The Engineered Beach

Port Waikato and the Contested Imaginaries of the Beach

Sarah Baker
Auckland University of Technology

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.3316



Vol. 29 No. 5 (2026): beach
Articles

Introduction

Sunset Beach at Port Waikato is a place of striking contradictions. Situated where the Waikato River meets the Tasman Sea on the west coast of Aotearoa New Zealand's North Island, its black sand shoreline, high dunes, powerful surf, and relative isolation create a landscape of remarkable beauty. Yet these same qualities also make the coastline hazardous and unstable. Rip currents, severe erosion, and volatile surf increasingly threaten homes and community infrastructure, prompting debate over how to manage the shoreline and who should bear responsibility for its protection (Bathgate). A recently constructed, community-funded coastal protection structure interrupts the beach as a visible attempt to slow erosion, transforming both the landscape and the meanings attached to it (Bathgate; Kumar, "Sunset Beach Sea Wall"). Rather than treating beauty and danger as opposing qualities, Sunset Beach demonstrates how contemporary coastlines are increasingly shaped through the interaction of environmental processes, infrastructure, governance, and cultural meaning.

This article argues that coastal space is socially produced through the interaction of environmental processes, cultural representation, governance, infrastructure, and historically situated relationships to place. Drawing on Lefebvre's production of space (33–46), Urry's tourist gaze, and scholarship on coastal imaginaries and liminality, it examines how Sunset Beach unsettles representations of the beach as an uncomplicated site of escape, recreation, and national belonging. The analysis draws on planning documents, hazard reports, media coverage, and representations of the protection structure to examine how the beach is imagined, governed, and transformed. In doing so, the article proposes the concept of the *engineered beach* to describe coastal landscapes in which environmental processes, infrastructure, governance, and cultural meaning have become inseparable. Instead of signalling the failure of the natural beach, the engineered beach provides a way of understanding contemporary coastal space as simultaneously environmental, infrastructural, political, and cultural, where relationships between nature, habitation, and environmental change are continually negotiated.

The article approaches these materials as more than descriptions of the coast: they are competing accounts of what the shoreline is, whom it should serve, how it should be managed, and which futures should be protected. Council documents frame Sunset Beach through hazard, consent, and technical management, while media reports foreground residents' experiences of vulnerability and institutional frustration. Descriptions and images of the recently constructed protection structure further reveal how coastal protection becomes materially and visually inscribed on the beach. Taken together, these sources illuminate the relationship between represented space, lived attachment, and infrastructural intervention, demonstrating that the shoreline is produced through competing understandings of risk, governance, and belonging.

The structure provides the article's central material focus because it exemplifies what this article terms the *engineered beach*: a coastal landscape in which environmental processes, infrastructure, governance, and cultural meaning have become inseparable. The wall embodies the tension between permanence and instability that characterises contemporary coastal space. Although it may slow shoreline loss, it cannot halt the geomorphological processes driving change. Rather than restoring a natural coastline, it makes visible the continual negotiation between environmental forces, engineering, and human habitation. While the intervention can be understood within wider debates about climate adaptation, erosion at Port Waikato also reflects reduced sand supply, sediment movement, storms, wave action, and long-term geomorphological change (Bird; Gibberd and Dahm).

Sunset Beach's significance lies not in rejecting coastal beauty but in revealing how beauty, danger, environmental change, and attempts to preserve human occupation converge on a single shoreline. Reading cultural-geographical accounts of beach imaginaries alongside coastal-justice scholarship makes it possible to understand the seawall as more than a technical response to erosion. Within the engineered beach, it becomes a cultural object through which competing understandings of nature, property, belonging, responsibility, and the future of the coast and its communities are made visible (Gesing; Lau, Gurney, and Cinner; Stoltz et al.).

Producing the Beach: Cultural Imaginaries and Marginal Shores

Beaches are physical environments, but their meanings are also culturally produced. Lefebvre’s account of space as an interaction among material practices, symbolic meanings, and relations of power helps explain how coastlines acquire social significance (33–46; Anderson). The term coastal imaginary describes the shared but contested expectations through which beaches are represented and experienced (Beaven 99). Circulating through tourism, media, planning, and everyday discourse, these expectations influence what a beach should look like, who it is presumed to serve, and which forms of use and intervention appear legitimate.

Within Western cultural imaginaries, beaches commonly function as spaces of leisure, freedom, and escape. Urry's concept of the tourist gaze explains how particular coastlines become culturally privileged as desirable, visually consumable destinations (1–15). In settler-colonial societies such as Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, these representations are also entwined with national identity and ideals of outdoor life, informality, and coastal accessibility (Edensor, *National Identity*). Tourism, popular culture, and media reproduce these selective versions of coastal experience, shaping expectations of what beaches should be. Such representations leave comparatively little space for coastlines where environmental instability, visible infrastructure, and contested futures become central to everyday life.

Cultural and media scholarship has frequently privileged iconic coastlines that conform to the tourist gaze, representing beaches through leisure, safety, spectacle, and national identity. Edensor argues

that tourist experience is standardised through familiar and aesthetically ordered landscapes, rendering places that resist these expectations comparatively less visible (“Performing Tourism” 60–6). Consequently, environmentally unstable and peripheral coastlines have received comparatively little attention within scholarship on tourism and coastal imaginaries (Salazar and Graburn; Beaven 99). Examining Sunset Beach helps address this gap by showing how environmental instability, visible infrastructure, and contested futures reshape the cultural meanings attached to the beach.

Beaven instead conceptualises coasts as "dynamic arenas actively shaped by human imagination, societal anxieties, and cultural values", where land and water, civilisation and the unknown, and different forms of social behaviour meet and are contested (99). The coast therefore emerges as a liminal environment rather than a fixed spatial category. Edensor's analysis of "mundane" and non-ordered spaces likewise suggests that peripheral coastlines may resist the aesthetic conventions of iconic tourist destinations ("Performing Tourism" 60–6). Their uncertainty and everyday forms of use offer alternative ways of experiencing the coast beyond spectacle and consumption. The case study of Sunset Beach at Port Waikato extends this scholarship by demonstrating that a marginal coastline need not stand outside the beach imaginary. Sunset Beach remains beautiful, recreational, and affectively valued, but those meanings now coexist with threatened habitation and visible engineering. Its significance lies in demonstrating that environmental instability does not displace the beach imaginary but reshapes it through visible infrastructure, threatened habitation, and ongoing negotiation over the future of the coast.

Port Waikato: A Marginal Coastal Imaginary

Prominent Aotearoa New Zealand beaches such as Mount Maunganui, Mission Bay, and Piha illustrate how particular coastlines acquire established positions within tourism, media, and national culture. This comparison is not intended to suggest that these beaches are environmentally stable or free from danger. Piha, for example, is also associated with black sand, powerful surf, and significant coastal risk. The devastation experienced by Piha and Muriwai during the severe weather events of 2023, including flooding, slips, property damage, displacement, and trauma experienced by affected communities, demonstrates that even highly established coastal destinations remain vulnerable to environmental forces. The difference is that such risks are largely accommodated within established systems of tourism promotion, commercial development, surf lifesaving, safety communication, and media representation. Sunset Beach remains comparatively peripheral to these circuits. Here, erosion, threatened habitation, and efforts to preserve the shoreline have become central to the beach's contemporary identity, reshaping rather than simply accompanying its cultural meanings.

The physical characteristics of Sunset Beach remain central to its cultural meaning. Its black sand, dunes, river mouth, and powerful surf create a visually dramatic landscape while also contributing to a highly dynamic coastline. Erosion reflects reduced sand supply, sediment movement, storms, wave action, and long-term geomorphological processes rather than an undifferentiated process of climate change (Bird; Gibberd and Dahm; Kumar). Consequently, the shoreline undergoes periods of erosion and recovery whose timing and extent remain uncertain. This uncertainty is culturally significant because residents, planners, and local government must make decisions about homes, infrastructure, and coastal protection without knowing precisely how the coastline will behave in future decades. Coastal instability is therefore not simply a physical process but a condition through which governance, everyday life, and attachment to place are organised.

Warning signs, surf lifesaving patrols, erosion barriers, and hazard notices make environmental risk part of the beach's everyday visual field. Recreation is therefore accompanied by observation, caution, and changing forms of access rather than existing separately from risk. This coexistence gives Sunset Beach a distinctive temporality. Whereas tourism imagery often presents beaches as calm, accessible, and apparently permanent, Sunset Beach is experienced as continually changing. Tides, storms, erosion, and shifting access reshape everyday encounters with the shoreline, while

residents and regular visitors compare the present beach with remembered landscapes and anticipate further change. The coastal imaginary operating here is therefore produced not only through visual appearance but also through memory, anticipation, observation, and continual adjustment to an evolving coastline.

Sunset Beach is liminal in both physical and cultural terms. Turner's concept of liminality describes conditions that exist between established categories and resist fixed meanings (94). At this beach, river and sea, land and water, beauty and danger, and occupation and loss meet on a shoreline that cannot be permanently secured. This fluidity also resonates with Anderson and Peters's challenge to the assumption that geographical boundaries are stable and fixed. Sunset Beach likewise exemplifies Edensor's peripheral and "mundane" landscape, situated beyond the heavily mediated circuits of coastal tourism ("Performing Tourism" 60–66). Its significance lies not in the absence of beauty, but in the ways its marginal position shapes how the beach is experienced, represented, and valued. Its significance lies not in the absence of beauty or recreation but in making visible the processes that iconic beach imagery often suppresses: erosion, uncertain access, threatened habitation, and the continual work required to sustain human occupation of the shoreline.

The Engineered Beach: Sea wall, Climate Adaptation, and Contestation

The completed protection structure makes the struggle over Sunset Beach's future a visible part of the landscape. Proposed by the Sunset Beach Surf Lifesaving Charitable Trust and financed by the local community, the approximately 366-metre structure extends along the seaward side of Ocean View Road to protect dunes, nearby homes, public space, and beach access (Waikato District Council; Smith). Unlike a conventional permanent concrete sea wall, it is designed to work with the beach's dynamic conditions rather than permanently arrest them. The structure therefore functions not only as coastal infrastructure but also as a material expression of community care, environmental uncertainty, and the ongoing negotiation over habitation and the future of the shoreline.

The structure is both protective and disruptive, representing a collective commitment to the community and its coastline. Yet its conspicuous presence interrupts the apparent naturalness of the beach. It seeks to preserve access, property, and belonging by materially transforming the environment to which those attachments are directed. The engineered shoreline therefore reveals a central paradox: it preserves the beach as a valued place that requires an intervention that visibly alters it, acknowledging that its previous form cannot simply be restored.

Its visual conspicuousness should not be dismissed as merely an aesthetic concern. The wall reshapes how the beach can be imagined by making the labour of coastal maintenance visible. Timber, backfill, machinery, and the continual movement of sand disrupt expectations that a desirable beach should appear unmodified and naturally self-sustaining. Yet the structure can also be understood as an infrastructure of care with material evidence of a community's commitment to preserving homes, public space, beach access, and attachment to place. These interpretations are not mutually exclusive. Depending on the observer's relationship to the coastline, the wall may appear intrusive, necessary, hopeful, temporary, or inadequate. Its cultural significance lies in its refusal to disappear into the landscape, making visible both the work of coastal maintenance and the political choices embodied in attempts to preserve the shoreline.

Coastal protection is consequently not only an engineering decision but also a cultural and political one. Decisions about which areas are defended, whose homes and public facilities receive protection, what forms of environmental modification are considered acceptable, and how long the present shoreline should be maintained distribute risks, resources, and benefits unevenly. The

protection structure therefore embodies ongoing negotiations over environmental responsibility, private investment, community identity, and public access (Cooper and McKenna 295–301). Within the engineered beach, infrastructure becomes more than a technical response to erosion; it materialises competing values about what and who is worth preserving.

Cooper and McKenna's temporal and spatial account of coastal justice is particularly relevant here. In the immediate term, the protection structure benefits threatened residents, community facilities, and beach users. Over the longer term, however, its financial and environmental costs may extend beyond those directly protected, particularly if ongoing maintenance, sand replacement, or further intervention is required. The seawall therefore concentrates protection in one location while leaving unresolved how responsibility for a mobile coastline should be distributed among residents, councils, future ratepayers, and the wider public (295–306). Rather than resolving coastal vulnerability, the structure redistributes it across space, time, and different communities of responsibility.

The available responses are not limited to protecting the existing shoreline or abandoning it entirely. Coastal management includes dune restoration, managed retreat, coastal protection, and related interventions. Each represents a different judgement about time. Protective structures may preserve existing occupation in the short term while creating continuing maintenance obligations, whereas managed retreat may reduce long-term exposure while concentrating immediate losses on residents and communities. Even apparently non-interventionist approaches distribute consequences because allowing the shoreline to migrate affects roads, public infrastructure, recreational spaces, culturally significant places, and private property. The question is therefore not whether humans should intervene in a supposedly natural coastline, but which interventions are considered legitimate, who participates in deciding them, and how their costs and benefits are distributed (Cooper and McKenna 294–306; Waikato Regional Council).

These tensions were evident in the years preceding construction. Residents described feeling powerless as erosion approached their homes while debate continued over protection, consent, and managed retreat (Kumar). The community eventually secured consent and financed the structure itself, turning its construction into a narrative of local resilience alongside institutional frustration (Smith; Waikato District Council). The resulting wall does not resolve the coastline's instability; rather, it records a provisional decision to defend particular homes, public facilities, and forms of community life. A recent news article (Jordan) provides early evidence of the structure's protective effectiveness, reporting that the new seawall has helped save coastal homes from further erosion. At the same time, residents are seeking assistance with its ongoing upkeep, highlighting that coastal protection does not end with the construction of infrastructure. The seawall therefore remains both a material defence against erosion and an ongoing question of responsibility, maintenance, and the distribution of the costs of protecting coastal property (Smith). In Lefebvre's terms, the structure demonstrates that coastal space is actively produced rather than passively occupied (33–46). It materialises decisions about what should be protected, where boundaries are imposed, and which forms of habitation and public access are sustained. The beach consequently emerges not as a fixed natural setting but as an ongoing political project shaped through negotiation, intervention, and competing visions of its future.

Contested Belonging: Colonial Histories and Coastal Space

The meaning of Port Waikato cannot be separated from the histories through which Te Pūaha o Waikato has been inhabited, named, governed, and represented. The river mouth holds enduring significance for Waikato-Tainui, particularly Ngāti Tāhinga at Ōraeroa Marae, through whakapapa, occupation, and kaitiakitanga (Waikato-Tainui, "Ōraeroa"; New Zealand and Waikato-Tainui, *Waikato River*). These relationships precede and complicate settler understandings of the beach as an open

recreational landscape, reminding us that the coast is neither culturally empty nor historically neutral.

Settler colonisation reorganised relationships with the Waikato region through raupatu, private property, governance, mapping, and infrastructure (New Zealand and Waikato-Tainui, *Waikato Raupatu*). Contemporary debates over coastal protection occur within this inherited spatial order. Decisions to stabilise the shoreline are simultaneously decisions about which forms of habitation, infrastructure, ownership, public access, and community life are preserved. The protection structure therefore does more than resist erosion. As part of the engineered beach, it materialises historically produced arrangements of coastal space while revealing that the future of the shoreline is shaped through ongoing negotiations over authority, belonging, and environmental responsibility.

The contemporary geography of Port Waikato also bears visible traces of colonial alienation and recovery. In 2016, the Ngāti Karewa Ngāti Tāhinga Trust purchased the local holiday park from council ownership, returning the site to hapū ownership after 177 years. Trust representatives described the $2.5 million purchase as the costly recovery of land that should never have had to be bought back (Haimona-Riki). This history complicates any account of coastal protection concerned only with present-day patterns of property ownership. Attachment, loss, and the defence of place therefore unfold within a landscape where ownership itself remains historically contested.

These histories also complicate the language of community participation. "The community" is not a single group with a shared relationship to the shoreline. Homeowners, beach users, local government, surf lifesaving organisations, mana whenua, and future generations may all value coastal protection while understanding responsibility, authority, and belonging in different ways. The Waikato River settlement recognises the continuing relationship of Waikato-Tainui with the river and demonstrates that environmental governance in the wider Waikato cannot be understood solely through private property or local-government authority. Although the settlement does not determine the appropriate response to erosion at Sunset Beach, it highlights that decisions about coastal intervention must also engage with mana whakahaere, kaitiakitanga, historical redress, and the different forms of knowledge and authority brought to environmental decision-making.

A comprehensive account of mana whenua relationships with Te Pūaha o Waikato lies beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, representing the beach as empty, natural, or universally accessible would obscure the histories and continuing forms of authority through which this coastline is understood. Port Waikato's contested future is therefore shaped not only by environmental change and engineering but also by the unequal histories of ownership, governance, and belonging through which coastal space has been produced.

Conclusion

Sunset Beach does not cease to be beautiful because it is dangerous, eroding, and increasingly engineered. Its significance lies in the coexistence of these conditions. Black sand, dunes, powerful surf, and the meeting of river and sea create a landscape of considerable visual and affective force, yet they also constitute a volatile environment where recreation, habitation, and access remain uncertain.

The protection structure makes this instability visible. It preserves community facilities, property, access, and attachments to place while transforming the shoreline it is intended to defend. Port Waikato shows that the contemporary beach is neither untouched nature nor a stable landscape of leisure, but a negotiated environment shaped by environmental processes, cultural representation, historical power, and material intervention. The wall is simultaneously an expression of care and a reminder that the coast cannot remain unchanged.

More broadly, Sunset Beach demonstrates why marginal, environmentally unstable coastlines deserve greater attention within cultural studies. Such places reveal processes that idealised beach imagery often conceals: environmental change, unequal distributions of risk, historically produced patterns of ownership, and the labour required to sustain coastal occupation. The *engineered beach* names this condition, offering a way to understand contemporary coastlines as spaces where environmental processes, infrastructure, governance, and cultural meaning have become inseparable.

References

Anderson, Jon. *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces*. 2nd ed. Routledge, 2015.

Anderson, Jon, and Kimberley Peters, eds. *Water Worlds: Human Geographies of the Ocean*. Ashgate, 2014.

Bathgate, Benn. "Frustration: Port Waikato Grapples with Most Difficult Coastal Erosion Issue in NZ." *Waikato Times*, 27 Aug. 2024. <https://www.waikatotimes.co.nz/nz-news/350392069/frustration-port-waikato-grapples-most-difficult-coastal-erosion-issue-new>.

Beaven, Brad. "Introduction to Coastal Imaginaries: Anxiety, Liminality, Power, and Cultural Construction." *Coastal Studies & Society* 4.2–3 (2025): 99–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/26349817251345114>.

Bird, Eric C.F. *Coastal Geomorphology: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

Cooper, J. Andrew G., and John McKenna. "Social Justice in Coastal Erosion Management: The Temporal and Spatial Dimensions." *Geoforum* 39.1 (2008): 294–306. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2007.06.007>.

Edensor, Tim. "Performing Tourism, Staging Tourism: (Re)producing Tourist Space and Practice." *Tourist Studies* 1.1 (2001): 59–81. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879760100100104>.

Edensor, Tim. *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life*. Berg, 2002.

Gesing, Friederike. "Towards a More-than-Human Political Ecology of Coastal Protection: Coast Care Practices in Aotearoa New Zealand." *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 4.2 (2021): 444–65. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2514848619860751>.

Gibberd, Bronwen, and Jim Dahm. *Waikato District Coastal Hazards Technical Report*. Focus Resource Management Group for Waikato District Council, 2020. 6 Aug. 2026 <https://ref.coastalrestorationtrust.org.nz/documents/waikato-district-council-coastal-hazards/>.

Haimona-Riki, Mare. "Port Waikato Iwi Share Te Winika Journey through Interactive App." *Te Ao Māori News*, 8 Aug. 2022. <https://www.teaonews.co.nz/2022/08/08/port-waikato-iwi-share-te-winika-journey-through-interactive-app/>.

Kumar, Malisha. "Port Waikato Homes at Serious Risk from Coastal Erosion." *RNZ*, 27 July 2024. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/523336/port-waikato-homes-at-serious-risk-from-coastal-erosion>.

Kumar, Malisha. "Sunset Beach Sea Wall Project Aims to Slow Port Waikato Erosion." *NZ Herald*, 19 Feb. 2026. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/waikato-news/news/sunset-beach-sea-wall-project-aims-to-slow-port-waikato-erosion/E46VLTCNAZB2NPWXMMQ63HTWNU/>.

Lau, Jacqueline D., Georgina G. Gurney, and Joshua Cinner. "Environmental Justice in Coastal Systems: Perspectives from Communities Confronting Change." *Global Environmental Change* 66 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.gloenvcha.2020.102208>.

New Zealand and Waikato-Tainui. *Deed of Settlement in Relation to the Waikato River*. Te Tari Whakatau—Office for Māori Crown Relations, 17 Dec. 2009. 18 Aug. 2026 <https://whakatau.govt.nz/te-tira-kurapounamu-treaty-settlements/find-a-treaty-settlement/co-management-of-waikato-and-waipa-rivers>.

Salazar, Noel B., and Nelson H.H. Graburn, eds. *Tourism Imaginaries: Anthropological Approaches*. Berghahn Books, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781782383673>.

Smith, Jordan. "Port Waikato's New Erosion Sea Wall Marks Victory after Years of Toil." *1News*, 3 Apr. 2026. <https://www.1news.co.nz/2026/04/03/port-waikatos-new-erosion-sea-wall-marks-victory-after-years-of-toil/>.

Smith, Jordan. "Port Waikato's New Seawall Saves Coastal Homes as Residents Push for Help with Upkeep." *RNZ*, 19 Sep. 2026. <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/regions/1469313/port-waikato-s-new-seawall-saves-coastal-homes-as-residents-push-for-help-with-upkeep>.

Stoltz, Amanda D., et al. "No Coastal Justice without Environmental Justice: A Systematic Literature Review of Climate and Coasts." *Climatic Change* 178 (2025). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10584-025-03999-0>.

Turner, Victor. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing Company, 1969.

Urry, John. *The Tourist Gaze*. 2nd ed. Sage, 2002.

Waikato District Council. "Port Waikato Erosion." 2 Oct. 2025. <https://www.waikatodistrict.govt.nz/your-district/district-overview/towns/port-waikato/port-waikato-erosion>.

Waikato Regional Council. "Coastal Erosion." 6 Aug. 2026 <https://www.waikatoregion.govt.nz/services/regional-hazards-and-emergency-management/coastal-erosion>.

Waikato-Tainui. "Ōraeroa." 18 Aug. 2026 <https://waikatotainui.com/marae/ooraeroa/>.

Author Biography

Sarah Baker, Auckland University of Technology

Dr Sarah Baker is an Associate Professor in the School of Communication at Auckland University of Technology. She is the co-founder of the AUT Popular Culture Centre and a member of JMAD and the AUT Media Observatory Group. She is a Senior Fellow and a member of the AUT Academy. Her research interests include television and film in mediated popular culture focusing on the Gothic, Horror, Sexuality, and Gender.

License

Copyright (c) 2026 Sarah Baker

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

1. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licenced under a Creative Commons Attribution - Noncommercial - No Derivatives 4.0 Licence that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
2. Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.
3. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (see The Effect of Open Access).







an publication

Supported by QUT creative industries

Copyright © M/C, 1998-2026 ISSN 1441-2616