

Tourism — enemy of our parks

Controversy
simmers
around

Rotorua over a
proposed tourism
project on Mount
Tarawera.

The Maori trust, which owns the mountain, has gone into partnership with a new joint operator. The operator proposes to raise the fee to walk up the mountain from \$2 per person to \$30, and from \$35 per car to at least \$50.

He agrees there will be opposition from locals, but replies that "the market we are after is not local, and international visitors won't have a problem with it".

While no-one could deny the right of landowners to derive an income from their property, we must breathe a sad sigh that the New Zealand we belong to is disappearing rapidly.

The change is happening before our eyes. Another guided party of 40 a day over the Milford Track is now proposed. There is no proposal to increase the number of "freedom walkers", New Zealanders who book well in advance to see one of our country's great places. The Kepler Track may soon have large guided parties.

Near Mount Cook, a privately owned hotel wanted to move two public huts for the convenience of its clients, require booking at both of them, and have one of those public huts as a modest adjunct to its own 25-bed hotel to be erected on the rocky top of the Sealy Range. If such a hotel were built there, the only



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method of carrying sufficient quantities of food, drink and fuel in, and rubbish and sewage out, would be by helicopter. Tariffs would be high. Inevitably, clients would fly in and out.

The precedent would be set. Next, the Welcome Flats hut, then Siberia Stream; every hut and valley would hold an exclusive, expensive, intrusive, and polluting resort.

Our country already has enough roads to and through the wilderness, and enough luxury lodges. There are plenty of opportunities to fly into the mountains. Even the conservation estate's great walks have been hijacked to some degree by tourism interests.

We desire no further exploitation and spoiling. We desire quiet, and time to think, and see what matters and what does not. We do not find this in the adrenalin rush of the helicopter and the deadening comfort of the hotel. Some places should, like a currently advertised brand of beer, be for people who have earned the right to be there by their own sweat.

Noise is one of the greatest curses of our time. National Parks are not immune now. Practically every tramper on the Milford hates the incessant drone and buzz of sight-seeing flights over the MacKinnon Pass.

Many tourists, not just trampers, at Mount Cook and the glaciers have any

possible sense of solitude destroyed by aircraft. Even mountaineers around Mount Cook can already find it hard to escape noise. For fit non-mountaineers, the Sealy Range is one of the best nearby, climbable, and non-technical overnight walks.

The attitude of the Canterbury conservancy of the Department of Conservation in these matters is hard to discern. Local and national opposition is taking a very long time to get the conservancy to relent in some very ill-advised plans to stop maintaining, and eventually remove, many public huts in the back country.

In the case of the Mount Cook hut privatisation, several official plans and policies exist covering the National Park, and the proposal

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referred to none of them. None of them, incidentally, would countenance such a proposal.

In the long run, tourism operators cut their own throats by proposals such as these.

No industry depending on friendly locals can survive significant unpopularity, and every new proposal will be furiously opposed if people reasonably believe that, as tourism goes forward, New Zealanders will suffer, and will more and more become poor relations or trespassers in their own country.

Already the Milford Track's

commercial lodges have "trespassers will be prosecuted" signs, and a sign near a touring hut by Ball Pass attempts to instruct the general public not to camp close to the hut.

Our hills and wild places are not the Crown's property, like an old off-ice block, to maximise the profit on. They are ours. We may visit them less often than we like, but we often think of them, and imagine we were there.

We are a nation dedicated to admirable principles of democracy, equality, and fraternity. Public lands should be the last place where segregation occurs. Huts in the hills are places for comradeship, not a division into haves and have-nots — with most locals firmly in the latter category.

Even our present Prime Minister, when she tramps or goes ski-touring, shares the same huts and bunks with whomever else happens to be there. This is how it should be.

National Parks are dedicated, not just to nature, but to an idea; they are the precious places of all of us, and they provide rest, reflection, inspiration, and peace. The aggressive business of tourism is as much the parks' enemy as ever logging or mining interests were.

Let us keep them, therefore, as the picture of what we are, and would like to be. This is the idea we all know, the idea tourists simply do not have time to learn; that the soul of each of us is strolling alone down a shingle road at sunset with our dog.

■ David Round is the national president of Federated Mountain Clubs.