

Natural Character

7A.1 BACKGROUND

Section 6(a) of the RMA identifies "the preservation of the natural character of the coastal environment (including the coastal marine area), wetlands, and lakes and rivers and their margins, and the protection of them from inappropriate subdivision, use, and development" as a matter of national importance. NZCPS Policy 13 expands on this requiring the natural character of the coastal environment to be assessed, identifying at least areas of high natural character and inclusion of provisions to preserve natural character. NZCPS Policy 14 promotes the restoration/rehabilitation of natural character in degraded areas. The RPS also has policy and methods to identify and preserve natural character and to restore or rehabilitate it where it has been degraded.

Both the NZCPS and the RPS recognise that there is a continuum of natural character. This is reflected in this Plan by the identification of 'outstanding' and 'high' areas in the natural character overlay. Outside of the overlay the Plan recognises that there are other areas in the District where man-made elements/structures have modified natural character. The higher the presence of man-made elements/structures, the higher the level of modification and degradation of natural character. It is these areas of degraded natural character, outside of the overlay, that provide opportunities for restoration/rehabilitation of natural character. Policy is included in Section 7 Coastal Environment and Section 24 Rural Area to address these opportunities.

7A.1.1 What is Natural Character?

The assessment and identification of natural character in the Plan responds to the requirements of the NZCPS 2010, which gives effect to section 6(a) of the RMA. Natural character is the expression of elements, patterns, and processes (naturalness) in the landscape and occurs on a spectrum from pristine (outstanding) to modified. Landscapes with the highest natural character are those which have less human modification and there is a predominance of natural elements.

The term natural character is not defined in the RMA, or in the NZCPS. There are a number of working definitions that have been used in assessments across New Zealand and are broadly similar. The majority follow a working definition of natural character that was developed by Landscape Architects and resource management professionals in a National workshop convened by the Department of Conservation (DOC) on the NZCPS 2010. This definition states:

"Natural Character is the term used to describe the natural elements of all coastal environments. The degree or level [of natural character] within an environment depends on:

1. The extent to which the natural elements, patterns and processes occur;
2. The nature and extent of modification to the ecosystems and landscape/seascape;
3. The highest degree of natural character (greatest naturalness) occurs where there is least modification;
4. The effect of different types of modification on natural character varies depending on context and may be perceived differently by different parts of the community.

Guidance on what contributes to Natural Character is also provided in Policy 13 (2) of the NZCPS which states that natural character may include:

- (a) Natural elements, processes and patterns;
- (b) Biophysical, ecological, geological and geomorphological aspects;
- (c) Natural landforms such as headlands, peninsulas, cliffs, dunes, wetlands, reefs, freshwater springs and surf breaks;
- (d) The natural movement of water and sediment;
- (e) The natural darkness of the night sky;
- (f) Places or areas that is wild or scenic;
- (g) A range of natural character from pristine to modified; and
- (h) Experiential attributes, including the sounds and smell of the sea; and their context or setting.

The RPS provides a definition of natural character:

"In relation to the coastal environment, wetlands, and lakes and rivers and their margins, the degree of naturalness of an area, as evidenced by the degree to which it possesses qualities and features that are products of nature as opposed to products of human activity."

The criteria in the RPS have been used in this Plan to identify areas of high and outstanding natural character:

| BIO-PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS: |
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| Land Forms: <i>reflecting the degree to which the natural terrain, headlands, coastal slopes, reefs, shoals, dunes, beaches and other natural geomorphic 'systems' remain intact.</i> |
| Vegetation type, Cover & Patterns: <i>reflecting both the physical extent of 'native' vegetation cover and the indigenous content and integrity of that cover: a higher proportion of endemic vegetation cover – e.g. from salt marsh to mature coastal/podocarp forest – connotes greater naturalness; conversely a preponderance of production forestry, horticultural planting or other 'exotic' vegetation are associated with a modified/developed environment. Similarly, the greater presence and proportion of the coastal environment that is covered by native species the greater its naturalness.</i> |
| Sea/Estuarine Water Bodies: <i>the greater the presence of the sea and/or estuarine water bodies, and the more intact and unmodified those marine bodies are – including their inter-tidal margins / edges – the more 'natural' a coastal environment is likely to be.</i> |
| Land Uses/Activities/Structures: <i>reflecting the degree to which human activities, structures, buildings, development and land/bush clearance impose their own values on the coastal environment and modify it: the greater that effect, the less natural a coastal environment will be.</i> |
| Habitat Value: <i>the greater the ecological/habitat value of any coastal environment, the more likely that the related presence of wildlife (e.g. gannets, seals, penguins) will evoke a strong sense of naturalness.</i> |
| Natural Processes: <i>the clear presence of tidal activity, estuarine flows, vegetative succession, even natural (not man-induced) erosion, the greater the feeling that the coastal environment is still largely shaped by natural systems; conversely, man-made structures, developments and activities – such as culverts and coastal defences – are likely to diminish such values.</i> |

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| PERCEPTUAL VALUES: |
| Wildness/Wildness/Remoteness: <i>reflecting the degree to which the coastal environment is perceived as being remote from urban/suburban New Zealand and imbued with qualities that make it seem wild and/or connoting 'wilderness'.</i> |
| Experiential Attributes: <i>related to the sounds, smells and the appreciation of other sensory attributes that contribute to the feeling of being at the seaside, within an area dominated by natural elements and processes.</i> |
| Context/Setting: <i>reflecting the qualities of, and degree of interaction with, other parts of the coastline and the degree to which that interaction enhances or compromises the naturalness of the more immediate coastal environment.</i> |
| Transient/Dynamic Attributes: <i>related to seasonal/ daily change, weather, the motion of water, surf breaks, waterfalls, tidal flows, seasonal changes, weather patterns, the presence of wildlife, etc. and the degree to which such exposure enhances the relative naturalness of the coastal environment.</i> |
| Night-time Values: <i>reflecting the extent to which lights, noise, perceived activities and exposure to the sky's star-field affect the perceived naturalness of the coastal environment.</i> |
| OVERALL ASSESSMENT: |
| Overall Evaluation of Natural Character Values: Outstanding - Near to Pristine High Natural Character - Predominance of natural elements (as per criteria above) |

Areas of ONC are the iconic, scenic and wilderness areas largely devoid man-made elements/structures and where the natural environment dominates. Areas of HNC may include a greater degree of modification, however in terms of the spectrum from pristine to modified, the natural environment remains predominant.

7A.2 ISSUES

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Subdivision, use and development can degrade the values and characteristics of the natural character of the coastal environment, wetlands, and rivers and their margins by: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) Introducing man-made elements/structures in areas where these are absent or the natural environment dominates; and b) Damaging or removing areas of indigenous vegetation; and c) Altering landforms and natural contours; and d) Creating 'scars' on the land surface; and e) Adversely affecting the natural processes between inland water bodies, estuaries, bays, sand dunes and beaches; and f) Adversely affecting people's perception and appreciation of the area's natural character. |
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7A.3 OBJECTIVES AND POLICIES

Objective 1

Recognise that there are different levels of natural character in the District and areas of outstanding natural character and high natural character are preserved and protected from the adverse effects of subdivision, use and development.

Policy 1a

Subdivision, use and development in an area of **High Natural Character** or **Outstanding Natural Character** shall consider:

- a) The values and characteristics of the natural character area;
- b) The extent of existing man-made changes to the landform, vegetation, coastal processes and water movement;
- c) The presence or absence of man-made elements/structures, including infrastructure;
- d) The vulnerability of the ecosystem and its representation in the District;
- e) The integrity of landforms and features including ridgelines, headlands, peninsulas, cliffs and streams, rivers and their margins;
- f) The natural appearance, functioning of beach and dune systems, wetlands, rivers and their margins;
- g) The duration and nature of adverse effects of the proposed activity;
- h) The physical and visual integrity of the natural character area;
- i) The cover, pattern, sequence and integrity of vegetation of the natural character area; and

Policy 1b

In areas of **Outstanding Natural Character** subdivision, use and development shall be designed, located and managed to avoid adverse effects on the values and characteristics of the natural character area.

Policy 1c

In areas of **High Natural Character** natural elements/influences shall remain dominant. The significant adverse effects of subdivision, use and development on the values and characteristics of the natural character area are avoided and other adverse effects are remedied or mitigated.

TO BE INSERTED INTO SECTION 24 RURAL AREA

New Policy (location to be determined maybe 5e)

The enhancement, restoration or rehabilitation of highly modified or degraded natural character should be promoted.

TO BE INSERTED INTO SECTION 7 COASTAL ENVIRONMENT

New issue

Areas of highly modified or degraded natural character provide opportunities for restoration or rehabilitation through subdivision, use and development.

New objective

Opportunities for enhancement, restoration or rehabilitation of highly modified or degraded areas of natural character are promoted.

New Policy

The enhancement, restoration or rehabilitation of highly modified or degraded natural character in the Coastal Environment shall be promoted.