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THE WATER OR THE WAVE?
TOWARD A CROSS-CULTURAL ECOLOGY
OF UNDERSTANDING
FOR ENVIRONMENTAL PRACTICE

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy
in Resource and Environmental Planning
at Massey University, Palmerston North,
Aotearoa / New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

One of the critical challenges of our times is how different cultures can communicate with each other on issues to do with the environment. At the root of this is how those cultures understand not just each other, but their own cultural relationships with Nature. The thesis examines this issue using an approach that is cross-cultural and interdisciplinary. It does so by assessing philosophical foundations within worldviews, ranging from an emphasis on the deterministic whole over the parts (monism) to one of reduction of the whole to the parts (dualism). In contrast, a nondual attitude supports a holistic basis for approaching wholes as dynamic patterns of interconnections. In this thesis, a nondual approach is offered as a way that enables and encourages open and dialogical understanding across cultural worldviews on environmental issues.

The thesis also explores cultural aspects of this challenge as it is expressed in the meeting of indigenous peoples and moderns. The ‘ritual’ cooperative basis of societies that seek cohesion among their members can be compared with the overtly competitive ‘game’-like modern society based on a pathology of continuous economic growth and rights-based individualism. It is increasingly obvious that the accelerated pace of change and scale of economic development is outstripping Nature’s capacity for renewal. Underpinning moderns’ drive for ‘development’ is a mechanistic attitude to the environment which is expressed through reductionist methodology. In contrast, the emerging awareness within Western science of ecosystems as complex, adaptive, self-organising systems suggests a more respectful attitude toward Nature. This awareness is also apparent among many indigenous cultures, although their understanding extends beyond secular relations to assert a strong spiritual interdependency of humans and the Earth.

The damming of the Whanganui River, New Zealand, for hydroelectric power development provides a case study for illustrating the key themes explored throughout the thesis. This development has had profound effects on the indigenous Whanganui Maori, whose existence is inextricably interwoven with the river’s life. The environmental planning system in New Zealand now requires developers to consider not only ecological consequences, but to consult with Maori. However, such consultation often falls short of realising an openness to dialogue aimed at a cross-cultural ecology of understanding. Essential to that understanding is a deeper awareness of one’s own worldview.
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