

Identifying and managing our seascape



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The sea, as a connected and contrasting element to the land, forms a critical part of our understanding of the world, and our place within it. As such, our understanding of landscape does not stop at the beach. Seascape is the term that embraces this expanded, integrated view; and the obvious place to begin exploring our relationship with the ocean around us.

While the term ‘seascape’ is not new in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is little-understood. Seascapes are a subset of the landscapes that make up our marine and coastal environments; like landscape, they reflect the relationship between people and place. Further, like landscape, they require a level of protection and management in response to different characteristics and values.

Under the *Aotearoa New Zealand Landscape Assessment Guidelines* (2022), produced by the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects and named ‘Te Tangi a te Manu’, landscape is defined as the following:

‘Landscape embodies the relationship between people and place. It is the character of an area, how the area is experienced and perceived, and the meanings associated with it.’

The term ‘seascape’ has some traction because it is referred to in the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (NZCPS) Policy 15, which directs:

“...the protection of natural features and natural landscapes (including seascapes) of the coastal environment from inappropriate subdivision, use and development...”

Landscapes in the coastal environment continue below the water — they do not stop at the shoreline or sea’s surface. They include references to marine bedrock geology and topography, bathymetry, species biodiversity, cultural heritage and aesthetics.

Seascape assessments are not the same as natural character assessments in the marine environment.

Overseas guidance on seascape assessments and seascape sensitivity have assisted in approaches to better understanding the sea from a landscape perspective in Aotearoa New Zealand, to date.

Living on a group of islands, inevitably we have strong links with the coast and sea; seascapes are an important part of our culture and our identities; additionally, they support our economies and quality of life. Therefore, the pressure for development on our coasts and in our oceans is a real issue – which means the need to understand these coastal and marine environments from a landscape perspective, is both urgent and complex.

Drawing on the well-established, predominantly land-focused Landscape Assessment toolkit, ‘seascape assessment’ is emerging as a method for characterising, mapping, describing, and assessing seascape character and values; including whether there are areas that merit specific protection from “*inappropriate subdivision, use and development*” under the RMA and the NZCPS.

The way in which a landscape or seascape can absorb further change or development is described as the seascape’s sensitivity — or its resilience to

the pressures or ‘threats’ from certain kinds of activity. Sensitivity means “the susceptibility of a landscape’s values to the potential effects of certain kinds of activity”.

The upcoming Climate Adaptation Act will place a particular focus on our relationships with our coasts and seascapes. We are only beginning to understand the human impacts of climate change within our coastal environments.

Different seascapes will be sensitive to different pressures due to the distinctions in their particular combination of attributes and values. Therefore, the ability to understand the characteristics and values of seascapes is critical.

Being a marine-focused nation, we use our seascapes in a number of broad ways, from ports and marinas to fishing, boating and swimming. Aquaculture is one of the common development activities in our waters; it has grown rapidly and looks set to keep on expanding. Offshore energy projects are another sector in which we are beginning to utilise our seas. The major threat to seascape values is not necessarily the activity itself; but its location, nature, scale, design or management.

A Seascape study represents a core component of the evidence base needed for coastal and marine spatial planning and policy formulation around aquaculture, not just by identifying the most special or outstanding seascapes, but by teasing out the specific attributes to be protected.

Seascape Assessments offer a robust platform for a finer grained ‘susceptibility’ or ‘issue-based’ assessment, (such as a NZCPS Policy 8 assessment of ‘appropriateness’ of aquaculture in Outstanding Natural Landscapes).

In an area considered susceptible to aquaculture pressures for example, findings could address where to site new developments, whether or not existing developments could be increased, or where existing developments should be removed to improve seascape character and values.

While we look at land and can see the changes, we often pay less attention to the marine environment. Seascape studies are helping to fill the gaps in our understanding and guiding how development can respond sensitively to the quality and variety of our coastal landscapes.

Having undertaken numerous seascape assessments for a number of regional councils and unitary authorities, we believe that comprehensively identifying seascape values and their characteristics will assist consistency in understanding how to manage and protect our seas. Working closely with councils in developing policy direction will provide a level of certainty for all. Additional concerns around climate change also amplify thinking in this space.

Pressure for development and change will undoubtedly put the spotlight on our seas, and with critical understanding, we can together appreciate the seascape as more than just the edge of the landscape.