

Habitat Mapping on the Coastal Plains

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Less than 5% of the land on New Zealand's coastal plains is still in predominantly indigenous habitats, falling to less than 2% across much of the Southland and Manawatu coastal plains. The protection, conservation, and enhancement of natural habitats in lowland New Zealand has been given minimal attention and as a consequence the loss of lowland habitats is ongoing and acute. In an attempt to address this decline the Department of Conservation, regional and local councils and other agencies as well as individual landowners have identified a number of natural areas which have received some form of protection following what can be termed a 'reserves approach'. This approach, however, has severe limitations as it ignores natural areas that are not designated as reserves or protected areas, ignores relationships between reserves and the wider landscape and divides the landscape artificially into areas of ecological value and areas not deemed to have ecological value. What is needed is a strategic approach that recognises and values all sites with natural habitats and the relationship between individual sites and the wider landscape. This paper presents the findings of a research project undertaken on the Manawatu Plains and on the Southland Plains to identify the full range of natural habitats, their natural character, their location, their ownership and institutional status, if any. A total of 744 sites were mapped using ArcView GIS and then spatially analysed with reference to their potential contribution to the development of a strategic plan for the protection and enhancement of indigenous habitats on the coastal plains. The application of spatial approaches are fundamental to the development of a strategic plan and in the determining the best use of scarce conservation resources.