

[Previous Story](#)[Next Story](#)

Article rank | 11 Jan 2017 | The Press

Ministry of Looking Good

Where's the honesty on water?

As a freshwater ecologist and passionate environmentalist you would think I'd have a natural affinity for a government department named the Ministry for the Environment and that I would work with them for the environment. While I have worked with and for them, now much of what they do just makes me angry.



PHOTO: ALDEN WILLIAMS/FAIRFAX NZ

A sign warns of toxic algae on the banks of the Wai-iti River at the top of the South Island.

Over the past few decades this ministry has been captured by politics, concentrating on making the policies of the government of the day look good. This phenomenon is happening at central and local government and is known as "agency capture".

Exemplifying how it manifests in the environmental arena, there is now a standard formulation initiated by Ministry for the Environment (MfE) and used by most regional councils for making freshwater states and trends look better than what they really are. Below is an abbreviated example of how it works:

Usually, the first trick is to make it look like there is considerably more water available than anyone could ever need or possibly pollute. This is done by presenting the total annual rainfall and then revealing the comparatively small amount of that taken for irrigation and industry. The implication being that all the water not used is "wasted".

In reality there is no such thing as "wasted water". The natural full flows are what shaped the river valleys, the morphology of the rivers and streams, and everything about them, including the life in them. The rivers and lakes evolved together with their biology over millennia with full natural flows. Every drop taken has an effect and the other unmentioned impact is that the water that is taken makes its way back into waterways in a much poorer state.

The next trick involves shifting the goalposts and claiming after applying less strict limits that there is no problem. You simply set the limits for pollutants to match the most degraded waterways, and then you can write state-of-the-environment reports showing how most of the sites have acceptable levels of pollution.

A great example of this goalpost shifting, ironically under the banner "A fresh start for freshwater", is MfE's radical weakening of the limits for nitrogen in water (which in many parts of New Zealand is the most significant freshwater pollutant).

The long-accepted and scientifically robust Australasian (Anzecc, 2000) standard to protect freshwater ecosystems from algal blooms is less than half a milligram – 0.44 mg/l – of nitratennitrogen per litre of water.

Under the new MfE regime, the allowable level has been set at 6.9 mg/l (15 times Anzecc guidelines). The associated "water quality bands" for nitrate are farcical; sites with nitrate levels more than double the previous (Anzecc) limit score an "A", while sites with more than four times the old limit score a "B" and those with up to 15 times the limit score a "C".

A very similar process to this nitrogen example occurred with human health protection in freshwaters. The data show that more than half of all monitored sites fail Health Ministry guideline levels. To get rid of this embarrassing statistic MfE shifted the minimum standard from "contact recreation" to "wadeable". This sleight of hand combined with the nitrogen trick meant MfE could then write in its "Environment Aotearoa 2015" report that most sites meet the standards for human health and nitrogen levels.

The third trick in the formula is to fiddle with trend statistics to make it appear that there is no change in water quality, implying that things are not getting worse. To do this you select a short time period from a long data set, thereby reducing the number of data points analysed so the possibility of any change being picked up is drastically reduced. For example, MfE use only the last 10 years of records from a 25 year data set sampled annually. By doing this it make it virtually statistically impossible to get a statistically significant change.

This misrepresentation of reality has a name: agnotology. This term was coined by Stanford University's Robert Proctor, who studied the antics of the tobacco industry. The definition of agnotology is: culturally induced ignorance or doubt, particularly the publication of inaccurate or misleading scientific data to spread confusion and deceit, usually to sell a product or win favour.

It's not just our environment ministry indulging in agnotology; the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) is up to the same tricks when it comes to fisheries. To see the contradictions for yourself compare both Forest & Bird's "best fish guide" and the recent fish dumping reports from independent Auckland University researchers, with the MPI reports and webpages.

Recently a team of young New Zealanders (Choose Clean Water) presented to the Local Government and Environment Select Committee their 14,000 strong petition to have swimmability as the bottom line for rivers, rather than wade ability. Instead of being supported by MfE, the agnotological formula of spin and denial described here was trotted out by MfE staff to the committee.

I have come to expect agnotology from industry but it makes me angry when it comes from "public servants". I'm especially angry when a dedicated group of young people are undermined by the ministry tasked to support them.

It is especially galling when you consider that the toxic legacy of freshwater pollution spun and denied by the ministry will most impact these young people.

Covering up and spinning the reality of environmental degradation fails us all. Am I asking too much to expect honesty from government departments?



► Dr Mike Joy is a senior lecturer in environmental science/ecology at Massey University.

This article was shared by a user of PressReader - an online source of publications from around the world. PressReader contains copyrighted material, trademarks and other proprietary information. Receipt of this article should not be interpreted as grant of any licenses express or implied, to the intellectual property of PressReader or publishers of publications presented. PressReader - Connecting People Through News PressReader, 200-13111 Vanier Place, Richmond BC V6V 2J1, Canada Phone: +1 604 278 4604 © 2003-2017 NewspaperDirect Inc. dba PressReader. All rights reserved. Terms of Use: <http://care.pressreader.com/hc/articles/206528495-Terms-of-Use> Privacy Policy: <http://care.pressreader.com/hc/articles/205818089-Privacy-Policy>

[Previous Story](#)

[Next Story](#)