

Signs of Change

Convened by Susan Krumdieck

Something really different happened at the end of last year. The Signs of Change conference was held 15-16 November. *Another* conference, how is that different? This particular conference broke new ground in three ways: use of technology to greatly reduce travel and cost, focus on emerging sustainability to showcase solutions rather than problems, and participation by a wide range of people from many fields and from across the country to gain a “whole of society” perspective on the transition toward sustainability. The conference was the brain-child of convenor, Associate Professor Susan Krumdieck of Canterbury University. Professor Krumdieck is a Mechanical Engineering researcher specialising in energy systems and sustainability. “I had been thinking for some time about how to design a conference that I would really enjoy attending,” explains Professor Krumdieck. “The real purpose of a conference is to share ideas, learn from others, and advance a field of knowledge. I wanted to design a conference that would maximise the core benefits while minimising the direct and external costs.”

The conference used technology to provide a conference where participants and speakers only travelled to the nearest city. For the first time, the recent investments in networking technology at the nations’ universities were used for a nation-wide conference, open to the general public. The Kiwi Advanced Research and Education Network (KAREN) network was set up four years ago to allow researchers to hold e-meetings much like the facilities found at large corporations. A new interactive video capability, the HD323 bridge, was used to link together lecture theatres at University of Otago in Dunedin, University of Canterbury in Christchurch, the Royal Society of New Zealand in Wellington, Massey University in Palmerston North, and Auckland University of Technology in Auckland. Venues in Invercargill and Kerikeri were connected via live web feed. Nathan Gardiner of the Advanced Video Collaboration Centre (AVCC) was instrumental in coordinating the technology and more importantly, working with the IT specialists at each venue to make sure the two-day interactive conference went off without a hitch. “This was a big project to pull off,” he says, “but it worked great and demonstrates the benefits of the technology.”

Local participants gathered at each venue, with the usual benefits of a conference including time away from normal work to focus on a particular subject of interest, food and discussion with other like-minded people. Presentations were made from the different venues, and question and answer time had the whole country talking.

There were more than forty speakers who gave short reports on their activities. Steve Earnshaw, an Orthopaedic surgeon from Timaru, explained how the first year of the Timaru weekend farmer’s market had been successful at growing local enterprise and social capital. Karen Schumacher from the East Taranaki Environment Trust described how local farmers have taken on guardianship of “their kiwi” with habitat restoration and protection resulting in impressive recovery of the species. Professor Steve Wratten of Lincoln University showed how biodiversity and using ecological services in agriculture outperforms chemical treatments in pest control. Karen Upton, CEO of Envirocomp Ltd, presented an entrepreneurial approach to dealing with disposable nappies and sanitary waste. James Samuel of Transition Towns Aotearoa discussed successful re-localisation projects, Dr. Elizabeth Eckles described a preventative health care programme, and Andrew Hurley of community-owned lines company, Mainpower, gave an overview of the company’s plans for renewable generation.

The underlying theme of the conference was the emergence of a new kind of economy based on innovation and prosperity, but addressing the risks of unsustainable resource use and environmental impact. There was also a common focus on regeneration of both ecosystem viability and social vitality. The mood at the conference was upbeat while still being realistic about the challenges ahead. The

feedback from the 250 participants nation-wide has been overwhelmingly positive, with many looking forward to possible future Signs of Change.

“I set out to develop and trial a low-impact conference platform, and we definitely succeeded.” Said Krumdieck. “The Engineers for Social Responsibility and the Sustainable Energy Forum promoted the conference as their official gathering for this year. We received a generous grant from the Positive Futures Trust, and I provided the funds for organisation and for students to attend. But the main resource for this project was good will from the local organisers and the universities who allowed us to use the venues at no charge for this trial.” She said. “We definitely reduced the negative aspects of attending conferences. If all of the people attended at the Christchurch venue for two nights, they would have spent more than \$120,000, cumulatively wasted 497 hours sitting on airplanes, and had a carbon footprint in excess of 85 tonnes of CO₂.” Another benefit of the local venue, nationally networked conference design is the higher participation. “Of course, if the conference had been only in Christchurch, fewer than half of the people who attended would have been able to make it. The people in the more remote areas would have been the least likely to be able to participate in a national conference.” Professor Krumdieck points out that now the full conference is available for viewing by the general public on youtube, easily followed from the conference website, www.signsofchange.org.nz.

“I think this Signs of Change conference may have touched off some new thinking about how we will achieve a sustainable future from the bottom up rather than from the top down,” Professor Krumdieck says. “All of the presenters were doing what they are good at, what they enjoy, what will reduce resource use or restore the environment, and they were all prospering. There were so many more potential speakers we could have had in addition to the forty who were the first in,” she explains. “The sustainable future is emerging from the ground level. These folks are not waiting around for the government to figure out anything. They know they are on the right path, and the government will follow along some day.”