

A Preliminary Buller District-wide Landscape Assessment

Introduction

This assessment has been prepared in response to requests for further information and concerns raised by a number of submitters. The purpose of this assessment is to provide a preliminary overview of the Buller District's landscapes so as to establish the context of the Mokihinui Hydro Project within the District.

To date the Buller District Council has not carried out a thorough RMA s6 or s7 analysis of its landscapes. It is not the aim of this assessment to do this, since it would be a major undertaking that extends well beyond the scope of the MHP consent application. So, the focus of this assessment is to ascertain whether or not the Mokihinui Gorge especially, is likely to be an outstanding natural feature or landscape within the context of the Buller District. A more detailed and rigorous study would have to be undertaken to conclude definitively as to whether or not the Mokihinui Gorge is an outstanding natural feature or landscape.

Methodology

This assessment is confined to the bounds of Buller District. The reason for this is in deference to recent case law¹ where it was concluded that outstanding natural landscapes and features are to be assessed within the context of the Territorial Local Authority (TLA) district in which they occur. In this regard the Court stated:

'The test is whether it [the subject landscape] constitutes an outstanding natural landscape at a district level, involving elements beyond geomorphology'.

Despite this, it is acknowledged that landscape character areas or units will extend beyond TLA boundaries, as is the case for Buller. However, it is noted that the District is generally defined by strong topographic features, such as principle ridgelines and rivers.

A further important point to consider is that landscape units are subject to a hierarchy of greater units. For example, a river basin unit will likely be located within the larger extent of a mountain range. And smaller units may well be found within each. Units will also overlap. The valley sides that define a river catchment also form the mountain ranges.

Within all of these there may exist discrete and discernable natural landscape features, such as rock outcrops, gorges, waterfalls, stands of bush, lakes, coastal escarpments and so on. Many of these features will be outstanding and in some instances will also occur within larger outstanding natural landscapes.

It is generally accepted that the assessment of whether or not a landscape is outstanding is based on application of the so-called Pigeon Bay criteria. These criteria comprise the following:

¹ Environment Court NZ. Decision C45/2008 Christchurch City Council v EM Briggs and others (paragraph 125)

- Natural Science Factors
 - Geological
 - Topographical
 - Ecological
- Dynamic
- Aesthetic
 - naturalness and memorability
- Expressiveness
- Transient Values
- Value to Tangata Whenua
- Historic Associations
- Whether the values are shared or recognised.

A further test is whether or not the landscape is ‘conspicuous, eminent, especially because of excellence...remarkable.’² This applies to all the Pigeon Bay criteria including topography. Further, the Environment Court in the same decision observed that ‘Usually an outstanding natural landscape should be so obvious (in general terms) that there is no need for expert analysis.’³ And so as part of any assessment considering if a landscape is outstanding, there is a need to pose the question of whether the lay person will perceive it as so.

Allied to perception is the matter of context. A landscape which may be outstanding in one district may not be outstanding in another. This is because the immediate and district setting of the landscape affects its prominence. For example, bush-covered hills on the West Coast are very common and therefore may not be considered outstanding. Whereas a bush-covered hill in Canterbury, because of its rarity, will very likely be considered outstanding. So context is a critical factor in determining whether or not landscapes are natural. This is further reinforced by the same Environment Court decision⁴ where it was noted that landscapes are subject to a naturalness spectrum.

“We consider that the criteria of naturalness under the RMA include:

- *The physical landform and relief*
- *The landscape being uncluttered by structures and/or ‘obvious’ human influence*
- *The presence of water (lakes, rivers, sea)*
- *The vegetation (especially native vegetation) and other ecological patterns.*

The absence or compromised presence of one or more of these criteria does not mean that the landscape is non-natural, just that it is less natural. There is a spectrum of naturalness from a pristine natural landscape to a cityscape”

With the above matters in mind, the methodology used in this supplementary assessment will include the following:

1. A broad description of the Buller District landscape.
2. Identification of large scale landscape character units and a brief description.
3. Scoping of likely outstanding natural features and landscapes.

² Environment Court NZ Decision C180/99 Wakatipu Environmental Society Inc. v The Queenstown Lakes District Council, paragraph 82

³ Ibid Paragraph 99

⁴ Ibid Paragraph 89

4. Assessment of MHP within the landscape context of Buller District.

A broad description of the Buller District landscape.

The Buller District essentially comprises three distinct macro landscape character areas, that include various generic landform sub-units. These are listed as follows:

- The coastline and coastal plain

Landforms

- Estuaries
- Lowland wetlands and pakihi
- Beaches and headlands
- Escarpments
- Alluvial plain

Land Uses

- Farming
- Settlement
- Conservation

Land Cover

- Pasture and exotic vegetation
- Native vegetation
- Buildings and infrastructure

- The mountain ranges and hills

Landforms

- Mountain peaks
- Mountain valleys
- Ridges
- Creeks, streams and rivers
- Tarns
- Lakes
- Rock outcrops, cliffs and scree
- Plateau

Land Uses

- Conservation
- Mining

Land Cover

- Native vegetation

- The valley systems

Landforms

- Rivers and their tributaries
- Alluvial flats and terraces
- Wetlands and lakes

Land Uses

- Farming
- Conservation
- Settlement
- Infrastructure corridors

Land Cover

- Pasture and exotic vegetation
- Native vegetation
- Buildings and infrastructure

Of the three basic units identified above, the mountains and hills comprise by far the greater portion. In area they occupy approximately 90% of the District. This means that about the same amount of land is clad in native vegetation and is generally devoid of human activity. Apart from some localised mining, conservation activity predominates within this landscape unit. The unit includes Kahurangi and Paparoa national parks in addition to Victoria Conservation Park and Lewis Pass Scenic Reserve. Numerous conservation and ecological areas are present in the unit also.

Human activity mostly occurs within the remaining 10% or so of the District. Virtually all of this is confined to the coastal plain and valley systems where farming is the predominant land use. A further characteristic of the coastal plain and valley systems is that they contain discrete sub-units.

For the coastal area there are two distinct plains – one surrounding and containing Westport and the other centred on Karamea. These larger coastal plains are strongly separated by Karamea Bluff headland and the coastal escarpments beyond. And they are further contained by their mountain backdrops.

The major river systems that host extensive human activity are the Grey, Buller and Maruia. The Grey is the largest in the District. Smaller systems draining into the sea include, from the north, Oparara, Karamea, Little Wanganui, Mokihinui, Waimangaroa, Nile, and Fox rivers. Similarly, the many tributaries of the Grey, Buller and Maruia rivers contribute to the network of micro-systems. Like the coastal plains, the river systems are strongly contained by the mountains that surround them.

Because of the conditions just described, the coastal plain and river system landscape units are strongly defined and therefore discrete entities. Reinforcing this effect is the dramatic contrast between land use and landform. Low and generally flat farmland abruptly adjoins steep bush-clad hills and mountains.

Overall, one of the salient characteristics of the Buller District is that its landscape units are very distinctive and are therefore easily discernible. Reinforcing this effect is a high level of landscape contrast within a relatively small and compact area. At a relatively small scale, the Mokihinui River system encapsulates what is typical of the District's landscape character.

Identification of large scale landscape character units and a brief description.

Apart from the three macro landscape units described above, there are within these larger units smaller ones. These are generally defined by strong topographic boundaries such as rivers, the coast, and major ridgelines. The units also contain landscape characteristics, principally landform and land uses that are more or less common throughout. It is also

important to appreciate that the units adjoining neighbouring districts are extended into them. This is because their topographic character is not generally defined by district boundaries.

An important consideration in defining landscape unit boundaries is that they generally need to be obvious to the lay person. The nine landscape units are shown on the Appendix 2 map.

The Northern Kahurangi Landscape Unit

This unit includes all the land within the District from the Little Wanganui River northwards, except for the Karamea Coastal Plain Unit. The unit is entirely within the Kahurangi National Park and much of it lies within the Tasman Wilderness Area. It is more or less uniformly mountainous and bush-clad. Apart from national park facilities, there is no modification. Consequently the unit displays a very high level of pristine naturalness.

It contains extensive areas of wilderness, most of which is inaccessible. Nor is it well served by public roads, the only ones within the District being those emanating from Karamea and terminating at the Park boundary. As a result the unit is not easily experienced, apart from trampers using the well-known Heaphy Track and lesser-known Wangapeka Track.

Within the landscape unit there are a number of features that can be considered obviously outstanding. Most notable among them are the Oparara Arches and Honeycomb cave system. Other features include McKay and in part, Goulard Downs. Extensive stands of nikau palms along the coast are another significant landscape feature, especially in the vicinity of the mouths of the Kohaihai and Heaphy rivers.

A further feature that is unique to the unit is that a very large, unmodified, portion of it fronts the coast. It is the only pristine landscape in northern Westland to have this characteristic.

The northern Kahurangi landscape unit contains four significant rivers draining to the West Coast. From north to south they include the Heaphy, Kohaihai, Karamea and Little Wanganui rivers. Smaller rivers, streams and creeks also drain the unit such as the Oparara River, Break and Granite creeks.

Of these rivers, the Karamea is perhaps the closest in character to the Mokihinui. Like the Mokihinui it drains an inland basin via seaward hills – namely Stormy Ridge and the Fennian Range. Between these ranges, the river also passes through a gorge, which is about half the length of its Mokihinui counterpart, and then it opens out into pastureland that is similar to that of Seddonville. On a smaller scale the Oparara River also displays similar characteristics.

The Inland Ranges Landscape Unit

Within the District this is the smallest unit, although topographically it extends well beyond into the adjoining Tasman District. It comprises the Matiri and Lyell Ranges where they lie within the District boundary. This unit incorporates the headwaters of the Mokihinui River, the North and South branches of which form the unit boundary. The inland ranges are quite

distinct from those to seaward as they can be easily discerned as separate topographic entities.

Within the District the Inland Ranges are entirely pristine, being totally devoid of human modification except for one small hut and some rough tramping routes. The ranges are mostly bush-clad; with the high summits comprising alpine tussocklands and shrublands.

Within the District this unit is accessible by foot only. Access is via rough tracks in the Mokihinui River gorge and on the Lyell Range. A trampers' track in from Murchison also gives direct access to the plateaux. Generally the unit is infrequently visited, and therefore retains a strong sense of remoteness. This is reinforced by the fact that it is not visually accessible from easily accessed public vantage points, such as highways and settlements.

A highly significant landscape feature of the Matiri Range is the limestone Matiri and Thousand Acre plateaux. These are striking topographic features that, in their relative flatness, contrast markedly with the surrounding and more usual apical mountain range geometry. This feature is clearly an outstanding natural landscape, and is a particularly good example of one that is conspicuous and eminent. And when compared to the Denniston and Stockton plateaux, the Matiri complex displays a much higher level of naturalness and distinctiveness.

The Seaward Ranges Landscape Unit

The seaward ranges unit comprises the Radiant, Glasgow and Mt William ranges and lie between the Mokihinui and Buller rivers and the sea. Strictly speaking, the seaward ranges also include the Paparoa Range, but this is regarded as sufficiently discrete to be considered a separate landscape unit – to be discussed next. This is because the Paparoa and above-identified ranges are incisively divided by the Buller River and are therefore easily discerned as two separate landscape features.

The unit is quite diverse in both topographic and land uses. Significant landforms within the unit include the Stockton and Denniston coal plateaux and the Mokihinui Gorge. A considerable part of the unit extends to the coast between Little Wanganui Head and Gentle Annie Point. State Highway 67 also runs through this part of the unit and more or less bounds it for around 15 km southwards between the Mokihinui river-mouth and Granity. Where this occurs the landform appears as an abruptly rising escarpment. The contrast of mountainous character of the unit with the adjoining coastal plain serves to highlight the qualities of each.

Most of the unit consists of bush-clad mountains, but it also includes fairly extensive areas of cleared and low vegetation – particularly on the aforementioned plateaux where mining activity has occurred. Compared to the other units discussed so far, this one entertains a reasonably high level of modification. Much of this is associated with mining and includes the mines themselves, access roads and existing and former settlements. Existing transmission lines also feature within the unit, along with other infrastructure such as the Stillwater Westport Railway. Historic remnants are common too. In addition to the mines, they include timber extraction and milling, which is a particular feature of the Charming Creek environment.

Because the unit contains reasonably extensive modification, it cannot be regarded as being pristinely natural. However, large parts of the unit are highly natural, including the Mokihinui Gorge and inland parts of the Radiant, Glasgow and Mt. William ranges. Within the western flanks of the Glasgow range is the outstanding natural feature of canyon-like Ngakawau Gorge. The Mokihinui Gorge is approaching outstanding natural landscape feature status, but is accompanied, in this regard, by similar gorges in the District. Other features obviously unique to the District are the Stockton and Denniston coal plateaux. But, because both have been extensively modified through mining, they cannot be considered sufficiently natural to warrant outstanding natural landscape status.

The Paparoa Range Landscape Unit

The Paparoa Range is a discrete and distinct mountain landform extending from the Buller River in the north to Greymouth in the south. About half of the range lies within Buller District and approximately 40% of that is in national park. The range is encircled and bounded by state highways which reinforce their discrete character.

Like most of the mountainous terrain in the District, the Paparoa range is almost entirely clad in native bush and alpine shrubland. Pakihi flats are reasonably common in the western lowlands of the range. Much of these lowlands have also been farmed, milled and mined, although most of this activity has ceased. Remnant roads and tracks are common in these areas. Thus the range has been modified to some extent within its low lying regions.

Conservation activity is now predominant, which includes some highly developed recreational facilities. Most of this is concentrated along the coastal margins of the range. The Paparoa Range mountains extend through to the Grey Valley and are otherwise free of modification. They are therefore highly natural in character.

The Paparoa unit contains some unique, highly distinctive and well known landscape features. Most famous among them are the 'Pancake Rocks' at Punakaiki. These are part of a very extensive karst or limestone formation that predominates along the western seaboard of the range. Arising from this are dramatic cliffs, caves and gorges. There is no doubt that the combination of these constitutes an outstanding natural landscape.

Like the Seaward Range unit containing the Mokihinui River, the Paparoa unit contains rivers draining inland basins via gorges incising seaward uplands. There are six of these that include, from northwards, the Nile, Tiropahi, Fox, Bullock Creek, Pororari and Punakaiki rivers. Unlike the Mokihinui, these rivers run through limestone country, thereby contributing to the dramatic rock formations that make the area so distinctive. The presence of extensive stands of nikau palms contribute to the drama and memorability of this area within the unit as well. These iconic plants are absent within the Mokihinui Gorge.

As mentioned the Paparoa Range unit is bounded to the north by Buller Gorge. This too is generically similar to the Mokihinui in that it flows via an inland basin centred on Inangahua. The Buller Gorge is significantly larger than the Mokihinui Gorge in both its length and size of its river. The mountains that contain the gorge are similar to the Mokihinui in that they are

also entirely bush-clad and are of a similar height. In places tall cliffs contain the Buller River in a way that is absent in the Mokihinui Gorge.

Unlike the Mokihinui though, the Buller Gorge does contain modifications in the form of State Highway 6 and the Stillwater Westport Railway. This makes it highly accessible and therefore appreciable to a very wide public audience. Because of this it is a nationally well known landscape feature that is widely publicised, whereas the Mokihinui is hardly known at all. Further, the latter is much less accessible, and as a result displays a higher level of naturalness.

Is the Buller Gorge an outstanding natural feature? To the lay person it certainly displays obvious scenic appeal and memorability. On account of the state highway and railway, it is relatively less natural compared to its counterparts elsewhere in the District. Apart from these it would probably rank as an outstanding landscape feature, but this would need to be tested conclusively via application of the Pigeon Bay criteria. Such a test is beyond the scope of this assessment, suffice to say that it would certainly match, if not surpass, the Mokihinui as a significant landscape feature.

The Victoria Range Landscape Unit

Like the Paparoa Range unit, the Victoria Range unit, and the Brunner Range within it, is a relatively discrete and stand alone landscape feature. It is bounded by the Grey, Maruia and Buller river valleys. State highways encircle the northern three quarters of the unit. The southern quarter is defined by the Upper Grey River and tributaries of the Maruia River.

The Victoria Range is typical of most of the District's mountain country in that it comprises bush-clad and alpine shrub-clad high country that is relatively unmodified. Most activity within is devoted to conservation and recreational outcomes, although mining is currently undertaken in the vicinity of Reefton. In fact, the western perimeter has undergone quite extensive mining in the past, where relics remain.

The presence of state highways around and through this unit gives good public access resulting in high levels of appreciation. Likewise, tramping tracks afford deeper penetration of the Victoria Ranges, although these are not extensive.

There are no especially salient landscape features within the unit, comparable to, for example, the karst landscapes of the Paparoa Range unit. But, it nonetheless displays high levels of scenic appeal as seen from the aforementioned highways and surrounding valleys.

The drainage systems within the unit all feed into, and are therefore tributaries of, the Grey, Buller and Maruia rivers. Some of these are substantial in their own right and include the Deepdale, Waitahu, Inangahua and Alexander rivers. These rivers differ from the Mokihinui in that they do not drain inland basins via seaward mountains. However, in other respects the Victoria Range rivers are similar in that they are contained by steep bush-clad mountain slopes.

Significantly, the upper Buller Gorge borders the Victoria Range unit to the north. In its character it is generically similar to the lower Buller Gorge described earlier with respect to

the Paparoa Range Landscape Unit. Before passing through the upper gorge, the Buller also flows via an inland basin centred on Murchison. At approximately 20 km long the upper Buller Gorge is the longest river in the District.

Apart from State Highway 6 and some transmission lines, the Upper Buller Gorge, like its lower counterpart, is predominantly natural in character. Further, its riverine character is also very similar to the Mokihinui in that it comprises a sequence of turbulent rapids and calm stretches. Also, like the Mokihinui, it contains the remnants of a lake formed due to an earthquake slip. So, in many ways the Upper Buller Gorge is the most similar to the Mokihinui in its landscape character, although there are differences.

The Main Divide Landscape Unit

This is the smallest unit within the District, although its landscape character extends well beyond into neighbouring districts. It encompasses all of the mountain land east of Maruia Valley and the Upper Grey River. Being mountainous it is largely unmodified and therefore displays high levels of natural character. And like the other mountainous units, it too is primarily given over to conservation and allied recreational activity.

This unit contains the District's only lakes of any significance – Lakes Christabel and Daniells. The former is the largest in the District, but compared to others on the West Coast it is relatively small. At a glance, it appears that the proposed Mokihinui reservoir lake will be larger still. Potentially it will be the biggest lake in the District.

As mentioned, the Main Divide Unit is relatively unmodified, but is not entirely without human activity. State Highway 7 runs through the unit via the upper Maruia River flats. And alongside is the well known Maruia Springs resort. Some tramping tracks and huts are also present within the unit.

Because the highway affords access to the unit, it is easily appreciated by the public. Its scenic qualities include not only bush, but also the District's highest mountains reaching to just over 2000 masl. Thus a wide range of landscape conditions exist within the unit.

The most significant river within the unit is the Upper Maruia. Other, smaller rivers are present as well. From north to south they include the Sheriff, Alfred, (Maruia) Blue/Grey and Robinson rivers. Apart from the Maruia, all these rivers are generally short where they drain the steep Main Divide mountains. Unlike the seaward river systems, they do not drain inland basins via gorges.

The Maruia Valley Landscape Unit

The narrow Maruia Valley unit separates the mountains of the Main Divide from those of the Victoria Range. Being relatively flat and at low elevation the valley is largely modified. Most land use is pastoral which contributes significantly to its landscape character. And because it is predominantly pastoral, its landform is easily very legible.

The relatively flat lowland character of the valley is highlighted by the steep bush-clad mountains that completely surround and contain it. The valley is also dominated by the

Maruia River that flows through it. Running alongside the river is State Highway 65 linking Springs Junction to Murchison. Although small, Springs Junction is the only settlement of any note within the unit.

Apart from the Maruia River, there are no obviously significant landscape features within the valley. However, within the context of the District the valley is the only one of its kind – being relatively small, inland and entirely enclosed by mountains. It is also geologically significant as the valley aligns with the Alpine Fault, where it kinks northward for a short distance, before returning to its north-east axis. The Alpine Fault continues south of Springs Junction via the Upper Grey River where it extends in a straight line to Milford Sound.

Despite its relatively small size, the Maruia Valley Unit is reasonably diverse in its landform, land use and natural attributes. Most of these are apparent to the public, and so the unit is one that plays an important role in peoples' appreciation of the District's landscape character. Like all of the District's valleys, Maruia is occupied by a significant river system.

The Grey Valley Landscape Unit

This is the larger of the two inland valleys within the District, which extends beyond the boundary to Greymouth. The Grey Valley unit displays a wide range of landforms and land uses. It includes extensive farm land, with large areas of regenerating and mature lowland bush. Landforms include alluvial flats and fans, terraces, broken hill country, and pakihi.

Much of the unit has been modified through a combination of farming, forestry, mining, milling, settlement and the provision of infrastructure. The latter consists of State Highway 7, a railway line and transmission lines. Numerous lesser roads occur within the unit. Existing and historic mining activity is common, especially in the vicinity of Reefton and south to Ikamatua. Reefton is the second largest settlement in the District after Westport. Large, formerly milled and mined, areas of the unit are reverting to native vegetation.

Despite the unit being mostly modified, there are some areas that are relatively natural. This is especially so in the vicinity of the upper Grey River catchment and the hill country west of Reefton Saddle but the majority of the unit is modified to some extent.

The Grey River and its head water tributaries are significant natural features within the unit. So too is the northward flowing Inangahua River, alongside which lies Reefton. And for a short distance the Buller River runs through the northern most extent of the unit. Thus the valley unit is divided into two distinct catchments separated by the unnamed hills either side of Reefton Saddle.

Among the three major rivers within the unit, are others of significance. These include the Stony, Larry, Waitahu, Little Grey, Otututu and Snowy rivers. Like those of the Maruia catchment these rivers typically drain the surrounding mountains without passing through any upper basins or gorges. The only exception is the Upper Grey River where it passes through Gentle Annie Gorge. A reasonably extensive basin occurs upstream of this centred on the junction of the Upper Grey and Robinson rivers. In this regard it is generically similar to the Mokihinui, although specifically quite different.

The Westport Coastal Plains Landscape Unit

One of two coastal plains in the District that centred on Westport forms a relatively extensive, and roughly triangular prominence jutting into the Tasman Sea. The landform is generally flat and contrasts with the plain's hill and mountain backdrop. Further contrast arises between the predominantly pastoral land use of the plain and the bush-clad slopes of the mountains. The sea provides a counterpoint contrast to the west. In this regard the plains act as a transition point between the sea coast and mountains.

Like all lowlands within the District the Westport Coastal Plain is entirely modified. Pastoral farming is the most extensive and common land use. Westport and its sphere of influence is a dominant feature also, as is associated infrastructure. Smaller settlements include Carters Beach, Waimangaroa and Granity. Industrial activity based on mineral extraction, and farming and port activity is also readily apparent. Human activity is therefore prevalent within the landscape unit and therefore contrasts significantly with the generally high natural character of the District's hinterland.

Despite this, natural features are present within the unit. These include the coastline itself, and various waterways. Significant coastal features include the Orowaiti and Okari lagoons along with that associated with the Buller River. Related to these are a number of back dune lakes north of Westport. Other features are the coastal cliffs and Three Steeples rock stacks at Cape Foulwind. Contrasting with these and other headlands are open ocean beaches north and south of Westport.

Inland are a number of ponds or small lakes. Some of these are artificially created water reservoirs. None are particularly significant contributors to the landscape character and amenity of the unit.

As is common throughout the District, this Westport Coastal Plain Unit has many rivers and lesser waterways flowing through it. The rivers include the Waimangaroa, Whareatea, Orowaiti, Buller, Okari, Totara and Little Totara. Of these the Buller is by far the larger, and as discussed is closest in character to the Mokihinui. All other rivers are much less distinctive. And because these rivers, including the Buller, run through a modified landscape within this unit, they are somewhat less natural compared to their mountainous headwaters and others in the District. Thus it is less likely they could be considered to be within outstanding natural landscapes within the Westport Coastal Plain Landscape Unit. However, it is possible that they could be assessed as outstanding natural features.

The Karamea Coastal Plains Landscape Unit

Although in some ways similar to the Westport Coastal Plain, it is essentially quite different. In its alignment it forms a smooth and uninterrupted continuation of the coastline. Apart from its river-mouths, its shoreline is entirely open ocean beach, free of headlands or any other anomalous features. It is generally a very narrow plain, although it does make an incursion inland following the Karamea River.

Like the Westport Coastal Plain Unit, land use within the Karamea unit is predominantly pastoral. The township of Karamea is the only one of any significance. Infrastructure

comprises roading, including the terminal point of State Highway 67. Land use and landform is not as varied compared to the Westport Unit.

In addition to the beach, significant natural features consist of Kongahu Swamp and the three rivers that flow through the unit. These are the Oparara, Karamea and Little Wanganui. The estuary of the Karamea River is particularly extensive, in fact the largest in the District, followed by the somewhat smaller one of the Oparara. So, within the relatively narrow confines and small extent of the Karamea Coastal Plain, there are a high proportion of significant riverine features. But like their Westport counterparts, they flow through highly modified landscapes which are in themselves not outstanding. Because of its size and generally natural character, the Karamea River estuary is likely to rank as an outstanding natural feature. Further, the Oparara and Karamea rivers both flow through gorges that break out onto the Karamea Coastal Plain. In this regard they are similar to the Mokihinui Gorge, where it exits at Seddonville Flats. And as mentioned, the Oparara, like the Mokihinui, drains an inland basin.

Scoping of likely outstanding natural features and landscapes.

As mentioned at the outset, the aim of this assessment is not to undertake a detailed analysis of the District's landscapes with a view to determining what is outstanding and what is not. Nonetheless, from the preceding assessment it is clear that some landscapes and features are outstanding because they are obviously eminent and conspicuous. For other landscapes and features there is less certainty because their quality is not so obvious. These would need more detailed assessment in order to ascertain whether or not they are outstanding. And then there are landscapes that are clearly not outstanding. The modified river valleys and coastal plains would fall into this category, although some contain what may be considered outstanding natural features. The Karamea River Estuary may be an example of this.

The obvious outstanding natural features within the District are:

- Heaphy River and gorge
- Oparara Arches
- Karamea River and gorge
- Matiri and Thousand Acre plateaux
- Ngakawau Gorge
- The Three Steeples
- Buller Gorge
- Porarari River gorge
- Punakiki Coast

The obvious outstanding natural landscapes are:

- Paparoa Range
- Northern Kahurangi landscape
- Victoria Range
- Main Divide

The above-listed features and landscapes are identified on a map that accompanies this assessment and images of the features and landscapes are conveyed on an A3 sheet that also accompanies this assessment. As alluded to, other features and landscapes may also be included, but these are either less obvious and require further assessment.

Assessment of the Mokihinui River gorge within the landscape context of Buller District.

The one natural feature that is common to all of the District's landscape units are river systems. The District is very well-endowed with these and all manner of waterways and water bodies. While all display specifically unique characteristics, most are generically similar. That is all emanate from steep, bush-clad mountain ranges and uplands. The Mokihinui is no exception in this regard and, like the Mokihinui, one of the prevailing characteristics of the District's rivers is that many either drain or pass through inland basins. And a large number also incise mountain ranges or uplands, creating gorges of varying depth and extent. In this regard the character of the Mokihinui is not especially unique. Or to put it another way, it is a variation on a theme that is widespread within the District, and for that matter, beyond.

As assessed, the Mokihinui displays a very high level of natural character. It is evident that this is abundant within the District where around 90% is mountainous and relatively unmodified. Similarly, much of the District's natural landscape is remote wilderness. This characteristic extends well beyond District boundaries.

The extent of the District's natural landscapes is clearly obvious to the lay person. Within this context the Mokihinui Gorge would occupy a fraction of 1% of the District's natural landscapes. Further it is apparent that the Mokihinui is not a high profile natural landscape readily accessed by the public when compared to the likes of Buller Gorge and those in the vicinity of Punakaiki.

As mentioned, gorges are a relatively common landscape feature within the District. And its landforms are very diverse. Coastal plains and escarpments, mountains, plateaus, valleys, karsts, wetlands, numerous rivers, terraces are all present as well. While the Mokihinui Gorge contributes to this diversity, as a landscape type it is not particularly rare. In fact the rarest landscape type is unmodified lowlands, where virtually none exists within the District. In contrast, the commonest landscape type are the bush-clad mountains and numerous waterways, of which the Mokihinui is a part. Thus it is assessed that the Mokihinui Gorge is not a particularly striking example of its type within the context of the District setting.

Andrew Craig and Peter Rough

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