

Adaptive Governance and Evolving Solutions to Natural Resource Conflicts

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Abstract

New Zealand is facing increasing challenges in managing demands on its natural resources. These challenges can be described as ‘wicked problems’; i.e. problems that may not be understood fully until they have been solved, where stakeholders have different world views and frameworks, the constraints and the resources required change over time, and no complete solution is ever actually found.

Adaptive governance addresses wicked problems through a framework to engage stakeholders in a participative process to create a long term vision. The Resource Management Act can be seen as an adaptive governance structure where frameworks for resources such as water may take years to evolve and decades to fully implement. Adaptive management is about delivery through an incremental/experimental approach, limits on certainty, and flexibility in processes and results. In New Zealand it also requires balancing central government expertise and resources, with local goals and knowledge.

This type of response is incremental, overlapping, iterative and time-consuming. Managing the expectations of those involved as to the nature of the process and their role in it, and the scope and timing of likely outcomes, is key to sustaining participation.