

Landscape Reflections

Mirror, mirror on the wall.... which landscape is the fairest of them all?

We all know the story... the mirror can answer any question. The queen chooses to ask who is the most beautiful and she doesn't like the answer. Perhaps the queen should have asked her mirror how to achieve consistency in landscape values? But chances are there isn't a fairy tale ending to that question either, especially if you are a forester.

This month I attended a roadshow organised by the Resource Management Law Association (RMLA) and Local Government New Zealand (LGNZ). The discussion was around how to achieve consistency and clear direction for the identification and management of landscape values. The Otago session was crowded, an extremely good turn-out for a winter night in Dunedin.

The roadshow was advertised with a focus on outstanding landscapes but the presenter made it clear at the outset that all landscapes are important to someone and therefore all landscapes need to be appraised. In addition, the current evaluation focus on aesthetics must be extended to include all characteristics of importance such as smell, air turbulence, sound and tactile factors. Economic factors appeared to be missing in the discussion relating to 'all characteristics'. Ecosystem effects were considered to be part of the equation but not pollution unless of course you could smell the nitrogen leaching through the land.

Why landscape, why bother?

Key terms in such as "natural character", "landscape", "natural" and "outstanding" are throughout our Resource Management Act (RMA) but are not defined in the RMA. As a result our TLAs have encountered difficulties in interpreting these terms, deciding on methods to assess them and on an approach to protect them. LGNZ recently commissioned a report to review and compare Regional Plan approaches to landscape and not surprisingly it found huge variation on what is covered and how it is being assessed.

Case law currently provides the only real guidance as to the meaning of key terms, particularly "natural character" and "landscape". However such advice is case specific and not ideal according to Rebecca Hughes. Therefore, the New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects (NZILA) embarked on producing a 'Best Practice Note, Landscape Assessment and Sustainable Management', due to be released any day. The document is the culmination of discussions from NZILA members over a number of years and attempts to gain consistency in landscape assessment approach.

The importance of such a document to forest managers cannot be overstated. We are particularly visual, we create abrupt aesthetic changes and we take a generation to mature.

We should be the first in line to support a clear direction for landscape appraisal and evaluation. However, it is not clear how landscape architects and TLAs account for changes in landscape values over time. For example, my parents greatly enjoy the sight of Hereford cattle wading through high country streams, it's not that acceptable to me. What will my children value aesthetically (and like to smell, hear and feel) in landscapes?

I am currently a PhD candidate working with Maori landowners who have third parties managing forests on their lands. One of my key questions has been if the creation and on-going management of a forest has enhanced or destroyed the values that the owners hold for their lands. Or more simply, what do they like and not like about having a forest on their land.

Although my work is not complete, the issue of landscape has surprised me. For Maori owners, having lived on the lands for centuries, there is a lot of important history connected with specific locations. I therefore expected many of the people who were alive at the creation of the forest to describe the aesthetic changes that took place as being negative. I guess typically of landscape issues, some didn't like it, some did and some were neutral.

However, in my discussions with the "younger" generation - the ones who had grown up with the trees - there is still variation in opinion but generally they like the fact that their forest is so visual. Some describe fond feelings of driving over the hill and seeing it. Some discuss the forest being part of their identity. In short, it is big, green and everyone knows it is owned by them. It has become a landmark in its own right.

Can there be any conclusions?

In our legislative environment TLAs are required under the RMA to censure 'inappropriate subdivision, use, and development'. The only current tool available to them is essentially a point-in-time assessment. However, landscape values change over time and a forest takes a generation to mature. It is all becoming clear to me now!

I don't have a magic mirror - mine cracked some time ago - but I suspect it is unwise to make your forest too pretty or too ugly; neither is good in this fairy tale. Foresters could drift off to sleep waiting for our handsome prince to arrive but I suspect we need to engage ourselves in landscape assessment discussions and keep abreast of any developments to develop national guidance.

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