

# Nurture nature



**Conservation:** Professor Ian Spellerberg, left, and Izone board chairman Jens Christensen plant native seedlings.

## IAN SPELLERBERG believes climate change has distracted attention from the importance of conservation.

One of my favourite actors is Peter Postlethwaite from *Brassed Off*. I was reminded of him when my daughter gave me a DVD called *The Age of Stupid*. In what is essentially a documentary, Postlethwaite stars as a man living alone in a devastated world in the year 2055, who asks, "Why didn't we stop climate change when we had the chance?"

It's not the only high-profile documentary about climate change. I wonder how many readers have seen the 2006 documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth*, about Al Gore's campaign to inform people about global warming.

Almost every day there is mention of climate change in the media. There are numerous conferences on climate change and there has been a huge amount of research on what we should do about it.

It appears easy to get the media to report on climate change, but it is hard work to attract attention to nature conservation.

The climate is always changing and will continue to do so. It's the human-caused global warming that has attracted attention and controversy. You would have to be a fully paid-up member of the Flat Earth Society not to believe that human activities have contributed to climate change and particularly the rise in global temperatures.

It is true there are dire consequences of climate change and global warming. We have already seen the effects on some low-lying countries. Some extremes in weather are almost certainly indicators of climate change.

But do we need more climate change conferences? Whatever policies we put in place now to reduce human impact on the global climate will, I suspect, take a long time to have any effect – if ever. Better to accept that it is happening and plan to live with it.

Indeed, I sometimes think that the political paranoia about climate change is a way of distracting our attention from far more important environmental issues.

In my opinion, the focus on climate change is unwarranted because climate change is just a small part of a much bigger issue.

The focus on climate change is at the expense of targeting the unsustainable and inequitable use of nature. Far more important and of far greater seriousness is what is happening to the oceans, the soil, water, plants and animals and to the interactions between all organisms.

We need to focus on nature conservation, because everything depends on nature. The economy, our livelihoods and our happiness are dependent on nature. The plants provide us with oxygen and clean air. The state of our water and the state of our soil depends on nature.

A colleague of mine has published several *Odes to Nature*. My favourite is his *Ode to Soil*. He talks about the soil as the "plant-nourishing mantle". He goes on to say that "loss of productive soil is among the top few environmental threats". Look how much productive land is lost to subdivisions.

In New Zealand and around the world, fisheries have collapsed because of over-fishing. Will our beloved whitebait go the same way? Much has been made of the losses of tropical forests. In New Zealand, we have not been very clever about managing our own forests and other native flora.

In Canterbury alone, less than 1 per cent of native vegetation remains on the lowlands. Recent land-use changes and expansion of intensive farming have had significant impacts on what little native wildlife remains.

A recent book from the New Zealand Plant Conservation Network talks about the increasing number of New Zealand plant species becoming threatened. The iconic kaka beak is almost extinct in the wild.

Does it matter that there is continuing destruction of nature and ecosystems? Of course it does. We depend on nature for food, water, fibre and materials. Globally, we struggle to feed the world. We depend on



**Dismal future:** Actor Peter Postlethwaite in *The Age of Stupid*, set in a climate change-ravaged future.

nature to absorb our wastes, but we exploit nature's ability to act as a sink. We depend on insects to pollinate our crops and on soil to provide the plant nutrients.

Agriculture, horticulture and forest all dependent on nature's genetic diversity yet we continue to lose varieties that could be the future life savers. Achim Steiner, the United Nations Environment Programme has, like many others, pointed out the multitrillion-dollar services provided by nature. But it's not just about nature's economy. More and more of us are living in cities devoid of nature and have little opportunity to be spiritually sustained and refreshed by it. There is much research showing that communing with nature is a contributor to happiness and good health.

It worries me that the unsustainable and inequitable use of nature has been occurring for a long time, but I am full of optimism about the growth in green initiatives. Tread lightly on the Earth is now widely accepted worldwide as being wise and rational.

Recently, I held my first grandchild and said: "Maisie, I long to go hand in hand with you barefoot among the rock pools. I long to share hugging a tree with you and I long to show you nature's gifts."

The most important environmental issue is sharing nature within and between generations.

■ Ian Spellerberg is Professor of Nature Conservation at Lincoln University and a member of the Environment Institute of Australia New Zealand.