Quality of the environment

Improving the environment, or at least not degrading it further, is becoming a priority for both the public and private sectors. Better data is being collected, and better frameworks to assess impacts developed. Community groups are often leading efforts to force changes, or creating it themselves. But contention & conflicts will continue.

What we're seeing

Rediscovering cleaner environments

During the first year of the pandemic, the improved quality of air[1] and water[2] during lockdowns were widely remarked upon. They provided strong visual illustrations of human impacts on the environment.

Increasing demand for clean environments

There is a renewed recognition that environmental wellbeing is closely linked to human wellbeing.[3] Legal rights are being given to environments.[4]

Air quality, water, and biodiversity tend to be top of mind.[5] But, plastic pollution, persistent chemicals, insufficient green spaces in urban areas, and mouldy homes also make the news headlines.

Planetary boundaries

Environmental impacts are starting to be assessed in terms of nine planetary boundaries. These measure particular chemical physical and biological factors in the environment.[6]

Environmental handprints

Measuring environmental footprints, the negative impacts, is now common. Emerging is the concept of measuring environmental handprints. This focuses on actions that reduce adverse impacts.[7] Regenerative rather than just sustainable practices are also emerging.[8]

Collection of environmental data is improving

Environmental data collection is improving,[9] or the need for better data is recognised.[10] Low cost sensor systems are helping.[11] Whole catchment or ecosystem perspectives also starting.[12]

Data doesn't solve the problems

However, data often doesn't help identify effective measures to address the problems. Most remedies are costly &/or complicated, so resolving the issues involves prolonged financial and political positioning. As illustrated by the Three Waters reforms.[13] Proposed solutions may also not really work,[14] or are simply greenwashing.[15]

Increasing regulation

What seems certain is that environmental regulations will continue to increase, and with more attention paid to consistent enforcement.[16]

Community conflicts

While improving the environment is generally regarded as good, this doesn't prevent conflicts over the means. For example, opposition to wind turbines can limit developments.[17] And threats and actions against conservation efforts appear to becoming more common.[18]

The Finnish Green Party recently decided to support nuclear power.[19] Expect more conflicts and policy shifts.

Grass roots actions are key disruptors

In NZ local community initiatives are driving change, such as predator trapping, replanting's, and beach clean-ups. More community activism is also likely. These can range from pop-up bike lanes[20] and community gardens, to larger scale civil disobedience groups, such as Extinction Rebellion.[21]

Potential implications

Create
- **More regenerative approaches, rather than just sustainable ones, to human activities are emerging**

Relate
- **Redeveloping community and social connections to local and wider environments**
- **Increasing conflicts over ways to improve natural and built environments**

Consume
- **Slow shifts towards less destructive patterns of consumption & living**

Degrade
- **Considerable time, costs, and collective efforts needed to reverse degraded, or even halt degrading, some environments**

Connect
- **Better use of data can help build connections**
- **Building & maintenance of trust is essential for social licence**

Define
- **The environment isn't separate from human society**

More information (links)

[1] Himalayas visible for first time in 30 years
[2] The water in Venice
[3] Land and te ao Māori
[4] Innovative bill protects Whanganui River with legal personhood
[5] Public perceptions of New Zealand's environment
[6] A safe operating space for New Zealand
[7] Environmental handprints tells of positive environmental actions
[8] Why regenerative agriculture?
[9] Environment Aotearoa 2022
[10] Rethinking plastics
[11] Low-cost environmental sensor networks
[12] Managing our estuaries
[13] Three waters: What you need to know
[14] Plastic recycling doesn't work and will never work
[15] Greenwashing - what is it and why is it dangerous?
[16] Environmental regulation will significantly tighten
[17] Are public objections to wind farms overblown?
[18] DoC security being reviewed amid sinister 1080 attacks
[19] Finland's Green Party endorses nuclear power
[20] More pop-up bicycle lanes to come
[21] What is Extinction Rebellion and what does it want?