

Lessons from The Fight for Freshwater – Mike Joy’s Memoir

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Two years ago, I stopped into the book launch of Mike Joy’s memoir (Joy, 2024) at Unity Books in Wellington (photo) to appreciate compelling anecdotes from one of New Zealand science’s top iconoclasts. Since that event, I’ve become fascinated by the observation that I spend more time disagreeing with Joy than anyone else I respect. The frequency and intensity of disagreement can be puzzling since we work on the same issues with similar goals, although I arrived in them from a global perspective built around climate science informing policy while Joy’s built his career bottom up from freshwater habitats. The book showed me what lies behind this puzzle, for the same reasons it will allow most readers see New Zealand’s academic institutions and environmental regulatory system through a new window. Joy’s perspective charts a classic yet unique Kiwi path that defies assumptions and has elevated Joy’s status as a Kiwi icon in the years following its publication. I want to draw attention to the book, because it provides a window into how scientists and their institutions can and do make a difference – helping us see how doing so has been uniquely challenging within New Zealand and may be getting much harder.

Thus, I want to draw attention to the book’s most enduring truth: it is far from certain that scientists will continue to play their essential role of speaking truth to power by bringing evidence into the public eye. Joy’s memoir demonstrates the barriers he faced publicly stating his perspective and evidence. If we examine the impact he and others are having in the years following its publication we see an equally deep concern – the quality of evidence and the need for robust debate that moves beyond polarised positions are a critical function of universities and our wider research system that must be better supported if we hope to make progress on the challenges affecting our nation and world in the 21st century.

Joy’s impressive career emerges from many small, coherent vignettes to lay down a clear case for his advocacy. He doesn’t bother to justify advocacy using the academic arguments presented by Pielke (2007) in *The Honest Broker* or set down based on case studies in climate science by Donner (2014). These works allow for and encourage advocacy that is declared and transparent. Instead, Joy simply leaves the reader questioning if anyone who has worn

his shoes – and waders – could choose differently or ever stop making the cases he does for looking after the ecology and environment around us.



These vignettes demonstrate the potential for science and integrity to make a difference, with the proviso that outcomes depend on whether findings and knowledge are heard or silenced. Cycles of frustration and success are authentically interspersed with how it feels to be a scientist, made more poignant by a life before science. Joy’s path in life has been very different from most researchers. A fascinating third of the book goes by as he lays down a great deal of learning across many threads before beginning university as a mature student.

Once Joy jumps from doctoral student to overworked

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lecturer, the vignettes defining his life become more familiar to those of us who have been in research or academia. We see the science, the students, the field trips, juggled along with the events of life ranging from moving house, taking holidays, and loving aging parents with different political views.

The book concludes with a perfect storm none of us would want to experience: a litany of letters that get to the heart of the issue that make us care about Joy's story – agricultural industry had captured many regional councils, and councils reckoned they should be able to capture Massey University, sending letters arguing that the facts put forward by Joy and his colleague, Russell Death, didn't deserve to be heard because of the implications they would have for the economy.

Joy's vignettes point toward regulatory capture (see for example, Doole and Stephens 2025; Doole et al. 2024) as the root cause of destruction of freshwater ecosystems, confounding and undermining the balance intended by our environmental legislation. His convincing case contains shocking examples of how our government and councils have made and communicated decisions that irreversibly harm the environment. Yet Joy's frustration with councils perhaps lacks balance since there are many cases where positive actions and outcomes have occurred (possibly because he feels the success of cases taken by iwi/Māori are not his story to tell). Nevertheless, the memoir's warning deserves to be heard whenever the freshwater ecosystems he loves and cares for face the common curse of environmental protection – every victory is temporary, and every defeat is permanent.

Part of Joy's story stands out to demonstrate an issue that matters for all academics who study contentious issues and communicate widely. Many will be aware Joy left Massey University following changes that merged his unit with the larger area of research focussed on agriculture. These events plunged Joy and Death into an embattled situation within the university, with implications also outlined in Death and Joy (2023).

Importantly, we learn that Joy was able to build a good career at Massey because he had been forcefully protected by the Vice Chancellor, Hon Steve Maharey. The protection ended under Maharey's successor, providing another clear example that vice chancellors have great power. They can and do make a difference.

It is perhaps notable that Maharey was an academic who returned to the role after being politician and minister. Vice chancellors can choose, as Maharey did, to ensure the university lives up to elements of the definition defined in legislation, currently represented by sections [s267](#) and [s268](#) of the [Education and Training Act 2020](#), and originally included in the [Education Act of 1989](#). These include [s268](#)'s well-known "critic and conscience" clause as well as the wider definition that "a university is characterised by a wide diversity of teaching and research, especially at a higher level, that maintains, advances, disseminates, and assists the application of knowledge, develops intellectual independence, and promotes community learning." The

expectation to 'preserve and enhance' academic freedom expressed in [s267](#) appears difficult to define and defend without assuming universities will live up to the interdependent expectations that define the starting point for any university in [s268](#).

Worryingly, a retired vice chancellor described an alternative path in which the independence allowed for universities in legislation can be used to assert top-down control to promote their corporate 'success' (Malcolm and Tarling, 2007). Unfortunately, both this prophecy and its drivers seem to be increasingly fulfilled, including by part of what we see in [Siouxie Wiles Employment Court case](#) (Hendy, 2025). Joy documents a cautionary tale of universities that seemingly fail to "maintain and enhance" their commitment to both academic freedom and all aspects defining universities in our legislation.

Notably, Maharey's defence of Joy was not boundless, but firmly set in a pragmatic application of academic freedom and a wider view of what must be protected in universities. Maharey plainly explained to Joy that he would be defended only if he always was able to cite evidence for the statements that end up generating flak at high levels. Intriguingly, this definition ensures debate is possible but may not be a recipe for breaking through polarised arguments to find solutions in the political economy of 21st century grand challenges, including protecting biodiversity and ecosystems, or responding to climate change and hazards.

I see value in the debate where I diverge from Joy as he extends his experience in freshwater to climate change. He has become an advocate for degrowth and detractor of the transition to renewables and the concept of net zero. On these topics, he's built a platform off the success of his memoir, but I find myself disagreeing with evidence Joy presents where I see, for example, outdated numbers and inconsistency with IPCC reports and datasets curated by Our World in Data (Ritchie, 2024; Ritchie et al., 2023) to demonstrate that economies can be decoupled from environmental harm.

This matters because regulatory capture isn't entirely the dichotomy of right versus wrong that Joy implies. Polarised dichotomies can be transcended by win-win solutions, including embracing the tools emanating from the Paris agreement that turn business and finance to transparently addressing the climate change challenge. Platforms ranging from social media to public talks make it possible to impugn 'net zero' and renewable energy without debating views that combine evidence with innovation (for example: Bento et al. 2026).

Joy's career, as told in his memoir, firmly reminds us we need to maintain and enhance the role of universities supporting debate as [s267](#) and [s268](#) of the Act defining universities intends. The academic freedom that allowed Joy to publicly pursue his case from with Massey University under Maharey's as Vice Chancellor was and must remain vital. Yet the ability to state a view and cite evidence is not enough. If we want to have hope for solving the difficult challenges facing our nation and the world, universities must

actively rebuild their capacity to be places that host high quality discourse and debate.

Ultimately, we learn that it was far from assured that Joy would catalyse, along with his students and colleagues, the understanding of freshwater ecosystems we now have. Joy has had to keep seeking safe harbour to act on the knowledge he's created to argue for protection. So far, we're lucky he's been able to keep moving to find roles where he can continue his fight.

Looking beyond the memoir's demonstration that one individual scientist found a unique path for his discoveries and advocacy, we should worry that our research institutions might not have supported him if he'd come along today. We need to make it safer to stand up like Joy, and we must go beyond that to create fertile ground for debate that can allow today's problems to grow into solutions. We should also worry we'll lose intellectual sovereignty (Gluckman, 2025) if our institutions cannot reliably support the even richer debate we need to bridge disagreements in ways that solve today's grand challenges. Threats are mounting from current directions including declining funding, job losses, mission-oriented funding and merged institutions more coupled to outcomes representing Government 'priorities'. Leadership to better define and support academic freedom and open debate as defining characteristics of universities seems likely to be pivotal in the years ahead. One might ask if doing so isn't an important part of justifying the value of universities to our society, and reversing the trend of declining university funding as proportion of GDP (Stewart and Baisden 2026, President's Column in this issue).

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