

Astronomical show of support for dark sky status to help boost tourism

Waiheke is on the cusp of International Dark Sky accreditation after years of outreach and community engagement. Recent feedback on the 2020 draft Waiheke Local Board Plan saw a massive 91 percent of respondents say they want dark sky status for the island. A swathe of letters from a range of organisations was also submitted in support of the initiative, which will help to protect the island's wildlife and decrease unnecessary light pollution. It's also hoped that accreditation will enhance Waiheke's visitor appeal and invigorate the tourism sector in the wake of Covid-19.

One of the organisations in support of Waiheke's dark sky status is the International Astronomical Union. Vice president John Hearnshaw says there are more than 100 places around the world with dark sky accreditation, most of which have seen an increase in tourism. He says that after the Mackenzie District went through the process in 2012, resulting in a 4300km² area being declared the Aoraki Mackenzie International Dark Sky Reserve, an immediate jump in visitor



A small group of astro-enthusiasts has been working towards dark sky accreditation for Waiheke since 2016, now the wider community is coming out in support of the initiative. Peter Rees Photography



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numbers was recorded.

"This is a brand of eco-tourism with a strong educational focus aimed at allowing people to learn more about the environment, about the human-health impacts of artificial light at night and of course about stars and the night sky."

Mr Hearnshaw, who is also a Professor of Astronomy at the University of Canterbury, says astro-tourism is an excellent benefit to the economy, particularly the accommodation sector.

"That has certainly been our experience in the Mackenzie District where beds per night in 2019 approached almost a million per year and the visitor spend reached almost a million dollars a day, each up by about a factor of three since the Aoraki Mackenzie Dark Sky Reserve was established in 2012."

As well as being a drawcard for star-gazers and tourists, many of those in support of Waiheke's dark sky status say

environmental protection and human health are significant benefits. Chairman of Waiheke's Native bird Rescue Bryan Gartrell says nature is compromised by artificial lighting. Birds such as little blue penguins are disturbed and confused by bright lights, and millions of seabirds die every year due to collisions with illuminated cruise ships, buildings and other structures.

Waiheke's Dark Sky initiative began thanks to a dedicated group of island and city-based astronomers back in 2016. The group, Dark Sky Waiheke, says sky park accreditation will position the island as a hot-spot for astro-tourists and ensure that the night sky over Waiheke is protected from light pollution now and in the future.

The dark sky initiative proposes a Dark Sky Park for the eastern end of Waiheke and a Dark Skies Community for the western end of the island. To achieve this, exterior lighting needs to be upgraded

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and improved by installing shades, directing light downward and using timers or dimmers.

According to astronomer and dark sky proponent Nalayini Davies, the local board has continued to embrace the dark-sky initiative to ensure Waiheke can follow in the footsteps of the Mackenzie District and Aotea Great Barrier. Great Barrier was the first island in the world to be designated a Dark Sky Sanctuary by the International Dark Sky Association and Nalayini was the driving force behind the project.

She says Waiheke’s accreditation is progressing thanks to such strong community support as expressed via feedback on the local board plan.

“The feedback on the draft local board plan around dark sky status for the island was fantastic and overwhelmingly positive. We are working together on our Lighting Management Plan with the local board.”

Nalayini says this plan includes regulations and guidance around safe and shielded lighting on the island.

“The local board is committed to moving this forward and Dark Sky Waiheke is working with them to make this happen. The lighting management plan is a big job and we have to rework some parts, but it’s moving forward.”

When the lighting management plan is finalised and council-approved, Nalayini says international dark sky accreditation will follow. • *Sophie Boladeras*

Community calls for improved housing, transport

Speed reduction, affordable ferry services, divided attitudes to tourism and business resiliency in the wake of Covid-19 were just a few of the many concerns and ideas put forward by the community in response to Waiheke’s draft Local Board Plan 2020. Between 13 July and 13 August, 213 people, groups and organisations shared their thoughts on the plan, which outlines key initiatives for the island over the next three years.

The plan will inform the development of the council’s 10-year budget and will be used to create the local board agreement for the following three financial years and subsequent work programmes.

During the consultation, islanders indicated a lean towards offline methods of feedback with 111 of the 213 submissions sent in as hard copies. A further five suggestions were given via social media and 97 submissions were made online via the council site.

Overall, public perception on the draft plan was positive, with 84 percent of submitters supportive of its direction and how well its themes reflected locals’ needs and aspirations. Nine percent of submitters responded negatively, and the remaining seven percent said they were unsure.

Large numbers of submitters said more needs to be done to keep people who can no longer afford rising house prices and rents on the island. Some said more support for elders to age and die in place is needed, and there were many comments around speed reduction and improved cycleways. Some respondents asked that the board’s plan be more active in supporting health-related addiction issues such as alcohol, smoking, drugs and gambling.

The majority of respondents support a focus on environmental regeneration, protection and the elimination of pests.

Unsurprisingly some longstanding concerns were raised including dissatisfaction with ferry services and prices, as well as the unsuitability of double-decker buses. Calls to care for locals more than visitors were heard and many said there seems to be little distinction between catering for locals and visitors in terms of infrastructure. Transport is a big issue with most respondents asking for more sustainable modes of travel, including fewer petrol cars, increased uptake of electric vehicles and more options for cyclists and pedestrians.

There was a significant amount of input on the need for greater support for business resiliency in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the plan was amended to include a focus on supporting initiatives that increase business and community resiliency. In response to the need for more affordable accommodation, another focus was added to assist the conversion of visitor accommodation units to permanent minor dwellings as well as extra support for tiny houses.

When it comes to transport and cycleways, the board said it will continue to advocate to Auckland Transport for a reduction of speeds on the island as well as the delivery of a continuous cycleway between Matiatia and Onetangi.

Other minor changes to the plan following submissions include an increased focus on stormwater infrastructure, work to reduce visual pollution like unnecessary signage, increased emphasis on sustainable visitor options, and support for health providers in their advocacy for Waiheke-based services.

The full list of submissions and feedback documents are available on the Auckland Council website. • *Sophie Boladeras*



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