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Wilderness tourism in New Zealand: exploring
the visitor experience in remote and
wilderness areas of New Zealand national
parks. A summary of research to date

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1.0 Prelude

This report provides a summary of research so far on the topic of “Wilderness tourism in New Zealand: exploring the visitor experience in remote and wilderness areas of New Zealand national parks”. The project initially began as a Master’s thesis, but has since been upgraded to a Doctorate. For this reason, only preliminary findings are presented here. It is expected that the final doctoral thesis will be completed in early 2009, and will be available for consultation through the Lincoln University Library.

1.1 Introduction

The New Zealand conservation estate is the country’s greatest tourism resource, and it plays a critical role in drawing visitors to New Zealand (New Zealand Tourism Board [NZTB] & the Department of Conservation [DOC], 1993). Visitors are attracted by the country’s clean, green image and easily accessible and highly developed protected areas (Shultis, 1989). Many come to appreciate the unique ‘wilderness’ values that the country has to offer, such as naturalness, solitude, isolation and scenic beauty. Several recent studies, however, have indicated that crowding and dissatisfaction is occurring at some of the more popular locations on the conservation estate, which has, in turn, led to increasing pressure on previously remote areas. Prior to this study, very little visitor research had been undertaken in *remote* or *wilderness* areas of New Zealand National Parks. Given the importance of these vast expanses of conservation land to the New Zealand tourism industry in promoting NZ to overseas visitors, it was felt that this was a significant gap in the research literature.

This research was undertaken to explore the ‘wilderness’ experience in Fiordland National Park, and to identify factors that influence people’s experiences. A particular focus was given to users’ perceptions of commercial tourism. Over 70 visitors to remote or wilderness areas of the Park completed a daily journal during their trip, detailing information such as where they went, what they saw, what they enjoyed, what they didn’t enjoy, what the experience meant to them, and anything that impacted on this experience. A selection of respondents was then interviewed in order to explore some of the themes and issues in greater depth¹.

The key findings from the research diaries are as follows:

- Visitors to remote and wilderness areas undertook a variety of activities during the study period, including tramping, climbing, hunting, fishing and kayaking
- Trips ranged from two days to fourteen days in length
- Respondents were predominantly male, and almost two thirds were New Zealanders
- Nine key dimensions of the wilderness experience were identified. These included naturalness, solitude, challenge, remoteness, psychological development and freedom. These are discussed further in Section 3.0.

¹ Additional interviews with tourism operators and managers were incorporated into the research project when it was upgraded to a doctoral thesis. These interviews have yet to be analysed.

- Four key influences on the wilderness experience were identified as: encounters with other visitors, signs of human impact/interference, motorised transport and commercial tourism

Interviews with diarists were carried out during 2007. Although no formal analysis of this data has yet taken place, some key issues related to commercial tourism have been identified, and will be outlined in Section 5.0.

2.0 Study Site

Fiordland National Park is New Zealand’s largest national park, and one of the largest in the world. Covering 1,260,200 hectares, it forms part of the TeWahipounamu World Heritage Area in South West New Zealand, and constitutes one of the greatest wildernesses of the Southern hemisphere. Fiordland National Park was chosen as the study site for the following reasons:

- It contains a large proportion of the country’s remote and wilderness areas
- It is one of New Zealand’s prime tourist and recreational areas for domestic and overseas visitors, and provides a diversity of recreation opportunities
- Visitor use of the Park has increased substantially in the past ten years, and is predicted to continue to do so, in line with broader tourism trends

3.0 Dimensions of the wilderness experience

Nine key dimensions of the wilderness experience and four major impacts on this experience were identified in the research diaries. They are listed below and will be elaborated on in Sections 3 and 4:

Key dimensions of the wilderness experience	Major impacts on the experience
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Naturalness • Solitude • Challenge • Remoteness • Psychological development • Freedom/escape • Self-sufficiency/self-reliance • Developing/strengthening relationships • Physiological development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encounters with others • Signs of human impact/influence • Motorised transport • Commercial tourism

‘Key dimensions of the wilderness experience’ are things that people felt were crucial features of this kind of trip, or that distinguish their wilderness trips from other types of recreation/tourism activities. ‘Major impacts on the experience’ are things that detracted in some way from people’s experiences, or prevented them from fully realising their recreational goals. The key dimensions are briefly summarised in the following sections, and each one is illustrated with a quote from a diarist.

3.1 Naturalness

360 degree view without a sign of human presence – amazing to look as far as the eye can see and see no sign of civilisation or human intervention

Fiordland was seen as a place where nature dominated, and where there was little evidence of human impact on the environment. For many visitors, the opportunity to experience relatively ‘untouched’ nature was a primary motivator for visiting the Park. Diarists contrasted the natural environment of the Park with the civilised urban world, and used comparatives to highlight the differences between the two. Fiordland was seen as “remarkable”, “unique” and “extremely precious” in this respect – a rare place where nature can still be seen as near to its original state as is possible in the world today. Visitors particularly enjoyed being away from the sights and sounds that they associated with civilisation and urban life.

3.2 Solitude

My feeling today of solitude and freedom was complete. Such a luxury to be allowed to be alone in such a beautiful place

The lack of other people encountered in Fiordland figured predominantly in many of the wilderness diaries, and was universally seen as a positive thing. Being able to travel through the Park without meeting the crowds typical of many other national parks throughout the world was seen as a unique and valuable attribute of Fiordland. Many respondents expressed a strong desire to spend time alone during their trip, and appreciated the opportunities to spend time in their own thoughts, and away from the pressures of society (such as bills, work and family commitments) and other people. The solitude experienced by many people was described as “cathartic”, “therapeutic”, “liberating”, “energising” and “invigorating” – a time to “switch off”, to “reflect”, or to “recharge the batteries”.

3.3 Challenge

I enjoy the challenge of it – knowing one’s limits, always able to pull back and figure out another way... I like the way Fiordland puts these problems in your path just when you least expect them. But there is always a way, and finding it is the challenge

Many respondents described their wilderness experiences as “challenging” - both physically and mentally. Challenges included the “harsh and unforgiving” terrain, the basic living conditions and the extreme weather conditions. Importantly though, many people viewed these challenges as a crucial element of the experience. They were often specifically seeking an experience that would require them to go outside their comfort zone and that would push them beyond their physical and mental boundaries. They enjoyed having to use their own skills and initiatives to find solutions to problems they encountered, and appreciated the fact that they had to be self-reliant.

3.4 Remoteness

You get the feeling of being completely removed from the real world when you're this far into Fiordland

Being separate from civilisation and other people was seen as one of the defining characteristics of the wilderness experience. Remoteness was described as both a feeling and a characteristic of the setting. Visitors knew that they were distant from settlements or road access during the majority of their trip, and commented on the physical distance between them and civilisation. Perceptions of remoteness were attributed to the vast size and lack of human influence, causing people to feel “totally removed from the real world”, and “completely isolated from society and civilisation”. This sensation of being separate from the sights and sound of civilisation was extremely important to many respondents, and was one of the key motivations for visiting Fiordland.

3.5 Psychological development

I have found I am capable alone of achieving something. Of looking after my well-being in adverse conditions... It [my trip] has given me greater control over my mind. I feel stronger, calmer, and more capable

Many people viewed the wilderness experience as psychologically beneficial (as well as physically). It enabled them to achieve emotional and spiritual development, including enhanced peace of mind, feelings of harmony, satisfaction and personal achievement, improved self-confidence, increased self-esteem and spiritual awareness. Several people noted that Fiordland provided them with valuable opportunities for critical introspection and self-reflection. The opportunity to spend time alone in nature was frequently cited as an important factor in facilitating psychological development.

3.6 Freedom/escape

I enjoyed the freedom of being able to go wherever I want, take my time and not worry about anything. Free from other people's demands

The sense of freedom felt during the wilderness trip was one of the highlights for many visitors. They attributed this to the lack of restrictions on their behaviour, and their ability to roam freely, to choose their own routes and to set their own time-frames. For many people, this provided a complete contrast to their everyday lives, where most things are rigidly structured around behavioural norms and strict time frames. Several trampers contrasted the sense of freedom they felt during their wilderness experience with previous trips to other, more regulated, areas of national parks – for example the Milford Track where there is a booking system in place, and trampers must all walk in a specific direction.

3.7 Self-sufficiency/self-reliance

You should feel that you are totally on your own out there and can't just phone up when you've had enough – you're committed until the end

The idea of being self-reliant and having to take responsibility for one's own actions during a wilderness trip was very important. Being self-reliant meant being prepared for any eventuality, and being able to take care of oneself in the bush without relying on external facilities and services (such as guides or rescue services). Most visitors agreed that wilderness users need to be sufficiently skilled, experienced and prepared to survive in that particular environment for an extended period without requiring assistance from others.

3.8 Developing/strengthening relationships

I really enjoyed the cooperation and sense of cohesiveness and comradeship that developed amongst our small group of three in the sharing of these memorable experiences

The social dimension of the wilderness experience was extremely important for numerous respondents. The nature of these trips often requires visitors to spend an intense (and often challenging) period of time with a small group of people. This inevitably means that they are able to get to know one another, and to develop or strengthen friendships and relationships. For many people, the ability to spend time with friends and family away from the distractions of society was an important reason for undertaking a wilderness trip. A sense of comradeship often developed amongst people in the group, and they were able to support one another when conditions became difficult. Several visitors also indicated that they enjoy meeting new people on tramping trips because they tend to share similar values or have other things in common.

3.9 Physiological development

Pleased with my body today – it seems to be responding to the challenge

The wilderness experience was seen as a way of developing and improving physical fitness and skills and abilities such as strength, agility, endurance. Most people saw physical fitness as a pre-requisite to a wilderness visit, and warned other visitors against trying to undertake such a trip if they were not confident in their abilities (and those of other party members). Almost all respondents indicated that they were expecting and looking forward to a test of physical endurance, strength and stamina.

Section 4 describes the four major impacts on the wilderness experience that were identified in the research diaries. In general, something was seen as a negative impact if it prevented the individual writing the diary from realising one or more of the key elements of their experience described above.

4.0 Major impacts on the wilderness experience

Four key factors were identified as having a major impact on the wilderness experience. They are outlined below and illustrated with quotes from respondents.

4.1 Encounters with other visitors

The amount of people (especially the group of seven) significantly detracted from my experience of the beautiful area around Worsley Arm

Encounters with other visitors were sometimes disagreeable, causing feelings such as surprise, disappointment and frustration. A number of diarists were shocked at the number of other people they had encountered during their visit. This was especially the case on the Dusky Track. Some made it very clear that the extent of crowding in certain areas was having a detrimental effect on their experience. Often it was not just the sheer number of other visitors that bothered respondents, but also the *characteristics* of the people encountered, and whether they perceived them to be like themselves in terms of activity type, appearance and attitude. For example, several visitors who were travelling on foot were annoyed by people who had accessed the area by aircraft. A small number of respondents did not like encountering people from overseas because they felt that they were eroding the New Zealand back country culture.

4.2 Signs of human impact/influence

Annoying to see oil/fuel drums being stored on the hulk - looks a mess, and out of place in a 'wilderness area'. Lots of old ropes lying around too... this looks an eyesore in such a place of so much natural beauty

Signs of human influence in the natural environment often detracted from people's wilderness experiences. This included litter, aircraft landing sites, old camp sites, track markers, footprints and purpose-built facilities such as huts and toilets. Respondents varied in the extent to which they accepted signs of human intervention in the Park. Some desired no visible evidence of humans at all, whereas others were happy with (and often desired) facilities such as huts, tracks, and signage. Evidence of human influence that was perceived to go against or to threaten visitors' expectations of/motivations for their visit was almost universally seen in a negative light. For example, if an individual's main motivation was to "get away from civilisation", then any reminders of civilisation (such as cell phones or motorised transport) would be likely to detract from their experience. If, however, they were motivated more by the desire to experience a totally 'natural' environment, then they would be more likely to dislike huts, facilities, tracks, bridges and littering.

4.3 Motorised transport

That makes two flights and landings – very disturbing of the peace and quiet of the morning... every day so far aircraft have intruded

Most respondents reported seeing or hearing motorised forms of transport during their visit. These included aircraft (helicopters and fixed wing), motor/power boats, cruise

boats, jet boats and fishing charters. As with the issue of human influence in the park, whether or not an individual perceived motorised transport to be a positive or negative thing was largely dependent on his/her motivations and expectations of the area. Paradoxically, motorised transport was both a blessing and a curse to wilderness visitors. In terms of accessing remote areas of the park safely and efficiently, it was highly valued by many people. It enabled those who had limited time available, or who had lots of equipment to carry (for example hunters) to visit areas of the Park that would otherwise have been inaccessible to them. It also provided a valuable search and rescue service for several visitors who came into difficulties during their trip. However, for many respondents, motorised transport was simply seen as incompatible with a wilderness experience. It was seen to go against many of the values that wilderness stands for – such as challenge, escape and a sense of adventure. It served as a constant reminder of civilisation – precisely what many of the wilderness visitors were trying to escape from. It eroded feelings of remoteness and isolation by reducing perceptions of distance from the ‘real world’, and most of all, it destroyed the natural quiet for which remote and wilderness areas are renowned.

4.4 Commercial tourism

A wilderness experience should have no tourists accompanied by guides and commercial trappings

Several respondents explicitly stated in the introductory section of their diary that they did not expect to (or did not want to) encounter commercial tourism or ‘tourists’ during their visit. Although no-one reported *encountering* any forms of commercial tourism during their visit, some respondents reported *seeing* commercial tourism activities taking place in the distance. Those people who did see tourism activities either said that it annoyed them, it disturbed them, or they were glad to be away from it. A number of respondents discussed the issue of commercial tourism in remote and wilderness areas in a more general sense. This typically involved hypothetical scenarios such as the level of tourism increasing, or the standard of the facilities being upgraded to accommodate tourists. **In each of these cases, commercial tourism was seen as incompatible with a wilderness experience, and respondents clearly stated that they would be disappointed to see the level of tourism increase.** Interestingly, one form of commercial tourism that seemed to be acceptable *in remote areas*² for most visitors was transport to or from (but not during) a wilderness trip.

The theme of commercial tourism in remote and wilderness areas was explored in more depth during interviews with diarists. Some of the key findings related to commercial tourism are summarised in the next section.

5.0 Interview analysis: Perceptions of commercial tourism

Formal analysis of the wilderness visitor interviews is yet to take place. However, some preliminary analysis was undertaken as part of a broader project looking specifically at the issue of commercial tourism in remote and wilderness areas. Some of the key issues that were identified through this process are outlined below:

² Wilderness areas were generally accepted places that should be free from motorised transport

- Some recreationists deliberately avoid particular areas of the conservation estate (such as Milford Sound and the Abel Tasman National Park) because of a perceived increase in commercial tourism
- There was a perception among some respondents that people who use commercial tourism services and facilities are distinctly different from 'independent' users of the conservation estate. It was felt that commercial tourism was aimed primarily at less-skilled and less-able people, seeking an 'easy' experience. The activities offered by commercial providers were seen as less adventurous and less challenging, with fewer possibilities for exploration and self-development, and commercial tourism was often associated with overseas visitors, 'tourists' or 'foreigners'
- A number of people felt that commercial tourism has the potential to bring benefits to conservation as long as it is well-managed and not allowed to proliferate beyond designated areas or use levels. Benefits identified by interviewees included:
 - Improved/facilitated access to some areas
 - Economic benefits to local communities and nationally
 - Controlling impacts
 - Imparting conservation messages
 - Raising the profile of outdoor recreation
 - Safety and companionship
- Specific aspects of commercial tourism activities that bothered respondents included:
 - A fear that it may threaten traditional recreational experiences
 - A fear that national parks may become 'commercialised'
 - A feeling that commercial tourism devalues independent recreation
 - A dislike of the impacts associated with some forms of commercial tourism (such as noise, increased visitors, vegetation damage, and increased facilities and services)
 - An aversion to private operators making money from a public resource
- The worst forms of commercial tourism that could be introduced into remote and wilderness areas were identified as:
 - Anything that requires (additional) permanent structures, facilities or tracks
 - Activities that requires motorised/mechanised transport
 - Anything with large groups, high frequency activities or large numbers of 'foreigners'
 - Noisy activities
 - Activities that do not fit in with the traditional use of the area
- Most interviewees felt that the effects of commercial tourism are dependent on the type and frequency of the activity or service. There was a general agreement that *some* types of commercial tourism are acceptable in *some* areas, but that other areas must be protected/managed as completely non-commercial
- The key issue with wilderness users' perceptions of commercial tourism was often not whether the activity was *commercial*, but whether it was *consistent with management objectives of the area*, and what its associated impacts were

- Finally, several respondents indicated that they were not particularly concerned about the impacts of commercial tourism in remote areas because it is unlikely that it will ever occur on any great scale. These people argued that remote areas are simply not conducive to commercial activities because they are too dangerous, too remote, and there is not enough demand.

6.0 Conclusions and Implications for the tourism industry

While the analysis of the research data is not yet complete, some general themes are emerging. The wilderness users participating in this study clearly have firm views about what a wilderness experience should entail, and about the appropriateness of certain tourism and recreation activities in these areas. It is also apparent that the wilderness experience is a fragile one, consisting of multiple dimensions that may be vulnerable to changes in the way recreation and tourism opportunities are provided in remote areas and buffer regions.

It is therefore important that those responsible for recreation and tourism policy, planning and management in New Zealand acknowledge the needs of wilderness recreationists, and continue to provide opportunities for such experiences in the future. Providers of commercial tourism services in or around remote and wilderness areas must also understand the full effects of their activities. Only once the impacts (positive and negative) of commercial tourism in these areas are better understood, will the industry be in a position to maximise the potential and limit the fallout.

The current study is the first comprehensive attempt to delve into the nature and scope of the New Zealand wilderness experience. Further analysis of the research findings will take place as part of the Doctoral thesis which is expected to be completed in early 2009. It is hoped that future studies will further develop some of the ideas contained in this report, and in particular, focus on understanding the complex relationship between independent and commercial use of the New Zealand conservation estate.

References

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