



# Natural character assessments and provisions in a coastal environment

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## Defining natural character

The term 'natural character' occurs within the first of eight matters of national importance under Section 6 of the Resource Management Act (RMA). Under the RMA, sustainable management of natural and physical resources requires the preservation of natural character within the coastal environment (including the coastal marine area), wetlands, rivers lakes and their margins. However, the term 'natural character' is not defined.

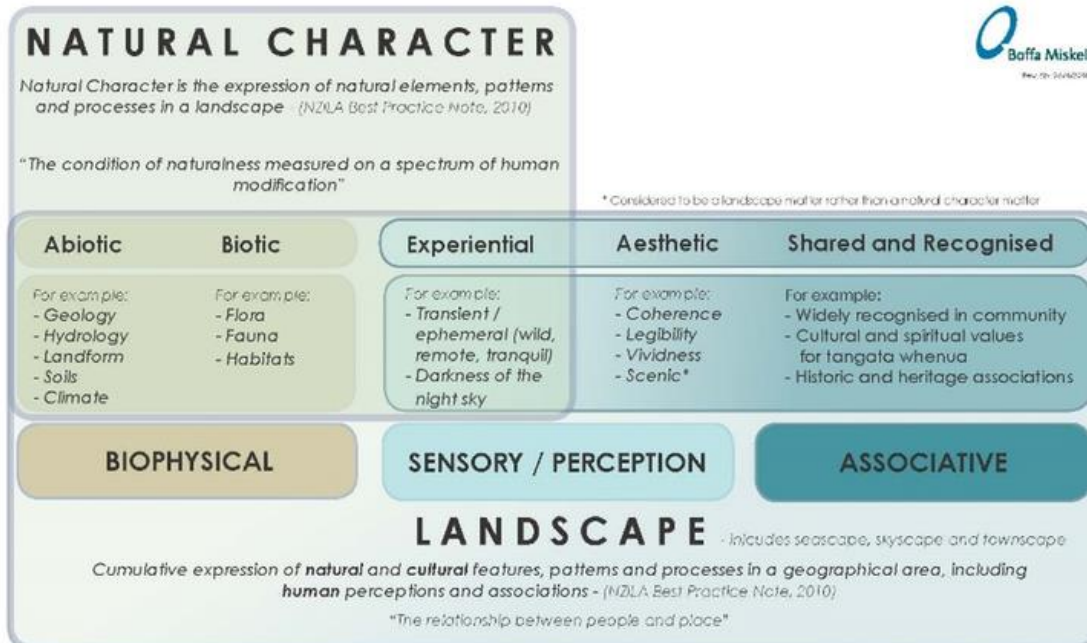
When the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (NZCPS) was released in December 2010, local authorities were tasked under Policy 13 to map or otherwise identify (at least) areas of high natural character in the coastal environment. The NZCPS also introduced the new term, 'outstanding natural character'. In defining natural character, the NZCPS clarifies that natural character is not the same as natural features and landscapes or amenity values and provides a list of eight matters which may apply in Policy 13 (2).

Guidance prepared by the Department of Conservation on how NZCPS Policy 13 is applied, identifies that the degree or level of natural character 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 degree of natural character is highest where there is least modification;**
- 4. The effect of different types of modification upon natural character varies with context and may be perceived differently by different parts of the community**

Whilst such guidance is useful for understanding the concept of natural character, it does not clarify how natural character relates to a landscape assessment. In seeking to clarify this relationship, natural character can be conceived of as a measure of the condition of biophysical landscape attributes. Such condition can vary as a result of levels of human modification and takes account of the way biophysical attributes are experienced i.e. the 'feeling' of being in a wild unmodified environment. By comparison, landscape evaluation considers a broader suite of biophysical, sensory / perception and associative attributes including aesthetic and scenic qualities alongside other shared and recognised values.

## The Relationship Between Landscape and Natural Character



Any natural character methodology must be flexible and adapt to suit different types and scales of coastal environments. The outputs from natural character assessments are enhanced through terrestrial, freshwater and marine ecologists and other natural science experts (e.g. geomorphologists), as well as landscape architects and planners. However, assessing natural character is different to determining whether coastal features, habitats or species are geologically or ecologically significant.

In essence, assessing natural character is primarily concerned with the degree to which biophysical landscape attributes have undergone human modification. In the case of habitats and ecosystems for which human action has resulted in at least some transformation of New Zealand's pre-human condition, assessment should consider how representative the current assemblage of species is relative to its possible natural successional stage. This also recognises that such natural character attributes can be restored or rehabilitated as promoted by NZCPS Policy 14.

### Defining the coastal environment

Preserving natural character within coastal environments requires identifying the extent and characteristics of the coastal environment itself. Policy 1 of the NZCPS 2010 recognises that the coastal environment will vary from location to location and includes a list of nine matters it includes. The coastal marine area (CMA) is defined below the mean high-water spring (MHWS), however the inland extent of the coastal environment can be more difficult to define. Policy 1 recognises that the coastal environment includes "Areas where coastal processes, influences or qualities are significant...". In this context, significant implies not just that coastal processes, influences or qualities are present, but that they form a key characteristic of that environment.

Natural boundaries such as coastal escarpments and ridges can provide a clearly defined and logical inland boundary to the coastal environment. Coastal watersheds can also be helpful. Where structures, such as roads and buildings are evident, these can dramatically reduce the significance of coastal processes, influences or qualities of the coastal environment. In 'flat' coastal areas, the significance of coastal influences may decrease gradually as you move inland. Consequently, mapping these areas can be challenging, and land use, coastal hazard lines and landscape character may help define where the inland extent of the coastal environment occurs.

## Scale of assessment

When defining levels of natural character within the coastal environment, it is important to clearly identify the spatial scale considered. The scale at which the coastal environment is assessed will typically depend on the study area or likely impacts and nature of a proposed development. Within a district or region-wide study, assessment scales may be divided into broader areas which consider an overall section of coastline with similar characteristics, and finer more detailed 'component' scales considering separate more local parts, such as specific bays or escarpments. In essence, the coastal environment can express different levels of natural character, depending on the level of detail gathered and the scale at which natural character is appreciated.

## Outstanding Natural Character

For an area to have outstanding natural character it should exhibit an exceptional combination of natural processes, natural patterns, and natural elements, predominantly unaffected by human induced modification. In practical terms, when undertaking a district or region wide study, this requires re-examining areas or components identified as having at least high natural character and evaluating whether all or part of such areas stand out as exceptional. Transparency of this assessment can be greatly assisted by use of a matrix which sets out indicators which identify where levels of natural character occur across the range of abiotic, biotic and experiential attributes assessed.

Areas of high natural character may also qualify as outstanding natural features and landscapes. However, other sensory and associative landscape attributes must also be considered when undertaking a landscape evaluation which determines whether a natural landscape or natural feature also qualifies as outstanding.

## Assessing Natural Character Effects

The assessment of natural character effects involves considering the change to attributes which indicate levels of natural character. This can be assessed by measuring and qualifying post development condition against current condition. Adverse effects reflect a reduction in natural character condition.



In all areas of the coastal environment, significant adverse effects must be avoided. Whilst the nature of significant adverse effects is not defined in the NZCPS, such effects are more likely to occur in areas with higher levels of natural character proposed to undergo more substantial reductions in condition. Any adverse effect and consequent reduction in condition must be avoided in areas with outstanding natural character. In all other areas of the coastal environment, any adverse effect on natural character must be avoided, remedied or mitigated.

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