



## Meaning and design of nature for the urban built environment

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### **Thinking like a tree: short-term planning ignores New Zealand's urban and peri-urban development crisis.**

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Conserving indigenous biodiversity in the landscape requires certainty for nature and particularly in urban and peri-urban areas where development pressures can be extreme and irreversible. Over the past twenty years an experiment in biodiversity conservation through the planning process has been conducted in the peri-urban and rural lands. In Waitakere City indigenous vegetation has been protected by strict protection rules and in neighbouring Rodney District by protective covenants, that landowners voluntarily enter into when subdividing land with significant natural areas. Unlike most experiments, this one has had almost no monitoring of the progress of the either of the two treatments and no comparisons until now. But this has not deterred the experts – as the Ministry for the Environment and the New Zealand Planning Institute have pronounced the Rodney incentives protection scheme as a resounding success and are advocating its wider use through the Quality Planning website.

I have analysed indigenous vegetation change in both districts from the mid-1970s until 2000, using both vegetation cover from topographic maps and vegetation cover from protected natural area surveys. Prior to Rodney District's 'bush lot' protection scheme, the annual vegetation loss for the entire district was 2.67%. The highest loss of indigenous forest and scrubland was for the development of hill country farmland and exotic forestry, which at that time was being subsidised by the Government. From 1984-98 the annual vegetation loss was 2.29% for the district. In Waitakere City indigenous vegetation cover increased annually by 0.7% in the first 10 years following the plan change in 1979. In the past decade indigenous vegetation cover has increased annually by 0.4% as urban development limits the opportunities for indigenous forest regeneration.

Clearly the incentive-based regime in Rodney has failed to arrest the loss of forest cover, particularly the more diverse, mature forest types and the forest loss from 1977-1998 was about 2.5% per annum. The prescriptive rules regime in Waitakere City appears to be the most effective in protecting both indigenous vegetation cover and biodiversity values, and providing an increase in the area of indigenous forest in the City. Voluntarism and incentives may be more palatable to people avoiding conflict – but they do not provide the long-term certainty needed for nature in the landscape.