

ROD
ORAM

rod.oram@nz2050.com

Reviving our regions

The quest to develop our rural growth in uniquely Kiwi ways has a distinctive scientific flavour.

IF YOU stroll down Whanganui's Victoria Avenue around eight o'clock on school mornings you'll see kids glide by on bikes, scooters and skateboards.

An idyllic scene from provincial life? Yes. But also rather worrying. With no vehicles around, they tend to travel down the middle of the road. Business stirs a little later on this, the town's main street.

Like many other towns around the country, Whanganui has abundant lifestyle but struggles to build its economic base. It was one of three regions that barely achieved jobs' growth over the past 10 years, according to a recent government study.

Half a dozen other regions of the 16 around the country achieved just over 1 per cent growth, and the balance better than that. But hard graft is the clear message from the 2014 Regional Economic Activity Report from the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, available at bit.ly/NZregions.

Are there new and better ways to spur local growth? Yes, Whanganui believes, which is why it was very happy to host an unconventional economic conference devised largely by scientists.

The origins lay in the work of Sir Paul Callaghan, the founder of the MacDiarmid Institute for Advanced Materials and Nanotechnology at Victoria University, who turned to economics to try to understand how New Zealand might progress. He presented a very challenging view on how we could transform our economy in his 2009 book *Wool to Weta*.

To explore how we could draw on science, our culture and environment to make New Zealand a "place where talent wants to live", Callaghan worked with the Royal Society of New Zealand on planning the Transit of Venus conference in 2012.

The dual purpose was to commemorate Captain James



Awakening: Victoria Avenue, the main street of Whanganui, is a quiet place at 8am.

Photo: Phil Reid/Fairfax NZ

Cook's first visit to New Zealand in 1769. Fresh from observing in Tahiti the planet's transit across the sun, he exchanged scientific and cultural knowledge with Maori in Tolaga Bay; and to examine how those scientific and cultural roots could enliven our progress today.

Very sadly, Callaghan died at only 64 years old, just two months before the conference. But his ideas and spirit suffused the event in Gisborne and Tolaga Bay. Some remarkable collaborations resulted, such as the Uawanui Project, a partnership between the community of Uawa/Tolaga Bay and the Allan Wilson Centre at Massey University.

One of seven Centres of Research Excellence in the country, its focus is molecular ecology and evolution. Its mission is "securing the future of New Zealand's biodiversity and improving human and environmental health".

Uawanui is a community-driven, science-backed programme for ecological, economic and social restoration in the community. It has deep history too. Some of the seeds for replantings have come from the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew in London. They were from plants descended from the ones Cook's botanist, Joseph Banks, had brought back from Tolaga Bay almost 250 years before.

Last year, the MacDiarmid Institute and Royal Society hosted a second conference, "Valuing Nature, to advance the themes of science, ecology and culture".

This year in Whanganui, the title was "A Place to Live: for the life

worth having".

The location had particular significance. In August, the Crown signed a deed of settlement with Whanganui River iwi, which gave the river itself a legal identity, with legal standing, rights and an independent voice. This gives expression to Maori beliefs that the river is a living entity from source to sea, with their health inextricably linked with its.

While such legal concepts and cultural beliefs might be challenging to many people, they are part of a worldwide search for better ways for us to understand, live and work with the ecosystem on which our physical, economic and spiritual wellbeing depend.

To explain the settlement and its historic significance, and to kick off the conference, Dame Anne Salmond gave the fourth and last of her Royal Society 2014 Rutherford Lectures entitled "Give me the water of life". Details of the lectures are here bit.ly/Rutherford2014. Radio NZ is broadcasting them at 4pm on the four Sundays in December.

Given every enterprise needs natural resources, business leaders are starting to learn how to apply ecosystem disciplines in their companies. Major multinationals such as Unilever, Puma and other members of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development are at the forefront, details at <http://bit.ly/bizecosystem>.

The business leaders in New Zealand on ecosystem services are the Sustainable Business Council,

part of Business New Zealand (bit.ly/SBCecosystems), and the Sustainable Business Network (bit.ly/SBNecosystems).

Our sense as a nation of the importance of our ecosystem was strongly affirmed with a rare accolade New Zealand won earlier this year. We were judged number one in the Social Progress/Life Quality Index, a comprehensive global analysis led by Professor Michael Porter of Harvard Business School.

A couple of dozen countries ranked higher than us in GDP per capita terms. But we outscored them in aggregate on social and environmental measures despite our poor performance on some of the 54 indicators such as high obesity and suicide rates.

Damningly, though, we ranked only 32nd out of 130 countries on ecosystem sustainability. In other words, we're flogging our natural resources to try to maintain our current economic performance.

How we can enhance our ecosystem and our economic and social performance was very much on the minds of the conference delegates in Whanganui this past week. Business and community leaders, local politicians and scientists, youth leaders and activists shared their knowledge and ambitions. In due course, you'll find their presentations at aplacetolive.org.nz.

The Predator Free New Zealand Trust unveiled the biggest goal of all. It presented its vision, and the first steps, to eradicate rats, possums and other pests that destroy native flora and fauna. Realising this was perhaps the greatest scientific, economic and social challenge we could set ourselves, and was Callaghan's last and biggest contribution to our national debate.

Of course it's about much more than the predators. It's about how we develop our natural and human capital in uniquely Kiwi ways. Then we will have distinctive scientific, economic, and culture wealth to offer the world.

This is the only way that we can turn things around so we make globalisation work for us. Currently its benefits often come at a cost to our economy, our communities and our ecosystem. Around the country, we're beginning to understand how to develop ourselves in very much better ways.

“Our sense as a nation of the importance of our ecosystem was strongly affirmed with a rare accolade New Zealand won earlier this year.”

Inside **CAREER MARKET** : Job Opportunities Nationwide

One of New Zealand's most experienced Executive Search and Recruitment teams, providing national coverage.

See D7, or our website for further information.

JacksonStone
& PARTNERS

04 550 8000

www.jacksonstone.co.nz