

# RESTORING THE BALANCE – WHOSE BALANCE IS IT?

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**Abstract** -As Christchurch City deals with strong development pressures, the impacts of urban growth on indigenous and European heritage is coming under intense public scrutiny. Planning strategies promoting urban consolidation are eroding the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century heritage values of inner city and suburban neighbourhoods. At the same time, there are signs of resurgence in re-establishing indigenous cultural landscapes, reflecting perhaps a legislative mandate that promotes biodiversity, natural resource management and the Treaty of Waitangi. In Christchurch, this is causing some concern to those who support the City's English 'Garden City' image. There is ongoing debate around the appropriate balance between highly ordered tidy landscapes and those linked with spiritual and cultural values associated with indigenous biodiversity. This paper explains how Christchurch is striving to accommodate these contrasting values within a growth management context. Using the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy as a case study, it concludes that, with detailed implementation plans and effective community engagement, the desired outcomes can be achieved.

**Key Words:** Urban growth management, balance, biodiversity, indigenous cultural landscapes, European heritage, natural heritage, cultural heritage.

## 1. Introduction

Christchurch has been known as the Garden City since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The historic connection is undeniable, and goes beyond the quintessential English image promoted to visitors. It is known as a most English looking city with a defined grid pattern of development, definite seasons and most exotic species, introduced from the northern hemisphere and particularly Europe, do extremely well.

The last decade has brought about a deeper understanding of the uniqueness of New Zealand's indigenous biodiversity and landscape. It has also brought about greater appreciation of Maori cultural values and their places of current and historic importance. Much of this change has been shaped by local government taking into account the values of manawhenua in planning and policy development. More collaborative processes have helped Tangata Whenua to manage their Treaty of Waitangi responsibilities and protect the indigenous cultural landscapes.

The City's uniqueness comes from the topography and hydrology, combined with planting that has blended exotic with natives species. Many people continue to express that it is this blend, the balance between indigenous and introduced that makes Christchurch special. But what exactly is the framework the City is working toward to achieve this balance: the need to retain the Garden City image while at the same time ensuring the protection and restoration of cultural and natural heritage?

### The Right Balance for Christchurch

In 1850, 161 ha or 500 acres were set aside for a vast central park, Hagley Park. The first trees planted there in 1863 were oaks, limes, and chestnuts. Today Christchurch City has around 670 parks for the 340,000 population and about 15% of the city's area is devoted to open space giving the people of Christchurch that Garden City feel. The City also has traditional boulevards of tall exotic trees and the Avon River flowing through the centre of the city is lined with willow poplars chestnut and other non-native species. The Botanic Gardens and areas near Hagley Park and the Avon River have clusters of daffodil and other colourful annual plantings.

Christchurch has a special place in preserving New Zealand's natural heritage. Christchurch is a water city, the wetland capital of New Zealand. The City is built on a low lying coastal system flanked by Banks Peninsula, two ancient volcanos to the east and an alluvial plain leading to the southern alps in the west. Movement of the braided Waimakariri River across to where the City is today has dominated the shape of the landscape leaving large freshwater and saltwater wetlands, small meandering waterways, sand dunes and old gravel beds. Around Christchurch can be found one of richest diversity of birdlife in New Zealand. Many are endemic species found no where else in the world. But loss of habitat, predation and competition by introduced predators has left this indigenous biodiversity in severe decline.

Wetlands, once a dominant feature of the Christchurch area, have been extensively modified through farming and urbanisation. Maps from the 1860's show extensive areas of wetland with very limited areas of forest left as small remnants. In the late 1800's Hagley Park contained large numbers of indigenous species but by the 1920's these had been drastically reduced and only a few native species exist there today, most of which are along the banks of the Avon River.

The importance of the water element is not well emphasised in the traditional or more common description of the City. The meandering form of waterways contrast with the grid like pattern of the Central City streets. However, many of the City waterways were considered nuisances and were drained or put into box channels. Over the last decade a considerable change has been initiated. Waterways are being returned from these boxed service drains and channels to their natural form and function. Today, the City is characterised by 360 kms of open waterways and over 50 wetlands.

The issue of place is important for the people of Christchurch. Community consultation carried out by Council continues to reflect the significance of the Garden City image. A survey in 2002 of 2000 households found 89% highlighted the value of the Garden City image. Many thought this is what makes Christchurch unique. A significant proportion said they think visitors identify with it and, for that reason, it helps to reflect community pride. A strong voice for protecting and enhancing the indigenous ecosystems while not losing the Garden City image for the Garden City also came through in recent community consultation completed for the Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy, one of the most successful consultation process ever held by Council.

The built environment of the Central City and surrounding suburbs is lastingly shaped by European settlement. The street and roading patterns, Hagley Park, the Botanical Gardens and smaller parks, historic buildings and the large tree lined streets that cross it are unlikely to change and this part of the City will remain true to its English heritage. However, there are opportunities to look to other parts of the City to strengthen the City's indigenous cultural and natural heritage.

### **The Overarching Policy Framework.**

The Greater Christchurch Urban Development Strategy (UDS) adopted in June 2007 provides the policy framework. The Canterbury Regional Council (Environment Canterbury), Christchurch City Council, Selwyn and Waimakariri District Councils and the central government agency Transit New Zealand came together as partners to agree and sign off a vision for Greater Christchurch. This vision covers all aspects of life for Greater Christchurch including the environment, the economy, integrating transport and infrastructure, health, education, housing, and significantly culture and heritage. It is a collaborative project that provides a long-term outlook to 2041. For Christchurch City it specifies a framework for achieving sustainable urban growth through the intensification of development, establishing an urban limit while providing high quality living environments. The UDS was developed through a collaborative process between the partners and the community of Greater Christchurch.

While the UDS signifies change for future growth management it also respects what people have said they would like to see retained. During the development of the UDS, the community were asked for their view on four potential growth options. The vast majority chose the most consolidated urban form. At the same time they also made clear what was important to them. These included the retention of rural amenity, that is, still being able to close to the rural land that surrounds the city, protecting water quality and the waterways, having more transport options and importantly protecting and enhancing the indigenous ecosystems while not losing the Garden City image. Many viewed more compact urban growth as the most effective means to protect those features of the city they value.

With adoption of the Strategy the emphasis has now shifted from consultation and development to implementation. Each of the partner councils are working towards implementing their identified actions of the Strategy's 182 actions, 20 of which are a priority. The UDS identifies the South West of the City as a significant greenfield growth area. For Christchurch City completing the South West Area Plan is a priority action.

### **The South West Area Plan**

The South West Area Plan (SWAP) will be a key mechanism for implementing the UDS. The SWAP sets the framework for sustainable land use and development for the largest greenfield growth area in Christchurch. The area plan was prepared through extensive consultation with the community and stakeholders and with active engagement with land owners and developers, current residents, government agencies and business and local community groups.

The South West of Christchurch has a current resident population of around 35,000 or 13,000 households. Over the next 35 years growth it is expected to accommodate around another 12,000 new houses and approximately 200 hectares of industrial development. The SWAP provides the framework for land use planning, the provision of infrastructure and open space, and reflects how the community wants the area to develop. It aims to ensure all growth is integrated and completed collaboratively while maintaining the intrinsic values of the area. To do this the Area Plan establishes a vision for the South West that is underpinned by three main principles:

- § Environmental sustainability - air, soil and water quality; biodiversity; resource use efficiency; energy-efficient infrastructure and buildings; and waste minimisation.
- § Liveability amenity - aesthetics, spaciousness; a sense of place; strong community networks; health and safety; access to community facilities, services and infrastructure, and
- § Competitiveness - the effective use of land for business and economic development with cost effective services and infrastructure.

The management of natural resources in the South West must also take into account the partnership, relationship and principles of the Treaty of Waitangi and other statutory requirements. Ngai Tahu are the Tangata Whenua of the South Island, with Ngai Tu Ahuriri

Runanga holding manawhenua within the Christchurch City area. Beyond statutory obligations there are policy and resource management documents such as Te Whakatau Kaupapa, Ngai Tahu's resource management strategy. For Ngai Tahu issues of greatest significance to the South West are around land use change, rural land use, forests and fishing.

The South West of Christchurch is of historic and contemporary importance to Ngai Tahu. Prior to European settlement, Ngai Tahu and before them Ngati Mamoe and Waitaha maintained both permanent and temporary habitation sites there. Maori were offered ready access to waterways with an abundance of swamp vegetation and salt and fresh water fishing. The development of their settlement patterns was closely related to these resources. Natural resources are *taonga*, highly prized treasures that maintain and sustain life. Ngai Tahu consider it impossible to separate one resource from another. The concept of ecological connectivity *From the Mountains to the Sea* reflects the holistic approach taken by Tangata Whenua towards protecting natural resources.

The European history of the South West is dominated by farming, the extraction and manufacture of primary products, industrial activity and the people who lived and worked there from the early European settlement in the 1850's. By this time almost all land in this area had been bought by settlers for large sheep runs. They drained the swampy land and established themselves on the slightly raised levees to provide some protection from floods. Current land-uses range from farms and quiet residential enclaves to major industrial and commercial sites. There are still large properties with interesting European histories and unique landuses, two examples are the former Wigram Aerodrome and the Canterbury Agricultural Park.

### **What can the South West Area Plan do?**

As the South West becomes increasingly urban more effort is required to emphasise the natural values. Urban planners and natural resource managers are looking for ways to protect and enhance natural water systems within these urban developments. Developing a vision that includes reconciling the range of values associated with cultural and natural heritage is essential. It is central to fulfilling the principles of environmental sustainability.

The primary aim of the SWAP is to use special landscape features and waterways as a means of restoring the balance. The City seeks to make waterways and wetlands more prominent features in the landscape by exposing and restoring their special qualities and by developing a management approach that builds on local and city identity. The aim is to provide the people of the South West with a greater 'sense of place'.

Because Christchurch is wet, stormwater management becomes a complex management issue. Integrating stormwater treatment and capture into the landscape incorporates multiple uses and retrieves multiple benefits. Improved water quality and mitigation of flooding hazard, protecting and restoring habitats lost, providing open public space and recreation as well as visual amenity for the residents of the South West are all benefits. In doing this, the South West will also provide its own particular character.

The vision for the South West is to accommodate the new 12,000 households and supporting high quality business environment through new neighbourhoods that are developed around an extensive open space network built on the existing natural values. Restoring natural habitats and Tangata Whenua values and incorporating landscape features and European heritage into development and public open space will help to celebrate the uniqueness of the area. The first tier of goals are around water and restoring and enhancing cultural values. This is unusual for such a plan where the focus is more often primarily around people or the built environment.

To illustrate, five of the first 13 goals of the SWAP are dedicated to water and cultural heritage. These are to:

1. Provide a high quality naturalised water environment connected across the south west
2. Establish a variety of indigenous forest and wetland habitats connected by ecological corridors
3. Incorporate local landscape features into urban development and public open space to maintain landscape character
4. Actively protect and restore values significant to Tangata Whenua both historic and contemporary
5. Conserve and protect European cultural heritage values

Using Goal 4 as an example, opportunities exist across the South West to reinforce and re-establish historic and contemporary connections with the land and taonga. Recognising and incorporating Tangata Whenua values into future development will strengthen cultural identity and wellbeing. Active protection, restoration and interpretation of cultural values requires an ongoing and healthy relationship between local hapu and runanga, the Council, land developers and the local community to achieve tangible outcomes. Mechanisms will include:

- § Restoring water quality and improving natural habitats that allows the practice of mahinga kai, traditional food gathering, as well the recognition and valuing of sacred sites. Mahinga kai is of paramount importance being a cornerstone of the spiritual historical cultural social and economic well being of Ngai Tahu.
- § Representing historic and contemporary Maori culture in building design, and artwork and furniture in public open space, particularly using sites of cultural significance, for example, Owaka located in the area now known as Wigram. It was named after a sacred food canoe and also contains a remnant shrine of the hapu of the nation of Waitaha. It is a fundamental link between the headwaters of the Heathcote River Omokihī and the Halswell River.

- § Using appropriate Maori names and associations for places, streets, and parks to protect and recognise traditional places and place names particularly acknowledging those areas of traditional use and significance.

South West Christchurch is an area of cultural and historical significance to Tangata Whenua. These associations remain important and form a central part of ongoing cultural identity and wellbeing. Christchurch City through the SWAP is working towards redressing some of the imbalance of the previous 150 years.

### **Conclusion**

Christchurch City combines European traditions of garden design with the informality of natural environments. In recent years, the Garden City image has come under increasing pressure through urban consolidation. Loss of large private gardens and large mainly exotic trees from infill housing has not been compensated for by a similar increase in public open space. Protection and enhancement of our valuable natural environments particularly waterways and wetlands will become increasingly important if Christchurch is to retain its Garden City appeal.

The Garden City image to some extent undersells the dynamic landscape and diversity of what Christchurch has to offer. And there is significant potential economic benefit that could arise from this. Indigenous planting has a very important place within the garden city concept and in providing a sense of local identity.

While the current tourism brand for Christchurch is the Garden City it is just one of the many attractions that makes Christchurch a popular place to visit and live. The Garden City encapsulates only one of the many positive aspects of life in Christchurch. Christchurch provides a unique variety of living opportunities from plains, to seaside, hills, estuary and central city. The South West will provide a unique opportunity to live within an area that respects the indigenous flora and fauna as well as Maori and European heritage values while at the same time is still a part of the Garden City setting. Turning the vision for the South West into a reality nonetheless will be a complex task.

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