

RESILIENCE
TO NATURE'S
CHALLENGES

Kia manawaroa –
Ngā Ākina o
Te Ao Tūroa

Mainstreaming Managed Retreat in Aotearoa New Zealand

How have retreats gradually evolved, from being reactive and unmanaged towards being a strategic part of our national risk management framework?

Retreat in Aotearoa has evolved from early indigenous practices which saw relocation from harm as a viable option, to the onset of colonisation and more protection-based approaches, to more passive policy that

acknowledged the option of retreat but provided little guidance or implementation support. Today, retreat is becoming a strategic part of our national risk management framework.

The increasing severity of climate-related disasters is now a tangible and visible reality. With this, the term ‘managed retreat’ has gone from being a specialist one to something discussed much more widely. And with the growing prospect of repeat events, the urgent need for a national managed retreat framework is very much in focus.

Central to the government’s first National Adaptation Plan, released in August 2022, is the role of managed retreat – the strategic relocation of people,

communities, taonga and assets.

However, there is an absence of detail in the plan on the enduring questions of who should move, how they will move, and who pays.

This will be the role of the Climate Adaptation Act, which in conjunction with the National Built Environment and Strategic Planning Bills aims to address the complex issues associated with managed retreats and how to implement them.

Recent research suggests a close examination of the past will help guide these difficult decisions. By analysing academic research, government reports, and policies, researchers have traced the historical and political context in which managed – and unmanaged – retreats have evolved in Aotearoa. These insights shed light on the implementation challenge ahead.

Learning from history

Pre-1800s

Physical relocation was a relatively common form of recovery for **early Māori communities**. Relationships with the environment were guided by principles such as kaitiakitanga, and emphasised place-based risk. Early Māori disaster risk reduction practices involved cultural restriction or avoidance of certain activities. Examples include rahui in response to fatal debris avalanche; oral traditions, place names and environmental indicators signifying risk; and purākau as precautionary warnings.

1800s

The **arrival of Europeans** brought colonial ideas of land management, settlement and dominion over nature which contributed to a drastic shift in relationships with the environment and hazards in Aotearoa. Risk management became dominated by hard protection measures and technocratic approaches that prioritised private ownership and state-led protection—ideas that continue to influence land management, risk and protection legacies to this day.

Early-1990s

The **Resource Management Act 1991 (RMA)** contained some mechanisms for managed retreat, but the enabling conditions to support retreat didn’t exist; in particular a directive national framework, and a source of funding.

1980s

The **1980s** saw the demolition or relocation of 69 houses after the largest urban landslip in Aotearoa history in Abbotsford in 1979. They also saw the abandonment of the town of Kelso around 1980 due to successive river flooding.

1950s—1970s

In the **post-war development boom**, most hazard planning and management was reactive. There was limited risk information available, so developments often occurred in dangerous locations, and some even disregarded previous experiences of destruction.

Mid-1990s

The **1994 New Zealand Coastal Policy Statement (NZCPS)** directed decision-makers to apply the precautionary principle, and began to influence planning practice, with some examples of managed retreats emerging in local policy. However, the idea of **extinguishing the existing use rights** of occupied buildings was looked at very unfavourably. For example, a review of the NZCPS in 2004 stated that “managed retreat never means the forced removal of dwellings as an alternative to seawall construction—councils do not have such powers, even if they wished to take such draconian action.” This has proven to be incorrect.

2000s

Managed retreat continued to be **a contested framework through the 2000s**. Policy makers and practitioners were becoming supportive of retreat and Waitakere City’s Project Twin Streams became the first example of strategic managed retreat in Aotearoa in 2002. However, while passive policy acknowledged managed retreat as an option, it provided little guidance or implementation support. Issues of compensation, public risk perceptions and preferences for hard protection prevailed. The necessity of climate change adaptation and risk reduction was clear but still not widespread in practice.

Early-2010s

In the 2010s, **dynamic adaptive policy pathways planning (DAPP)** logic started becoming embedded in national coastal hazards and climate change guidance.

Meanwhile, the **Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Act 2011** provided the central government with significant powers to enforce managed retreats. However, the government acted outside of these powers to offer “voluntary” buyouts instead resulting in the relocation of approximately 20,000 people. The absence of realistic alternatives, significant property damage and potential for compulsory acquisition means this approach was more coercive than voluntary.

Mid-2010s

A decade after a devastating debris flow in 2005, local government extinguished the existing use rights of residents in **Matatā**, in combination with a property purchase offer. This project became a key ‘triggering event’ for managed retreat in Aotearoa, capturing the attention of media, researchers and central government. Significantly, this case worked to inform policy innovation and learning at both local and central government levels. However, the affected community has borne the costs of institutional learning, with some community members experiencing protracted post-disaster trauma.

Other Crown supported projects include the relocation of flood-prone businesses in **Franz Josef**, and compensation for property owners following the **Kaikōura earthquake**. However, local authorities have not been able to secure funding for retreat of the wider settlement of Franz Josef.

2020s

Today, after what has been a long period of fragmented experimentation, institutional development and legitimisation, with enduring appeals for national direction, and mounting evidence of increasing risk, managed retreats have finally reached the **central government policy agenda**, to be dealt with strategically.

Key Findings

Decision makers and communities have tested different approaches to retreat and have confronted existing science, law, and behavioural norms that supported the status quo. These experiences have all been important in making the case for a more anticipatory mindset when making policy.

- ◆ There are diverse relationships between people, places, land and property. It's vital that managed retreat processes empower and support communities to make decisions that reflect their specific social, cultural and environmental contexts – particularly including Te Tiriti o Waitangi and rights to tino-rangatiratanga (self-determination) for Māori land and taonga.
- ◆ Policy development will need to encompass these multifaceted relationships, with flexible approaches tailored to local needs. The right funding mechanisms that address the potential for inequitable outcomes are also necessary.
- ◆ It is vital to start a national conversation about the role of permanent property rights and land ownership – and how managed retreat challenges this notion.
- ◆ Ultimately, planning for managed retreats demands that we reform relationships between communities, place and the environment. This is about more than physical relocation. Managed retreats provide transformative opportunities to unmake and remake space, place and property, but current perceptions of permanence cast a long shadow.
- ◆ For communities across Aotearoa, support and direction to enable effective managed retreat is still a waiting game. The challenges of managing retreat without supportive policies heighten the political risk for decision makers, which means effective action may be deferred until a national framework is in place. This is particularly difficult for communities already in limbo, at risk, and without a plan for the future.
- ◆ The Climate Adaptation Act provides a significant opportunity for Aotearoa to make better planning decisions for the future. But there is still much work to be done to ensure it can be applied equitably.

FURTHER READING

Christina Hanna, Raven Cretney & Iain White (2022): Re-Imagining Relationships with Space, Place, and Property: The Story of Mainstreaming Managed Retreats in Aotearoa-New Zealand. *Planning Theory & Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649357.2022.2141845>

Christina Hanna, Iain White, Bruce C. Glavovic (2021): Managed retreats by whom and how? Identifying and delineating governance modalities. *Climate Risk Management*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.crm.2021.100278>

Christina Hanna, Iain White, Bruce C. Glavovic (2020): The Uncertainty Contagion: Revealing the Interrelated, Cascading Uncertainties of Managed Retreat. *Sustainability*. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su12020736>



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