

Parks Division Using the landscape classification system for visitor management

Procedural guides further define complex decision-making processes or requirements of the Environmental Protection Agency, incorporating the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. Procedural guides provide guidance and information to assist staff in the completion of specific tasks or in making certain judgments. Procedural guides are for internal use only.

Purpose and scope

This document provides guidance on use of the Landscape Classification System, the QPWS standard for characterising the biophysical, social and management attributes of sites and areas (within QPWS managed areas) for visitor management purposes.

Background

The landscape classification system (LCS) has been adopted by Parks Division as a standard for assessing and characterising landscape settings at QPWS managed sites and areas for visitor management purposes. QPWS has adopted the LCS because a standard way of characterising sites and areas is needed to help achieve the aim of providing a range of visitor opportunities across QPWS managed areas (and geographic areas).

Use of the LCS provides useful information and support for management decision-making in a range of areas, including visitor management, infrastructure development and risk management.

Assessment and classification of sites using the LCS essentially allows managers to consider the implications of proposed visitor activities and other changes that may alter the biophysical, social or managerial attributes of a site or area, and to assess and monitor the effects of more gradual change such as increasing visitor use.

The following guidelines are provided to assist the user in applying the LCS to determine the landscape class, or setting of a given site or area.

Definitions

'QPWS managed areas' (for the purposes of this procedural guide) include the following areas:

- protected areas (state land) under the *Nature Conservation Act 1994*;
- state forests and other lands managed under the *Forestry Act 1959*;
- Recreation Areas under the *Recreation Areas Management Act 1988*;
- Brisbane Forest Park under the *Brisbane Forest Park Act 1977*;
- other areas where QPWS has control, trusteeship or otherwise manages the land.

For the purpose of this procedural guide, QPWS managed areas do not include Marine Parks under the *Marine Parks Act 1982*.

'Setting' refers to the landscape class of a given site or area.

Procedures

General process for determining landscape class

1. Use the landscape classification system table attached to the operational policy on the Landscape classification system for conducting assessments. Start by assessing the site or area using the descriptors under the physical category, and then assess the social and managerial categories in turn.
2. For each of the criteria listed in each category (eg. Viewscape, indicative appearance), identify the description (from class 1 – 9) that best suits the site you are assessing. Record the description class for each criterion. A scoring sheet is attached at Appendix 1 for recording purposes. Print off and copy as many scoring sheets as you require, or develop your own paper-based or electronic scoring sheet if you wish.

3. For each category of criteria (physical, social and managerial) add the numbers together to obtain a total score and then divide the total score by the number of criteria scored to obtain an average score for that category of criteria. Record the average score for the category.
4. When the average scores for the 'physical', 'social' and 'managerial' categories have been identified, the highest of these scores (i.e. the category with a score closest to '9') is the overall landscape class.
(Note: Moderation of the overall score based on sound judgement is appropriate, where a particular score is inappropriately skewing the overall class. The reasoning behind any such moderation should be clearly set down on the Scoring Sheet for future reference.)

Evaluating sites or areas

Evaluations of the landscape class of a given site or area should be taken from a point which is representative of the site that is being assessed, and where you are able to accurately characterise the setting of the site or area. For example, if the site you are assessing is a camping area which has some facilities located at one end, and natural bushland at the other, you would stand in a location where the facilities and the bushland would be reflected equally in your assessment of the site. You would generally avoid standing right beside the facilities so that they dominate the viewscape, or standing in the bushland where you couldn't see the facilities.

Evaluating landscape class along linear features

Particular visitor activities are likely to cross a range of settings. For example the activity of walking along a walking track may occur in a range of settings where the walking track passes through areas of different landscape class. For example the trailhead may be located at a visitor centre where visitor numbers are more concentrated and the physical conditions are substantially modified. The track may then lead to a less modified environment where fewer people venture. Walking even further along the track may take you into an even less modified setting, where little evidence of human presence is discernable.

If you are evaluating the landscape class(es) along a linear feature such as a walking track, take multiple assessments along the track if and when you feel that the setting has changed significantly. Changes in setting may not be immediately obvious and you may need to backtrack to make an assessment from a place that characterises the setting.

Assessments to reflect current condition

Your assessment should reflect the actual or current condition of the site. The site's current condition may differ to the preferred condition of the site; however, it is vital that it is the current condition that is assessed.

Irrelevant criteria

If a particular criterion does not apply to the site you are assessing, do not give the setting a score for that criterion. For example, if there is no water (i.e. creek, lake or other water feature) at the site, do not give it a value for 'Water quality'. Some criteria (for example interparty encounters while at nodes or destinations) relate only to site-based activities (eg. picnicking), while others (eg. interparty encounters while travelling) relate only to travel-based activities (eg. walking, mountain bike riding). When completing an assessment at a given site or area, only consider criteria that are relevant to the activity undertaken at the site.

Assessment of natural condition

Your knowledge of the natural condition of the site will also influence your assessment. For example, if you have no knowledge of the site's natural condition you may have difficulty in determining the site's "naturalness". If you need to, seek advice as to the natural condition of the site. Do not assume that what you currently see is the natural condition of the site.

Assessment of social condition

When evaluating the social class of a site, your assessment should be based on the site's social condition, as most people would experience it. For example, if the site receives very little visitor use during the week, maximum use on weekends and peak visitation on long weekends, assess the social conditions as per a 'normal' weekend.

Guidelines

General Intent

This classification system is meant as a useful guide for visitor management, rather than a detailed 'forensic' analysis of settings. The field application of the tool and the time devoted to assigning a setting score should be commensurate with this intent.

Criteria overlap

The LCS criteria are not designed to be mutually exclusive. There is overlap between the factors to be considered in some of the criteria. Having a range of criteria ensures that more than one feature of a site is responsible for its landscape classification. Overlap in criteria also ensures that a site's features will be well reflected in its landscape classification.

Note that where the characteristics of a given site or area are not completely consistent with any one of the class descriptions for a particular criterion (i.e. it is half-way between 2 classes), it is appropriate to give a half-score for that criterion.

Evaluations at different scales

Assessments of landscape class may be undertaken at a range of scales, from discrete locations (for example at a point along a walking track through a forest) to broader areas (for example a forested planning area may be mapped as landscape class units). The aim of each exercise is still to characterise the physical, social and managerial conditions or settings that are likely to be encountered in those areas. Assessments may be undertaken partly as desktop exercises, but only where the physical, social and managerial conditions are well understood by the person(s) undertaking the assessment.

Information gaps

If an assessing officer does not have a sound knowledge of site parameters for assessing a particular criterion (for example a criterion relating to site use), it is best to simply skip that criterion and base the assessment of landscape class for that category on the scores for the remaining criterion in that category.

Further information

The Landscape classification system has been used extensively in visitor site and landscape inventory programs across protected areas and state forests in Queensland over recent years. Information about the landscape classes of particular sites and areas may be held at local, Regional or Central office levels. Further information on application of the system is also available by contacting the Visitor Facilities and Management Unit in Parks Division.

Interpreting the LCS criteria

Physical class criteria

Prevalence and permanence of visitor impacts -

Assess the frequency and permanence of visitor impacts at the site. Consider aspects such as vegetation and soil disturbance, and changes to fauna behaviour.

Viewscape (360°) -

Assess the extent to which the natural condition of the landscape has been modified from its natural state. In determining the setting class, consider foreground, mid-ground and background views, and the proportion of the natural landscape modified in each.

Indicative appearance (360°) -

Consider the extent of visible modifications to the landscape, whether the modifications are temporary or permanent, and whether they blend into or dominate the landscape.

Prevalence and durability of impacts from non-visitor impacts -

Assess the site for evidence of past and present non-visitor use of the site. Is there evidence of non-visitor land uses such as mineral exploration, logging, grazing or flower harvesting? Are these land uses still active, and in what proportions? If these uses have ceased, is the site regenerating?

Naturalness of over storey -

Assess the percentage of natural over storey cover that remains. What percentage of the over storey is intact? Is it regenerating? You should consider the naturalness of the overstorey for the whole area that you can see, not just the overstorey directly above you.

Naturalness of understorey -

Assess this criterion in the same way as the 'over storey' criterion.

Water quality -

Where there is water at a site, identify the extent to which human-induced changes in the aquatic or marine ecosystem have occurred.

Social setting criteria

Evidence of other people (eg. sites, sounds and smells) -

Assess the evidence (sights, sounds and smells) of other people, including industrial and residential presence at a site. How aware are you of other people? Is the evidence just at nodes and along main routes, or throughout the whole site? Is the evidence of other people short term and minor, permanent and pervasive or somewhere in between?

Sense of isolation and opportunity for solitude -

Consider factors such as sighting, hearing or interacting with other people. How aware are other people of you? What opportunity is there for solitude? What sense of isolation can be achieved?

Interparty encounters while travelling -

If the assessment site is along a track, trail, road or watercourse, how many encounters with other groups could be reasonably expected?

Interparty encounters while at nodes and destinations -

Assess the likelihood of meeting other people or groups while you are at the visitor site. Can contact with other people be avoided or expected? If contacts can be expected, are they rare, frequent, or unavoidable?

Dependence upon outdoor skills -

Assess the level of outdoor skills required by visitors at a site. Outdoor skills include fitness, strength, specialist outdoor recreation skills (eg. technical climbing or canoeing skills) and skills such as navigation, first aid and the judgement required to assess the risk involved and the necessity to carry water or food in, or rubbish out. Note that 'outdoor skills' do not include attributes that could be also called common sense, such as knowing how to cross a road. The level of outdoor skills required by a visitor generally decreases with increasing levels of site development and facilities.

Density per hectare (PAOT - Persons At One Time) -

This criterion refers to the number of people present at a site or area at any one time. Assessments should be based on the conditions that most people visiting the site would experience.

Management class criteria

Access -

Consider the nature and extent of visitor access to the activity site. What form of tracks or roads do people use to get to the site? Is motorised access provided to a site, or do people require non-motorised modes of transport? Are trails, tracks and roads marked, formed, maintained, sealed, single or double lane?

Evidence of management personnel -

Consider factors such as construction and maintenance activity and the patrolling of a site. How evident or obvious is management presence at a site?

Presence and extent of signage -

What is the level and nature of signage at a site? Signage may be regulatory, directional, informative, interpretive or advertising. Note: For the purpose of the LCS, regulatory signage refers to any signage that attempts to directly control the behaviour of visitors to the site. The signage does not have to be legally enforceable to be considered as 'regulatory signage' for the purpose of determining a site or area's landscape class.

Rules, regulations and law enforcement -

Assess the messages that are being communicated about the site. Are rules and regulations communicated on-site (managers present, signage, registration shelters) or off-site (permits obtained prior to visit, use conditions explained in a book)? Are visitors aware of the management presence?

Presence of management and visitor infrastructure -

Assess the nature and extent of management and visitor infrastructure at the activity site. Are structures present? Where they are present, how apparent or obtrusive are they? Consider the design of the structures. Are they designed to blend into the natural environment (eg. according to departmental standards for a particular type of setting) or are they designed to stand out and provide a focus for recreational activity (eg. brightly coloured playground equipment)?

References

Operational policy – Landscape classification system for visitor management

Department of Natural Resources Forest Resource Policies and Procedures Manual

QPWS Visitor Site Inventory User Manual

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Signature

13/8/2003

Date

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Appendix 1

Landscape classification system (visitor management) – scoring sheet

Date: _____

Recorder: _____

Site type & name: _____

Site location: _____

Overall Landscape class (Category with average closest to 9)	
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Category	
Physical criteria	Score
Prevalence and permanence of visitor impacts	
Viewscape (360°)	
Indicative appearance	
Prevalence and durability of impacts from non-visitor land uses	
Naturalness of overstorey	
Naturalness of understorey	
Water quality	
Total (Sum of scores)	
Average (Total divided by number of criteria scored)	

Category	
Social criteria	Score
Evidence of other people (eg. Sights, sounds and smells)	
Sense of isolation and opportunity for solitude	
Interparty encounters while travelling	
Interparty encounters while at nodes and destinations	
Dependence upon outdoor skills	
Density per hectare (people at one time)	
Total (Sum of scores)	
Average (Total divided by number of criteria scored)	

Category	
Management criteria	Score
Access	
Evidence of management personnel	
Presence and extent of signage	
Rules, regulations and law enforcement	
Presence of management and visitor infrastructure	
Total (Sum of scores)	
Average (Total divided by number of criteria scored)	

The score for each criteria is the landscape class that best describes the site being assessed.