The Aotearoa Circle – The Circle We Keep Podcast

Episode Overview: In this episode, our host Izzy Fenwick is joined by James Palmer, Secretary for the Environment and Chief Executive (Ministry for the Environment). Together, they reflect on the journey of understanding our environment and James shares insights on how environmental change unfolds quietly around us, why it matters deeply for future generations, and how innovation and reform can help us reconnect the economy and the environment.

Step into the circle with James Palmer.

Host Izzy Fenwick:

Hi and welcome to ***The Circle We Keep***, a podcast series from The Aotearoa Circle. In today's episode, we have James Palmer who needs no introduction, but if you don't know, he is the Secretary for the Environment at the Ministry for the Environment. So, let's bring him in, enjoy. I was kind of laughing to myself a little bit when I was thinking about the conversation that I wanted to have with you as the Secretary for the Environment and I hear Secretary for the Environment and I imagine you, know knocking on Mother Nature's door and being like, hey, just checking in, know, do you need anything?

And to a degree, that is kind of the job. But I want to know a little bit about James behind the job. What started you on your environmental journey? ***What has that looked like for you before being Secretary for the Environment?***

James Palmer

Thanks, Izzy. It's been a journey and there were lots of little things that built up over time to bring me to where I am today.

I grew up inTe Matau-a-Māui/Hawke's Bay and I had a very outdoor sort of childhood. The climate there is good, and I spent a lot of time at the beach and the river, and out running barefoot, and those sorts of classic Kiwi kid things that we were privileged to do growing up in an environment like that. But I had no sense growing up how modified the environment that I was living in was. And I kind of got interested in environmental issues. I had an older sister who was very active in environmental activism. And she came to our school on a nationwide tour around deforestation and trying to drive behaviour change. And the little things like that, that sort of tweaked my interest in environment. But I really didn't have a sort of a transformation in my passion and my understanding until a couple of things happened a little bit later in life.

The first of which is that I spent a bit of time in the South Island, tramping in mountains, bush, around lakes and rivers, and discovered another part of New Zealand that I'd never seen growing up in the North Island, which was this kind of pristine landscapes, most people I think really struggle not to have quite profound experiences when they experience it for the first time, just the sheer scale of nature and the forces and all of those sorts of things.

So that made me realise that New Zealand had some diversity to it, but also that the landscape that it might have once been before human occupation was quite different.

And then I had the privilege of discovering a book by the late Jeff Park called *Nā Uru Ora, The Groves of Life,* which is an ecological history of New Zealand. And I read that sort of in the years that I was a student going from

high school into university - amazing book tells these stories of these little remnant parts of New Zealand where there's great history behind why places were kept or protected and what modifications have taken place in our landscape.

And that gave me the sense of what an incredible transformations occurred, particularly over the last couple of hundred years, but over the last seven or eight hundred years in Aotearoa and New Zealand and how we've gone from a nation where the bird life was so noisy that you heard Aotearoa before you arrived and we had millions of birds and reptiles living here and forests covering every inch of the country and how radically we transformed that to produce wealth and it created an economy that I've been really privileged to be part of.

But I started to see the cracks of this environment that had felt really healthy and vibrant. And I started to see, as having some real issues that needed to be addressed and that really sparked my interest. And know from there, I've just ended up having a public service career working at that interface between environment, the economy, particularly around the primary sector, science and innovation. And I've worked through the Ministry for Primary Industries, the Ministry for Environment, and then I had this amazing experience of being the Chief Executive of the Hawkes Bay Regional Council. So, all of that led to me getting the opportunity in 2023 to become the Secretary for the Environment.

Izzy Fenwick:

Very cool. I love your detailed story about that book because I have a similar but different story and experience of a pretty profound, you know, like, 'aha moment' of really shifting my view around nature. And it was to do with one of the Ministry for the Environment reports, the 2016 Marine Report. And I can vividly remember being in Dad's bedroom and for listeners who don't know who Dad is, Sir Rob Fenwick, who went on to found The Aotearoa Circle.

But I can vividly remember being in his bedroom on Waiheke and he was reading the marine report, and he was not happy. And he took the time to explain the decline in fish stock. And up until then I'd kind of seen nature largely as something to conserve because it's the right thing to do, which is still very true, but just a really 'aha moment' of the economic reliance that we have, especially we as New Zealand, have on our natural assets and our environment.

It's a tricky one for me because, for all the other spiritual and true reasons to protect and restore New Zealand, still very true, but also critically important to our economic success. ***And I wanted to ask you about those MfE reports. Is what happened in that story, you hope, like what is the purpose of those reports? Are you hoping more people have the reaction that I kind of had, that like profound' aha moment' when they read those reports?***

James Palmer

100%. So those reports are in some ways a similar kind of product to a book like what Jeff Park wrote with *Nga Uru Ora*, because they connect us with across time and space that. In our busy lives, and as human beings with a relatively small kind of sensory perception around our own existences and also our time in history, we often don't get the perspective around environmental change and so we don't know how things were necessarily in the past, how they've changed and how they're trending into the future.

And often those things are happening at scale that people can't perceive in their day-to-day life or is not meaningful for them in terms of the things that they do to make a living or to support their family or just go about their recreation. And so, what the reports do is they bring the world closer, if you like, and through statistics, but also through storytelling. What we do is we enable people to see what otherwise is unseen. And so, we certainly hope that that is the outcome.

And ultimately people will make their choices about how they respond to that. And what we don't do with those is tell people what they should do. The policy choices come through the political process, through the political

parties that represent different values in society or different ways of doing things through local government, their consultations with the community. So, what we aim to do is have really well-informed debate. And that's actually a core role for the Ministry for the Environment under the Environment Act 1986 that created us.

And so, what our job is to do is to ensure that we make the most informed and best possible decisions as a country, and then we reflect the information and those decisions through legislation that empowers people to make choices. So, Resource Management Act, Climate Change Response Act, Hazardous Substances New Organisms Act. There's actually 10 pieces of legislation we're responsible for. And all they do is enable people to then make decisions out in the real world, can be businesses, can be local government, or even the Department of Conservation. So, our role is really to advise and to help people make the best possible decisions.

Izzy Fenwick

Tell me a little bit about the latest Our Environment report, what would you like people to know about that?

James Palmer

Well, there's two things about it. The first of which is that our environment's continuing to change. again, as I said before, often in our day-to-day lives, we don't notice the change that's happening because it's happening at either at scale or on timeframes that's hard for people to perceive. So, it is important for people to understand that despite the quality of our institutions and the good things that many people are doing across Aotearoa New Zealand, we still have a lot of environmental change occurring, which has created greater pressure on future generations and on our choices in the future.

But the other key message that I'd love people to take from it is that there is an awful lot that we can do. And so, we highlighted examples where communities or industries or even at the household level are doing things to make our future better.

And one of the most important things for me, for people to understand Izzy, about the economy and the environment is that it's not a question of trading one off against the other. It's much more a question of how we continue to evolve, innovate, and develop in our ways of being as people and how we develop our economy. That's always been changing. We continue to innovate. We've got new technologies. We've got new ways of doing things. That's not going to stop. But we've got choices in how we develop, and we can develop in ways which are better and better for a more sustainable future.

Izzy Fenwick

I really don't think you or MfE have an easy job. Looking at some of those reports and reading things like 182 million tonnes of soil was lost last year.

It’s quite hard to make soil sexy for people to read and understand the consequences of that. And even, like you said, being so far removed, hard to even mentally contextualise how much is 182 million tonnes. It's a lot, but I can't see or feel what that looks like.

And I used that stat recently in some of the presentations that I was giving. And... I was trying to find another way of describing it and I learnt that it is a dump truck of soil every two seconds, like an astronomical amount. ***And what is it like trying to demonstrate some of those critical aspects when it is hard to get people to care about things like soil? What is that challenge like for you and for the Ministry?***

James Palmer

I feel like the challenge that we have is just humanity's challenge. So, I feel like the challenges that we're wrestling with as a country, all over the world are wrestling with similar things. My colleagues in other jurisdictions have similar challenges and they're actually ones that humanity is wrestling with at a pretty deep level. And it is the way

in which we think about our relationship with the natural world which clearly, we are part of and that we have evolved through.

And we have increasingly separated ourselves from our understanding of that dependency. And so, the work we have to do is about reconnecting, reconnecting people with what's happening around them that they are responsible for or part of or will be impacted from in the future. And so, as we think about that challenge, it is about precisely the sorts of examples you give.

How do you make data, which can seem overwhelming or theoretical, meaningful for people. And I think as a species and global scale, we're going on a journey in how we understand that. And I do think that we've got emerging opportunities with data and digital to be able to sense more and make sense of more and be able to communicate that in ways that people can visualise and they can make better decisions from.

So, our real big focus as an agency at the moment is improving data and creating a much more digitally enabled resource management system for the future. So, decisions can be made by visualizing future outcomes, by being able to understand the systemic connections we have across soil, water, coastal environments, how all that knits together and how those processes are continuing to occur every single day around us, often without us being aware so that we can make better decisions.

Izzy Fenwick

So, I love the idea that using data and digital to be able to show what is actually happening. I think for some people that when they think about nature or climate and they're thinking about the pressures that we face and they're imagining extreme weather and climate disruption. And some of the things that we're talking about are actually this death by a thousand cuts piece. ***How do you think about the differences in those two categories? And what do you wish more people understood about the state of New Zealand's natural capital and maybe how many paper cuts we've already had?***

James Palmer

So, I do think that severe weather events in some respects are useful for drawing people's attention to environmental change. And when we've had cyclones, for example, people have seen the huge amount of soil loss that then ends up on our floodplains and in our houses and in our coastal environment. So, what that draws people's attention to is our highly erodible land, the lack of forest cover, and how vulnerable those landscapes are. So, I think those events do draw attention.

One of the things that I love about The Circles work is that what we've done in a number of our projects in recent times is we've brought together sectors.

So when individual businesses operate in isolation of either the wider sector in which they're operating or the wider community they're operating in, it's really easy to discount everything that's happening around them in terms of other forces that might be impacting on their businesses, but also the impacts that they might be having downstream. So, by sectors coming together and thinking about their common interests, particularly in terms of common resources, but also how across the supply chains there are those dependencies and changing circumstances, lifts them up from the immediate business to actually thinking about that wider context.

And the most recent work that we've done in the Bay of Plenty on natural capital resilience is an example of going from the sector scale to place-based, going to regional scale and understanding how all of the different sectors and parts of society are all actually intimately interwoven and interdependent on one another when you're in place.

And so, I think by The Circles we're connecting people, lifting up and thinking about common challenges, we can actually start drawing people's attention to those things that are happening, perhaps little slices all over the place, which add up to an awful lot, but are hard to perceive either at individual business or individual community scale.

Izzy Fenwick

But uh for you, that must be another challenge as well with MfE where entities or regions might think about climate or adaptation as being just like too big to even know where to start.

We know there are some solutions in coming together and looking at it as a region. But how are you thinking about advising or enabling organizations or communities to start thinking about, not just thinking about, been thinking about it for a minute, you know, starting to really implement adaptation at scale.

James Palmer

Yeah, so I think the severe weather we've had in recent years and the growing awareness around climate crisis is meaning that our communities do have this in mind. I think more so on adaptation, particularly for Aotearoa and New Zealand, than necessarily mitigation. People have a sense that we're relatively small in the global scale of things in terms of our contribution to climate change, but they also know that we're incredibly vulnerable as a country.

Partly that's to do with our geology and our geography bottom of the South Pacific and we're a country that gets a lot of rain, gets a lot of weather, a lot of wind and those sorts of things. So, we are very vulnerable, and we've built our towns and cities on floodplains, on river mouths, on coastal margins because that's the sort of country that we are. So, we've got a lot in harm's way, and I think people understand that.

The next thing is for them to have a sense of what they can do differently. the things are all falling into place on that now. So, a national policy statement on natural hazard management is going to be issued very, very soon. And that will direct councils to work closely with their communities. There's also going to be a requirement to develop adaptation plans with communities, particularly starting in our most at-risk areas and to help communities understand what are the choices and trade-offs. We have a national flood map that's rolling out, which is just the first of a number of data inputs to help communities make those decisions. And I think what's really exciting for me about the Adaptation Challenge is it is notwithstanding the fact that there will be a lot of damage and there continues to be a lot of impact on our communities. There is the opportunities for us to actually rethink the way we actually live with our rivers, with our coastal margins, with how live with our mountains, how we think about how we stitch our landscapes together.

Thinking back to the *Nga Uru Ora* book and the pre-human state of Aotearoa New Zealand, I like to do the thought experiment of if you imagine this country before humans arrived, and we know that forest covered every part of the country, that forest cover and everything that happened within those ecosystems had evolved over tens of millions of years to develop their own strength and resilience - there has always been severe weather and we know that severe weather and flooding had hit these countries, this country long before people arrived. But you had a landscape that had evolved to be incredibly well knitted together. So, our soils and our hillsides were very knitted together by the forest cover and they had the ability to withstand heavy rainfall without major devastation and destruction.

So, as we've cleared the land, somewhat arbitrarily, so we've used the match and we've used the axe, and we've done that often with cadastral boundaries that bear no resemblance to the biophysical flows underneath. We've put our towns and cities, as I said, on our floodplains and on our river mouths. And we've often taken our wetlands, know, 90 % of the original wetland cover of Aotearoa New Zealand has been drained. Now those wetlands are crucial for absorbing rainfall and water, slowing it in the landscape, filtering that water as well. So that natural infrastructure was actually quite critical to protecting us. We didn't understand that during the early periods of development. In fact, New Zealand's development was characterised by a heck of a lot of drainage and flood schemes. That's basically how councils were first created here. Communities got together in the face of flooding and said, we've got to build stock banks, we've got to drain these areas so we can grow and develop.

That's been great in terms of providing land for horticulture and lands for our towns and cities, but it's also made us incredibly vulnerable. So, the opportunity now with the adaptation planning, and this is where the Circles work around natural infrastructure is so exciting, is to invest into and build back into our physical infrastructure, more natural infrastructure that captures water, slows water has those co-benefits for biodiversity. And we actually think in a more sophisticated way about how do we actually build back our resilience and strength into our landscapes so that when the severe rainfall comes, all the winds, or we go through drought periods, that our landscapes don't crumble and fall apart and end up flooding our towns and cities. So that's the work that we're embarking on. And we see some great examples around the country of communities starting to do that and understanding that water is not a problem to be piped away and removed. Actually, it's a source of life, but it does come with hazards. And so, if we treat it with respect and we think about how to make space for water around our towns and cities, we can live, you know, we can live symbiotically with it.

And in many respects, we've been living off a period in which we've been able to extract from our natural capital, we've been able to create risks to our resilience without ultimately, as I've heard you talk about, the invoice arriving. Now the invoices are arriving now. And so, what that means is that the economic case we're taking action becomes just stronger and stronger. And so one thing that I'm actually just confident about, and it's a shame, I wish I didn't have to be confident about this, but I am confident about the fact that what we know from climate science is that the bills are going to get greater, and that's going to be costly.

But that's going to drive a reprioritisation about where we put our investment and the types of things that we invest in. And ultimately, I think our response to that can drive a much greater degree of long-term resilience for our communities and for our economy, and also can be good for nature. And so, I really think that we're at a point where the innovation potential and human beings are extraordinary innovators. We are so good. And that's what's got us into this. Because they're almost too good.

Izzy Fenwick

Too good, absolutely.

James Palmer

But now the opportunity is for our innovation to actually turn its mind to these challenges. And there are great examples of that. I think we'll see more and more of that.

Izzy Fenwick

Very cool. I also saw recently um that the World Bank had, kudos to whatever resources they've got, they've managed to find a way to kind of put a value on the world's ecosystem services and they valued it at 179 trillion USD, which is greater than the whole world's GDP.

Does MfE play in that kind of ecosystem services space, like trying to kind quantify for advisory purposes as well, quantify the ecosystem services that we're currently getting for free that the invoices will come for eventually and kind of what that might look like for a country like Aotearoa, New Zealand?

James Palmer

Yeah, so in the past we've done a number of pieces of work that have sought to quantify that. The numbers are often really large, and they can be quite challenging for people to really gain meaning from. So, what we're now focusing is downscaling that to really understand what informs decision-making at a much more local scale. And so, I think our understanding of the value of our ecosystem services as a country is still emergent, and we've got quite a lot of work to do in there.

And I think that's where The Aotearoa Circle in particular can play a really strong role. That's information that needs to go to our business leaders and decision makers. And so, the Ministry can play a role in that, but actually I

think a lot of the data and understanding actually resides in our industries and communities. And that's one thing that we're really excited about our work around data and digital is our partnership opportunities. There's so much information that's held outside of government that historically we have not tapped into because government and industry have kind of stood apart somewhat on these challenges and this is absolutely what the Circle is all about.

Izzy Fenwick

I know because I heard it from you know the horse's mouth but it's also sort of in our mandate that the Circle was very specifically for public and private collaboration and you know it's not nothing without that but that is like a real core part of its mandate and I'd like to hear from you why you think that was baked in from the get-go. You've kind of alluded to it a little bit, but why is it so important and what makes that so unique for the Circle that is a critical part of who we are and what we do?

James Palmer

You alluded to it before, Izzy, in terms of no one person can solve and that we're all in this together and that it's a question as much, if not more, about what happens in the economy than what government does.

Government can enable, but government ultimately can't do. And so, think what we recognise is that historically, many of these debates around our natural resources, our natural capital, our environmental sustainability, have become a little bit of a football between government and private sector and should government regulate more or should the private sector lead more.

And I think what our founders recognised is that this kind of passing backwards and forwards was not helping very much actually. And what we need is a sustained effort and approach. And I think by building partnership and relationships between public sector and private sector, we can build the basis for an effort that kind of endures through different political cycles, that can accommodate the different preferences that different governments will have but is ultimately about people sharing the resources that they've got, their perspectives and helping one another so that the total effort is more than the sum of the parts.

Izzy Fenwick

You chair The Aotearoa Circle; we are very lucky to have you. And so you're involved in the work that we're doing here and then you're obviously involved in the work that's happening at MfE. How does each kind of complement each other? Like think it is interesting to look at the. partnerships that MfE are involved in and how it's not a competitive approach to how are we going to move the dial in some of these ways. It's how are going to complement each other? And I think the Natural Infrastructure Plan from the Circle is probably quite a good example. That's not a new concept to you that we're trying to work on. So yeah, what's it like for you to kind of sit across those two things or how does each kind of complement each other, those uh partnership opportunities.

James Palmer

So it's hugely complementary to our work because there's a bunch of things that we don't have the resources to do and all of the partners and those that have contributed to the work of the Circle over the last five years have done work that you know we have not had the resources or central government has done so that's been hugely complementary.

It's also gone into spaces where it may have been harder for government to go because the private sector has found it easier to welcome in a collaboration that involves many parties and it's not as if central government's turning up to tell or central government's turning up to figure out how to regulate an outcome or something like that.

So, it's created the environment in which there's been additionality to our work very much. But also, back in the other direction, it's created inputs into our work that's helped us understand the perspectives of business the opportunities that we have in sectors and also now increasingly will be in regions and in place to think about how our policy and legislative settings and the advice that we give supports greater action, particularly by our industries and our companies that really lead out in the space.

Izzy Fenwick

Is there anything in that large scale policy change that's happening or coming soon that you would like more people to kind of understand. And I'm thinking, we haven't really talked much about the RMA. Is there anything kind of in that space that you want people to know or think about within their businesses or within their individual lives about some of the large-scale kind of change that may or may not be coming?

James Palmer

This is a huge area of potential, but also with some challenge for the country as a whole. The Resource Management Act 1991 has been with us for 35 years. look, everybody's got a war story about it, and everybody's got an opinion about it the RMA was really well-intentioned legislation, but it was very complicated.

It was very processed heavy, created quite a big burden. And it was a reaction to the National Development Act and the 'Think Big' era where almost by design the legislation slowed down decision making and brought a lot more participation, a lot more information burden in, all of which was really well intentioned. But we really overdid it. And in that sense, it then took up to a decade to change a regional plan, to introduce new rules. There are many examples with really good developments, particularly in renewable energy, for example, where getting a resource consents take an awful long time.

There's many examples where people are frustrated and slowed down progress. And so, as we've evaluated the performance of the RMA, it hasn't delivered particularly great environmental outcomes. It stopped some of the absolute worst pollution that had occurred previously, but it hasn't tackled some of our harder and more systemic issues.

And it has also created a lot of cost. And probably for me as Secretary of the Environment, one of the greatest concerns is that we lost the social license for our most important environmental legislation. And so, when you could stop people in the street and say, have you heard of the RMA? And just about everyone will say yes. And what do you think about it? And most people will say, there's a problem there. We've got a problem as a country where we don't have support and buy-in for that important legislation.

So, the change that we're going to go on as a country is adopting a system that lifts up the threshold of the things that we worry about and narrows the focus. The RMA tried to do everything. It tried to accommodate all the well-beings of society we could possibly wish for and do that very comprehensively.

The reality is that we're a small country with just over five million people. We're not actually particularly wealthy and we've got scarce resources that everyone can apply to council, to their planning processes to how much in their business they can put into compliance and all those sort of things. So, what's most important is that the new system focuses on the things that really matter and worries less about the stuff that really doesn't matter.

And so, when I've looked at the RMA's performance over the last 35 years, I've seen a regime that over-regulated the under-reported and under-regulated the more important. And it also just created a process that was disproportionate to the benefits that we were getting or the risks that we were trying to manage.

So, the new system is going to shift the dial on some of that, but it will be a culture shift for New Zealand. We won't necessarily be able to participate in everything. We won't be able to litigate absolutely everything, and we won't be able to complain about everything. So, we do need to accept that ongoing change and development in the economy is not necessarily a bad thing for our environment or for our society and wellbeing, actually as we

continue to grow and develop, we've got the opportunity to make things better. And one of the things that those that have worked on the RMA have remarked to me in recent times, I've certainly observed, is it's been the great do-nothing legislation. It's made it hard to change things. So, in many respects it was easier to stick with the old ways that we produced food or produced energy or did transportation than do new ways of doing it, which is why it was so hard to shift into renewable energy a lot of the time, even though there was an overall benefit for society.

So that's going to be a bit of a journey to go on, accepting more growth and development, but encouraging that to be better growth and development for the future.

Izzy Fenwick

Interesting. I mean, makes good sense, you know, like do what we need to do, focus on what we need to focus on, worry a little bit less about the, you know, low impact, potentially high effort areas. And it got me thinking, you know, and I don't…This isn't a question about what the RMA is going to do or say, but from your perspective, if you had a magic wand or if I gave you unlimited funding, where do you think that high impact areas are for New Zealand? If I gave you free rein, magic wand, what are three things that you would really prioritise energy towards for New Zealand?

James Palmer

Well, I think the first thing is the investment in that data and the digitisation for the availability and the analytical grant that we will need to be able to inform better decisions in the future, right?

That's something that as a country we can do a lot better in. There's amazing new tech coming from remote sensing from the sky in our environments, eDNA, all sorts of new technologies that enable us to see the natural world and see our impacts on it in ways we've never been able to before.

So, some really good investment in that and then using things like AI to be able to process that data, visualize it, enable us to make better decisions that is a game changer and so investment in that is a priority for the Ministry. But if I had a magic wand, I'd probably invest even more than the government will be able to do so and certainly doing that with private sector partners. The next thing that is a really big priority in my view and it's urgent is around the vulnerability of our landscapes.

So, we do know that we get a major flood event about every eight months now somewhere in Aotearoa, New Zealand. And we do know that with the changing climate that we are going to see more cyclones, more severe weather. And so, we actually don't have a lot of time to lose to do the adaptation planning that we need to do.

And the really amazing opportunity we have with that is to analyse our landscapes and think about how do we build back in structure to those landscapes. And so, you can think about how our riparian corridors can become not only habitat, they can also thread back together our landscapes over time. I think that is a super high priority and a good return on investment. It's not a small investment. There's a lot that we have to do as a country. But if we do the counterfactual… about the cost on infrastructure and homes and businesses and all of those sorts of things. Even if we look at recent events like Cyclone Gabriel, the cost of that relative to what we were investing. At the Regional Council, I was really proud of the fact that we had a programme around our hill country erosion. We had $30 million we were going to spend over 10 years. That felt like that was a big ask for the council at the time. Cyclone Gabriel caused between nine and $14 billion, right?

And as I stood there in Napier during Cyclone Gabriel watching the whole thing unfold, it became evident to me that the resources we were applying to these challenges were pitiful relative to future losses and what's at stake. So, I think when you combine the shift in information and understanding and then what we can do to build resilience back into our landscape, there is a huge opportunity for us to reconceive of our vulnerabilities and where value lies and where we can put that investment.

Third area, magic wand, if I could really invest it, would be into our indigenous biodiversity. We have this crazy situation as a country where we are going backwards on biodiversity because of animal and plant pests, which we introduce to this country, many of which add little or no value to our wellbeing. They run rampant in our forests, and they are undermining the ability of our landscapes to hold together. Again, this is a big investment, but also when you do the counterfactual, if we don't do the investment, the actual costs are much greater. And so again, it comes to prioritisation, but it also comes to, you know, technology and deployment and also acceptance of some things like 1080, for example, or accepting the fact that maybe we can't have a certain species in all of our native forests there for recreation because of the broader ecological impacts they have. So those are some tough decisions we've got to make as a country. But actually, we know what the solutions are. If we just are prepared to make the investments sustained year on year, we can get on top of that issue. So, it's kind of like its biodiversity, its landscapes, which is about land and water and ultimately what ends up in the coast and then the information that supports all that.

Izzy Fenwick

I have a good news story for you on the benefit of getting rid of pests and predators. And I think it's a nice one because it's also not just government's job to do all of the things all at once all the time. But we've been doing predator and pest control a lot on our place on Waiheke and once we got to a point where we had that under control, eradicated, 10 Kiwis were released onto the property and if that isn't the coolest story ever, this week a baby hatched.

James Palmer

Oh wow, congratulations!

Izzy Fenwick

We have a baby in the island! Isn't that so cool?

James Palmer

That is fantastic. You know the thing that I feel so optimistic and excited about when I hear these stories is that we see time and time again when we actually get rid of the pests, our job is largely done. Because what we see then is mother nature take over, right? And we see the power of our natural forces taking over and doing the restoration, the rejuvenation for us. And so, it really is about unlocking that potential not about us having to, you know, forever in a day continue to invest and invest and invest to restore. So, we've got that to work with. And I think that's one of our superpowers as a country. We've got young geology, we've got incredible biodiversity, we've still got really good remnant areas around the country. And, you know, the nature of our climate that drives a lot of energy into our environment means that actually if we get things out of the way and let nature take its course, we will see this country, you know, knit itself back together and restore its ecological integrity, you know, in ways that we can probably not even imagine.

Izzy Fenwick

I could not agree more. Nature, yeah, get out of her way and she can do amazing things. And her, the dividends that she provides or the ROI on the investment of removing those things is so much greater than anything we could reinvest or create.

I want to ask you a little bit about like, the challenge and responsibility of the uplift in ecological literacy or understanding about some of these challenges and the information that we are trying to provide to people because that's obviously a key part to this. And I just think, gosh, there's so much information coming at people. How do you feel about the work that kind of needs to get done in some of those spaces?

James Palmer

So that is kind of one of our biggest, if not our biggest challenge, right? It's how to make what's happening at a global scale be personal and local, what's happening over a decade or longer time scales feel present for people in their here and now. And also, that it's not so overwhelming that they can't make sense of it in their day-to-day lives.

And I think we need to not be also overwhelmed by that challenge ourselves and recognise that society is continuing to evolve and go on a journey. And we've just got to do our best to put these things in front of people when they're ready to, I think there are, you know, people at the moment are particularly preoccupied, understandably, with the cost of living, the economic performance of the country, job security, even challenges with funding our healthcare, etc. So, people will inevitably have concerns that impact them in their daily lives.

Human beings will continue to be concerned about their standard of living. Ah you know, the well-being of their children, the health of their friends and family. All of those sort of things are really important concerns for human beings and they're important actually because they reinforce our awareness of our independence on one another.

The economy we're part of, the community we're part of, how through our taxation and how we support our wider community. I think ultimately that is consistent with the kaupapa here.

Izzy Fenwick

We've talked about a number of things that you, the MfE does or contributes to or plays a role in and I'm thinking I bet we haven't even scratched the surface and I'm wondering if there's anything that you think people misunderstand about MfE, about the Ministry for the Environment, misunderstand or undervalue because some of the stuff isn't front and centre. ***Do you think people have a good grasp on what..***

James Palmer

No, no, we're certainly misunderstood. There's a couple of things, Izzy, I'd particularly mention. The first of which is that when people think of the Ministry for the Environment, they automatically think of the natural environment. They think of our forests, they think of our rivers, they think that we're an agency concerned with that. We are, but the act that established us describes the environment as including people. It's actually society. And it's also what we call our built environment. It's our physical environment. So, it's our towns, our cities, our infrastructure. So as an agency, we are as much concerned with how we build our towns and cities, how we generate our energy, how we grow our food, as we are with how we're protecting the natural world. uh So the environment that we experience day to day as human beings is not just a natural one, it is a human constructed and built in and what's really important is that we actually think about that holistically. Those things, you we have water flowing through our towns and cities and our physical environments that we're dependent on and then the way we use our land or the way we might use our transportation has an impact on our water and then on our coastal environment. It's all connected, right? So, for people to understand that our concern as a ministry and the decisions that we support is about the whole system. So that is really important. The other thing that I think we misunderstood is people think the Ministry for the Environment is probably about stopping development, stopping people from impacting on the natural environment. We're actually about supporting the full wellbeing of our people as a country. And so, what we're really interested in is not a trade-off dichotomy between the natural environment and the economy.

That's a very static view. The truth is, as I said before, we are constantly changing and evolving. We change the way we interact with the environment, change the way we build our towns and cities, the sort of homes that we live in. We're changing the ways we generate our energy, the way we do our transportation. All that is continuing to evolve. So, what we're interested in is the direction of travel, the trajectory, and recognizing that our investment decisions, our innovation decisions are constantly in the process of refining and improving, hopefully, the sort of country that we are. So, we don't see the economy and environment at odds. What we see is actually decision-making in people's lives and people's businesses, all adding up to a mix of natural environment and built environment that can support better wellbeing for the taiao for the natural environment, as well as for people.

Izzy Fenwick

And where are you seeing that trajectory at the moment, is it, and if it's not going in the direction, you'd like it to go in, what would get it to a detractor you'd like?

James Palmer

So, some of the good news is that our gross and net greenhouse gases as a country are reducing, so they're reducing at a headline level, but when you think about the fact that our population is also increasing, and our economy has been growing over the last, actually since we sort of peaked in emissions, in about 2016.

What we're seeing is that we're seeing a decoupling from both population growth and economic growth and our emissions. So that's the sort of divergence we want to see. So, we're actually seeing a decarbonisation of our economy occurring. Huge investment in renewable energy, which is great. We're seeing shifts in transport mode and a big electrification of lot of industrial heat for our big companies too.

So, we are making progress on that front. Similarly on waste, we're seeing our waste reductions falling. So, on a per capita basis, on a GDP basis, we're getting better at recycling. We're being better at reuse of materials and diversion from landfills. So that's heading in the right direction. In both cases, there's more we can do and we're going to have to do more, but they are going in a good direction. Where we're not seeing as much positive trends as we would like is in that biodiversity space. We've just got more to do there, but we've got lots of localised examples, just like your one at your home on Waiheke, where we've turned the tide and we're seeing improvements. So, we know we can do it, that's just a question of scaling up.

Freshwater, it's a mixed bag. We've got some areas where we're seeing some improvements, and that's particularly because of land management interventions, but also things that have been done in our towns and cities around stormwater and around upgrade to wastewater, plants, et cetera. So, we are seeing areas where freshwater is improving, but we've also got some areas where it's in decline too. Again, what that tells us is we actually know what we need to do, we just need to do more.

Izzy Fenwick

So, you highlighted an area that you'd like to be going in a stronger trajectory being biodiversity. I'm such a big believer – and so is the Circle, we're public-private partnership - that the more allies that can get brought into this, the better. That is a good new story. ***What's the kind of leadership, especially from the business sector, that you would like to see? Or what's the kind of encouragement that you could give to leadership in the corporate sector to help with that specific trajectory if you think that that is one that needs a lot more attention at the moment?***

James Palmer

I think one of the things that seems a little luxurious to me as a public servant about working in the private sector is that you have the clarity of working within the confines of your business. Yes, you'll have supply chain dependencies that you need to understand, but you're not necessarily dealing with all of the complexity of the world that we have to in the public sector. And you've also got often a lot more controls over the levers. That presents a real opportunity.

The opportunity is one of focus and business can be really laser-like in its focus about applying its effort and resources. And it's also got control over a lot of those resources. Now, many businesses operate in a slice, if you like, of a larger ecosystem of activity, whether it be economic activity or environmental ecosystem services.

And that's where think businesses are coming together and forming relationships at that leadership level. And the Circle facilitates that. And we see great examples of business leaders forming literally friendships, but also really strong connections where they share their knowledge of what they're doing, their perspectives to build, I guess, an alliance of effort. And then there are those resources that can be mobilised.

I think one of the interesting things about how we think about business is we often think that business is short term, it's profit motivated. But actually, most businesses make really big investment decisions on capital that often has a 30 or 40- or 50-year life. The building plant, it be energy or processing or other parts of infrastructure. So, when you're making those investments, you're actually looking quite a long way out on the horizon.

So, I think business has the capacity, if not the imperative, to be taking a long view around things like climate resilience and where do we need to be as a country. And so, I think what the Circle does by bringing people together and sharing their perspectives and their initiatives within their business, they give confidence to one another about making some of those longer-term decisions maybe just a bit differently by seeing a future that has maybe a different set of challenges, but also a different set of opportunities.

Izzy Fenwick

We've covered a huge amount of stuff today James and I guess I just want to ask you for those listening like what is the one thing that you hope they kind of take from this or what's the one thing that you hope more of the type of audience that we know will be interested in this kind of conversation what would you like them to really take from the conversation that we've had today?

James Palmer

So, I think what's embedded in the challenge that we have as human beings with all of these issues is our ability to lift up and get perspective over longer timeframes, over bigger scales. And I think when you do that, what you can do is you can actually build a greater sense of hope and also an understanding that this is all a marathon, not a sprint. And I know that day to day in our lives, we see examples of things happening and we see decisions that are made, and we can feel like we're going backwards or that we're not getting on top of these issues or that it's all hopeless. But I think that that is a symptom of the very same, uh very localized myopia that we have in our lives that actually cause us to make bad decisions in the first place. So we do need to sort of step back and if people take from this that in doing so, they can see more opportunity, they can see more answers in the way that thing knit together systemically, whether it be in society or in our environment, and that that is where the opportunities lie to actually do things differently. And if we're prepared for the marathon and we run at the pace of a marathon, which is recognising that, you know, there will be hills and headwinds along the way, but actually if we're on a sustained effort, we see enough examples of the solutions and of what people are doing to have some confidence that we can do this.

Izzy Fenwick

Thank you so much for joining us today and for watching that conversation with me and James. And a big thank you to James for joining me today. We have lots more episodes in this series for you to enjoy. So, follow along or subscribe and I will see you next time. Bye.