Rural amenity and character

Above: Belmont Quarry in Lower Hutt.

Claire Kelly, Senior Principal and Planner and **Rhys Girvan**, Senior Principal and Landscape Planner at Boffa Miskell, discuss an issue often faced by quarry operators when expanding existing or establishing new operations – the effects on rural amenity and character.

City-dwellers have come to accept that what they see out their windows, and what they find at street-level, is subject to change. Cities are dynamic environments.

Yet, we protect rural areas through a perceived expectation that they will always look the same, and maintain rural character and amenity for the benefit of rural residents. The opportunity to extract aggregate resource in many places is played against a perceived need to maintain existing values and satisfy residents' expectations.

Rural landscapes are a combination of the natural landform and human introduced elements. The type of rural activity and settlement patterns that overlay these landscapes are the factors that contribute to their character. The rural landscapes of New Zealand are overlain with human influence. Natural patterns are evident and natural systems operate; but rural activities prevail.

The Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA) defines 'amenity values' as "those natural or physical qualities and characteristics of an area that contribute to people's appreciation of its pleasantness, aesthetic coherence, and cultural and recreational attributes".

While it differs from person to person, most agree that 'rural character and amenity' relates to a quiet environment, open and spacious areas with scattered buildings and structures, clean air, low volumes of traffic and a dominance of vegetation along with some area-specific matters.

It can be more complex in the hinterlands around our cities, where many quarries are located; and people have moved to lifestyle blocks or small rural properties to enjoy their 'rural amenity.'

Community expectations can be reflected in district plan descriptions of rural zones. An example is found in the Palmerston North City Council District Plan, which concludes: "Overall the rural area represents a patchwork of activities, some of which are not always compatible with each other, or which produce environmental effects which must, as far as possible, be mitigated".

While our rural zones differ, many district plans also describe rural zones as working environments with activities that produce noise, dust and odour.

If we look at the nature of rural activities, they are a lot more diverse than just farming and agriculture and include quarries and renewable electricity generation; while primary production activities usually have related structures and infrastructure with associated traffic. Therefore, we need to be realistic about our rural landscapes: they are working environments that change over time through human activity.

Managing effects on rural character and amenity

When assessing these effects, it should be noted that a change in a rural area or landscape does not, of itself, necessarily constitute an adverse effect. All landscapes are dynamic and constantly changing over time, in both subtle and transformational ways, and through both natural and human activity. And, it is important to avoid, remedy or mitigate adverse effects through proposed changes to rural land use.

Some local authority plans provide for quarries through specific policies in their Rural Zone chapters but require these to be considered alongside other policies that seek to maintain or enhance rural character and amenity values. This, along with submissions (on notified applications), can lead to councils taking a conservative approach, placing stringent conditions on consents, such as limits on extraction seasons to manage dust impacts that could be adequately managed by dust suppression measures.

Communities may seek that quarries be heavily screened, despite this potentially enclosing an area valued for its openness and blocking views that they purport to enjoy. Put bluntly, it is the prospect of change that can worry people, regardless of the level and effects of that change. In the case of quarries, once it has happened, it cannot be reversed – at least not for a long period of time.

In hinterlands around cities and towns, the number of established lifestyle blocks suggests an expectation that existing amenity values will not be reduced; despite this being a mixed, working environment, perhaps with a significant mineral resource. Christchurch is a prime example of this and exacerbated by the inability to dig deeper than one metre above the highest recorded level of groundwater. This means quarries in the region are many, and comparatively expansive.

We suggest several 'solutions'; but please note that this is not a comprehensive list but food for thought.

Spatial mapping of areas for quarrying

To some extent, when councils zone areas as a quarry zone it involves spatial mapping, but this is generally over existing quarries with a preference for a consenting, rather than a zoning approach. Spatial mapping would require councils to understand and address the capacity of a rural landscape to absorb change, but would clearly identify areas for quarrying and thus provide certainty to quarry operators and the community alike.

Plan provisions

The New Zealand Planning Standards require Councils to adopt prescribed rural zones: General rural zone and/or Rural production zone. Both provide for primary production, but do not necessarily reflect the diversity of our rural areas. We suggest specific policies are needed to provide for and manage the effects of quarries, including provisions which enable appropriate outcomes where proposed.

Alternatively, quarries or areas where quarries are likely to locate could be identified as 'precincts' within the rural zones; with specific policies and rules being applied to provide for quarrying activity. This would enable the community to clearly understand where anticipated rural amenity and character is likely to differ from other parts of the rural zone, and could also enable councils to discourage residential activities within the precinct.

While these suggestions provide a clearer and less contentious pathway for quarries through the consenting process, to achieve this we suggest that the quarry industry needs to speak as one voice with a clear message.

Guidelines/ practice notes

Alongside statutory mechanisms, non-regulatory approaches such as design guides can also encourage good outcomes for several activities. Several councils have prepared such guidelines including Christchurch City Council's Quarry Rehabilitation Plan Guidance (2018). Good design guidelines should be based on a robust understanding of the local landscapes, the character and features that are important and valued, and how activities can be designed in an appropriate manner. The quarry industry could produce its own guidance that councils could use.

Understanding our relationships with quarries

Quarries are an absolute necessity. Without them we would not have roads, housing developments, hazard mitigation, sewerage plants and other important infrastructure.

However, no-one seems to want to live near one or to see one. We suggest that the time has come to stop hiding quarries and embrace them as a vital part of our economy and society, and as part of our rural landscapes.

Yes, they can generate adverse effects but that is why we need to spatially manage our rural areas where quarries are generally located to enable them to operate with moderate constraints. After all, the more stringent conditions applied to quarries and the greater the distance from their markets, the higher the cost of the aggregate.

However, we are not sure this is well understood and the quarry industry needs to enforce this message more strongly in its submissions to councils and through its aggregate producer groups. Maybe developing a virtual tour of raw aggregate to housing development to share with schools and community groups?

Future uses

It is getting more and more difficult to establish cleanfill quarries as the Technical Guidelines for Disposal to Land have further refined the meaning of 'cleanfill', and anything other than cleanfill is subject to expensive monitoring requirements.

We need to get clever about the future use of quarries. Through accepting that our rural landscapes are dynamic, and their character and amenity is ultimately shaped by human activity, then there is scope to be adventurous.

We therefore leave you with a final thought: can the quarry industry be as dynamic as our rural environments? Q&M