

The Reluctant Eco-Hero

Vicki Buck has just been named by the British *Guardian* newspaper as one of 50 people who can save the planet and she has a message for the tourism industry – “Business as usual is no longer an option.”

She says it was “flattering” to be included on the influential *Guardian* newspaper’s list of “50 people likely to save the planet”.

But after a long career in local politics – in 1975 she was voted onto the Christchurch City Council at just 19 years of age and later spent nine years as the city’s mayor – she says she knows better than to believe any hype.

“I found the whole thing with *The Guardian* a bit embarrassing actually when I read it and saw what everyone else was doing. I thought the others were really impressive.”

A *Guardian* panel, taking nominations from key environmental figures, met to compile a list of its ‘ultimate green heroes’ and the list makes impressive reading.

Vicki Buck makes the cut next to anti-whaling activist Paul Watson, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, United States politician Al Gore, Australian rocker-turned-Environment Minister Peter Garrett, actor Leonardo DiCaprio and a host of scientists.

The article describes Vicki Buck as the “acceptable face of biofuels”, through her work with Aquaflow, a small company which harvests wild algae from sewage ponds, then extracts fuel from it suitable for cars and aircraft. She helped set up eco-website celsias.com, which contains information about environmental projects and initiatives worldwide, and is a director of NZ Windfarms and Carbonscape. A newer project involves work to reduce methane emissions from animals.

As her own interest in climate change started only four or five years ago, her admiration is reserved for those people who have committed their lives to environmental change.

Her work as a company director has brought her into contact with “stunningly clever” scientists, engineers and technicians living and working in New Zealand. Vicki Buck’s interest is to try to help bring these possibilities to life. “The people I have been involved with in building these companies are hugely fun, and very energising. It means that these companies have a tremendous energy. It’s been a steep learning curve but a lot of fun.

“The more you learn about climate change the more scary it is. In many ways I’d really rather not know about it.

“But once you do know about it – you have to try to do something. I can’t think of anything more important actually.”

But Vicki Buck is quick to point out that she is far from being an environmental leader or eco-warrior.



Above Vicki Buck

“Change is not something that committed environmentalists will achieve by themselves; it actually needs action from all of us.”

Her message for the tourism industry is clear: “Business as usual is not an option. That time has gone.”

The cost of fuel is going up and flying here will only get more expensive; the supply of airline fuel from traditional sources is probably near or past peak.

Visitors from other countries, like Europe, are already taking the environment seriously and they will rethink their holiday choices, in terms of both where they go and what they do when they get there, she says.

“I think tourists will become increasingly aware of their own carbon footprint as they fly thousands of miles to get here and then travel by car when they get here.”

Her advice to operators is to get on the front foot and do something.

“I think that things will change far more quickly than we are anticipating and those are the changes in behaviour we need to anticipate.

“Instead of being overwhelmed, find the things you can do at home or in your business, and make a start. Probably the first step will show the second.”

The celsias.com website is full of bright ideas from around the globe.

But be sure to make it meaningful, she warns. “People will be increasingly aware of ‘greenwash’. If you claim you’re doing something and you really aren’t, the blogs on the web will out you very quickly.”

Take a look at www.celsias.com for some fresh ideas and projects worldwide.