

Ecotourism on the West Coast

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Abstract

With the largest conservation estate in the country, the West Coast of the Southern Alps is, in many ways, an ideal place in which to grow the theory and practice of ecotourism. At the same time, though, the driver industries within the region create tensions that have the potential to threaten this. This presentation examines the practice of ecotourism in the current context of this region, and suggests some possibilities for enhancement.

Intro

The West Coast has 8% of New Zealand's land mass and 1% of its population. The conservation estate – land that comes within the definition of the National Parks Act 1980 – accounts for 87% of the region's area (compared to 26% for New Zealand as a whole). Physically isolated by an alpine fault, it stretches from Kahurangi Point in the north to Awarua Point in the south, a distance of some 550 kilometres – the distance between Auckland and Wellington.

The West Coast economy in the 19th century was based on the utilisation of the region's natural resources, notably gold, timber and coal. Early in the 20th century, farming came to prominence in the regional economy. Tourism - long established at the region's two glaciers, has recently begun to rival agriculture and mining in economic importance.

The region has recorded sustained economic growth above 3% per annum since Year 2000 and also above the national figure since 2003. Growth peaked in mid 2004 at over 5%. Despite a fall since then, the rate of growth over the March 2006 year, at some 4%, was still well ahead of the national result.

In 2006, direct tourist expenditure on the West Coast is predicted to be in the order of \$320m, and to grow to \$416m by 2011. Tourism now employs the most people on the Coast, and is the greatest contributor to household income, notwithstanding that it is amongst the most lowly-paid, least productive and least profitable sectors.

Predictions are that total visitor nights on the West Coast tourist numbers will rise by an average of 3.7% annually over the next five years, and that most of that rise will come from the international market (5.8% annual growth). By 2011, there will be a total of 1.14 million visitors yielding around 3 million visitor nights.

The West Coast arguably demonstrates more starkly than anywhere else in the country the tensions involved in sustainable economic development. Its three driver

industries – dairying, mining and tourism – often have competing interests and influence. For example:

- run-off from dairy farms can degrade trout fishing and kayaking rivers that are an important source of income from tourists
- the coal and gold mining industries seek access to resources that reside wholly or partially within the conservation estate that is a major drawcard for tourists
- rapidly increasing tourism numbers put pressure on local infrastructure – funded by local rates income. That increases the costs of dairying, and provides intense competition for labour.
- many of the tourist attractions draw heavily on the heritage that has been created by the mining activities of the past. The implication is that current mining activities are creating future attractions.

An important component in the resolution of these tensions is the sustainability of the developments that are occurring, and the recognition of the interconnectedness of the sectors. For example:

- the health and wealth of the region will not be advanced if the effects of dairying or an increase in coal and dairying trucks on the roads lead to tourist perception that the region is not clean or safe. (The Coast already suffers in the domestic market from misperceptions about its weather!)
- the infrastructure to cope with the projected increase in tourist numbers will put serious pressure on the 13% of land that is not in the conservation estate, and the pressure will spill over into the conservation estate itself
- increasing activity on the part of the extractive industries has the potential to erode the perception of the region as a destination for ecotourists.

Ecotourism

Attitudes to the development of eco-tourism on the West Coast are inextricably linked to the context in which it is occurring. In 1986, following a prolonged campaign by conservation groups to stop the logging of indigenous forests, the (then) recently-elected Labour government entered into an accord with the regional local authority, conservation groups and the timber industry to allow such logging provided that the forest areas in which it was allowed (some 10-15% of the total forested area) were managed in such a way as to allow a continuing supply of indigenous timber in perpetuity. The balance was placed under the management of the Department of Conservation, which has a duty under the National Parks Act 1980 (section 4(2)) to ensure that national parks are “...preserved as far as possible in their natural state.”

In 2000, in response to a campaign that had continued, the (again) recently-elected Labour government controversially cancelled the West Coast Accord, withdrew (by 31 March 2002) state-owned natural forests from management that included timber production, and reclassified them for conservation purposes. \$120 million was made available to the West Coast by way of compensation - \$7 million to each of the three local authorities immediately; the balance to a Trust that would be able to access it following completion of a regional economic development strategy.

The region's Economic Development Strategic Plan (2002) included, inter alia, an aspiration to be recognised as a centre of excellence for eco-tourism, and specific targets relating to the increase of visitor numbers for 'eco-experiences'. This was

included in the plan because Tai Poutini Polytechnic had researched the feasibility of establishing a centre for eco-tourism, which would co-ordinate the development and provide training and education. The aspiration of the Polytechnic is that the centre should, over time, build an international reputation in the field and it holds the view that, in order for this to occur, the centre will need to sit within a wider environment that is congruent with its aims.

This will require, amongst other things, coherence in the planning and resource-use policies of the four local authorities and the Department of Conservation. Growing this coherence will require the support of public sector leaders, both politicians and officers.

In September 2002, I took up the position as Project Director for ecotourism. In the period between my appointment in May and actually taking up the position, I completed a dissertation that examined the relationship between ecotourism and health improvement, and looked at the views of public sector leaders on the Coast about ecotourism. I will come back to this shortly.

The position came about as a result of work - carried out, mainly by Kevin Piper, on the Polytechnic's commission - which researched the potential for ecotourism training in the region. In February 2003 the Certificate in Ecotourism was offered for the first time. John Kennedy will on Friday outline the developments in education and training.

In the time since, considerable work has been done to scope the potential for a Centre of Excellence that might include - as well as education and training - emphases on research and development, marketing and accreditation, and to begin the development. This conference is one of the steps in that process.

As well, the Polytechnic last year set out to research the education and training needs of the wider tourism industry on the Coast. The first phase of the research is complete. It includes a comprehensive mapping of the industry in a way that we understand to be unique in New Zealand. Sandra Rhodda will be reporting the results on Friday, but I want now to draw on that research in order to sketch an outline of ecotourism businesses in the region.

On the RTO website (Tourism West Coast), there are 13 businesses listed that probably fit within the parameters of ecotourism. In Sandra's survey, 17 of the responding operators said they offered mixed sightseeing and/or nature tours, although only 7 estimated that more than 50% of their income was derived from these activities. The Department of Conservation has granted concessions to 65 people or businesses to operate within the West Coast conservancy the sorts of activities that might fit the parameters (how would you classify guided mountain biking trips, or guided jet boat tours; or horse treks or guided kayaking?). 19 of those are clearly West Coast owned or based so it is clear that, even if that number was in fact 50% higher, there would still be less than half the operations that are locally operated.

That might not matter: it is likely that in terms of the volume of business, local operators predominate, but the literature does put emphasis on local control of

ecotourism operations as one of the key parameters. In part, I believe, that is because of issues relating to intellectual property. If ecotourism is about telling the stories of the environment – the ecological stories, and the stories of exploration and exploitation – does it matter who tells them? There is certainly a strongly-made claim by Mana Whenua in this region – Ngati Waewae and Ngati Maahaki – that there are stories of Pounamu (greenstone) that are theirs; and amongst Maori more generally there are claims to ownership of some ways of telling the stories of other environments. I hope that, at this conference, we find time to tease out some of these issues.

If you Google “ecotourism west coast New Zealand” on the New Zealand pages, the first 2 (of 27,000) results are Tai Poutini Polytechnic – one of which points to the programme for this conference. The next points to Auckland’s west coast. Fourth is (at last) a West Coast operator – a lodge that offers guided fishing & hunting, ecotourism experiences and nature tours. Only one other West Coast operator features in the top 10 – a Punakaiki hotel that brands itself as an ecotourism hotel.

A conclusion is that, if you want to find ecotourism operators on the West Coast, you have to be determined; and you have to have the persistence to follow links. I think we need to do better than that.

I indicated earlier the research I did in 2002 and, as part of setting ecotourism into its West Coast context, I’ll offer a brief overview.

At the time, there was still bitterness about the renege on the logging accord:

...you have to look at the recent history on the West Coast. The denial of the Government for indigenous logging extraction from Government estates has caused a number of problems, because they keep saying, “We are going to take your forestry away, but we are going to be able to give you eco-tourism”. And people didn’t like that. So I think there is a certain amount of distrust as to what eco-tourism is

.....and they are still recovering from the fact that the Coast thought it was on to a winner with sustainable indigenous logging. It could have been a world beater. And to have it thrown in our face and thrown thirty gold coins - that is the attitude. And that’s a pretty common attitude throughout.

The decision to stop sustainable logging was seen as being made on political grounds, to appease objections from other parts of the country

The West Coast is the conscience of Aucklanders....

...the public perception is that the Coast was being raped and pillaged and therefore it had to stop...

and that now gives rise to uncertainty and nervousness about the trustworthiness of government promises.

That's one of the things which has made it difficult for people to want to invest on the Coast is that so much of it is that political whim. And people have

been reluctant to invest on the Coast because they don't know what sort of change is around the corner.

The position of the Department of Conservation (DoC) as the 'owner' of most of the West Coast's physical resources contributes to this uncertainty

...they are the major landowner; they are the one with the access denial or granting processes....

...when 90% of the land is locked-up, virtually for any sort of meaningful development, that is significant.

because the process of getting consent to use the DoC estate for commercial purposes is seen as cumbersome and time-consuming,

I think the biggest hurdle is inaction within DoC. They have got a pretty cumbersome process for dealing with consents

.....one of the biggest issues is the length of time it takes to do anything...three years on average.

not conducive to establishing businesses,

One of the issues I guess is that you have got the tension between the use of the resource which DoC controls in that significant chunk, and the fact that you have got a lot of small business operators who can't afford to spend a lot of time and resource getting concessions and so on

and with outcomes dependent on inflexible, nationally-established criteria

there are restrictions in accessing land because they are governed to a certain extent by national policies which don't really apply in a lot of cases for the extent of estate that we have got here and the sparsity of population that we have got. Impact could be quite minimal, but it still has to go through those rigid tests for high-impact operations.

There is a bit of that sense of, "What are they going to stop us from doing next?"

A legacy of the decision to stop the logging of indigenous timber is that the discourse around conservation issues is framed in terms of 'extremist' Greens having won the battle of political influence at the expense of the majority of West Coast residents who, whilst strongly conservation-minded, are 'sensible' in their approach.

West Coasters are greenies but not extremists. Most of the beauty we've got here is because West Coasters have looked after it. Most other areas of New Zealand have been clear-felled and dumped (but) there has been a pretty responsible attitude taken to the West Coast

I just know that as soon as you mention "Green" to people on the Coast, it's like putting a red rag to a bull

I'm not a Greenie at all. And if you speak to most West Coasters - and we'll all say the same thing...we're not Greenies but we're certainly conservationists

The upshot is that there are dissonant messages perceived. On the one hand, eco-tourism is held out as being an important part of the future economy, but on the other, there is fear that the 'Greens' and their DoC allies will succeed in restricting the

numbers of people who are able to enjoy what the Coast has to offer, and a scepticism about whether it will ever be possible to make successful eco-tourism operations in other than the 'top end' market

...and if (the eco-tourism opportunities) really are there and just waiting to be capitalised on ... you would have thought that private enterprise would have worked its way into those nooks and crannies. But it hasn't. And I suspect that that suggests that it's actually quite difficult to do...

And I think a lot of people tick the box saying "I think rainforest and whales are really good" but I don't know that they are actually prepared to pay someone \$60 or \$70 per head to take them into that. And that's the challenge faced by the Coast.

The frustration is more keenly felt because of the enthusiasm and pride people have for the Coast and its natural assets.

...having grown up here, everything is just natural. You know, it's all taken for granted. You drive down the road and waterfalls are coming down there or you go down to the lakes and the fish are jumping and.....it's just everyday occurrence...the Heaphy Track for example – it's world-renowned

...With eco-tourism I believe it is something that you can't really touch, but you have an inner feeling for it. That's the way I would sum it up. So that people can come through, get that buzz, that feeling, and something will stay with them all of their life.

...compare our tourism icons on the West Coast – glaciers, blowholes, seal colony, Oparara arches and things – ...to Queenstown. They are all things that you can actually visit free...

and they are keen to share this landscape with others, not just for the economic benefits, but also in the belief that those who visit will be better for it and will want to come back

The more people that go through that sort of experience, hopefully, the better they are attuned to life itself. I mean they relate ... if you are driving around London or New York or some of those places it's just like a concrete maze. You just don't get a feeling for life, birth, death, growth and everything else. Coming through areas like the West Coast you automatically get that very quickly in most cases...

Although it has been imposed, the development of tourism in general – and eco-tourism as a sub-set - is important for economic growth, but the seasonality makes it difficult to do

Well one of the big problems with tourism, eco- or not, is that the period is a six-month period.

On the other hand, if it grew to levels that would give the economic return hoped for, the infrastructure could not cope

...some of our infrastructure just can't cope with it. We can't cope with what we've got...

Every dollar we've got goes into core functions. Anything pretty around the edges doesn't get it. And a lot of that is absolutely critical

...one of the difficulties the West Coast faces of course with the likes of the Punakaiki blowholes is that we as ratepayers bear the full burden of paying for the toilets and the servicing...

Neither are the resources readily available to improve the infrastructure

...So it's a very small population based through a very large area. And the dollars that can be generated within here to publicise, advertise, encourage people to come here is minimal in the scheme of things. ...It's no good talking about eco-tourism and what they can develop when they are here. You've got to get them here first. And we haven't got the ability financially to do that.

DoC's position as the major landowner is an issue here.

...one of the biggest problems also in terms of the local councils is we actually get no rates off that land.

although it is not a simple issue

when people say, "Look, we are not getting any rates off all this other land", there's actually no services that the rating-base is trying to provide out there. And certainly if that land were to be rated, then (they'd) be expecting (that) the services that (they) currently provide (would be provided) from that rating-base.

Some argue that DoC could help by charging visitors for access to its sites, and using the income to help with infrastructure costs,

...there is a lot of free public access around the place where you can see the seals for free, see the rocks for free...

but doing so would require alteration to entrenched viewpoints

I think the principle of paying for access to public land is a bit of an anathema to New Zealand¹. The Government have certainly never given any indication that they are prepared to tackle that. And I think that New Zealanders in reality wouldn't be very keen to tackle that.

And we all visit them too. We live here. So we say, "Why should we have to pay?"It's an expectation of the rest of New Zealand too, isn't it? What they come to the West Coast to get, they get free.

In this context, the development of eco-tourism requires a number of components, including selling the concept to the populace

There is an internal PR exercise required where Coasters would understand that this would actually be done on their terms... what is the average Coaster going to get out of this? And is it really going to be run by them or run by DoC?

. We've got to have the local community buy into it. And we have got to have everyone thinking along the same wavelength. They have got to know that the best way to get dollars put back into the environment is to get dollars out of the tourists.

¹

In summary, then public sector leaders on the West Coast generally expressed enthusiasm about the possibilities for developing eco-tourism activities in the area; but the enthusiasm had a desperate edge to it. Increasing the economic activity was seen as urgent, but there was a strong belief that they were forced to accept tourism generally – and eco-tourism in particular – as a second-best option after the removal of what they saw as their successful efforts to develop sustainable logging. They were therefore sceptical about the willingness of the Government generally – and therefore the ability of the Department of Conservation in particular – to act in such a way as to allow ecotourism developments to occur. Further, they felt bound by the seasonality of the tourist trade to develop alternative sources of income as well, but didn't have a clear view of what these might be.

Their experience with the loss of sustainable logging of indigenous forests led them to believe that their destiny was in fact controlled by an 'extremist' Green lobby, which is able to mobilise sufficient opinion in the urban areas – predominantly Auckland – to exert political pressure that the 31,000 people on the Coast cannot match.

Proud of their environment, and keen to show it to others, they felt that they could not do it unaided, because just 10% of the land provides rating income for local authorities. They were therefore struggling to provide such basic amenities as sufficient toilets to cope with the number of tourists who currently visit the area, and wondered how they would cope with an expanded tourist population, even if they could resource the marketing exercises needed to attract more visitors.

That was 2002. Since then there has been a significant change in the people who were occupying the positions – for example, all of the mayors and two of the TLA chief executives have changed. I'm not sure that views will have changed much, though: the tensions remain. However the economy is more buoyant, and my sense is that the edge of desperation has receded.

Within the last two months, the West Coast Development Trust and New Zealand Trade & Enterprise have announced a Major Regional Initiative which will invest \$6 million in the continued development of tourism, including the development of a Centre of Excellence for ecotourism.

The way ahead? I think we will continue to get better at selling the telling of the environmental and heritage stories of this unique region. It is important, though, for ecotourism operators on the West Coast to develop a shared understanding of the potential for collaboration in developing their products, becoming familiar with each others' products, and passing people on; and for developing a collective voice that enables Coasters to see the benefits of ecotourism.

And I hope that we can develop similar collaboration with operators in other parts of the country

The story of ecotourism in the region can take its place as a continuous narrative alongside the heritage and environmental stories, and I expect that this conference will feature as one of the important developments.