

5.6 Coastal environment

5.6.1 Introduction

The coastal environment is an important focus of human activities and aspirations. Many of us live near the coast, we go to the beach, we fish in the sea and, especially for Maori, there are strong cultural associations with the coast and all it provides. It can also be the scene of dispute, reflecting different demands and perceptions of ownership – but fundamentally, the heat of debate shows how important the coastal environment is to all New Zealanders.

The coast is also a dynamic natural environment with unique ecological values. Where these processes and valued natural areas are under the sea – in the coastal marine area – we might be excused for not realising that their presence contributes to a dynamic, diverse and healthy marine environment.

On coastal land, this dynamic environment is more visible. There are ongoing natural processes that, over the years, have built up dunes, eroded headlands, deposited mud in estuaries and formed the characteristic coastlines we see. This constantly changing land is cloaked with distinctive vegetation and populated by birds and insects specially adapted to windy and salty conditions. On coastal land, as at sea, there are valuable natural sites, but they are becoming rarer and damaged as pressures grow with more of us wanting to live near or visit the coast.

The sea and the land are not separate environments. What people do on the land has major impacts on the health of the sea. Rivers bring sediment and pollution from our land use activities in their catchments. Looking after water quality and habitat in the sea requires us to look after the land first. Conversely, the sea can be at times a serious hazard to coastal settlements and property.

Balancing the use and the protection of the coastal environment clearly requires very careful management that goes beyond looking after the rubbish on the beach! Because of the importance of the coast to us all, and because there are so many complex links between land and sea, management of the coastal environment is shared between a number of authorities.



The *New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement 1994* (NZCPS) is prepared by the Department of Conservation for all New Zealand's coastal environment. The NZCPS sets out objectives and guidance on a range of nationally important matters including access to the coast, maintenance and protection of natural character, improving coastal water quality, how appropriate development might be most suitably accommodated, and protection of places and aspects of special value to tangata whenua. The NZCPS is currently being reviewed.

The *Resource Management Act 1991* (RMA) requires that Regional Policy Statements give effect to the NZCPS, and that regional councils prepare regional coastal plans (which reflect and give effect to both the NZCPS and the relevant Regional Policy Statement). The *Regional Coastal Plan for the Wellington Region 2000* only applies to the "wet" part of the coast – the coastal marine area. Management on land is the responsibility of city and district councils through their district plans.

5.6.2 How successful has the Regional Policy Statement been?

As noted above, the *Regional Policy Statement for the Wellington Region 1995* is part of a management framework for the coastal environment. Provisions in the coastal environment chapter derive strongly from the NZCPS, and gave direction and context for the Regional Coastal Plan and district plans. District plans are especially important for coastal care because they manage the dry land part of the coastal environment and the effects of land uses and activities that are either close, or eventually find their way, to the coast and coastal waters.

Until recently, district plans only had to be “not inconsistent” with the Regional Policy Statement. This wording does not encourage active pursuit of the provisions of the Regional Policy Statement. Recent amendments to the RMA (see also next section) now require district plans to “give effect” to the Regional Policy Statement, so it may be expected that there will be greater uptake and application of policies in the next Regional Policy Statement. Having said that, the last decade has seen the successful introduction of provisions in several district plans to provide guidance on where development might occur, and which significant sites and special values should be protected.

In broad terms, the objectives and policies in the Regional Policy Statement are still suitable and have been used more perhaps than other parts of the Regional Policy Statement when considering resource consent applications for subdivision and development in the coastal environment. A notable success in this regard has been the three tables in the coastal environment chapter that specify sites, landscapes and outstanding natural features. There has also been some success in achieving recognition and some form of protection for several nationally and regionally significant natural areas.

The coastal environment is arguably the area of most pressure for development in the region. Coastal locations are highly valued and are commonly the subject of subdivision enquiries and applications. A good proportion of proposals get approval. While district plans and conditions on resource consents increasingly reflect wider community concerns

about impacts of development on a sometimes fragile coastal environment, the bottom line is that a scarce resource perceived as a public asset – the coast – is being steadily developed. To that extent, it is questionable how successful the Regional Policy Statement or the NZCPS have been in relation to managing change in the coastal environment.

5.6.3 What’s changed and what are the coastal environment issues now and for the future?

Besides the continuing, if not accelerating, interest in coastal property, there have been legislative changes since the preparation of the current Regional Policy Statement. There has also been growing interest and participation by community groups in restoration projects and, on a somewhat larger scale, local authorities have made major progress with sewage treatment and discharges into the coastal marine area. In the Wairarapa, the three district councils and Greater Wellington have worked together on the *Wairarapa Coastal Strategy 2004*.

Among the legislative and other regulatory changes are the *Resource Management Act (Marine Pollution) 1998 Regulations*, the *Foreshore and Seabed Act 2004*, aquaculture reform, establishment of the Kapiti Marine Reserve and the likelihood of further such areas (e.g. Taputeranga Marine Reserve at Island Bay). The NZCPS is currently under review and recent amendments to the RMA have resulted in Greater Wellington having new functions in relation to historic heritage and maintaining and enhancing ecosystems in the coastal marine area.

One other significant change, foreshadowed in the current Regional Policy Statement, is climate change. The potential for sea level rise, increased storm surges and the consequential flooding of and damage to coastal property and assets has become a very high profile concern in the last few years. The threats to life and property, and more broadly on the economy and society, carries significant implications for all of the region but especially those who live or work on or near the coast. Given the scale of impacts and the necessity to consider this matter more fully, it is mentioned here, but also in the separate chapter on **climate change**.

Besides the issue of climate change and its effects, what are some of the other enduring or new issues for coastal management? Through the preparation of Greater Wellington's state of the environment report, *Measuring up 2005*, and early discussions for the review of the Regional Policy Statement, the following issues have been highlighted:

- Those areas of land adjoining the sea that have not been developed are either rocky and wild (and not likely to be easily developed soon), or rare and fragile (and under threat from development or its effects). In this latter category are dune systems (in the Wairarapa and on the Kapiti Coast) and "low energy" estuaries (such as Porirua Harbour and Pauatahanui Inlet) which contain delicate habitats where sediment and contaminants can build up as they are not flushed by strong tides or river flows.
- We have four years of data about water quality for bathing and shellfish gathering at 76 locations around the coast. However, we know little about the biodiversity of the coastal marine area – we don't know what is there or its condition. We don't know about the effects of fisheries management on marine habitats or on other species of marine life. Nor do we know the effects of our land-based activities on marine ecosystems generally.
- Risks associated with living on the coast have been made readily apparent in recent years. Besides the catastrophic impacts of tsunamis, there are the more frequent storms that regularly erode the coastline. This process of erosion is natural, but when it comes into conflict with human occupation, there are demands for sea defences and associated structures. In conjunction with considering climate change and sea level rise, we will need to seriously consider long-term land use policy for the coastal environment.
- Several of the above issues (use of coastal water, subdivision and development, pollution of coastal waters) can affect "natural character".

Preserving the coast's natural character, which encompasses landform, vegetation, scenery and ecology, is a matter of national importance in the RMA. However, certain areas of the coast do need to be available for strategically important uses (the port areas are the obvious example). At the same time, there are other activities that do not need to be on the coast (other than reasons of financially capitalising on a marketable asset). The coast is a finite resource and, as it diminishes, a key issue is what development should occur on the coast and how it will affect natural character.

- Access to and along the coast is a statutory consideration. As noted earlier, there is a strong public perception that "the coast" is a community, rather than a private, asset. Meeting public expectations and private property rights, while maintaining legally prescribed access to a diminishing resource will be a complex issue for most authorities to deal with in the next decade.

5.6.4 Comments and questions for you to consider

The Wellington region has mainly an urban population, with many of our urban centres enjoying coastal locations. Concentrations of people, growing numbers of vehicles on transport networks, drainage systems coping with increasing amounts of often polluted run-off, and liquid waste disposal – all of these factors intensify the pressures we put on our coastal environment. Places on the coast where we are not yet living or influencing natural processes and biodiversity by our land-based or coastal activities are rare or non-existent.

Many contaminants from land eventually end up in estuaries and the sea. Different agencies and authorities may have to work more closely on their separate, but linked, responsibilities for land and coastal management.

Question 1:

Do you think we have identified the right issues for the coastal environment? Are there other issues that we should recognise for the coastal areas of the Wellington region?

Question 2:

How effective do you feel coastal management practice has been during the last decade? What have been the main factors that have influenced performance? How can we encourage the good factors and reduce the bad ones?

Question 3:

Where do you think the priority action areas are? Should there be a focus on coastal areas that have high development pressures? Should only special places with high natural character warrant attention while we leave others to change without controls? How should the Regional Policy Statement deal with natural character?

Question 4:

What role do you see for the Regional Policy Statement in coastal management for our region? Would it be helpful if the Regional Policy Statement dealt with the coastal environment by ensuring it is managed in a more integrated way by considering it with related areas such as fresh water, ecosystems, and the urban environment? How might this be done in conjunction with other agencies?

Question 5:

If city and district councils prepared changes to district plans for land use that explicitly managed effects on the coastal environment, would it be helpful if there were more directive policies in the Regional Policy Statement? What guidance does the community need for coastal management? What role do coastal strategies have in managing the coastal environment?