



19 November 2005

By Owen McShane

The New Zealand Centre for Political Debate

Getting in the Way

The most ubiquitous way government “gets in the way” of private conservation activity is through perverse implementation of the RMA.

The Smart Growth pandemic is now infecting more and more district and regional plans. This pernicious anti-environmental planning theory encourages “intensification” or urban land behind an urban fence, and protects “productive farmland” from small farming and rural residential development.

Smart Growth’s high density urban housing leaves no room for gardens or large trees and hence is antithetical to the biodiversity objectives of the RMA. Similarly large-scale “productive farming” is dominated by monocultural pasture or forestry. Conversely suburban or rural-residential gardens are modles of biodiversity. Smart Growth thrives on dense thinking.

Planners also discourage conservation objectives by writing so-called “tree protection” rules into their plans.

They begin by assuming that New Zealanders wake up every morning determined to cut down every tree in sight. Hence they produce plans which require resource consents to prune or cut down trees. The reality is that New Zealanders are planting trees in huge numbers most of which are

natives. That’s why native plant nurseries are booming. The planners compound their error by writing rules that say you must apply for a resource consent to prune a native tree once it is say three metres tall, but exotic trees remain immune until they are six metres tall.

Naturally, people respond by planting exotic trees. They make sure any existing native trees never grow taller than three metres by topping them at regular intervals. Or they rip them up.

One reason I chose to migrate from Waitakere City to Kaipara District was the absence of any such tree clearance rules. Hence, we have been able to plant over 80,000 trees and plants on our property without worrying about a future dominated by applications for resource consents. When council proposed a rule granting protection to pohutukawa trees on private land I advised that I had cancelled an order for 200 pohutukawa in favour of 200 Chinese poplars.

Council withdrew the proposal.

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