NATURAL CHARACTER – NATC[1]

Overview

The Natural Character chapter sets out the overarching directions in response to section 6(a) of the RMA, which requires preservation of the natural character of *waterbodies* and their margins, and their protection from inappropriate *subdivision*, use and development.

Natural character is generally described as a combination of natural characteristics and qualities of a *waterbody*, including its degree of naturalness, abiotic and biotic aspects, and how it is perceived, experienced and appreciated by humans. The duty to preserve natural character entails a broad obligation to preserve the existing characteristics and qualities of a *waterbody*, whether outstanding, high, or significantly modified, and may include actions to restore or enhance those characteristics and qualities.

The *rivers* and *streams* of the Gore District range in size, with the Mataura River being the largest and most prominent. The Mataura River is subject to a Water Conservation Order, which identifies the Mataura River as having outstanding fisheries and angling amenity features. It is also a Statutory Acknowledgement Area under the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998, which recognises Ngāi Tahu cultural, spiritual, historic and traditional associations with the *river*. The tributaries of the Mataura River, including Waikaka River, Otamita Stream, Mimihau Stream and each of their tributaries, are an integral part of the Mataura River system and its functioning and health. The natural character of particular ~~streams and~~ rivers and *streams* vary along their different reaches and between each other.

[1] Decision 46 paragraph 7.7.10 includes a new NATC chapter and Appendix 6

Riparian margins contribute significantly to the natural character of a *waterbody*. Activities that can impact on the natural character of *waterbodies* and their margins include *buildings* and *structures*, e*arthworks*, ~~and~~ mineral extraction, and *indigenous vegetation clearance*. For the purposes of this Plan, the *river* and *stream* Orders outlined in Appendix 3 has been used to determine *setback* distances for activities that may impact on the natural character of *waterbodies* and their margins.

This chapter contains a single objective with supporting policy, and is given effect throughout the chapters of the Plan. Provisions relating to the preservation of the natural character of *waterbodies* and their margins are contained within Zone and District-wide chapters, including within *river* and *stream setback* rules and standards, and matters of control or discretion. Appendix 6 contains a description of the natural character of Mataura River and its margins, including values to be protected and potential threats to those values. Appendix 6 is included to assist Plan users due to the dominance of the Mataura River in the district, but it should be noted that the natural character of other *rivers* and *streams* and their margins must also be preserved and protected from inappropriate *subdivision*, use and development.

Objectives

NATC-O1 The natural character of each *waterbody* and its margin is preserved, and protected from inappropriate *subdivision*, use and development.

Policies

NATC-P1 Manage *effects* on *waterbodies* and their margins to preserve natural character by:

1. using the River and Stream Order in Appendix 3 to guide *setback* distances for activities that can adversely affect natural character;
2. ensuring public *access* is consistent with maintaining natural character;
3. limiting development of *infrastructure* on or over *waterbodies* and in their margins;
4. controlling activities on *waterbodies*;
5. controlling *indigenous vegetation clearance* within the margins of *waterbodies*;
6. encouraging restoration and enhancement, including *indigenous vegetation*, within the margins of *waterbodies*;
7. encouraging *subdivision* design that maintains, enhances or restores the characteristics and qualities of *waterbodies*.

NATC-P2 Recognise that there are activities appropriately located within the margins of *waterbodies* because of their function and purpose, including:

1. *natural hazard* mitigation *structures*;

2. farm *fencing*; and

3. *critical infrastructure* where there is a *functional need* or *operational need* and no practicable alternative location.

Appendix 6 – Mataura River Natural Character – NATC-APP6

Description

The Mata-ura (Mataura River) includes the entire main stem of the Mataura River within the Gore District, including the *river* margins. The *river* and its margins are defined as including the active *river* floodplain to the top of the defining terraces.

The Mataura River is clearly a major natural hydrological feature of the district, responsible for the creation of many of the adjacent landforms and subject to powerful natural processes. The *river* corridor morphology strongly expresses the natural fluvial processes in features such as gravel beds and channels, *river* terraces and meander loops. The natural character of the *river* margins are now generally highly modified by farming, and the presence of ~~stop~~ flood banks, exotic trees, scrub and grass species. Whilst natural character attributes are modified, they are still present, and the *river* is an important bird habitat because it supports breeding colonies of endangered tarāpuka/Black Billed Gulls.

The *mahinga kai* values of the *river* have also been recognised through the establishment of the Mataura River Mātaitai Reserve in 2006, which recognises its importance as a habitat for a range of *mahinga kai* species – most notably kanakana/lamprey. Additionally, the *river* is famous for its Brown Trout fishery and is covered by a Water Conservation Order (1997). Under this, the recognised outstanding values relate to fisheries and angling amenity.

Perceptual natural character remains due to the flowing water and *river* landforms but has been significantly modified by agricultural land use on the floodplain. *Indigenous vegetation* presence is minimal. There are transient values associated with various flow regimes, and the presence of bird and fish life. The *river* has some wildness qualities due to its scale and power but these, and its scenic values, are modified by the exotic character of the vegetation along its margins and by the presence of urban development in the vicinity of the towns of Gore and Mataura.

The Mata-ura (Mataura River) has significant cultural values for *mana whenua*. This importance is formally recognised through a Statutory Acknowledgement within the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998. The Mata-ura and its tributaries are also areas with strong connections to Ngāi Tahu *mahinga kai* practices, which are a key vehicle for expressing and perpetuating Ngāi Tahu culture and identity. The intrinsic value of wai and its mauri are key cultural values for Mata-ura, connected to its natural character. The Mana Whenua chapter provides more information on these Ngāi Tahu cultural values and association of *mana whenua* with the *river* and its margins.

Values to be protected

Remaining natural characteristics including natural *riverbed*, floodplain and terrace landforms, and any remaining *indigenous vegetation* and areas of *wetland.*

- Attributes that contribute to its habitat value for birds and aquatic fauna, particularly *indigenous species* and Ngāi Tahu *taonga species* and *mahinga kai* species.
- Low visual impact of built elements.
- Qualities of naturalness and wilderness as experienced from within the area.
- Qualities that contribute to Ngāi Tahu cultural associations, including *mauri*, *river access*, and the ability to practice *mahinga kai*.

Potential threats to natural character values

- *Quarrying activities* / *earthworks* that significantly erode the legibility of the natural landforms and the landscape coherence.
- Clearance of or damage to, areas of *indigenous vegetation.*
- Visually prominent *buildings* and *structures*.
- Exotic tree planting that obscures the legibility of the natural *river* landforms.
- Alterations to the naturalness of the *waterbody*.
- Activities resulting in inappropriate discharges to the *waterbody*.
- *Structures* and land use that restrict *access* to Mata-ura for Ngāi Tahu cultural activities (including *mahinga kai* practices).