APPENDIX 2: WAITAKERE RANGES CASE STUDY

Introduction
The Waitakere Ranges are located on the western edge of the Auckland region (see Figure 1). They contain one of New Zealand’s last areas of northern coastal forest and are home to around 542 species of higher plants and 150 endangered animals and plants (Waitakere City Council (WCC) 2002a). On the western side lie rugged windswept beaches. On the east, rolling pastoral foothills frame the bush-covered mountains.

The Ranges have enormous environmental, aesthetic, historical and recreational significance for the region (McAlister, 1991: I). They provide an iconic visual backdrop to the growing metropolis of Auckland and an escape from suburban Auckland to an accessible “wilderness” area [Woodward Clyde (NZ) Limited 1997: 3-6]. The Ranges are identified as a heritage area for Te Kawerau A Maki and have significance for Ngati Whatua (WCC 2003a: 37). The bush-covered areas of the Ranges are identified in the Auckland Regional Policy Statement as outstanding landscapes of national and international importance.

Of the 25,870 hectares of land within the Ranges, 65.8 per cent is in public ownership, being primarily owned and administered by the Auckland Regional Council (ARC), with the balance being privately owned (WCC 2002a: 7). Much of the privately owned parts of the Ranges are used for urban and rural-residential living. The Ranges fall within the jurisdictions of the Waitakere City Council and the Auckland Regional Council.

Pressures on landscapes
The main pressures on the landscape in the Waitakere Ranges are the increasing number of houses and associated infrastructure driven by regional population growth, increasing visitor numbers and the spread of weeds. The development pressures are greatest in the eastern foothills, which partly form the area of the Ranges seen from the metropolitan area.

In 2001, 17,658 people lived in the Ranges, an increase of 5.9 per cent since 1996. As shown in Figure 2, this was less than the 8.5 per cent growth for Waitakere City and 8.4 per cent for the Auckland region, but almost double the national increase of 3.3 per cent. The number of dwellings increased 9 per cent during the same period, from 5,724 to 6,237, an increase of 513 dwellings (WCC, 2002a: 6). The population is relatively affluent, with a median personal annual income in 1991 of $26,251, compared with the national average of $18,500.

The population growth has been particularly high in Swanson which is located in the foothills. The area experienced a 20.5 per cent population growth between 1996 and 2001 mirrored by a similar growth (21 per cent) in occupied dwellings. This indicates that growth in Waitakere City has

Figure 1: Location of Waitakere Ranges
been occurring in areas within the foothills, thereby concentrating the impacts on a smaller area that is highly visible.

Although population growth along the west coast of the Ranges has been relatively low, this is probably more due to district plan provisions restricting further subdivision than lack of demand. Continuing strong demand for properties on the west coast is illustrated by the almost doubling of average house prices at popular Piha Beach between 1996 and 2002, from just over $200,000 to almost $400,000 (Piha Property Brokers Limited 2003).

The population of Waitakere City, which in 2001 was 176,200, is predicted to increase by around 61,000 people by 2021, a similar growth rate as that predicted for the Auckland region as a whole. This is likely to increase pressure for development within the Waitakere Ranges. A major threat to the landscape values of the Ranges is the potential relocation of the metropolitan urban limits for the Auckland region (MUL). The bulk of the Ranges is currently outside the MUL but, as residential capacity within the MUL is used up, there is likely to be increasing political pressure to move the MUL westwards into the foothills.

Increasing numbers of dwellings as a result of population growth can cumulatively have a negative impact on the landscape values of the Ranges (see Figure 3). This is particularly the case if they are poorly sited and designed.

As well as accommodating a growing number of residents, the Ranges is experiencing high visitor numbers. It is estimated that the Ranges attracts about 2.6 million visits each year, with Piha receiving up to 10,000 visitors daily during the height of summer. Most of these visits are from people living within the Auckland region, illustrating the important role the Ranges play in the quality of life of people within the region (WCC 2003b: 3). Large visitor numbers can in turn generate increased infrastructure provision such as more roads, carparks, tracks and facilities for rubbish collection and sewage treatment. Such infrastructure itself can have a significant negative impact on landscape values.

The spread of weeds, which compete with indigenous flora, is also a major threat to the landscapes of the Waitakere Ranges. Many of these weeds have been introduced to the area from plantings in residential gardens. Between
1994 and 1998, a survey of residential gardens found a five per cent average increase in the abundance of weed species (WCC, 2002a:12). The problem is increasing as more land is subdivided and more houses are built.

**Identification of important landscapes**

There have been several landscape assessments of the Waitakere Ranges. These include:

- **Wainamu - Te Henga Study** [1978] which records the outstanding landscape qualities, archeological significance and biological diversity of the Wainamu - Te Henga area.

- **Auckland Regional Landscape Assessment** (1984) which assesses and rates landscapes in the region for their quality, based on public preferences.

- **Proposed Ranges Authority Landscape Study** (1988) prepared by Boffa Miskell Partners to assess the visual and ecological contribution that Bethells Road, Te Henga, Piha and South Titirangi would make to a proposed Waitakere Ranges Authority.

- **Landscape Assessment of Waitakere City** (1994) prepared by Boffa Miskell Ltd in association with DJ Scott and Associates.

- **Landscape Assessment** (1997) LA4 Landscape Architects.

The Auckland Regional Policy Statement (1999) assigns a Landscape Quality Value of either 6 or 7 (on a scale of 1 to 7) to the majority of the bush-clad areas of the Ranges and the west coast beaches and classifies them as outstanding landscapes. The foothills area is assigned a rating of 5 and is identified as a regionally significant landscape. The ARC is currently in the process of redoing its landscape assessment, but it is unlikely to significantly change this classification.

The Waitakere City District Plan identifies three outstanding landscapes: the coastal landscapes between Bethells/Te Henga and Whatipu; the coastal estuarine areas between Whatipu and Green Bay; and the Waitakere Ranges proper, including the fingers of bush in the upper areas of the foothills catchments. The district plan acknowledges that key landscape areas for iwi are the coastal areas and Ranges, both in terms of natural features and in terms of the particular way iwi have occupied them in the past. This significance of landscape to iwi was seen as a further major factor in identifying these landscapes as outstanding.

Outstanding landscapes are identified on a separate map within the district plan, but not specifically on the planning maps where they are integrated into the Natural Area layer of the plan. Natural landscape elements, local character areas and iwi heritage areas are also identified on separate maps. The areas adjacent to the outstanding landscapes are recognised in the plan as a buffer area, with their own distinctive landscapes which have value in their own right.

**District plan landscape provisions**

Unlike the other case study areas, the Waitakere Ranges has a long history of landscape protection measures. The transitional district plan, which became operative in 1984, provided for landscape protection zones. Landscape Protection 1 Zone, which applied to large properties on the West Coast, had a minimum lot size of 20 hectares. The Landscape Protection 2 Zone, which applied to the non-urban bush-covered ranges area and part of the foothills, had a minimum lot size of 4 hectares. Non-urban residential zones also applied to parts of the Ranges. The non-urban residential 1 Zone, which applied to more heavily occupied areas including Titirangi, Waipa and Laingholm, provided for a minimum lot size of 2,000 m² for sewered areas, except Laingholm, and 4,000 m² for unsewered areas and Laingholm.

In 1992, the council was dominated by councillors sympathetic to conservation objectives. Preparation of the proposed district plan commenced in-house during 1993 and the plan was notified in October 1995. The notified plan rationalised the previous regime and provided for four main ‘Living Environments’ with the Ranges:

- **Bush Living Environment** which includes bush-covered areas with intensive urban development

- **Waitakere Ranges Environment** which includes bush-covered areas with less intensive development

- **Foothills Environment** which includes the lower elevation land on the east of the Ranges, where large areas have been cleared of bush

- **Coastal Villages** which include the small settlements located on the west coast and Manukau Harbour.

The proposed plan provided for a 4 hectare minimum lot size in the Waitakere Ranges Environment as a restricted discretionary activity, if certain requirements for the location of the building platform were met including avoiding highly sensitive natural areas. The Waitakere Ranges Environment included some areas of land which had previously been given non-urban residential zonings, and thereby significantly reduced development rights in some areas. In the Foothills Environment, subdivision was a controlled activity down to a minimum lot size of 4 hectares or where the density of the subdivision was in compliance with a structure plan. A structure plan for Oratia was included in the notified plan which provided 346 lots compared to 126 lots permissible under the transitional plan.
Smaller lot sizes were provided for in the Bush Living Environment as a restricted discretionary activity (ranging between a minimum of 4,000 and 8,000 square metres). One dwelling per site was generally a permitted use in these areas if it was not located on a sensitive ridge, headland, clifff or scarp as identified on the planning maps.

A similarly orientated council was re-elected in 1999. Decisions on submissions in respect of the proposed plan were released during 1996 and 1997 and the landscape provisions of the plan were essentially confirmed, with subdivision control in the Waitakere Ranges Environment slightly loosened to an average 4 hectare minimum site area and a minimum net site area of 2 hectares. Provisions to protect sensitive ridgelines were reduced. The Waitakere Ranges Protection Society (WRPS) lodged references to the Environment Court on a range of issues including the Oratia Structure Plan. In August 1998, the Environment Court hearing on the Oratia Structure Plan commenced and was adjourned part heard, after the council gave evidence, until July 1999.

In 1998 the development controls in the district plan became an election issue and a council dominated by more development friendly councillors was elected. The council resolved to adopt a more flexible approach to subdivision and to move away from the 4 hectare minimum lot size within the Ranges. It undertook several studies of mechanisms to achieve this, but failed to notify a variation to the plan prior to the 2001 election, when it lost power. The WRPS adopted a largely successful strategy of delaying action on district plan matters until this 2001 election, in the hope that a ‘greener’ council would be elected.

In respect of references on the Oratia Structure Plan, the 1998 council reversed the position which the previous council had taken at the Environment Court hearing and, mid-hearing, reached an agreement with the property owners in the area (Mitchell & Ors v Waitakere City Council A21/2000, paragraph 33). This provided for an average minimum lot size of 8,000 square metres, the downgrading of the structure plan to a guideline document and an extension of the boundaries of the Oratia Catchment. The WRPS and the ARC opposed the council’s position. The Environment Court released a decision on the references in 2000, essentially confirming the approach taken in the notified plan, with some changes. This was a middle position between the more restrictive approach proposed by the WRPS and the very permissive approach proposed by the council and landowners.

In 2001 a council dominated by councillors with a stronger conservation orientation was elected. Structure plans for Birdwood and Swanson were prepared and notified as variations to the district plan. The WRPS lodged references to the Environment Court in relation to both structure plans, along with numerous other parties, and these have yet to be heard. By March 2003 the bulk of the plan was operative with ongoing negotiations to resolve outstanding matters.

The structure plan approach adopted by the council is based on the concept of identifying the maximum carrying capacity of the natural character of the area. This involves demarcating areas of high value, such as vegetation and fauna habitat and landscape areas, and identifying potential development locations that avoid these. It is intended to improve the overall resilience, biodiversity integrity and extent of existing native vegetation and fauna habitat within the foothills (Waitakere City District Plan, policy 2.2).

Interviewees expressed differing views about how appropriate this planning approach is to the area. Proponents of the structure plan approach argued that it applies the effects-based approach of the RMA better than the imposition of minimum lot sizes. Secondly, it enables specific environmental benefits to be obtained through requiring environmental protection measures to be adopted as part of the development consent process.

Opponents of the structure plan process argued that:

- it started from the wrong perspective. Instead of developing a future vision for the whole foothills area, it focused on identifying the maximum development capacity for one catchment at a time, without first addressing the question of whether or not the foothills should be further subdivided.
- the cumulative impacts of the structure plans are not assessed.
- when the maximum capacity for the area is released all at once, areas can change their nature very quickly with negative impacts on the community.
- the approach raises subdivision expectations which may not have previously existed.
- the approach can fail to adopt a precautionary approach and the assessment of development capacity may therefore prove over-optimistic.
- the subdivision approved under the structure plan may simply fuel further demands for more subdivision in the future.

In practice, council officers report some difficulties in obtaining the hoped-for environmental benefits from the structure plan approach, as landowners have sought to change the rules specified in the structure plan when applying for resource consents. This problem was exacerbated by the conceptual nature of the first structure plan for Oratia. This structure plan failed to include roads or house sites, and open space areas were only incorporated at the end of the development process. There are also concerns that landowners may seek more intensive development later down the track and that the flexibility of development control under the RMA may allow this to happen. In order to address concerns about the approach, a review was commenced by council. The reviewers’ report contained 17 recommendations,
including one to withdraw the Swanson Structure Plan (WCC 2003d:11).

There have been many players involved in setting the district plan landscape rules in the Waitakere Ranges. The Department of Conservation has not become involved in landscape issues on private land. The regional council has been active in landscape issues, although primarily at a policy level. The regional council, however, has no landscape expertise in-house and infrequently becomes involved in resource consent applications solely in relation to landscape issues.

The WRPS, which is well resourced with legal and other resource management professionals, has been very active in district plan and resource consent matters. The Society was established in 1973 and now has over 600 members.

Landowners have not been significantly mobilised in relation to landscape issues over the entire Ranges, although there has been local landowner activism in the Titirangi, Laingholm, Swanson and Oratia areas. This may be because many private landowners are lifestyle dwellers and consequently support the ongoing protection of the area to preserve the values that drew them to live in the Ranges.

The Environment Court has played only a small role in establishing landscape protection rules, as the council and other players have actively sought to negotiate settlements over district plan issues rather than resort to a court determination.

**Resource consent processing**

A significant amount of subdivision within the Ranges is obtaining approval. For example, between 1995 when the plan was notified and December 2003, there were 145 subdivisions approved in the four Living Environments in the Ranges. Of these, 55 were either for boundary adjustments or to create right of ways. The remaining 90 subdivisions created an additional 283 properties, of which 199 were in the Foothills Environment [WCC 2003d: 26].

Assessing the cumulative impacts of resource consent applications is reportedly difficult. It is only relatively recently that resource consent processing staff have had information about approved development on surrounding sites and there is little information on development over a broader geographical area. It can be difficult to turn down resource consent applications on the basis of cumulative effects or the basis that the development is out of character for the area.

The Council collects statistics on the processing time for resource consent applications but not on the environmental outcomes of the consents granted. As a result, staff can feel pressured to meet the processing deadlines, rather than take additional time to ensure a good environmental outcome. There has been a very high turnover in the consent-processing team within the Council, with about a third of the staff turning over during the past year. Waitakere City Council does very well on the timing of resource consent processing, reporting that 100 per cent of notified and 97 per cent of non-notified land use resource consent applications were processed within the statutory time frames. However, it has a low notification record, notifying only 0.6 per cent of resource consent applications compared to the national average of 6 per cent (Ministry for the Environment 2003).

**Non-Statutory approaches to landscape protection**

The Council has implemented a range of non-statutory measures to promote landscape protection, within the framework of broader strategic planning. Preparation of a strategic plan for the Waitakere Ranges, titled 'The West Coast Plan', was commenced in 1996. A wide range of community organisations participated in the preparation of the plan whose purpose is to guide responsible authorities in their policymaking and planning for the area. The plan contains a vision, a set of guiding principles, targets and specific actions. A broadly based West Coast Liaison Group has been established to advocate for the adoption of the plan by relevant public agencies (WCC, 2001).

The Long Term Council Community Plan incorporates the Green Network Programme, of which the permanent protection of the Waitakere Ranges is a part. Actions planned for the Ranges over the next ten years include undertaking a study and implementation programme for the protection of the Ranges, raising landowners’ awareness about Ranges issues, developing a visitor strategy for the Ranges, preparing and implementing action plans and monitoring programmes for lake and wetland areas, supporting the establishment of a West Coast Marine Park and developing design guidelines for infrastructure works (WCC 2003c: 72).

**Outcomes**

Although the district plan incorporates strong landscape protection provisions, a considerable amount of further residential development may happen in the Waitakere Ranges under the current provisions. Potentially over 1400 new houses could be built in the area, as a result of previously subdivided lots which have not yet been built on, and new subdivision consents. This is an additional 24 per cent on top of the total number of dwellings existing in 2001 (see Figure 4). This does not take into account potential successful resource consent applications for non-complying activities which could add to this number.
The district plan appears to have been moderately successful in controlling subdivision in the coastal villages. Very little new subdivision is happening in these areas and, under current district plan rules, only about 30 additional lots can be created. However, considerable impacts are likely from the building of houses on vacant properties, with 153 of these being currently available (WCC 2003d: 55). In addition, much larger houses are being built as villages transform from bach settlements to permanent living areas. In response to concerns about changes to the character of Piha, the council is considering a plan change to strengthen district plan provisions.

Much more development is likely on the bush-clad hills and foothills. In the Waitakere Ranges Environment, there are currently 119 vacant lots which could be built on and an estimated 40 additional lots could be created through subdivision. In the Bush Living Environments there are currently 312 vacant lots which could be built on and an estimated 175 additional lots which could be created through subdivision.

The greatest impact is likely to occur in the Foothills, where there are currently 86 vacant lots, but where 562 potential additional lots could be created through subdivision, including provisions in structure plans (WCC 2003d: 55).

Strict control on the location and design of buildings and associated bush clearance is reducing the potential impact of this development, but there may still be negative cumulative effects if such a large number of new houses are built within the Ranges.

The Future

Several people interviewed for the case study indicated that the community appears generally happy with the district plan, with the major exception of controversy over the structure approach adopted for the foothills areas. However, both the Council and the WRPS expressed concern that, after a decade of negotiating the content of the district plan to most parties' satisfaction, it can still be changed at any time through the plan change and review procedures under the RMA. There was also concern that the MUL may ultimately be moved westwards, thereby opening up areas of the foothills to more intensive development.

In early 2003, the Council initiated a project to investigate whether or not the Ranges are well enough protected now and for the future and if not what could be done. The project has involved research and information gathering, community workshops and community focus groups. An action plan is scheduled to be developed by the end of July 2004, with a range of options being canvassed (WCC 2003b: 3).

Conclusions

The Waitakere Ranges is under considerable pressure for further residential development as a result of being located on the fringes of New Zealand’s largest urban area. The area has been recognised as being of regional and national significance and has a long history of landscape protection measures. Under current district plan provisions, considerable further development is provided for in the area. Concern has been expressed about the ability of the district plan to protect the Ranges in the long term and the council is exploring options to strengthen protection.
People interviewed
Interviews were carried out during June 2003

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<td>Chairman</td>
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<td>Gordon Griffin</td>
<td>Resource Planner/Landscape Architect</td>
<td>Waitakere City Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>Penny Hulse</td>
<td>Chair of Environmental Management Committee</td>
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<td>Graeme McCarrison</td>
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<td>Jenny McDonald</td>
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<td>Neil Olsen</td>
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<td>Gary Taylor</td>
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<td>Pamela Wells</td>
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