

Getting to know you...

Regular feature profiling New Zealand's archive community

Michael Pringle

Environment and Conservation Organisations of New Zealand



Zubin Unwala and Richard Miller, volunteers working at the ECO Library and Archive.
Photo: Michael Pringle 2016.

Who are you and where are you based?

Environment and Conservation Organisations of New Zealand is the umbrella group for environment and conservation organisations in New Zealand. It was founded in 1971 as CoEnCo and later was renamed ECO New Zealand.

Our membership includes the New Zealand chapters of large international groups such as Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, national groups including Conservation Volunteers New Zealand, as well as small local groups such as Guardians of Pāūatahunui Inlet and Save the Otago Peninsula, and issue-oriented groups like the Yellow-eyed

Penguin Trust.

ECO has been centrally involved in campaigns to protect native forests, lakes and rivers, the reform of the Mining Act and defeat of the National Development Act, and in supporting the Resource Management Act and the establishment of the Department of Conservation and Ministry for the Environment. ECO continues to be at the forefront of environmental campaigns on fisheries, transport and environmental management.

ECO's work is carried out largely by volunteers, supported by a small office and Resource Centre in Wellington. There are around 300 "Friends of ECO," individual subscribers and others who support our work.

We are based in the Trades Hall Building at 126 Vivian Street in Te Aro, Wellington. ECO has two adjoining rooms on the second floor of this building and our resource centre, which houses most of the archive and our library, occupies one of these rooms. Some material is stored off-site owing to space restrictions.

What services do we provide?

We provide a facility for researchers exploring environmental history in New Zealand to examine file boxes at their leisure in the resource centre. Files cannot be borrowed but there is a facility for photocopying and scanning. The catalogue is on The Community Archive website. Material needs to be ordered at least three days in advance in order to allow time for retrieval from off-site storage, and for appropriate permissions to be obtained where sensitive material may be involved.

What do we hold?

We hold around 400 file boxes of material relating to ECO's work since its founding, and the work of individuals and other groups in environmental campaigns from the early 1970s to around 2000. Some of the material is technical in nature and there are many submissions to Select Committees and Royal Commissions, for instance on the nuclear power debate in New Zealand in the 1970s. There are large files on energy strategies, forestry, native forest action campaigns, the struggles over the impact of coal and gold mining, the development of the 1990 Resource Management Act and subsequent changes to the RMA, conservation, environmental impact assessments, Antarctica, agriculture, national parks, climate change, marine issues – and more. A typical file may include reports (governmental and non-governmental), press clippings, articles, submissions, council plans, pamphlets and other material that may be hard to find elsewhere

– or does not exist elsewhere. There is an emphasis on non-published items that may not have found their way into New Zealand libraries and are likely not held in other repositories.

Biggest challenge for our archive

Storage is a problem for us. We need to maintain the collection in suitably dry and insect-free conditions that will ensure the long-term survival of paper. Although current conditions are less than ideal, they are adequate in the short to medium term. In addition, the collection needs a full appraisal and more detailed cataloguing to locate the “gems” that may be lurking in a box which has not been properly described. This is a long-term project on which some progress has already been made.

Biggest opportunity

We see this collection as having the potential to make a significant contribution to the research community, especially for environmental history researchers. By supporting scientists and others looking to explore the background to current issues – or indeed past debates such as that over nuclear power – we aim to enrich environmental and scientific understanding in New Zealand.

Favourite or most important collection

The collection on climate change provides an interesting insight into the development of climate change mitigation policies in New Zealand over the 20 years since the 1992 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. It records the first attempts by our government to get to grips with the magnitude of the climate crisis when understanding was more limited than it is today – and the growing frustration of those in the public, and the academic and non-governmental sectors, about the lack of meaningful government action. It is a sobering case study of years of inaction creating the crisis we face today.

Notable recent acquisition

We don't have any recent paper-based acquisitions into the collection as it has not been augmented in this way since the advent of digital files around the year 2000. ECO does not actively collect the papers of individuals involved in environmental work or from organisations similar to our own. The collection is entirely one created from ECO's work and its relationships with other organisations, particularly member organisations. Its significance lies in the broad canvas of issues covered

in its work and in the depth and diversity of its member groups and their contributions to the archives.

Archivist and contact details

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