

## **WHERE IS THE COLLECTIVE LANDSCAPE? *Landscape Character and the Community***

*Contributors to this Article*

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### **Introduction**

Landscape Character in the public realm is difficult to define. How do you plan for a collective character, when it is an amalgam of perceptions, values and feelings carried around by communities of diverse people?

Pine Rivers Shire Council is seeking to bring the community's values into landscape character assessments of the Shire's non-urban and rural areas. The community's values are being sought through a consultative process (Visual Diaries) pioneered by John Mongard Landscape Architects. Council commissioned John Mongard Landscape Architects to undertake a Strategic Landscape Character Assessment of the study area and 6 Visual Diaries of significant or potentially vulnerable local character areas. The Strategic Landscape Character Assessment has been completed and 4 of the Visual Diaries have been commenced.

This article discusses the innovative approach taken to identifying and planning for communal landscape character using the visual diary in Pine Rivers Shire.

### **About Pine Rivers Shire**

*Location* –adjoins the northern boundary of Brisbane, Queensland (Qld), Australia  
*Area* –767km<sup>2</sup>  
*Population* –doubled in last 20 years to over 117,000 people – one of fastest growing Qld local authorities with expected increase of 50% by 2016  
(figures 1 & 2)

#### *Land Use* (figure 3)

- 10% of the Shire area comprises the urban corridor accommodating 89% of the population
- 60% of the Shire area comprises non-urban residential, rural and water supply catchments
- Western boundary is formed by the regionally significant D'Aguilar Range
- North and South Pine Rivers flow east from the D'Aguilar Range to Moreton Bay

#### *Employment/Economy*

- 50% of the workforce employed in Brisbane
- 25% of the workforce employed in Shire in industrial, business, commercial activities, farming and rural activities and tourism.

#### *Landscape*

- vegetated, steep, rugged mountain ranges in west
- hills and valleys with river flats and plains
- coastal lowlands in the east

(figure 4)

### **Why was the Landscape Character Assessment Project Initiated?**

The protection of the Shire's landscape character is a goal identified in Council's Corporate Plan. The project is primarily being undertaken as a background study to support the preparation of a new planning scheme required by the Qld *Integrated Planning Act* (IPA).

Planning Schemes are required to address core matters such as Valuable Features which includes areas contributing significantly to amenity (e.g. areas of high scenic value, physical features that form significant visual backdrops or that frame or define places or localities, and attractive built environments).

Preliminary consultation undertaken during the process of preparing the new planning scheme indicated a strong concern for the visual quality of the area. The community not only valued the existing character of the Shire but also recognised the elements that make up that character. There was acknowledgment that these landscape values needed to be documented in order to be protected. The need to undertake an assessment of the Shire's landscape character particularly in the western non-urban and rural areas was also highlighted.

In addition, Pine Rivers Shire is recognised by residents and visitors for its accessible, attractive rural and mountain scenic qualities. Residents often cite the rural, country atmosphere as reasons why they choose to live in the Shire. Much of the western area remains vegetated and the attractive scenic drives and views are a drawcard for visitors. Visitors also appreciate the diversity of landscapes within relatively close proximity to the urban areas and the city of Brisbane.

Council resolved to undertake a Strategic Rural Landscape Character Strategy (Big Picture) of the study area and then based on the findings, focus more detailed assessments (Local Picture) on those landscape character areas found to be significant or potentially vulnerable, utilising the visual diary process. A 'big picture' strategy for the regional image is a cornerstone of developing meaningful landscape character policy. This 'big picture' needs to be incorporated into the legal planning framework so that there is strength to the strategy and so that local policies and 'visual diaries' can have a legal and philosophical context. The 'local picture' approach distinguishes the landscape and built environment qualities of the various visual districts, entities or areas within the region.

### **Strategic Rural Landscape Character Assessment**

The main intent of the Strategic Landscape Character Assessment is to guide the image of the whole region identifying, protecting and promoting significant positive character elements. The Strategy consists of a set of principles, 2 strategic maps and supporting text. While the focus of the project has been to recommend measures that may be translated into the new planning Scheme, other mechanisms to assist in retaining these landscape values in the rural areas have also been recommended.

#### *Process*

Through an expert assessment of the character of the rural areas and a series of interactive workshops between specialists, Councillors and Council Officers who live or work in the area, the study sought to identify the key strategic qualities that make up this landscape. The outcomes of the workshops were used to refine and provide subtle distinctions to the expert character analysis undertaken. There was a high correlation of values between the workshop outcomes and the expert assessment, forming a good context for further workshops with local communities.

#### *Principles*

From the analysis and consultation, the following statements summarise and synthesize the range of issues identified, and form the basis for development of the Strategic principles:

- **Retaining Rural Character and Detail**  
The landscape qualities of the rural parts of the Shire are being strongly impacted by new housing and associated gardens, fences, sheds, driveways and infrastructure. Suburban character is seen as inappropriate for the rural areas, and is the most negative visual characteristic. There are differences between the various areas and townships of the rural parts of the shire created by landcover, topography, land-uses and cultural variations. These local differences should be identified, strengthened and promoted as the rural areas grow.
- **The Shire's Green Backdrop**  
The forests, trees and vegetated areas are very important in creating a bushland setting and backdrop for the Shire as a whole. These continuous green edges and visual districts act as visual buffers, dividers and breathing spaces between the townships and other rural living places.
- **Valuing Scenery and Views**  
The scenic quality of the views from key public viewing points, landmarks and gateways are vital to the Shire's sense of identity and tourism. These views should be protected and retained in a framework of naturalistic landscapes. There is a strong desire to retain and promote the nature and environmental values of the rural landscape. The quality of creeks, waterways, endemic forests and tree-cover is essential to the sense of 'ruralness' that people value and search for in Pine Rivers Shire.
- **A Continuous Rural Experience**  
The rural roads contribute to scenic amenity for both residents and visitors. Day-trippers come to escape from the urban landscape and to experience rural scenery and views. This experience needs to be retained, particularly in the light of infrastructure improvements required over time. The sense of a complete rural experience is an important consideration: - people value the sense of peace, openness and 'ruralness' evident over sequential experiences formed by daytrips as well as work trips. Small pockets of undesirable character can alter this sense of a complete rural landscape.

#### *Strategic Plan Maps*

The Strategic Plan Maps indicate the key visual elements, the relationships of the shire's landscape form and the various landscape character areas. They are conceptual strategies that can be used by planners to guide the future character of the region.

The landscape character areas consisted of 7 rural visual character areas and 4 visual nodes (or major settlement character areas) which are discrete and have differing landscape qualities, values and associated issues. The 11 character areas and nodes were assessed to determine the need for further, more detailed landscape character assessment and strategies, such as through the visual diary process where each local community is involved in establishing local values and priorities. The character areas and visual nodes were prioritised on the basis of vulnerability to changes from housing development, relative importance of visual paths and corridors and the number of character issues identified through the analysis and consultation. The top 6 priority character areas are Dayboro Village, Dayboro Valley, Mt Glorious, Mt Nebo, Samford Village and Samford Valley. The Council has allocated resources for Visual Diaries to be undertaken for these 6 priority landscape character areas.

#### **Pine Rivers Shire Council Landscape Diaries**

Visual diaries are being prepared for the 6 priority character areas identified through the broad Strategic Rural Landscape Character Assessment component of the project. The form of the Visual Diaries relates to the particular project, however the following components are generally included (figure 5):

- map of the important local character elements,
- an indication of the character that is desired and not desired through photographs and text
- statements regarding the vision, landscape description, issues and desired outcomes.

### *The Visual Diary Approach*

The visual diary approach, pioneered in Australia by John Mongard Landscape Architects, is a proactive, community-driven process to find shared values about the landscape of a locale, and to use these shared values as a powerful planning and political tool.

The approach begins with the premise that each region can be perceived as an entity, a discreet image that has memorable elements. The strong and positive elements of a region are its major 'image' assets, and usually form a strong factor for the lifestyle quality of the place for its people.

The visual diary is the communicative tool and process for identifying local character in an interactive, communal way. Through a particular workshop process that seeks to unlock both the rational and irrational values and perceptions of a local community, a visual diary of their visions and desires is created. This diary can then be used by planners, developers, agencies and the community to test, gauge and guide future growth and development. The output can be a legal planning tool, a policy and also an educational mechanism.

The Visual Diary process has evolved over the past five years, having been used in over twenty communities throughout Australia. It has proven to be a successful tool, easily understood by the general community, and well-accepted due to its open and engaging process.

### *How has the Visual Diary Approach been undertaken in Pine Rivers Shire?*

The community has been involved in the process of preparing the visual diaries through interactive consultation workshops. Two workshops have been undertaken with the communities of Samford Village and Valley and Dayboro Village and Valley. Each workshop was attended by approximately 40 people including community members, and representatives of selected interest groups, local and State Government agencies. The representatives of groups and agencies were invited to the workshop generally by phone, letter or email. While an advertisement was placed in the local paper inviting community members such as residents, business operators and landowners to attend the workshop. Interested participants were requested to contact the Council to register their interest in attending the workshop. To increase effectiveness of the workshop numbers were limited to 40 people.

The workshops have provided opportunity for Council to obtain community input into the projects. The community has been able to provide their views on what they consider to be attractive and valuable in terms of the local landscape character of the study area and what is unattractive or detracts from the landscape character of the study area. The community has demonstrated a reasonable level of interest in attending the workshops. These first 2 workshops have been positive forums for the discussion of the landscape character issues and were well received by the community. A workshop with the Mt Nebo and Mt Glorious communities will be held during April 2002.

### *What happened at the workshops?*

The consultants from John Mongard Landscape Architects facilitated the workshops with the assistance of Council's Project Manager. During the workshops, the groups were asked to contribute to a number of activities including:

- Brain storming responses to questions relating to rural character of the study area (figure 6)
- Community valuing of photographs of the local area by placing coloured stickers on photos nominating them as either 'good' or 'bad' in relation to their ideas about the desired character for that particular area. Workshop participants were given approximately 5 blue dots (desired character element) and approximately 5 red dots (undesired character elements) and asked to value the whole or parts of the images. These photos were placed on sheets under general topic headings relating to character issues such as housing styles and streetscapes.

The photos and associated issues were then discussed and debated by the whole group. This process acknowledges that character valuing is a cultural, political and social construct that requires a communal process to negotiate a group view. (figure 7 )

- Completion of a survey to obtain feedback from the community regarding their views on how best to respond to the relevant landscape character issues. The survey responses will be considered when determining the most appropriate means of facilitating the protection of significant landscape character values (i.e. -regulation or education or a combination).
- Drawing a mud map for visitors to illustrate how best to experience the rural qualities of the area.

The responses from the community are currently being analysed and evaluated. Further details of the project and the outcomes as they become available can be viewed on Pine Rivers Shire Council's website [www.prsc.qld.gov.au](http://www.prsc.qld.gov.au)

### **Conclusions**

From the outcomes to date it is clear that Pine Rivers Shire has some outstanding rural landscapes, some of which are under threat from incremental change due mainly to new development. The protection of the Shire's rural landscape values is a matter of concern to the community particularly the suburbanised character of new development and the intrusion into 'green spaces'. The new IPA Planning Scheme provides an opportunity to facilitate the protection and enhancement of significant landscape character values. It is also evident that it is necessary to implement other measures if these landscape values are to be protected (e.g. education, streetscape programs, urban design strategies for public places). The challenge ahead is to translate the project outcomes into planning scheme measures and strategies for other operational areas of Council.

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