

That, to me, is not progress. That is a tragedy of shortsighted, misguided economics.

Commonsense tells me that there are parts of this country, which Nature decreed ought to be dry, ought to be golden, or yellow, or bleached brown. And of course, some parts are naturally green.

But to transform them into the same palette as the wet Waikato, or naturally damp Southland, is simply wrong, and no economics will persuade me otherwise. It offends me that such changes are happening in my lifetime, and that the only sound greeting those changes appears to be applause.

I resent the rapidity of that change, for I believe fast change is most likely to be bad, and I see these rapid transformations in the name of productivity and greater income as being both ruinous and unsustainable: if it takes persistent application of artificial fertilisers and water to be piped or hauled vast distances to encourage production, then the soils will not sustain it.

The changes to the face of this country in the few years since its settlement and arm-wrestle into submission have been rapid in anyone's language – especially

if one speaks the slow language of this planet's evolution. Many of those changes will be seen to be ultimately unsustainable with devastating consequences. Destruction is fast, the process of building is slow, and Nature is our witness to the truth of that.

If we are to preserve the unique landscapes we love, and which make us feel and understand the specialness of where we belong, we must begin to put a value on qualities and outcomes, which are not necessarily proven in monetary gain. There has to be acceptance of a concept of worth in terms, which are not just monetary, and somewhere along the line everyone has to accept that change personally, and concede to it with pride, and long view into the future.

The word "ownership" brings with it very dangerous implications: implications, for example, that the land is "ours" and we have a right to make it economic, to do better, or at least as well – financially – as our fathers. But we are not owners, any more than the purchaser of one of my paintings is an "owner": we are no more than caretakers, brief renters, and I believe we have no right to impose those rapid and too often destructive, artificially-sustained changes on landscapes which Nature has sculpted and coloured so slowly, and so appropriately, region by separate region.

I read a lovely piece recently about we humans, discussing the phenomenon that we alone amongst the species can contemplate our future, and have a concept of death. The beautiful statement was made that "life is a flicker of consciousness between two great silences."

Two great silences: we will not get out of this alive, of course. We are not owners: we are merely caretakers, and we must think far beyond the immediate gratification of the balance sheet, regardless of what shifts and upheavals that requires, and hold to a vision of we want our landscapes to mean and look like to our faraway, unknown descendants.

If they're anything like me, green will be but one of the colours in the vast palette, not the only desirable one.

The danger in the headlong stampede which regards every landscape, regardless of Nature's obvious intentions for it, to be transformed into something "economically viable", is that the unique, unusual and separate landscapes with

which we are singularly blessed in this country will all finally end up ploughed, tamed, artificially manicured, and, God forbid, GREEN. The rationale might well be economic viability, but that is an empty mantra in the long run: it is our acts which define us, not the cause we use as rationale, and our acts have the capacity to rapidly destroy what may have taken millennia to evolve and build.

Nature has made it abundantly clear that this semi-arid rain shadowed plain, with its tracery of rivers and unmodified glacial lakes is no place for industrial scale dairying, indeed no place for intensive farming of any variety. To attempt the domination of Nature is always a foolish conceit of human kind, and seldom succeeds: it is a brief triumph at best, then the consequences begin kicking in.

To allow these consents would be a tragic mistake, and would result in the irretrievable loss of a priceless landscape. Sometimes, real progress resides in the courage to refuse, and to defend against the insistent armies of inappropriate progress.

These industrial scale proposals are totally inappropriate for this magnificent region, and I ask that they be comprehensively rejected.

GCS