



NATURAL CHARACTER ASSESSMENT AUCKLAND REGION

introduction	4
natural character areas	5
map index	6
map 1 north east rodney	7
map 2 north east rodney	8
map 3 orewa & whangaparoa	9
map 4 waitemata & rangitoto	10
map 5 waiheke island	11
map 6 firth of thames / clevedon	12
map 7 ohahukura peninsula	13
map 8 Kaipara harbour	14
map 9 Muriwai	15
map 10 Manukau harbour	16
map 11 Waiuku river	17
map 12 Little Barrier Island	18
map 13 Great Barrier Island - north	19
map 14 Great Barrier Island - south	20
summary	21

NATURAL CHARACTER VALUES

The 2009 study of Natural Character Values within the Auckland Region is being undertaken to identify those parts of the Region's Coastal Environment, together with wetland, river and lake margins, that display "high" levels of Natural Character. This work is devolved from section 6(a) of the Resource Management Act and its statement that "the preservation of the natural character of the coastal environment (including the coastal marine area), wetlands, and lakes and rivers and their margins and the protection of them from inappropriate subdivision, use, and development" is a Matter of National Importance.

Any assessment of the Natural Character values of the Coastal Environment, together with wetlands, rivers, lakes and their margins, must address three key matters:

- The definition of the Coastal Environment ie. that part of the coastline (and lake / river margins) which interacts directly with the CMA and other water bodies;
- The factors that contribute to Natural Character Values; and
- Both the 'environmental indicators' and value thresholds applicable in the identification of those areas / locations that display high Natural Character values.

THE COASTAL ENVIRONMENT

The RMA and NZ Coastal Policy Statement do not identify the limits of the coastal environment; however for the purposes of this assessment – in line with others undertaken in the past (for the likes of the Firth of Thames, Kaipara Harbour and Wairarapa Coast) together with the definition of the Coastal Environment in Policy 7.4.1 of the Auckland Regional Plan: Coastal¹ – both can be pragmatically defined as those terrestrial areas that:

- enjoy a direct physical / functional connection (as part of a related catchment or due to obvious biophysical links) with the sea, lake or river; and
- visually interact with the sea, lake or river to the extent that land cover and activities directly affect the character of the CMA / lake / river.

Although this may often mean that the 'first ridgeline' acts as the natural point of division between the coastal environment (or lake / river margins) and other areas, it has to be recognised that this is not always be the case. Physical influence and visual connections can be more tenuous than is implied by the first ridgeline concept, while still involving a degree of interaction between land and sea (or water) that is significant. Consequently, such connections can only be assessed on a location by location basis.

However, to provide some guidance areas normally within the bounds of such limits might include:

- beachfronts
- shoals
- estuarine margins
- marshes / wetlands
- headlands
- dunes
- primary ridges
- foreslopes on hills addressing the sea / lake / river
- other slopes oriented directly towards the sea / lake / river

NATURAL CHARACTER VALUES

Throughout the first decade of the Resource management Act's application, the determination of natural character values largely revolved around three broad categories of evaluation focusing upon:

- Natural Processes
- Natural Elements
- Natural Patterns

To try and establish a more stable and consistent foundation for determining Natural Character values, with emphasis upon the 'perception' of such values, the Ministry for the Environment hosted a workshop on the subject in February 2002. Held in Wellington, and drawing together a wide cross-section of local and regional planning staff, consultants and educators, the workshop set out to determine a set of 'environmental indicators' appropriate to the assessment of Natural Character. As a result the following indicators were subject to general agreement and have since been employed in a wide variety of locations - from Southland to North-eastern Rodney:

- Abiotic factors (landform).
- Vegetation type (native / endemic and exotic vegetation).
- Vegetation cover and patterns (quality of vegetation and evident relationship to landform, climate, mature historic land use and ecological factors).
- Land uses / activities: buildings and structures (their presence / absence).
- Seascapes and water areas.
- Natural processes.

The NZCPS also addresses natural character elements of the coastal environment in Policy 1.1.3 (a) (iii) as:

"the collective characteristics which give the coastal environment its natural character including wild and scenic areas";

In a similar vein, the Environment Court also discussed how to determine the degree of natural character that a landscape contained in the Wakatipu Environmental Society decision and determined that:

"The word 'natural' does not necessarily equate with the word 'pristine' except in so far as landscape in a pristine state is probably rarer and of more value than landscape in a natural state. The word 'natural' is a word indicating a product of nature and can include such things as pasture, exotic tree species (pine), wildlife ... and many other things of that ilk as opposed to man made structures, roads, machinery." (p.197)

In that same case, the Court went on to say that:

"The absence or compromised presence of one or more of these criteria does not mean that the landscape is non natural, just that it is less natural. There is a spectrum of naturalness from a pristine natural landscape to a cityscape." (p.52)

- Levels of naturalness are, in turn, a reflection of the presence or absence of various elements:
 - Maintenance of original landform.
 - Lack of built elements and human influences.
 - Vegetation cover, particularly indigenous vegetation, and other ecological patterns.
 - Water bodies.
 - Remoteness.
- (Wakatipu Environmental Society Inc. and others v Queenstown-Lakes District Council C180/1999 – pg 51 – 52)*

ENVIRONMENTAL INDICATORS

Natural Character Value Criteria

On the basis of these Court interpretations and the 2002 MFE workshop, the following criteria have been identified as key determinants of Perceived (as opposed to Biophysical) Natural Character, and are to be applied in the identification of such values throughout the Auckland Region:

- **Natural landform(s):** Addressing the relative legibility, integrity and intactness of coastal and hinterland landforms that are a product of natural processes and the degree to which they remain free of development and modification: including hills, ridges, escarpments, dune systems, rock shoals, beachfronts, headlands and dunes.
- **Natural land cover:** Focusing on the relative legibility and integrity of coastal and hinterland vegetation. Although this criterion also addresses the surficial components of exposed landforms (scree, dune systems, tidal banks, etc), it primarily addresses the relative intactness and endemic character of vegetation cover: ranging from low lying salt marsh to fully mature native forest at one end of the naturalness spectrum to pastoral grasslands, production forestry, orchards, even areas of urban development, at the other.
- **Areas of sea and water:** Addressing the relative prominence (or dominance), integrity and intactness of areas of sea, harbour bodies, estuaries, stream corridors, lakes and wetlands.
- **Land uses:** Focusing on the relative prominence and level of intrusion / disruption generated by land uses; in particular, reflecting the degree to which buildings or structures within (or adjacent to) the coastal environment affect its perceived degree of modification, intactness and cohesion.
- **Evident processes:** Related to how apparent coastal processes are within the coastal environment – including tidal flows, wildlife / birdlife, erosion and deposition, and the more transient / ephemeral qualities derived from such elements.
- **Feelings of remoteness / wilderness / wildness:** Reflecting the extent to which the coastline 'feels' remote (far from any metropolitan or developed areas), wild / raw, even untamed – usually in response to many of the factors cited above.

The "High" Natural Character Threshold

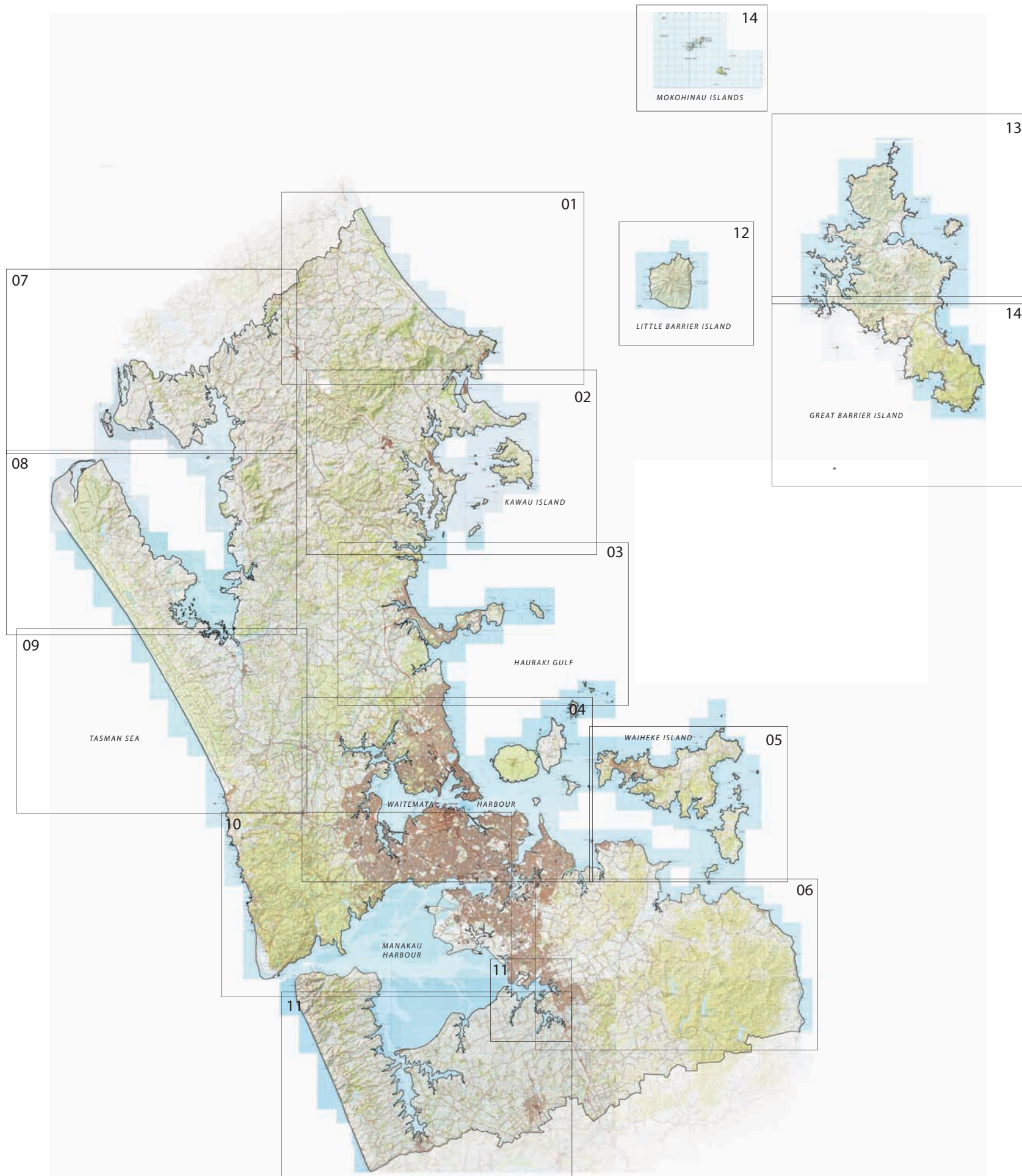
Those parts of the coastal environment, together with lakes, rivers, wetlands and their margins, considered to exhibit all of the above values through to those which display most of them, or are 'hallmarked' by one or two quite exceptional natural characteristics – eg. the dune spits of South Kaipara and the dune ridges of the Awhitu Peninsula (regardless of shortcomings in other respects) – are identified as having 'High' Natural Character.

NATURAL CHARACTER ATTRIBUTES




Natural Character area	Natural land cover	Natural landform(s)	Areas of sea & water	Land uses	Evident processes	Feelings of remoteness/wilderness/wildness
North East Rodney - Map 1						
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North East Rodney - Map 2						
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Orewa & Whangaparoa - Map 3						
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Waitemata & Rangitoto - Map 4						
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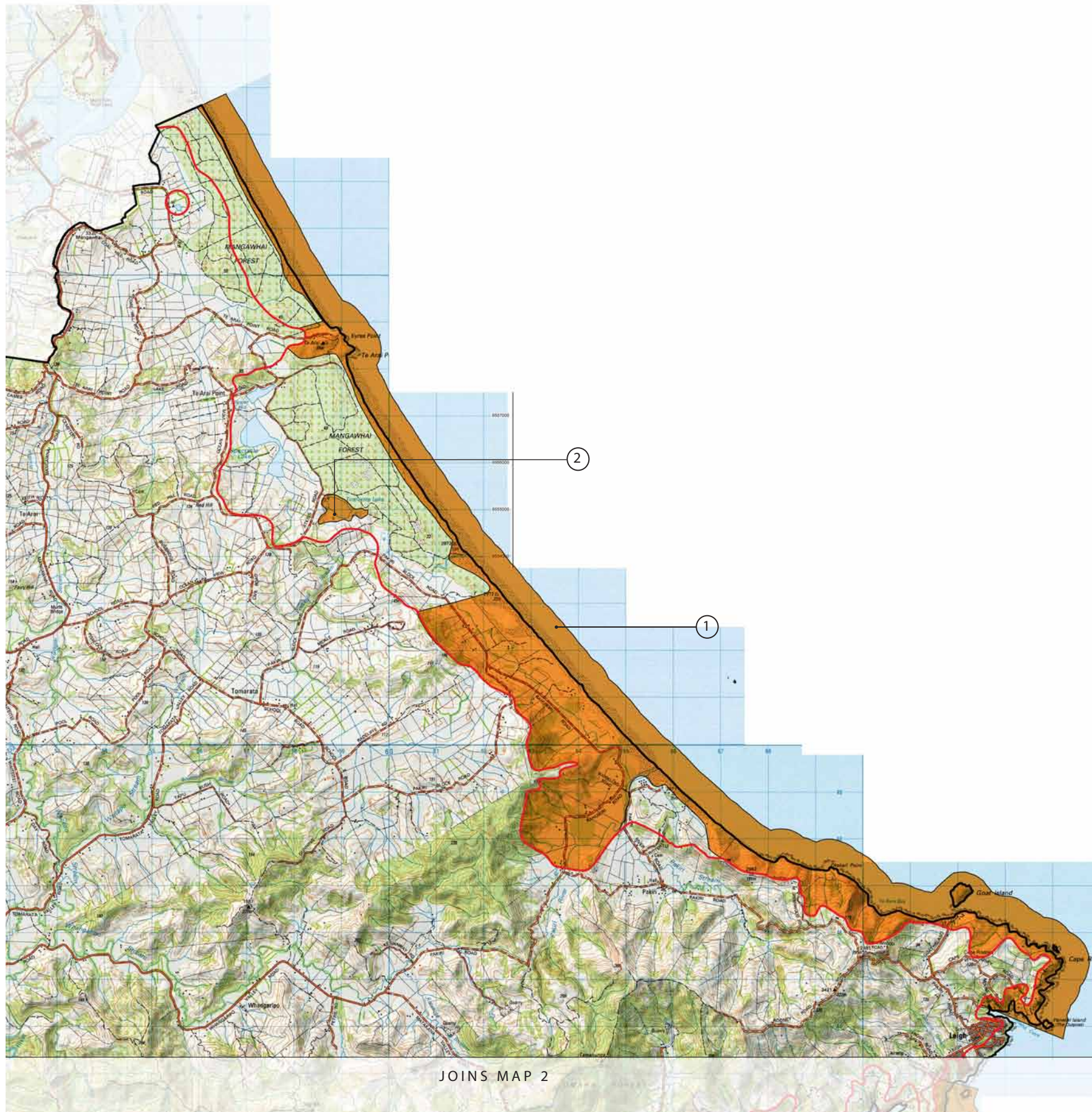
Natural Character area	Natural land cover	Natural landform(s)	Areas of sea & water	Land uses	Evident processes	Feelings of remoteness/wilderness/wildness
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Waiheke Island - Map 5						
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Firth of Thames / Clevedon - Map 6						
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Okahukura Peninsula - Map 7						
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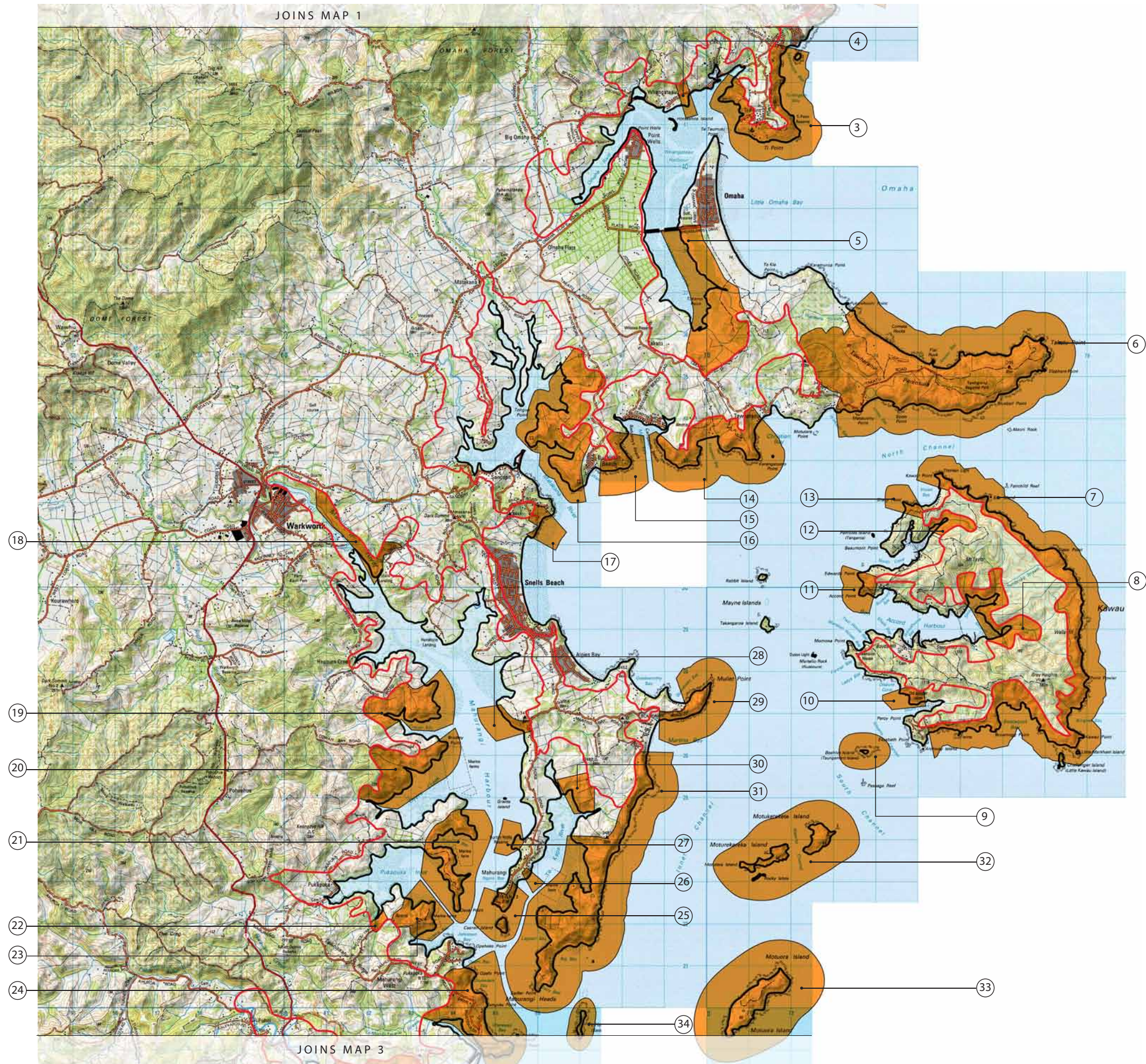
Natural Character area	Natural land cover	Natural landform(s)	Areas of sea & water	Land uses	Evident processes	Feelings of remoteness/wilderness/wildness
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Kaipara Harbour - Map 8						
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Muriwai - Map 9						
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Manukau Harbour - Map 10						
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Waiuku River - Map 11						
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Little Barrier Island - Map 12						
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Great Barrier Island north - Map 13						
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Great Barrier Island south - Map 14						
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Mokohinau Islands - Map 14						
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LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value 
- Natural Character Area 
- Extent of Coastal Environment 





LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area
- Extent of Coastal Environment

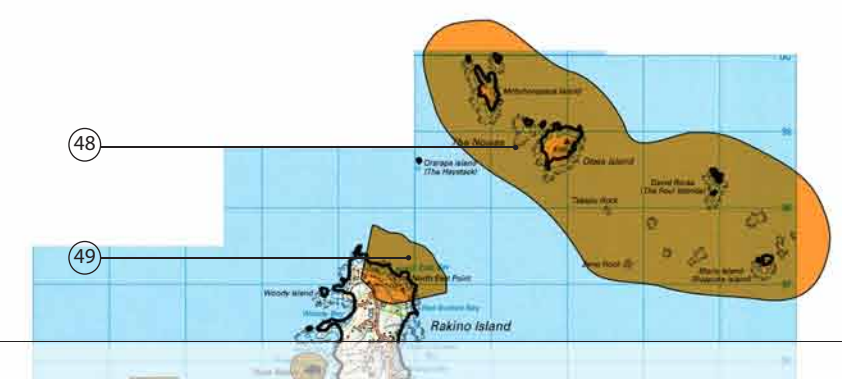


JOINS MAP 2



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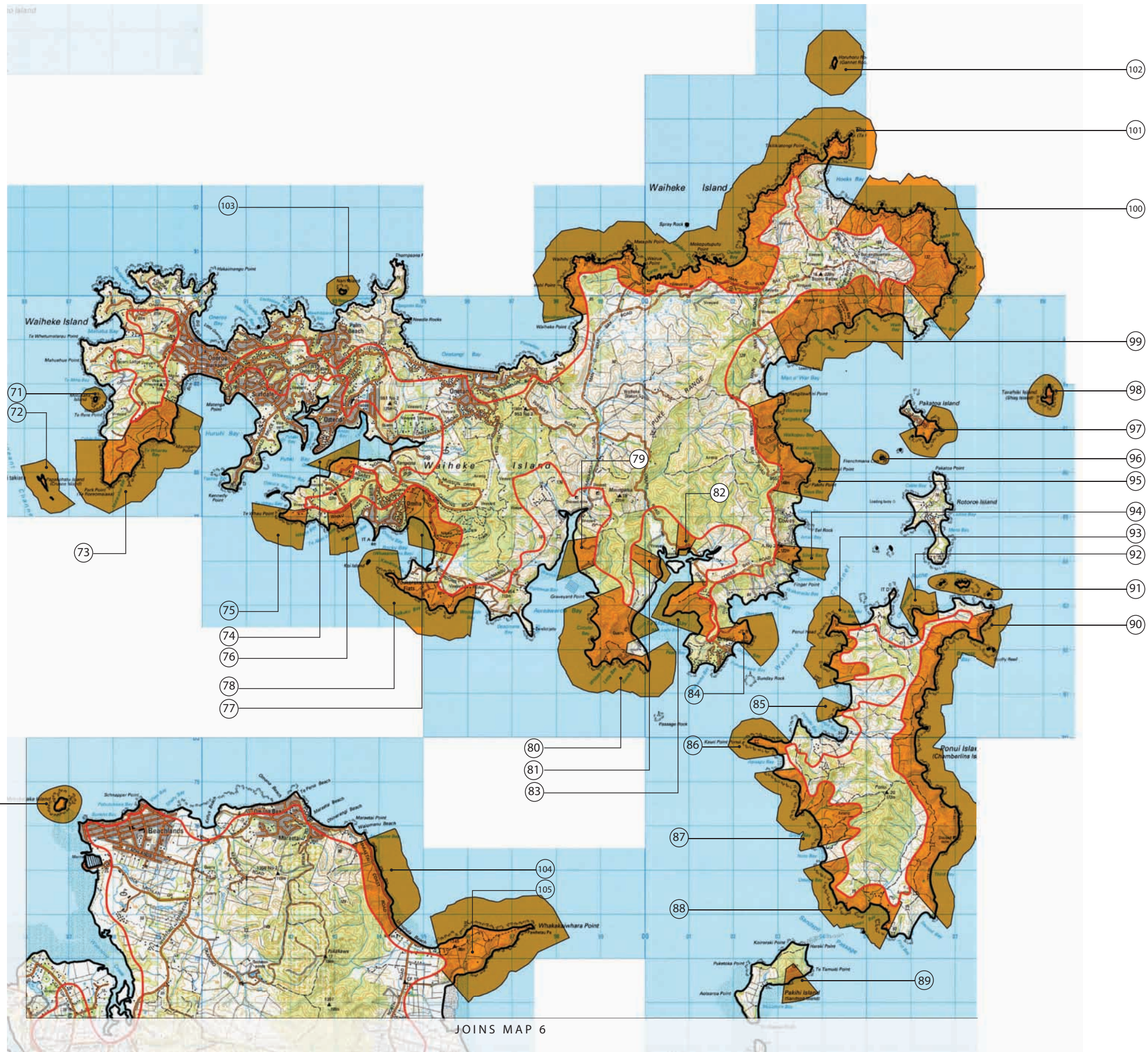
- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area
- Extent of Coastal Environment



JOINS MAP 4

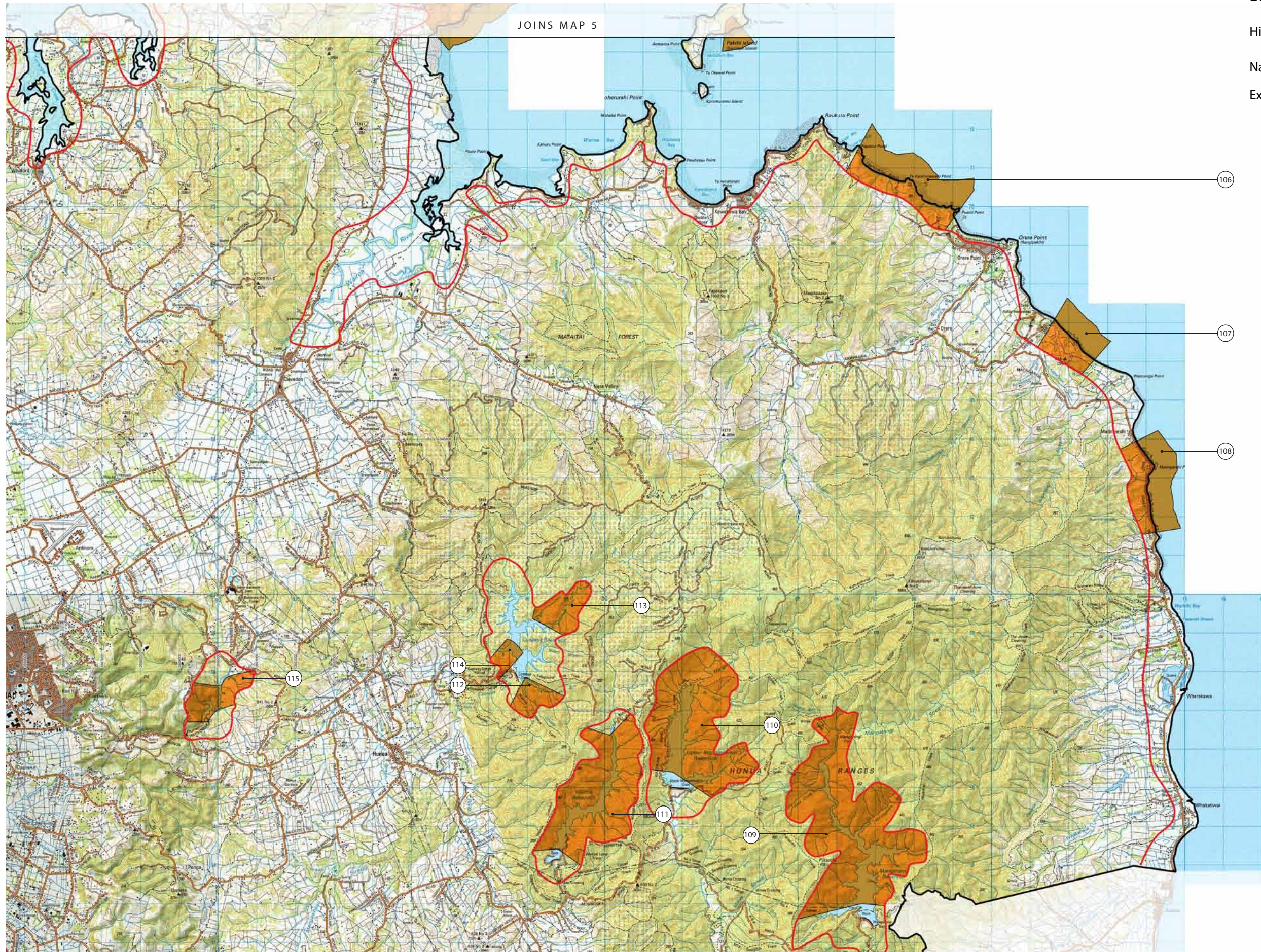






LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area 1
- Extent of Coastal Environment



LEGEND

High Natural Character Value






Natural Character Area

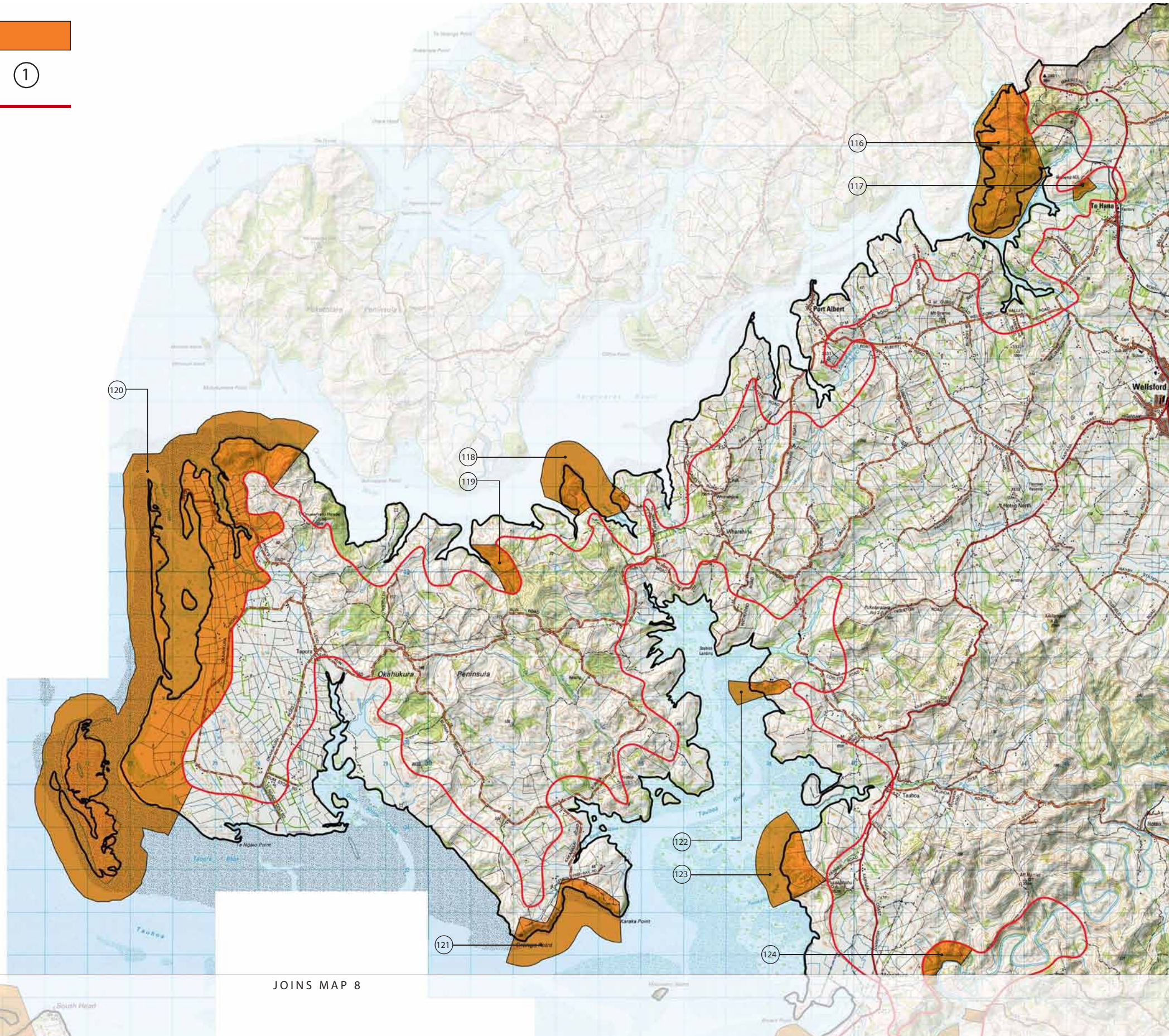


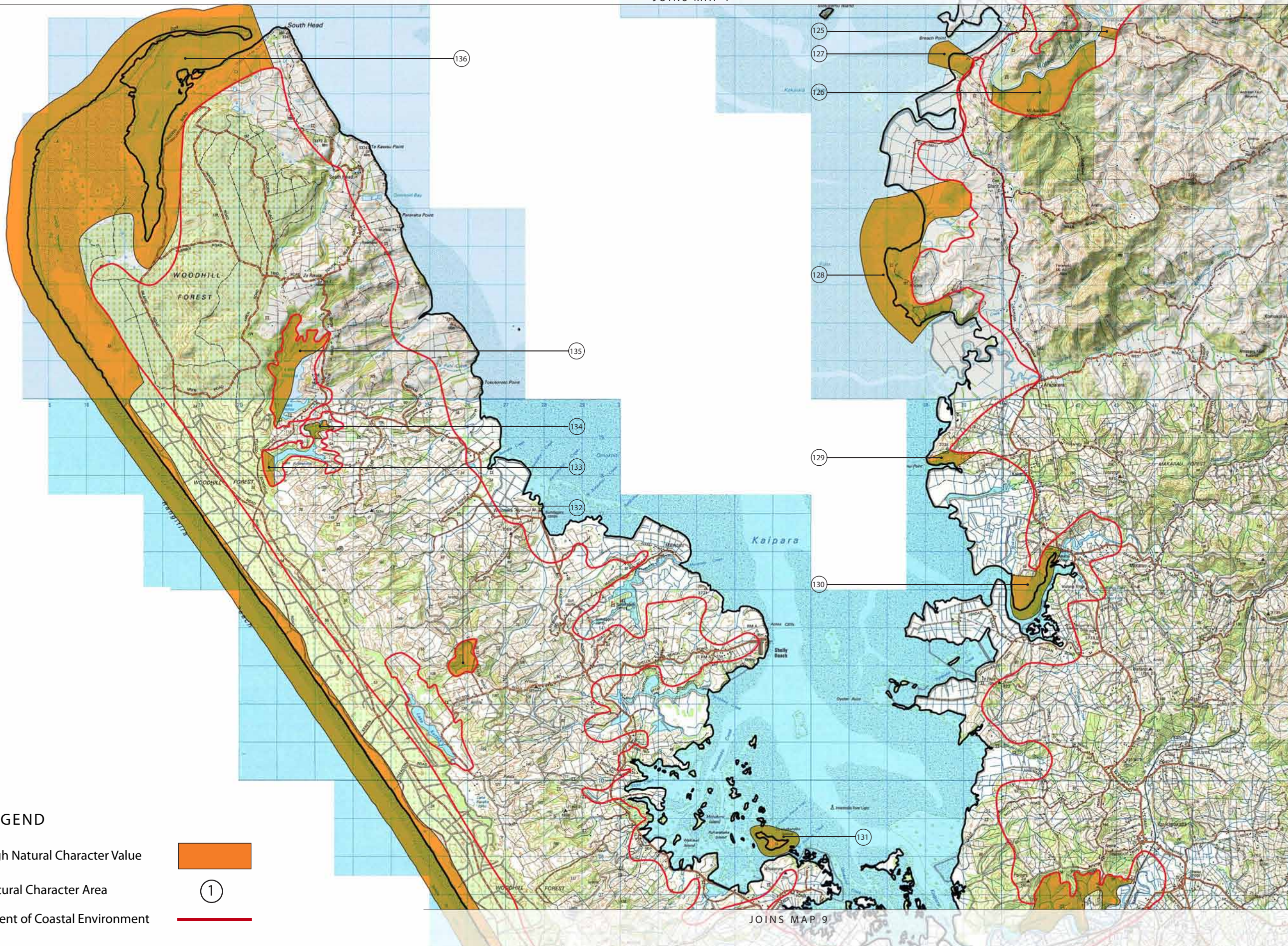
Extent of Coastal Environment



LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value 
- Natural Character Area 
- Extent of Coastal Environment 





LEGEND

High Natural Character Value

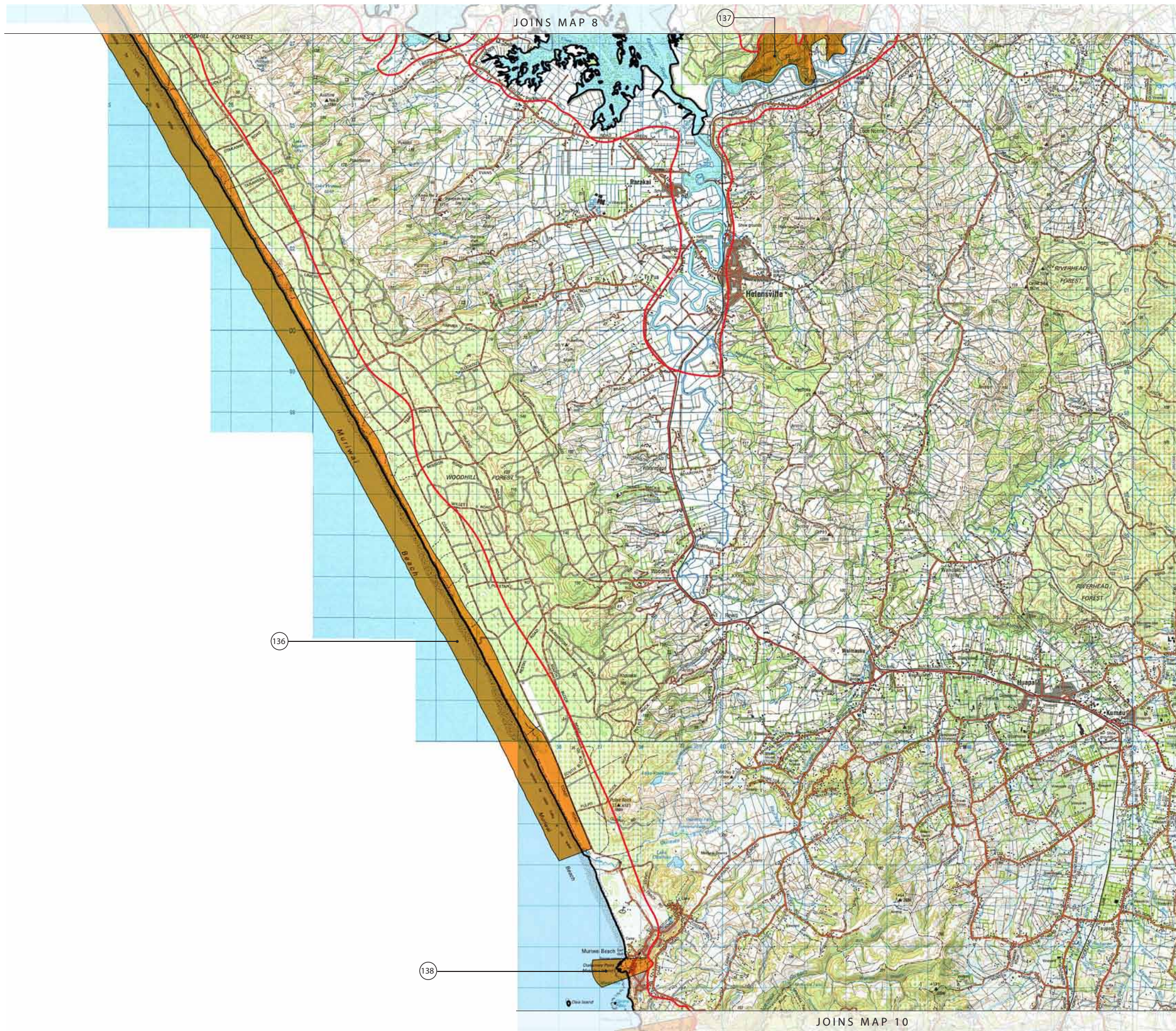


Natural Character Area



Extent of Coastal Environment





LEGEND

High Natural Character Value



Natural Character Area



Extent of Coastal Environment



JOINS MAP 9

LEGEND

High Natural Character Value



Natural Character Area

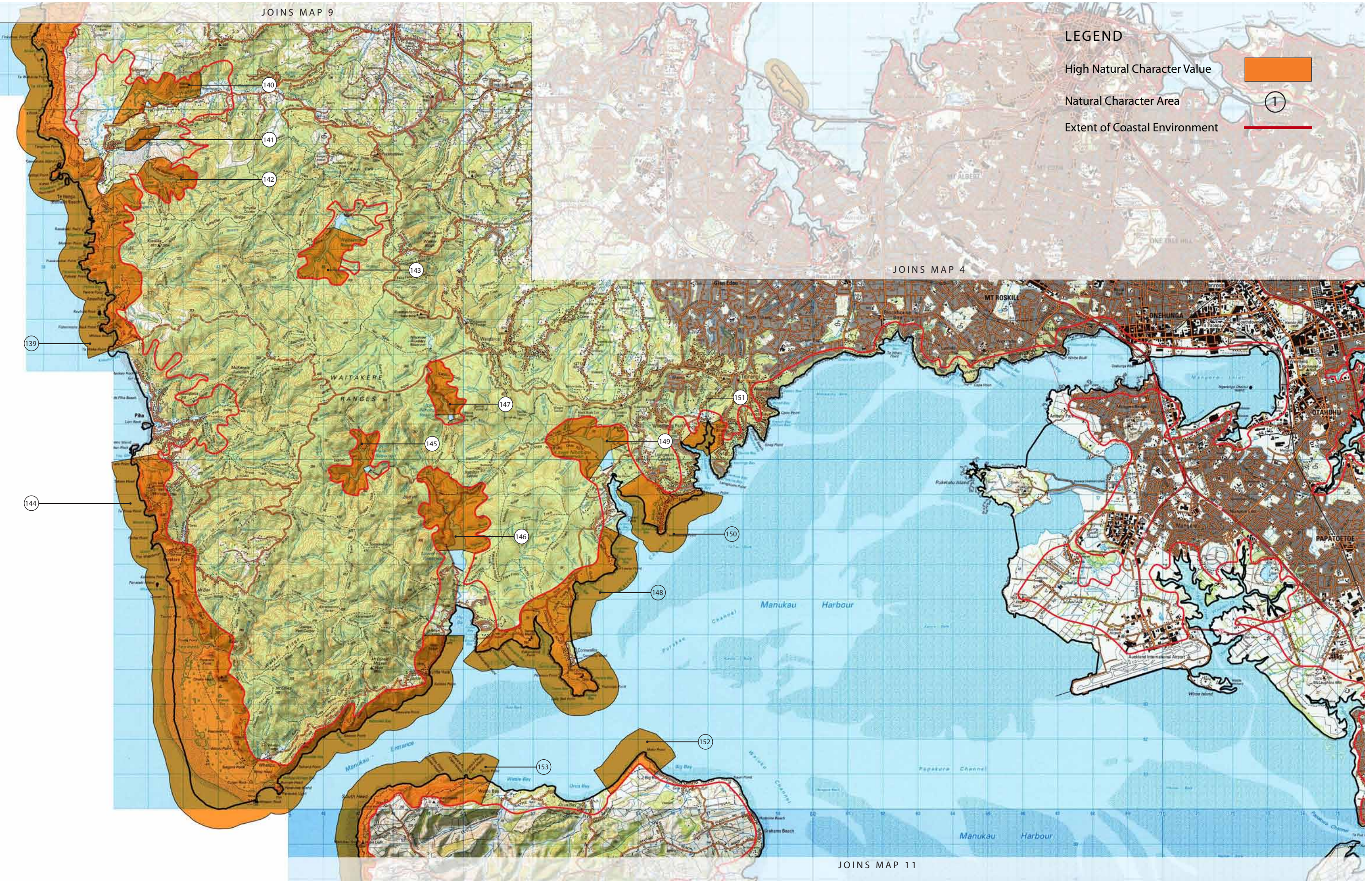


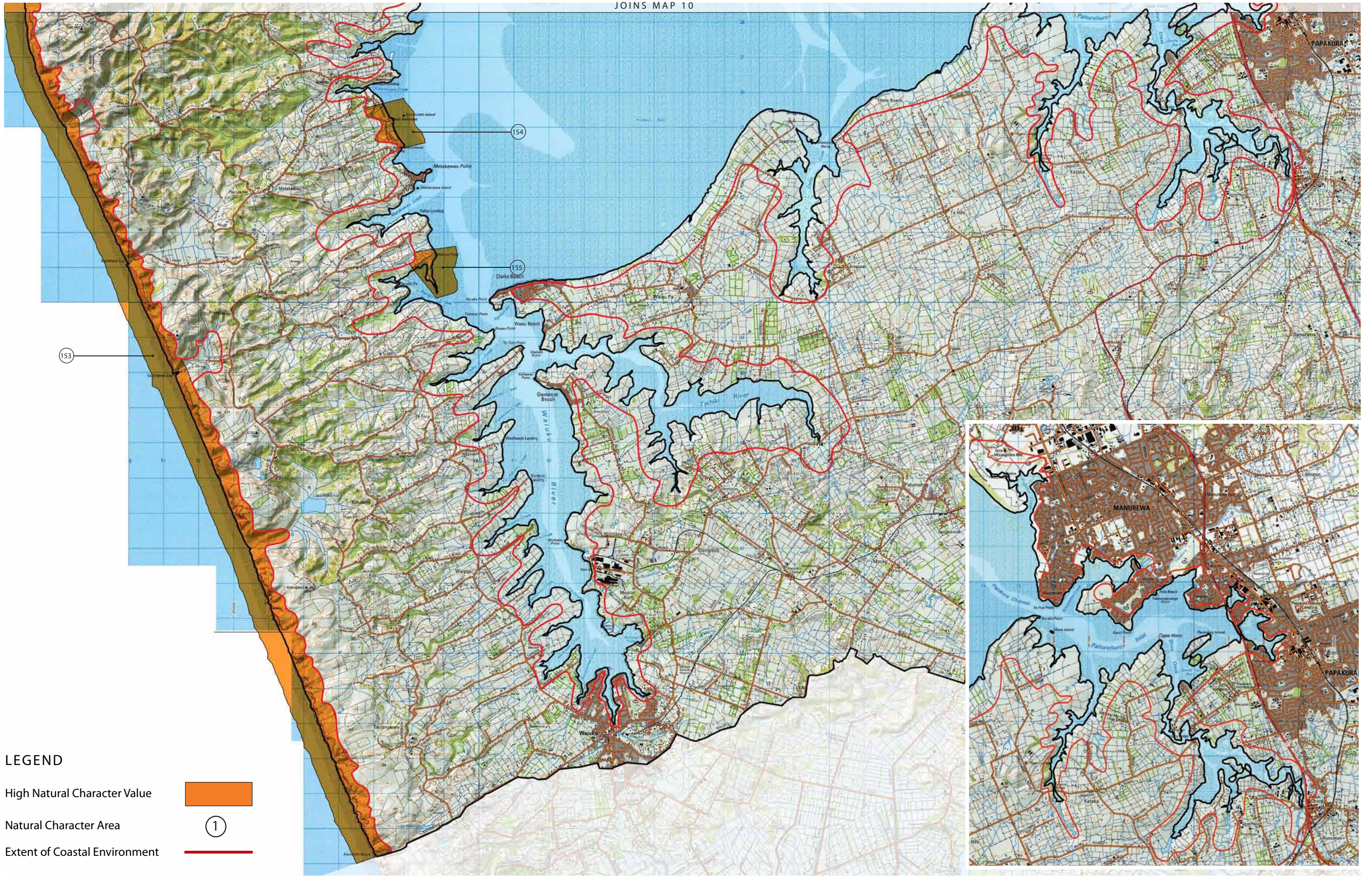
Extent of Coastal Environment



JOINS MAP 4

JOINS MAP 11





LEGEND

High Natural Character Value



Natural Character Area



Extent of Coastal Environment



JOB

NATURAL CHARACTER ASSESSMENT
AUCKLAND REGION

DRAWING

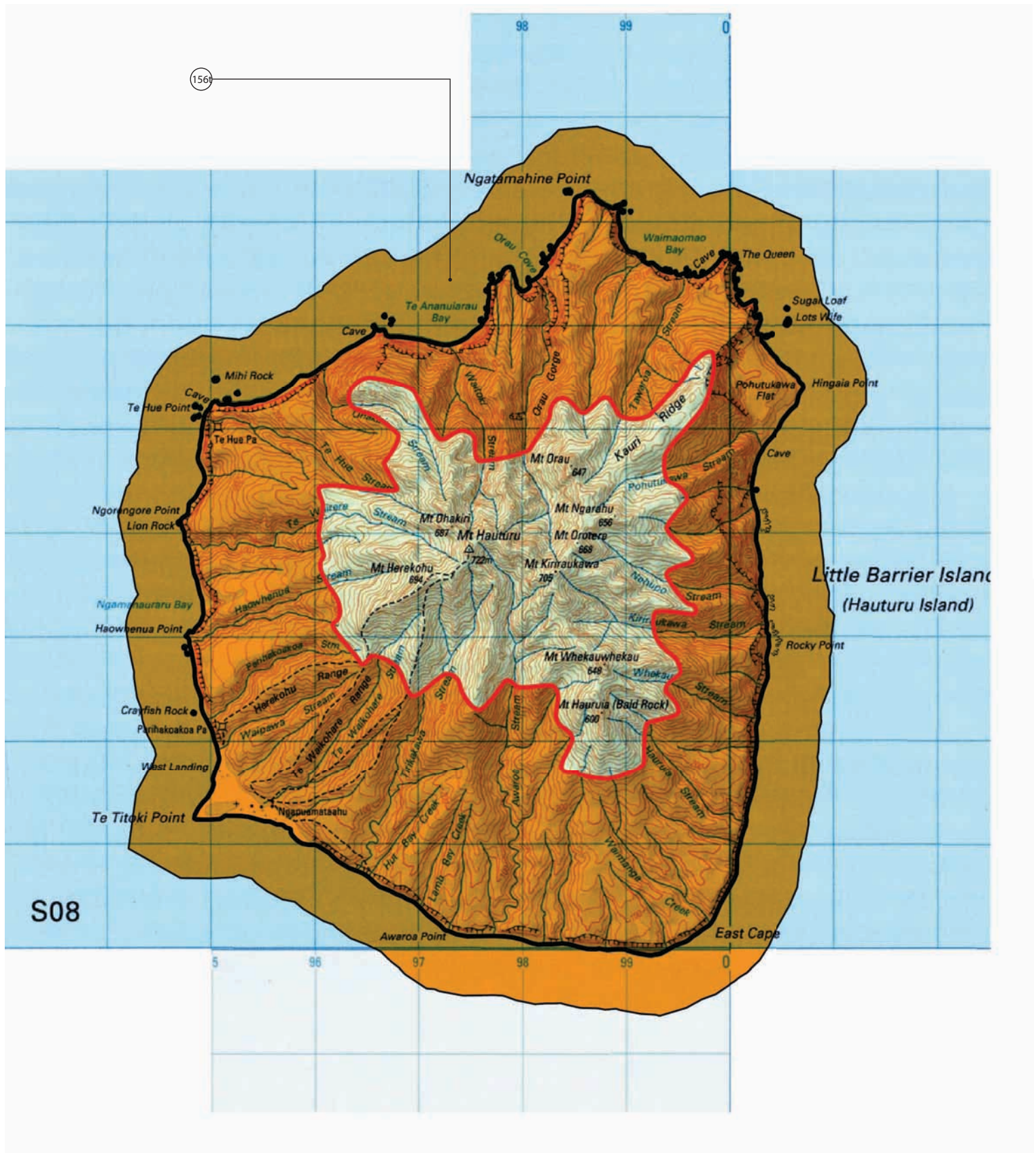
map 11 waiuku river

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SHEET 17 of 22

STEPHEN BROWN
ENVIRONMENTS LTD

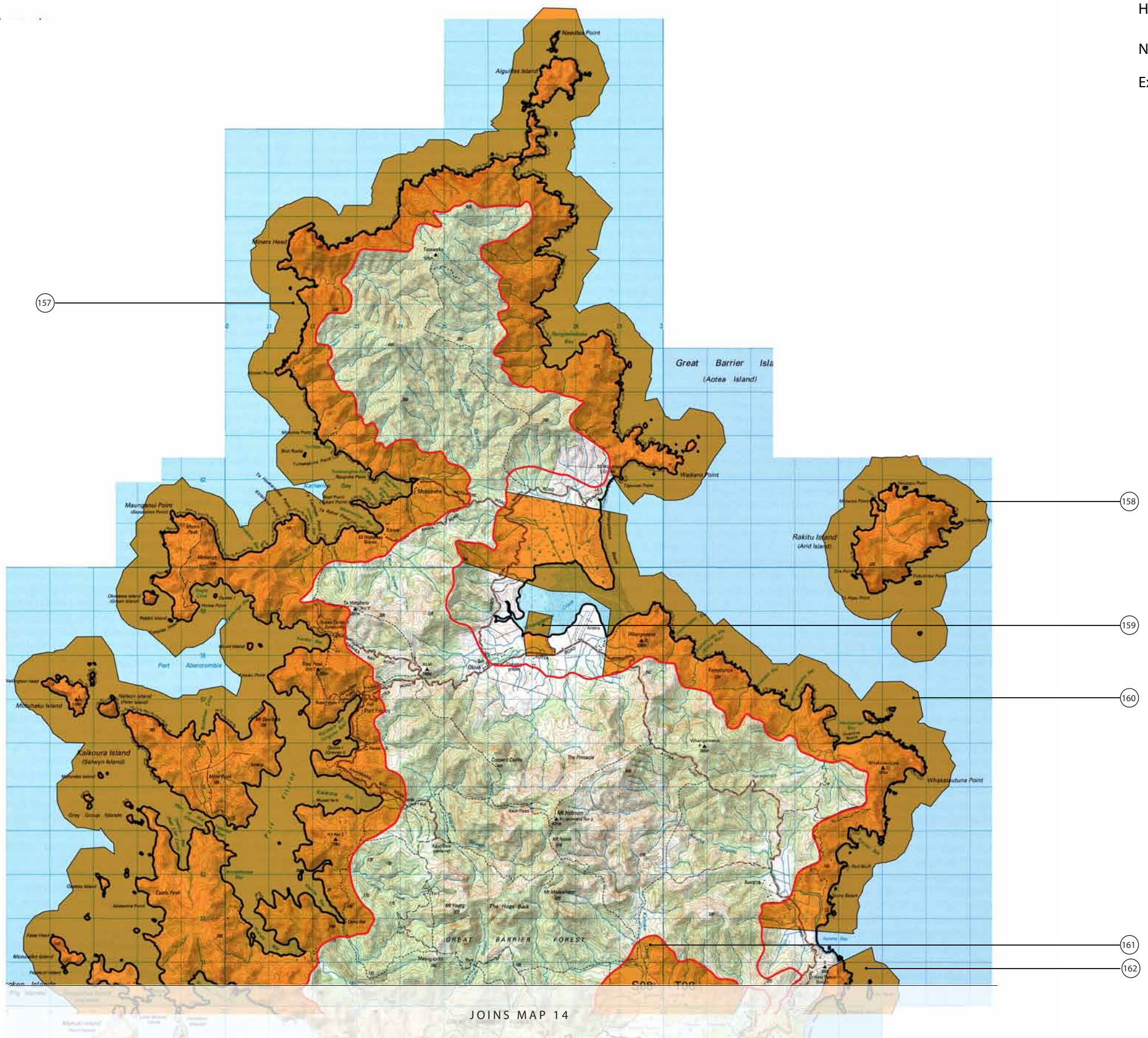
LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area 1
- Extent of Coastal Environment



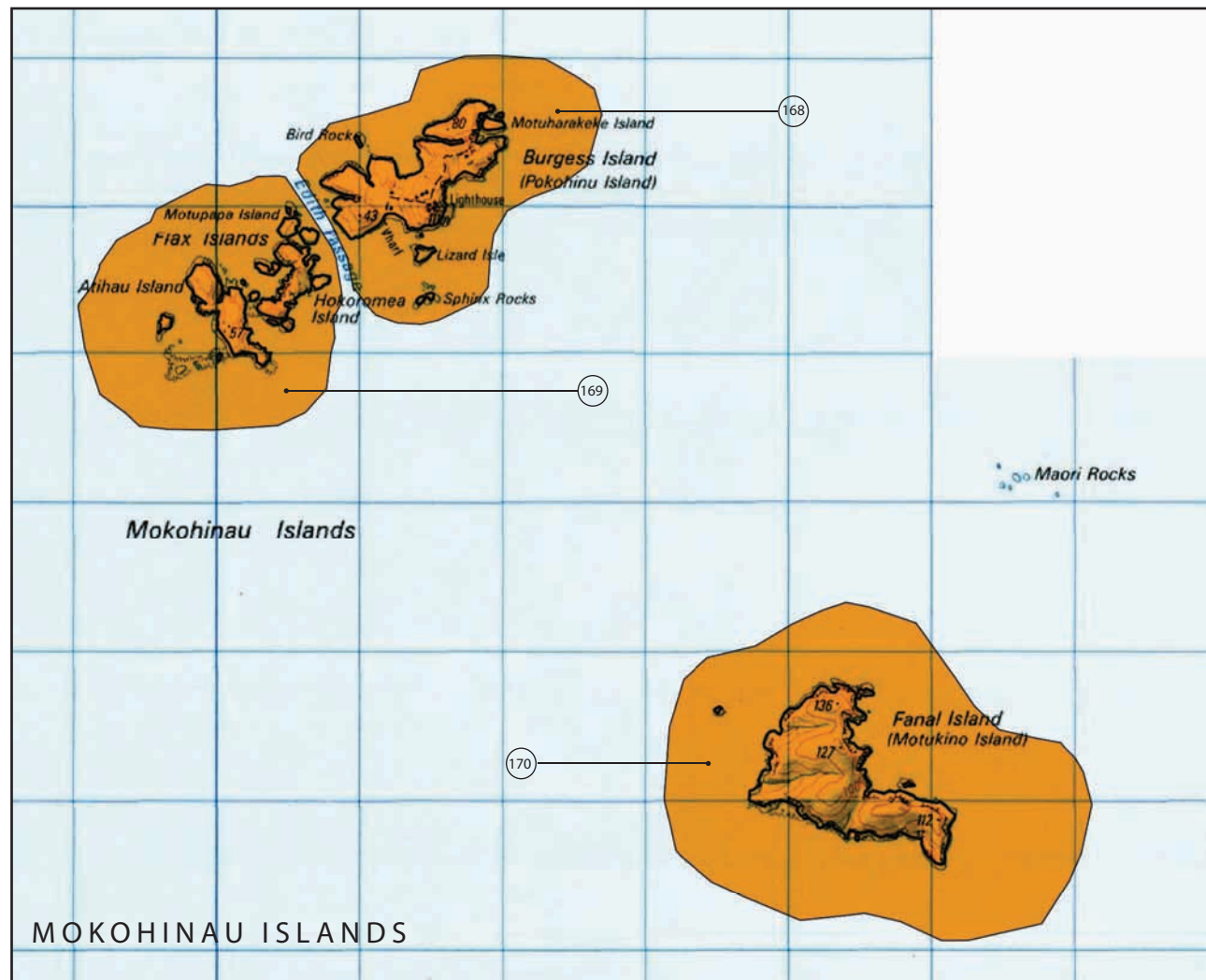
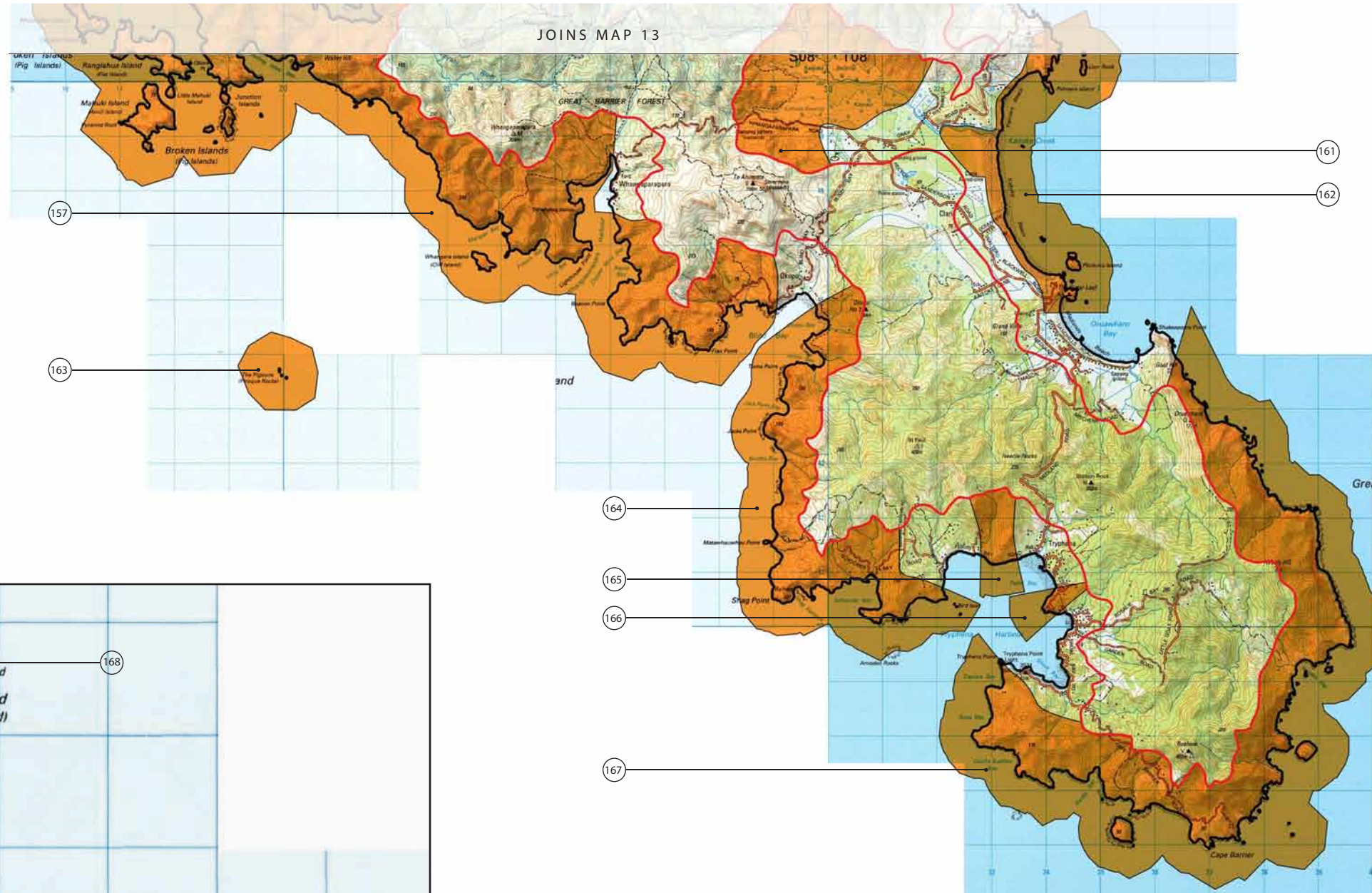
LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area 1
- Extent of Coastal Environment



LEGEND

- High Natural Character Value
- Natural Character Area
- Extent of Coastal Environment



SUMMARY / RECOMMENDATIONS

MAIN FINDINGS

The coastal environment of the Auckland Region traverses a diverse spectrum of landscapes, from the highly modified urban environments of the central city, to the remote and wild coastal landscapes such as Whatipu that remain wholly pristine and epitomise the high natural character found within parts of the Region's coastline.

Although highly complex, the Auckland region's coastal landscapes can be broadly broken down into:

- Urban Coastlines
- Ocean Beaches of the West Coast, Pakiri and Te Arai
- North-eastern Beaches, Bays and Inlets
- Manukau and Kaipara Harbours
- Firth of Thames
- Hunua and Waitakere Water Catchments
- Gulf Islands

Urban Coastlines

The concentration of urban development along the Region's eastern seaboard has a significant influence on the natural character perceived between Maraetai and Orewa. The intensity and prominence of urban development along the eastern coastline dominates all but a few areas of the coastal environment. By its very nature, the Waitemata Harbour's urban edge retains very little in the way of natural land cover or notable areas of native vegetation, and built development has in many instances masked the natural process and contours of the underlying landscape. Combined, these factors simply overpower any related remote/wild or transient elements that may be retained along the metropolitan coastline.

West Coast Ocean Beaches, Pakiri & Te Arai

Beyond the areas of urban concentration noted above, the Region's rich diversity of natural forest cover, landforms, and the shaping influence of coastal processes become far more apparent. The Region's unique topography and the very physical isolation of many of its harbour reaches, estuaries and ocean margins also inlets also contributes to the remote and often wild nature of the coast, where development is sparse, if evident at all. In these locations, even rural land uses – predominantly pastoral farming and production forestry – contribute to a coastal environment that is less 'manicured', with much of the terrain sculpted by the coastal winds and the 'infiltration' of recolonising coastal vegetation. The majority of the regions

west coast, and that north of Leigh, clearly exhibit these qualities, with the West Coast's combination of rising hill country and bluffs, native forest, and dynamic interaction with the Tasman Sea having created an iconic coastline that is highly valued for its natural qualities.

North-Eastern Beaches, Bays & Inlets

Between the two ends of the development spectrum, the Region's coastline skirts around an extensive network of river flats, sandy beaches, rocky shoals, tidal inlets, headlands and coastal scarps. North of Orewa, this series of intimate coves, estuaries, isolated beaches, and exposed oceanic coastline contains many small coastal communities. However, the limited scale of these coastal settlements, combined with extensive stretches of coast that remain dominated by native coastal vegetation and natural landforms, and that are clearly defined by both their exposure to the Pacific Ocean and evident coastal processes, creates a diversity of natural to semi-natural environments.

Manukau & Kaipara Harbours

The rural landscapes that surround the Manukau and Kaipara Harbours are largely dominated by a combination of alluvial coastal terraces and eroded foothills, with open pasture often extending down to the edge of the CMA. Native forest / vegetation cover tends to be isolated around river courses and headlands, and both harbour margins have often been further modified by reclamation, intensive drainage, and in the case of the Manukau Harbour, intensive urban development. As a result, the coastal environs of both harbours are substantially devoid of the elements, or combination of elements, that are typically associated with "natural" environments (culmination in the likes of suburban Blockhouse Bay and Onehunga, and Auckland's industrial 'heartland' stretching from Penrose and Favona to the International Airport at Mangere. The two notable exceptions to this situation are the western end of the Tauhoa Peninsula and the Waitakere Ranges between Laingholm and Whatipu.

Although the coastal hinterland of the Tauhoa Peninsula is also predominantly pastoral, the western edge of the Peninsula terminates in a series of remote coastal wetlands, shell banks and sandbars – including the vegetated dunes of Manukapua Island – which jut out into the open waters of the Kaipara Harbour. The scale of the landforms, natural cover, sense of remoteness and coastal processes found at this location 'outweigh' the influence of its rural hinterland and the presence of the small coastal settlement of Tauhoa.

At the mouth of the Manukau Harbour, the steeply uplifted formations of the Waitakere Ranges combine with the Ranges' extensive forest cover to create a coastal environment that is, in many ways, emblematic of what much of 'NZ must once have been'. Despite the presence of small settlements at Huia and Little Huia, the coastline is fundamentally natural and highly significant in terms of its dynamic interaction with the Manukau Harbour.

Firth of Thames

While inland areas – focusing upon the bush clad mantle of the Hunua Ranges – convey the strong sense of a coastal hinterland that is both highly natural and shaped by natural processes, the predominance of rural land uses and settlements along the edge of the Firth of Thames appreciably diminishes the overall naturalness of the more immediate coastal environment. Although the Hunua Ranges' bush tracts extend down to the coastal foreshore around both the Tawhitokino and Tapapakanga Regional Parks, much of the Firth of Thames coastline remains fragmented and dissipated – in terms of its natural character values – by open pastures, orchards, exotic forestry and coastal settlements hugging the Firth.

Hunua & Waitakere Water Catchments

While obviously man-made, the inland waters of the Region's reservoir lakes comprise enclosed bodies of water with quite different characteristics to the coastal areas. Much more physically confined, the lakes are enclosed by and interact with, surrounding forests, ridges and spurs very directly. Consequently, the lakes are rarely visible in their entirety: instead, views across them are fragmented and compartmentalised by intervening landforms and vegetation cover. This heightens the sense of interaction between bush and water, and related feelings of remoteness, even wilderness – to the extent that the dams and other reservoir structures become subservient to the overall naturalness of these landscapes, except at and around the actual dams and related areas of human activity.

Gulf Islands

The Gulf Islands can be broadly considered in two groups; those islands that have been extensively modified – by development, vegetation clearance, exotic forestry and pastoralism (like most of western Waiheke, Kowhai, Motuihe, Motutapu and Rakino) – and those islands that remain largely unmodified. The majority of the inner islands have been modified to varying degrees, yet despite vegetation clearance and the more open nature of rural land uses, the qualities of their underlying landforms, and the seascapes that



The urban coastline of Cheltenham Beach, Devonport



Looking south down one of the West Coast's ocean beaches from Manukau Heads



The Manukau Harbour & Puketutu Island from the Otautaua Stonefields

SUMMARY / RECOMMENDATIONS

surround them, often register far more strongly than the rural land uses which 'back' them. This is particularly evident in more remote locations such as Ponui Island, north-east Waiheke Island and Motutapu, where headlands and rocky shoals jut out from the end of sandy bays and tidal inlets. Pockets of remnant native vegetation (such as the Taraire stands on eastern Waiheke) are often still apparent and even exotic vegetation is frequently shaped by the wind and coastal influence. Such vegetation often combines with the islands' headlands, bluffs, shoals and more intimate beaches to create pockets of higher natural value.

By contrast, built development has also established a very marked presence on parts of western Waiheke, Kawau Island and Rakino, undermining the natural structure and patterns otherwise still apparent. Indeed, the urban beaches of Waiheke Island are the most extreme example of such modification, but even on less overtly modified islands where the natural land cover has been retained, coastal structures and jetties are frequently evident. Kawau and Great Barrier Islands move between both ends of the modified – natural spectrum: from areas dominated by a natural sequence of landforms, native coastal forest and natural processes (eg north of Port Fitzroy on Great Barrier) to areas that are dominated by coastal settlement and infrastructure (eg around Medlands on Great Barrier).

SUMMARY

In summary, the highly variable interplay of factors that contribute to natural character has resulted in the identification of wide variations in the levels of natural character found across the Auckland region.

Within and close to Auckland's metropolitan area, the transformation of the coastline has been dramatic, with changes to much of its landform, natural vegetation cover and patterns and – hardly surprising – wide-spread proliferation of man-made buildings, structures and activities. Contrasting with this situation, areas that still display high levels of natural character, and remain frequently close to pristine, are still found surprisingly close to central Auckland – most notably long the west (Tasman) coast and within the Hauraki Gulf. The frequently dramatic engagement of land and sea often heightens such values from a sensory perspective.

Elsewhere, levels of natural character are highly variable and mainly reflect the degree to which residual natural features – headlands, escarpments, ocean beaches, dune systems, and pockets of native forest 'out-compete' areas of

rural production and coastal settlement. The composite appreciation of a coastal landscape's landforms, remnant vegetation cover and patterns, even feelings of remoteness and wilderness can still 'override' the modification associated with nearby land use activities, such as pastoral farming and exotic forestry. Indeed, the ocean beaches of Muriwai and Pakiri / Te Arai still retain high natural character values that are derived from their dune / beach corridors, dynamic interaction with the sea, and sense of remoteness, despite being extensively 'backed' by exotic forestry.

The impact of buildings and structures on natural character values is typically far more fundamental however. Thus, even though many coastal areas contain buildings and settlements that are well integrated into their coastal settings, the accumulation of built structures, vegetation clearance and the erosion of any real sense of remoteness, can quickly undermine a coastline's more natural elements. This is, in fact, why most of the regional coastline is not identified as displaying high levels of natural character. The majority of the Region's coastal margins are now subject to a broad scattering of settlements, infrastructure and human activities that effectively limit its residual areas of high natural character value to fragmented pockets.

MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

Given this situation, it is clear that those areas which display higher order natural character values in a more continuous and cohesive fashion – for instance, around much of Great Barrier Island and down the west coast from Bethells Beach to Whatipu, then along the Manukau Harbour to Big Muddy Creek – can only increase in significance as Auckland's metropolitan area and regional populations continue to expand. Elsewhere, those remnant pockets of high natural character remain important, both as relics of Auckland's coastal heritage and as parts of the coast that still help to impart a distinctive and definable coastal identity – one that is unique to the Auckland Region. In looking to protect the values of those locations identified as displaying high natural character in terms of section 6(a) of the RMA, the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park Act 2000, and the New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (NZCPS), a number of management strategies need to be explored.

Building upon the operative Auckland Regional Plan: Coastal, development proposals for land identified within or adjacent to the areas of high natural character that have been identified should be subject to assessment against the objectives and policies of sections 2.9.1, 3.3 and 3.4. Additionally, coastal management should ideally involve:

- Preservation, in their entirety, of those sequences of coastline that consistently display high natural character values – such as parts of the west coast, eastern Waiheke Island and much of Great Barrier Island.
- Preservation, in their entirety, of those remnant pockets of coastline displaying high natural character from further encroachment by settlements, other development, infrastructure and forestry.
- Protection of these same areas from the influence of development on physically congruent land that visually interacts with these high natural character areas.
- Making development and subdivision within the areas of high natural character either fully Discretionary Activities or Restricted Discretionary Activities – subject to assessment criteria that address the potential modification and diminution of:
 - existing natural landforms and foreshores
 - existing native vegetation cover and patterns
 - the CMA and / or the water areas of lakes, rivers and streams
 - natural processes
 - feelings of remoteness and wildness / wilderness
 - natural character within the wider coastline around each area of high natural character in a cumulative sense



Goat Island Beach



Motu Island, Gulf Islands