

Boxed in with clean and green

Phil O'Reilly at BusinessNZ

There's a Kiwi slogan that rolls easily off the tongue, a way of describing our beautiful countryside, farms and our love of the outdoors - 'clean and green'.

We hear it said with pride. We also hear it used in a critical way, for example when some environmental problem is seen to be undermining our 'clean green image'.

But does 'clean and green' paint a true picture and is it how others see us?

In the course of my work I get to quite a few international forums and often hear people's perceptions of New Zealand.

Here's what they say:

The country is beautiful, and the people are friendly, open, down to earth, direct, hospitable and welcoming. New Zealand people are 'authentic'. They say there is something vibrant about us.

New Zealand is safe and pretty. It's the least corrupt country in the world. The people are honest and trustworthy.

Americans say the food is good with no worries about food safety. Australians talk about flying over to have fun in Courtenay Place.

People overseas find our countryside beautiful but they tend to mention our people more. And interestingly, I've never heard anyone describe New Zealand in terms of 'clean and green'.

Yet we seem to have convinced ourselves that that's how the world sees us.

We seem to have a view that any chink in our environment will badly compromise our clean green image in the eyes of the world.

But I don't think people overseas do have such simplistic opinions. Most people are realists. They understand that an absolutely pristine environment is not achievable unless humans are somehow removed from the picture.

People's work doesn't happen in a purely pristine way - you can't call coal mining 'clean and green', or panel beating, air travel, dairy farming or diesel transport. Work is fundamental and can't just be airbrushed out of a clean green landscape.

Same with our everyday life: driving to the supermarket; turning on a light that's maybe powered by a coal-fired generator; concreting your driveway or painting your house – all these impact on the environment.

Not everything can be green all the time.

The danger in holding up 'clean and green' as a banner to describe ourselves is that it is very excluding – it excludes many aspects of our work and our lives.

It's more mythology than statement of reality.

It also sets us up to fail. With an absolute statement like 'clean and green' any variation becomes a failure.

This is unfortunate, given the pervasiveness and rapidity of communications. Try googling 'clean green New Zealand' and you'll find many recent critical entries pointing out instances where we are failing to meet the standard of 'clean and green'.

It can be used by extremists for the very purpose of highlighting any environmental failings, however slight.

So why should we set ourselves up for this?

Part of the magic of New Zealand is that as a people we are more committed to our natural environment than just about any other people on earth.

That's why the silver fern expresses our national psyche so well - a simple plant, a beautiful piece of prehistoric vegetation from the time of Gondwanaland still sustainable today.

In our commitment to the environment, we need to be careful to avoid an absolutist attitude that can limit our thinking, boxing us in.

We need a holistic, not extremist view.

When overseas people ask me to describe New Zealand, I always say, "It's one of the best places in the world to live."

That's my attempt at conveying all the different parts of New Zealand that together add up to something pretty wonderful. New Zealand is the natural environment but it's also much, much more.

I'd like us to get beyond lazy slogans like clean and green. We should start thinking in a more realistic, holistic way and get out of the box.

Phil O'Reilly is Chief Executive Business NZ