

June 2010

ISSN 2070-4593

EARTH CONSCIOUS





Planning scenarios help West African fisheries adapt to climate change...

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EARTH CONSCIOUS

is published by:

Caribbean PR Agency

#268 Harold Fraser Circular, Valsayn, Trinidad and Tobago, W.I.

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www.earthconsciousmagazine.com

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ON OUR COVER

Magical Mountains of "Middle Earth" at Milford Sound in New Zealand's Fiordland National Park.

Photo by Mark Meredith.

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Bajan woman - CARICOM's top nominee for the UNFCCC Executive Secretary position ...

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Photo: Mark Meredith

Sheep station, Mt Aspiring National Park in the South Island.

THEY SAY “MINE”, WE SAY “OURS”

By Mark Meredith

Mark Meredith spies Orcs on the horizon in the land of plenty that is Middle Earth, foes he hopes true Kiwis will see off on their own. Trinidad and Tobago, on the other hand, needs Gandalf the Wizard and some heroes.

In 2003 we lived in Trinidad, in the Port of Spain suburb of Cascade in what used to be a forested valley just off the Queen's Park Savannah. That year, just like this year, fires blackened the mountainsides around us and the air hung smoky and heavy for months.

The day after crowds in Baghdad tore down Saddam's statue, we flew out of Trinidad – and the smoke that seemed to belong in Iraq – for a three-week scout of New Zealand, as somewhere we might move to.

The Fellowship of the Ring was in the cinemas. *Middle Earth* was played by New Zealand. Our journey was like *Lord of the Rings* in reverse: leaving the wasteland of *Mordor* for the green pastures and promise of *The Shire*.

Like desperate *Hobbits*, we wanted to escape the wars in Trinidad and Tobago: the one being waged on citizens like us by criminals, and the war being waged on its natural world by the population as a whole.

It was as though the destructive hordes of *Sauron's* army had reached the Caribbean. *Orcs* at every turn, burning, littering, polluting, pillaging; turning tourism potential to tatters, sending the country plummeting to the foot of international environmental sustainability indexes.

Nothing has changed. Trinidad and Tobago is still going up in smoke. Magnificent tropical forest is turning to cinders, or quarries, while wildlife is pursued relentlessly over hill and dale. Protected turtles are slaughtered on the beaches of eco award-winning Tobago. Coral reefs, rivers and coastline are all under great stress, becoming ever less fit for human recreation or wildlife habitats.

* The armies of *Mordor* are on the march in T&T. It has chosen to shun the preservation of its

natural environment and a viable tourism industry, for heavy industries like smelters that *Saruman* and his *Orcs* would have envied.

Well, we weren't hanging around for impossible odds to overwhelm us. Clean, green New Zealand, I'd been told; nuclear-free New Zealand; "100% Pure New Zealand", where the tourism industry is even bigger than agriculture. Would it provide a sustainable future for our family? Would it live up to the hype and its high rankings on a host of global sustainability indexes? Would it become our *Shire*?

January 2011 will mark five years since we emigrated to Aotearoa: *Middle Earth* at the bottom of the Earth. Sometimes I feel like Frodo or Sam: that I've been on a long journey of enlightenment and seen many remarkable things. Leaving full-on environmental apathy behind for what, some here will complain, is a zealous and over-protective attitude towards the environment has been an eye-opening voyage of Tolkienesque proportions.

This May Day I joined the largest demonstration seen in New Zealand in a generation, estimated at between 40,000 and 50,000 ordinary Kiwis — old, young, families, the disabled — all taking time out to tell the government: "No!"

It wasn't a demonstration for a political party, or a protest at high taxes or unemployment. It was a protest for conservation. "Hands off our National Parks!" screamed the banners. "They say Mine – we say Ours! The Nation's Parks not National's Parks!"

The National Government, in their pursuit of closing the economic gap with Australia, has floated plans to open up some of the most valuable areas of New Zealand's conservation estate, including National Parks, to mining: principally coal, lignite and gold.

They claim there are billions of dollars hidden under "them thar hills" which will see us

catch up with Australia’s living standards. Business NZ chief executive Phil O’Reilly said, “New Zealand has in-ground natural resources worth thousands of billions of dollars and developing them could change New Zealanders’ prosperity.”

Energy Minister Gerry Brownlee is especially interested in 7,000 ha of prime “Schedule 4”- protected land, the most valuable type of conservation land, where mining is forbidden precisely because of its special features – the plants and animals, the habitats and special landscapes. The targets in the government’s firing line are located in areas of **extreme** natural beauty. Places so lovely you could weep. Really.

There is the Coromandel Peninsula, Auckland’s favourite retreat, a wondrous finger of forested mountains and mind-blowing beaches; and Great Barrier Island, the jewel of the newly created Hauraki Gulf Marine Park.

Greenpeace points out that plans for “digging up 3,000ha of the stunning Paparoa National Park” on the South Island’s west coast come with the added irony of the very same coal “being burned here in clean green New Zealand”.

Additionally, nearly half a million hectares of other National Park areas will be surveyed for

future mining possibilities. These include eastern Kahurangi National Park (“treasured possession”) and north-eastern Mt Aspiring National Park, both in the South Island. Also on the list, to many people’s horror, is Rakiura National Park on Stewart Island, a unique and remote wilderness south of New Zealand.

Hardly a fit for our image, you’d have to say. All this fossil fuel mining, for burning here or in China — 70% of New Zealand’s own energy requirements already come from renewable sources like hydro, geothermal and wind. And we haven’t even tapped wave power, in a country with a coastline longer than that of the US.

Greenpeace NZ say the Government’s vision is to “race Australia to the bottom of the mine pit”, and is an example of the “19th century industrial thinking we used to do before the reality of climate change kicked in”. They want to see “an economic vision for the 21st century that plays to the strength of our clean and green reputation and meets the challenges of climate change”.

Many believe the mining policy will imperil the country’s unique tourism brand: “100% Pure New Zealand”. It was recently valued the 21st most valuable brand in the world.



Photo: Mark Meredith

The “No Mining Pure New Zealand” march was the country’s biggest demo in decades.



Photo: Mark Meredith

The UK *Guardian* reports that our government’s national marketing strategy is underpinned by a survey showing that tourism would be reduced by 68% if the country lost its prized “clean, green image”.

Such is the importance of our multi-billion dollar tourism industry that the new Prime Minister, John Key — a self-made millionaire who made his luck as a money trader — also made himself Tourism Minister. He has just awarded the Tourism Ministry \$30 million in the budget.

Already there are signs Key’s Government is retreating, such was the impact of the unexpectedly large turnout for the May anti-mining demonstration. They underestimated Kiwi passion. The Government is currently receiving public submissions on its mining agenda, where New Zealanders get to have their say put on the record.

But the trouble for New Zealand’s green brand, say some, is that the mining issue is not an isolated case, and is symptomatic of a deeper



Photo: Mark Meredith

The Coromandel is being targeted for its mining potential

malaise. It is just the latest in a series of recent environmental criticisms levelled against us, when the charge of hypocrites has also been hurled our way.

We are accused of trading on our greenness to promote our two big industries, tourism and dairy exports, when such credentials are really an illusion: “100% Pure Hype”. Trade Minister Tim Groser says this country’s access to American markets for its produce is based on our positive environmental image: packets of butter or cheese adorned with the pristine splendour of the snow-capped Southern Alps.

There’s no question about it: there are **Orcs** about in Aotearoa and we need to be aware.

“New Zealand was a friend to *Middle Earth*, but it’s no friend of the earth,” wrote Fred Pearce in the *Guardian’s* “Greenwash” section last year. “*Lord of the Rings* country trades on its natural beauty, but emissions have risen 22% since it signed up to Kyoto.”

Pearce said: “New Zealand turns out to be mining ever more filthy brown coal to burn in its power stations. It has the world’s third highest rate of car ownership. And, with more cows than people, the country’s increasingly intensive agricultural sector is responsible for approaching half their greenhouse gas emissions.”

But the sacred cow (and sheep) of agriculture, whose emissions of methane and nitrous oxide from belching are such a problem, won’t begin to have those emissions counted until 2015 in the country’s emissions trading scheme due to kick in this year.

The Economist, in a critique called “It’s not easy seeming green”, said: “The ruggedness of much of New Zealand’s terrain may have protected its film-friendly uplands, but at lower elevations farming has stripped away forests, eroded hills and clogged rivers with silt and fertiliser run-off.”

The agricultural industry’s success continues to come at a price not readily visible to the eye: the run-off from armies of ruminants, and the fertilisers that power our impressive fruit and vegetable exports, have made some waterways unfit even for animal use.

So I’ve discovered New Zealand is not 100% pure, environmentally speaking. Given its history, this is not surprising: it’s the owner of one of the world’s most shameful environmental records — how that shaped the attitudes of today’s New Zealanders towards their surroundings is an interesting story in its own right. But, I’ve also learned that we are still purer than many, and in a better position to adapt to the uncertain future of climate change than most.

Our small population (4 million) and large land mass, bountiful natural resources, and Kiwis’ positive, proactive attitude to the environment

— we are world leaders in many ecological and environmental initiatives — lead me to believe we’ve chosen a special place to live... even if it is oceans from anywhere.

“Us Kiwis Give a Shit!” said a banner at the May Day anti-mining march. It’s true, we do. In *Middle Earth* you get used to these attitudes after a while. However, one soundtrack to life in *The Shire* that I have not got used to, but have grown especially fond of, like the call of the *tui* bird, is the morning song of the bottle truck.

Every other Tuesday I’m woken by the “Green Machine”, a friendly monster with a mechanical arm that sweeps our streets of plastic wheelie bins we’ve filled with glass, plastic and tin. It lifts the bins high into the air with giant pincers and tips the contents into a cavernous hold with a tremendous crescendo of crashing, for recycling.

I think: “Take that, *Dark Lord*. You and your army of *Orcs*.”

* In its manifesto, the new People’s Partnership coalition government in Trinidad and Tobago said it will not pursue the aluminium smelter policy of the previous PNM administration.



Mark Meredith is a writer and photographer who lives on Auckland’s North Shore. A former environmental journalist for the Trinidad Express, he produced a Caribbean natural history and environmental magazine called Samaan. See (<http://issuu.com/meredith/docs/samaan2>)