

# Defining natural character areas in the Proposed Regional Plan

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## *Introduction*

The Regional Policy Statement for Northland (RPS) includes maps of areas of High Natural Character (HNC) and Outstanding Natural Character (ONC) in accordance with Policy 13<sup>1</sup> of the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement 2010 (NZCPS). The RPS maps were designed to be used in both district and regional plans and therefore included maps of HNC and ONC on land and water within the coastal environment (the coastal environment was also defined in the RPS). The maps were generated using the methodology set out in a report by V Froude<sup>2</sup>. This methodology also sets out the criteria for defining natural character units (by environment type) and the ranking to distinguish between areas of high and outstanding natural character (there are different thresholds for HNC and ONC).

## *The Issue*

The Regional Policy Statement requires (Method 4.5.4) that these maps be incorporated into district and regional plans. The RPS natural character mapping included terrestrial, freshwater and marine environments. Typically the HNC or ONC unit boundaries reflect the environment type but not always, and mapped areas often span a range of environment types and jurisdictional boundaries established under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA). However, the mapping of natural character in district and regional plans must reflect the differences between district and regional jurisdictions<sup>3</sup> – district plans are primarily limited to mapping terrestrial areas, while regional plans cover freshwater and marine environments. These functions are further reinforced in the RPS, which specifies that management of natural character in freshwater and marine environments is a regional function (Method 4.6.3).

Determining which HNC or ONC units to include in the proposed regional plan is very simple where the mapped area is limited to a single environment type or falls entirely within a regional jurisdiction (for example, it is confined to a distinct area of salt marsh or mangrove entirely within the coastal marine area). However, the issue is more complex where:

- A mapped area of natural character on land includes numerous small waterways (E.g. the HNC or ONC unit covers an entire catchment or ridge and valley system and associated streams – in such cases the natural character values typically relate to terrestrial characteristics);
- An area of HNC or ONC extends across RMA jurisdictional boundaries (E.g. covers both land and coastal marine area);

In these situations a judgement needs to be as to how the regional plan will depict the HNC or ONC area. A key concern is to avoid overlap or duplication between district and regional plans. The approach to mapping is necessarily linked with the management of the area of

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<sup>1</sup> Policy 13(1)(c) requires identification of areas of at least high natural character.

<sup>2</sup> Froude, VA, 2014: Northland Regional Council Mapping Project. Natural character methodology report (including amendments following council decisions): Pacific Eco-Logic Ltd, Bay of Islands.

<sup>3</sup> Related to their respective functions set out in sections 30 and 31 of the Resource Management Act 1991.

natural character – if the management response is limited to policy or addressed by generic rules, then mapping is not as critical as natural character issues can be considered through the resource consent process (whether mapped in the regional plan or not).

### ***The Approach***

Maps of High Natural Character (HNC) and Outstanding Natural Character (ONC) areas have been included in the proposed regional plan as required by the NZCPS and RPS. However, for the purposes of the regional plan mapping is limited to freshwater bodies and the coastal marine area as per regional council functions / jurisdiction.

The following approaches have been used to address the issues outlined above:

#### **Rivers/streams and wetlands in wider HNC or ONC units on land**

As noted above, in many cases areas of HNC and ONC mapped in the RPS include numerous small waterbodies within a larger terrestrial unit. In such cases, unless the water body is distinguished as a distinct and separate unit, the values of the HNC/ONC unit are typically related to the terrestrial characteristics. The proposed regional plan has not included maps of such waterbodies on the grounds that:

- It is not practical to map natural character for each individual freshwater body in a HNC/ONC unit at a regional plan scale;
- Management of the natural character of such waterways in a wider terrestrial HNC or ONC unit can be addressed by generic regional rules<sup>4</sup> and associated policies which apply whether natural character has been mapped or not. Policy D.2.5 also requires specific consideration of natural character values in the consent process.
- District plans are also required to map and manage natural character on land<sup>5</sup>. Therefore the natural character values of the wider HNC or ONC unit will be subject to district plan provisions which will manage effects on natural character values.

#### **Coastal marine area**

- Where a HNC or ONC unit spans the coastal marine area, the proposed regional plan maps that part of the unit that falls within the coastal marine area, unless the coastal element is very minimal and the worksheet for that unit describes it as having terrestrial characteristics.
- In cases where the unit extends beyond the coastal marine area and includes 'wet' areas (such as saltmarsh or wetlands) that part of the unit is mapped but shown as hashed to indicate it is not within the coastal marine area.
- The RPS natural character assessment included all harbours and estuaries but did not assess or map all of the remaining areas of the coastal marine area (i.e. large areas of the coastal marine area beyond estuaries and harbours remain unclassified). These areas remain unclassified in the proposed regional plan.

#### **Water related natural character units**

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<sup>4</sup> Such as: Activities in the beds of lakes and rivers and wetlands; Taking, using damming and diversion of water; Land disturbance rules

<sup>5</sup> Method 4.5.4 of the Regional Policy Statement

- The proposed regional plan has mapped a number of freshwater bodies as HNC or ONC where the unit specifically delineates that freshwater body (E.g. dune lakes). This is on the basis that the values and characteristics of the freshwater body underpin identification of the unit as HNC or ONC (i.e. the values of the unit relate specifically to the freshwater body and therefore the management of the natural character values of the water body are best addressed by the regional plan).

### **Wetlands**

Wetlands are subject to specific rules to manage adverse effects – these rules do not rely on wetlands being mapped (definitions are used instead and wetlands are not mapped in the proposed regional plan). These rules serve to protect the natural character of wetlands regardless of whether they have been identified within a HNC or ONC or not.

The above approach is considered to be consistent with Policy 13(1)(d)<sup>6</sup> and the RPS direction for regional plans in Method 4.6.3(2) given that where necessary, the proposed plan includes maps and provisions to protect the natural character of water bodies.

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<sup>6</sup> Policy 13(1)(d) requires regional policy statements and plans to identify areas where preserving natural character requires objectives, policies and rules and that they include those provisions