

*"We condition the masses to hate the country [wilderness], concluded the Director.....but simultaneously we condition them to love all country [wilderness] sports. At the same time we are to see to it that all country [wilderness] sports shall entail the use of elaborate apparatus so that they consume manufactured articles as well as transport"*

Aldous Huxley (Brave New World 1932)

# The 7 great myths influencing DOC's Recreation Management (thinking)

Paper for the 2006 Recreation Summit by Rob Brown

## **Myth 1: There is no difference between commercial and non-commercial recreation.**

Explanation:

There is a difference between commercial and non-commercial forms of recreation. Former NZCA member Craig Potton has described this as being the difference between 'expectation' and 'hope'.

In a non-commercial setting there is a high level of self-autonomy and/or help from friends in which mystification and enchantment loom large in a relatively uncontrolled context. By contrast most commercial experiences place a high reliance on a professional and a recreational product where the comfort and predictability of the package is almost guaranteed. In a commercial setting, people are considered 'customers' purchasing a 'product' where service providers are expected to deliver a set of outcomes at a fixed cost. The sorts of recreation that individuals or clubs participate in are ones where there are far fewer expectations and a successful outcome is more unpredictable and self-regulated. In a commercial setting, the expectation is that the service provider will keep people safe, deliver them through their purchased experience without harm to a successful conclusion. In a non-commercial setting, we set off *hoping* that we ourselves make all the right choices and get back unscathed.

Currently the department believes it is in the commercial business of recreation and therefore its tendency is to over react to negative feedback or situations (we don't want disappointed customers on our hands, or worse injured customers). More than one of DOC's area managers believes they are in the business of providing a set of products for customers. This situation also means that society now places an unrealistic 'expectation' that DOC will keep users safe in the wilds. To a certain extent DOC has contributed to this societal trend by over-reacting to how harsh the New Zealand back-country can be from time to time [in its response to accidents and complaints].

Why is making a distinction between commercial and non-commercial important? Perhaps the best explanation is from social philosopher Ivan Illich who noted that: *"Observations of the sickening effect of programmed environments show that people in them become indolent, impotent, narcissistic and apolitical. The political process breaks down because people cease to be able to govern themselves; they demand to be managed."*

Too much commercial recreation in our wild places results in them being artificially programmed.

## **The Reality**

There is a world of difference, from both a management and an individual user perspective, between commercial and non-commercial recreation. While that difference has a lot to do with philosophy and style, there are still major implications for society should back-country recreation continue to be commercialised at its current rate.

Society has seen this in urban sports where participation rates have fallen when a sport is over-commercialised. New Zealand's main recreational activities now fall into the passive rather than active category (walking the length of the shopping mall does not really count as active). SPARC has shifted the greater proportion of its funding to the sponsorship of elite athletes so that we may have the pleasure of watching them run fourth on television. Programmes encouraging participation are few and far between and schools are finding it increasingly difficult to find resources to run out of classroom activities.

DOC sees commercial recreation as *increasing* participation in outdoor recreation, without ever asking just what these 'consumers' are participating in. There is no doubt that the purchasers of commercial recreation products seriously believe they have pushed their own boundaries and achieved something of significance. The reality is that until they have taken that experience, used it to go out into the real world and stand on their own two feet, make their own decisions where they are responsible for their own safety, then they have just purchased another commercial product and have barely stepped out of the urban world.

Commercial products have the ability to totally dominate a recreational setting. For example the Fox and Franz Valleys are now packaged as a set of products, some purely visual, others involving activities. The department itself tries to control the recreational experience with signs and barriers and under an atmosphere that, in peak season, can only be described as surveillance. The expectation is that most people will enjoy these valleys using a private or public pre-packaged product with the quiet enjoyment of the valley in a pure sense being relegated to the fringe.

Un-restrained commercialisation of recreation is to some degree unequitable because by its profit-motivated nature there will be a significant proportion of the population never able to afford the experience. An example of this is the Great Walks where the costs for a family of four to walk, for example, the Milford are beyond the reach of many New Zealand families.

## **The Way Forward**

The philosophical difference between commercial and non-commercial recreation has implications for all of us because it is a statement about where we want to be as a society.

We need to be bold enough in society to minimise commercialism in wild places and this may mean major areas of public land which are zoned as being free of commercial activities. It is philosophically no different from leaving old growth forest standing tall for the birds because we don't really need to cut it down. Commercialising recreation has a cost to society – it is just not as obvious as a clear-cut forest.

Public land managers need to be free from the commercial pressures of 'meeting market expectations' and instead focus on providing a setting where the people can either take or leave the experience provided. This could involve a major shift in society thinking about the way 'duty of care' is applied by managers of wild lands which would be philosophically quite different from managers of urban or rural areas.

Managing recreation in wild places should involve people taking up the challenges on a 'nature on nature's terms' basis.

## **Myth 2: There is such a human being as a 'Back Country Comfort Seeker'.**

Explanation:

In fact these mythical persons only exist in the minds of DOC planners and are an artificial construct to drive the standards of huts and tracks that DOC provide.

This has come about because DOC took a system (the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum or ROS) that worked in that it was centred around describing a range of opportunities, and then decided to overlay an invention of its own with the Visitor Groups. These groups were a total invention that had little basis in reality.

There is evidence that DOC itself is confused about these Visitor Groups and recognises criticism of them. Below is the very muddled explanation directly from the DOC website (How Does DOC Analyse Recreation Opportunities?):

*It is well accepted that there is a great variety of visitors in terms of such characteristics as demographics and interests. It is more complicated to get agreement about how to divide visitors up into groups with similar characteristics to inform management decisions on appropriate facility types and standards.*

*People are assumed to belong to a particular Visitor Group when they visit conservation areas. The Visitor Strategy explains the origin of Visitor Groups based on the range of Recreation Opportunity Class settings, and the typical visitor profiles of those people preferring to use the different ROS Classes. People may belong to different groups at different times, and the group will tend to choose a facility that suits the least able or least adventurous of the group they are with, or they take steps to enable everyone to participate to the same level. As with any type of 'market segmentation' the groups are simplifications of the real world, and as such may not be accepted by everyone. Of particular note is that the difference between SST and DV may be hard to determine other than the length of time that people actually spend at a location.*

As a tool managing recreation on public wild lands, this has been problematic. It generates a totally artificial approach based on what planners think their 'market' wants at each location.

These artificial Visitor Groups drive standards and are used by managers when they employ contractors to do the work (it is no co-incidence that the front country track width standard is precisely the width of the motorised diggers used to make those tracks). No person exists that considers themselves a back-country comfort seeker, demanding a 1 to 1.5 metre gravelled track no steeper than X degrees.

### **The Reality**

Individuals who recreate on public lands cannot be put into convenient boxes in terms of what they seek from an experience in the wild. Individuals move through a variety of experiences in their lives from the early easy school tramp, to perhaps more challenging trips in their 20's, to perhaps easier trips when they have children. Further, they seek a variety of experiences where there is a consistent set of values grounding each experience.

DOC's current obsession with applying precise standards to track work, often takes little account of the experience, history of use, location and does not fulfil the vision of managing places in a way that fosters self-reliance.

In many cases, DOC's short walks are becoming so manicured that they are of a higher standard than a local recreational park like the Port Hills of Christchurch where many people day walk on relatively rough tracks

### **The Way Forward**

The Visitor Groups are essentially a commercial model not a recreation model. They are seriously flawed and add nothing in terms of managing recreational opportunities.

DOC needs to ditch the Visitor Groups and get back to thinking about the basics of the ROS spectrum that focused on types of experiences at different places and the values associated with these places.

What individuals are looking for as they take up these opportunities is management firmly grounded in a core set of values across ALL wild lands and not simply experiences that change to suit a perceived 'market' trend.

### **Myth 3: 'Hard core' back country users only ever go to hard places.**

Explanation:

This is perhaps the biggest myth driving the department's thinking in the past 10 years because it is pure fantasy. The implied myth is that these same people virtually never appreciate and never go to any of the 'easy' places.

When the department says: "Mountain Biking is more popular now" or "There are more people doing easier walks" it says this in a vacuum of knowledge about where this increasing popularity is coming from. There is plenty of evidence that tramping clubs are running more biking trips than ever and plenty of evidence that many outdoor recreationalists, some of whom the department unofficially labels 'hard-core', are participating in a wider variety of activities than ever.

Running through the department is an undercurrent that this [perceived] group of users is far too few in number and yet far too vocal in their arguments for the back-country. And yet when DOC did some basic research before the Hut and Track ROR review it found that nearly 10 percent of the population has spent a night in a back country hut within the last few months indicating high number of Kiwis out hunting, fishing, tramping, biking and mountaineering in these places (part of the argument for the 2002 Recreational Funding Budget).

#### **The Reality**

It would be more accurate to refer to these people as intensive and regular users (of recreational opportunities) of public land as they tend to be there at least once a month and using all manner of facilities from short walks to camp grounds to the classic back-country hut. Like everyone else, these users go through a life cycle in the outdoors, and take on different experiences depending on whether they are going into wild places with their children, their parents or their friends.

They are vocal because they passionately believe that in a world of change, wild places offer something solid and enduring to pass onto the next generation which is full of value and meaning. This group argues so strongly for the back-country because it sees the value in DOC staying focused on providing opportunities that span the full spectrum from front country to back country to wilderness. This means DOC has to be equally committed to both front-country (usually intensive use) areas and back-country (usually but not always moderate use).

#### **The Way Forward**

DOC needs to stop pigeon-holing users into convenient boxes as a management technique. The use pattern is too complex for this and the boxes don't assist the thinking in any real way.

DOC does not need to try and second-guess the mind of users or their motivation but instead to stay focused on the core experiences – walking, natural quiet, the challenge of ancient nature, solitude, the cultural significance of returning our wilderness roots – that make public conservation land special and provide the sort of experiences not found elsewhere.

## **Myth 4: Maintaining the back-country is expensive (and benefits few).**

Explanation:

There is still a simmering undercurrent, perhaps even the purpose behind this conference, that many of the back-country assets are too expensive to retain in the long term and are only used by a few anyway. Despite the Hut and Track review, there is still a persistent feeling within DOC that the hut issue is simply too big for the country in the long term and apart from a few huts here and there, there are no real heritage issues at stake.

When Sandra Lee gained the new funding for the department in the early part of this decade it was intended to be \$349 million over 10 years (2002-2012). This was being ramped up over the term, however there has still been many millions in new funding for DOC. The best estimate is that only around a proportion of this new funding has been spent on hut replacements (around 30 new huts at an approximate average cost of \$300,000 each).

So where is the rest of the money going?

By far the bulk of the new DOC's new recreation money is currently being spent on new carparks at 'hot spots', upgraded toilets, upgraded short walks, road maintenance. The back-country has received a share but it is still a proportionally small share given how capital-intensive the projects are in the major tourist hot spots.

Just one small example is the upgrade of the Knights Point carpark on the West Coast. This will involve stormwater control, new fencing, some plantings and is forecast to cost \$185,000. It is unlikely this upgrade would last as long as the forecast 50-year life of a new hut. Unlike a new hut there will be no recovery of the expense.

There are many more projects like this on the West Coast: \$200,000 to the Oparara Trust for upgrading the arch tracks; \$250,000 for upgrading the Pororari-Punakaiki River Walk, \$250,000 for upgrading the Cape Foulwind carpark. This is happening right around the country.

### **The Reality**

While the new money undoubtedly 'saved' the back-country system from withering on the recreation vine (it was sorely under-resourced previously), in effect, the Recreational Facilities Funding of 2002 is still a massive subsidy to the large business of commercial tourism (albeit with some flow on benefits for New Zealanders).

Maintaining the back-country is a small part of the equation and is relatively cheap by comparison. The reality is many of the 950 odd huts are in reasonable condition and with a proper maintenance programme could be passed onto future generations with their value intact.

There is no evidence that the use on any hut is declining, in fact quite the opposite. Even the most remote sites on the West Coast have greater and increasing use and this jumped markedly once the network received some maintenance in the past five years.

People obviously see the value.

DoC gives every indication that it is worried only 30 huts have been replaced with this funding and is still fretting about the replacement of the others into the future and the size of the hut inventory as a whole.

And yet the money was *supposed* to be mainly for huts and tracks; it was *supposed* to deal with this issue.

From the Budget Announcement 2002:

*Implications of the budget announcement*

*The governments announcement establishes a new increased funding base and sets parameters within which the department and community can work together to more effectively manage New Zealand's hut and track network into the foreseeable future. Provision for depreciation ensures that recreational facilities can be replaced in future.*

The entire document was focused around the hut and track network and yet the expenditure on the front-country has turned this funding into a huge subsidy for tourism.

**The Way Forward**

I believe DOC needs to be more efficient and careful about its front country upgrades. Currently virtually every upgraded track is gold plated. Instead it should use the money for maintenance rather than expensive upgrades. Generally it is far cheaper to repair old buildings than build new ones.

It needs to stop simply building larger carparks and larger huts just because things get busy for a couple of months of the year (most of the large new carparks will be empty for much of the year – during the tourist off season) and get away from the corporate image that insists on seeing nicely polished DoC signs and billboards everywhere. It should not be providing what are almost back-packer lodges at some back-country locations and adopt a 'fit for purpose' approach to facility replacement.

DOC needs to stay committed to the motley old collection of huts it inherited as part of our national identity and if it is really worried about how the costs of the modern building code applies affects the maintenance of these structures then it needs to work with government to develop a back-country building code that preserves the heritage.

**Myth 5: There is no implied hierarchy in the Conservation Act that the department will 'foster recreation and allow tourism'.**

Explanation:

The authors of the Conservation Act intended DOC to make a clear distinction between 'fostering recreation' and 'allowing tourism'. They carefully choose words to make it clear what the priorities should be. 'Foster' lies above 'allow' in the hierarchy.

DOC struggled with this issue in the recent construction of the General Policy for the Conservation Act and eventually tossed it in the too hard basket. There were simply too many tourism operators that would have been offended had clarity been added to the Conservation Act.

How does DOC give effect to the words in the legislation? Does it just need to do the basic job of providing facilities to 'foster' recreation? Or should it be more proactive? And while the legislation says 'allow' tourism, how much should it allow? – Some? A little? A lot?

Should not giving effect to the legislation be a question of where DOC puts its priorities and the bulk of the resources?

And what role should rangers play in 'fostering' recreation? There was once a time when they seriously carried out this role and now they are hardly to be seen. We see DOC people out working on biodiversity, the odd person out working on tracks, plenty of people driving around in vehicles, but where are the rangers?

There was once a time when DOC really was out there interacting with the public, fostering recreation, simply by ensuring it had a presence in the field. Some conservancies run good summer, school or conservation week programmes where for a limited time rangers are to be seen out 'ranging'. Other conservancies do not. There seems to be no consistency.

It still has an average set of Visitor Centres which on the whole provide reasonable information as ways of fostering recreation, when they are staffed by someone with good local knowledge (staffing is patchy) and when they are open.

### **The Reality**

DOC has now become so confused by this part of the legislation that it seriously believes that allowing tourism is actually fostering recreation. Even though DOC's funding has gone up markedly in the past 10 years, it has wound back a lot of its traditional programmes that fostered recreation, preferring instead to let the private sector pick up these roles. This is now the conventional thinking in the department and they make decisions accordingly.

The reality today is that in parts of the country, there are more people processing and monitoring tourism concessions than there are out behaving like traditional rangers and inter-acting with the public who are choosing to recreate without the need to purchase a product. The West Coast Conservancy has bigger teams of people inside processing concessions or monitoring some type of commercial activity than there are out cutting tracks and looking after huts, or running summer programmes (the last in particular now seen as quaint stuff of another era).

There seems no clear strategic direction to ensure DOC has the bulk of its employees out in the field.

But there is within government and the department a slightly covert strategic direction to ensure that concessions – particularly tourism concessions – jumps the cue for resources. This is because the department now raises fully 10 percent of its operating budget from concessions revenue. But at what cost? Certainly the department recovers some of this monetary cost but the main cost is in distracting it from higher priorities.

### **The Way Forward**

The crux of giving effect to the legislation is to ensure that in allowing tourism, DOC achieves its first two responsibilities of conservation first and the maintenance of recreation facilities second.

There is disquiet within the department about the level of funding for recreation, but this has more to do with the government's current under-funding of DOC's biodiversity programme (DOC as a whole, throughout the whole country has a smaller budget than the Christchurch City Council).

The second way of giving effect to the legislation is to put more weight on submissions from non-commercial organizations during the planning process for our public lands. Currently the submissions of some commercial operators are given undue weight and this distorts the process because of their vested interest. In short, tourism should only be 'allowed' once the public process has set the regime for a place.

**Thirdly, DoC needs a greater field presence with a return to the days of real rangers. DOC needs to ensure that the perception of the public is that it is, at heart, an organization that works in the field. This currently is not the case.**

**Myth 6: Questioning people on location is a useful way of determining what people think of a certain recreational experience.**

Explanation:

Feeding in to DOC's management of recreation is its basic research at certain sites.

In the past 15 years DOC has (unwittingly or not) diluted the voice of New Zealanders by using this technique.

An examples of this is monitoring the impact of aircraft noise on the experience of users of wild places. At a place like Franz Josef, for years DOC has asked people visiting the glaciers whether they are experiencing any level of dissatisfaction with the noise in the valley. For years the results have hovered below the arbitrary 25 percent dissatisfaction limit.

### **The Reality**

The third day of the Milford Track over the pass is still pretty much a tramping track in the traditional sense. It has been this way for over 80 years and there is the odd 80 year old who still goes over the pass. Most people who do the Milford actually find it surprisingly hard and if you were to interview people at Dumpling Hut they would probably say just that, maybe even that it was *too* hard. But ask them a few days latter, after the aches and pains have ebbed away and the warm glow of achievement has set in and they would probably say that it was just at the right level.

The moral of the story is that questioning people on location is a crummy way of doing recreation research, particularly when the participant is tired, hungry and from a country not used to the sort of landscape we have in New Zealand.

### **The Way Forward**

DOC needs to consider any form of research in a way that most people use customer research: with a grain of salt and barely worth the paper it is written on.

Most successful organizations will tell you that it is almost impossible to second guess what people want and where trends are heading and that nothing beats working from a grounded and secure set of values where everyone is clear on what the objectives are.

DOC needs to be more grounded in New Zealand's historical recreational roots and working from a consistent set of values rather than trying to second guess trends or deliver what it thinks people want.

## **Myth 7: Each generation is becoming more pathetic than the last.**

Explanation:

Darwin may have believed in evolution, many managers in DOC covertly believe in devolution.

DOC believes that society is becoming softer and softer and that it has no option but to go with the flow and manage places in a way that accounts for this (i.e building easier and easier tracks, bigger and better huts). Others believe that we need to guard against devolution with the most powerful tool we have: our wild places. The department accuses the others of asking it to engage in a form of social engineering, to which the others reply: Guilty.

There is nothing at all wrong with managing wild places in a way that is hard nosed enough to shape the human spirit. So why is DOC, and governments, so willing to 'go with the devolutionary flow'?

### **The Reality**

People still have two arms and two legs, and we hope a functional brain. People were trudging through the New Zealand's mountains 100 years ago with terrible gear and long skirts or tweed overcoats. Things are significantly better with gear and tracks today and yet despite this we are overly obsessed with making the wild safe and comfortable.

## **The Way Forward**

DOC should not treat users as small children. We should not obliterate the wild in our wilderness by arriving with all our urban expectations for comfort and safety and expecting it to be a tightly controlled environment.

To keep persisting with the policy of providing for softer and softer wants in the back-country is to destroy the very reasons why people recreate in these places.

*"If the preservationist does not succeed in reducing the taste for such [consumer] activities, he will have fundamentally failed. His goal is to encourage the public increasingly to internalise its capacity to wring satisfaction out of experience – not merely for the brief moments spent in the parks, but in the attitudes carried away from them as well. In this respect recreation policy fundamentally reinforces the symbolic value that parks embody for the preservationist. As symbols of restraint, and human limits, their message is inevitably undermined unless they affect the attitudes we bring to the use of our leisure time.*

*Indeed, the issue is not simply reducing conflict between opportunities for different kinds of recreation. It is unlikely that we could fill the exploding demand for power-based [consumer] recreation even if that were our first priority. Recreation that is dependant on ever-increasing growth and impact for its satisfaction is insatiable. The scarcity of resources we encounter in trying to meet such recreational demand is as much psychological as a physical problem. No matter how much land we have, more will always be demanded because the object is itself more, more of whatever there is.*

*This, perhaps, is another way of asserting that the will to power[to consume] is ultimately self-defeating, and the preservationists' moralistic stance may be a practical solution, even for those who can only see the problem as one of perpetually insufficient resources.*

*The parks themselves, however they are used, will never constitute more than a small fraction of all our recreational resources. And ideal forms of recreation will never account for more than a tiny fraction of anyone's leisure activity. But the underlying idea – substituting intensiveness of experience for intensiveness of consumption – can radiate out into a much wider area of both private and public recreation and can speak broadly to the problems of scarcity and conflict that we see everywhere."*

Joseph Sax *Mountains Without Handrails: Reflections on the National Parks.*