

Best practice in coastal development: a strategic perspective

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Overview

The primary aim of this conference is to highlight the need to do much better in the management, planning, development and conservation of our coastal and lakefront environments. It is about moving beyond complaining about the problem to focus on solutions – good practice that we can promote at national, regional and local levels. We want to apply these solutions now, recognising that we still have a window of opportunity in New Zealand to maintain and enhance the unique coastal environments we have inherited.

This paper aims to set the scene for identifying, promoting and implementing best practice in coastal development. It starts from a simple premise – that without a vision how can there be best practice? The paper develops this concept of a vision further and applies strategic thinking to key steps in the planning process at national, regional and local levels.

The paper finishes with an equally simple conclusion – good coastal planning is not rocket science. As a nation of beach lovers it can't be that hard, can it?

1 Vision

Good planners are inspired by what they see around them. Most people in our profession have felt a special bond with our environments or communities from an early age.

In the coast it is not hard to be inspired. From birth many of us have lived on or near a beach and if you weren't that lucky, it's a sure bet that you have found your special spot for those long summer holidays.

Wind swept west coast dune country, breaking your first bone attempting to swing off some dodgy rope, family picnics at Long Bay, that first great fish, Great Barrier sunsets after a long days cruising or fishing. These are a few of the images indelibly etched on my mind.

These are surely also the simple ingredients in the recipe for a successful vision for the future of our coasts. We don't want to lose the wild kelp beds of the Catlins or the isolation of our mountain lakes. The loyal mongrel rides with us as we hunt for crabs, survive the sea biscuit and journey down long deserted beaches collecting drift wood. Lose these experiences and we lose our nations heritage.

What excuse do we have for poor planning when our whole way of life is so intrinsically linked with water. We have fished the rocky shores of Waiheke, sat on slimy wharf steps waiting

patiently for a passing monster to bite, tramped the wild southern shores at Tuatapere, or the tranquil margins of Lake Pukaki. Remember when you or your kids vomited all night after swallowing enough sand for a castle!

Still unconvinced about the power of these memories to inspire good planning outcomes? What about the time then that the wind was blowing so hard on the beach at Wanganui that it was difficult to stand up, or the time your dog ran off with the day's catch? Remember when the kids made a hut to shelter from the blazing Taupo sun, or that ice cold dip in Lake Tekapo. Those East Cape snapper photos still evoke memories of great food, too much beer, sun burn and camp fires on the beach. Then there is that funny feeling you get when you stand in front of the Rainbow Warrior memorial on the hill at Matauri Bay.

With all these special experiences engrained in our psyche we must have the basic tools to get it right. If we in NZ can't, then who can! It's time to get out of the office and get back to grass roots. Be inspired by what you see around you. Planning a sustainable future for our coasts can't be that hard....can it?

2 The Challenge

If it's all so easy, why then are there signs of failure, of poor planning outcomes and dissatisfaction at both the development and conservation ends of the spectrum.

Firstly in my view, planners, developers and politicians have all found it too convenient to blame the RMA for our problems. Perceived statutory limitations have become a standard excuse for a lack of true strategic planning. The old line that the RMA (and by inference all planning) is limited to managing effects of activities and not about communities planning for their long term futures is putting our unique coastal environments at risk. Unless we take planning to a much higher level and beyond the strict ambit of the RMA, the future for our coastal environment is placeless bland development, devoid of distinctive character and plagued by ad hoc decision making.

A related challenge is our hang up with process rather than outcomes. How many guide books have now been written on improving process? How few have been written on the strategic outcomes we want for our environments?

What is it about the NZ coast we wish to protect? What types of development do we want and where? These are fundamental questions that local council's are left to grapple with in the absence of sound national guidance. In many cases council's have simply found these philosophical challenges too hard, and have reverted to a focus on process – something they believe they can safely have more immediate control over.

Without a clear vision for our coasts we are left to judge success on an ad hoc site specific basis. How can we measure good practice without a strategic outcome in mind? In my simple view you can't. Whether you are running a business, coaching the All Blacks or planning for our coasts, achievement of strategy and our vision is the true benchmark for measuring good practice. If the All Blacks perform badly we sack the coach.

Maybe it is time to retrain the planners who have forgotten how to plan. Failing that, maybe it is time to look for a new coach?

3 Strategic Planning Framework

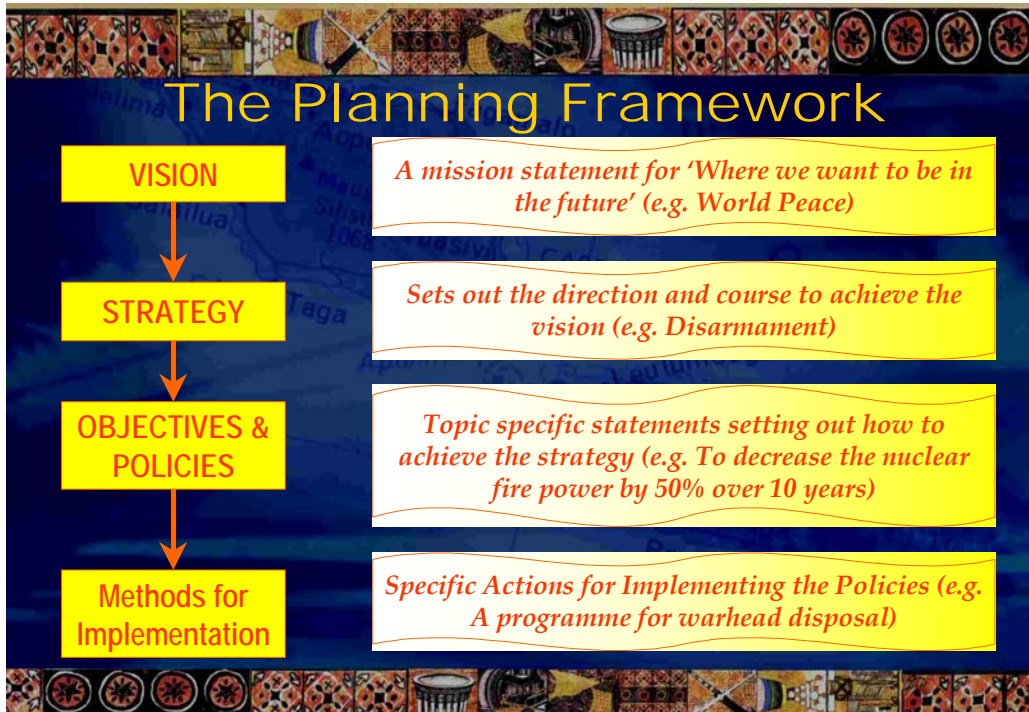
Beyond all the rhetoric history teaches us one thing about planning – people respond to personal and community goals. There is a common desire ‘to do better’.

If we accept this principle, it follows that regardless of situation or context, good strategic planning will be achieved by helping communities to develop a vision for their future and then translating that vision into an action plan that people can work together to achieve.

Alignment of personal and community visions is essential if we are to move forward. My experience with coastal communities suggests that alignment at a strategic level is not hard to achieve – it comes back to the basics about what we love about our unique coastal way of life. The challenge then is to translate the vision into workable strategies, policies and actions.

The recipe for good strategic planning is universal. I have witnessed this myself in NZ and on planning projects through-out the Asia-Pacific region. By way of example consider the Samoa Coastal Infrastructure Management Strategy project.

Samoa lacks a single translation for the concept of planning and currently has no statutory process. However this makes little difference because the Samoan people still readily relate to the concept of a vision, to personal and community goals and to a common determination to ‘do better’. We have been able to translate the planning process into a simple framework and by using a global vision – world peace, illustrate how such a vision can be progressed towards reality.



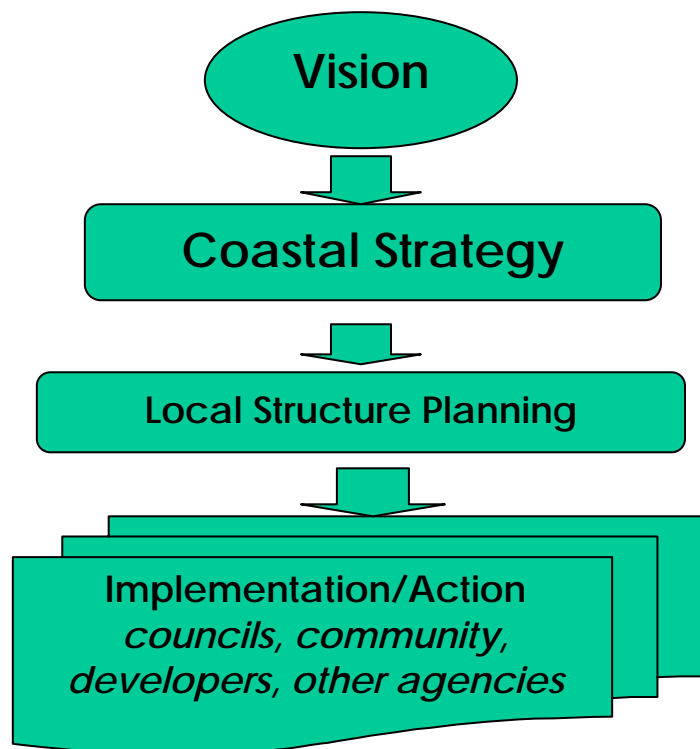
It is not necessary in this forum to describe in detail key steps in the planning process, suffice to say that despite very different cultural, statutory, economic and even physical environments, the visionary planning process for the coastal environment is fundamentally the same in Samoa as

it is in NZ, and of course the many districts and regions within NZ. In short these basic steps should be common to all good practice examples:

1. *Work with the Community to define and develop their Vision.*
2. *Once adopted, market the vision widely and seek ideas on issues impacting upon achievement of the vision and options to work towards it.*
3. *Develop goals or strategy statements for various management themes representing aspects of the vision.*
4. *Develop objectives and policies on specific topics for each management theme.*
5. *Consult widely and debate the objectives and policies with passion.*
6. *Develop methods, action plans and implementation measures for the adopted policy framework.*
7. *Monitor the strategy and revise, revise, revise until the Vision becomes a reality!*

4 Coastal Strategies

How then should this universal planning framework be applied to improving our coastal planning outcomes? In my view the framework lends itself to interpretation through a 'coastal management hierarchy'.



Having established a vision for your district's or region's coast, a Coastal Strategy can provide the long term strategic direction needed to integrate activity and work towards that vision. Coastal strategies are high level non-statutory documents that provide an umbrella for a raft of

policies, plans and actions. Of critical importance, they are neither limited to, nor constrained by the RMA and this is a key strength.



Coastal strategies are a record of partnership between council and the community on how desired outcomes will be achieved. They recognise the complexity of agencies, groups and individuals active in the coastal environment and the fact that council can only implement a small part of the integrated management framework needed to deliver the vision. Key aims of a coastal strategy are that they:

- Offer long term (20 year plus) positive strategic direction for growth, economic and social development, recreation, conservation, tourism and other land use activity on or near the coast;
- Improve inter agency cooperation and cross the artificial boundaries of local government (esp. the MHWS);
- Bring together and interpret a wealth of information on the coast and identify critical gaps in our understanding that could impact management;
- Provide more certainty on future direction by offering benchmarks against which all activity and development proposals can be assessed (reduce the ad hoc decision making factor);
- Seek to maximise social, environmental and economic benefits whilst avoiding adverse effects and enhancing the environment where possible.

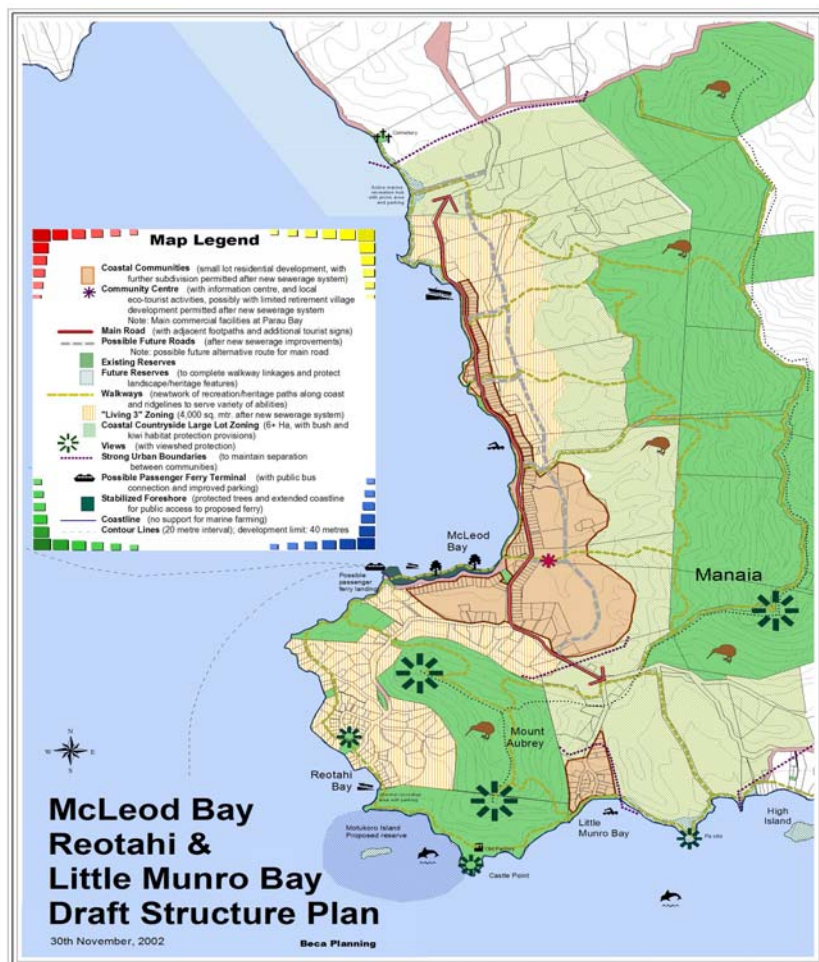
Fully integrated coastal strategies have been prepared for several districts around NZ including Hastings, Whangarei and Wairoa Districts. A number of other council's have embarked on strategies for specific localities. Greater Wellington in partnership with the local districts, has prepared what may be the country's first integrated regional coastal strategy for the Wairarapa Coast.

5 Structure Planning

Structure Plans provide local direction for land use, development, recreation and conservation. They take many different forms and their success or otherwise is, in my experience, heavily influenced by four key factors:

- The extent to which the local structure plan is guided by a higher level strategy and vision (structure planning without a guiding framework is much more difficult);
- The limitations on scope and content (in general I favour structure plans that are not constrained by the RMA - statutory interpretation can come later);
- The level of community involvement (including the development sector);
- Having (and sticking to) a clear programme on the way the structure plan will be implemented (e.g. via plan changes, works or services) once adopted.

Coastal structure plans provide another benchmark against which individual development proposals can be assessed. In Whangarei for example, 12 structure plans were prepared for coastal settlements as part of the Whangarei Coastal Management Strategy project (see www.wdc.govt.nz). Whangarei has a very diverse coast and the structure plans vary greatly in setting directions for the type and style of development envisaged.



6 Community Initiatives

At a local level community and developer activities often have far more influence on sense of place and environmental quality than anything council can do.

If communities 'own the outcomes' of a strategy or structure planning process they can achieve great things on the ground through initiatives such as beach or coast care. Some local groups have gone further to take planning into their own hands by producing village plans and urban design guides such as that prepared by the Glenorchy community for their special area at the head of Lake Wakatipu (See www.qldc.govt.nz).

Smart councils look to partner with their development, rural and coastal communities. An enlightened developer who captures the spirit of a strategy or structure plan can set the scene (the precedent if you like) for years of consistently good development practice in a local area.

7 Defining Best Practice

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What then do we mean by best practice? To set the scene for critical evaluation of the several examples you will hear more about as the day progresses, here are some of my thoughts on defining a way forward at national, regional and local levels.

7.1 National

As I have already said, it should not be hard for us to define what we think is best for our nations coastal and lakeside environments. Inherently I think most New Zealanders have a pretty sound grasp on what feels right.

The question that must be asked then, is why is there such a reluctance to define a national vision for the coast? The NZCPS provides some pretty sound principles for management, but it is not a vision. For a maritime nation like ours I see this as an early priority if we are to avoid the uniform blandness of coastal development that is so evident in most western countries.

A good starting point would be to carefully survey and stock take what we have now, in particular to gather an inventory of the outstanding resources and features. An exercise of this nature, driven at a national level would greatly aid regional and local government who are currently left to make these judgement calls in isolation.

Having completed a stock take, I firmly believe there is a need for central guidance on how we want to manage the best of what we have left. National guidance must be tangible and meaningful however – not just another policy statement please. There are numerous international examples of central government providing real, tangible leadership in coastal

planning. Like it or not, financial support is a necessary reality if local government is to be charged with the responsibility for implementing our national coastal vision.

7.2 Regions

Best practice at the regional level of coastal management is, in my opinion, currently pretty scarce. Most regional councils have struggled to make a transition from catchment board and still feel most comfortable with soil, water and flood management. Councils who did dabble in long term strategic planning during the 90's tended to have their hands slapped and retreated back to consent processing roles.

There are promising signs however. For example WRC has prepared a regional coastal strategy for Wairarapa and EW is actively working with their TA's and DoC to face the challenges evident around the Taupo and Rotorua lakes and on the Coromandel Peninsula.

I suggest that regional government can make their best contributions in the following areas:

- By helping to improve our understanding of our coast and lake environments through targeted research, particularly addressing issues such as catchment land use, coastal processes, hazards, outstanding natural features and landscapes and unique sense of place;
- By working with their TA's to integrate strategic planning activity, facilitate cooperation between adjoining council's and to arrest unhealthy competition.
- By promoting district planning responses that maintain and enhance the diversity of coastal character that exists across a region and ensuring local plans reflect the need to embrace that diversity.

7.3 Districts

Promoting best practice within district and city councils is significant enough to warrant a conference all of its own. As a starting point, here are a few pointers I consider important at a district level:

- Solid Council leadership that aims to balance economic growth and environmental protection (a pro active rather than reactive stance);
- Coherent long term growth strategies that developers and communities can understand;
- A good understanding of market and growth demand. This enables a council to respond positively to accommodate that demand in appropriate locations and direct it away from sensitive locations;
- Close integration of all council activity to achieve goals (in too many councils the planners, engineers, parks staff and finance teams work with a silo mentality);
- Consistent decision making once a strategy is set in concrete. This comes back to the quality of political leadership;
- Close partnerships with local communities and good developers, recognising their important roles in implementing the shared vision.

7.4 Local

You have already heard about the 'environmental tick' initiative promoted by Environmental Defence Society. To be labelled best practice in coastal planning or development the bar must be set high. Developments that satisfy the eds criteria will help us achieve our vision for the coast and protect the unique way of life we enjoy. Those projects that achieve this standard should be celebrated.

My own interpretation is that best practice developments should demonstrate that they:

- Implement coastal strategies and local policy, including the NZCPS in a real tangible physical way (for example direct most impacts to areas already compromised);
- Have no impact on outstanding landscapes or outstanding natural character areas and if there is a risk they might, there should be clear evidence of exceptional efforts to remedy impacts and compensate with other tangible benefits such as gifting park land;
- Avoid coastal edges, dominant ridgelines and headlands and protect or enhance natural defences such as spits, dune fields and lagoons;
- Provide a long term commitment to restoration with a clear management and maintenance plan (think beyond landscaping and about biodiversity);
- Fit the local context, both with respect to natural character and with respect to unique sense of place (chilly bin houses simply don't go down well in bush clad coastal settings);
- Minimise earthworks and plan access and house sites well in advance of physical works;
- Enhance public access to and enjoyment of the coast;
- Achieve legal protection in perpetuity and ensure that this protection is well understood by new owners;
- Can stand up to independent review and be celebrated as a model for others to mimic.

8 Conclusions

We still have a window of opportunity in NZ to set the scene for a sustainable future for our coastal and lakeside environments.

In my submission good coastal planning is not rocket science. While there will always be as wide a range of views on specific local detail as there are personalities within our industry, I firmly believe that at a strategic level, as New Zealanders, we should have an inherent sense of what is right.

To define best practice, we need a vision. I suggest that it is time to record our vision at a national, regional and local level and to benchmark our plans, policies and development proposals against that vision.

We need only get out of our offices and in most cases drive no more than a couple of hours, to capture the inspiration we need to transform the way we think and act in managing our coasts.

Don Lyon
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