

### **3.2.6 Visual Quality and Sensitivity**

Specific qualities of a landscape infuse a site with a sense of place for people. Natural vegetation, water bodies, landscaped parks, and the sea in particular, provide aesthetically pleasing environments for the inhabitants of an area. This is important to note in any discussion of land conservation and growth management, because development activities tend to eliminate unique features of the landscape. The cumulative impact of sprawl development is often not recognised and in a growing city the effect is only realised once the development has actually taken place. By that time it is often too late to mitigate the loss of visual quality and sense of place.

Being a coastal town in a sub-tropical climate, surrounded by a variety of water features, Richards Bay has the potential of being an attractive city. This character has to a certain extent been preserved by careful town planning and layouts incorporating vast open space, as illustrated in the photographs in **Figure 16**. At first site, this leaves one with a pleasant feeling of the environment. However, this is spoilt not only by sight of towering industrial buildings, but offensive odours emanating from these. Together with health related connotations, industrial development is a serious threat to the sense of place and the visual character of the study area (**Figure 17**).

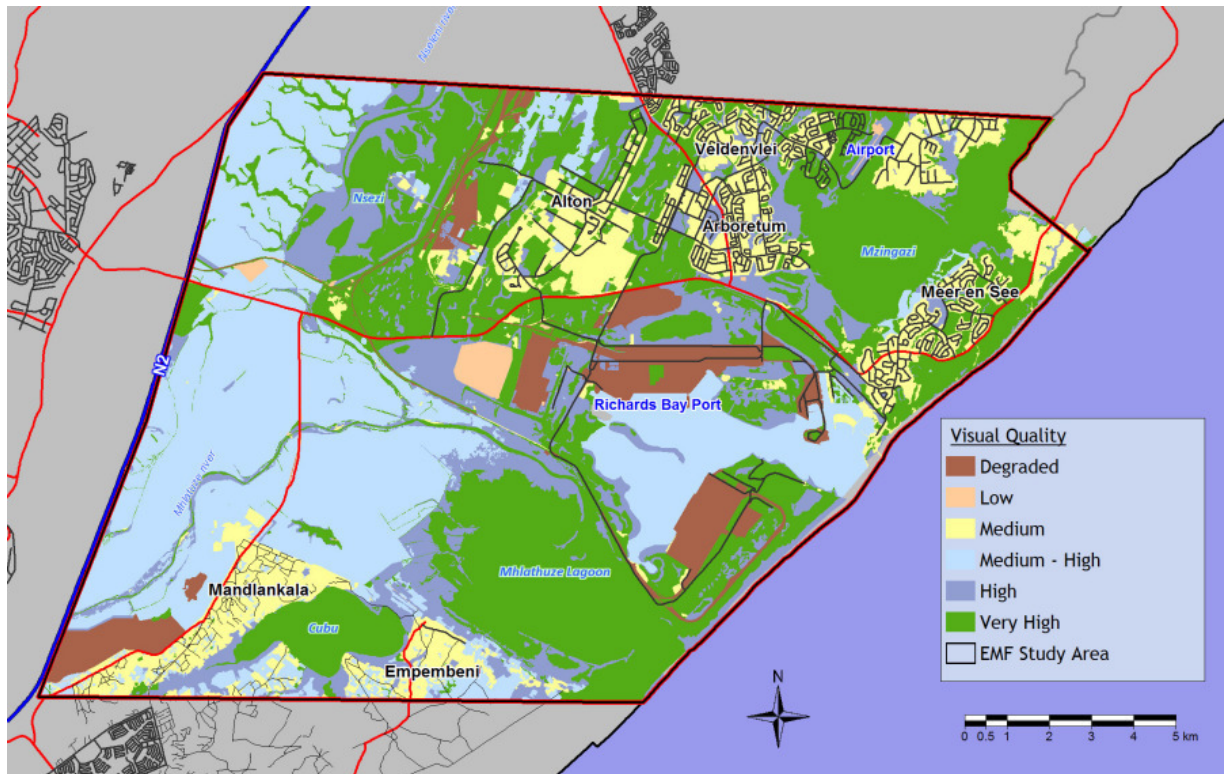


**Figure 16: Open space in Meerensee**



**Figure 17: View of Foskor (left) and Tata Steel (far right) with a foreground of degraded vegetation**

The quantification of visual quality is somehow difficult, since aesthetic judgement may be considered a matter of personal taste, which is often influenced by emotions and feelings. On the other hand, the aforementioned features certainly have a positive effect on a person's sense of place, as it is formed in respect of the study area. Hence, by assigning values to land use and vegetation classes, the visual character of the study area can be visualised on a map (**Figure 18**).



**Figure 18: Visual quality**

The classification of visual qualities has been done as follows:

Degraded:	Industrial activities, including the port;
Low:	Disturbed areas;
Medium:	Built-up areas associated with open space and landscaping;
Medium to high:	Agriculture, Forestry and the harbour;
High:	Grassland, mangroves, swamps, etc;
Very high:	Open water, natural forest, dunes.

The attraction of areas with high visual qualities lies in its ability to be utilised and exploited. In the study area opportunities for recreation exist in the form of the following:

- Swimming: Alkantstrand Beach;
- Fishing: Various locations along the beach and around the port area;
- Whale watching: Alkantstrand Beach;
- Yachting: Harbour;
- Golf: Meerensee;
- Birding: Various spots associated with natural forests and open water;

**ISSUES:**

- The combination of natural vegetation, water bodies and sea provide an aesthetically pleasing sense of place to the people of Richards Bay. Development requires buffering from urban and amenity areas to maintain the existing carefully planned character of the city.
- A general concern is limited accessibility to the beach, and limited public amenities around the lakes and rivers. Enclosed by the port, cane farming and the villages of Mandlankala and Empembeni, the Mhlathuze River and the estuary with its unique mangroves, are virtually inaccessible by the general public.



**Figure 19: Birding opportunities**