

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS: A SUCCESSFUL TWENTY-FIVE YEARS: WHAT NOW?

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As this is the year of our twenty-fifth anniversary, it seems appropriate that I should comment on the Society itself rather than on some aspects of the science it promotes. What I have to say is in four sections. The first is a brief reminder of the Society's objectives, the second traces how these objectives were pursued in the early and mid 1950s and in the mid 1970s, the third section examines a few current problems of policy and administration, and the fourth suggests how some of these problems might be alleviated. The historical section is heavily weighted towards periods when, as a member of the Council, I was closely associated with the Society's affairs; it does not purport to be a comprehensive review of what the Society has achieved in its first 25 years. To those who attended the Annual General Meeting and feel they have heard enough of the Society's domestic affairs, I am glad to say that following my address, there is another by Dr K. R. Allen, the Society's first president, and he covers some of the broader aspects of Ecology appropriate for an anniversary occasion.

(1) OBJECTIVES

The purpose of our Society is clearly stated in the resolution which brought it into being at a special meeting, presided over by Professor B. J. Marples, during the Science Congress in Christchurch in May 1951. It was moved by Mr (now Dr) K. R. Allen, and seconded by Professor V. J. Chapman "that a Society be formed for the promotion of the study of ecology in all its aspects", and this was carried. This simple and unrestrictive definition of what the Society's functions should be survives unchanged in our present rules, and long may it continue to do so.

One interpretation of how we should begin promoting the study of ecology is contained in the minutes of the provisional committee's first meeting which was held in the old Fisheries Laboratory in Wingfield Street, Wellington, on 3 August 1951, with Mr Allen in the chair. The minutes recorded that "it was generally felt that not only was the publication of papers presented at meetings of the Society impractical at present, but that it might be

undesirable, since it would tend to encourage the presentation only of finished work whereas the reporting of unfinished work which indicated the question but not the answer, might be more productive of vigorous discussion which should be the aim of the Society". What is perhaps substantially the same interpretation, but phrased in another way, appears in the account of the Society's first conference where it is stated that "One of the main objects of the Society is to promote a wider understanding among ecologists of the ideas and methods of workers in other branches of the subject".

Let us now consider how we have gone about "the promotion of the study of ecology in all its aspects".

(2) REVIEW OF ACTIVITIES

Within a year of being elected at the inaugural meeting in Christchurch in May 1951, the provisional committee, under the chairmanship of Mr Allen, not only formulated the rules which have served the Society so well for 25 years, but also began work on a register of ecologists, and organised a very successful conference. Despite the earlier reservations about publication, a full account of the proceedings of the first conference appeared in the June 1952 issue of *N.Z. Science Review*. The publication delay of about a month, and the price of 2/- per copy, appear very attractive compared to what we have come to regard as normal to-day.

In deference to the anniversary, it is perhaps appropriate to record that the provisional committee consisted of K. R. Allen, B. M. Bary, R. K. Dell, Miss V. Dellow, Miss L. B. Moore, S. H. Saxby and K. Wodzicki (*Minute Book*), and that the first officers and councillors, elected in May 1952, after the Society's rules had been adopted, were:

President: K. R. Allen.

Vice-Presidents: Miss L. B. Moore, Prof. V. J. Chapman.

Secretary-Treasurer: K. E. Lee.

Council: G. A. Knox, Prof. B. J. Marples, Dr R. V. Mirams, G. B. Rawlings, S. H. Saxby, J. S. Watson.

Hon. Auditor: Mrs R. M. Allen, A.R.A.N.Z.
(N.Z. Science Review 10 : 93)

The two days of the first conference were fully taken up by three symposia and an Annual General Meeting, but in the second conference (subsequently reported in the first volume of the Society's own Proceedings) the third symposium was replaced by an afternoon devoted to contributed papers on a variety of subjects, and there was also a field excursion. This combination of symposia, contributed papers, Annual General Meeting and field excursion set the pattern for future conferences.

A symposium on "the Western Taupo Project" at the first conference resulted in an instruction to the incoming Council to investigate the possibility of establishing "a biological reserve in the western Taupo Region", and this was the beginning of an interest in reserves, primarily for research purposes, that has continued to the present day. At the third conference, in Auckland in 1954, Miss Ruth Mason drew attention to the way in which land development was altering or destroying native vegetation of all kinds. She said there was little public interest in native vegetation except for the major forests and suggested that the Society should consider what could be done to obtain protection for representative areas of vegetation of all kinds. Dr (now Sir Robert) Falla then moved that a committee be set up to define such areas, and this motion was carried. In 1961, Mr Atkinson reported that, from information provided by members, it had been possible to draw up a tentative list of 36 native communities which would possibly disappear within ten years if no examples were preserved. This was perhaps the first occasion, apart from conference discussions, when the Society used its corporate capability to achieve something that individual ecologists could not do alone. (To digress for a moment, I understand from Dr Atkinson that at least 13 of these communities are now reserved, another ten are still under negotiation and the present status of the rest is unchanged or unknown; happily, as far as is known, none of the 36 communities has yet been lost.)

Before passing on to some of the activities that have occupied the Council during the past two years, I must mention two very important documents which were prepared under the Society's sponsorship in 1973, namely: L. F. Molloy's "A Critique of the Environmental Impact Report on the Proposed Utilization of South Island Beech Forests to the Officials Committee for the Environment (undated)" and R. A. Fordham and J. Ogden's "An Ecological Approach to New Zealand's Future" (published in 1974). Each of these documents has been widely commended and, seemingly, frequently used by

government agencies and the general public, though (understandably) the acclaim has not been universal.

During 1974-76, in addition to its traditional function of organising the annual conference and publishing its proceedings, the Council has attended to the Society's responsibilities as a member body of the Royal Society; it has also started a list of members' interests, maintained and promoted the register of ecological consultants and issued regular newsletters about the Society's affairs. Apart from these domestic and administrative functions, the Council has become involved during recent years in a seemingly ever-increasing number of outside activities, some strictly ecological and others rather less so. This involvement with environmental issues, and with the multiplicity of new organisations which promote them, is the most striking change in the Council's activities in recent years, or so it seemed to me when I rejoined the Council in 1974 after an absence of some ten years.

Conservation and population matters together occupied 31% of the Council's meeting time in 1971-72 and 40% in 1972-73. The time spent on such topics was not recorded during 1974-76 but they certainly occupied a very high proportion of the Council's time, both inside and outside meetings. The diversity of the environmental issues with which we were involved is indicated by the following list, which is by no means exhaustive:

- (i) Environmental Impact Report Procedures
- (ii) Population Matters
- (iii) Classification of Fresh Waters
- (iv) Nuclear Power
- (v) Forestry Development Conference
- (vi) Regional Forest Management Plans
- (vii) Logging in Okarito Forest
- (viii) South-east King Country Forest Plans
- (ix) Ultramafic areas of Western Otago
- (x) Upper Clutha Valley Development
- (xi) Wetlands of International Importance
- (xii) Reserve in Manawatu Sand Country
- (xiii) Harbours Act (planning procedures for selected areas below high water)
- (xiv) Historic Places Amendment Bill
- (xv) Forests Amendment Bill

(Details of these and other similar subjects are provided in the Society's newsletters.)

Individually, each of these activities seems to promote the study of ecology in that it helps to preserve plant and animal communities for future study, or it brings to the notice of administrators the relevance of ecology to the wise management of natural resources. Collectively, however, these increasingly numerous and diverse activities impose

a heavy work-load on the Council. In my view, our increasing involvement in environmental issues, commendable though this may seem, is leading to problems in the Society's management. Although we seem to have coped with these problems reasonably well so far, I think it might be useful to mention some of them so that they can be examined and any necessary action taken to cope with them.

(3) SOME PROBLEMS

One of the major problems facing us today is that the public, perhaps encouraged by the news media, has come to think of ecology as synonymous with conservation and the environmental lobby. Of course ecology has very major contributions to make to conservation, but so it has also to the growing of pine trees or the control of animals harmful to agriculture or public health or, for that matter, to almost any kind of management of living things.

Many environmental issues have *both* scientific and political aspects, and it is often difficult to preserve our reputation as a scientific society when our involvement in environmental issues so often aligns us with a wide range of other organisations some of which, however worthy their motives, are not primarily concerned with scientific issues. I fear that, increasingly, we are being regarded by the public, and by government officials, as "just another protest group", and that this will reduce the respect accorded to our Society and its views.

Another difficulty is that the Council meets only once a month, and its collective knowledge is of course very much less than that available from the membership as a whole. With environmental matters cropping up so frequently (e.g. environmental impact reports and audits) and often requiring urgent action, the Council is increasingly hard put to perform efficiently in this field. Many Council activities are possible only because we have enthusiastic Councillors, and also departmental and university chiefs who concede that some modest use of official time and equipment to help the Ecological Society is in the public interest (and of course it is!). I think it important, however, that we should keep this "invisible" aid to a modest level, otherwise the Society may become too dependent on the goodwill of some other organisation, or else its officers may be placed in the unfair position of imposing on their employers in order to do the job the Society expects of them. In the 1950s and early 1960s, Council business was comparatively modest and was dealt with fairly painlessly by evening meetings of Wellington Councillors; now we require a four hour afternoon meeting once a month, and out-of-town members manage to attend some of these despite

steeply increasing travel costs. Finally, I think pre-occupation with environmental issues leaves the Council too little time to organise research.

(4) SOME SUGGESTIONS

If it were thought that the Ecological Society should make better use of its corporate ability to collect information that individual members could not amass by themselves, what sort of information should be sought? The register of threatened plant communities, started by Dr Atkinson in the late 1950s, is a service which I think should have been maintained. Likewise, I regret that the proposal to compile a register of data about estuaries was allowed to lapse until it was taken up by Dr McLay with resources provided by Canterbury University (though subsequently Ecological Society contributed to the cost). Another useful activity might be to encourage the publication of brief accounts of significant local ecological events or, alternatively, to provide a documentation service for such events along the lines of the Smithsonian Institution's Centre for Short-lived Phenomena. Local surveys of threatened areas by multi-disciplinary teams of ecologists could also be sponsored by the Society for work in New Zealand and, conceivably, occasionally on off-lying islands or even further afield.

As you will have gathered from the paper on waders given by Mr Veitch at the Nelson Conference (and another at this conference) members of the Ornithological Society have amassed a great deal of information of value to conservation agencies, even though the Ornithological Society itself rarely becomes involved in the politics of bird protection. Indeed, until a few years ago, the Society's constitution specifically prohibited such involvement. Nevertheless the members, wearing other hats, frequently become deeply involved in conservation matters. It is sometimes said that the Ecological Society, with the high proportion of professional scientists in its membership, should not be compared with the Ornithological Society which consists mainly of amateurs (though most of New Zealand's professional ornithologists also belong). The implication of this difference in membership, I have been told, is that professional ecologists are less willing to pursue their science outside working hours. If there is any truth in this (and I doubt if there is much) then the sooner we get some more amateurs in the Ecological Society the better; we need more any way. The sponsoring of more field research by the Society, preferably on a local scale, might well attract more amateurs to join us. This would not only help our finances but also lead to a greater appreciation of ecology by the community at large. I do not

believe our discipline is so technical that there is no place for amateurs. Some of you may have seen, in *Environmental Pollution* (1974), K. Mellanby's account of a water pollution survey undertaken mainly by British school children. The survey was based on the presence or absence of a few easily identified indicator species, and Mellanby says that the results compare favourably with existing data professionally collected but give more details than had previously been recorded for many areas. Also the children, even the youngest, soon found the indicator species easy to identify and many appear to have developed a permanent interest in freshwater biology.

I do not suggest that the Ecological Society should abandon its efforts to ensure that ecological information is put to good use in selecting viable reserves and in wisely managing natural resources. I do question, however, whether we are right in devoting so much of our energy to promoting our views on conservation issues (commendable though this is) and so little to collecting new information (which is much more fun). I also question whether our present organisation, which depends so heavily on a national council, makes the best use of the Society's strength. It may be better to establish more regional groups, like the present Canterbury one, and to give them responsibility for investigating local issues and,

where necessary, for taking prompt action, preferably in the name of an individual ecologist. Personal statements by one or two knowledgeable people can be more convincing than a corporate opinion, which is sometimes merely an emasculated, anonymous and delayed version of the same statements. It is to be expected that individual scientists will not always agree on the facts or their interpretation, and here the Society can be useful in promoting debate as it did with the beech forest issue (*Proceedings* Vol. 21).

If the Council were relieved of most of its "fire-fighting" activities in the environmental field (a function which it is ill-designed to perform) it could concentrate more on managing the Society's domestic affairs (particularly the organising of conferences, which has been one of its most productive activities) and in making a thorough study of one or two carefully selected issues of national importance. The Society has done just this in the case of the beech forest critique and symposium and, more recently, with its sustained interest in population matters. My concern is that worthwhile projects of this kind will suffer unless our increasing involvement in a multiplicity of environmental issues is not checked. In conclusion, despite my critical (but I hope constructive) remarks, I must say that I am proud to belong to a Society that has achieved so much in 25 years—may the next 25 be as fruitful.