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Managing Recreation and Tourism in New Zealand Mountains

Kay L. Booth
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New Zealand is a very mountainous country with sparsely populated mountain lands. While large tracts are held in private ownership and used in pastoral production, the majority is state owned. New Zealand's protected natural area system encompasses the Southern Alps/Ka Tiritiri o te Moana and the North Island peaks, with the highest mountains in the country within Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, a World Heritage Site. Thirty percent of New Zealand's land area falls within the protected natural area system, managed by the Department of Conservation (DOC). Within these mountain lands, there is a range of mountain recreation opportunities including skiing, alpine climb-

ing, hiking, wilderness fishing, and hunting. Aircraft-based activities, such as scenic overflights, heli-hiking, and glacier skiing, dominate some mountain regions. Ski fields represent small enclaves of high-level facility and infrastructure development within an environment that is largely unmodified wilderness. To facilitate high-quality recreational experiences and protect the natural mountain environment, DOC provides facilities such as huts and tracks, and applies management techniques to minimize visitor conflict and biophysical impacts. Commercial activities in parks are managed through concessions that place controls upon these activities.



FIGURE 1 Climber descending from summit ridge Aoraki/Mt Cook. (Photo by Ross Cullen)

Growing visitor numbers

The spectacular beauty of New Zealand's mountains has attracted recreationists and tourists for more than a century (Figure 1). Numbers of visitors to the mountains grew slowly until the advent of passenger jet aircraft. The decline in real costs of travel both domestically and internationally and increasing real incomes triggered a sustained growth in the numbers of tourists traveling to and within New Zealand. Mountain land recreation boomed in the 1960s and 1970s; today approximately 250,000 people per day are engaged in tourist activities including mountain viewing and recreation. Recreation and tourism use of mountain lands has intensified around key hot spots, including ski fields near Queenstown, Christchurch, and in the central North Island, the Aoraki/Mount Cook region, Milford Sound, and Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers in Westland/Tai Poutini National Park (see maps here and in introductory article). This article briefly explores some issues that have arisen as increasing numbers of people visit New Zealand mountains.

Ski field development

Downhill skiing and snowboarding occurs at 25 ski fields in New Zealand, most of these fields being within protected natural areas. Skiing has grown rapidly in popularity and now generates US \$45 million annually (New Zealand Ski Council 2000).





FIGURE 2 Hooker Hut with Aoraki/Mt Cook behind. (Photo by Richard Wesley)

“There is a glorious field for the members of the Alpine Club here. Mount Cook awaits them, and he who first scales it will be crowned with undying laurels; for my part, though it is hazardous to say this of any mountain, I do not think that any human being will ever reach its top.”
(Samuel Butler, *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement*, 1863)

An estimated 105,000 people visited the 6 major South Island ski fields in 1999, recording just under 600,000 skier/snowboarder days (Tourism New Zealand 1999). This represented a 16% increase from the previous year, most growth occurring within the overseas skier market (New Zealand Ski Council 2000). The increase in the popularity of skiing has been accompanied by development of new downhill skiing areas. Four of the 5 major South Island ski fields have been developed since 1970. These developments have typically occurred on state-owned and managed land and often encountered considerable opposition.

Development of the Remarkables ski field near Queenstown illustrates the debate that occurs when new skiing areas are proposed in New Zealand. The debate focuses around environmental concerns. The Remarkables Range reaches 2324 m and provides a dramatic skyline east of Queenstown. In 1973, the company that owns Coronet Peak ski field, 10 km distant from the Remarkables, applied for planning permission for a new ski field in the Remarkables Range. Justification for the proposal included the argument that Coronet Peak ski field would soon reach capacity and the proposed ski field would provide new capacity to meet growing recreation demand.

Opposition to the proposal came from local landowners and from environmental groups. Landowners argued the development would disturb livestock in the region. Environmental groups argued construction of the access road to the ski field would scar a prominent hillside on

the north end of the Remarkables Range, while the ski field would threaten the fragile ecosystem of an alpine tarn and destroy the natural quietness enjoyed by mountaineers and other visitors to the region. Local government required the proponents to show how sewage would be managed in an alpine environment. Support for the ski field proposal came from the local business community, who argued it would add to the tourist attractions in the region, creating more employment and income.

A 7-year planning struggle ensued. Much of the debate between environmentalists and tourism developers centered on the access road and its impact on the landscape. Approval for the project was eventually granted after lengthy and costly court action, and the ski field commenced operation in 1985. The Remarkables is now one of New Zealand’s major ski fields, and tourism in Queenstown has grown dramatically during the same period. The contentious road is clearly visible today.

Ownership and use rights of mountain huts

Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is 70,728 ha and contains New Zealand’s highest mountains, which have attracted climbers and sightseers for more than a century. At the time of the first ascent of Aoraki/Mount Cook in 1894, a hotel 10 km from the mountain provided the only permanent accommodation in the park. Growth in numbers of tourists and recreationists has been accompanied by growth in demand for accommodation, both within the small alpine village at the road end and higher in the mountains. Visits to Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park total over 250,000 annually, with 70% of visits undertaken by international tourists.

Provision of accommodation in New Zealand’s national parks has been dominated by the State, but more recently, new players have contributed to the supply of hotels and mountain huts. Climbers, skiers, and hikers visiting Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park can stay at a selection of privately owned accommodations within the village. Within the backcountry, they have 3 options—state-owned huts,

huts provided by clubs but open to the public, or a hut established by a private concessionaire, whose clients enjoy exclusive use.

The 1980 *National Parks Act* allows the public freedom of access to parks. Many facilities and services provided within parks, including accommodation, have charges for use. Management of national parks is guided by management plans prepared by the Department of Conservation (DOC), which are reviewed every 10 years with extensive public input. Organizations planning to construct new huts in parks must obtain approval from DOC. The approval process includes public comment, and in some cases, this has resulted in strong opposition.

In 2000, the private owners of the Hermitage Hotel in Aoraki/Mount Cook village proposed purchasing and moving an existing state-owned hut (Hooker Hut, Figure 2) from its present location en route to the high altitude Copland Pass to a new site in the lower valley where it would provide a day shelter for tourist walkers (numbering approximately 20,000 per year). The company simultaneously announced plans to replace the aging state-owned Mueller Hut, a popular overnight hiking destination, with a new structure that would provide basic accommodation for recreationists and separate serviced accommodation for concessionaire clients. Both proposals received rapid criticism from recreation organizations opposed to incursion of commercial interests into the provision of mountain accommodation.

Private huts used exclusively by concessionaire clients are found in several national parks, especially along the popular hiking tracks, such as the Milford Track. Two proposals are currently before DOC for more private accommodation along this prestigious track. Opposition to private and exclusive accommodations in national parks comes from New Zealand recreationists concerned about the potential loss of their use rights in national parks. Decisions to permit further development of private and exclusive huts have the potential to deepen the schism between traditional New Zealand recreationists and wealthier, often foreign, visitors to parks.

Aircraft overflights

New Zealand national parks are rugged, and access to backcountry areas is often difficult on foot. Mount Cook Airline pioneered glacier landings by small planes on the 29-km-long Tasman Glacier in 1955. Ski planes and helicopters now carry skiers, sightseers, and mountaineers to numerous sites within Aoraki/Mount Cook and several other national parks (Figure 3). As well, scenic overflights above the Southern Alps/Ka Tiritiri o te Moana are popular, especially with international tourists. Growth in numbers of tourists and recreationists has been accompanied by increased numbers of flights and landing sites and increased competition between aircraft companies. Landing sites within national parks are specified in park management plans, approved after public consultation. Aircraft landings in Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park currently number 7000 ski plane and 300 helicopter landings per year. Aircraft flight paths, however, are not controlled by national park legislation or by park management plans. Aircraft noise adversely impacts other park users, leading to new controversy.

A recent development is the formation of the Resident Aircraft User Group, spanning Aoraki/Mount Cook and West-

*Much filming of the movie **Vertical Limit** occurred in the park, with extensive use of helicopters, including in the Hooker Valley.*

FIGURE 3 A helicopter unloads climbers on Faith Col. Mt Hopkins behind. (Photo by Ross Cullen)



FIGURE 4 Map of Aoraki/Mount Cook *topuni* area. (Source: Department of Conservation 2001. Draft Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park Management Plan 2001. Christchurch: Department of Conservation)

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land/Tai Poutini National Parks. This group of aircraft operators has developed an environmental policy and operational procedures to minimize the impact of aircraft noise on other recreationists. Annual monitoring within both parks of the effects of aircraft on visitors suggests that changes to flight paths and maneuvering, voluntarily undertaken by operators, has reduced visitor dissatisfaction with aircraft overflights.

Maori values

The New Zealand Government has committed to settling grievances held by the indigenous Maori relating to assertions that the Government has not upheld the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi, signed in 1840 between representatives of the Maori people and the British Government. Observation of the principles of the Treaty is an important influence on the management of many resources, including national parks and mountains. Resolution of a significant Treaty claim by Ngai Tahu (tribe), settled in 1997, has implications across the *iwi's rohe* (tribal area), which encompasses most of the South Island.

Aoraki/Mount Cook is sacred to Ngai Tahu, and ownership of the mountain will be vested in Ngai Tahu who, in turn, will gift the mountain to the Crown on behalf of the people of New Zealand. Figure 4 shows the area to be vested. This same area has been declared a *topuni* site, a new form of designation that acknowledges and provides for the special Ngai Tahu values attached to the mountain. The *topuni* does not override the national park status of the land but places an overlay of Ngai Tahu values on Aoraki/Mount Cook. Management of the park must give particular regard to Ngai Tahu values.

Cultural conflict has arisen over a statement from a Maori advisor to the Department of Conservation, that “because the mountain was an ancestor, and the sacred part of the body was the head, it was *tapu* to stand on top of it.” His request of climbers to desist from standing atop the mountain was met with a mixed reception from mountaineers within the New Zealand alpine community. Sir Edmund Hillary, now in his 80s, the first person to stand on the top of Mount Everest and New Zealand’s best known mountaineer, said “he would probably ignore a Maori *tapu* on the summit ... reaching the summit was the pinnacle for any climber” (*The Press*, 1 May 1998, p 1, <http://www.press.co.nz>). In contrast, Shaun Norman, President of the New Zealand Mountain Guides Association, said:

Mountaineers should have no problem with respecting the request ... standing on the summit of a mountain was only a small part of the whole mountain climbing experience ... there are many holy mountains around the world ... where local people said ‘please climb the mountain but because our special gods ... live on top, don’t stand on the top’ (*The Press*, 1 May 1998, p 1, <http://www.press.co.nz>).

This example illustrates the complex issues concerning accommodation of Maori values within a national park system established by British colonists under a different value set. With increasing recognition of Maori values in New Zealand society, such conflicts are likely to arise during the debate required to establish a ‘new order’ for all New Zealanders using the mountains.

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