

## **Tramper perspectives on New Zealand's Great Walks in a time of transition**

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### **Abstract**

We consider the network of 'Great Walks' established by New Zealand's Department of Conservation, examining their history, their branding and publicity. In light of the marketing and popularity of this network, we ask '*How have the contexts for recreational walking in the New Zealand wilderness changed?*' and '*How are these changes regarded by trampers, practitioners of backcountry leisure walking?*' To address these questions, we draw on responses to an on-line survey undertaken in 2012 that elicited the views of 703 trampers throughout New Zealand. We note a polarisation of regard for the nine 'Great Walks'. It appears that for many, the wilderness experience sought through tramping an expression of banal domestic tourism is undermined by the 'packaging' and popularity of these branded experiences. As further 'Great Walks' are proposed, with the implied imperatives of attracting overseas visitors and advancing regional development, the devaluing of the experience of (lower-case) 'great walks' for conventional trampers is considered.

### **Introduction**

With increasing numbers of visitors seeking adventure tourism experiences, and heightened attempts by government to market the conservation estate, the contexts for recreational walking in the New Zealand wilderness are rapidly changing. Notably, since 1987 a subset of the more scenic and hitherto challenging walks have been upgraded in terms of accommodation and track surface qualities as well as vigorously marketed. These walks, for which significant 'hut' fees are now levied, attract a wide range of walkers including both novice international 'backpacker' tourists and seasoned 'kiwi' walkers. For the latter group, wilderness walking has been traditionally known as 'tramping', a practice associated with 'getting away from it all', self-sufficiency, improvisation and enduring challenging conditions of weather and terrain. This practice of tramping and identity (being a trumper) is often contrasted with the more cosmopolitan label 'hiking' which, at least in New Zealand, connotes a tamer and less demanding leisure practice.

Walkers have varied motives for seeking wilderness experiences. Experienced local trampers might be motivated by a physical challenge, the opportunity to see new landscapes, a desire to spend time with friends or simply to 'escape' regular routines. In comparison family groups typically seek shared and/or educational experiences and the opportunity to introduce their children to the outdoors. Foreign

visitors to New Zealand often use tramping as a way to see the country at a relatively low cost and thus prioritise the more spectacular scenic attractions.

Tramping is often undertaken as an intermittent antidote to urban life given its chosen simplicity, improvisation and physical exertion. These sentiments extend to the 'hut', the usual destination for most who tramp. Staying in a basic shelter with little more than running water, an open fire, bunk beds and a 'long-drop' toilet adds to the experience of chosen simplicity (Kearns and Fagan, 2014). For many the challenge of the terrain combined with self-reliance and the basic privations of the hut are why they head into the wilderness. Indeed 'user expectations of huts are different to those of other buildings, to enhance the experience sought, instead of diminishing it, only a rudimentary level of services and facilities, including communal style living and sleeping, is expected by users' (Department of Building and Housing, 2008). This said, there are other user groups (families and foreign visitors) who appreciate the amenities provided by newer huts such as more space and solar-powered lighting. These competing user expectations have created challenges for the management of the conservation estate.

As we have noted earlier, 'traditional' trampers often regard newer and larger-scale huts with some disdain. In this paper we go beyond imputing tensions between the old and the new through reading 'between the lines' of visitor book inscriptions (Kearns and Fagan, 2014) to presenting views regarding recent developments in the The Department of Conservation (DoC) estate that have been directly sought from a sample of regular trampers. We ask two questions: '*How have the contexts for recreational walking in the New Zealand wilderness changed?*' and '*How are these changes regarded by trampers*'. We begin by surveying the emergence of tramping as a recreational practice in New Zealand as well as its infrastructure: tracks and huts. We then discuss the advent of a more managed form of wilderness walking (the 'Great Walks') and how this development has created a divide between the 'front country' and the 'backcountry.' This leads us into a detailed exploration of the varied responses to an online survey of outdoor track users, with particular focus on respondents' regard for the Great Walk system. We close by reflecting on the limitations and strengths of our approach and acknowledge that while the landscape of tramping in New Zealand has changed so has the attitudes and expectations of its users.

### **The genealogy of Great Walks**

New Zealand's tramping network emerged out of three eras of hut building. Tramping became increasingly popular following World War I and a number of outdoor recreation clubs formed. By way of example, the Tararua Tramping Club started building huts in the Tararua mountain range north of Wellington, primarily for shelter (Pawson, 2002). These initiatives were followed by an intensive period of hut and track building aiming to provide purpose-built accommodation and access for government hunters (employed to cull non-native introduced species such as deer). Initially this hut

building was carried out by the Department of Lands and Survey (DLS) but in 1956 The New Zealand Forestry Service (NZFS) assumed responsibility, leading to a ‘hut-building boom (in) the back country’ (Pickering 2004, 136). It is estimated that in total 750 huts were built for wild animal control (Department of Conservation, 2016a) and these simple, well-constructed NZFS huts form the basis of the hut network today.

In 1987 DoC was formed (an amalgamation of agencies including DLS, NZFS and the Wildlife Service) and it inherited the existing hut and track network. As part of its mandate to promote recreation DoC continued to build new huts and tracks. Not all huts were originally built for the recreational purpose they serve today, however. Some, such as at Port Craig (in Southland) and Cape Brett (Northland), were initially schools or houses and were later converted into huts.

After carrying out a recreational opportunity review DoC realised that the hut network was economically unsustainable. The increased popularity of tramping (boosted by large numbers of overseas visitors) was leading to overcrowding and environmental problems on a number of popular tracks. Consequently DoC introduced hut fees (in 1988), removed some huts and upgraded and rebranded some of the more popular tracks as ‘Great Walks’ (from 1987 onwards). These three to five day walks have since been heavily advertised and become increasingly iconic attractions for New Zealand tourism. DoC hoped that better tracks, larger (more expensive) huts and booking facilities would meet the ‘greater expectation of overseas visitors’ (Barnett and Maclean, 2014, 264).

Currently DoC manages 977 huts and 14000 kilometres of walking tracks (Department of Conservation, 2015) but it is the nine ‘Great Walks’ that have become important marketing assets for New Zealand tourism. Some of these ‘walks’ are more challenging than others, and one paradoxically involves paddling rather than walking (the Whanganui River journey). Three are in the North Island, five in the South and one on Stewart Island (see Figure 1). These tracks are said to ‘*showcase* New Zealand’s diverse and dazzling landscapes’ (emphasis added) (Orrell, 2006, 13) and are characterised as the country’s premier walking tracks. ‘Showcasing’ implies elements of display and grooming and, indeed, people of variable abilities can walk these tracks as they are well cut and maintained with clear signage ‘making it more difficult for novices...to get lost or injured whilst venturing into *true wilderness*’ (emphasis added) (Orrell, 2006, 13). Notwithstanding debates surrounding the corrosion of wilderness values through human intervention, the essential purpose of the Great Walks, is therefore to democratise access to otherwise inhospitable areas of remote and scenic landscape through the provision of a higher standard of infrastructure and management than is found elsewhere on the track network.

[Figure 1 about here]

A key feature of the Great Walks is that the huts are generally more robust and better cared for than on more remote and less popular tracks (Department of Conservation, 2016b) and wardens are usually present. Fees of up to \$54 NZD per night are charged to stay in communal, open plan and non-catered huts. In 2012 Air New Zealand and DoC agreed to a five and a half year partnership which saw the national carrier become a major sponsor of the Great Walks (Department of Conservation, 2016c). The Great Walks now regular feature in Air New Zealand's in-flight magazine and safety videos.

### **The Great Walks as Branded Wilderness Infrastructure**

While walking in more manicured settings has been identified as inherently sociable (Doughty, 2013) and mental health-promoting (Roe and Aspinall, 2011) traditional tramping is a practice primarily associated with an engagement with the 'natural' world, and one in which the reach of activity into wilderness areas has increased with the availability of technologies such as weather-resilient clothing and personal locator beacons (Ewert and Shultis, 1999). The notion of wilderness is problematic, however. Perceptions of wilderness are shaped by a range of factors – individual, societal and cultural (Stankey and Schreyer, 1987). Kliskey and Kearsley (1993, 204) suggest that 'wilderness is natural, unspoiled, wild, free and challenging.' Purists would argue that wilderness areas are 'untouched' and devoid of roads, bridges and other infrastructure such as tracks and huts. Generally, however, people's perception of wilderness varies greatly and the term is understood relative to one's experience of the world. For some 'wilderness' can be found by walking through a forested section of an urban park; for others only the remotest location would constitute wilderness.

As the development of tramping infrastructure continued (greatly aided by aircraft during late 1950s-70s) some felt that this 'eroded the wilderness' (Barnett and Maclean, 2014, 240). This view, combined with a strengthening of a New Zealand identity and an increased connection to our unique landscapes, led to a call for hut-free wilderness areas. According to Molloy, 'Ironically, the outdoor recreation community, which spent the previous 50 years promoting the development of roads, tracks and huts in the mountains, suddenly became concerned that there would soon be few truly wild places left' (in Barnett and Maclean, 2014, 243). This transition arguably was more inevitable (than ironic) as increased access to the wilderness resulted in more visitors and therefore more awareness of the country's unique flora and fauna. Between 1974-2006 eleven 'Wilderness Areas' were created in New Zealand in which there are no roads, buildings, tracks or bridges and motorised land and air vehicles are generally prohibited (Barnett and Maclean, 2014).

The nation's national park system has long been a major draw-card for especially younger international visitors who set out to 'do' the more well-known tracks (Higham, 1998). The commodification of landscape, and latterly the Great Walk system within the national parks, has been central to sustaining the nation's 'clean and green' and 100% Pure image (Morgan et al., 2002) which,

in turn, draws more international visitors seeking a choreographed sense of discovery and adventure (Cloke and Perkins, 1998).

To Reis (2012, 1), especially overseas trampers' experiences in New Zealand are 'modulated by a media-constructed and media-sold tourism'. Hence in her fieldwork in Rakiura National Park on Stewart Island, she noted the obsessive quest to see a kiwi as overriding the enjoyment of the landscape being traversed. We therefore join Reis in seeing the Great Walks as not only democratising access through improved infrastructure and the surveillance of wardens, but also as the tourism industry 'adding value to' and 'extracting revenue from' the natural world (2012, 6).

Drawing on the theorist, Debord, Reis (2012) argues that 'tourism and recreation, as well as nature and the experiences associated with it, are formatted and sold' (2012, 6). In particular, Great Walks 'appear as tourism products ...and (are) astutely marketed by the tourism industry' (2012, 7). Here we can draw a parallel with organised professional sport. In New Zealand, the All Blacks occupy a prominent place in the images associated with what might be collectively called 'Brand New Zealand' 'which does the work of globalising the New Zealand economy and building economic nationalism domestically' (Lewis and Winder 2007, 203). Thus, both the scenery encountered along the Great Walks and the masculine prowess of the national rugby team have become a key ingredients in marketing the nation. Both, significantly, have cultural origins in amateur encounters and practices (tramping and rugby) but have been subjected to 'the exploitation and commercialisation of a romance of identity' (Lewis and Winder, 2007, 203).

A distinguishing feature of the commodification of the Great Walk experience is that, whereas traditional tramping is characterised by improvisation and self-provisioning, Great Walks involve a 'bundle' of experiences that range from checking into the DoC Visitor Centre to uplift costly hut passes, often being shuttled to the beginning of the track by a commercial operator, participating in or encountering guided walking groups, and staying in well-appointed but invariably fully-occupied 'huts' or private lodges.

Clearly this 'bundled' set of experiences constitutes a very particular encounter with the 'wilderness'. To allow us to 'place' these Great Walks, we draw on Barnett and Maclean (2014, 246) who introduce the concept of a 'tramping continuum' with complete and infrastructure-free wilderness at one end and established walkways and state-of the art new-build huts at the other. The attitude and experience of users place them somewhere on this continuum and one's position (or preference) can change over time (a younger person or novice tourist beginning tramping will likely experience different expectations as they grow older/gain experience). In its management of the conservation estate DoC are constantly trying to balance the installation of infrastructure with the preservation of wilderness. As partnerships with businesses serve to further promote the Great Walks, however, questions can be raised as to where the balance lies in DoC's role between conservation and commercialisation.

## **Transitions in walking and wilderness in New Zealand**

New Zealand's tracks and huts have evolved into a network that exhibits an obvious divide between two distinct areas; the 'front country' and 'backcountry'. The backcountry contains physically challenging tracks and is populated by smaller, basic huts with simple facilities. The front country has well maintained, easier and clearly signposted tracks along with large comfortable huts equipped with gas stoves, heaters and sometimes even lighting. The remote nature of the backcountry huts means that users often find them empty or at least sparsely populated. In contrast the front country is popular, some would say crowded, and users must book the huts in advance.

DoC's management decisions, and the notion of a tramping continuum, have been significantly influenced by a number of significant events. The 1995 Cave Creek tragedy, when a viewing platform collapsed in Paparoa National Park killing 14 people, prompted widespread criticism. As a consequence DoC became increasingly risk adverse (Barnett and Maclean, 2014) and an era of standardisation followed (track quality and access improved, risk managed via wardens). DoC's continued recreational mandate means that they have prioritised 'front country' experiences (i.e. more accessible and well-patronised tracks). Significant budget cuts have also led to the rationalisation of the back country facilities. This includes a reduction in track and hut maintenance and the removal of seldom used huts or those requiring significant maintenance.

The government reduced DoC's budget by \$54 million in 2012 and by a further \$8.7 million in 2013 (Matthews, 2013). While DoC receives limited funding (\$343 million in 2015 (Green Party Press Release, 2015)) they nonetheless managed to develop new tracks/huts and upgrade popular existing ones. It is important to note that this decline in DoC funding coincided with a rapid increase in overseas visitors (Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, 2013), an increase in part influenced by the intensive marketing of New Zealand's 'clean and green' image (Barnett and Maclean, 2014) and more recently the 100% Pure campaign, something that DoC (with its limited funding) is at least partially, responsible for maintaining. Limited funding means DoC has sought corporate 'sponsorship' for specific projects including the promotion of the 'Great Walks' by Air New Zealand and hut maintenance with Dulux Paints.

As hut size, and associated facilities, on the Great Walks has increased a change in social relations among hut users (in relationships and the nature of interactions between users) has become evident. The more modest confines of smaller huts encourages communal living and shared experiences. The newer larger huts, with their more impersonal living spaces and artificial lights facilitate a very different hut experience and potentially a change in etiquette between users and towards the hut itself. However, it must be noted that the current tendency to construct larger huts is largely due to new building code regulations (and hence beyond DoC's control).

While the Milford track has had a booking system in place for independent walkers since the late 1960s (Patterson, 1995), DoC started introducing online booking systems for the other tracks in 1995 (initially the Routeburn, followed by the Abel Tasman in 1999). Today all of the 'Great Walks' and a number of other popular huts have booking systems in place between November and May. This has resulted in a more regulated experience and a shift in expectations. On the one hand, trampers no longer need to rush to the next hut to secure access to a bunk. However on the other hand, the spontaneity of being able to change one's plans or stay an extra night has effectively been removed. This situation also has implications for safety because when the weather turns inclement occupants are forced to push on to the next hut (as their bed has already been 'sold' to someone else). People have also been trying to flaunt the system by booking in non-existing (non-paying) infants to create more 'space' for themselves (stuff.co.nz, 2016). The expense of the Great Walk huts has also caused problems with people trying to avoid payment; free-camping between huts (with associated environmental issues) (Cook, 2016) or attempting to walk the tracks out of season (when facilities such as gas are turned off and bridges have been removed) (Back et al., 2014).

In many ways DoC's prioritisation of the 'Great Walks' is justifiable because they bring in revenue but this does mean that there is less funding available for the maintenance of existing backcountry tracks and huts. Consequently there is a trend towards community groups or organisations assuming responsibility for these assets. To aid this initiative the New Zealand Outdoor Recreation Consortium was formed and has received \$700,000 in funding to support volunteer maintenance projects on conservation land.

During the 2012/13 season 86,873 people undertook one of the nine 'Great Walks' (Smith, 2013). Since then numbers on the 'Great Walks' has been increasing by 10 percent each year (Cook, 2016). Well known tracks such as the Milford and Routeburn 'are running at an all-time high' and there are concerns that this 'congestion' may damage New Zealand's tourism reputation overseas (Newport, 2016).

At the same time the number of New Zealanders walking the 'Great Walks' is decreasing. Only 24.77% of people who walked the Kepler track in 2014-15 season were New Zealanders (Nicoll and Mack, 2016). There is a suggestion that this is because tourists book their trips months in advance whereas New Zealanders make decisions more spontaneously (and thus miss out on a bed). However our research tends to imply that there are other reasons.

In summary, the Great Walks were developed out of a quest to democratise and better manage access to the outdoors while also servicing the increased demands of an expanding population of tourists. While most would agree that the Great Walks have achieved this dual purpose, their development has also paved the way for change in New Zealand's tramping landscape. Contemporary trampers are faced with a choice: a 'front country,' providing managed and manicured experiences within some of

the more spectacular landscapes; or a 'backcountry,' with an abundance of more remote and challenging offerings receiving less attention by DoC . We sought to examine views on this choice from a cohort of established trampers via an online survey, the method and results of which we now describe.

## **Method**

After gaining institutional ethics approval we created an anonymous online questionnaire that was hosted on [www.surveymonkey.net](http://www.surveymonkey.net). A link to this survey was sent to New Zealand based tramping clubs and outdoor organisations (Federated Mountain Clubs, New Zealand Alpine Club, New Zealand Deer Stalkers Association etc.) and posted on dedicated New Zealand tramping, hunting and travel websites/forums. The survey was made available for two months (January and February) in 2012. During that period, 703 responses were received.

The survey contained 20 questions, four establishing respondent demographics, four investigating their outdoor experience and 12 asking for their opinion on tramping huts and tracks within New Zealand. In this paper we focus on two questions:

- *What are your feelings about the network of Great Walks in New Zealand?*
- *How important are the following hut facilities or services?*

The former question was open ended and the latter required respondents to evaluate a number of options as either 'Essential', 'Beneficial', 'Not needed' or 'Not wanted'.

Many respondents appear to have taken considerable time to offer detailed comments, presumably because the format allowed them to complete the questionnaire in their own time. The software allowed us to note how long each person spent completing the survey, and some spent up to an hour with one taking 102 minutes to respond to the questions.

We initially explored responses through SurveyMonkey's in-built data analysis function. The complete data set was then exported to both Excel and SPSS. We coded responses for further analysis and both authors read and discussed responses multiple times to identify themes and extract indicative comments for further consideration, following an adapted sequence of Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of analysis. First, we familiarised ourselves with the data, then searching for and reviewing themes. Rather than fit the data into a pre-identified framework, we ensured our analysis was data-driven (following an inductive approach). However, we acknowledge that our categories and themes are not purely emergent from the data but rather we aided their development through our own experiences as recreational trampers as well as social researchers.

## **Participant characteristics**



Of the 703 respondents 65% were men and 35% women, with 90% of respondents identifying themselves as New Zealanders or as living in the country. Most of the foreign respondents were from the United Kingdom, the United States or Australia. Reflecting the typical membership of New Zealand tramping clubs (the predominant audience for the survey) respondents tended to be older (50% were over 50 years old) and experienced (73% had over 10 years' tramping experience). Hut visitation among respondents was high: 42% estimated that they had stayed in over 50 huts and almost 18% had stayed in over 100 huts. While 12% of respondents identified themselves as hunters, most of the remaining respondents preferred the more remote back country tracks (50%) or both these and the Great Walks (47%). Only a few (2%) preferred just the Great Walks. This latter group typically had less experience with 64% having stayed in five or less huts.

### **Ambivalence towards managed walking**

We initially explore responses to the question: *What are your feelings about the network of Great Walks in New Zealand?* (Table 1). As is evident, although on balance most responses were positive, only just over a quarter (27%) were emphatically so. Others (42%) despite having a positive response also expressed concerns about the Great Walks. Approximately 15% of respondents had an outright or qualified negative regard for the Great Walk system. A smaller number remained indifferent or neutral on the subject. Interestingly of the 12% of respondents who identified themselves as hunters the proportion of completely positive (25%) or only negative (20%) respondents was roughly similar. However a much larger proportion of hunters (30%) did not answer the question or felt unable to comment. We now seek to uncover some of the nuanced feelings that lie behind these coarse initial assessments.

[Table one about here]

Of all those who expressed some form of positive response to the Great Walks (484 respondents) (see Table 2) approximately 30% commented that they provide a good introduction to tramping and/or cater for a range of users. While a further quarter felt that the Great Walks were good for tourists it is important to point out that the majority of these responses came from people who had mixed (both positive and negative) attitudes towards the Great Walks. The sentiment '*I see their place, for tourist*' but '*I'll leave them for the tourists*' is evident. The provision of scenic experiences (12%) and benefits for New Zealand tourism (10%) were also recognised. A number of respondents (8%) acknowledged that the Great Walks provide a '*safe environment*' for people to access the outdoors. Of these respondents a significantly larger proportion came from those with a purely positive perspective. Five percent of positive respondents appear to appreciate the Great Walks because they concentrate users

in one high use area while leaving other wilderness areas comparatively empty. Almost all of the respondents (88%) who expressed this viewpoint came from those with both positive and negative opinions, indicating that this is not an entirely positive response. For example one respondent commented, *'They're great - they take the pressure off the truly "great walks"'*. The concentration of users in one area was also seen by a minority of respondents as positive in terms of reducing environmental impact. A handful of people also liked the booking system. Interestingly of all the purely positive respondents over a third (36%) failed to provide a clear reason for why they actually liked the Great Walks.

[Table 2 about here]

The feelings of those who expressed some form of negative response (n=404) to the Great Walks was more obvious (see Table 3). Only 10% of these respondents failed to provide a reason for their negative position. The main negative reactions were that the Great Walks are expensive (35%) and overcrowded (34%). Indeed 46% of those with a purely negative perspective felt that the Great Walks were *'toooooo expensive'* and *'priced out of reach of New Zealanders'*. Also evident among those with a completely negative viewpoint was that the Great Walks are *'catering for the overseas tourist'* (32%). While this reduced to 16% when taking into account those with both positive and negative attitudes this topic appears to be particularly emotive. One respondent referred to the Great Walks as *'overpriced international tourist conveyor belts'* and another commented that they *'tend to exclude New Zealanders.'* A strong anti-tourist sentiment was evident in some comments such as *'I resent the fact that visitors to our country make these places much less appealing to local people.'* Others asked questions such as *'Why is DoC providing such mansions for foreign walkers to enjoy [while] the upkeep of these building [is] still the responsibility of NZers?'* Another (a German/NZer) stated *'I feel that every area that becomes a Great Walk is taken away from Kiwis.'* In summary, a strong narrative among respondents spoke of the costs of provisioning on the Great Walks and associated with tensions regarding overcrowding that lead to disdain for both the numbers and proportion of *'foreigners'* among walkers.

Some (14%) felt that the Great Walk tracks and huts were too developed and that this was changing the wilderness experience (8%). One respondent wrote about *'gentrified tramping.'* Others felt that *'the standard of track is too high - they've been sanitised to reduce some of the risk'* and *'there's no need for gas and lights in those huts - that's not what tramping in NZ should be about.'* A smaller number didn't like the booking system (7%) stating that it was *'restrictive'* and *'does not allow for spontaneity.'* As one respondent put it: *'For several Great Walks, it's no longer a practical option to pick up and visit on short notice. It has to be planned and booked months in advance, competing with*

*thousands of people from overseas.* Others felt that the Great Walks were being developed at the expense of the rest of the network (6%) and that *'DoC is transferring the GW model into places that aren't or weren't great walks.'* A minority of respondents (3%) felt that the Great Walks were too expensive to construct and maintain.

[Table 3 about here]

Of the smaller number of respondents (6.7%) who were neutral or indifferent to the Great Walks (see Table 4) 44% felt that they served a purpose and a further 18% added that the current number are sufficient. Generally there appears to be a sentiment that the Great Walks are *'there to serve a purpose and they do it very well'* but the use of the phrase *'necessary evil'* provides a slightly less enthusiastic interpretation. The notion that *'we should keep and maintain the existing ones but not create anymore'* appears throughout the wider collection of comments (particularly from those with both positive and negative responses). Some respondents discussed the financial gain provided by the Great Walks and would like to see the revenue being *'distributed to the backcountry huts'*, while others are happy *'as long as it goes back into the area of tramping/conservation.'* It is clear that a significant number of respondents feel that the Great Walks are too expensive and a few took this further suggesting the idea of two tier pricing – *'a lower price for New Zealand citizens and the higher price for tourist visitors.'*

[Table 4 about here]

When ignoring all respondents who were neutral, ambivalent, or provided incomplete answers, the most frequent individual response to the question *What are your feelings about the network of Great Walks in New Zealand?* were as follows: 'expensive' (143 responses), 'overcrowded' (136), 'good for tourists' (118), 'provide a good introduction to tramping' (98), 'full of tourists' (66), 'provide scenic experiences' (58) and 'too developed' (58).

Similarly the most common word used in responses expressing to *feelings about the network of Great Walks in New Zealand* was *tourists* (25%) was *tourists* (25%). This was followed by *Great Walks* (16%), *huts* (15%), *tramping* (15%), *tracks* (12%) and *expensive* (9%). Considering that other descriptors were often used to describe tourists (such as *overseas visitors* (2%)) this reinforces the notion that a significant proportion of people associate the Great Walks with tourists and/or tourism.

There was no clear difference in gender between those with purely positive and negative responses. Age may play a role with younger people (<29 yrs) appearing to slightly more frequently express a negative attitude towards the Great Walks. In terms of experience, there was a subtle shift in the other direction: those with purely positive attitudes towards the Great Walks tended to have slightly less tramping experience. For example, of those with purely positive perspectives on the Great Walks 26% had been tramping <10 yrs, while of those with only negative perspectives 17% had the same amount of experience. A similar, but less obvious, trend can be seen when considering trampers with very little experience (ie those who had have stayed in only five or fewer huts). This data suggests that less experienced trampers have marginally more appreciation of the Great Walks than those with more experience. We should note here that people can start tramping at any stage of their life and so age and experience are not always strongly related.

Of the 68 respondents who were clearly foreign (i.e., did not mention any ties to NZ in their answers), 26% were completely positive, 53% were both positive and negative and 12% were only negative. These are roughly similar proportionally to the results shown by those respondents who are from NZ or had ties here. Overall 79% of foreigners had something positive to say about the Great Walks (compared to 67% of NZers or those who stated they lived in the country). However 64% of foreigners also had something negative to say (compared to 57% of NZers). It seems that NZers or those who stated they lived in the country were more ambivalent than visitors (it was not possible to tell how many foreigners were actually visiting NZ and it is conceivable that some live here).

Clearly huts, as the sole form of accommodation along Great Walks and other DoC-maintained tracks (other than the lesser-undertaken tenting option), are a key concern for trampers. We next report on what hut facilities or services were deemed important to respondents (see Table 5).

[Table 5 about here]

As Table 5 shows, respondents expressed a clear preference for essentials relating to the most basic physiological needs (availability of shelter, water, and somewhere to sleep). That 'toilets' didn't register as essential for many may reflect an association between that word and 'flush' toilets, which are now found at most Great Walks huts, whereas conventional back country huts have dug-out 'long drops'. The absence of a radio, mattresses, fireplace and firewood as 'essential' reflects the self-provisioning tradition among trampers, many of whom are accustomed to huts above the tree-line without fireplaces, gathering wood if there is a fireplace, carrying a foam bedroll in lieu of expecting a mattress and having a personal locator beacon for safety. A further point is that a hut warden, stationed at all Great Walks huts over the summer season, along with lighting (solar-powered and now

present in many Great Walks huts) are expressly not wanted by most respondents who are tacitly indicating a dissonance between these innovations and the conventional practice of tramping.

## **Discussion**

The 'Great Walks' play an important role in tourism, showcasing New Zealand and providing clear marketing 'icons' and, in so doing, create recreational opportunities for a range of users. The booking system reduces the uncertainty of finding a spare bunk and provides an appropriate (and safe) entry point for less experienced walkers. By way of example, elements of the 'soft' infrastructure of the Great Walks such as hut wardens provide an element of tacit chaperoning that offers comfort to the novice, but irritation to the veteran. We have presented a historical overview of their development and the attitudes these heavily promoted tracks and their huts engender among a sample of potential and actual users.

At the outset, it is important to note the vantage point of respondents: exactly half were over 50 years of age, implying a likelihood that they were tramping prior to the branding of the 'Great Walks'. Notwithstanding this depth of experience, on balance more positive than negative assessments of the 'Great Walks' were reported, highlighting a strength of 'buy-in' to a style of walking practice and accommodation that is not necessarily their preference. Some respondents also recognised the benefits of the Great Walks stating that they make it easier to manage environmental impacts by confining these impacts to a smaller area as well as increasing environmental awareness (by exposing a wider audience to our landscapes (through tramping)).

Many traditional trampers are prepared to tolerate the Great Walks as they keep people away from the more remote areas they prefer to explore themselves (*'a necessary evil'* as five respondents stated). Others felt that the current tracks were acceptable, preferred that no more Great Walks were established, or felt that the funds accrued from hut fees should be spent on conservation or returned to the backcountry. Some suggested the 'Great Walks' were good as winter options (when there are fewer visitors and fees are reduced) and should be cheaper for New Zealanders (two-tier pricing), a view that has gained some support in the media (Dominion Post, 2016).

Many of the negative comments about the 'Great Walks' were predictable. They were seen as overcrowded, expensive and too developed. These factors have contributed to changing the wilderness experience (i.e. the facilities are beyond what the typical New Zealand trampers want). Given the imposition of higher fees and the redevelopment of some older huts on higher use tracks, there is concern among long-time hut users that the 'Great Walk' approach will consume other popular tracks and huts.

Many respondents made a strong connection between the Great Walks and tourists stating that *'they are set up for tourists'* or *'aimed at making money out of the tourist market.'* At the same time even

more people felt that the Great Walks were expensive and overcrowded and thus there appears to be a tendency to associate these two concerns, some would say unfairly, with the tourists. While, unfortunately, clear disdain for foreigners is evident, most of these negative connotations can be linked to concerns over numbers (*'We often fell out numbered in our own country'*) and cost (*'NZ citizens should be able to use these huts at a cheaper rate than foreigners'*), rather than with the characteristics of the tourists themselves. A minority expressed concerns about tourists not paying for huts (although presumably they are referring to backcountry huts and not the Great Walks here) or their lack of environmental awareness. Correspondingly another minority mentioned positive interactions with tourists, such as, *'we have meet many interesting people from all over the world.'*

Reflecting on our approach (i.e. surveying established and mainly New Zealand-based outdoor walkers), we can identify both limitations and strengths. Limitations of our online method include a response weighted in favour of those who are members of tramping clubs and relevant outdoor organisations and/or who frequent tramping, hunting or travel websites/forums. Hence, one could argue that the sample does not reflect the breadth of current track and hut users. To do this would require surveying inside huts currently in use, an approach we trialled but one which is logistically and institutionally more difficult. Instead our data conveyed the views of those who have used huts in the recent past. However, these limitations are countered by several distinct advantages: we were able to readily access an enthusiastic cohort of respondents, many of whom invested considerable time into composing their responses. Further, there were practical bonuses: the fact respondents typed in their views meant that no transcription of responses was required and the inbuilt analysis function of surveymonkey allowed an ease of initial analysis of quantitative, 'closed' questions.

Our study has added relevance not only because of the prominence of the existing suite of Great Walks in the promotion of New Zealand's conservation estate, but also because a more widespread application of the Great Walks the 'brand' is being proposed. In that respect there are currently proposals to create more 'Great Walks', often built on a perception these tracks provide economic opportunities for businesses in the surrounding area and hence contribute to regional development. Cape Reinga and the Waipoua Kauri Forest in Northland as well as the Coromandel Coast, and Lake Tarawera in the Central North Island have all recently appeared in the news as options. Significantly, however, none of the foregoing proposals have been advanced by DoC, but rather by local councils or business interests seeking to deploy the 'brand', presumably in the quest to attract visitors. The only confirmed candidate is in Paparoa National Park on the West Coast of the South Island which aims to link existing tracks in memory of the 29 miners who died in the Pike River mine in 2010. This development will reportedly cost \$10 M NZD with DoC will receive extra funding for this purpose. (Smith, 2015; stuff.co.nz, 2015; Newstalk ZB, 2015).

## **Conclusion**

As Bell (2008, 353) has remarked, ‘...off the beaten track... can become beaten into something of a highway’. As the infrastructural and promotional landscape of tramping has changed in New Zealand so have the attitudes and expectations of users. As our data have shown, while some fear the implications of future development, others become used to well-appointed front country ‘huts’ and thus have heightened expectations for the rest of the network.

The use of the name ‘Great *Walk*’, and not tramp or hike, suggests a degree of ease, a clearing of a path or a smoothing out of the wilderness. With the popularity of Great Walks the tramping accommodation network is changing and catering for new constituencies of users. This situation has led to what appears from our analysis to be growing concern that DoC has become a tourism promoter at the expense of maintaining and sustaining (local) public recreation. In an environment of budgetary cuts, it is a challenge for DoC to balance traditional user expectations, their own recreational mandate and commercial pressures, particularly when the ‘front country’ provides revenue and the ‘backcountry’ does not. Indeed, DoC’s promotion of Great Walks may well reflect a broader shift in societal perception of engagement with and in wilderness towards a more managed experience, epitomised in the trend towards costly guided walks and boutique lodges.

This trend provides little solace for those who continue to seek remote locations and rudimentary conditions. Nonetheless, the tenor of response within our survey was generally sympathy for a style of engagement with the ‘great outdoors’ that is at odds with respondents’ own preferences. However it does appear from our data that under the current management structure the traditional kiwi trumper is beginning to feel undervalued. It also appears likely that this situation is not a temporary phase, as noted in DoC’s recent challenge to trampers to ‘use it or lose it’ with respect to more remote huts and tracks (Martin 2016). Users are thus beginning to assume greater stewardship over the resources of tracks and huts with community and club-based efforts to extend the life of huts and keep tracks open.

Interestingly it seems that momentum is shifting towards either end of the tramping continuum. On one hand more funds are being directed to the development and maintenance of the ‘Great Walks’ and other managed walkways and tracks. At the other end less funding for maintenance means that some backcountry huts and tracks are being neglected and will eventually be removed/become overgrown – thus returning these environments to a more wilderness state.

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