

Ngunguru Sandspit: Values, Community and Property on the Northland Coast

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“...so much special intrinsic
value beyond just another
beach per se...”

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Executive Summary

This report documents and analyses stakeholder perspectives on the status and future of the Ngunguru sandspit, with a focus on how interested parties perceive and value the landscape. Our research took place at a time when a major development was proposed for the sandspit by its private owners, prompting community concern and interest. We draw on the views of a purposive sample of interested local residents, government officials, and landowner representatives, who were interviewed between February and December 2008. Key findings include:

- A high level of community mobilisation in defence of the sandspit's undeveloped character, built up over decades of private ownership and plans for development.
- A keen awareness among respondents of both the *affective* importance of the sandspit (in terms of emotional connections and a sense of place attachment) and the likely *effects* of development on the landscape.
- A prevailing interpretation of the sandspit as a holistic feature, with inter-related values, the integrity of which is dependent upon preventing development.
- The rarity value of the sandspit – as an undeveloped beach proximate to coastal settlements and a nearby city – preserved by its relatively inaccessible character.
- A remarkably widespread (near-universal) level of interest and support for the sandspit's entering public ownership, possibly via a landswap. Importantly, this extended to the landowner representatives at the time of interview.
- Local skepticism towards the exercise of private property rights over the spit, due to the identification of higher values, and a sense that with rights come significant responsibilities towards the landscape and the community.
- Potential development of the sandspit, like that occurring along most of Northland's east coast, would be suburban in form, and even in function.
- Community concern to avoid both suburbanisation, and large-lot elite subdivision of the spit, via the preferred option of public purchase of the site, and its conversion to a reserve.
- A community view of the sandspit that emphasises the immediate impacts of development on a highly-valued aspect of the *local* landscape, but is also aware of the *regional* and *national* significance of the site in both cultural and natural terms.

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Introduction

Ngunguru has become a slow-burning 'hot spot' of community concern around a major residential development proposal. Located on the east coast of Northland, 25 km north-east of Whangarei, Ngunguru encompasses a well-established settlement, a river and estuary system, and a large (119 ha) undeveloped sandspit. The spit is approximately 2.5 km long and 300-600 m wide, with intermittent cover of low-level vegetation. In November 2006, the private owners of the spit, and immediately adjacent forested site (including the Whakairiora mountain), released a development proposal for 152 hectares of land. This is the most recent proposal for development on the site, which has been in private ownership since 1964.

This statement set out the company's "preferred future for the sandspit [with] a compact village style development located at the southern end" (Landco, 2006: 6). It included 350 dwellings within a defined 35 hectare development area on the spit, as well as five larger lifestyle lots on the forested land, and also proposed setting aside 85 hectares (largely at the northern end of the spit) as a conservation reserve. A development of this magnitude would require substantial changes to the planning rules currently set in place for the site by the local authority, the Whangarei District Council (WDC). It would also represent a substantial and permanent change for the spit, which currently lacks both built structures and formal road access. Because of this, for most residents and visitors to this area of Northland, stepping onto the sandspit is an exceptional rather than routine event: it is most often a sight appreciated from a distance. The significance of the sandspit was described by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (PCfE) in the following terms:

The sandspit is a unique combination of historic and cultural heritage and natural heritage and it is one of only a few unmodified and unprotected sandspits remaining in New Zealand. Ngunguru Sandspit is of considerable significance to tangata whenua as it had a long history of occupation and has significant cultural, spiritual, historical, and environmental values. Three tangata whenua groups have associations with the sandspit - Ngatiwai, Ngati Taka, and Te Waiariki (PCfE, 1996: 2.1)

Maori attachment to the spit is enhanced by archaeological heritage, with sites dating from the nineteenth and possibly eighteenth centuries. A major inter-tribal battle there in 1832 resulted in some of the bodies of those killed remaining in the sand. While specific sites are identified as waahi tapu, one of which is in a separate land title in Maori ownership, a 1995 Ngatiwai Trust Board (NWTB) report to the New Zealand Historic Places Trust stated that the entire area warranted this designation given the profusion of urupa (burial sites).

Settlement in Ngunguru is concentrated on the western side of the estuary, immediately across from the sandspit. It consists of approximately 360 houses and a small number of retail outlets. Houses vary in age, size and quality – those closest to the estuary (and the main road) tend to be older and built at typical suburban densities, while further inland – on hills and ridgelines typically offering the most expansive views of the sandspit – are many of the newer houses, built on larger lots. It is the largest of a series of small coastal settlements in the area – often referred to as the Tutukaka Coast – including the Tutukaka settlement itself (339 houses), as well as Matapouri (153 houses) (WDC, 2008a).

Ngunguru has been experiencing steady growth, which is significant in the local context. Between 1996 and 2006 the number of dwellings increased 30% (from 276 to 360), while the resident population increased 27% (from 666 to 846). As is characteristic of coastal Northland (Peart, 2009), there is also a substantial supply of undeveloped residential lots – 113 such parcels currently stand vacant at Ngunguru. The existence of relatively large numbers of such lots (which account for around half of all sites in some areas) stems from landowners acquiring subdivision consents in excess of current demand, and speaks to the speculation associated with coastal property during the boom of 2002-07. Notwithstanding these undeveloped residential sites, future growth in Ngunguru is not anticipated to be particularly rapid, with the WDC (2008a) predicting population and dwelling increases of 11% between 2006 and 2016.

The Council's strategy for the area – the *Ngunguru Structure Plan* – sets out a vision “for development, management and protection of Ngunguru over the next 20 years”

(WDC, 2008b: 8). It characterises Ngunguru as both a service centre for other settlements along this area of the coast – such as Tutukaka and Matapouri – and, less prosaically, as “a lifestyle alternative centred on a scenic tidal waterway” (2008b: 2). It notes the “special sense of place” associated with the area, which is attributed to the rural setting, coastal marine resources, native vegetation, a scenic waterfront road with opportunities for improving pedestrian access, and “distinctive landscape features, and in particular the Ngunguru Spit” (2008b: 8). The document notes at numerous points strong community support for protection of the spit as a reserve or park, and indicates Council approval of such protection.

The current Ngunguru township is a centre for community organising around protection of the sandspit, including resistance to large-scale development, and advocacy for its conversion to a publicly-owned reserve (something that has been investigated on numerous occasions over four and a half decades of private ownership). Community concern about proposed development of a new, relatively high-end residential community has international precedents, in part because “established residents [have] often grow[n] to treat privately owned undeveloped land as community property for passive enjoyment of views and openness if not for active use as quasi-parks” (Pendall, 1999: 114). Indeed, at Ngunguru, the PCfE (1996) identified a strong sense of *de facto* ownership of the spit on the part of the community. This has likely been facilitated by *de jure* public ownership of the sandy beach below the mean high water mark (MHW) (for visitors to the site), and by the topography of the current settlement immediately across the estuary (for viewers of the site). Specifically, many dwellings in the settlement retain a seaward view of the undeveloped spit, which is also enjoyed by travellers on the township’s main road. The democratised availability of the outlook to an undeveloped spit has arguably broadened resistance to its development.

The purpose of this research was to document and analyse stakeholder perspectives on the status and future of the Ngunguru spit, with a focus on how interested parties perceive and value the landscape. This was driven by our primary interest, as human geographers, in the relationship between people and places. In this instance, the people of most concern were not the general public (e.g., residents of the Whangarei

District in general, or the Tutukaka Coast in particular), but those actively involved in debates over, and planning for, the sandspit. After undertaking a purposive sample of this group, we sought to situate views on the sandspit, and its potential development, within broader debates over attachments to place, community organising, property rights, and coastal housing in New Zealand. In pursuing these goals, we provided an alternative perspective to that offered by other professionals (e.g., archeologists, ecologists, coastal scientists) who have examined the spit. Our work is distinguished, in particular, by its emphasis on the language that people engaged in debate over the Ngunguru sandspit use to describe, compare, evaluate, and (often) valorise the site. Implicit in our argument is a view that such language matters, because it speaks to both the future of the sandspit, and New Zealanders' understandings of the coast more generally.

(Sub)urbanizing the Coast

The difficulties of managing pressures associated with sustained population growth and residential development in coastal areas with high landscape and ecological values have been recognised for some time. As Essex and Brown observed in New South Wales, this entails “reconciling the aspirations of all interest groups”, exercising planning control, protecting natural resources, and “managing development in such a way that the scale of the new urbanization does not overwhelm the landscape” (1997: 259). This “urbanization” – which Essex and Brown (1997: 264) note generally entails the replication “of suburban forms” – may include extension and infill of existing settlements (as has been occurring in Ngunguru), ribbon development, the establishment of small urban centres on greenfield sites, as well as up-market marina villages and canal estates. Escalating demand for coastal living also creates pressures for higher building densities and rapid price increases.

Plans for both expansion (i.e., sprawl) and increased densities (i.e., infill) may provoke local opposition from residents who value the existing sense of community, and the current (contained, low-rise) urban form. Vocal opponents can include new migrants, who “while contributing to this development process themselves,” are often well educated, and capable of articulating support for environmental protection, and resisting plans for

further development (Essex & Brown, 1997: 264). Groups seeking to preserve current built and natural landscapes in coastal areas, and the sense of place associated with these, are often able to achieve a measure of power and success in smaller communities, where they can achieve a high profile (Essex & Brown, 1997).

Coastal residential development has attracted a degree of controversy in New Zealand for at least fifty years, as Peart (2009) comprehensively demonstrates. Widespread pressure for subdivision and bach development in the late 1950s gave rise to concerns that coastal landscapes and vistas were being 'destroyed' and 'spoiled' for the benefit of the few, and to the great detriment of the public. Visual obtrusiveness, inadequate provision for public reserves and public access, and poor infrastructure were frequently noted (Peart, 2009; Morton et al., 1973). The most frequent form of development at this time involved the conversion of marginally economic coastal farmland to residential uses via incremental subdivision. This led to the creation of new coastal settlements, and the expansion of existing ones.

One outcome of this mid-twentieth century growth in coastal residential property was *sprawl*, particularly in the areas of highest demand on the east coast of the upper North Island (including Northland). Governmental efforts to impose more control on the development process from the 1960s did little to address this issue; on the contrary, new statutory requirements had the effect of mandating the reproduction of suburbia along previously rural coastline. Specifically, planning legislation required road frontages of at least 20 m, and most residential land parcels were required to exceed 800 m² in area. The result, Peart (2009: 188) confirms, was to reinforce "a grid-like pattern of sections where houses were widely set apart in long parallel roads, much like the suburbs in the rapidly developing cities."

In some instances – such as at the Whangaparoa Peninsula in the north of the Auckland – bach settlements were literally enveloped by the expanding suburbs of an adjacent urban region. In the vast majority of cases, however, coastal settlements remained distinct from urban areas, while replicating the dominant suburban form. This was the case even in unconventional developments, such as New Zealand's first master-

planned coastal holiday home community, established on a sandspit at Pauanui, on the Coromandel Peninsula. Begun in 1967, this development avoided reproducing the standard “grid-like row of sections close to the beachfront with minimum supporting infrastructure” (Peart, 2009: 124), but instead took as its inspiration the garden suburb concept, with an emphasis on openness, public spaces, and boulevards. The result was a large, well-planned and prosperous community that mimicked up-market suburbia, complete with generous setbacks, retained mature trees, coastal view corridors, and a golf course. While Pauanui was in many respects “well ahead of its time”, its manicured lawns, wide roads, and detached housing nevertheless represented the domestication and suburbanisation of a previously wild coastal landscape (Peart, 2009: 124).

While Pauanui was in some ways unconventional, the concept of building a holiday home community on a sandspit was not. A partial list of developed sandspits (on the east coast of the upper North Island) includes: Ohope and Mount Maunganui in the Bay of Plenty; Tairua, Whangamata, Matarangi and Pauanui on the Coromandel Peninsula; and Omaha in the Auckland region. The last of these is well-known as an example of how sandspit development can go wrong.

Begun in the early 1970s, with the subdivision of over 500 lots on the northern end of the Mangatawhiri spit, the Omaha development encountered significant erosion problems in the mid-late 1970s. A series of storms at this time caused massive sand loss, and destroyed a seawall, threatening beach front houses – a situation exacerbated by historical sandmining as well as the bulldozing of frontal dunes to provide building platforms and improve views for the houses that were eventually threatened (Peart, 2009). This situation necessitated extensive remedial work, and subsequent rounds of development have incorporated greater coastal setbacks (as is also the case at Matarangi). A more recent source of controversy at Omaha was the destruction of up to 200 archeological sites (middens) as part of the development of the southern portion of the spit (Peart, 2009).

Interestingly, residential development of sandspits has not, as of yet, occurred in the Northland region. The four large (all north-directed) spits on the region’s east coast

(Mangawhai, Ngunguru, Whananaki and Kokota) remain undeveloped and largely unvegetated (two are partially used for grazing). On the west coast, three rather different south-directed dune fields/spits are found, one of which (Kaipara North) is farmed, while the others (on the Hokianga and Herekino harbours) are undeveloped (Buckley, 2010).

Context

The status and potential development of the Ngunguru sandspit have been debated at length since its initial sale from Maori to private ownership in 1964. The first three decades of this debate are well summarised in a report by the PCfE (1996). It notes that within three years of the spit's transfer to private ownership, it was designated as a proposed public open space reserve by the then local authority, the Whangarei County Council. This designation, held by central government agencies – initially the Department of Lands and Survey, and later the Department of Conservation (DOC) – promoted numerous attempts purchase or exchange the land, although no mutually-agreeable arrangement was reached. This was despite strong support for the creation of a reserve at the central government level, including a 1974 report proposing the creation of a wilderness park at the site (PCfE, 1996: 5).

Given the long-term inability of government agencies to purchase the land, insufficient funds to support further offers in light of site's rapidly escalating value, and changing statutory requirements, DOC lifted the designation in 1994. This decision received criticism for opening the door to development. However, as the PCfE (1996: 4) noted: "the sandspit had been designated for over 20 years, and in that period the owner was unable to develop the land, there was no compensation available, and no steps were taken by relevant authorities to exercise statutory powers of purchase...."

Despite the removal of designation, the sandspit's *public* value continues to be recognised in a number of ways. Local planning maps which long labelled it a 'proposed public open space reserve' now identify it (in non-statutory terms) as a heritage area and 'possible regional park' (WDC, 2003). There are currently no regional parks in Northland, although immediately to the south, in Auckland, a system of such parks has achieved the protection of large areas of coastline (see Peart, 2009). Moreover, at a statutory level, the

WDC classifies the bulk of the sandspit as an ‘Outstanding Landscape Area’ – the highest level of landscape protection a local authority can offer (see Collins & Kearns, 2010a) – and most of the remainder (on the western and northern edges, adjacent to the Ngunguru River) as a ‘Notable Landscape Area’ – which signals a heightened level of public protection. The sandspit is also officially recognised by the WDC as containing sites of significance to Maori, as a coastal hazard zone (along its seaward edge), and as a flood susceptible area at its narrowest point (due to the risk of flooding from the Ngunguru River).

In 2003, the land (by this time in four titles) was sold by its owner of 35 years to a private development company, Landco. It was offered for sale again between late-2004 and mid-2005, at which point it was taken off the market, and preparation for the development proposal began. Neither offers for sale, nor development proposals, are new – as both the PCfE (1996) report, and a local community group, the Ngunguru Sandspit Protection Society (NSPS), have documented in considerable detail. On the contrary, potential sale and on-again/off-again development proposals of various sizes have characterised over four decades of private ownership.

The site’s former designation as a reserve offered de facto protection for many years (PCfE, 1996), and development has long been complicated by enduring legal questions around potential road access (and specifically whose land this would cross). More recently, official recognition of coastal and flooding hazards on the spit, heightened awareness of archeological sites of significance to Maori, and classification of the spit as an area of ‘outstanding’ and ‘notable’ landscape values, have offered regulatory protection. Thus, a site once valued by its owners at over \$37 million (NZD), continues to bear few ostensible marks of human interference, beyond those represented by non-native plants and animals.

This situation looked set to change in late 2006, when Landco released a proposal for the site. A range of lot sizes and housing styles were suggested for the development area – “to cater for a cross-section of people” – which would contain publicly-accessible roads and common areas, thus preventing “exclusive enclaves” (Landco, 2006: 6). The

proposal also outlined broad design guidelines regarding building styles, roading, drainage, and other infrastructure. As part of the development, Landco would extend, upgrade and seal the public road (Ngunguru Ford Rd), which currently terminates close to the sandspit. The research reported here began at the time this proposal was released.

Methods

In this research, we draw on a discursive data set developed from in-depth interviews, supplemented by a critical reading of several published reports and plans. Our approach closely followed that undertaken earlier in Hawke's Bay (Collins, 2009; Collins & Kearns, 2010a). A purposive sampling strategy was adopted with the aim of recruiting the participation of a diverse range of people with a clear 'stake' in the future of the locality. A total of 23 interviews was conducted – 22 in person, and one via email. These were conducted between February and December 2008, with in-person interviews typically lasting 30-60 minutes. Most of these were digitally recorded, and transcribed verbatim.

The largest sub-group of participants consisted of 14 present or former residents of the Tutukaka coast with particular interests in the future of the site. While members of this group were interviewed principally in their personal capacities, many voluntarily brought relevant professional experience (e.g., as developers, earth scientists, environmentalists, archeologists) to bear on related debates. Two of the 14 were members of a local iwi – and offered specific insights into the historical and contemporary significance of the sandspit (and nearby Whakairiora) to Maori. The remaining nine respondents were interviewed in their professional capacities: five as representatives of local, regional and national government agencies with interests in the sandspit; two as representatives of the landowner, Landco; and two others with professional interests in Ngunguru related to their involvement in ecological and Maori business interests, respectively. Where respondents are quoted in this report, they are assigned pseudonyms.

In interviewing interested locals, we were concerned in part to achieve data saturation – that is, to continue conducting interviews until new themes no longer appeared. Our total of 14 interviews is similar to the 12 that Guest et al. (2006) found adequate to enable fairly complete and stable data analysis, albeit among a relatively

homogeneous sample. In interviewing professional stakeholders, our concern was to speak with at least one representative of all three levels of government in New Zealand (local, regional and national), and of the landowner.

Following the authors' previous work (Collins & Kearns 2010a; Kearns et al., 2009), we began analysis from the position that values and experience are constituted in participants' accounts as they talk about landscapes and trends in ways that others can accept and understand. We were seeking data that was inscribed with the subjectivities of the participants, so our analysis is oriented to the language they use to construct the environment, events, experience and feelings. Our goal was to draw out the common features of participants' insights, as well as the variations deriving from their particular perspectives or professional positions, in order to highlight the impacts of potential or actual change in the locality. We assembled verbatim sections of text relating to six broad themes. We clarified patterns of ideas and assertions relating to each theme by further reading of the data, working independently on text files and then meeting to discuss and ratify the interpretations.

In six subsequent sections we discuss and interpret the data. We begin by exploring foundational aspects of participants' relationships with the locality, focusing first on their feelings *for* the coast, then their attachment *to* Ngunguru. From that platform, we examine the sense of community that has developed, at least in part, in response to development proposals and private ownership of the sandspit. A proposal to transfer the sandspit to public ownership – the latest of many attempts to secure the site as a reserve – is the focus of the fourth section. As this transfer has not yet occurred, and the sandspit remains in private hands, we then consider participants' views on property rights, especially as they pertain to this particular landscape. In our last results section, we explore the prospect of suburbanisation of the sandspit (as set out in the Landco proposal of November 2006), in light of experience elsewhere on the New Zealand coastline.

Results

A. Feelings for the coast



In her recent survey of the state and status of the coast, Peart (2009: 10) suggests that historical ‘do-it-yourself’ bach-building – sometimes even on public land (see Kearns & Collins, 2006) – represented not only kiwi ingenuity but “a deep love and affinity for the coast.” However, with the intensity of contemporary development, “New Zealanders are losing those things about the coast they *love* the most” (emphasis added). Peart applies this far-reaching and variegated human emotion in recognition of the intense and enduring bond *felt* by many, if not the majority, towards the coast in general and specific coastal locations in particular. From this perspective, coastal environments occupy a central place in the emotional landscapes of New Zealanders. Too easily, we contend, emotion (the domain of feelings) has been devalued in relation to landscape. This section places people’s feelings for the coast under the spotlight, and highlights emotional dimensions of people’s relationship with our case study of Ngunguru.

People’s connection with the coast can be broadly divided into relationships based on *effects* (e.g., accumulation of capital through property ownership, or the gaining of

livelihood through fishing) or *affects* (e.g., feelings evoked through some form of engagement with a coastal landscape). These are not necessarily discrete categories. A fishing boat owner for whom a coastal location provides a commercial base of operations, for instance, may also find comfort in simply *being* and not necessarily *doing* at the wharf.

Feelings for beaches and the coast invariably prevail among populations residing within easy reach of them. Emotional connection is a particularly strong discourse commonly invoked to explain and justify connection to place, and opposition to proposed developments (Collins & Kearns 2010a). Elsewhere, Stratford (2009) uses the concept of “belonging as a resource” to theorise local politics of place. While ‘belonging’ may be framed as dispassionate attachment to place via property rights, it more likely embraces feelings of connection or loyalty, which may be disrupted when significant changes for the land/seascape and proposed/or undertaken. Stratford (2009: 7) discusses the way that a personal sense of belonging can extend to concerns about “what does and does not belong on [the] shores.” This concern for the integrity of a place and how one feels when in its midst builds on phenomenological understandings of people-place relations. In the words of an early exponent of this perspective, it involves:

a recognition of the person’s emotional links with environments, places, and landscapes, ranging from the momentary emotional irritation one feels when a thing is out of place to the profound sense of attachment and concern people may feel for a place they consider sacred (Seamon, 1984: 757).

These perspectives both build on, and reflect, the seminal ideas of Yi-fu Tuan, encapsulated in the title of his 1974 book, *Topophilia*. Others have teased out what such ‘love of place’ might mean for coastal locations. In the American context, Kellert (2005: 12) writes of coasts as “hav[ing] provided people with physical areas historically rich in intellectual, *emotional*, aesthetic and even spiritual opportunities for growth and development” (emphasis added). Aspects of this feeling for the coast include mastery, fear, awe and attachment.

The perceived therapeutic value of the coast can be significant, most dramatically illustrated by the western tradition of seeking out the shore for solace and rehabilitation at times of mental and physical stress. The persistent appeal of camping near the beach,

often in frugal conditions, is arguably reflective of the capacity of coastal environments to offer renewal in the context of summer vacations (Collins & Kearns, 2010b). Conversely, “it is not unusual to encounter extreme feelings of loss when particular elements of the coast are despoiled or degraded” (Kellert, 2005: 17-18). Indeed, Kellert (2005) writes that the coastal *sense of place* is lessened when there is physical degradation (including suburbanisation).

Closer to home, for Maori, the coast can evoke a powerful range of emotions. In her account, Smith (2004: 15) describes being near the coast at her Taranaki turangawaewae as leading to “consciousness of the sea as a source of food” and also “a comforting presence when calm and an uncontrollable force in rough weather; engendering moods in you to match its own.” The coast can also provide a reconnection with ancestors:

As you stand on the beach, absorbed in ceaseless sound and motion, a further element is added by the wind. ...your eye is caught by the activity of birds...they draw your attention upwards towards their flight paths ..the songs of the land and seabirds are associated ... with those of departed friends and family members... (Smith, 2004: 16).

Maori are not alone in having strong emotional bonds with the coast. Much popular New Zealand literature (e.g., Bruce Mason’s celebrated play *End of the Golden Weather*) and film (e.g., Christine Jeff’s *Rain*) reflect links between childhood, emotion and the beach. Indeed, feelings of loss associated with the beach often involve memories of lost childhood as well as changed places.

The emotional reaction to court decisions and legislation relating to the foreshore and seabed issue is used by West-Newman (2008) as another example of how deeply and passionately New Zealanders feel about the coast. The coast is deemed to be part of our national psyche, a claim reinforced by a plethora of pictorial books celebrating the coast (e.g., Barnett & Wolfe, 1993). According to West-Newman (2008: 168): “Perhaps because most New Zealanders now live in cities, the beach draws enchantment as refuge from the impersonal and overwhelming nature of urban life.” She writes of three main emotions associated with the foreshore and seabed issue: grief, fear, and nostalgia (“an ambivalent longing”) (2008: 171). Interestingly, all of these emotions are associated with loss, and thus have negative connotations, in contrast to love. Our Ngunguru data speak to the

ways in which a broad set of emotions play a role in constructing peoples' relationship with the locality as well as mediating their experience of the actual and imagined effects of residential development.

A fundamental and widespread emotion noted across a number of narratives is anxiety. According to Xavier, debate over protection is "never more pertinent than today because we haven't got much left." Xavier refers here to the scarce resource of undeveloped coastal landscapes (especially in the northern North Island), and his sense of reduced opportunities to act in terms of both resources and time adds an imperative to the feeling of anxiety. In reference to Waipu, a locality south of Whangarei that has seen considerable residential development, Xavier goes on to comment "That is really symptomatic of what's wrong with this country I love. That pressure on what's left". Others offered confirmation of Xavier's views, with David, a respondent with Maori heritage commenting "we have precious few really pristine untouched pieces of coastline left ...the Coromandel is, you know... gone, uh, the whole development is creeping up the coastline from Auckland now."

Anxiety at the prospect of degradation of a pristine, or at least undeveloped, coastal site at Ngunguru is frequently accompanied in respondents' narratives by feelings of outrage at what has already been imposed on the coast elsewhere in the region:

I am worried about development both coastal and in wilderness areas as well in New Zealand. I think a lot of it's poorly put together and profit driven, and um, you know.... there's few chunks of Northland that haven't been filled in and developed, you know, and when you take into account all of the intrinsic, historical um, ecological, you know, biological, cultural issues associated with a specific site it's just absolute madness that it's being developed, I mean, for God's sake it's a gravesite (Dennis).

The sense of "worry" that grips David, and prompts his expletive "for God's sake", leads to a further emotion – outrage – that landowners can propose substantial development of the sandspit: "it's sort of an emotional reaction you're like, ahh, aghast, and how they want to do something like that."

A fundamental emotion running through the narratives is the love of the locality. Bella, for instance, moved to Ngunguru when she met her partner and in so doing entered a relationship with both a place and person:

I fell in love with the area I think it's just so beautiful and there are amazing people up here and so, I met my partner up here and we've decided to make Ngunguru our home [laughs] yeah, and here we are... there's something really special, I guess I know this place...I definitely feel connected to this piece the coast.

If the human experience of love essentially involves a connection between people, then so too is it the case with place (we return to this theme in the next section). For Trevor, place-connection has been compromised by recent landscape change, but the love remains nonetheless:

Overall I loved the way the houses at Ngunguru nestled into the flat areas beside the road – and that the hills behind and the sandspit in front were pretty much free of housing. That's now changed, with houses on the hills and ridgelines – which I think is a mistake.

Significantly, Trevor's observation of houses "nestled ...beside the road" speaks to his love being not just for a pristine landscape devoid of human imprint (e.g., the sandspit) but rather for the locality as a whole in which until recently the human imprint was subtle. This speaks to a gestalt between people and place developed in what Cheshire and Reynolds (2008: 9) describe as "more innocent years", prior to the "affluence-driven acquisitiveness of new generations of city-dwellers." Similarly, Fagan notes that his love of New Zealand is "because we have places like the sandspit. Otherwise you can go to Surfer's Paradise". Another respondent referred to the near-continuously developed east coast of the United States (Xavier). Here we see over-developed parts of other coasts being held up as a counterpoint to what the New Zealand coast can offer, a point of contrast we have noted elsewhere (Collins & Kearns, 2010a).

A key dimension of this love of place is a sense of spiritual connection. This translates into feeling of awe, and affirms West-Newman's (2008) contention that Maori are not alone in claiming a spiritual affiliation with New Zealand beaches. Bella, for instance, remarks:

Every time I drive down that road I look at the sandspit you know, it's just so stunningly beautiful and it's, it's what makes Ngunguru special.... there's a spiritual dimension you know, you kind of, you can just sense that it's, you know, it's untouched. Mm, yeah, I don't know how else I can explain it.

With a greater economy of words, Fagan simply states "...people need places to go to." This comment speaks of the need for places of retreat and restoration, even if they lie near one's back door (see Conradson, 2008). The resounding emotion that rings through in such discourse is love: "I love going down there ... especially down at that headland [where] there's some really significant trees and stuff ... it's a very, very pristine natural environment" (Nick).

Placed alongside Fagan's expression of the need for "places to go," Nick's observation amounts to love of place that is not just appreciation from afar (i.e., the view) but also a need to engage with place itself (i.e., to visit) in a sense akin to pilgrimage. This speaks to a difference between landscape as something to be appreciated in a detached manner (like a painting), and landscape as something to be actively engaged with, immersed in and enjoyed. The latter is particularly significant in New Zealand, where the coast is routinely a site of active recreation and hands-on experience, rather than passive appreciation (see Perkins & Thorns, 2001). Significantly, for our purposes, this engagement often co-exists with feelings of reverence, which may verge on a spiritual imperative to treat coastal places with care. Such sentiments are evident in Bella's account: "[We have] some really special undeveloped places so I guess, yeah I do, I feel that we've got something up here that's unique, maybe, in Northland or New Zealand that we need to look after."

Reverence for pristine places can be informed by recollection of the coast more generally once was like, in addition to feelings for the particularity of place:

It's those open spaces that make New Zealanders what they are I believe. Um, the childhood that we've had, you know, the experience of being out in the open, being able to go and explore places, especially along the coast, I think that's an integral part for a lot of Kiwis (Fagan).

The sandspit was my playground ...it was a great place for adventures. I was dimly aware of the name of the owner, the almost-mythical "Mr. Green", but that was all. I was almost completely unaware of adult concerns over the fate of the sandspit... (Trevor).

Here we see the accretion of layers of memory and discovery leading to a strong bond with the coast preceding any awareness of "adult concerns" about development. This type

of bond, we contend, often forms a foundation for the enduring love articulated by many respondents, and the emotional dimensions of their opposition to major changes on the sandspit.

As we illustrate elsewhere in this report, respondents also articulate their concerns in ways that are not overtly emotional, particularly in the (somewhat narrower) technical and legal types of language that are the ‘stock in trade’ of most public planning processes. Moreover, their emotional responses are well-informed by an awareness of coastal development at the national scale in New Zealand, and thus resist easy characterisation as overly insular or self-regarding. It is this understanding of the connections between the particular (e.g., the local effects of development at any one beach) and the national (e.g., the cumulative effects of many coastal developments) that informs Peart’s (2009) analysis, quoted at the outset of this section. As David remarked, in explaining his concerns around the Landco proposal for the sandspit: “I’m very passionate about New Zealand, I’m passionate about its economic future but I’m also passionate about its heritage and looking after what I think are its taonga [treasures].” To him, the prospect of building houses on the sandspit raises the spectre of violating the sacred Maori burial grounds, as well as the integrity of the site in general.

For local Maori the feeling of sacredness is sharpened by the history and archaeological significance of the sandspit where, as Faith said “visiting warriors were left ... So there’s blood and bones making it sacred.” Local Pakeha are also very aware of this aspect of the sandspit’s history. As Karen noted, in past decades, “human remains and bones have been exposed after heavy storms.” In addition, Xavier reminded us of the significance of the adjacent mountain to Maori – “a local hapu leader has described Whakairiora as ‘their Notre Dame’” – and added that “the feeling of awe is associated with these special places, be they built like Notre Dame, or natural like Whakairiora.” Thus we see parts of the coastal landscape (the spit, the mountain) being claimed as warranting reverence, and indeed awe, not only for their intrinsic worth, but also for their accretion of historical and spiritual significance in generations past.

In this section we have highlighted the emotional dimensions of narratives collected at Ngunguru. These discourses might be dismissed by the ‘rationalist’ orientation of planning (with its conventional emphasis on the technical and quantifiable). Yet we believe they warrant documentation and interpretation on two counts: first, because emotions reflect deep, and often dismissed, dimensions of the people-place relationship; and second because emotions are not only produced by engagement with coastal landscapes but also, in turn, can produce collective mobilisation in favour of place protection.

B. Place attachment



Although the affective bonds between people and place are often under-acknowledged, they frequently motivate community responses to developments such as that proposed for the Ngunguru sandspit (see, e.g., Manzo & Perkins, 2006). This link between feelings of belonging, the lived experience of place, and community mobilisation is arguably strengthened when development proposals disrupt people’s sense of place, as well as the sense of self associated with familiar physical and social environments. ‘Place attachment’ is analogous to the geographical notion of sense of place (Williams & Vaske, 2003) and generally refers to “the positive emotional bonds that develop between individuals and their environment” (Brown & Raymond, 2007: 90). Here the word ‘develop’

has significance, for place attachment among individuals generally develops over time, often with the impetus of being (at least intermittently) resident and hence immersed in the character of the place.

In ex-urban coastal environments, the extent of social and environmental change potentially incurred by major developments can be profound and can feel overwhelming to 'locals'. In other words, prospects of change "can make explicit the bonds between person and location that are typically latent, resulting in emotional responses such as anxiety and loss, and a sense of displacement" (Devine-Wright, 2009: 428). While these responses might be easily dismissed by commentators, by simply describing them as what they are (i.e., 'emotional'), they speak in a deeply human way to the strength of place attachment and commitment to locality-based community.

In this section we explore this sense of place attachment in the narrative data, following Cresswell's (2009) view that place transcends mere location to involve *locale* (the material settings for social relations) as well as *sense of place* (the feelings and emotions that place evokes). In the context of Ngunguru, this means we give credence not only to the tangible landscape and its role as a crucible for community and conflict, but also the feelings and experiences that inform people's attachment to place. Most fundamentally, it is the material character of the landscape of Ngunguru that attracts and attaches residents to the area. This character is simultaneously stable (the sandspit is a constant, routine presence) and subject to change: "it's a dynamic environment, it looks different everyday" (Carla). This dynamism is part of what is at stake in debates over development, which would inevitably result in at least partial stabilisation of the spit and dunes. As Trevor says:

The sandspit itself is a very dynamic environment. I've seen the low-lying sandy areas inundated by high seas and flooded by heavy rains. I've seen manuka inundated by sand-dunes, and marram-topped dunes undercut by wind. I've seen middens slowly disappear under an advancing dune, only to re-appear years later. I'd like to see the sandspit stay that way, and not be "stabilised" by unnatural means.

To Beth, attachment to place cannot be disaggregated to highlight one element of the landscape over the others because, to her, there is a "relationship between the sandspit, the mountain and the sea and ... they all fit together as a total environment." This underscores previous research which has found opposition to coastal development

anchored in the notion of “a gestalt experience”, which will be degraded even if housing is confined to particular areas (Collins & Kearns, 2010a). This said, for many respondents, the sandspit is clearly a centerpiece within Ngunguru. For Kent, “the sandspit, intact and undeveloped, is a beautiful piece of coastline [which, with the maunga at its base, forms] a discrete geographical and cultural entity”.

This comment speaks to the holistic understandings of the sandspit that prevail among ‘locals’. For David, the site’s significance is due to “a mixture of its landscape value, its habitat value, its cultural value, and its value to the community that make it so important... It’s really the package of values.” Similarly, Daniel says “It’s not just a piece of barren, waste sand. It carries a purpose for the community. Multiple purposes even – it’s a barrier, an historical and archeological site, and a recreational place”. A discourse of uniqueness often underlies such assessments: “it’s just about unique. As a spit that hasn’t been built on. Well, there’s one more up in the Far North.” To a minority of ‘locals’, however, the familiarity of the sandspit detracts from their willingness to embrace such superlatives:

Q: In the local plan for the area they talk about the sandspit being an outstanding natural landscape. Is that a term you’d think is pretty fair, pretty accurate for it – do you think of it in that way?

Francis: I don’t know whether it’s an outstanding landscape at all...

Faith: It’s ordinary to us.

Francis: Yeah it’s ordinary - we grew up with it. Because we live here.

In the case of these respondents, skepticism towards official landscape designation processes was informed, in part, by experience as landowners seeking consents to develop other areas deemed to be of high value. In any case, their view – while opposed to the general consensus on the sandspit – did not necessarily detract from a more general sense that the material landscape at Ngunguru is a crucible for social dynamics of place. For the most part, these were seen as harmonious. As Carla noted, what strikes her is that “driving down into Ngunguru for the first time you see the estuary and the sandspit and how people are using them – for small-scale activity, kayaking, seafood collection, even in winter.”

Definitions of place too easily incorporate only the material and the social. Eyles' (1985) conceptualisation of place goes a step further, signaling a recursive relationship between actual places and the notion of 'dwelling' or 'place-in-the-world'. In other words, place is not only shaped by landscape features and the social life and meanings contained therein, but the deeply personal experience of being in a place (being 'placed') also has significance. This significance is enhanced through the experience of dwelling there – either intermittently or permanently. Certainly, attachment to the Ngunguru sandspit is not limited to long-time local residents or holiday-home owners: "it's amazing how many people have got a connection. I think people value it if they've seen it, if they've been out there" (Karen).

This idea of place has been used and extended by Kearns and Andrews (2010) to help explain why some locations evoke feelings of wellbeing whereas others do not. Place attachment is, arguably, strongly shaped by whether one's place-in-the-world (or identity) is enhanced or corroded by the qualities of the literal places of everyday life. With respect to Ngunguru, we encountered respondents who said they were attracted by the "open space and freedom of lifestyle.. where kids can go to school without shoes" (Eva). This seemingly inconsequential comment contrasted with Eva's prior experience overseas (in a more regimented society and restricted climate) and seems an emblematic image of deeper, ontological aspects of place such as safety, security and comfort.

According to Trevor, "the main appeal is the familiarity of the area and the link with the past. I know pretty much every inch of the place." The temporal reach of familiarity with place is powerful glue in place-attachment. This is echoed in another narrative in which Fagan's attachment to the sandspit is evocatively linked to discourses of environmental integrity and childhood nostalgia along with a sense of foreboding with respect to the creeping grip of development pressures. His narrative warrants recounting in full:

it's a pristine sort of piece of beach, you've got birds nesting on it, it's as it was when I was a kid so, you know, that's forty years ago and it hasn't really changed and I think there's not an awful lot of places, particularly in Northland where you can say the same thing of it. You know, I've seen the changes at Wellingtons Bay where there forty years ago there was a prime patch on the beach front scattered along and now it's completely filled in and three baches back. And that will continue to happen, so you know Wellingtons Bay is sort of, is done and that will continue to grow as will Ngunguru [township] and Matapouri and the rest of them.

Fagan's feelings of place-attachment appear to be underlined by a sense of responsibility to do the right thing. He returned from overseas and saw an opportunity to buy real estate at Ngunguru from someone who "just saw [it] as some way of earning money and thought there's an opportunity here to buy that land and take control of what does happen here, and make sure that it's something good." For him, attachment to place, while personal, is also informed by a concern for the common good, including protecting land with panoramic views of the sandspit from obtrusive and poor-quality residential development.

Views of the sandspit often featured in discussions around its future. Xavier noted an underlying tension, characteristic of New Zealand coastal property more generally (see Collins & Kearns, 2008), in which "the values that people want to preserve in the landscape, such as the open vistas, are also the exact same values touted in advertising for coastal property." In other words, fuelled by the images promoted by the real estate industry, there is a quest on the part of private buyers to acquire the same 'uninterrupted views' that lobby groups seek to keep in the public domain. This in turn bolsters expectations and hopes that the state will step in to purchase remaining undeveloped private coastal land, at Ngunguru and elsewhere.

Perhaps reflective of his own position and expression of place-attachment, Fagan comments that while coastal development in New Zealand has almost universally been destructive of natural character, this may be changing. He sees more environmentally progressive views emerging among actual and potential residents: "ten years ago in Northland no one would pay anything for a piece of land that had native bush on it and now people are paying premium." Given this observation, the notion of place attachment may in the future come to be informed increasingly by values that privilege the indigenous and pristine over the exotic and developed.

However, the notion of what constitutes 'pristine' is called into question by some in respect to the Ngunguru sandspit (recalling our observations at Ocean Beach, Hawke's Bay – see Collins & Kearns 2010a). As Oscar notes, "it's certainly nowhere near as ecologically pristine as a lot of other areas," and as Lawrence says "it's not pristine at all -

but it still has a lot of natural character.” Arguably in the vigorous defense of the beauty and ecological importance of the area, the word ‘pristine’ may be over-used. Nonetheless, the term may be deployed in a metaphorical rather than literal manner to signify ways in which the sandspit has been spared despoliation and over-development, as has occurred on other sandspits like Omaha.

This section has followed our discussion of articulate and heart-felt expressions of emotional connection to place at Ngunguru with further exploration of the nature of place and people’s connection with it. We concur with Jivén and Larkham (2003) that sight strongly informs sense of place, with numerous informants speaking to a high value placed on (currently) undeveloped ‘viewsapes’ at Ngunguru. Respondents’ sense of foreboding in the face of development proposals is reminiscent of Porteous’ (1989) notion of ‘topocide’ – the destruction of place. While residential development on the sandspit would not destroy the place in an absolute sense, the incursion of roads and buildings into a (relatively) pristine site would amount to a symbolic undermining of the remaining integrity of the site, which the majority of respondents hold in very high regard. As Trevor put it, “when a beautiful landscape ... is populated, the end-result is degradation.”

As with emotions, claims of connection with place – whether based on ancestry or affinity with landscape and wildlife – evoke an uneasy fit within the technical and legalistic frameworks of planning practice. The foregoing narratives have spoken to a place attachment that is not necessarily predicated on residence, but is certainly enhanced by it. Indeed, the philosophical ideas of dwelling that are intimately bound up with place-attachment speak to the way stability within, and as, a community can engender the emergence of a common vision of place-attachment such that, as in the case of the NSPS, resources can be shared and energy harnessed in defense of place itself.

We are arguing for place as comprising not just the sandspit (the object defended) but also the place-at-large (the combined physical, social and symbolic landscape of Ngunguru) which is more generally what people speak as being attached to. This ‘gestalt’ of people and place bears links with the past, and is deemed worthy of preservation, or at least careful stewardship, into the future. The holism implied by ‘gestalt’ was repeatedly

invoked by participants who tended to resist separating out and prioritising particular characteristics of their place. A further aspect of place attachment worth reiterating is an acceptance that change is inherent in the natural order (e.g., processes like shifting sand dunes, storm damage). Yet a prevailing view was that this dynamism in the landscape should not be augmented by excessive human interference – especially on a fragile landform like the sandspit. This view speaks to a regard for place that stretches beyond self-interest to generate an ethic of environmental care that is informed by, but not limited to, personal place-attachment.

C. Sense of community



For many locals, the sandspit is on the horizon not only literally, but also figuratively in terms of being near the forefront of their consciousness. This is reflected in a high level of community participation in events such as meetings and organised walks related to the status and potential development of the sandspit. Such engagement speaks to the way in which the possibility of change brings the value of particular places to the forefront of many people's consciousness (Manzo & Perkins, 2006). When this experience is shared, it can form the basis for cooperation at the community scale (as in the formation of local environmental groups), as individuals are motivated by a common sense of purpose, and

a commitment to undertaking collective action. At Ngunguru, as elsewhere, it is the prospect of change that gives rise to opportunities for empowerment and citizen participation – as well as the potential for conflict (another common characteristic of many planning processes) (Manzo & Perkins, 2006).

In the case of Ngunguru, a history of community organisation around protection of the spit, and opposition to multiple development proposals over the decades in which it has been in private ownership, provide a foundation for contemporary efforts, led by the NSPS. Over time, “different groups of people have stood up to ... protect the spit” (Bella). Another respondent noted that proposed development of the spit was “not a recent thing, it’s been going on for a long time. And it’s testimony to, I think, the fortitude and resilience of various people that have kept the fight going for so long” (Dennis). These views were affirmed in a conversation with two of the longer-standing local proponents of the spit’s protection:

Connie: People have slaved their guts out for years [to save the sandspit from development]. A lot of them are dead now, there’s been so many battles year after year. ... I’ve been involved since 1993, when [the sandspit] was advertised for sale as a “wonderful opportunity”. I took a petition around the Tutukaka Coast, and asked central government to buy the sandspit. ...

Karen: We seem to have been having meetings for goodness knows how long....

Connie: And we have a sense of community, not like some other places, which have the great big two storey mansions. ... We have lots of volunteers.

The act of ‘standing up’ was reported to be widely shared among interested locals, who volunteered “their own time and money and energy”, but who also knew that “if, you know, you need to step back there’s always someone who will step forward and take your place for a while” (Bella). The large pool of potential volunteers helped to inform a strong sense that, among those who had taken an interest in the issue (both locals and those from further afar), the great majority opposed development on the spit:

From a community point-of-view there’s an incredible strength of feeling that the place needs to be protected. We [DOC] have had absolutely constant lobbying. The Minister’s had constant lobbying. And normally in these situations it’s coming from one or two individuals, but this time it’s been coming from hundreds of people. And it’s not just people in Northland ... a lot of it’s from Auckland. And obviously it’s become

very clear to us that from a community point-of-view, and from a national point-of-view, that it's a priority (David).

Some people would say it's just another sandspit, you know, who cares, but the locals out there are becoming organised. ... A lot of local Maori still don't want any – most people don't want any – development there. Most of the locals. You'll find that out [at community meetings] (Lawrence)

A representative of the sandspit's owner had a slightly different perspective on wider opinion regarding its development, but affirmed a high level of local opposition:

Oscar: We held [consultation] events in Ngunguru, itself, and I don't think we were ever going to get the local population on side, but we were actually trying to explore sort of wider regional-type benefits, so we would probably have been better consulting more widely with the public in Whangarei, for example.

Q: Right, people who might benefit [from] access to an ocean beach and coastal homes?

Oscar: Exactly. Because obviously the people who live in Ngunguru have an attachment to the site, and are going to be very resistant to see any change occur. ... I think we still got a reasonable amount of positive feedback on those Open Days.

Q: Oh yeah?

Oscar: I mean, [from] people [who] had travelled to come up, even some locals that weren't opposed to it. But it's pretty hard for them to say that they're not, up there, in that climate.

The 'climate' of opposition referred to here reflected both long-standing community support for preservation of the site in a natural condition, and a strengthening of community ties in response to the latest development proposal: "[the community] is strengthened because of talking and meeting with people. Quite a diverse community has gathered around protecting the sandspit. It's a point of commonality" (Carla). A number of respondents noted that this strengthening was due in part to shared disappointment with the consultation process initiated by Landco (referred to by Oscar, above). The following views on this matter were broadly representative:

We were just being talked *to* – 'have a look around at our story boards, have some food.' There was no meeting to speak of. We were treated like peasants (Connie)

At the first public meeting, at the Sports Complex, 200 to 300 people gathered, but there was no real meeting, and only a one-way dialogue! Landco talked *at* us about what their plans are (Carla).

Ironically, then, landowner efforts to engage with the local community appeared to harden opposition. In the case of most locals, and other interested parties, this opposition is *not* grounded in regular use of, or visits to, the spit – although a number of interviewees reported swimming, paddling or rowing across from the current township for recreational purposes. This sets Ngunguru apart from most other coastal sites in New Zealand where large-scale development has been contested, such as Ocean Beach in Hawke’s Bay (Collins & Kearns, 2010a), in which *beachgoers* have featured prominently. Opposition here is based on an appreciation of the site’s natural and cultural heritage that does not depend upon physical use; indeed, the site’s heritage qualities have undoubtedly received a degree of protection, thus far, from its isolation, and in particular the absence of a road. As one respondent explained: “the reason people feel passionately about the site is because the site is the way it is, not because they’re missing out on a recreational opportunity” (David). The relative difficulty of access has contributed to the sandspit’s increasing rarity value as a large, undeveloped beachfront site completely free of development. As Fagan put it, “there is an element of uniqueness to this I think in terms of proximity to Whangarei and to Auckland, for the quality of what you have here.”

In this context, there is the potential for development on the sandspit to improve public access, and thus recreational opportunities, in particular by extending a public road to the site. In practice, such an extension is complicated by long-standing (and much-debated) questions regarding ownership of the land it would most likely cross. Our focus here is on the more general principle of increased access, and how this is understood. In broad terms, roading would reduce the solitude and wilderness qualities of the spit by opening it up to a much larger potential pool of visitors: Whangarei residents, in particular, would gain relatively easy access to this part of the coastal environment. This is significant, as public access is valued under current resource management law:

Many developments are opposed on the basis that they restrict access to the coast. The Landco development will increase access. The increased access is probably not all that good for the animals and plants unless the area is well-managed, but it will be a boon for the population of Whangarei, which will have a huge beach to go to – one that is probably closer than any other sandy beach. I think that’s going to be Landco’s trump card... (Olaf).

Unsurprisingly, Landco representatives identified increased public access as one of the benefits that development could bring. Together with permanent protection and enhancement of over 60 hectares of the sandspit, as well as a potential role for local Maori in the protection of cultural sites, improved access could contribute to “an overall environmental betterment” (Oscar). Landco’s plan to extend the Ngunguru Ford Road to the site would provide “public access without cost to any public parties”, thereby opening up to all “the closest ocean beach to Whangarei” (Oscar). In this context, community opposition to the development, and the improved access that would accompany it, could be interpreted as opposition to “a good outcome for the people of Northland and New Zealand, and for that [the sandspit] to be able to be something people can enjoy” (Lydia).

Local concerns around access centred in part on how bird species, and Maori cultural sites, could be protected with a large increase in visitor numbers. As Lydia noted, these issues connected to broader debates around the place of humans in conservation efforts, and “what does conservation mean.” However, there was also an implication that some in the community opposed development in part out of self-interest, and the private benefits they enjoyed from its current isolation and natural qualities. This could be read into a range of statements relating to the motivations of opponents.

The essence of the landowner representatives’ claims relating to access was the observation that the sandspit – while including a publicly-owned reserve strip below the MHWM, which was legally accessible over water – was not a ‘public beach’ in a conventional sense. Instead, it was accessed primarily by locals (“a couple of hundred people or a thousand people” - Lydia) with the means and knowledge to cross the river, who enjoyed a relatively exclusive beach experience on the other side. This rendered the publicly-owned land on the spit “semi-public for some people” (Lydia), a proportion of whom also walked across the privately-owned land separating the river (western) and ocean (eastern) sides of the spit.

Related to this argument was a contention that members of this group – most of whom already owned homes in the area – now opposed others enjoying similar benefits: “they have been really lucky to find a house [here], but they don’t want any more, and they

don't want other people to be able to access it [the sandspit]" (Lydia). Potentially adding to this type of self-interest – which has certainly been observed elsewhere (Essex & Brown, 1997) – was a concern to enhance real estate values by “not hav[ing] more supply in that area” (Lydia), and by preserving views of the sandspit enjoyed from many houses in the current township: “it's not so much ... the natural character of the site which would have been affected as opposed to their vistas” (Oscar). The latter point was also articulated by a Maori respondent, who suggested that some members of the local iwi were skeptical about “a bunch of Pakeha over the hill in their nice fancy houses looking down at the spit from their nice scenic views saying: ‘we don't want it developed’” (Dennis). The latter group had already benefitted, Dennis noted, from the fact that “the Pakeha can develop, chop up their farm land across the estuary.”

In light of the foregoing narratives, we see strong evidence of a recursive relationship between a sense of community and efforts to protect a highly-valued local landscape. On the one hand, the development proposals – of which Landco's November 2006 plan is but the latest – have undoubtedly bolstered community organising, and provided a common focus for the energies of many local people. On the other, the effectiveness of lobbying to protect the Ngunguru sandspit reflects the very broad-based nature of local opposition to its development. This allows for “ebbs and flows” (Bella) in the commitment of particular individuals, as their energy and availability varies over time.

The interconnectedness of community and environmental advocacy at Ngunguru, together with the duration and relatively high profile of debates over the sandspit, make it a key site in broader national concerns over the balance of public and private interests in coastal environments (see, e.g., Peart, 2009). As one respondent noted, “I think it's ... important that we make a stand here and if you bring the battle then it's also going to make other people [notice], you know?” Few would disagree that a stand has been made at Ngunguru, and that local opposition to development is both widespread and effective.

D. Proposed landswap and aspirations for a reserve



Governmental responses to pressure for coastal residential development in New Zealand have often centred on securing public ownership of remaining undeveloped sites, which are then vested as reserves or parks. As Peart (2009) outlines, in coastal areas where pressure for development is high, authorities frequently moved to purchase privately-owned, undeveloped sites in advance of subdivision, thereby preserving high-value landscapes for public purposes (e.g., recreation, conservation). Such action has been motivated in part by an awareness (or fear) that “escalating land prices would make future acquisition unaffordable” (Peart, 2009: 194) – something that remained very relevant during the 2002-07 boom in coastal property prices (Collins & Kearns, 2008). Such action, undertaken by all three levels of government (local, regional, national) at various times and in various places, has been largely detached from the national park system; national parks encompassing coastal areas remain located primarily on the remote west coast of the South Island. Instead, governments have acted under alternative frameworks, and made substantial one-off purchases as opportunities have arisen.

Perhaps the best-known framework for public purchase of privately-owned coastal land is the Auckland regional park system, facilitated by specific legislation passed in 1963. Within a decade, the Auckland Regional Authority had established nine substantial coastal regional parks, with a total land area over 2300 hectares. Attempts to replicate this approach in Northland and Coromandel were unsuccessful (Peart, 2009). These parks protected large areas of the region's east coast, in particular, while west coast landscapes were protected by the pre-existing Auckland Centennial Memorial Park. A separate statutory initiative in the Auckland region involved the creation of the Hauraki Gulf Island Maritime Park in 1967, which secured over 8500 hectares of island land in public ownership (Peart, 2009).

In the 1960s there also was increasing central government awareness of coastal development pressure – and dissatisfaction with the ways in which local councils managed this pressure. Sporadic Crown purchases in the early-mid 1960s saw a number of new coastal reserves established, particularly in the northern-most reaches of Northland. Later, a specific budget was set aside for acquisition of coastal reserve land, enabling large-scale purchases throughout the country, including a 4300 hectare site on Northland's Parengarenga Harbour (Peart, 2009). Although this fund was discontinued in 1982, its legacy is significant, as the interviewed DOC representative attested:

There's a very widespread belief that it would be advantageous for the Crown to go back to a policy of trying to acquire coastal properties. Lands and Survey had that policy in the 1970s, and that's why a lot of the coastal reserves were acquired. The difficulty of course is that you get 100 or something hectares of coastal land, and you could buy virtually a whole station [in the South Island high country] for that same price. It's just a huge, huge value. Because coastal property's got such an incredible high price (David).

In the Tutukaka Coast context, a Crown-owned reserve has protected Whale Bay – an idyllic, sheltered beach to the north of Ngunguru, accessible only by walking track – from development, allowing forest to flourish on the hills behind the sand. A number of respondents remarked on the value of this DOC-managed site:

I suppose the thing for me that's so special about this place is that we've still got places like Whale Bay (Bella)

It's a huge attraction. And so you know, if you sold Whale Bay – what development is acceptable at Whale Bay? Two baches? So if you get two baches there, someone's going to subdivide and then there's three, then there's four and soon it's like any other beach (Fagan)

In one conversation, Whale Bay figured as a testament to what could be achieved through public ownership:

Lawrence: Whale Bay is a treasure, and it's only staying that way because it's a DOC reserve. All that land behind it. Otherwise some bastard would have their house ... sitting out on the headland. Because that's what they want to do. ...

Q: There's certainly a stark contrast between it and....

Lawrence: Whale Bay's beautiful! That's why I take any visitors there. But if you want to go to the best-kept, or those areas with the most natural character, you need to go, the best place is a reserve. Or parts that have covenants on them. One thing we have here is a lot of covenants ... but no one's going to do it to the sandspit, because it's too valuable. But I think, personally, it will be a DOC reserve in five years time.

Lawrence referred here to relatively long-standing discussions around a 'landswap' between Landco and DOC, whereby the Ngunguru sandspit (and potentially the adjacent forested land) would be exchanged for Crown-owned land elsewhere that had development potential but lower conservation value. Should that land have lower economic value than the Ngunguru site, the difference could be made up in cash. The Landco representatives explained that this idea originated with a specific proposal that land at Ngunguru be 'swapped' for an undeveloped site to the south, at Bream Bay:

We saw this piece of land on the way up [to Ngunguru, from Auckland] which again is coastal, but is less significant, if you like, than the spit. So we came up with some ideas, and a couple of us even approached DOC in that regard, for a specific swap (Oscar).

When this suggestion failed to gain Ministerial approval in mid-2007, Landco and DOC entered less prescriptive discussions, centred on the idea that the sandspit could be "transferred into public ownership" (Oscar) in exchange for one or more parcels of land, not necessarily at the coast, supplemented if necessary by monetary compensation. This led to a detailed national search for land currently in Crown ownership that could be involved in such an exchange. This progress in the landswap idea was confirmed by a DOC representative:

The landswap we've put a huge amount of energy into. There was a proposal for a part of Bream Bay, that Landco came to us with originally. We got to the point where I'd held discussions with a number of key agencies like District Councils ... and I'd had two hui involving the iwi, and they were pretty uncomfortable with the idea. But it was also at the point where the economic downturn really started to bite.... Therefore what's the point of swapping one difficult site for another one? So at that point the landswap changed. We worked with other government agencies to see if we could find suitable land [elsewhere], and we were unsuccessful (David).

As Oscar related, the search for alternate sites in public ownership proved "very complex and very tricky" – given that "central government's divested most lands of value anyway", and much of the remainder is subject to Treaty of Waitangi claims. Accordingly, it did not progress to a second specific proposal. The detailed discussions and investigation around the landswap did, however, lend considerable weight to the notion of the sandspit remaining undeveloped, and entering public ownership. This continued to appeal to Landco, whose plans for the site were temporarily on hold, as of late 2008:

Really strongly we're still on plan A [transfer of the spit to public ownership]. I mean, we've made it really clear to everyone that we're not doing resource consents, we're not trying to, we're not even thinking about it, we're not sitting down and having plan B meetings. I'm sure at some stage in the future we'll have to.... So maybe in six months' time if we're not getting any further or if the Ministry [DOC] turns around and says, "Hey guys, we're not interested" ... we'll have to have a Plan B discussions (Lydia).

While consideration of the landswap was protracted, it was interpreted as worthwhile from Landco's perspective. This was in part because of the likelihood of an exchange occurring ("we wouldn't be wasting our time and energy on it, if we didn't think it was a go" – Lydia), but also because it presented an interesting 'test case' regarding the willingness of government to purchase a highly-valued natural landscape currently in private ownership:

Part of the process we're going through is actually testing how important this is, nationally. ... If the government's willing to buy it, say for example they buy it outright at market price, that gives a clear indication that it is nationally important. If they're not, it's an indication that it's not nationally important (Oscar).

The landswap option, then, had evolved from a very specific idea about exchanging the Ngunguru sandspit for a large parcel of coastal land elsewhere in Northland, to a more general (and more conventional) discussion about how the site might be transferred to public ownership in return for adequate compensation for the current owner. Such a

transfer did not necessarily require Crown-owned land, or detailed negotiations with DOC, but rather a prompt and definitive public commitment to the site:

Lydia: I do feel we are kind of getting up to a point where if a decision [can be] made now, it will, and I think the locals know this too ... it's a tipping point, really. ...

Q: Right. It's sort of coming to that decision time?

Lydia: I think so, I mean, ... you do need to get to a point where if the government isn't willing to buy it and if the Regional and [District] Councils aren't willing to push for that, and the people aren't willing to get behind that, and the people of New Zealand aren't willing to get behind that...

Among a substantial proportion of the respondents speaking in opposition to development of the sandspit (or at least to the November 2006 proposal), there was a belief that the site was more difficult to develop than its owners initially appreciated, and that a landswap (or other arrangements leading to it being transferred into public ownership in return for adequate compensation) would therefore be to Landco's benefit:

I think you could argue that a lot of what Landco have done recently is just a ploy to try to keep the valuation up and put pressure on someone to buy it off them. Because ... Landco has just been landbanking over the last ten years, and ... got sold a dump by the other guy who couldn't develop it either (Dennis).

It's not a good site to develop, in my opinion. The spit's been breached twice in living memory and that's exactly where they propose to put this village. With sea level rise and more extreme weather events, I think it's a foolish place to develop. But anyway, that's their business, but I think that if they got the right swap that they would go for it (Lawrence).

The bulk of the sandspit is extremely fragile and therefore commercially unusable in any conventional way (in other words, by the plonking of buildings on it). ... Landco can keep pretending the land is commercially valuable, and keep asking ludicrous sums for its purchase [and] that keeps it locked up in its landbank (Trevor).

Questions of motivations and fair value aside, there was very broad support among respondents for the concept of public ownership of the sandspit, as a mechanism for protecting significant public interests from private development. The general view, as articulated by Xavier, was that "the case is strong for sandspit reserves – because otherwise we won't have any. We will have the Omaha-isation of sandspits throughout New Zealand!" Beyond this, however, there were debates about what public ownership would mean in practice – particularly in terms of administration and use of the site. At least

three different models of public ownership and access were advocated by respondents: a conventional coastal park, accessible to the public for recreational purposes; a conservation-oriented reserve, to which public access was controlled; and a site of small-scale local economic development, particularly for Maori cultural and tourism ventures.

The following quotations provide two illustrative examples of each 'model':

The original intention was 'proposed public open space' and this has been thwarted, or 'subverted' I guess you could say, by someone throwing money around. It should have been [compulsorily acquired by the Council] under the *Public Works Act* years ago.... (Conrad).

The best outcome is a combination of community groups making the sandspit reserve land and open to education, recreation, and weed and pest control. And open space for families (Eva).

We want to protect it, we see it as more of a wildlife sanctuary [than a park] so we'd have to really carefully manage visitor numbers and so on, but it must go in to public ownership (Bella).

There's definitely a need for regional parks but the question [is] how the sandspit should be managed [when maybe] it's upwards of ten thousand people that are attracted. Obviously you'd have things like boardwalks and signs and there would be protected areas on it, but you've still got to be wary of introducing a whole lot of humans on it (Stephen).

[I] can see an opportunity there where a broad base partnership between the community – between Northland, between Whangarei people and further abroad – where the intrinsic values of the property are upheld, of that area upheld, but it allows for, you know, some development, some occupation, because a lot of the Tauariki people are displaced, but if you could create something that provided some economic, you know, there could be an eco park, there could be sort of appropriate commercial activity done there on a low-key basis (Dennis).

New ownership and governance arrangements should provide benefits for the local hapu, and not just focus on utility, for example restoration and pest control (Carla).

There was also a great deal of discussion among respondents as to how public ownership could best be realised, but again no consensus position. Several respondents suggested that the best possible outcome, from the community's perspective, would be Landco *gifting* the land to the public. Such an act, it was argued, would bolster the company's public image, and improve environmental outcomes on the spit, in a way that "their weasel-words about ecologically responsible development" (Michael) did not. More commonly, central, regional and local government were all identified as potentially

appropriate purchasers of the land (either separately or in partnership), as were (unspecified) trusts and community groups.

Given the likelihood of a high sale price (“it would start at \$10 million and work up” – David), multiple sources of funding could be required. However, it was widely noted that both the Whangarei District and Northland Regional Councils were unlikely to contribute in this way, given budgetary constraints as well as a shared sense that “their core business isn’t land management” (David). In addition, a regional council representative emphasised that “there is already protection of a land barrier sandspit in the region, due to DOC ownership of Mangawhai. So that landscape type is already represented in protected public lands” (Neville).

Public ownership of a similar landform elsewhere in the region was little consolation to those committed to protecting the natural and cultural values of this particular site. Moreover, the landswap discussions between Landco and DOC had re-invigorated *long-standing* aspirations for its transfer to public ownership, something previously recognised in its official designation as a ‘proposed open space public reserve’, and the non-official current label affixed to the spit by the WDC: ‘possible regional park’ (see Context section). The potential for a landswap, together with a downturn in the coastal property market, had opened up a window of possibility for pursuing public ownership, in which multiple parties – including the landowners – were “very keen to see if we can negotiate a way through” (David). It was widely noted that such chances had been missed on numerous occasions in the past. The following exchange with two members of a local iwi gave one perspective on this, referring to the original sale of the sandspit into private ownership:

Francis: Y’see, the council should have bought it off them a long time ago and made it a reserve

Q: There’s been a few missed opportunities down the years I guess, eh?

Francis: Oh gosh, they could have bought it for a song off [our relatives]

Faith: So don’t tell us it was a lack of foresight from [our relatives]!

Francis: They could have bought the whole lot for a song!

In addition to insufficient priority and urgency being given to purchase of the site by public authorities in the past, a potential sale has frequently been prevented by disagreements over how fair value for an undeveloped sandspit can be calculated. As Trevor put it: “the difference between the value of the land as an undeveloped area and its value as a ‘potential development’ block has always been the sticking point. The selling price has generally been ten times what the public body buyers have offered.” Stephen affirmed that previous public offers have “been one-tenth of what the landowner has wanted and basically negotiations have stalled because the two sides are so far apart.” There was some sense of urgency associated with the current negotiations, given an awareness that private owners would not put plans for development on hold indefinitely, and that this could be the last such opportunity. As Olaf noted: “I’ll put it this way, the longer it stays in private ownership, the higher the odds of development occurring.” In this context, the time was ripe for collective action – likely led by central government – to secure public interests in Ngunguru Sandspit through public ownership.

E. Property rights



There was a broad sense among respondents that the option of public ownership of the sandspit had been thwarted (due to historical failings on both sides – that is, of both

owners and governmental authorities), resulting in a situation whereby the site remained in private ownership, which by definition carried with it certain rights of use and development. Any attempt to exercise current rights (under the 'coastal countryside' zoning) would produce 20 ha lots, which were seen by almost all interested parties as undesirable, both socially and environmentally. This led many respondents, including the landowner representatives, to identify public purchase as a very desirable alternative:

Lydia: If council really wanted to protect it they should have zoned it [as] not being able to be developed.

Oscar: Well they can't

Lydia: Yeah, I know...

Oscar: Then they have to buy it!

Lydia: We get it! But that's the tension, right. And this is the bit that pisses me off ... if they really want it ... they should buy it.

The reality that private ownership carries with it development rights – which cannot readily be abrogated, but might be transferred to government authorities as part of a sale – was also at the forefront of thinking at the WDC:

Lawrence: The only way to protect that in perpetuity is to make it a reserve. DOC, Regional Council, or our Council, or a combination. And there were plans to do that in the past. All Councils were going to get together and buy it. But you can't say to someone who owns it, "You can't use your property, *for anything!*" (original emphasis)

Q: No!

Lawrence: You know, you can't restrict people's property rights that much. Because then they say, "You buy it then!"

The fact that the sandspit remains in private ownership, to which certain rights are attached, did not stop many respondents from arguing that building on the site remained fundamentally *inappropriate*. This notion was repeatedly invoked by local interviewees, particularly in response to a question asking whether they would find *any* level of development on the site to be acceptable. For many, any exercise of landowner rights to develop – whether into 20 ha lots, or a more intensive suburban-style community that might receive planning permission in the future – was unconscionable:

No, forget it, there's no compromise there for me. It's just not appropriate. ... I mean, for goodness sake, if there's a place where development isn't appropriate then that's got to be it, for me there's no two questions about it (Bella).

The reality is it's not about, you know, the scale or level of development, it's about a fundamental which is that there should be no development there because it's totally inappropriate. ...it's no more appropriate that building townhouses in the cemetery in Grafton gully (Dennis).

There are many opportunities to do it somewhere more appropriate. The sandspit is discrete and detached from other areas, including the few houses on the Ngunguru Ford Road and Maunga [i.e., the adjacent mountain, Whakairiora] (Michael).

In such comments, we see a distinction between land uses that are legally permitted, and those that are morally acceptable (see Brown, 2007). Indeed, this point was made explicit by another interviewee, who emphasised that his objections were grounded not in self-interest (e.g., NIMBY sentiment), but in a deeper-seated belief in the site's sanctity:

[The proposed developed won't] disturb my view, but that's not the point for me. That's got nothing to do with it. I would feel equally strong about something that I could see, because it's just morally not the right thing to do from my perspective (Fagan).

Perceptions of inappropriateness (and immorality) in relation to development of the sandspit were grounded in a set of factors, including its legal status, and physical and cultural characteristics. These were understood to interact in ways that would make the site difficult to develop intensively, particularly in terms of obtaining the necessary planning permission to undertake anything more than subdivision into 20 ha lots. This was important, because it followed that respondents could oppose development from the perspective of the current planning/resource management framework, without necessarily calling into question private property rights more generally (see Collins, 2009). Put another way, there were myriad *site-specific* reasons to claim that a development of the broad type proposed for the sandspit in late 2006 should not proceed, already recognised as valid constraints on the exercise of property rights:

[Reviewing a map with the interviewer]. That yellow means that it's an Outstanding Landscape, so it's going to have planning restrictions on it. The dotted part is flood-susceptible, so that has further restrictions on it. These squares are sites of significance to Maori, so that has further restrictions on it. And the whole thing is a waahi tapu site under the Historic Places Trust, so they're going to need permission

from them. So from a planning perspective, it's not easy for them to develop there (Lawrence).

'Not In My Back Yard sort of thinking' is levelled as some of the people who are opposing this. But I think that's one thing in further development of areas that already have something in them, you know. I mean clearly this land has so much special intrinsic value beyond just another beach per se (Dennis).

Well, first I think it's a very, very difficult time for someone like Landco to put the vast sums of money that would be required to do that. Secondly, you're probably aware they'd need a plan change to do it, because under current zoning they can have only one property per 20 hectares. One house. And thirdly, they're well aware there'd be a huge amount of public opposition. ... And fourthly, ...they've got an access dispute (David).

One of the ways in which the exercise of private property rights is constrained is through local council identification of landscapes that merit protection (from the adverse effects of development) due to their 'notable'/'significant' or more importantly 'outstanding' status. As noted in the Context section, the majority of the sandspit is designated as outstanding by the WDC – the highest level of landscape protection a council can afford. In other coastal communities in New Zealand, attaining this status has been seen as a potential mechanism for inhibiting private development (Collins & Kearns, 2010a).

The 'outstanding' status of most of the sandspit was seen as appropriate by nearly all respondents who commented on it (for an exception, see Results section B), including the landowner representative, who suggested "whether it was denoted in the District Plan or not, it's pretty hard to argue that it's not an outstanding natural feature" (Oscar). Nor was this designation seen as an unfair or unjustified imposition on private property rights: "I think it's something you can work with, yeah. I mean, I think you need to recognise – as most district plans do – that there's the potential for development in these outstanding landscapes, it's just a matter of control of that development as opposed to prohibition on it." From this perspective, the question then became one of whether a development could improve the environment, for example via "permanent protection and enhancement of sort of 60-odd hectares" (Oscar).

That it is possible for landowners to propose substantial changes to outstanding natural landscapes in this way led another respondent to question whether the classification "does carry with it the appropriate level of protection" (Michael). He went on

to note that this issue would, in any case, likely “be played out in the legal process and it’s hard to translate ‘outstanding natural landscape’ to legalese!” More commonly, the designation was seen as an appropriate recognition of the value of the sandspit: “For locals, it’s probably an external validation of something many of them already feel” (Trevor).

Respondents also offered general reflections on the relationship between landscape values and private property rights at the coast, usually with reference to long-standing debates in the region about visual amenity, and the related issue of tree protection. For example, one discussion centred on “a shiny white house half way up the hill” in a nearby bay – glaring in part because of the absence of trees – which was taken as an example of “how not to protect visual amenity” (Carla). This led Michael to reflect upon “a continuum of opposed values – one person’s natural aspect is another person’s development opportunity; one person’s trees around the house are another person’s guttering problem,” before concluding that – at least for now – “the sandspit is everyone’s visual amenity.”

Xavier also reflected on these issues, discussing an “illustrative example” of coastal property owners “cut[ting] down very long-established pohutukawas because they block the view... A view of what? Of other people’s pohutukawas across the bay?!” The larger point here, he suggested, was that the ‘landscape’ concept was by definition more social, and less self-regarding, than the property rights attached to any particular parcel: “Landscape is reciprocal – in that in securing your own view of the coastal landscape, you may ruin someone else’s. ... Landscape is a social contract. Recognizing this prevents us destroying landscape features in order to see others’.”

Many respondents also discussed the ways in which private property rights have been invoked to resist formal landscape protection in the area – most notably during an ill-fated landscape review process carried out in the Whangarei District in 2005-06. In short, this review – conducted pursuant to the RMA – produced a recommendation that large areas of the coastal countryside be classified as notable or outstanding landscapes, subject to council protection. This was widely reported as having met with an “uproar,” in

particular by “farmers who own prominent headlands,” whose ability to profit from subdividing their land could have been compromised (Stephen). The proposal quickly became politically untenable, as “all the farmers were out protesting: ‘this is a land grab, you’re stopping us from selling our sections, this is our retirement fund’” (Fagan). Accordingly, “Council was rather scared and they just shelved it”, continuing a situation whereby – in Lawrence’s view – “slowly all the iconic landscapes are just being cut up.” A more modest proposal for a bylaw protecting significant trees on privately-owned property also failed to gain support, Fagan noted, even after “council ... whittled it down to only pohutukawas within 25 metres of the beach.”

These incidents spoke to the strength of property rights discourse in the area: something explained by respondents in terms of “a large degree of conservatism in the district” (Stephen), and a “regional context” characterised by a “long history of a lack of development, roading problems, unemployment” which meant “that development proposals are generally viewed favourably” (Carla). These discussions point to one of the ways in which conversations initially centred on the specifics of the sandspit and its future led to broader reflections on the nature of property rights, and how these are defined and exercised. In partial contrast to what has been found elsewhere in coastal New Zealand (Collins, 2009), such reflections led many respondents to challenge to the very notion of private property rights.

A more ‘moderate’ perspective, typical of that reported in the aforementioned research, emphasised the socially and legally constrained nature of property rights, without challenging their value. From this view, public regulation of the uses and development of privately-owned land, such as the sandspit, did not represent an affront to a sanctified notion of private property. Private ownership simply did not carry with it absolute command of geographic space. As one Landco representative noted: “you won’t see an approach from us in here that says: ‘we own it and we’re going to do whatever we want with it’, you know? That was never the intention” (Lydia). Later in the same conversation, it was noted that if Landco had pursued the November 2006 plan, the process of obtaining planning approval, and the court appeals that would inevitably be

associated with this, “would have taken six or eight years” – an observation that prompted further reflection on property rights:

Q: That [process] doesn't necessarily sit very easily with conventional or classical notions of property rights, and the general ability to do what you want with it....

Lydia: No!

Oscar: Property rights have always been fettered. I don't think anyone can argue they haven't been. I think the main frustration [i.e., from a landowner perspective] is not the outcomes that are being achieved but the process to get to the outcome.

Q: In terms of how time consuming it is?

Oscar: Yeah, how long and expensive it is, and I think there's a lot of attention paid to minutiae as opposed to focusing on outcomes and trying to get the outcomes as quickly as you can.

Here we see an expression of frustration about the *processes* associated with public regulation of property rights, but no objection to the *principle* (“property rights have always been fettered”). However, among other respondents, there was considerable skepticism expressed towards even “fettered” property rights, at least as they concerned the spit. This opposition was often strongly expressed, even by respondents who themselves owned nearby coastal land. This tension was negotiated, in part, by invoking various ‘trumps’ to property rights. These included the notion that development has already reached excessive levels, appeals to the national interest (especially in preserving remaining ecological value), and suggestions that some uses of property rights were motivated by greed:

Kiwis need to look beyond chopping up land in order to generate income for their retirements – we've been doing it for 200 years in this country, and enough is enough. When does it stop? All the while we bemoan the development and the loss of special places... Right now too many people think there's nothing they can do. Or they look at a place like Ngunguru and say: 'well, I've got my bach and you've got yours. Why can't they have some over there on the sandspit?' (Dennis)

[Developers say] 'I've got just as much right', but if you ask 'what's your motivation for that?' they say 'Oh, I want to make as much money as I can.' So [they] go and built 40 houses down at the end of the street, don't really care what it looks like. ...well, what sort of country are we going to end up with? (Fagan)

In one instructive exchange, two respondents discussed in some detail the tension implicit in arguing against some of the very rights enjoyed by most local residents:

Kent: If they'd done their research, they would have known the sandspit wasn't suitable for development. [So,] I don't have any sympathy for Landco. Property rights carry no sway whatsoever. In any case, they come with duties and responsibilities. ... Property rights are an ideological argument of the right.

Beth: But opposing development on the sandspit causes some discontent in the wider community, because people wonder about their *own* property rights, and so there is some ambivalence.

Kent: There is some dissonance between local people's attachment to their own coastal property and their feeling that they should oppose the sandspit proposal. But ambiguity is part of life! If we continue [on the present track], there will be nothing left. We have an opportunity to save it, to preserve it. If the dwellings were there they would destroy every ecological value for ever.

In addition to these perspectives, respondents were generally unconcerned about any difficulties the current landowner was facing in developing the site, presenting these as a normal commercial risk, rather than a threat to property rights per se:

I don't have any sympathy for the landowners because it was a case of buyer beware. They knew what they were getting into (Connie)

[Landco] should not be compensated for not being permitted to do as much as it would like. It's a development company. Of course it's going to go for the biggest return on investment possible.... Ngunguru sandspit is probably one of Landco's higher-risk, higher-potential-return projects (Trevor).

Such positions were not universal, however, and a minority of respondents expressed more support for a stronger understanding of property rights:

I've never worried much about development of the spit. My [relative] sold it for money, and the person who bought it off whoever is entitled to get his money back. I think, well, he's quite entitled to do something (Francis).

I wonder what right does someone have to say to someone else what they can do with their land, you know? The government had the chance to buy it, so did the council. It might have been too expensive, but they still had an opportunity, and at the end of the day it's in private ownership (Olaf).

In summary, then, we can discern three broad positions on property rights among our respondents. The majority was skeptical of their value, and identified various higher values present on the sandspit that, in their view, properly trumped the rights associated with private ownership. Second, there was a moderate position, espoused by the landowner representatives, among others, that accepted the status quo of public regulation ('fettering') of property rights. Third, a small number of respondents expressed

some sympathy for a stronger rights position, seeing the use of property rights as self-regarding. The overall balance is different from that found at Ocean Beach (Collins, 2009), where nearly all respondents fell into the second category, and few were willing to challenge private ownership of property per se.

This difference may reflect, in part, the relative uniqueness of an ecologically-valuable undeveloped sandspit adjacent to a residential area (and reasonably proximate to a city). It is this *context*, in other words, that appeared to lead many respondents to question property rights in rather fundamental ways, in a manner that they may have been reluctant to do elsewhere (e.g., in an established suburb). It is telling, in this respect, that the critics of private property rights being exercised on the spit were generally willing to accept some level of ongoing subdivision and development in the existing settlement: “I mean Ngunguru township is the most established settlement around here, it makes far more sense to develop here” (Fagan). This approach was seen as broadly consistent with the WDC efforts to consolidate future development around existing settlements on the Tutukaka Coast.

As set out in the *Ngunguru Structure Plan* (WDC, 2008b: 9), this consolidation involves “clustering residential and commercial settlement,” and maintaining boundaries between settlements in order to preserve their distinctiveness. This goal was based on a community consultation process in which, according to one participant, “people were really clear, you know, we said we don’t want strip development, we want to keep these pockets of community instead of kind of joining them all up, we want to make sure they stand alone” (Bella). A Council representative affirmed that “on the coast we’ve identified these growth notes, ... rather than getting the continuous ribbon development. ... Each of these [existing townships] have a Structure Plan, [which] are trying to consolidate what growth will occur” (Lawrence). It is unclear what relevance this goal has for the sandspit – for while the *Ngunguru Structure Plan* affirms strong local interest in the site’s preservation, it is uncertain whether development there would be considered an ‘extension’ of Ngunguru, or a new settlement in its right (see Results section F).

In summary, at Ngunguru we see some of the complexity of contemporary property relations clearly apparent. At minimum, this involves debate over the planning framework in which private property rights are managed and exercised – concerning, for example, the appropriateness of particular provisions, and their application to particular sites. In the Ngunguru context, this manifests in discussions around the ‘coastal countryside’ zoning, which allows for 20 ha lots on the sandspit, and around the goal of containing development in existing ‘nodes’. Most significant, however, is the designation of the majority of the spit as an outstanding natural landscape. Discussion around this status, which was strongly supported by almost all respondents, led to insightful reflections on the relationship between property rights and the landscape concept. In an area where land ownership is relatively fragmented, and yet landscapes are highly valued (and indeed valuable in an economic sense), this relationship is necessarily a complex one. In the Whangarei District, it is also overtly politicised. Given that many of our respondents were specifically motivated to protect a particular landscape – the sandspit – from development, it is perhaps not surprising that many called into question the value and appropriateness of private property rights, in a manner that they would likely be reluctant to do in other (less sensitive) contexts.

F. Suburbanisation



As part of their November 2006 proposal, the owners acknowledged “some strong opposition to any development on the sandspit” but countered this by emphasizing private ownership (since 1963), the current lack of public access to land above the MHWM, and – perhaps most significantly – existing zoning that gives owners of ‘coastal countryside’ land the right to subdivide into 20 ha lots. Such an outcome, Landco (2006: 5-6) warned, risked replicating other (unnamed) coastal locations “where only wealthy New Zealanders can afford to enjoy its special qualities.” The essence of this claim was that the smaller lots available in the proposed 350-dwelling ‘village’ would be relatively affordable by comparison, as a company representative explained in a subsequent interview: “part of the concept that we explored was actually have smaller pieces of land for sale in here so they would be relatively more affordable than just having large lots throughout the whole of the development.” In addition to raising the spectre of 20 ha “lifestyle lots” being “beyond ordinary New Zealanders”, the proposal document warned of a “gated development with no public access, no coastal reserve, fragmentation of the landscape and ecology, loss of

community control and valuable natural areas and features, [and] no upgrade of Ngunguru Ford Road” (Landco, 2006: 3).

Current zoning of this site (and all land classified as ‘coastal countryside’ in the Whangarei District Plan) allows the owner to subdivide into 20 ha lots as of right – this having been imposed by the Environment Court, which overturned a proposed minimum lot size of just 6 ha. One estimate held that the latter rule would have “enable[d] up to 1000 additional sections to be created as of right in Whangarei’s coastal rural area” (Peart, 2009: 227). However, because the current rule allows for an outcome seen by most parties as undesirable for the Ngunguru sandspit (for reasons including deleterious social effects), it provides a point of leverage for the landowner in proposing a much larger, but potentially more beneficial, development. As one respondent, who viewed the sandspit as deeply unsuited for development, noted:

I don’t even know why it’s even an issue. [Well,] the problem is because the council originally zoned it as lifestyle [i.e., 20 ha] blocks, they zoned the whole damn spit as lifestyle blocks. So it has some sort of development zoning already, which to me is, you know, just a stupid decision in the first instance. And so what Landco were trying to do was lever that and say: “well, look we recognise the spit shouldn’t be developed so we’re only going to put our houses on the southern end. And we’re going to leave the rest undeveloped.” Well, that’s a twisted argument for justifying an intensification of what’s currently on the district plan (Dennis).

This is by no means unique to Ngunguru; it speaks to a broader issue with coastal planning in New Zealand, whereby large proposals are often “‘sold’ as being less environmentally damaging than the project for which consent has often been obtained, or which could be under current district plan rules” (Peart, 2009: 223). In the case of Ocean Beach, Hawke’s Bay, for example, one development proposal portrayed a relatively dense 1000-lot subdivision as more environmentally beneficial than subdivision of the extensive site into 20 ha lots (Collins & Kearns, 2010a). In addition, the adverse effects of a development proposal may now be disregarded by a planning authority if they could be produced by an activity already permitted under the district plan (the ‘permitted baseline’ approach) (Peart, 2009). For the current owners of the sandspit, what this means is that the environmental effects of any proposal may be compared against this baseline, “rather than what it is at the present time” (Oliver).

The images associated with the November 2006 proposal – which were also displayed in the Ngunguru hall during a well-attended public consultation period – portrayed only stand-alone houses with private yards, while the accompanying text spoke of “low rise single level buildings on the outskirts of the site, with two level buildings only appearing within the centre of the site” (Landco, 2006: 8). This document cautioned that “the plans are not final” (Landco, 2006: 5), and a local respondent with experience in development added that they should be viewed with skepticism given that the owners were principally in the business of planning development, rather than “selling a finished house package on those properties” (Fagan). Nevertheless, the overall impression was of a suburban-style community – the average density would be one dwelling per 1000 m², excluding provisions for roading and public space – albeit within a contained area, and with a greater degree of master planning than has historically been found in most coastal developments in New Zealand.

The development of a suburban-style residential community on the sandspit, combined with road access, raised the possibility of a commuter settlement with workers travelling to employment in nearby Whangarei. This phenomenon is already clearly evident in Ngunguru township, and other settlements along the Tutukaka coast, with a significant morning ‘peak’ in traffic consisting almost solely of vehicles travelling towards Whangarei, and a corresponding return of vehicles in the early evening. In addition, a substantial proportion of our locally-based respondents commuted to Whangarei – one having done so for over 30 years. Two respondents noted that residential development of this area of the coast had been facilitated by the sealing of the road to Whangarei (“for years it was ‘bump, bump, bump’ along the metal road” - Francis), which had fundamentally altered the character of the area. Another respondent explained that he and numerous colleagues at the same Whangarei-based workplace commuted from this area of the coast: “I mean it still only takes us 20 minutes, half an hour to come. And I would say, God, there’d be hundreds of people, easy, or more” (Olaf).

A number of respondents commented specifically on the suburban style of Landco’s proposal. One local opponent of development on the spit characterised it as “higher density suburbia ... a scaled down version of what we could afford in the 1950s and 60s.

You know, the quarter acre paradise” (Michael). From this perspective, it would come to resemble coastal suburbs north of Auckland, which originated as isolated beach-front settlements made up in part by baches, but were subsequently consolidated into a sprawling urban area: “It will become like Orewa, which is now a suburb of Auckland. The sandspit will become a suburb of a grown Whangarei.” To extend suburban “logic” to an environmentally-sensitive sandspit in this way, in Michael’s view, “beggars belief”. Another respondent concurred that the Landco proposal would effectively supplant the sandspit’s natural community with a suburban community: “Suburbia where it ought not to be – wildlife values can’t coexist with a community of houses!” (Xavier).

The discussion of the suburbanisation of the sandspit, and the larger coastal area of which it is part, then, entailed not only a replication of suburban forms (i.e., stand alone houses), but also functions (i.e., commuter settlement / ‘bedroom communities’). It was also understood to be occurring in the context of significant pressure for sprawl, at two levels: first, the Northland Region’s coast in general, and second, the Whangarei District in particular. As Neville, a representative of the regional council explained, “the entire east coast [of Northland] from Cable Bay in the north to Mangawhai in the south has seen huge development pressure over the last 10 or so years – pressure for more-or-less continuous housing development.”

Neville referred here to the relatively low-density, ribbon-like development that stretches almost the entire length of the region’s east coast (encompassing hundreds of bays, as well as numerous harbours and estuaries), attracted by amenities such as a favourable climate, golden sand beaches, generally safe swimming and boating conditions, and protection from the prevailing south-westerly wind. Similar stretches of ribbon development also characterise other east coast regions of the North Island, particularly the Bay of Plenty, where Peart (2009) identifies a near-continuous narrow band of housing stretching for 43 km. Peart (2009: 153) notes that this style of development is visually intrusive, “inefficient in terms of the provision of services”, and at high risk of coastal hazard by virtue of its proximity to the coastal edge.

While the Tutukaka Coast, and potentially the Ngunguru sandspit, are part of the general picture in Northland, they are also situated more specifically in the Whangarei District. This area has specific sprawl pressures, not only along the coast, but also on valuable agricultural and scenic land in the vicinity of the main city, Whangarei. It is in this context that the WDC is seeking to consolidate future development in “growth nodes.”

With regards to Ngunguru and the surrounding coastline, there was an acknowledgement that growth would continue, “because it’s in a commute from Whangarei” but that if it was tight, consolidated and clearly bounded “it doesn’t have to ruin the place” (Lawrence). This was important, in part, “because people come up here and live for the natural environment, and they don’t want to see that, they don’t want to see Langs Beach [a well-known example of sprawl in the southern-most part of the District] right the way up the coast.” In practice, what this means is that WDC structure plans for the Tutukaka Coast propose concentrating new development in or immediately adjacent to existing built-up areas, albeit at existing suburban densities: the two operative residential zones allow for minimum lot sizes of 500 m² (‘living 1’) or 2000 m² (large lot residential – ‘living 3’).

Because of these densities, there is evidence of sprawl in and near existing nodes, particularly near the Tutukaka Harbour, which Peart (2009: 156) criticises for “lacking a definable settlement edge or centre.” At the same time, efforts to intensify development in this environment have proved controversial. Case in point is the multi-storey Oceans Resort which opened in 2005 – supplanting a single-storey hotel partially destroyed by fire in 2000 – and closed in 2008 amid a severe downturn in the real estate market. The structure’s “mock Mediterranean” design is considered by some to be “out of place within the rounded natural shapes of the surrounding harbour and hills”, and in addition its sheer size forms a wall “visually cutting off the head of the bay from the hinterland” (Peart, 2009: 157).

Given that the *New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement* also encourages “subdivision, use or development in areas where the natural character has already been compromised”, and the avoidance of “sprawling or sporadic subdivision” (Policy 1.1.1.a), a

pertinent question concerns whether the Ngunguru sandspit might be considered adjacent to, or even part of, the existing Ngunguru settlement. *Prima facie*, this seems unlikely, as public access is currently by water only (i.e., visitors must swim, paddle or boat across the estuary from Ngunguru), and even if road access were to be completed in the future, the route from Ngunguru township would be extremely circuitous. In line with this, the few local respondents to comment specifically on this issue described the sandspit as “adjoined to Ngunguru, but alone” (Michael), and as “bear[ing] no relationship to Ngunguru except for proximity across the water. But in terms of driving across or any form of infrastructure, there’s nothing there, is there?” (Fagan).

By contrast, the landowners have claimed that any development on the sandspit “will be an extension of the existing community just across the water” (Landco, 2006: 5). As a representative explained: “we still think there’s a fairly close relationship between Ngunguru township and the spit itself” (Oscar). While there are potential advantages, from a planning perspective, in making such a case, Oscar noted that if it was not accepted by public authorities, it would not necessarily undercut development of the site:

In many respects the Coastal Policy Statement doesn’t actually prevent new development from occurring, it’s just a general policy of preventing townships from spreading all the way along the coast, which is, try to centralise locations. And this would have been a central location, sort of similar in size to what Ngunguru is now. This would have been a new township, if you like, as opposed to being an elongation of an existing one.

As of the time of writing (late 2009), debates over how the Ngunguru landscape should be interpreted are at least temporarily rendered somewhat moot by an economic downturn which has put a halt to much large-scale coastal residential development, and by shared interest in conversion of the site to a reserve or park (see results section D). Moreover, if and when development is reconsidered, it is unlikely to follow the plan set out by Landco in 2006, as the developer representatives explained:

Lydia: [Since November 2006] the business has changed. ... there doesn’t seem to be an appetite for the original proposal.

Oscar: ... I mean the, the proposal, I don’t like to use the word ‘proposal’ – it was a concept that we were exploring at the time, and we thought it was worth exploring. The overwhelming sentiment was that it’d be just too difficult, so we would have

revised our plans anyway, following the consultation we had, and the feedback from various people.

This said, any future development on the sandspit remains very likely to consist exclusively, or almost exclusively, of stand-alone houses surrounded by private yards, a proportion of which would be purchased by commuters from Whangarei. Similarly, future growth around the fringes of Ngunguru township and other current settlements in this part of the coast, will continue to be largely suburban in character, with low densities and limited commercial activity beyond small-scale retailing. This represents in many ways a continuation of the status quo, which has seen Ngunguru township expand beyond modest baches and owner-occupied houses on flat land adjacent to the main road, and up onto nearby hills and ridgelines. One respondent characterised this expansion as “a mistake”, given its impact on viewsapes in the area, and admitted “I’m of an era that mourns the loss of the Ngunguru bach and is ambivalent about the gentrification of the Ngunguru housing stock” (Trevor). This reference to ‘gentrification’ was made in the context of localised sprawl, and the construction of larger and sometimes lavish stand-alone family homes on large (‘living 3’) lots in the hills in and around Ngunguru. Such narratives affirm previous analyses of New Zealand coastal development that have portrayed it as strongly suburban in orientation (Peart, 2009; Morton et al., 1973).

Conclusion



In this report we have placed Ngunguru in a regional and national context of resistance of suburbanization of coastal landscapes. What is of concern, we have argued, is not settlement of the coast per se, for the bays and beaches of New Zealand have been host to habitations since pre-European times. Rather, it is the scale, style and location of development that is at issue. This situation has been exacerbated by the absence of a national policy to guide development, and authoritatively distinguish between sites for settlement, and sites to be preserved in their natural character.

We then presented our method for engaging with the question of development at Ngunguru. We argued that a focus on language allows us to examine the discourses that underlie both the proposal to develop the spit, and protestations to the contrary. In-depth engagement with stakeholders, in the form of relatively open-ended conversations, produced rich and wide-ranging narratives unlikely to be captured by narrower question-and-answer formats. In interpreting these narratives, this report canvasses a broader range of experience than is often apparent in a formal planning process (e.g., consent

hearings). In particular, we were able to discern often-overlooked emotional and psychological bonds between people and place.

Our findings began with exploring these matters of the heart that underlie and precede technical and legalistic argument. We contended they warrant serious consideration for their role as shapers of place attachment, a concept involving both *affect* (feelings for place) and *effect* (the influences of place on everyday life). A widespread sense of belonging vis-à-vis the Ngunguru sandspit is strongly evident in both feelings for the site, and mobilisation in defence of its undeveloped character. This collective effort with respect to a site that is not in community or public ownership could be seen as an expression of stewardship, or an ethic of care, and evokes Stratford's (2009: 7) notion of "belonging as a resource." If the sandspit passes into public ownership in the future, this 'resource' could potentially be manifest in guardianship over the site. Another point arising from our analysis of feelings for the coast is the somewhat banal observation that strong emotional connections transcend the particularity of cultural backgrounds. Notwithstanding an array of origins and birthplaces, many of our participants expressed an acute consciousness of undeveloped beaches as evoking powerful feelings, including awe and exhilaration.

Respondents' narratives clearly demonstrated that the sandspit has considerable value as a cultural, ecological, and recreational resource, and a treasured aspect of the broader local environment. The threat to these values posed by the prospect of large-scale development often prompted strong expressions of anxiety and loss. Although the Landco proposal of November 2006 proposed a somewhat contained development, with the majority of the sandspit becoming a public reserve, this provided little consolation to most interviewees, for whom any development was deemed an affront to its integrity. This spoke to an holistic understanding of the sandspit – "a total environment" and a "package of values" according to two respondents – which meant that it could not accommodate development without its qualities being significantly compromised.

A third results section considered the sense of community at Ngunguru, where the sandspit lies on the horizon both literally, and metaphorically, in terms of being within

people's consciousness. A strong sense of social cohesion has stemmed from a commonly perceived threat – development of a privately-owned sandspit – prompting sustained 'place-protective action.' This action was fuelled by what one respondent described as “an incredible strength of feeling that the place needs to be protected,” and galvanized by early attempts at engagement on the part of the current landowner, which were regarded by many respondents as deeply unsatisfactory. In addition to an element of 'reaction to' proposed development, community cohesion and resistance is informed by a very positive understanding of the sandspit's significance, and a sense of its rarity value. Certainly, undeveloped sandspits are *perceived* as a scarce and threatened resource, a perception that probably speaks to their near-universal development in nearby regions (Auckland, Coromandel, Bay of Plenty) – although not, interestingly, in Northland itself.

The Ngunguru sandspit's values stem in part from the its being very visible, but relatively difficult to access. The latter quality means even locals tend to be at most intermittent visitors to the site, helping to preserve its natural character. The lack of road access, in particular, has assisted in maintaining the spit's integrity as a constant, but relatively untouched, presence across the estuary. In this context, potential development opening up the spit for general public access could simultaneously 'democratise' and 'degrade' the landscape. This lends a unique dimension to what might otherwise be interpreted as a relatively common debate over housing development in a greenfield coastal site. Accordingly, this is not the rather typical case of a coastal farm being subject to subdivision (see, e.g., Collins & Kearns, 2010a; Peart, 2009); instead, what is at stake is the future of a spit identified as a *de facto* 'mainland island', whose ecological, heritage and landscape values could be compromised by greater access.

Our fourth results section surveyed persistent proposals that the spit become a reserve and, latterly, that the mechanism for such a transaction be a landswap. We found remarkably widespread (near-universal) interest and support for the sandspit's entering public ownership. Significantly, this extended to the landowner representatives, who characterized this option as “plan A” (as at December 2008). For a number of locals, the value of a reserve was affirmed by the qualities of nearby Whale Bay (a DOC reserve),

while the problematic Omaha development to the south provided the counterpoint (i.e., an illustration of what could happen when a sandspit was developed).

Notwithstanding very broad support for a landswap, the historical designation of the sandspit as a proposed reserve, and its 'outstanding natural landscape' status, there was also a view that without decisive government leadership (most likely from central government), such a change of status was unlikely to occur. Awareness of this 'requirement' at the community level, particularly among members of NSPS, prompted what one respondent (quoted in another section) called "absolutely constant lobbying." We also documented, in this section, three relatively distinct visions of how a sandspit reserve could function.

Our consideration of the landswap was a precursor for a deeper consideration of property rights at Ngunguru. It could be argued that part of what is at stake is a series of views from private property in the existing Ngunguru settlement over the estuary to the sandspit. From this perspective, local opposition might be seen as a form of 'Not In My Back Yard' (NIMBY) politics, driven by self-interest. Importantly, however, locals are not necessarily motivated by a desire to protect such views – as if they had purchased a view easement with their property (see Thompson 2007) – but instead are concerned to protect a de facto public resource (with de jure access to the sandy beach below the MHWM) often described as special, and officially recognized as outstanding.

The application of such superlatives to the sandspit bolsters efforts to protect its natural character, and speaks to the power of language in such circumstances (e.g., if something is described as 'outstanding', it follows that it has qualities meriting protection). Notions of the spit's special character, and value to the public, also informed resistance to the exercise of private property rights at the site. In a district and a region where the appeal of such rights has often been strong, many respondents identified higher values inherent in the sandspit that properly 'trumped' private interests. From this perspective, the sandspit was not simply a parcel of land (or, more accurately, four parcels) over which the landowner had certain (fettered) rights – instead, it was a highly valued dimension of a broader landscape. As one respondent eloquently noted, "landscape is a social contract,"

to which changes should not be made without due regard to the interests and concerns of others.

Lastly, we considered the prospect of suburbanization – the extension of relatively low-density sprawl into coastal locations. In the case of Ngunguru, should a development akin to that proposed in November 2006 proceed, residential development would be disconnected from other settlements by the estuary and the neighbouring hills, but would consist largely of stand-alone houses built at suburban densities, within commuting distance of Whangarei. At Ngunguru and elsewhere in New Zealand, such developments have been portrayed by landowners as more democratised, and less ‘elitist’ than the subdivision into 20 ha lots allowed as-of-right. In other words, smaller lot sizes are more within reach of “ordinary New Zealanders” (Landco, 2006: 3).

Faced with such an argument, those resisting development are, to rephrase a proverbial saying, ‘caught between a rock and a sandy place.’ For in resisting suburban-style development, the fall-back position is too easily endorsed: that of large-lot elite development that is less ecologically bruising. At Ngunguru, however, many locals refuse to buy into this argument, and are unwilling to accept the ‘lesser of two evils.’ They emphasise, instead, what they perceive to be the fundamental unsuitability of the sandspit for any development, and point to the imperative of public action to preserve its qualities.

Such action is likely to require a decisive move on the part of central government, which has both experienced, and acted upon, pressure to purchase key coastal sites over many decades (Peart, 2009). More generally, the coastal property boom of 2002-07, and the enduring “pressure on what’s left” of New Zealand’s unsettled coastline, speaks to the need for a stronger, more directive role for central government in shaping and containing development. As one respondent contended, in a memorable turn-of-phrase, the need of national-level guidance on coastal property is urgent, and “either we recognise this, or we have a landscape of concrete and iron” (Xavier).

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