

## Too many tourists: Should we limit visitor numbers to NZ?

- [By Mike White](#)
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*A crowd gathers at low tide at Hot Water Beach in the Coromandel, where bathers dig holes to create natural hot pools formed by geothermal activity beneath the sand. Photo/Getty.*

***Crowded towns, clogged roads, dangerous drivers, filthy freedom campers, congested trails: the rapid growth in tourism is causing concerns throughout New Zealand, and headaches for politicians and public alike. Mike White investigates the growing backlash against our country's largest industry and asks if we need to limit the number of tourists coming here.***

Queenstown. Beautiful place. But becoming a bit of a bugger of a place, they say. Anyone flying in can't help but gawp and gush at the scenery, The Remarkables up to their left as they cross the tarmac, Lake Wakatipu's willow-fringed shore just down the hill. But then you drive out of the airport and hit that first tailback before the roundabout by the BP,

and the traffic carries on all the way into town – 30,000 vehicles a day travelling this route in peak season.

Finding a car park is usually a luckless crapshoot. Finding a bed in peak season is fraught too. Tourists throng, they queue, they line up out the door and down the pavement to get dinner at Fergburger, where staff hand out menus to those waiting far up the street.

Every year, Queenstown gets 3.2 million visitors, with two million staying overnight. At peak times, the population of the wider Queenstown area swells from around 40,000 to 130,000 a night.

It's the face of New Zealand tourism, with stupendous scenery, adventure activities galore and four seasons of fun. Paragliders pirouette and spiral down to the town centre. Gondolas rise through a channel in the forest to a hilltop restaurant. The antique steamer, Earnslaw, smokes its way up the lake.

It's an alpine Arcadia, an amphitheatre for Instagram show-offery.

But for many New Zealanders, and certainly many residents, Queenstown has got too big, too busy. Used to be great, they grumble. Used to be beaut. Not like that now. Bloody tourists, they mouth.

This will give you an idea of how tourism in New Zealand has grown, since people started arriving to see Tarawera's pink and white terraces and Mt Cook, and be guided over the [Milford Track](#) in the late 19th century.

A hundred years ago, 8000 overseas visitors came here. By the early 1960s, that had risen to 100,000; then 500,000 in the 1980s. Through the 1990s, international tourist numbers rocketed by 85% to 1.8 million. There were static years after the 2007-2008 global financial crisis, but recently things have boomed again. Encouraged by cheaper jet fuel, more airlines flying here, and the middle classes of China and India beginning to travel, there has been a 40% growth in overseas visitors in the past five years, to 3.9 million a year at present.

That's predicted to expand to 5.1 million by 2025. Nobody is suggesting the growth will stop there.

Tourism is our biggest earner, reaping \$39 billion last year (\$16 billion from overseas tourists – 20% of our exports – and \$23 billion from Kiwis holidaying at home). There are more than 200,000 people directly employed in tourism, about 8% of the workforce. It's unquestionably a cornerstone of the country's economy.

But here are some other numbers.

In a March 2019 survey by the tourism industry, 43% of New Zealanders believed international tourism was putting too much pressure on the country – a big increase from only 18% three years before. The proportion of New Zealanders who think visitor numbers are too high has doubled in that same period to 26% – up from 21% in just the past six months to an all-time high. And for the first time, more than half of New Zealanders, 52%, thought the predicted growth of tourism – a million-plus extra tourists in the next six years – was too high (41% thought it was just right).

When this Mood of the Nation survey was released, Tourism Minister Kelvin Davis seemed to ignore the clear and worrying trend of all these concerns, instead pointing to the fact 93% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed tourism was good for the country. "I think what happens is the 7% who don't support it get most of the air time."

Political spin, bravura, or not scratching beneath the surface of that statistic, Davis overlooked that the number who strongly agreed tourism was good for New Zealand had slumped from 56% to 46% in the past year, its lowest-ever level. Sure, New Zealanders support tourism generally – but, increasingly, not at current or forecast numbers.

Davis also ignored enlightening regional figures. In Otago, 69% of residents thought there was too much pressure from international tourists (rising to 76% in Queenstown). The same percentage of Otago residents felt the predicted tourism growth was too high – along with 61% in Canterbury and 68% in Northland.

Issues with growing tourist numbers have shown themselves in different ways. In April, Mermaid Pools near Northland's Matapōuri Bay were closed indefinitely due to environmental damage from rubbish and human waste. The Tongariro Alpine Crossing had 45,000 walkers in 2005, but now has more than 140,000 a year, often filing uphill in a thermal-clad conga line. Visitors to Aoraki-Mt Cook rose 11% in the past year to more than one million for the first time. The number of people going to the Blue Pools near Makarora has risen from 3400 to more than 100,000 in just three years. Tourists visiting Northland's giant kauri, Tāne Mahuta, went up 44% (152,000) in the past year. At Lake Tekapo, where tourist numbers have doubled since 2012, limits have had to be placed on entry to the Church of the Good Shepherd.

Queenstown airport wants to increase flights to keep up with demand (from more than 2 million users now, to potentially 5-7 million by 2045), causing anger from many locals worried about noise and congestion.

**Basic infrastructure** – roads, toilets, carparks, rubbish bins – have come under pressure, with local authorities struggling to cope. Queenstown's council is seeking to introduce a 5% levy on accommodation – a “bed tax” – to help with this. Likewise, on 1 July the government introduced a \$35 visitor levy on tourists flying to New Zealand (excluding those from Australia and many Pacific islands). The \$80 million a year raised will be split between the tourism and conservation sectors to help alleviate some of the stresses from huge tourism growth, and comes on top of other government funding in these areas. Even the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Simon Upton, has begun an investigation into tourism's impacts.

Yet, efforts to lure tourists to New Zealand aren't slowing. In June, Tourism New Zealand launched the latest iteration of its 100% Pure marketing, which it's run for 20 years. “Good Morning World” is the country's biggest-ever global campaign, costing \$3 million, and will run for a year, showcasing our “welcoming people and culture”. New Zealanders are being asked to submit videos of their favourite places, with Tourism New Zealand's chief executive, Stephen England-Hall, saying they want “real authentic stories” from Kiwis. He should perhaps be careful what he wishes for, given more than half the country doesn't want the tourist growth his organisation is encouraging. Videos of pissed-off New Zealanders ranting about traffic congestion, environmental damage and inconsiderate tourists are probably not what he has in mind.

What England-Hall does have in mind is Kiwis being enthused about tourism, wanting to be part of the story, and reflecting the 100% Pure campaign's foundations of “incredibly warm and inclusive people, beautiful, epic landscapes, and amazing things to do... that's exactly what we promise the world and that's exactly what we deliver them when they come”. But locals increasingly opposing growing tourist numbers inevitably threatens the welcome and experience of those who've paid to come and see our country.

“I think we're pretty much at the tipping point now,” says economist Shamubeel Eaqub. “And I say this because when I go to places like Queenstown, people aren't talking about how happy they are to see the tourists any more. There's a genuine resentment – except for, of course, the people who are benefiting from it. But the locals are like, ‘We can't live here anymore, it doesn't feel like it's our town anymore.’ And that's really quite frightening.”

It's frightening because Queenstown's economy relies on tourism, and tourists can easily be scared off by overcrowding, Eaqub says. "What we offer is very perishable. If you've got too many people on a mountaintop, it's a bit shit, right?"

Eaqub is unequivocal we've learnt little from past economic booms. "I think tourism will be the next dairy, if we're not careful. There can be too much of a good thing, and dairy was exactly the same, and [we] got so besotted with the growth in revenue that we didn't think about the impact it actually made on local communities. I think we're making the same mistake with tourism."

Eaqub says tourism's pressures are very real and need to be dealt with urgently, but the government's response has been vague and piecemeal. "We don't seem to have any kind of strategy in terms of what we might do and how we might do it. Personally, I think we should have limits. Central government has to take quite a strong leadership role and say what is sustainable, and how much of it do we want."

Of course, in May this year, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) and the Department of Conservation (DoC) released the New Zealand-Aotearoa Government Tourism Strategy, which is meant to do exactly what Eaqub suggests: guide the growth of tourism. But Eaqub says he's given up on these strategies, because they never contain specific policy.

What the latest strategy does contain is a bureaucrats' wordfest ("government policy lever... inclusive growth objectives... collaborative spatial planning... responsive funding streams... coherent visitor proposition... readiness work programmes... integrated outcomes") and a wishlist drowning in generalities and good intentions. (Government documents assure there are "17 work streams and 44 actions across the government to achieve the strategy's outcomes".)

"Hollow, hollow, hollow," says Forest & Bird's chief conservation advisor, Kevin Hackwell, of the latest strategy. "I look at it and I go, 'They've failed again.' It's just pathetic. They say they want to protect and restore the environment. Great words. But where was the actual mechanism to do that? No mention whatsoever."

Hackwell says everyone is too scared to discuss what might be the limit for tourism in New Zealand. "I think we've already reached the maximum when you look at what's going on in Queenstown. We need to manage demand. We should have control over the number of tourists who come into New Zealand."

Instead, he says everyone just accepts overseas tourist numbers will jump more than 25% in the next six years, with no limit on growth beyond that. "And there seems to be no questioning whether that's a good or bad thing. The industry and communities are already struggling to deal with the growth they've already experienced. And to just accept it's going to go to that sort of number, I think is shameful, really."

Hackwell says there are many pretty places in the world tourists can visit, but New Zealand has the benefit of being less populated. "It's one of the things people come to New Zealand for: 'I walked down a beach and I was the only one on it.' That sort of stuff has been really significant for tourists and also a significant part of being a New Zealander. And we're wrecking that."

Many argue New Zealand can cope with more tourists, if they are spread more evenly throughout the year and through all regions. But Hackwell insists this is just "spreading the pain – environmental pain, social pain". He points to the fact our busiest tourist regions, like Queenstown, are the ones with the greatest levels of dissatisfaction about visitor numbers.

**"To me, that should be this huge wake-up call. The tourism industry is just hurtling full-speed towards a brick wall and it's going to really hurt everybody when it hits that wall."**

Federated Mountain Clubs president Jan Finlayson worries what further environmental damage might occur by the time that happens, and decries the government's approach announced in May as "vapid. If we attain a sustainable tourism industry here, it won't be because of the strategy."

In her submission to the process, Finlayson stressed that, "Wilderness is easily harmed by the very industry that most lauds those qualities," and encouraged the government to concentrate on values rather than value, something she still considers vital. "I don't know how we've ended up in a place where saying words like 'economic growth' and 'jobs' and so on carries the moral high ground."

The tourism strategy talks of "ensuring that tourism does not deplete the natural resource on which it depends". It stresses "strategies must increase visitor spend, rather than focusing solely on growing visitor numbers", and hopes "communities will understand the benefits of tourism and will be welcoming hosts".

Announcing it, the Minister of Tourism noted the tourism sector was booming, "but we can't leave the future to chance... we must build and support this dynamic industry in a planned, coordinated and focused way".

But this wasn't May 2019, nor was it Kelvin Davis. This was the New Zealand Tourism Strategy released 18 years earlier, by then-Tourism Minister Mark Burton. The similarities in issues, goals and ways to get there are remarkable – as if little has changed in nearly two decades, other than there being an extra two million international tourists each year – double what the number was when Burton was minister.

In 2001, Burton highlighted "sustainable tourism development", saying there were "enormous benefits in terms of economic and regional development, while protecting our natural and cultural environment".

In 2019, Conservation Minister Eugenie Sage, who released the latest strategy with Davis, talked of "sustainable tourism growth", noting, "New Zealand's natural and cultural heritage is at the core of our tourism industry and our national identity", and needed to be protected.

The sense nothing has changed and nothing has been done to confront the problems caused by tourism's rapid growth isn't lost on Morgan Williams.

In 1997, as Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Williams released his own report, "Management of the Environmental Effects Associated with the Tourism Sector". It is prescient.

"While there is no question that most communities in New Zealand welcome the economic benefits of domestic and international tourism, there are constant concerns about the effects on the place they call their home town or district," he wrote, and pointed to widespread community concerns about being overrun by tourists. "The recent focus on rapidly increasing numbers of international tourists is not necessarily sustainable, either for the industry or for New Zealand."

At that time, there were only 1.5 million international tourists arriving here each year, and Queenstown only got 630,000 visitors (now 3.2 million). But even then, Williams laid out a clear path for "sustainable tourism", by limiting access to some areas, and concentrating on quality of tourists rather than quantity.

"Perhaps New Zealand should aim to position itself as a global environmental oasis: Aotearoa, an ark of ancient natural treasures, and thus be seen as a boutique tourism destination."

Williams is frustrated and mystified that his warnings and suggestions have been largely ignored. He says the dearth of specific policies to deal with tourism's problems is symptomatic of New Zealand's lack of long-term planning – content, instead, to enjoy the goldrush flowing from the visitor boom.

He points to Botswana, a country that deliberately targets high-end tourism in places like its Okavango Delta. “It’s a premium experience because they’ve got a premium product. New Zealand has got a premium product, but we’re actually selling it at a rock-bottom price if you look at the value of a freedom camper.”

Williams also notes our reluctance to charge for entry to our conservation land, which so many tourists come to visit (this is currently prohibited under the Conservation Act), drawing a parallel with Ecuador, which charges tourists \$US100 to visit the Galapagos Islands.

The new \$35 visitor tax was a start, Williams says, but could be 10 times that. “Anybody who can afford to front up for a northern hemisphere-to-New Zealand ticket and back can sure as hell pay a little bit more for the uniqueness of [the experience] when they get to Gondwanaland. Or a lot more.”

Otago University tourism professor Juergen Gnoth says New Zealand has simply been “asleep at the wheel” for the past 20 years when it comes to the impact of tourism. “It can be a fantastic supplement to our GDP, but it can also be a creeping disease. And I think that’s what it’s turning out to be, because we’re not prepared to invest sufficiently in infrastructure – we’re releasing the pressure on the population.”

Gnoth also raises concerns about the amount of tourism money flowing out of the country via foreign-owned companies, and a lack of good careers for New Zealanders in the tourism industry, to the point where, “if you go to Queenstown now it’s a Chileno or Brazilian experience – because that’s the majority serving you or cooking for you.”

If predictions are right, and there are more than five million international tourists by 2025, Queenstown and Rotorua will burst at the seams, Gnoth says, and other regions will be overwhelmed, “unless there’s a more successful strategy to disperse tourists. We can actually take more tourists, but I don’t know how New Zealanders will take it if it goes on like it is now... letting them just come, Tourism New Zealand just pumping people into the country like mad. It’s a tragedy in the making.”

Chris Roberts admits he sometimes feels a bit under siege, that the tourism industry he heads is under attack, despite how central it is to our economy: \$39 billion a year, up \$10 billion in the past five years alone. By comparison, the kiwifruit industry is worth about \$2 billion annually.

The chief executive of Tourism Industry Aotearoa, the body representing tourism businesses, Roberts says he’s absolutely concerned about the trend of growing dissatisfaction from Kiwis about tourism’s effects, sparked mainly by the rate of growth in the past five years.

“We’re very aware what happened with dairy and have always said we don’t want to be in that position where public sentiment just switches against the whole industry. That’s why we’re trying to ask every tourism business to act responsibly and be sustainable.”

However, he also tries to put things in perspective: New Zealand has just 0.2% of the world’s tourism. On average there are only 180,000 international tourists spread across New Zealand on any one day (with a peak of 320,000 at Christmas/New Year). In only three regions, Queenstown, Mackenzie Country and the West Coast, do international visitors outnumber Kiwi tourists; in regions such as Hawke’s Bay, New Zealanders account for 80% of tourists.

And the tourists themselves don't seem concerned about overcrowding, he says; surveys show visitor satisfaction as high as it's ever been, with more than 95% of tourists saying their expectations were met or exceeded.

"From our point of view, we don't have a visitor issue," says Roberts, "we have an infrastructure issue. If the right infrastructure, the right facilities, were in place, then the additional visitors wouldn't be a problem."

But of course, that's not always true. As Shamubeel Equb points out, it doesn't take too many people on a mountaintop to spoil the experience. And nor is Roberts' frequent claim that New Zealand has very low visitor density (tourists per resident, or tourists per land area) on a world scale that relevant when you consider many tourists come to New Zealand precisely because they value wide open, unpopulated spaces – not busy cities or urban antiquities – and this emptiness has always been one of the country's selling points.

Roberts points out tourism growth has slowed in the last year, and this might provide some breathing space for infrastructure to catch up.

But he admits we still have to spread the tourist load into quieter seasons and less-touristed regions. However, this mantra has been spouted for years and TIA's own figures show it's been a total failure. In 2014, the proportion of tourists going to regions other than Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch or Otago was 36%. In 2018, it was 35%. And the spread of tourists across seasons has likewise been virtually static. So is there any policy or plan that's going to change that?

"To be frank, no, there isn't," admits Roberts. "But we must keep trying."

Consequently, Tourism New Zealand hasn't advertised summer visits here for three years. "But that's had very limited impact because the visitors still want to come here in summer, even if you promote to them they should come in autumn and spring. So it's incredibly difficult to change seasonality."

Likewise, regionality. "Telling someone who's coming on a once-in-a-lifetime visit to New Zealand they shouldn't go to Queenstown is a very big ask."

Another issue is that when tourists are shifted to other, quieter areas, they often spend less. There aren't many places to get your wallet out in the Catlins compared to Queenstown, which sabotages the industry's goal of high-value visitors.

This aim of value (what tourists spend) over volume (the number of tourists coming to New Zealand) was again trumpeted in the government's latest tourism strategy, as it has been in every tourism strategy over the years. That's because it's so obvious. If you get fewer tourists paying more while they're staying here, the impact on the country decreases but the economic gains remain the same. And the industry has in the past increased how much each visitor spends. But government statistics suggest ongoing commitment to this is somewhat hollow, going little further than a formulaic catch-cry. MBIE is forecasting visitor numbers to rise 4% per year until 2025, but the total of what those visitors spend to grow just 4.3% annually – suggesting most of the value increase is simply being driven by bringing more tourists here. (In contrast, Queenstown's authorities aim to grow the amount visitors spend by double the increase in tourist volume.)

"We're very good in New Zealand at providing free things to do," sighs Roberts. To that end, he's supported DoC's [move to charge foreign tourists double what Kiwis pay](#) for huts on some Great Walks, and says this should be extended, along with looking at broader charging for entering conservation sites, which would see day-visitors pay for the privilege. "I think we need to have a mature conversation about that, for what are probably no more than half-a-dozen spots on the conservation estate: Milford Sound, Punakaiki, Tongariro, Cathedral Cove."

Ngāi Tahu Tourism's chief executive, Quinton Hall, strongly agrees with Roberts that discounted or free products don't help New Zealand's efforts to lift what tourists spend while here, and charging for entry to conservation sites is a no-brainer. "Why would we not look at that as an opportunity to explore? Why would we not do these things when people have an expectation to pay to experience amazing things?"

Ngāi Tahu Tourism has become one of the country's largest operators, with 14 businesses from Auckland to Fiordland, a million customers a year, and more than 500 full-time staff. Hall blames much of the negative reaction to recent tourism growth on central and local government failing to keep up with demand for improved infrastructure. "Look, I'm not an advocate for just turning on the tap [of tourists]. If there's nowhere for manuhiri [visitors] to go, then it's going to be a terrible experience and it will have a detrimental effect on the entire New Zealand destination."

"Yes, we have been caught behind the eight-ball," admits Queenstown mayor Jim Boulton about the town not keeping up with tourist numbers. "You can't create infrastructure for 40,000 people and stuff another 90,000 people in and hope it all works, because it doesn't." Thus, Boulton and his council are planning a billion dollars of spending over the next decade on basics like drinking water, stormwater, wastewater, roading and transport. The 5% bed tax Boulton has championed will also help pay for upgrades, but won't come in for at least two years.

However, he points to Queenstown's swelling population also being part of the problem, and says the queues along Frankton Rd from the airport include a lot of locals and tradie vans.

"Yes there's congestion at certain times of the day, but as a regular visitor to Auckland and Christchurch, I'm reminded we've got a long way to go. But it's a warning sign that if we don't do something about it, we'll get into trouble."

International examples of tourism pressure also put things in perspective for Boulton, who took his family to Edinburgh a couple of years ago and was shocked by the crowds at the city's castle. "I lasted 20 minutes. It wasn't my thing – an hour-long queue to get into anything. And I'd hate to see that happen in New Zealand. There'll come a time where we actually physically have to manage numbers in some fashion, but I don't think we're anywhere near that at this stage."

The best way to control Queenstown's numbers is by price, Boulton says, and he expects the town to evolve into a premier destination which is more expensive, but still accessible to Kiwis. "We've got to get away from thinking about numbers, thinking about bums on seats, and start thinking about value. We need to target markets that give us the greatest value. And a couple of people in the back of a second-hand Subaru stationwagon camping under a tree provide absolutely zero value to us."

Boulton says well-publicised problems with freedom campers – toileting in the bush, crowding out carparks, using local facilities as laundries etc – had tarnished the whole tourism industry, and made Kiwis angry about tourists generally.

Graham Budd, chief executive of the town's tourist organisation, Destination Queenstown, is in complete agreement. "If we banned freedom camping, I'd be perfectly happy. In Queenstown, we've got no need, and I don't support providing any facilities that are genuinely free. If you can't come here and spend the money it costs to stay at a DoC campsite for a few bucks a night, then stay somewhere else."

Budd says the idea Queenstown has reached its tourist limit is completely wrong. "I never use the f-word, for good reason – because we're never full. There'll just be a very high price if you want that last hotel room."



At peak times, there's high demand for accommodation, "but that's no different from any other popular holiday destination anywhere in the world, frankly."

From March to June, and September through to December, it's easy to find a bed, Budd says. "The negativity you get [about Queenstown's tourism] is typically from Kiwis who've been here 30 years ago and it's not the same as it was when it was quieter. But most visitors, well into 90%, have a fantastic experience."

The issues New Zealand is facing as tourism grows are shared around the world. Global tourism has risen from 525 million in 1995 to 1.4 billion in 2018. Central Amsterdam's 850,000 residents struggle with 20 million visitors a year. France will have 100 million tourists by next year. The Greek island of Santorini saw more than 10,000 cruise-ship tourists a day before capping this at 8000; Venice has banned cruise ships from its centre; and Boracay, a tiny island in the Philippines, closed for six months to help it recover from the two million tourists it was getting each year. Maya Bay in Thailand, which featured in the movie *The Beach*, has been closed till 2021 because of environmental destruction; and *Game of Thrones* hype has seen tourist numbers in Croatian city Dubrovnik explode by more than 50%. Cinque Terre, Machu Picchu, Chichen Itza, Barcelona – there's a long list of destinations threatened with being "killed by admiration".

With average airfares estimated to be 60% cheaper than they were 20 years ago, and *Lord of the Rings* drawcards (600,000 tourists visit Matamata's Hobbiton each year), New Zealand could hardly expect to escape the surge of tourists. But Budd is right – Queenstown's not full. In early June, you won't find a "No Vacancy" sign around town, you can get a park, and there's probably only a 15-minute wait at Fergburger.

An hour up the road at the head of Lake Wakatipu, things are even more peaceful. Toni Glover has owned Kinloch Lodge with her husband John for nearly 20 years. They've ridden the rollercoaster of tourism in that time, toughed out the dry times when the world economy tanked, expanded when things picked up, and now offer a range of accommodation in a sublime and serene spot.

Glover knows things could get difficult for the tourism industry again – an economic downturn, reluctance to fly by some people, a move to virtual reality rather than the real thing. But while the number of tourists coming here continues to grow, we have to talk about the pressures they're causing, says Glover, and do something about it – like charging people for day walks in national parks though parking fees.

But most of all, New Zealand needs to think hard about exactly who it wants to attract here, Glover says, rather than have a free market and pick up the pieces afterwards. "New Zealand is probably more like Eden than just about anywhere else in the world, and it really should be the world's park – not a Disneyland-type destination."

## Preserving paradise

### The Abel Tasman National Park has a unique foreshore management plan that works – mostly.

By Gareth Eyres & Virginia Larson

Darryl Wilson has a fat crayfish in the fridge for dinner. He bagged it earlier in the day – wearing his winter drysuit. The beach was a bit "crunchy" with frost first thing, he says, but the day was a cracker, fine and calm.

Wilson knows how to enjoy the off-season. Not that the family business, tourism operators Wilsons Abel Tasman, closes up for winter. Core staff stay on to do building, boat and

website maintenance, and run the company's (reduced timetable) water taxis and scenic cruises, walks and sea-kayaking trips. The multi-day guided walks, including overnight stays at the company's lodges, taper off for winter.

At 22,530ha, the Abel Tasman is New Zealand's smallest – and sunniest – national park, noted for its honey-gold beaches and crystalline waters. More than 350,000 visitors packed into the park in the 2018-2019 season; two years earlier, numbers hovered around 250,000. Around 75% are day-trippers, and most confine their visit to the 60km coastal stretch between Mārahau and Tōtaranui, using commercial operators' water taxi and kayak services to go ashore. Locals say the summer influx is putting pressure on the tracks, facilities and the environment. And don't expect to find a quiet spot at the 850-capacity Tōtaranui campground in January. It's a bog-standard measuring stick, but DoC monitors its toilet waste removal: last summer, it barged out about 110,000 litres of sludge from the park's coastal visitor sites (at a cost of \$56,000), up 20,000 litres from the previous season. What is working for Abel Tasman is a park management plan seeded, surprisingly, as the global financial crisis hit in 2007. Before then, visitor use was mostly unregulated and any number of commercial water taxi and kayak operators carried boatloads of tourists along the coast. Wilson says the volume of visitors at the time wasn't the problem, "but we knew numbers would rise and we wanted a sustainability plan in place".

The Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve was gazetted in 2007. It's managed by a DoC-Tasman District Council committee, with the aim of maintaining the quality of the visitor experience and "clipping tourist tickets" for a park improvement fund. From 2012, the plan allocated five bays as access points for water-based tourism operators, and limited the number of tourists they could move across the foreshore. Operators are monitored on how many visitors they land. Water taxi passengers who are picked up or dropped off pay \$1.15 each time they cross the coastal strip (there's also a per-head fee for kayak hires). The money raised goes back into the park – funding the likes of track upgrades, new toilet blocks, beach replenishment, replacing bridges and pest control. (Independent travellers don't pay the access fees, and DoC's hut fees go into its "consolidated fund".)

As head of Abel Tasman's earliest tourism operators, Wilson is a champion of the foreshore scheme, but with a couple of riders.

"We're having a debate at the moment as DoC is proposing a fee increase to \$3.28 per person. That would add about \$10 to a day-trip ticket. We'd like more transparency around the mechanisms used [in regards these decisions] – and more transparency from DoC around visitor statistics, so we can plan ahead and manage visitor flows efficiently.

"We also have two excellent private conservation trusts: the Birdsong Trust and Project Janszoon. It would be good to see some of the fees going to them, or fees lowered and operators making voluntary donations to the trusts."

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