

Rural Development Strategy

Open Space and Recreation: Issues and Options



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1 Introduction

For the purposes of this Paper, the term 'open space' relates to an area of land or a water body to which the public has a level of free physical or visual access. This definition encompasses both 'public' and 'private' open space and includes the following:

- Green spaces such as parks and reserves used for amenity purposes and for the protection of biodiversity, landscape and cultural heritage
- Sports fields and recreation areas that may contain buildings and structures designed to facilitate physical activity
- Waterways and harbours
- Civic squares, streetscapes and the transport corridors.

Open space provides for the recreational needs of the community while contributing to people's feelings of social, psychological and spiritual well-being and their sense of identity. Identified open spaces have special significance for Maori.

In addition, open space provides for the preservation and enhancement of natural settings and ecosystem processes and also gives context to the form of urban communities.

Whangarei District Council presently manages around 3,000ha of open space land throughout the District. This includes natural areas such as forest remnants and regenerating bush, pine forests, wetlands and mangrove estuaries, coastal areas and esplanade reserves. In addition, Council manages a range of modified open space, such as city parks and street gardens, cemeteries, former quarries and landfills, areas reserved for water supply, waste treatment and other public utilities, sports fields, swimming pools and playgrounds, walking tracks, boat ramps, wharves and jetties.

1.1 Description of Open Space and Recreation in the Rural Environment

This paper focuses predominately on recreation and public open space in the rural environment that is directly managed by Whangarei District Council and Department of Conservation. It is often assumed that because the rural environment is characterised by open landscapes and views and the feeling of openness, that public open space is not needed, however this open space is essential in contributing to rural sense of place and community. This is especially so for recreational open space that is often the centre or hub of rural settlements such as the local sports club or community hall.

The rural environment is also popular for recreation uses, such as walking, horse-riding, farm-stays, photography, sightseeing and off-road vehicle use (4 wheel drive vehicles and mountain bikes). Walkways, legal roads, esplanade reserves and marginal strips are the main ways by which visitors access open space areas. Department of Conservation manages a significant amount of the remaining natural areas found in rural environments.

2 Policy Framework

The Whangarei District Plan sits within a layered policy framework, which incorporates the National Policy Statements, National Environmental Standards, Iwi Management Plans, the Regional Policy Statement for Northland, Regional Plans, Structure Plans and Long Term Community Council Plans. Each of these policy documents and plans have been considered in accordance with the Resource Management Act and, where necessary, the Local Government Act.

2.1 National Policy

2.1.1 Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA)

The Act provides the statutory framework for the sustainable management of natural and physical resources. The Act defines sustainable management as:

'managing the use, development, and protection of natural and physical resources in a way, or at a rate, which enables people and communities to provide for their social, economic and cultural well being and for their health and safety'

Under the Act it is mandatory for a territorial authority to prepare a District Plan, which manages land use and development within its territorial boundaries. The Act requires District Plans, and thereby changes to District Plans whether private or Council driven, to meet the purpose and principles of the Act. Part 2 of the Act, (which sets out the overarching purpose and principles of the Act), requires that a territorial authority, in

exercising the functions under Section 31, shall recognise and provide for matters of national importance. Those matters which have a direct relationship with the management of open space are:

- The preservation of the natural character of the coastal environment (including the coastal marine area) wetlands, and lakes and rivers and their margins and the protection of them from inappropriate subdivision, use and development (S.6a)
- The protection of areas of significant indigenous vegetation and significant habitats of indigenous fauna (S.6c)
- The maintenance and enhancement of public access to and along the coastal marine area, lakes, and rivers (S.6d)
- The relationship of Maori and their culture and traditions with their ancestral lands, water, sites, waahi tapu, and other taonga;(S.6e)
- The protection of historic heritage from inappropriate subdivision, use and development (S.6f).

Furthermore Part 2 of the Act also requires that particular regard be had to:

- The maintenance and enhancement of amenity values (S.7c)
- Maintenance and enhancement of the quality of the environment (S.7g).

2.1.2 The Conservation Act 1974

The Department of Conservation is responsible for managing a large amount of open space in the District, in terms of public conservation lands. Principally, such lands are managed under the jurisdiction of the Conservation Act 1974, and other key statutes such as the Reserves Act 1977, through Conservation Management Strategies. Each conservancy is required to prepare a Conservation Management Strategy for its area of jurisdiction.

The Northland Conservation Management Strategy identifies a number of priority areas for integrated management with other agencies. These include Whangaruru to Mimiwhangata (as part of the wider Bay of Islands), and Whangarei Harbour from Bream Head to Bream Bay. Issues for integrated management identified by the strategy include:

- Protection of kiwi and brown teal
- Establishment of marine reserves
- Invasion of plant pests
- Wild animal control
- Protection of habitat and breeding grounds for threatened coastal birds
- Coastal subdivision and development
- Impacts of urban expansion
- Industrial processing and port development
- Disturbance to archaeological sites
- Quarrying of scoria cones; and
- Activities and developments in the coastal environment.

Department of Conservation is presently undertaking a review of the Northland Conservation Strategy and is in the consultation phase of this process. Common feedback themes relevant to open space and recreation are:

- **Changing values**

Public understanding and expectations are changing around recreation use, awareness of the environment and the importance of conservation.

- **Access**

Walking, vehicle or aerial access to public conservation land is necessary if people are to enjoy it and value it. There are potential conflicts between some user groups in some locations.

- **Subdivision**

Concerns about the impact of more intense housing subdivision especially in coastal areas is widespread, along with potential impacts on natural and recreation values, changes in the character of small communities and infrastructure needs.

- **Pollution**

All forms of pollution ranging from sewage, to plastics, to rubbish left by visitors are unacceptable.

2.1.3 New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement

The purpose of the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (NZCPS) is to state policies regarding the management of natural and physical resources in the coastal environment, and to achieve the purpose of the Act in relation to the coastal environment of New Zealand. Local authorities are required by the Act to give effect to the NZCPS through their plans and policy statements.

The NZCPS provides policy guidance in regard to provision of open space and recreation opportunities in the coastal environment. There is an integral relationship between rural land and activities and the coastal environment.

The coastal environment is a significant contributor to recreation opportunities in the Whangarei District. Objective 4 of the NZCPS seeks to maintain and enhance the public open space qualities and recreation opportunities of the coastal environment. Policy 18 recognises the need for public open space within and adjacent to the coastal marine area, Policy 19 recognises the public expectation of and need for walking access to and along the coast.

2.2 Regional Policy

2.2.1 Regional Policy Statement

The Regional Policy Statement (RPS) for Northland provides a framework for achieving or promoting sustainable management at a regional level. The Operative RPS for Northland was adopted 31 March 1999. The RPS is intended to serve as a vehicle for identifying and dealing with the key resource management issues in the region. These issues relate to the management of the use, development and protection of the natural and physical resources, particularly air, land, water, and the coastal marine area.

The RPS only considers open space and recreation in relation to the coastal environment; Chapter 22 is dedicated to the coastal environment including the following objectives and policies:

Objective

22.3.3 *Maintenance and enhancement of public use, enjoyment of and access to the coastal environment.*

Policies

- 22.4.(d.)1 To maintain and enhance the provision of public access to and along sections of the coast for...recreational purposes.
- 22.4.(d.)2 To protect culturally or ecologically sensitive areas of the coast from over use and potential degradation, and to restrict public access to them.
- 22.4.(d.)3 To require compensation where the public are deprived of access to and along the CMA as a result of subdivision, use or development.
- 22.4.(d.)4 To restrict public access in and around commercial activities and facilities where required for public health and safety and for the security of the activities or facilities.

Northland Regional Council is currently preparing a New Regional Policy Statement. The background paper on the Coast identifies the establishment of access to the Coastal Marine Area, particularly linking road access to esplanade reserves, as a major challenge. Northland Regional Council notes that the demands on existing public access points, near existing developed areas, is likely to increase as the population and number of visitors grow. Future population growth is likely to be focused around existing developed areas. This will create more pressure on those existing access points.

2.2.2 Regional Plans

There are a number of Regional Plans for Northland that have been developed under the Act. These include the Regional Water and Soil Plan, Air Quality Plan and the Coastal Plan. The Regional Water and Soil Plan provisions control a number of rural land use activities, methods, policies, objectives and environmental outcomes which may impact upon open space. The plan does not however, contain policy in relation to protection or provision of open space. Part 10 of the Regional Coastal Plan covers public access in the coastal environment and Part 15 covers recreation issues within the context of sustainable resource management and effective management of coastal recreational activity. The Plan considers the following:

- Maintaining or enhancing public access to and along the coastal marine area, except in cases where this is inappropriate.
- Protecting the amenity values of the coast which are important to recreation, including its natural character, diversity and abundance of aquatic life, scenic values, and water quality.
- Controlling the adverse environmental effects of recreational activity, particularly minimising risks to public health and safety, excessive noise, physical damage to the environment, and disturbance of wildlife.
- Avoiding conflicts between recreational uses and other uses, and amongst recreational uses, of the coastal marine area.

2.3 District Policy

2.3.1 Long-Term Council Community Plan (LTCCP)

The LTCCP is a key strategic planning document that describes how Council will fulfill its responsibilities under the Local Government Act 2002. It provides a long-term (10-year) focus for the decisions and activities of Council, setting out a plan for decision-making and co-ordination of Council's resources.

Provision for and ongoing maintenance of reserves is managed by Council's Parks and Recreation Department. The LTCCP sets out what Council will do for the Community for the next ten years, the first three years in detail and the remaining seven years in overview. Level of Service – Parks, Reserves and Natural Areas within the LTCCP states:

Council will provide and maintain 4.3 hectares per 1,000 people of managed neighborhood, city and District parks to beautify urban areas and encourage outdoor activity. Existing managed parks will be managed to a high standard and ratepayers will be satisfied with the provision and upkeep of the parks. Council will manage at least 145 hectares of natural areas so that they are free of plant pests.

Due to a constrained financial envelope a service level short fall is expected by 2019 and is acknowledged in the LTCCP.

2.3.2 Parks and Reserves Asset Management Plan (AMP) 2009

The Parks and Reserves AMP prepared by Council's Parks and Reserves Department, notes the amount of open space administered by Council. Table 1 below shows the area (ha) of each reserve type. The table includes Council owned and Department of Conservation land which is available for use by residents of and visitors to the District.

Reserve Type	DoC/PRK	DoC	PRK	Total
Cemetery	0	19	42	61
Esplanade reserve	54	135	493	682
Forest	0	10,455	0	10,455
Foreshore	0	45	0	45
Historic reserve	0	389	0	389
Local purpose reserve	1	353	153	506
Managed area	0	0	233	233
Natural reserve	0	488	409	897
River control	0	0	23	23
Road reserve	0	0	0	0

Reserve Type	DoC/PRK	DoC	PRK	Total
Recreational reserve	6	1,521	502	2,029
Scenic reserve	353	3,919	372	4,644
Wildlife refuge	0	755	1	756
Grand Total	414	18,078	2,228	20,720

2.3.3 Reserve Management Plans

The Reserves Act 1977 requires land administered by Council to be managed in accordance with the Act. Council is required to prepare and approve reserve management plans to set the direction for the management and control of administered reserves. Several Reserve Management Plans have been completed for the District and Reserve Management Plans form part of the Parks Team's current work program.

2.3.4 Open Space Strategy

Council's Open Space Strategy, operative in 2001, intends to show how the Council will provide, develop and maintain a network of high quality open spaces to meet the needs of the city and the District in the future. The strategy includes an assessment of existing spaces, future visions and priorities for open space. The Council's core open space functions are to protect valued open space and to provide adequate recreation opportunities to meet the needs of the community.

The concept adopted by the strategy is that open spaces can be described according to the four main values they have:

- Conservation values include plants and animals, wildlife habitats and ecological processes
- Landscape values include landform and land use, visual appreciation and the sense of place
- Recreation values include the opportunity for active and passive, formal or informal recreation activities
- Cultural values include sites with cultural or historic significance; they also arise from the lifestyle patterns and preferences of the present culture.

Ten guiding principles for the management of open space have also been developed. These are:

- 1 A heritage to be proud of
- 2 Responding to pressure and demand
- 3 Effective organisation of recreation
- 4 Potential for tourism
- 5 Fostering conservation
- 6 Enhancing urban areas
- 7 Protecting and accessing the coast and streams
- 8 Effective linkages
- 9 Promoting partnerships
- 10 Realistic goals.

Council's Parks Department are currently undertaking a review of the Open Space Strategy in response to the Sustainable Futures 30/50 Sub-Regional Growth Strategy.

2.3.5 Whangarei District Plan

History of District Plan Provisions for Open Space

Proposed District Plan 1998 included a range of objectives and policies relating to the open space environment (urban). Through the submission and hearing process the significant issues were amended to focus upon 'insufficient space' rather than 'lack of'. Submissions generally sought to clarify and amend proposed objectives and policy to strengthen the message regarding intended use of the Open Space.

Operative District Plan

According to their use and location, land in the rural environment is attributed different District Plan zones, primarily Countryside, Coastal Countryside and Open Space Environments. Council and Department of

Conservation owned land for reserve and recreational purposes has been zoned under the District Plan as the Open Space Environment. Reserves are an important aspect of Community planning for open space, recreation and environmental quality.

Chapter 5 Amenity, describes the amenity values of the Open Space Environment. These areas are used by the public to interact socially and relax. The key elements of this amenity are:

- Low intensity of development
- Provision of public facilities
- High landscape qualities
- Public places can be exciting and vibrant
- Recreational qualities
- Access to daylight and sunlight
- Limited vehicular traffic.

The Plan creates an 'Open Space Environment', which covers land owned by the Council, Department of Conservation or other private parties and organisations for recreational and/or conservation purposes. It also applies to other land privately owned and administered for recreational purposes. The Open Space Environment has its own set of land use and subdivision rules, and construction of buildings is generally restricted to provision of infrastructure in accordance with a Reserve Management Plan or Conservation Management Strategy.

2.3.6 Rolling Review of the Operative District Plan

Under the Act Council is required to monitor the effectiveness of the District Plan and complete a review of all District Plan provisions within any 10 year time period. Monitoring of the Whangarei District Council Operative District Plan has identified areas of inconsistency and ineffectiveness and has examined what new issues have emerged since the District Plan was first devised.

The District Plan will become a live document, as council staff will review chapters of the plan every year, in what is called a "rolling review". The rolling review examines whether the current objectives, policies and methods in the plan are consistent with legislation and are working the way the community needs and wants them to.

The review updates the District Plan to recognise the role different areas of the District will play in the District in the future, given the population changes and estimated economic growth over the next 10 years. These tie in with Council's long-term planning project, Whangarei District Growth Strategy: Sustainable Futures 30/50.

2.4 Iwi and Hapu Management Plans

Current Issues Three iwi management plans have been prepared by iwi of the Whangarei District all of which have relevance to open space. These being, Te Iwi O Ngatiwai Environmental Policy Document (2007), Patuharakeke Te Iwi Trust Board Environmental Plan (2007), and Ngati Hine Iwi Environmental Management Plan (2008).

Each of these documents recognises the importance of open space, particularly in the coastal environment, to iwi, acknowledging the continuing need to defend and protect the cultural beliefs, traditions, and practices. Providing for the health and well-being of their people is extremely important to all iwi, policy in the iwi management plans reflects this importance.

Plan changes prepared to address mineral resources must take into account these three objectives and the four supporting policies and methods.

3 Current Issues

3.1 Whangarei District Growth Strategy: Sustainable Futures 30/50 and Background Papers

The environmental, social and cultural constraints on, and the consequences of anticipated development have been identified and assessed and used to identify a preferred sustainable future (Three). The 30/50 Growth Strategy acknowledges the role of sport and recreational facilities in enhancing community well being and their contribution towards achieving desired social outcome. The main benefits include improved health, community development, attracting visitors and new residents, economic development, and contributing to the social and cultural well being of the community.

Providing a wide range of sporting and recreational facilities assists in attracting and retaining residents in the District. They make it easier for local businesses and service providers to attract skilled workers by offering the kinds of facilities people have come to expect in a modern urban centre. Sporting and recreational facilities can be a major economic asset to the District.

The Infrastructure and Services Background Paper assessed each urban centre and node in terms of existing infrastructure and projected infrastructure demands. Open space (reserves) and recreation facilities were included in the infrastructure projections.

30/50 Growth Strategy concludes that the provision of adequate open space and recreational opportunities is integral to social and cultural well being. It also contributes to environmental and economic well being. Existing open space needs to be protected and well managed while the future provision of parks, reserves and recreational facilities needs to be planned to meet the needs of a growing and dynamic population. Future provision of these community assets must be of sufficient quantity and quality whilst located appropriately to meet growth demands.

3.2 Environment Monitoring Information

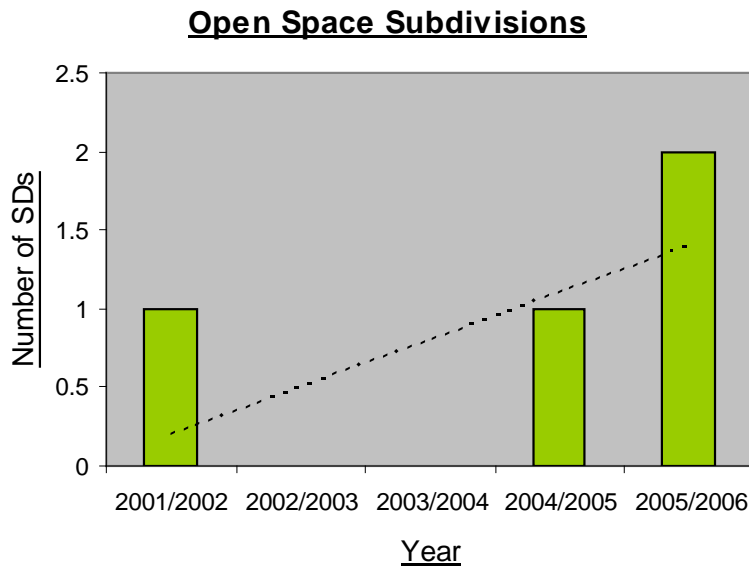
3.2.1 Northland Regional Council Monitoring

Open space and recreation are not topics or environmental issues in the State of Environment Report 2007, the Annual Environmental Monitoring Report 2009 – 2010 and the New Regional Policy Statement Background and Discussion Reports. As previously outlined, open space is discussed in terms of the coastal environment, in particular the Coastal Marine Area, all of the Regional Council monitoring reports have focused on the effects of increased access and usage of the coastal environment open space.

3.2.2 Whangarei District Council Monitoring

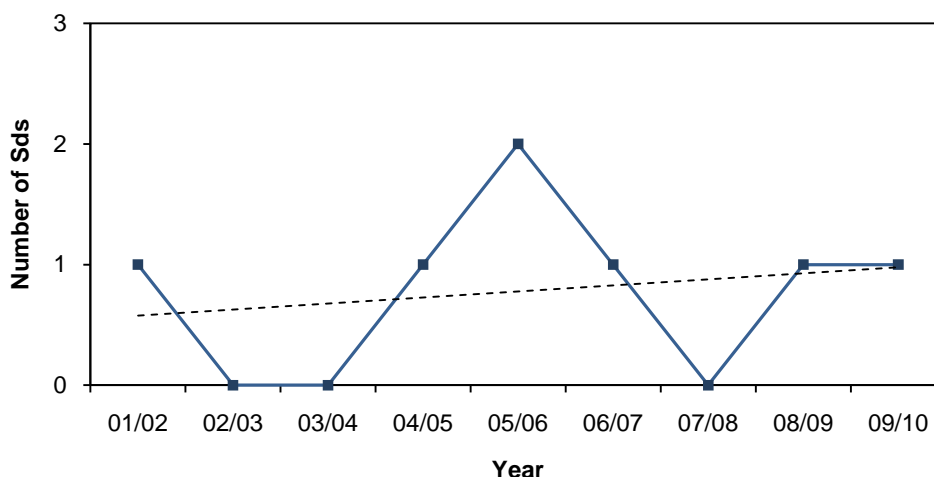
The Resource Consents and Complaints Monitoring Report primarily monitor the implementation and effectiveness of the District Plan. Consent numbers and distribution provide a good indication of land use and subdivision activity throughout the District.

Council's Resource Consents and Complaints Monitoring Report 2005/2006 confirms an increasing trend of subdivisions in the Open Space Environment:

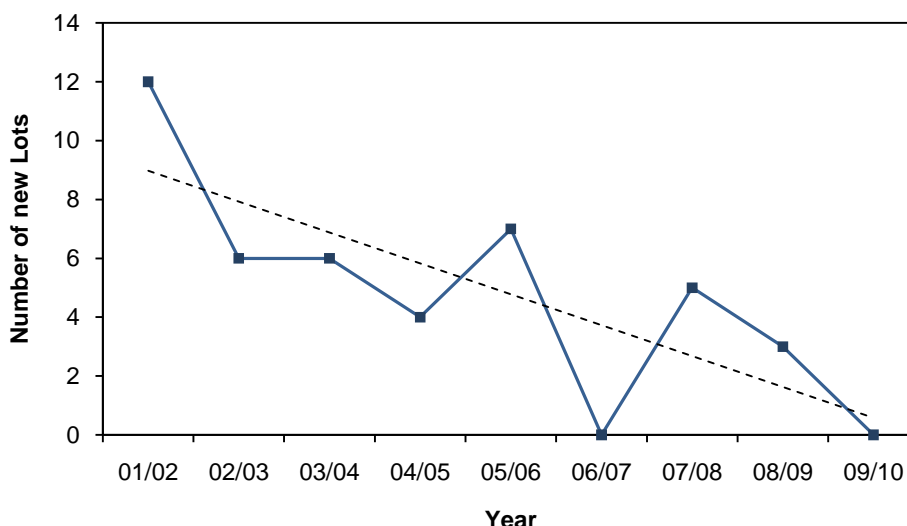


Council's Policy and Monitoring Team has commenced preliminary research and analysis of data for the 2007 - 2010 Resource Consents and Complaints Monitoring Report. More up to date data illustrates that the number of subdivisions and new allotments in the Open Space Environment are following a decreasing trend.

Open Space Subdivisions



Open Space - New Lots



3.3 Analysis of the Current District Plan Open Space Provisions the Issues

3.3.1 Objectives and Policies

Current provisions in the District Plan for the Open Space Environment are limited. Section 15.2 overview outlines that Open Space is important for community well-being and environmental health. Open Space Environment provides for both active and passive open space in the form of recreation and conservation reserves. Rules in Chapter 46 set the standards for Open Space however given the varying nature of recreation and conservation activities, these standards are insufficient to cater for the expected activities.

The following objectives and policies are located within Chapter 15 Open Space of the District Plan:

- 15.3.1 Provide open space that meets community, recreational and conservation needs.
- 15.3.2 Where appropriate, create open space linkages that provide physical connections between ecosystems, and enhance biodiversity and recreational opportunities.
- 15.3.3 Provide open space and manage activities within open space in a manner that avoids, remedies or mitigates adverse effects on the environment.
- 15.3.4 Protection of open space from subdivision, use and development inconsistent with their purpose.

While these objectives acknowledge the need to provide for and protect open space, they do not recognise the different values of open space areas, and their varying aspects of importance to the environment,

community and District. Policies in Chapter 15 address matters such as financial contributions, new reserves, open space linkages, coastal environment, outstanding landscape and open space values, but fail to provide direction with respect to the rationale and approach for the creation and management of 'open space'. What are the "community, recreational and conservation needs" of the District sought by Objective 14.3.1? Exactly where are the "strategic locations" that reserves should be provided in to meet the needs of the community? Consistent with Policy 14.4.2. The vague and open ended nature of these provisions provide little strategic direction with respect to the acquisition or management of open space.

3.3.2 Mapping

Unfortunately, the distinction is not made on the maps as to whether land is public or private, or more suitable for active or passive recreational use or as natural reserve. Additionally, maps do not signal opportunities for direct access to and along the foreshore or the possibility of other access rights (e.g. easements).

3.4 Department of Conservation Issues

The Northland Conservation Strategy identifies issues in relation to visitor access to conservation land for recreation purposes. The availability and quality of vehicle access has major implications for the management of visitor services. Improvements to existing roads can alter patterns of use. Facilities adjacent to the road like toilets, carparking and information, will be sought while facilities off the main sealed highway may become less inviting for visitors. New air links and tourist operations such as water taxis and backpacker fun buses will also alter visitor use patterns. Vehicle access to attractions often leads to vandalism of facilities, the need for ongoing maintenance of roads, and increased visitor pressures.

Service areas are usually associated with focal points such as bays, lookouts, walking tracks, road ends or rivers. At these points visitors seek facilities such as carparking, shade in the summer, sun in the winter, seating and tables, signposts, rubbish disposal, and toilets.

The main issues facing the Department of Conservation at service areas in Northland are:

- The pressure to provide services at sites that are either major natural tourist attractions visited by commercial tour operators; or major sites in residential areas where the local authority would normally fund and maintain facilities
- The poor standard of toilet facilities at key tourist attractions
- The conflict of existing or potential facilities with cultural and spiritual values and/or Treaty of Waitangi land claims, such as at Cape Reinga
- Vandalism, security of visitors' belongings, and inadequate car parks at high use areas in the Conservancy, e.g. Cape Reinga, Flagstaff Hill and Tane Mahuta.

4 Options for the Whangarei District

4.1 What are the resource management issues?

- 1 Open space is being reduced and fragmented by subdivision, development and use of the rural environment.
- 2 Changing population trends (de-population), results in changes to demand and loss of open space, in particular recreation facilities in rural villages.
- 3 Open space is owned and managed by both private and public entities. This results in cross boundary management issues.

4.2 Options for Implementation in District Plan

Maintaining, enhancing and providing open space and recreation facilities are District wide issues. The Whangarei District Sub-Regional Growth Strategy has confirmed the need to increase open space areas and recreation facilities. Implementation of this strategy through the Long Term Plan, Infrastructure Asset Management Plans and Reserve Management Plans will work to resolve District wide matters, such as purchasing land for open space.

Changing how the District Plan provides for open space and recreation in the District will assist in the Council's ability to provide such facilities and locations. Options for the District Plan are:

- Provision of zones within the District Plan accommodating open environments (currently zoned Open Space Environment) this may take the form of additional Environments/Policy Areas to reflect varying use of open space.
- Provision of prescriptive policy for open space areas, location of these policies within the District wide policy context of the new District Plan structure.
- Cross-reference Council adopted Reserve Management Plans.

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