2 THE IMPORTANCE OF LANDSCAPE

Landscapes are a touchstone for where we have come from, who we are and how we relate to the world around us.

What is ‘landscape’?

‘Landscape’ is a complex concept. The English word is over 400 years old and derives from the Germanic word landschaft, and subsequent Dutch word landschap, which referred to a geographical area of human occupation. Over the subsequent centuries the meaning of ‘landscape’ has evolved to encompass many differing concepts. The two most widely used are the character of an area defined by the way people live and the scenery. The scenic and natural component of landscape has historically received the most policy attention in New Zealand and the tension between the different concepts of landscape continues in landscape assessment practice today (Swaffield and Fairweather 2003: 79-80; Grant 2003:191).

More recently, a concern has developed to protect New Zealand ‘cultural’ or ‘heritage’ landscapes, which reflect the inter-relationships between people and the environment over time. They may be significant to Pakeha, Maori and/or other cultures. Stories can provide a powerful link between the present and past human relationships with the landscape (Sims and Thompson-Fawcett 2002: 261-262; Department of Conservation (DoC) 2002).

Landscape, as the concept has evolved, means more than just what we can see. It is an important nexus of the interaction between humans and nature.

This study investigates the management of landscapes that are important to New Zealanders. The term ‘important landscapes’ is used in the report to encompass those landscapes identified as ‘outstanding’ under section 6(b) of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), significant under section 7 and important to ‘promote the sustainable management of natural and physical resources’ under section 5.

Why are landscapes important?

Natural and cultural landscapes play a critical role in enhancing our social, cultural, economic and ecological well-being. They help to define the uniqueness of New Zealand as a country and underpin our sense of place, who we are and where we have come from. They also form the core of the New Zealand ‘brand’ which attracts tourists to the country and helps to sell New Zealand products overseas.

The presence of accessible natural landscapes provides the opportunity for people to escape the pressures of modern living, to get back in touch with nature, and to refresh their minds and bodies.

The change from rural to urban lifestyles has divorced us from our environment and many people now live in cities, increasingly oblivious to the power of nature. A strong connection to the land can give us identity, a perspective of ourselves in time and place. We can see ourselves as New Zealanders in New Zealand. We start to know who we are by knowing where we feel ‘at home’ [Edgar 2003: 50].

Accessible natural landscapes significantly increase the quality of life in urban settlements. Take the Waitakere Ranges away from Auckland or the Port Hills and Banks Peninsula away from Christchurch and the quality of life in those cities would drop significantly. The quality of life in urban areas is not only important for the well-being of current residents but has been identified as significant in the attraction and retention of members of the ‘creative class’. These talented individuals are critical to economic development in the context of a growing ‘knowledge economy’ (Florida 2002: 218).

Historical landscapes provide New Zealanders with an understanding of earlier relationships to the land. They can encapsulate many layers of stories about the past. It is important to preserve these landscapes as “a nation which does not celebrate its history is insecure and impoverished” [New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHPT) 2003: 5].

For Maori, the landscape provides a critical connection to their deities, ancestors and descendants through whakapapa (Sims and Thompson-Fawcett 2002: 260). Whakapapa encompasses the concepts of ancestry, heritage and history. It incorporates the recounting of stories which link people with the land (NZHPT 2003: 7). For example, Tipene O’Regan eloquently describes the importance of passing on this whakapapa to future Ngai Tahu generations:

“If we have been successful in our delivery, they will look upon a river and know its name and who died there and at a rock and know who was born there and where battles were fought and where peace was made. Most of all, they will care that it was so and cherish the knowledge that those memories are part of their being—of who and what they are as Ngai Tahu people [O’Regan 2000: 231].

Natural landscapes also provide a haven for New Zealand’s unique biodiversity, whether as existing or regenerating indigenous habitats or through opportunities for indigenous species to be introduced into exotic production systems (Meurk and Swaffield 2000).

New Zealand landscapes have long been a source of inspiration for artistic expression. Artists such
as Colin McCahon, Don Binney, Rita Angus, Ralph Hotere and Grahame Sydney have reflected New Zealand’s unique landscapes in paintings (Simpson 2003). Landscapes are also the backdrop of high profile films such as *The Piano*, *Lord of the Rings* and *Whale Rider* and have underpinned the growing success of the film industry in New Zealand. Our landscapes are therefore a powerful source of creativity and support creative industries which are a focus of the government’s Growth and Innovation Framework (Ministry of Economic Development 2003).

Landscapes make a significant contribution to our economy through underpinning tourism. Research carried out by Tourism New Zealand has indicated that the key motivation for visitors coming to New Zealand is their interaction with the landscape. The contribution of tourism to the economy is substantial. Two million international visitors arrived in New Zealand in 2002 and spent an estimated $6.1 billion in foreign exchange (Tourism New Zealand 2003: 1, 7).

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Landscape is also a large component of New Zealand’s clean green image which is a substantial driver of the value of New Zealand goods and services in the international market place. The image is worth at least hundreds of millions and possibly billions of dollars (PA Consultants, 2001: 7).

So landscapes are about far more than aesthetic and cultural identity – important though these are. New Zealand’s economic welfare is intimately connected with the conservation of our landscapes.

**What landscapes are important to New Zealanders?**

Considerable survey-based research has been carried out over the past decade by researchers at Lincoln University on perceptions of, and preferences for, the natural character of landscapes. Little research has been carried out into preferences for cultural and heritage landscapes.

Studies of perceptions of the natural character of landscapes have found strong consensus on which types of landscape are most preferred and which are least preferred. At the most preferred level are landscapes with a high degree of natural character, including modest to high relief, water, tall indigenous forest and no evidence of humans. At the least preferred level are landscapes low in natural character, including urban or production landscapes with buildings and strong geometric patterns (Swaffield and Fairweather 2003: 85). The studies found less consensus in the middle ground, where pastoral, forestry or coastal landscapes contained some evidence of human modification. People tended to fall into one of two groups when evaluating these middle landscapes. The first and larger group, comprising roughly 60 per cent of the population, exhibited a ‘wild nature’ orientation and considered monoculture production systems such as pasture or exotic forestry to be more natural and preferred when compared to built artifacts such as houses. The second and smaller group, comprising roughly 30 per cent of the population, exhibited a ‘cultured nature’ orientation and had a greater acceptance of some evidence of human artifacts, particularly if they were older and picturesque, and visually well integrated within and subservient to the wider landscape. These were considered more natural and preferred when compared to monoculture production systems (Swaffield and Fairweather 2003: 85–86; Swaffield 2003).

It is this divergence of views on what is most important in the ‘middle ground’ of landscapes that has resulted in dispute within processes under the RMA. Yet, rarely is the basis of the conflict articulated.

For example, in relation to the proposal to subdivide pastoral coastal land on the headland of Pakiri Beach north of Auckland into 15 lots, the major issue in contention during the appeal to the Environment Court (Arrigato Investments Ltd & Ors v Rodney District Council A115/99) was the visual impact of residential structures on the coastal landscape. Substantial revegetation of the site was proposed as part of the development. Three landscape architects gave evidence at the hearing. The two who appeared on behalf of the regional council, reflecting a ‘wild nature’ orientation, expressed concern about the negative visual impact of the proposed built structures on the remote beach experience. The third landscape architect giving evidence on behalf of the applicant contested this viewpoint.

The Court, led by Judge Whiting accepted the latter’s evidence and expressed the view that ‘the intrusion of buildings on a ridgeline, even in the coastal environment, is not inherently unattractive’ (paragraph 35) and, further, that pastoral ‘development’ was relatively unappealing (paragraph 43). He considered that the opportunity to return indigenous vegetation to the slopes above Pakiri Beach was more important than any concern about the intrusion of housing and firmly rejected the view that the pasture presently on those slopes was natural and had appeal in its own right.

In contrast, a division of the Environment Court led by Judge Sheppard (Kapiti Environmental Action Inc v Kapiti Coast District Council A60/02) expressed preference for cultivated land as opposed to buildings because it still preserved the naturalness of the area. When applying the
‘permitted baseline test’ to a subdivision proposal on dunes along the Kapiti Coast, the Court found that in respect of production forest:

Apart from the harvest period, a person using the beach or adjacent public track need not have a feeling of being overlooked, or of the natural character of the area having been marred, as one might at the sight of dwellings among dunes (paragraph 125).

From a policy point of view, in order to protect what is important to most New Zealanders, it is important to cater for both sets of preferences when making decisions impacting on important landscapes (Swaffield 2003). The results of the research indicate that most New Zealanders are highly sensitive to structures being built in important natural landscapes and that these need to be very carefully placed and integrated into their surroundings if they are to be placed there at all. Similarly, agricultural activities (such as production forestry) in important landscapes need to be well designed to avoid geometric shapes and hard edges and impacts on key landscape features such as coastal headlands.

Summary of key points

- Landscapes are a touchstone for where we have come from, who we are and how we relate to the world around us. They are a critical component of our well-being as individuals and as a nation. Our unique landscapes provide people with physical and spiritual respite, links with the past and our cultural heritage and havens for our biodiversity. They are also a source of creative endeavour and underpin a significant proportion of our economy.

- Landscape is a complex and partially contested concept. It is clear that most people highly value landscapes which are strong on natural character and lack human artifacts. There is more divergence in the values attached to our ‘middle’ landscapes, those which show evidence of some human modification. Most people tend to adopt one of two viewpoints: either ‘wild nature’ or ‘cultured nature’. We know much less about the importance New Zealanders place on cultural and historical landscapes, although we know they are highly significant to tangata whenua.

- Most New Zealanders are highly sensitive to structures being built in important natural landscapes and these need to be very carefully placed and well integrated into their surroundings if they are to be placed there at all. Similarly, agricultural activities (such as production forestry) in important landscapes need to be well designed and carefully located.