



## Lives and landscapes: who cares, what about, and does it matter??

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Undertaking landscape assessments to inform planning and resource management decisions is not new. With the passing of the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA), however, came a radical shift in focus, purpose, and language. Where the Town and Country Planning Act 1977 focused on the allocation of space, the Resource Management Act focuses on the management of effects. Within the landscape profession there was considerable optimism with the passing of the RMA; planning that separated uses and fragmented landscapes would be replaced by management that integrated uses and sustained landscapes.

While the Purpose and Principles set out in the RMA clearly reflect the need for communities to build relationships with their environments that are both sustaining and sustainable, much of the language and structure of the Act reflects a history of adversarial process and the separation, rather than integration, of interests. Landscape Architects have not been alone in struggles to interpret the language, mediate processes to apprehend the values and meanings communities attach to places, and provide direction to the management of resources. Our efforts have been subject to intense scrutiny, not least by the Environment Court. In spite of the evolving case law and the promulgation of guidelines in 2010, the profession continues to face criticism for a lack of consistency in assessing landscapes to ascribe values as well as in the assessment of the effects of activities. The various statutory processes attract increasing community interest, especially the qualitative dimension of resource management. The 'landscape' is now central to people's concerns. The number of visitors to our country each year is fast approaching the number who live here. Our landscapes frame a visitor's experience of New Zealand, making a vital contribution to our economy as well as the wellbeing of New Zealanders generally.

In order to accommodate the increasing diversity of interests and perspectives, coherent and transparent processes of landscape assessment and management have become critical. In response to concerns raised by the Environment Court a review of assessment guidelines was initiated by Shannon Bray, NZILA president at the time, in 2016. In 2017 some 120 people attended a series of workshops around the country. They were asked to respond to a series of questions. The collated responses are informing a review of our guidelines. This task is being undertaken by two of the professions most experienced practitioners. A draft of the revised guidelines will be circulated among those who have engaged in the review process, as well as representatives of the various professional bodies and interest groups with whom landscape architects engage. This newsletter provides a series of 'think pieces' exploring some of the key questions the review process is addressing.

Landscape matters arise in both sections 6 and 7 of the RMA, as well as policies 13 and 15 in the NZ Coastal Policy Statement. While the overriding objective of the Act is to sustain the character and quality of all landscapes there is a requirement to recognise the significance of particular landscapes in distinct contexts, notably in coastal environments and in landscapes where the impacts of culture have been minimal. 'Amenity' tends to be an important consideration in the management of all landscapes; values attaching to amenity must be identified and sustained regardless of context. All too often our assessments are limited in both their scale and scope so that the effects of a proposal are evaluated within very limited frames of reference. There is a need for us to clarify the language in the Act and to recognise the relationships between the various statutory contexts in order to provide more comprehensive and coherent assessments. And while assessments may identify differences in the character and quality of landscapes, they do not always provide direction to their management.

It is now generally accepted, not least by the Environment Court, that the landscape attributes to be recognised in landscape assessments fall into three broad categories: biophysical, perceptual, and associative. There is also general agreement on critical attributes, and to a lesser extent, how their significance is to be evaluated. The evaluation of significance is often undertaken in collaboration with other experts and specialists, for example ecologists, social scientists, and those with the authority to weave the values and aspirations of indigenous communities into statutory processes. Landscapes are effectively 'summary expressions' of complex relationships, ecological and cultural. Landscape management must therefore recognise and provide for critical attributes and ensure their relationships are sustained.

Landscape assessments, like most resource assessments associated with the RMA, serve two primary purposes; they inform policy development and the establishment of 'bottom lines', and they inform decision makers on the likely effects of proposed developments, and how such effects can be managed. They may also need to address 'cumulative effects', effects extending through time and across space.

Most regions, and at least some districts, have completed landscape assessments in support of their policies. All too often however, assessments undertaken as part of consenting processes do not have the support of clear policy statements and mapped information; assessments are undertaken on a case by case basis in a limited context of effects. The capture and validation of values is often cursory, undertaken with limited consultation, either with other professionals or communities. Consenting processes tend to be adversarial. Development can be threatening for many individuals and their communities. Adversarial deliberations are not ideal for reaching a consensus on the values of a landscape's character, quality, or amenity. The 'effects' of proposals are all too often overstated by affected individuals and communities, and underestimated by developers.

Landscape assessments to fully uncover the values and relationships across landscapes need to be collaborative and inclusive. Humans and the places they inhabit are a reflection of the cumulative effects of activities. Climate change reminds us that we share a commons and our relationships with land, air, water, and one another shape evolving futures. Landscape assessments are becoming increasingly important in informing conversations about such futures.

## Papa-tu-a-Nuku (Earth Mother)

We are stroking, caressing the spine  
of the land.

We are massaging the ricked  
back of the land  
with our sore but ever- loving feet:  
hell, she loves it!

Squirming, the land wriggles  
in delight.

We love her.

**Hone Tuwhare**