

# URGENT NEED FOR PROTECTION OF NEW ZEALAND'S COASTAL LANDSCAPE

Terry Healy

Coastal Marine Group, Earth Sciences, University of Waikato

[t.healy@waikato.ac.nz](mailto:t.healy@waikato.ac.nz)

**Abstract:** Alarm bells for protection of coastal landscape should be well and truly ringing! This is exemplified by the great rush toward “life-style block” subdivision of large coastal tracts (simply glance at the “NZ Herald” Real Estate section), and recent cases such as the University of Auckland’s hedonistic attempt to sell prime coastal land on the scenic Coromandel coastline for development.

Coastal landscape protection is already embedded in the Resource Management Act, and most explicitly stated under S6 (“Matters of National Importance”). S6a refers to “preservation of the natural character of the coastal environment” – which implicitly includes landscape - and S6b “the protection of outstanding natural features and landscapes from inappropriate subdivision....”. Unfortunately landscape protection is rarely considered seriously as a major impediment to new sub-divisional developments along areas of largely undeveloped coast.

There are compelling reasons for protection of coastal landscape. These include (i) reduction in long term economic return from tourism from ribbon development along the coast, (ii) huge increases in the cost of supplying infrastructure (roading, electricity, water supply, sewage disposal) to remote coastal wild and scenic locations – which the entire community contributes major cost for rather than the select few beneficiaries at the end of the line; and (iii) the improved infrastructure amenities, facilities and economic benefits possible from concentration of capital development into nucleated coastal settlements. But the major problem is the creeping ribbon development along the coast – leading to significant irreversible impact on the “vistas of nature” – especially along the scenic coasts of Northland, the Coromandel Peninsula, the central North Island and the Marlborough Sounds.

**Keywords:** coastal landscape protection, coastal management,

## INTRODUCTION

In 1975, a public discussion paper put out by the Public Issues Committee of the Auckland District Law Society stated:

*“Over the past 10-12 years there has been a gradual realisation by the public that the value of the coast line is not indestructible and that steps need to be taken to protect and preserve it. It is further being appreciated that the coastline is a limited or finite resource, and that destructive and unnecessary subdivision must be controlled”*

This concern by a body as august as the Auckland District Law Society appeared in response to the perceived ravages of the new Zealand coastline from the accelerated rate of coastal subdivision developments of the during the 1960s and early 1970s.

In a like manner concern for the coastal management and recognition of the coast as a “finite resource” is manifest in the book by Morton, Thom and Locker (1973) “Seacoast in the Seventies”. They state in the preface: “*Our message is an urgent one, especially for the northern coasts, now coming under the greatest pressure for development and*

*alteration.....We believe that our whole coastline, but most immediately the coast near Auckland, is under threat....”*

Since that time 30 years ago the subdivisional onslaught on the coast was temporarily abated by a number of factors.

- Firstly the world “oil shocks” of the mid 1970s and early 1980s significantly increased the cost of fuel, and with the temporary implementation of “carless days” access to distant coastal blocks from the main centres of population was made more difficult.
- 1968-1978 might be termed the “Decade of Coastal Erosion” for New Zealand’s northeast coast. It began with the “Wahine Storm of April 1968, which caused widespread beach erosion and storm surge flooding along the northeast coast and Bay of Plenty, and included widely publicised erosion problems for coastal subdivisions at Ruakaka, Mangawhai spit, Omaha, Orewa, Mercury Bay (Buffalo Beach, Cooks Beach), Waihi Beach, Ohope, Ohiwa Spit (where houses were lost to the sea), Wainui Beach, and the Kapiti Coast to name some of the more notable cases. Its climax was the “July 1978” storm which finally totally destroyed the sea wall at Omaha, and instigated several legal proceedings. Indeed, during the late 1970s property at Omaha subdivision was cynically advertised as “every storm brings you closer to the sea”! These highly publicised erosion events created some warning bells in the minds of the public.
- The economic downturn and stock market crash of the late 1980s, after a decade of high inflation, decreased immediate demand for coastal subdivisional land.
- Following economic reconstruction (Rogernomics) of the late 1980s and early 1990s, appeared the Resource Management Act 1991. This allowed greater public participation in objecting (i.e. “submitting) on issues at the local authority planning Hearing stage. On the surface the statement on the need to protect coastal landscape in Section 5 of the Act imposed restriction on coastal subdivisions. In reality, in practice that had little impact on preserving coastal land of high landscape value, and only recently has landscape protection become a more recognised issue.

### **THE INSIDIOUS “NEW WAVE” COASTAL SUBDIVISION**

In the intervening 30 years since the alarm bells raised by Morton Thom and Locker (1973) and the Auckland District Law Society (1975), the rate of new coastal subdivision slowed. But in the late 1990s, and ever increasingly, a more insidious type of coastal subdivision has evolved – the 2-10 hectare so called “lifestyle block”. This arose with the emerging new right political philosophy of removal of agricultural subsidies, and *laissez faire* economic development. So as the population became less egalitarian and coastal agricultural land became less economic, it became more valuable for subdivisional purposes.

So has evolved a ribbon coastal margin ‘subdivision creep’ from redevelopment of farms and marginal coastal land into lifestyle blocks. Compared to the traditional “1/4 acre block” suburb-at-the-beach settlements such as Omaha, Pauanui and Whangamata, it does not have the immediate drastic effect of wholesale modification or destruction of the coastal natural landscape. But the evolutionary implications are clear: subdivide from 200 Ha to 10 Ha to 5 ha to 2.5 Ha to 1 Ha. A few years later follow this with “infill subdivision”. In due course full coastal subdivision around the coastal perimeters becomes almost inevitable.. The New Zealand coast as a whole, except coastlines within the bounds of National Parks, is under threat from this blight of coastal subdivision creep.

“Lifestyle block” sub-divisional examples are to be seen each weekend in the local and national newspapers. Some real estate companies specialise in producing glossy brochures on “coastal lifestyle” and sea front blocks. And even esteemed institutions are part of this

blighting trend. Note, for example, the hedonistic attempt by the University of Auckland in 2002-03 to sell a high conservation value coastal block on the Coromandel Peninsula for coastal development. - hardly the action of a “critic and conscience” of society!

#### **THE RMA 1991 AND NEW ZEALAND COASTAL POLICY STATEMENT 1994**

The well known **Section 6 Matters of National Importance** of the RMA states that all persons managing the use, development, and protection of natural and physical resources shall recognise as a matter of national importance: “6(b) *The protection of outstanding natural features and landscapes from inappropriate subdivision, use, and development*”. Moreover, under **Section 7 Other Matters**, the RMA states that for management of resources there shall be particular regard to “Any finite characteristics of natural and physical resources”.

It has been recognised for decades that the coastline and coastal landscape is a finite resource (Morton et al. 1973; Healy 1980). Yet rarely has the issue of protection of coastal landscape been considered as a serious impediment to subdivision in the Planning treatment of coastal subdivisions, the case of the Pakiri ‘life style block’ subdivision being an exception here.

On the face of it the New Zealand Policy Statement (1994) presents positive direction regarding the value of coastal landscape. Policy 1.1.1 states: “*It is a national priority to preserve the natural character of the coastal environment*” which clearly includes landscape. However specific reference to landscape protection is made only in a rather weak way in policy 1.1.3, relating to “*landscapes seascapes and landforms*” which are “visually” significant.

This problem of coastal landscape protection is international. Brouwer (1997) presents a visual landscape evaluation methodology for the coast. She laments for the Australian (but equally germane to the New Zealand) coast: “*The scenic qualities of the coast are diverse and frequently present landscapes of the highest scenic value....Yet though the coast is such an attraction to us and is part of our identity, we are at the same time destroying much of its landscape integrity, its scenic quality and its visual-cultural values*”.

#### **COMPELLING REASONS FOR PROTECTION OF COASTAL LANDSCAPE**

In Healy (1997) it is argued that the coastal landscape of numerous beaches and dunes constitute “outstanding natural features” and that greater recognition needs to be accorded their scenic landscape value in the planning process. To this logic could be added the entire coastal “landscape of nature”, defined by Healy (1997) as the dominant landscape elements which are devoid of the artefacts of human settlement, such as infrastructure roadways, dwellings, power pylons, [and these days, wind turbine power generators]. Instead the ‘landscape of nature’ resents a coastal backdrop of pasture, plantation forests, native bush, wetlands, mangroves, cliffs – all of which may have been modified by human activities, but the structural manifestations of human occupation are not predominant in the landscape (Figure 1).

The essential rationale behind the need for coastal landscape preservation is that people visit the coast primarily for its intrinsic values of the sea and coastal landscape. As French (1997) states in relation to coastal development: “The importance of tourism cannot be understated”. And it must be remembered that with 16,000 km of coastline, New Zealand must be considered a very “coastal” country.

Since the new millennium, tourism has been the world number 1 industry. In New Zealand the number of overseas visitors has been steadily rising, and this can be expected to continue. A major reason for that growth is the “clean green image” and the “wild and scenic nature of

much of the landscape – which exhibits a variety of coastal types, typically of high scenic value. The advantage that New Zealand can offer the overseas visitor is that much of the coast is not highly densely settled – although almost all beaches now feature some form of subdivision along parts of them. Overall the coast still presents a ‘wild and scenic’ image, and this is a major attraction for overseas visitors. After all, if the overseas tourists preferred to experience a developed coast, it would be much cheaper, and ‘ordinaire’ for them to visit the built up coasts of Europe, the USA, or Japan.

The danger from unmitigated coastal development is that the wild and scenic nature, and landscape value of the coast is severely diminished (Figures 2,3), and in turn this tourist drawcard is lost, thereby impacting on the economy. This is well illustrated in the State of Florida where subdivision and private ownership down to the water have effectively precluded tourists from access to the beaches, thereby knee-capping future tourist earnings based upon attractions of the coast. Unless your hotel is on the beach, it is otherwise difficult to actually get to a Florida beach to enjoy it!

Other reasons for discouraging the insidious creep of the coastal lifestyle block subdivision is the cost of supplying infrastructure and services – sealed roadways, electricity, sewage. As the lifestyle blocks become subdivided into smaller units, continuing extra demand is placed upon the services. Due to pressure of use, a single lane roadway suddenly needs to be widened to 2 lanes, and yet the entire community will be asked to contribute payment for the additional services – often required only for a few peak holiday weeks of the year. It would be much more efficient and less costly on the community to encourage subdivision in nucleated coastal settlements where a greater number of people are able to contribute to the capital development of those services.

### **MAINTAINING LANDSCAPE VALUES AT COASTAL SUBDIVISIONS**

The message for New Zealand, clearly, is to protect the coastal visual environment and ‘landscape of nature’ by strengthening disincentives against coastal subdivisional deterioration of landscape quality, and providing incentives for maintaining and enhancing the scenic values and integrity of the coastal landscape. As noted previously, “Ultimately subdivision of coastal land is like extractive industries such as mining; in the long term it is not sustainable, and yet internationally “sustainability” is supposedly the dominant paradigm in coastal planning and management (Kay and Alder 1999).

There are nevertheless some planning concepts that could be applied to minimise the visual impacts, and help maintain the visual quality and integrity of the coastal landscape.

- For the case of open duned coasts subdivision buildings should not be able to be observed by people on the beach (Figure 4). Thus the impression on the beach is of the intrinsic nature of the beach, dunes and waves. In some cases this would require communities to artificially raise the height of the frontal dunes, which is
- Dwellings constructed along coastal highways and roadways should not break the skyline or sea horizon by projecting their outline when viewed from the roadways, highways etc.(Figure 2)
- Around harbours and lakes, dwellings should not break the ridge skyline when observed from the major boating navigation ways.
- A wide coastal hazard zone and development setback also acts to enhance coastal natural character and protect coastal landscape (Healy 2002).



Figure 1. The coastal “landscape of nature” – under dire threat of being cut into lifestyle blocks.



Figure 2: Lifestyle block subdivision often leads to inappropriate development, with dwellings breaking the skyline and destroying the scenic integrity of the coast.



Figure 3. Inappropriate dwelling breaking both the skyline and sea scape as viewed from the main highway.



Figure 4. Coastal subdivision much too close to the beach, and deteriorating the amenity and intrinsic value of the beach environment.

## CONCLUSIONS

- Deterioration of coastal landscape from subdivision development has tended to be accorded little weight in the planning process to date.
- The accelerating trend for coastal development and insidious 'lifestyle block' developments are causing severe deterioration of the integrity of coastal (and rural) scenic values.
- The coastal landscapes are an important attraction for tourists and are therefore an important economic consideration.
- For sustainable management of the coast as a finite resource urgent attention needs to be given to protection of coastal landscape values.
- Dwellings and infrastructure such as pylons and wind turbines should not be visible from the highways and tourist routes, or from tourist navigation ways on harbours, lakes and rivers.
- Coastal landscape values can be protected if development buildings and infrastructure are not able to be seen directly from roadways

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