

# **New Zealand Environmental Campaign Management and News Media Coverage**

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The ability of environmental groups to attract and achieve positive news media coverage is a vital feature of successful environmental campaign management. The environment has become an increasingly newsworthy terrain for journalists but a history of antagonism between journalists and environmentalists, as well as more recent pressures of journalistic staff cutbacks, increased productivity demands, and high rotation of 'rounds', has meant that the cultivation of media contacts remains a challenging task for environmental groups. In the organisation of campaigns, groups must choose their modes of environmental advocacy (Cox 2006) in accord with their objectives, and incorporate an appropriate news media strategy.

This study assesses, through an analysis of two New Zealand environmental campaigns, the benefits and challenges associated with framing the environment in a positive way as a site of celebration where local community formation can occur. The study will also investigate the nature of the relationship between local, national and global levels of environmental campaign management. In addition, the study will analyse the level of alignment or accord between the campaign framing and the subsequent news media coverage, including journalist and source relations, the varying treatments of the campaigns by different levels of media (local/metropolitan/national) and types of media (print/broadcast). While much recent attention has focused on national and global political difficulties associated with the implementation of legislative changes in order to reduce carbon emissions, particularly in the context of the failure of the Copenhagen climate change discussions, it remains the case that many environmental groups continue to implement campaigns that are directed at the level of the local and seek to foster and enhance environmental stewardship through community formation. Such campaigns often seek to frame the environment as a site of celebration and enjoyment, even though they may be informed by a global consciousness about the threats of climate change and the problems associated with an economic system based upon the perpetual exploitation of non-renewable resources. As has been noted previously, framing (Goffman 1974) involves the construction of interpretative schemas, through which issues can be understood: they are 'the most basic process of managing

meaning' (Deetz, Tracy & Simpson 2000). The framing of the environment in such a positive manner, unlike the conventional combative terrain of environmental protests and politics, attests to the importance of environmental groups in the initiation of cultural change as much as political change (Doyle 2008) and their role as 'agents of social learning' (Princen and Finger 1994: 65). The framing of such environmental campaigns in turn raises important issues about the subsequent journalistic reportage of the environment, given that it is less likely that campaign events will be defined by a fundamental conflict between different groups of sources, although the 'good news' value associated with soft news stories can be an important factor in the selection of journalistic content, as Harcup and O'Neill have reminded us in their revisiting of Galtung and Ruge's seminal study of news values (2001: 279).

The two New Zealand environmental campaigns to be analysed here are the 350.org campaign (<http://www.350.org/>) and the Wild Rivers campaign (<http://www.wildrivers.org.nz/>). The 350.org campaign was co-founded by renowned environmentalist Bill McKibben. The number 350 stands for 350 parts per million: the safe upper limit of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere needed to prevent deleterious global climate change. Over 4,500 events occurred across more than 170 countries on October 24, which was designated as the International Day of Climate Action by the 350.org movement, although actions occurred prior to that date and continue to take place. In Sydney, over 1000 people formed the number 350 at the Opera House. In London, thousands of people gathered under the London Eye. Protests also occurred at iconic global sites, such as the slopes of Mount Everest. The events focused global attention on the issue of climate change and highlighted the need for substantive action at the Copenhagen climate change summit.

Events promoting the 350.org message occurred on 24 October 2009 throughout cities and towns in New Zealand: a native tree giveaway took place in Wanganui, a human sculpture of 350 people in the shape of a kiwi was formed in Wellington, a floral 350 design was built in Timaru, and 350 sandcastles were built on Oreti beach in Southland. The main feature of the Dunedin 350.org group was the Spring Food Festival, supported by the Otago Farmers' Market, the Dunedin City Council and the Otago Polytechnic. Features of the Spring Food Festival included an award ceremony for local sustainability 'heroes', the hand-out of 3,000 seedlings, and free community workshops on subjects such as fruit preserving, home-brewing, and composting. Other events in the town included the ringing of church bells 350 times and cyclist and surfer events.

The Wild Rivers campaign seeks to protect the remaining wild rivers of New Zealand under threat from irrigation, pollution and hydro-electricity generation. Rivers are defined as 'wild' if they are isolated or remote, run through mostly indigenous, unmodified landscape, have a natural riparian zone, are a healthy habitat for fish and other ecological life, and have a high water quality. Fifteen rivers were highlighted on the Wild Rivers website including the Mokihinui, the Motu, the Kaituna, and the Nevis. The Wild Rivers campaign was initiated by a coalition of groups including Forest & Bird, Fish & Game, Federated Mountain Clubs, Whitewater NZ, the Council of Outdoor Recreation Associations of NZ, the NZ Rafting Association, the New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers, the Environment and Conservation Organisations of NZ and Mountain Bike NZ. The campaign was initiated earlier in 2009 but the analysis here focuses on the organisation and media coverage of a national day of events, titled 'A Day on a Wild River' held primarily on the 28th and 29th of November. Ten events, featuring kayaking and rafting, fishing, nature walks, and picnics, were held around the country. Green Party co-leader Russel Norman took part in a kayak slalom on the Hurunui River, and West Coast/Tasman National MP Chris Auchinvole was involved in rafting along the Matakaitaki River in the Buller region.

The 350.org and the Wild Rivers campaigns were selected for analysis partly because of practical issues of timing, with each campaign occurring in the latter part of 2009. More substantively, the two campaigns had similar organisational structures: they had a national focus (although 350.org was also a global campaign) but the national co-ordination was relatively loose with local organisers retaining a high level of autonomy. The campaigns also had a similar strategic orientation, organising events that celebrated the environment and involved local communities in positive, 'fun' actions that were presented as not overtly political. Both campaigns are also ongoing campaigns but the respective days of action provided the opportunity for more targeted analysis. As noted, the Wild Rivers campaign involved a coalition of established groups but the 350.org movement arose specifically in the lead-up to the Copenhagen climate change talks.

The analysis here is based upon interviews with campaign organisers and journalists who reported on the events, as well as questionnaire responses from local organisers of the Wild River events. The 350.org analysis focuses more on the specific actions of the Dunedin group although news media coverage of events around the country was also analysed. The Wild Rivers campaign interviews were limited to personnel from Forest & Bird—the country's largest independent

conservation organisation and a leading group in the campaign. Interviews were conducted with campaign organisers both prior to and after the campaign events. This sequence of interviews enabled an assessment of how accurate the campaign organisers were in their judgements about the strengths and weaknesses, both of their campaigns and the media responses. The interviews were loose, broad-based conversations although certain key topics—such as media awareness, relationships with journalists, news values, organisational interaction—were addressed in each interview. In addition, national media monitoring of both campaigns was conducted, and a textual analysis was undertaken of the collected television, radio and print news stories.

## **Campaign Management**

### **350.org**

The 350.org campaign was run across global, national and local levels. The New Zealand office was staffed by five people, including a media publicist for the six weeks preceding October 24. The media publicist position was funded by the global organisation. In addition, a raft of volunteers helped in the campaign, including lawyers who established the organisation as a charitable trust. The national office co-ordinated activities in the South Pacific, in addition to events in New Zealand. While the relationships between the local, national and transnational levels of environmental campaigns can be complicated (Rootes 2007), national 350.org team member Marie Canny (2009) noted that the national office and the campaign were 'quite autonomous' from the global organisers: 'In general we've created our own little thing here.' In particular, an initiative that saw 350.org promoted in schools was exclusive to New Zealand.

While the campaign was a global phenomenon, attracting international media coverage as a global event with footage and reports of the diversity of events in global metropoloi and far-flung centres, it was also, at least in New Zealand, a campaign that was organised primarily at the local level. The national office primarily assisted and supported regional and local initiatives after an initial push to establish local organisers. As national team member Sophie Jerram (2009) noted: 'This is such a fluid organisation that every region has formed its own strategy... There wasn't any centralised control, we're essentially a hub.' Such a view was supported by Dunedin 350.org team member Susan Smirk (2009a) who noted: 'We're pretty

much running off our own steam, we probably haven't had as much contact with the national organisational team as we could and should have.'

The management of the Dunedin 350.org campaign was substantially defined by the novelty of the group which was comprised largely of young, energetic activists who had responded to the global initiative of McKibben (who visited Dunedin and New Zealand in April to promote 350.org). While group members had prior environmental activist experience, the absence of a pre-existing organisational structure helped energise group members and attract news media interest, according to Smirk:

I think [the novelty of the campaign] does enhance the newsworthiness. We've popped out of nowhere, especially with environmental things I think the public and journalists get tired hearing from the same groups. (2009a)

While a team of about five contributed to the media strategy, it was community mobilisation, rather than news media coverage or government policy change, that was the primary goal of the Dunedin 350.org campaign, according to Smirk:

I think the priority is definitely the community education side, and we do try and pull that back to the 350.org message of using that to send a message to the government, but I do think in Dunedin we've deviated fairly far from that and it's very much community education, but I think more than that community participation. Everyone will be involved in more ways than just turning up. I think that getting the [media] coverage hasn't been the key part of it. It's the secondary side of things. (2009a)

While media coverage was not the primary goal of the campaign, the group's media strategy was nonetheless carefully implemented with consideration of journalistic story requirements, the framing of reportage, and the differing news agendas of individual media outlets. Most of the group who worked on the media strategy had prior personal media experience or prior dealings with journalists and this informed their approach to journalists:

Every time I write something it is in mind of how [the journalists] will receive it and how it'll pop up on their e-mail whether it'll catch their attention. I guess it is about making it as easy as possible, because a journalist's day is hectic and it has to hit them in the right timeframe as

well, if it's too far out from the event and if the contact details are not clear it just gets dropped. I'm definitely aware of it. (Smirk 2009a)

The group was also aware there was a need to balance the political nature of the campaign with the community focus and that the latter approach would be deemed more newsworthy by local news organisations:

We wanted to get the message out there in an accessible way and in a less hard line way particularly because we thought the media would be more interested in that. In terms of the coverage you get you tend to get one sentence in there which says: "350 is about the safe level of carbon in the atmosphere", but at least perhaps people will pursue that idea and are accepting rather than reading the headlines that's too political and you switch off. (Smirk 2009a)

More particularly, the group was also cognisant of the different readership profiles of newspapers and how the event could be best promoted across different types of media. The group sent different story lists to the regional metropolitan daily newspaper *Otago Daily Times* and to the local Dunedin newspaper, *The Star*. Similarly, the local radio station, MORE FM, was offered 30-second promotional slots for the Spring Food Festival and the local television station, Channel 9, was targeted just prior to the Spring Food Festival when good pictures of preparations could be provided.

Gaining coverage for the 350.org campaign was also made easier by the relatively small size of Dunedin, a factor that facilitates the establishment of contacts with journalists. Smirk (2009a) noted:

I know a few people, not very strongly, but I've come across them through other events and they've been on my list cause they'll recognise my name. Hopefully they won't trash it. People I've sent stuff to is largely based on people I know or who I know will be interested in covering this area. ... It's the same journalists covering most things and I think it seems to me that they have quite a bit of autonomy and if you do shoulder tap them they will say, 'yeah I'll cover that'. They don't have to run everything through their boss.

Such observations seem to support earlier findings (Craig 2007) that the smaller size of communities can sometimes help facilitate the establishment of good relations

between environmental groups and journalists, particularly when contrasted with larger metropolitan centres. It is also interesting to note that while it was commonly acknowledged across both the 350.org and the Wild Rivers campaigns that the high rotation of journalists made the establishment of long-term, trustworthy relationships difficult, it was still possible, within a shorter time-frame and based on more superficial contact, to use personal relations with journalists to help enable campaign coverage.

## **Wild Rivers**

As noted, the Wild Rivers campaign involved a coalition of established environmental groups including Forest & Bird. As with the 350.org campaign, the Forest & Bird national office provided support and advice about media management but the events around the country were primarily organised by local volunteers. Forest & Bird Communications Officer Marina Skinner (2009a) said:

I sent out a media release template earlier this month and most of them have worked with that putting their own details in. I've given them suggestions about when they're contacted what to do, that sort of thing. ... But really how people used my template and guidelines was up to them. Most of the people organising events are volunteers so really it's a matter of how much time they've got as to what to do.

While the communications staff at Forest & Bird are professionals, the media experience of volunteers across the organisation's 50 branches varies considerably, according to Skinner (2009a): 'Some of them are dynamos and have monthly columns in community newspapers, they really know their local journalists but some are just not as experienced'. The five questionnaire responses received from local Wild River event organisers suggested a comparatively good level of media experience with three groups claiming at least one individual with some kind of practical media experience while the other two groups drew on years of experience in promoting environmental causes as one respondent stated: 'There is no previous media experience, although we are building on quite a few years of experience within our group'.

Both the national Forest & Bird office and the local event organisers claimed their campaign management was assisted by good media contacts and relationships with journalists although there was also an acknowledgment that good contacts did not

necessarily translate into news media reportage. Marina Skinner (2009a) noted that she regularly kept in touch with environmental journalists but the high turnover of environmental reporters meant it was 'quite difficult to maintain relationships'. This was supported by one of the event organisers who said:

We generally have good relationships with the news media professionals and cultivate relationships directly or indirectly. However, there seems to be a high turnover in media professionals so it is more difficult to maintain ongoing relationships.

Respondents again noted that relationships with journalists were assisted by the smaller community size:

This is a small town, and we have found the paper very approachable and open to reporting on our activities. ... I would say that in our small community nothing achieves getting people on board like a personal phone call.

The biggest difficulty in the Wild Rivers campaign management was the isolation of most of the events. The national campaign organisers invited journalists but did not arrange transport. The isolation of the events, coupled with the weather and other competing news stories, meant it was uncertain what level of news media coverage would be obtained:

Question: What problems does the isolation of the rivers create in getting journalists out there?

Answer: It does cause quite a few problems because most of the events were well away from cities with TV crews. I don't know exactly which events they are going to cover. I've suggested that the Hurunui is going to be a particularly fun event and its got Russel Norman who will be in a kayak. I've been highlighting that. The Hutt River event, which I'm involved with, is also relatively close to Wellington. I've suggested that that might be an easy one to cover. I've been in touch with the TV channels, national radio. They all have something scheduled but I don't know exactly where and which newsrooms will be involved. (Skinner 2009a)

While noting that all types of media were important, Skinner (2009a) acknowledged television coverage was a priority for the campaign:

Everyone wants TV first. Despite what people say about the importance of online I think everyone wants TV first. This is a visual event so it provides opportunities however the remoteness is a hindrance.

Alternatively, local event organisers said local community newspapers were their priority although they sent media releases to a wide range of media outlets, including community radio and local television stations.

As with the 350.org campaign, the Wild Rivers events were primarily framed as community-based, 'fun' events where engagement with the environment could be celebrated rather than more conventional political protest actions. As Skinner (2009a) noted:

It's not a conflict story, it's a fun story, part of the news value will be in having ten events happening this weekend ... I think there is value in the fact that it is a nationwide event and that there are quite a few events. ... We are not even particularly saying a great deal about conservation and protection... Of course, at the events we've got a lot of material we're going to be saying that 'the river may not always be here so look out for it'. We are really not focusing on conflict.

That said, Skinner (2009a) believed that the news media were still primarily attracted to environmental issues when conflict was evident:

I suspect that you don't get as much coverage with positive actions. I think that conflict and something outrageous is going to win out every time. However that's not the sole reason for organising an event. It's not purely about the media. There are a whole bunch of other things as well. It's about community, or a particular branch of volunteers.

Such comments highlight a couple of important points about media management in environmental campaigns. Firstly, media management is only one factor in a mix of reasons for the implementation of campaigns. While news media coverage in environmental campaigns is vitally important in the contexts of mediated public life (Craig 2004), environmental communication analysis needs to be cognisant that the organisation of campaign events is also influenced by other factors, such as community mobilisation and group support. Secondly, both campaigns analysed here, as well as previous findings (Craig 2007), suggest the extent to which media management of environmental campaigns is informed by the differing priorities of metropolitan and local community-based media. The former are primarily interested

in presenting the environment as a political issue and as a site of conflict, while local media are more willing to present the environment as a site where community formation occurs and a celebration of the distinctiveness of 'the local' can be represented. The environment, then, is often framed differently across media levels with the deployment of different sets of news values. This claim will now be explored in the following section, by analysing the news media coverage of the 350.org and Wild Rivers campaigns.

## **News Media Coverage**

### **350.org**

The news media coverage of the 350.org International Day of Climate Action in New Zealand reflected the particular organisational structure of the campaign. The local organisational focus resulted in widespread coverage in local and regional newspapers while the coverage in the larger, metropolitan newspapers was comparatively limited. There was a high degree of uniformity in the kind of coverage the issue received in the local and regional newspapers, framing the issue as a 'softer' news story, highlighting the local community celebration, and usually including some pictorial coverage of the events. Nonetheless, the environmental basis of the campaign, including an explanation of the significance of 350, as well as the broader global environmental and political contexts, were also usually noted and placed relatively high in the news stories.

The Whangarei *Northern Advocate* (23 October 2009: 4), for example, showed a picture of smiling children putting their feet up to the camera, with a headline of 'Best foot forward for climate', referring to the banner of footprints that had been constructed as a way of urging people to reduce their carbon footprints. The lead paragraph explicitly linked local actions with the global event:

It promises to be the biggest climate-action event in history, and Kerikeri's hoping to be one of the first places in the world to make its voice heard.

The second paragraph provided further detail about the global actions and the forthcoming climate change talks in Copenhagen. The third paragraph again linked the community celebration with the serious global environmental concerns:

Kerikeri event organiser Geert Dierick said tomorrow would be a fun, family day with a serious message—that world leaders need to aim for a CO2 level in the atmosphere of 350 parts per million, or risk runaway climate change. The current level is 389ppm and rising.

Such stories highlight the problematic distinction between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ news (Tuchman 1972; Lehman-Wilzig and Seletzky 2010), and, while criticism might be made that the ‘soft’ news treatment of such stories risks reducing the most serious global environmental crisis to a generic community festival celebration, it can also be suggested that the campaign’s desired aim to ‘get the message out there in an accessible way’ (Smirk 2009a) was successfully realised in such news stories.

Equally, the complexity of such texts can be elucidated with an analysis of the quotations of event organisers that reveal the variable ways the agency (or lack of agency) of community members is represented. Often, the 350.org event is presented as raising awareness in order to prompt future environmental action:

“We’re trying to get everyone aware of global warming so we can get people to do something about it,” student organiser Alex Gordon said. (*Wairarapa Times Age*, 22 October 2009: 3)

The proximity of the Copenhagen climate change talks to the 350.org events also structured a communicative process whereby community members were represented as ‘concerned’ and wishing to communicate their desire for their governmental representatives to act at Copenhagen:

We’re wanting to raise awareness, especially among community leaders, of the extent to which ordinary people are concerned about what’s happening to our climate ... to encourage them to take firm action in Copenhagen in December. (*Weekend Press*, 24 October 2009: 7)

These [events] are sending a message to the Government to make them aware that we want a strong stand at the world summit meeting this December in Copenhagen [Denmark]. (*Malborough Express*, 27 October 2009: 3)

As the following quotations suggest, when community members were explicitly represented as taking action, such action was variously portrayed: sometimes as material actions (giving away trees, growing and buying food), sometimes with a

subsequent symbolic dimension (remembering why trees were planted), and sometimes as inadvertent actions ('Without people even realising it'):

Mr McDonald said giving away trees was an appropriate action for a climate change event, as trees absorb carbon dioxide. "But we'd also like people to take the trees home, plant them in their gardens, and remember what it stands for." (*Wanganui Chronicle*, 22 October 2009: 1)

"Without people even realising it, they are lowering their food miles and carbon footprints by using their own food grown in their or their friends' vege garden, or buying produce from the Saturday morning markets," said Kirsty Gaddum, spokeswoman for the Gisborne arm of 350 Aotearoa. (*Gisborne Herald*, 21 October 2009: 3)

In Dunedin, the 350.org campaign was featured prominently on the front page of the *Otago Daily Times* on the Monday after the Saturday Spring Food Fair. Featuring the headline, 'Dunedin embraces international climate action day', the article was dominated by a large, striking colour photograph showing people arranged in the shape of the number 350 on the grounds of the iconic Dunedin railway station. As with the other local and regional newspaper stories, the article was a brief and simple account of the local event, while also noting the environmental significance of 350. Both the *ODT* and the local newspaper *The Star* also featured stories about 350.org in the week prior to the Saturday events.

In contrast to the coverage by local and regional newspapers, the larger metropolitan newspapers, and in particular the Sunday newspapers following the day of action, provided little coverage. Commenting on the national media coverage Sophie Jerram said: 'I was pleased with what we got but I was disappointed with a couple of major papers, the Sunday papers' (Jerram 2009). *The Sunday Star Times*, for example, condensed the national actions into a one-paragraph story in the national news digest column (25 October 2009: 2).

The variability in the news coverage of the 350.org campaign also occurred in the national television coverage. On the news bulletins of the Saturday of the campaign events, TVNZ's *One News* (24 October 2009) limited their coverage to a brief picture story in the weather segment, whereas TV3 News included an extensive story by reporter Jono Hutchinson that was the fourth-featured story in the bulletin. Hutchinson said both the visual appeal as well as the political significance of environmental issues contributed to the coverage of the story: 'It was very visual. It

suited the medium quite well and with Copenhagen coming up environmental issues were very much at the fore of our news coverage. ... As a national broadcaster those kinds of political issues are very much on our radar' (Hutchinson 2009).

The narrative structure of the *3 News* story included an initial explanation of the significance of 350 with an explicit acknowledgement of the objectives of the environmental groups: 'The organisers of today's events want this number to stick in your mind' (*3 News*, 24 October 2009). The national scope of the actions was then covered with footage of various events before a linkage was made with the politics of global climate change, with Hutchinson reporting that he had called John Key's press secretary to ask about the Prime Minister's attendance at Copenhagen and the government's targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. In this sense, the desire expressed in the local newspaper stories to 'send a message' to government leaders was realised by the national television reportage. In turn, the story ended with Hutchinson making explicit the conflict between the government and the 350 protesters commenting that 'those involved in campaigns like this one here today say [government greenhouse gas emission targets] ... are not nearly enough to get us down to that magic number of 350' (*3 News*, 24 October 2009).

The TV3 news story adopted a national (and international) focus on the 350.org campaign and reported it as a political, 'hard' news story, but television coverage also replicated the local and 'soft' news reportage that occurred in the local and regional newspapers. Maori TV's programme *Te Kaea* provided a short news story about the 350.org campaign, using pictures from the 350.org gathering at Mt Eden (26 November 2009), and it also ran a longer story about a Northland primary school's education day about global warming (24 November 2009). In the latter story, the pictures showed children engaging in activities on the education day and the framing of the story emphasised the Maori stewardship of the land, as well as the educative and generational significance of climate change. The channel 9 local television news programme in Dunedin featured the local 350.org events as its lead story in the bulletin of the evening prior to the Saturday events (23 October 2009). While the story outlined the forthcoming events and included extensive footage of the Otago farmers' market where the Spring Food Festival was held, the story was introduced through a foregrounding of the global scope of the International Day of Climate Action and the scientific explanation of the significance of 350.

Dunedin 350.org team member Susan Smirk had been expecting good local coverage of the day of action given 'it fits all the criteria for a good Dunedin news

story in terms of being community participatory, family focused and positive' (Smirk 2009a), and her hopes were realised in the local print and television coverage. Smirk commented:

With such a fragmented wide event it was difficult to get all the different parts covered. I think each outlet covered the main ideas and introduced or explained what the number meant and what the political message was behind it. I think mostly it was good coverage. (Smirk 2009b)

The Dunedin 350.org campaign was marked by vigorous enthusiasm, but Smirk admitted that their media management did have some failings. Closer to the event the campaign team distributed fewer fully developed press releases and more brief story ideas with contact details of specific event organisers. While this strategy realised a range of stories in the *Otago Daily Times*, it was not always successful:

[The story idea strategy] fell through slightly with *The Star* who were keen to follow something each week but the contact people didn't get back to them and being journalists if they don't get it first time they just let it go. That turned out to be not such a successful idea. (Smirk 2009b)

The campaign team's difficulties with media relations also surfaced during the Spring Food Fair. *Otago Daily Times* journalist Edith Schofield said she encountered difficulties talking to group leaders on the day of the Food Fair:

I tracked someone down and he had five minutes and then he had to run off and do something else. It would have been nice to get a few more quotes so I didn't have a lot to work with. (Schofield 2009)

Alternatively, Jono Hutchinson from TV3 said he was impressed with the 350.org national organisation. He received several press releases, was well informed by the 350.org organisers who also dropped off video footage to the TV3 Wellington office:

They were certainly well organised. Obviously it was a global initiative and the 350 campaign had been running for a while so they had built quite a lot of background info and online resources. ... I could see it was a huge coordination effort. (Hutchinson 2009)

## Wild Rivers

The Wild Rivers events received comprehensive coverage in local and regional newspapers throughout the country but the campaign was largely ignored by the metropolitan daily newspapers and totally ignored by national television news. In this sense the structure of the campaign's news coverage was similar to 350.org where the local organisational focus yielded strong local media coverage. The lack of news coverage at a national level may seem surprising, particularly given the number of events around the country, but the lack of imminent threats to the status of the rivers in some sense diminished the news value of the campaign. Marina Skinner from Forest & Bird said it was disappointing the campaign did not receive television coverage but acknowledged this was partly due to the community focus of the events:

They're recreational events. They are not hard hitting news stories and it's more likely to get coverage in the [local] area. (Skinner 2009b)

As noted, the campaign was primarily promoted as a fun, community day and the news stories were primarily framed in such a manner:

More than 200 people turned up to celebrate a day out on the Mohaka River on Saturday (*Hawkes Bay Today*, 30 November 2009: 3).

About 150 Wairarapa residents came together at the Waiohine and Atiwhakatu Rivers on Sunday to celebrate the region's wild rivers (*Wairarapa News*, 2 December 2009: 1).

This framing of the events often highlighted community participation in river-based activities and also community education about the rivers:

Upper Hutt College year 9 pupil Michael Bird learnt how to paddle in a deep pool in the Hutt River, and attempted to make his way up a small rapid, helped by expert kayaker Paul Schofield. "It's fun," Michael said. "I like the rapids best."

Eel feeding on the Pakuratahi River was popular with children, who loved stories from Kiwi Conservation Club officer Jenny Lynch about the epic journey eels make at the end of their lives to breed in the Pacific Ocean (*Upper Hutt Leader*, 2 December 2009: 20).

The framing of the environmental campaign through the mobilisation of the news value of personalisation featured most strongly in an *Otago Daily Times* story that featured a photograph of a Whitewater NZ conservation spokesman with his baby daughter. The photograph caption, 'Glenn Murdoch wants to help protect wild rivers so they are still there while his daughter, Maia Kerr, grows up' (7 November 2009: 21), supported the story's lead paragraph:

"The real reason I do it now is for her," Whitewater NZ conservation spokesman Glenn Murdoch says, nodding down at his 3-month-old daughter Maia (7 November 2009: 21).

These types of 'soft news' treatments of the Wild Rivers campaign did not, however, preclude articulation of the broader national environmental politics associated with the future of the wild rivers. Indeed, an explicit linkage was often established between the local celebration of the rivers and their perceived threats from development and hydro-electric dams:

A WILD rivers celebration day will be held on the Nevis River this weekend, as part of a nationwide campaign to draw attention to the plight of New Zealand's remaining wild rivers, many of which are threatened by hydro development (Lakes District & Central Otago News, 26 November 2009: 3).

The Kaituna River is a haven for native fish—and a playground for humans. And that's why Forest & Bird is opposing a proposed dam, which it says will spoil the area. (Bay of Plenty Times, 4 December 2009: 26)

The Wild Rivers news stories did not receive as prominent visual coverage as the 350.org campaign, despite the obvious pictorial possibilities in such scenic locations, although this may be explained by the practical difficulty of obtaining such photographs in remote locations. In contrast, the aerial 350 group photograph that occurred frequently in that campaign coverage was a more easily constructed photo opportunity.

## **Conclusion**

The study of the 350.org and Wild Rivers campaigns has demonstrated an accord between the environmental group promotion of their campaigns and the news media

framing and reportage. The organisational structure of the campaigns was similar with a national centre providing resources and broad media guidance to a wide range of local, amateur organisers who retained a high level of autonomy in the running of the campaign events. Supporting previous research (Craig 2007), the local environmental groups had relatively productive and harmonious relationships with the local journalists who provided coverage of the campaigns. This is not to deny that local campaigners were sometimes frustrated by lack of responses or lack of interest from individual journalists and news media outlets. Similarly, individual journalists sometimes expressed a belief that the media management of environmental groups could have been more professional.

The local organisational focus was reflected in relatively good local news media reportage while the level of metropolitan or national media coverage for both campaigns was comparatively limited. Campaigners sometimes expressed frustration with the cynicism of metropolitan and national journalists and editors who prioritised conflict and the presence of celebrities in their judgements about newsworthiness. The local news media coverage of the campaigns occurred primarily as print media reportage, supporting recent research about the geographical foci of environmental news by different types of media, with newspapers the preferred source for local environmental news (Lacy, Riffe and Varouhakis 2007; Riffe and Reimold 2008).

The 350.org campaign was marked by variability in the television news reportage at the national level, and responses from campaign organisers as well as journalists suggest that the responsiveness of individual journalists can be a factor in event reportage. Caution should be expressed about such a judgement: the 350.org campaign was a single campaign, and there was uniformity in the national television response to the Wild Rivers campaign, and uniformity also in the local newspaper reportage of both campaigns. Nonetheless, the analysis of both campaigns does suggest that claims about the standardisation of the news need to be balanced with an appreciation of personal relations with individual journalists as a factor in attracting news media attention, particularly at the level of local news media.

The generally harmonious and productive relationships between campaigners and journalists that were exhibited in both the 350.org and Wild Rivers campaigns was partly facilitated by the lack of direct political or community conflict in both campaigns. Much of the history of environmental reportage has focused on protest activities or the difficulties of translating scientific process and knowledge, including

assessments of risk, and these approaches have incorporated considerations of the role of primary definition and the hierarchy of sources (Anderson 1997; Allan, Adam and Carter 2000; Manning 2001; Smith 2000). The campaigns analysed here were organised primarily as community mobilisation and education events and, as such, the environment was presented not so much as a site of political struggle but more as a site of celebration, fun and community formation, as well as environmental group coalition formation. Of course, both campaigns do fundamentally arise out of political conflict and struggle—global climate change and the Copenhagen talks, as well as the potential threats of hydro development—but both campaigns did not encounter direct political opposition. As such, both campaigns, seeking to mobilise public participation and opinion, might be viewed as early stages in a narrative of campaigns that would ultimately engage in conflict: protesting more directly against weaker climate change legislation or the damming of a river by an electricity company. In this sense, it might be appropriate to note the differing roles of environmental groups with regard to their role in relation to media coverage across different stages of an environmental campaign (Hansen 1991: 451). More specifically, this study has demonstrated the significance of what I believe is an emerging trend of framing the environment through the perspective of local community lifestyles and, as such, there is a need to give greater scrutiny towards the journalistic presentation of the environment through ‘soft’ news stories.

In both campaigns the presentation of the environment as sites where the community can gather and celebrate was an important framing of the environment. This framing is initially prompted by a primary objective of engendering public participation, underlining the importance of embodiment in environmentalism (Carolan 2009). News media coverage was an important but secondary objective in both these campaigns, and in this sense it partly explains the difficulty the campaigns sometimes had in attracting journalistic interest. Importantly, however, when media coverage did occur, the positive media presentation of the environment as a site of celebration, fun and community formation provided a strong and attractive image that was beneficial to both campaigns.

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