

Editorial: Landscape assessment: means and ends

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THIS ISSUE OF *LANDSCAPE REVIEW* is unashamedly parochial: it features a series of reports from a New Zealand professional development conference which focused upon the topic of landscape assessment (Landscape assessment: Means and ends. New Zealand Institute of Landscape Architects annual conference, Lincoln University, 12–14 March 1999). However, whilst the reports all deal with New Zealand examples, the issues they raise are potentially of wider significance. They explore the ways that landscape assessment procedures have been used under the Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA91), a piece of legislation that has been acknowledged internationally as radical in its aims and approach.

Noteworthy aspects of the RMA91 include its statement of purpose, which is sustainable management of natural and physical resources (see following articles) and its procedural emphasis upon the assessment of the effects of activity on the environment, rather than on control of land use. Other important aspects include statutory requirements for submitting resource management policies and plans to efficiency and cost–benefit tests, and an emphasis on performance standards in implementing policy.

A shift away from land-use zoning to effects-based assessment and performance standards raises many challenges for landscape assessment, challenges that, as the following reports demonstrate, have not always been met by landscape architects, landowners and other stakeholders. In particular, the tension between private property rights and public interest in landscape quality has become acute in some rural areas. Farmers attempting to adapt to falling global commodity prices within a deregulated economy strongly resent what they perceive as attempts by urban-based landscape consultants to constrain their freedom of action under the guise of policies to protect landscape quality. As a consequence, some landscape assessments have come under public and political scrutiny in the national media, and local authorities have become reluctant to implement landscape-related policy.

There is irony in this state of affairs. New Zealand commodity producers make extensive use of New Zealand's 'clean and green' image when marketing their products, typically promoting them with images of verdant pastoral landscape. Many rural communities are passionate advocates for their own distinctive landscapes, as expressions of community identity. The tourism sector, which is New Zealand's largest single earner of overseas currency, is largely based on presenting New Zealand's rural and wilderness landscape as a commodity. Urban dwellers, in a search for their personal Arcadia, are moving into lifestyle blocks around all the main urban centres. Surely in New Zealand therefore, there would be wide support for the need for systematic landscape assessment and management. Yet the reverse appears to be the case. The papers that follow explore some possible reasons for this apparent contradiction.

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One of the key lessons that emerges from the following reports is the need to address the 'community' dimensions of assessment. Yet again a tension emerges as the New Zealand system of resource management relies heavily on an adversarial process in the Environment Court, which has tended to encourage dependence on expert opinion. Another lesson is the need for the sector to focus on change management, as opposed to static protection. This also raises tensions because of land managers' expectations for certainty in policy outcomes.

The first three reports explore the statutory context of landscape assessment. One of these reviews current activity and issues, based on a questionnaire survey and a series of workshops (Simon Swaffield). The next two reports examine the statutory context from the perspective of a planning commissioner (Bob Batty) and a member of the Environment Court (Roger Tasker). The second section of this issue presents a number of case studies: a series of comparisons of work undertaken within a single practice (Allan Rackham) and two contrasting studies. The first of these studies emphasises development of an analytical understanding of land systems and of indigenous vegetation cover, leading to management based on guidelines (Simon Swaffield and Di Lucas), and the second focuses on identifying and protecting iconic landscapes that have particular cultural value (Gavin Lister). Finally, there is a report on the development of an assessment framework, based on the conference plenary sessions (Simon Swaffield).
