



**LINCOLN
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Centre for Land,
Environment
& People

LEAP Research Report
No. 49

Geogastronomy in the Waitaki Whitestone aspiring Geopark

A snapshot of sector perspectives on
opportunities and challenges

Helen Fitt

June 2020



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Land Environment and People Research Report No. 49
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ISSN 1172-0859 (Print)

ISSN 1172-0891 (PDF)

ISBN 978-0-86476-445-4 (Print)

ISBN 978-0-86476-446-1 (PDF)

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Executive Summary

The Waitaki Whitestone Geopark aspires to be New Zealand's first UNESCO Global Geopark. Many Geoparks around the world include 'geotrails' that integrate the different attractions and activities in an area. The proposed Waitaki Whitestone Geopark has been focusing on establishing a 'Geogastronomy trail' that will invite visitors to engage with the Geopark through experiencing its food and drink. This research sought to explore the perspectives of stakeholders on the proposed Geopark and its associated geogastronomy trail. This document primarily reports on the data collected through 17 interviews with 20 representatives of the Waitaki geogastronomy sector. Their perspectives were varied and nuanced, however, some of the main findings reported include:

- Most interviewees thought that having a Geopark in the District was broadly a good idea. Many of them also raised issues about how a Geopark would work and questioned whether the wider community would share their enthusiasm.
- Many interviewees reported a lack of understanding about Geoparks generally and about the proposed Waitaki Whitestone Geopark in particular. They noted that it was unclear to them what would be included in the Geopark and how the Geopark would function; they also noted that they did not know who to approach for further information about the Geopark.
- Interviewees were often unclear about how the Geopark would be funded, sometimes noting barriers to funding the venture either through business contributions or through general rates. A number of interviewees reported feeling they needed to see a detailed business case for the Geopark before lending their support.
- Opinions on Geopark branding were mixed with some interviewees broadly liking current branding and believing it would complement the brands of their own businesses while others were less certain or more critical of Geopark branding to date.
- Interviewees linked potential increases in tourism to a perceived need to upgrade infrastructure provision, including that associated with public toilets, roads, waste, and first aid.
- The complex issue of boundaries prompted some discussions about how to manage differences between administrative, geological, business sourcing, and cultural boundaries that might influence the marketing and operation of the Geopark. Ensuring the fair spread of Geopark costs and benefits across the District was also a priority for some interviewees.
- Most interviewees were enthusiastic about the concept of geogastronomy and about opportunities to showcase the District's food and drink; they noted that work is required to define the criteria to be used to determine a business's inclusion in the 'geogastronomy club'. Some interviewees disliked the name 'geogastronomy' and some had difficulty pronouncing it.
- Many interviewees were able to tell detailed stories of the area's cultural history and some noted that it is these stories, alongside geology, that make the District special. Some interviewees questioned how well the District could compete on a world stage of cultural food destinations.
- Few interviewees had thought about geotrails in any great detail and some struggled to identify ways in which the District's attractions could be brought together into cohesive visitor itineraries or packages. However, nascent ideas can coalesce to form new concepts of geotrails and these may develop over time.
- Many interviewees saw good opportunities to improve networking and collaboration through the development of a Geopark and geotrails. A few interviewees gave concrete examples of emerging conversations or ideas that they thought were unlikely to have happened without networking opportunities provided by the Geopark.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank all the interviewees and other stakeholders who engaged with this research for their generous and open contributions. I hope you see your own thoughts and opinions reflected here alongside a variety of other perspectives. Despite all your differing points of view, the thing that came through with the most unity and clarity is that you love your District, you know you have something special, and you want to look after it and make the most of it. I hope this research helps you to have ongoing and constructive conversations about what you want for your District and how to achieve your goals.

Thanks also to Dr Mike Mackay and Dr Nick Taylor for providing helpful comments.

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Background

The Waitaki Whitestone Geopark in the Waitaki District of New Zealand's South Island aspires to be New Zealand's first UNESCO Global Geopark. UNESCO Global Geoparks are discrete geographical areas in which globally significant geology is both protected and used to promote education and sustainable development, often through geotourism (Dowling, 2018; UNESCO, 2017). At a recent count, there were 147 UNESCO Global Geoparks in 41 different countries (UNESCO, 2017).

In early 2018, the New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO announced its intention to establish a programme to support and encourage New Zealand nominations for official Geopark status (New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO | Te Kōmihana Matua o Aotearoa mō UNESCO, 2018a). The proposed Waitaki Whitestone Geopark (WWG) was selected as the first New Zealand candidate to be supported in an application to UNESCO. In late 2018, the Waitaki Whitestone Geopark Trust (WWGT), supported by the Waitaki District Council (WDC), submitted a detailed application dossier to UNESCO in Paris (New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO | Te Kōmihana Matua o Aotearoa mō UNESCO, 2018b).

In April 2019, the WWGT put its application on hold. It had received a suite of recommendations from visiting expert Professor Patrick McKeever and wanted time to respond to these and maximise chances of UNESCO accreditation (New Zealand National Commission for UNESCO | Te Kōmihana Matua o Aotearoa mō UNESCO, 2019). In September 2019, the WDC voted to support the ongoing development of the Geopark and its work towards UNESCO accreditation with a fund of up to \$190,000 (Waitaki Whitestone Geopark Trust, 2019b).

Geotrails and geogastronomy

Many Geoparks around the world include 'geotrails'. Geotrails are commonly used to integrate the different (often geographically dispersed) attractions or activities within a Geopark. Although geotrails are defined slightly differently in different contexts, a common theme is the provision of interpretation of the geological landscape alongside other activities or attractions. Whether white-water rafting through a gorge while learning about gorge formation (Steirische Eisenwurzen UNESCO Global Geopark, n.d.), or learning about soils, climate, and wine (Weber, 2018)—geotrails are about connecting geology and other features of an area into cohesive visitor packages.

The WWG has conceived of the idea of developing a 'geogastronomy' geotrail. Geogastronomy is defined by the WWG as:

The act of travelling for a taste of place in order to get a sense of place, and of exploring the unique character of foods (including beers and wine) resulting from a Geopark's special geological character, including its soils, environment and climate, and the sustainable stewardship of the land by growers and producers. (Waitaki Whitestone Geopark Trust, 2019a)

Geogastronomy is related to the idea of 'terroir', which is a much older term used to describe the expression of physical and cultural factors in and through the produce of a region (Hill, 2018). Through the creation of a geogastronomy geotrail, the WWG aims to encourage visitors to explore the local area through food and drink, coupling culinary experiences with geological and cultural education and interpretation. The WWG argues that a geogastronomy brand would help to showcase local producers and industries and bring stakeholders together to develop a more cohesive tourism offering (Waitaki Whitestone Geopark Trust, 2019a).

The integration of Geopark values, local community aspirations, and regional economic development is central to the UNESCO Geopark vision (UNESCO, 2017). Community collaboration can help to facilitate the integration of local community aspirations with other aspects of a Geopark, and is an important part of the management of destinations and of tourism more

broadly (Erkuş-Öztürk & Eraydın, 2010; Healy, Rau, & McDonagh, 2012; Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). Collaboration can help stakeholders to tackle complex issues and to pool their resources to achieve better decisions (Beaumont & Dredge, 2010; Erkuş-Öztürk & Eraydın, 2010). Effective collaboration is, however, difficult and often missing from tourism projects (Healy et al., 2012; Pforr & Brueckner, 2016). Similarly, the integration of different regeneration and tourism activities has been highlighted as often problematic in the Waitaki region, and for regional development more widely (Mackay, Taylor, & Perkins, 2018). It is pertinent, then (while the WWG prepares to move forward with its Geopark status application) to ask whether geogastronomy has the potential to increase the integration, cohesion, and collaboration of stakeholders in the Waitaki District. Consequently, this research considers how local operators and related stakeholders perceive the Geopark and 'geogastronomy', and the opportunities and challenges that they might provide.

Research context

The research on which this report is based was conducted during the pause in the UNESCO application process. It explores local food and drink sector perspectives on the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of a Geopark. Perspectives on change are usually complex, varied, and nuanced; they often mix enthusiasm for some aspects of a proposed change with concerns or doubts about others, all muddled by past experiences and the uncertainty inherent in trying to think about the future. Perspectives can change with time and further information. This report represents a snapshot of perspectives at a moment in time and (in such a rapidly developing context) some of those perspectives may have already changed by the time this report is published.¹ However, the report contains insights that may help both the WWG and other prospective Geoparks, in New Zealand and further afield, to understand a variety of different perspectives on Geopark development.

This is independent research conducted as part of a postdoctoral project funded by Lincoln University's Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Tourism for Regions, Landscapes and Communities. This project did not receive any funding from WDC, WWGT, UNESCO, or any of the other agencies or organisations directly involved in the WWG proposal or operations. This report has been written primarily to outline the results for stakeholders in the Waitaki District (including local government, those in the geogastronomy field, and the wider community). The research was not conducted for the specific purpose of informing future Geopark directions, but the results may be useful in that regard.

¹ This report was also written before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Such a substantial change in circumstances will undoubtedly have changed perspectives and possibilities further, and in ways that were not imagined at the time of the research.

About the Waitaki District

The Waitaki District is located towards the south east of New Zealand's South Island. It extends from the base of the Southern Alps in the west of the District to the Pacific Ocean on the east, and is bordered by the Waitaki River along its north-eastern border. The District has a rich geography and geology, including landscapes influenced by the movements of glaciers, rivers, ocean, and tectonic plates (Waitaki District Council, 2018). These features have influenced local human history from the development of mining, to agriculture, irrigation, and hydro-electric dams and power stations (Mackay et al., 2018). Tourism and recreation in the area have also developed in response to the District's natural and human resources. Attractions include Victorian heritage experiences in and around the District's characteristic limestone buildings, encounters with marine wildlife (particularly penguins), visits to geological features including the Moeraki Boulders | Te Kaihīnaki and the Omarama Clay Cliffs, fishing and boating in the region's hydro lakes, and excursions on the Alps to Ocean cycle trail.

The District has a resident population of just over 22,000 people (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). The population is comprised primarily of people reporting themselves to be of European ethnicity (88%), but has sizeable minorities of Māori (8.2%), Asian (5.3%), and Pacific peoples (3.8%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). At the time of the 2018 Census, the median income in the District was \$27,700 (compared to a New Zealand median of \$31,800), the most common occupational category was 'labourer' (21.5% compared to 11.3% for New Zealand), and unemployment in the District was 2.4% (4% for New Zealand). Access to the internet was available to 78.8% of the population (86.1% for New Zealand), and 89.9 had access to a cellphone (91.9 for New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2018).



Methods

This research involved seventeen semi-structured interviews with twenty-two individuals (some interviews involved more than one individual). Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to facilitate analysis. Two interviewees requested that the data they provided be deleted and not used in publications (primarily due to commercial sensitivities), no further details about these interviewees or their perspectives are provided. This report is primarily based on the analysis of the data provided by the remaining twenty individuals, all of whom live or work in the Waitaki District. A further three interviewees contacted researchers wanting their voices to be heard, but declined to take part in a formal interview. With their verbal consent, their comments help to inform the narrative in this report but they are not cited or directly referenced.

Interviewees were recruited in several ways. The WWG sent an e-mail to stakeholders who had attended meetings exploring the geogastronomy idea. Stakeholders were invited to indicate whether they would like to participate in the research. Fifteen of the final twenty three interviewees were recruited in this manner. Six interviewees became involved in the research after seeing media reports or hearing about the research in local conversations and getting in touch with the researcher asking to be involved. The two remaining interviewees were directly contacted by the researcher and invited to take part to improve the spread of interviewees across the geogastronomy sector.

Interviewees came from a range of locations in the District. Most were based in or near the major town of Oamaru, but the research did include interviewees from smaller settlements to the South and West of Oamaru and from near the borders with neighbouring Waimate and Mackenzie Districts to the north. Interviewees also represented a range of sectors including growers (3 interviewees), producers (7 interviewees), restaurateurs and café owners (7 interviewees), tourism related businesses (4 interviewees), and other community members (2 interviewees).²

Quotes selected from the interviews are shown in highlight boxes in this report to illustrate the flavour of some of the things interviewees said; more nuance is provided in the main text. Wherever possible, interviewee identities are protected. Quotes and comments are usually presented in a way that does not reveal the geographic location or sector from which the interviewee originates. In some instances, it is necessary to reveal these details in order for the meaning and relevance of comments to be conveyed. It may be possible for other stakeholders who know the local context well to identify interviewees from their comments. This possibility was discussed with all interviewees and all interviewees to whom this might apply provided written consent to their comments being used in this way. This project received ethics approval from the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee (approval no. 2019-38).

² It is worth noting that some interviewees could accurately be described in more than one of these categories. The category that the interviewees described as their core focus in interviews and conversations has been used here. Several businesses are also in a process of transition to including new offerings; in these cases the business has been categorised according to current core focus. One business was yet to open, that business has been categorised according to its anticipated starting focus.

Results and discussion

Overall perceptions of the Geopark

The overwhelming impression from the interviewees in this research was that they broadly thought that having a Geopark in the District was a good idea. Many of them raised issues about how the Geopark would work, how it would be managed, how much it would cost, what it would include and exclude, and whether it was the best way to develop or promote the District, but very few considered the idea of a Geopark to be a fundamentally bad idea. Some interviewees noted that their views may not be typical of those that would be expressed in the wider community and doubted that community members outside the geogastronomy sector would share their enthusiasm. Consequently, while it is fair to say that the interviewees in this research were broadly supportive, further research would be needed to confirm wider perspectives on Geopark development.

Community attitudes towards new developments are usually complex and nuanced; this situation is no exception and interviewees provided a wide range of perspectives. Comments about the Geopark ranged from very positive, to more reserved, and on to quite sceptical.

Those who were most positive could see opportunities for their businesses to develop into new markets and new ventures, including potentially functioning as miniature visitor information centres for the Geopark, or showcasing other Geopark products and partnering with other businesses.

I think it's a great idea. I mean as to the execution? ...just because something is a brilliant idea doesn't mean it gets implemented well. But it helps to have a brilliant idea to implement!

Those who were more reserved in their evaluations often said that they did not currently have sufficient information to judge the Geopark's merits, or that the idea had a lot of potential but the reality would depend heavily on the quality of execution. Some interviewees also noted that they did not currently feel they knew enough about the Geopark to tell visitors about it, recommend places to visit, or tell people about other tourism offerings in the District. Some kind of training or familiarisation events on the Geopark would be needed, they said, to enable people working in the

geogastronomy sector to feel competent and confident in talking to visitors about the Geopark.

The interviewees who gave the most negative overall evaluations of the Geopark concept did not argue that a Geopark was a bad thing to have, rather that they had concerns that it was not the best focus for the area or that it did not adequately include all of the District's attractions.

Finally, a number of interviewees made the point that, while they were keen to share the region's assets with visitors, it was really important to them that any developments are designed in a way that protects and cares for the local environment and the local community. Further, they hoped that a Geopark would encourage visitors and locals to value the region and treat it with increasing respect.

I'm all behind it, I'm all for it. I'd love it to happen. And I think it's really exciting for the region. I want it to happen, yes.

This is the stupid bit, I get it! I just don't think it's the right fit...I just don't think it's quite the right fit.

Transparency and communication

Some of the different perceptions of the Geopark were closely related to differences in what interviewees understood a Geopark to encompass. For example, one interviewee who reported a very positive overall opinion of the Geopark described how it could encompass the rich historical and cultural stories and narratives of the land and its people. In contrast, an interviewee who reported a largely negative opinion of the Geopark proposal described 'geo' as being only about the ground, whereas she wanted to include a much more holistic vision of the evolution of the area. These interviewees had quite similar views on what is important in the area, but quite different understandings of whether these attributes would be incorporated in a Geopark and so different overall evaluations of the Geopark project.

Different sources of information can be important to how people perceive the value of a potential project. Personal connections are important in access to information and those interviewees who had personal connections, usually referenced (on a first name basis) the person or people from whom they got information about the Geopark. Those who did not have such personal connections more commonly referenced relying on information found online (commonly about Geoparks overseas), and sometimes described unsuccessful attempts to get more local information and a lack of knowledge about who to contact in a local government system that they described as impersonal and hard-to-penetrate. There was also some confusion about the respective roles of Waitaki District Council, Tourism Waitaki (TW), and the WWGT.

Several interviewees reported noticing progress in developing greater engagement with local government through being involved in Geopark discussions. They reported that local government

...what [proper consultation] would do to the community too, would be profound. Because... real grassroots, down to earth, go and look people in the eye consultation is so powerful.

was becoming more aware of the operators in the area and of the content and value of their operations. Other interviewees expressed a real willingness to engage and to share information and their expertise, but felt that they had been shut out of Geopark discussions to date, and sometimes reported having been told that their input was not required.

Interviewees suggested a wide variety of ways through which the community could be more effectively informed about, and engaged in, Geopark issues. These included a stand at local supermarkets, explaining the project and asking for genuine input from community members;

a road trip around the District—or even an i-cast—exploring issues that are important to the community (many of which are briefly raised in this report); and improvements to the WDC and TW websites to make them easier to navigate and more open to effective engagement with the community. In addition, it would be beneficial to establish a focus on ensuring that frontline staff at the involved agencies are well acquainted with the Geopark proposal, prepared to answer the most common questions, and briefed on procedures for forwarding less straightforward questions and comments.

I just didn't know who...I've had a little bit correspondence, because I want to know, no one's got back to me, whether we can use the logo yet. ... I don't know who to talk to, I don't know which person, I know there are four people I've spoken to; which person do we send our queries to? That is important.

Financing

Most interviews included discussions about how the development of a Geopark was going to be financed and interviewees described a considerable lack of clarity. Several reported that they did not know how much the Geopark project would cost, including not knowing whether there would be an ongoing annual cost to remaining a Geopark (for example, an auditing cost associated with assuring that UNESCO principles are being upheld).

Interviewees also reported not knowing how the costs associated with being a Geopark would be met. They noted that the Council was already investing substantially in the Geopark in terms of staff time and several agreed that the Council should be the first to back a project to demonstrate its commitment. They also, however, expressed doubt about ratepayer willingness to continue funding the project. Central to that doubt was a perception that the general population may not recognise, or see, much benefit from what was often considered to be primarily a tourism venture. Interviews took place before WDC committed to a substantial

funding package (Waitaki Whitestone Geopark Trust, 2019b) and further conversations with interviewees could shed light on whether this has led to changing perceptions.

Where's the money going to come from? I did ask a couple of people but nobody seems to know. But I'd be perfectly willing to help, like with my time, not that I've got any at the moment but I might, yeah, I haven't got any cash at the moment. So that's what makes me think how is it going to work, financially?

In most of the interviews, the possibility of some funding coming from the businesses that would benefit from an increase in visitation related to the development of a geogastronomy trail was discussed. In these conversations, interviewees commonly reported that they would, in principle, be prepared to pay a small contribution to be part of a developing Geopark, but some noted that they would have financial difficulty in contributing. Those interviewees who indicated that they would not be willing to pay primarily argued that this was because they did not believe that there would be sufficient benefit for them to justify the outlay. Wanting to see a business plan that would detail the costs and benefits of the proposed Geopark was a common

request from both those who indicated some willingness to contribute to the project financially and those who did not. Some noted that a sliding scale for contributions might help them to support the Geopark in advance of any tangible benefits.

Other sources of money discussed included Ngāi Tahu but the researchers were unable to get a mana whenua perspective on that potential source of Geopark funding. Interviewees also discussed the possibility of the Geopark 'clipping the ticket' at a range of local attractions, including the—already popular—Moeraki Boulders and Oamaru Blue Penguin Colony, and increasingly at other sites around the District to allow the Geopark to become essentially self-financing. However, interviewees also noted that many of the proposed Geopark sites are located on private land, so the potential for the Geopark to charge for entry or parking at these locations was questioned. Some interviewees wondered whether the Geopark Trust would seek to acquire these sites, but the capital funding of such purchases was not discussed in any detail.

We have to know what it looks like, we have to know what it costs, we have to know what the return is, potentially, you know there's got to be a business case for it basically.

Branding

The branding of the Geopark was the focus of a lot of discussion with interviewees. Some liked the logo currently in use, some did not. Similarly, some thought the Geopark brand would complement

I want them to do it properly. I don't want them to stuff it up. If they stuff it up it's going to be a stuff up of major proportions, and the town and the District will have a bloody hard time recovering from it.

their own brand, others were less certain. A clearer consensus emerged around doubts about the ability of Waitaki District Council and the WWGT to deliver the branding work necessary to make the Geopark a success. Some interviewees argued that, as primarily a branding exercise, the Geopark should sit more clearly with Tourism Waitaki than with WDC (which was where interviewees most commonly saw it as being based). Some argued for the need for professionals with substantial branding experience to be involved.

While many interviewees argued that they would like to see the work around the Geopark done properly and professionally, interviewees offered no clear vision as to how this could be funded and several interviewees did

describe in negative terms the previous use of expensive consultants to advise on local projects.

Infrastructure

The provision of local infrastructure featured in conversations around the funding of the Geopark. A number of interviewees commented on a perception that existing infrastructure (especially public toilets) is inadequate. Further, interviewees suggested that increasing tourist numbers would be associated with increased need for infrastructure provision, including more provision for roads, rubbish and recycling, and children's play areas. First aid provision in the area was also mentioned, and particularly whether St John would need to recruit more community volunteers to cope with increasing visitor needs.

We don't have roadside collections...rubbish waste is being trucked out of the District, we don't have recycling, our roads are a mess; the list goes on.

It seems that presenting local residents with a plan detailing the expected costs and benefits of a Geopark, and a phased expenditure plan showing how tasks like branding exercises and infrastructure developments are going to be achieved, could help to answer some of the questions that interviewees raised.

Geopark Geographies

Several interviewees raised the complex issue of Geopark boundaries. There is a range of administrative, economic, geological, cultural and historic boundaries that could be used to define the Geopark area. These do not conveniently coincide, meaning there is no 'consensus of boundaries' that can be used for contention-free definition of a Geopark. Instead complex layers of boundaries are overlaid in ways that intersect, overlap, and diverge.

The proposed Geopark boundaries currently align with the administrative boundaries of the Waitaki

We make [our product] here, and we make it locally, but we also make it in Wanaka, which is outside the District. And now we were talking about getting some [ingredients] made in Dunedin, outside the District. We would like to [source locally], but as far as we know none of [another ingredient] is from here.

District (Waitaki District Council, 2018), which undoubtedly facilitates discussions around local authority funding (MacLean, 2019) and wider governance processes. Some interviewees questioned the rationale for using administrative boundaries, as opposed to geological boundaries, supply network boundaries, or tourism flow routes. Cultural understandings of geography, such as iwi boundaries or sites (and routes) of historic practice, although not discussed, could further complicate future boundary discussions.

Interviewees noted the importance of boundary clarity, but also recommended attentiveness to the challenges that firm boundaries could pose for businesses with geographically complex sourcing, production, collaboration, and distribution networks. Some interviewees also called for attention to the distribution

of Geopark investment and publicity within Geopark boundaries, to ensure that the costs and benefits are evenly spread and to avoid a contentious scenario of some parts of the District subsidising the development of others.

Open and explicit discussion about the complexities of overlapping boundaries could help the Geopark to represent its local area in a culturally nuanced and appropriate way and demonstrate a maturity that exceeds in/out binaries and reflects what one interviewee described as a more 'fuzzy' reality. Specifying boundaries, but allowing some overlap in terms of sourcing and the cultural and historic stories that can be told in the Geopark may facilitate understandings of the park area that are both 'definite' and 'fuzzy'.

Geogastronomy

Interviewees had a range of views about the concept of geogastronomy. These can broadly be divided into two groups, one group of ideas focused on the concept itself, the other focused on the name.

Starting with the name, throughout the interviews it became apparent that some interviewees struggled with pronunciation of the word 'geogastronomy'. It was common to hear interviewees stumble over the word, get frustrated while trying to pronounce it, or mispronounce it as 'geogastromony' rather than 'geogastronomy'. Explicit comments included that people did not instinctively know what the term meant, that they related it to imagery of unpleasant gastric conditions, or that there was a confusing proliferation of 'geo'-terms (geopark, geogastronomy, geotrail...). The geogastronomy magazine that had been shared with local stakeholders, however, was widely praised, particularly for being 'beautifully produced'.

Moving to the geogastronomy concept itself, interviewees were broadly positive about the high quality of local food and drink and of opportunities for promoting the District through the idea of geogastronomy or terroir. They noted the important sensory and cultural features of eating and drinking, and how food and drink can help visitors to connect with a sense of place. Interviewees urged caution about potentially overselling the District and some expressed doubt about whether people would visit the District specifically for its geogastronomy. Some, however, also noted opportunities to enhance local offerings, including making culinary connections to landscape more visible to visitors, and facilitating more connections to mahika kai, kai moana, and customary food preparation practices.

It's very easy to oversell a destination, I think it needs to just be confident, and confident in our talents, and in our aspirations, but not overdo it. There's a lot of talented cooks out there, and they don't all live in North Otago!

Interviewees indicated a number of challenges associated with catering to the spatial and temporal distribution of visitors currently, and that may be ameliorated or exacerbated by Geopark developments. They described patterns of visitation that mean that some businesses struggle to cope with demand (especially during the peak visitor season), while others struggle to remain viable. Planning processes that help promote the alignment of visitation and service provision could be beneficial. Some food producers and growers, while broadly welcoming visitors to the District, also indicated that direct visitation to their work sites could be problematic and that they would prefer planning processes that gave visitors dedicated opportunities that did not interfere with everyday production.

Finally, there was considerable debate amongst interviewees about which businesses should be included in a geogastronomy trail. Interviewees made a wide variety of comments on inclusion criteria, including debating whether these should incorporate (subjective) evaluations of quality, or payments into a membership system, or simply confirmation that the geographical location of a business' (main) operations is within the Geopark's boundaries. No clear consensus emerged and further collaboration with the geogastronomy sector (broadly defined) would be advisable to define inclusion criteria.

Cultural identities

Many interviewees were able to recount stories of the development of the cultural history of the region, and often to link these to its landscape and gastronomy. Stories about farming heritage and hospitality, moa hunting, and culinary and cultural links to continental Europe (particularly through

...a lot of our stuff has been imported in; it's not of the land originally. But it's part of the culture that we've created here in New Zealand. And you know, why not celebrate our food?

military history) reflected a rich and varied District history. If the Geopark project ultimately proceeds, it may be possible to incorporate, or even prioritise the kinds of stories that interviewees told (one interviewee was quite emphatic that it is the *stories* that make the District what it is and have real potential to appeal to visitors). Some interviewees, however, expressed a degree of scepticism about whether the culinary culture of the District (and local identity more broadly) is sufficiently mature or distinctive to be considered an attraction in its own right. One interviewee referred to regions (particularly in France) with more well-recognised culinary specificities by way of comparison.

There was some optimism that a Geopark might help to enhance residents' sense of an authentic regional identity alongside some caution about not overselling what the District has to offer.

Building a Geopark, or a geogastronomy trail within it, that respectfully builds on the varied cultural heritage of the area would require careful consideration of the interests and values of different cultural groups.

Although most interviewees focused on European, Māori, and Chinese heritage in the area, there are also contemporary populations of other Pacific Island and Asian groups who contribute to the contemporary culture of the region. Leaving people out, getting stories wrong, or prioritising some histories over others could all be culturally damaging, but interviewees argued that getting it right could help the local community in a variety of ways, including through a stronger appreciation of local cultural identity.

I think [a Geopark]...could actually have the side effect that people will develop kind of an identity. A regional identity, which I think is something that New Zealand is lacking.

Other potential geotrails

Most interviewees had not given a great deal of prior thought to how the District's different attractions or activities could be brought together into coherent tourism packages. However, they did suggest that conducting organised famils for the different operators in the area could both

I think at the moment everyone's focusing, rightfully, on their own business, as a single entity, within a bigger region. And [the Geopark] has the potential to have a lot of cross-pollinational benefits.

facilitate strategic collaborations and enable businesses to recommend one another to visitors. One interviewee also suggested encouraging each community, however small, to identify its strengths and opportunities. A District-wide strategy could then help to guide actions and develop a network of community ideas and projects across the region.

Themes drawn from across the interviews suggest several possible geotrail ideas for investigation. These go beyond a focus on gastronomy and connect with other attractions in the region. Further investigation could explore whether these ideas have potential to be future WWG geotrails helping to build business

networks and facilitate longer visitor stays.

Rivers and lakes: Focuses on the District's rivers and lakes and includes activities like fishing, kayaking, sailing, and jet boating. Could focus on the historic importance of water in the region, from moa hunting, to gold mining, to irrigation, and hydropower. Gastronomic links could be provided to local salmon, beer and wine, and cheese—all of which rely on the quality of the region's water resources.

Coasts: Links the scenic and productive coastal parts of the District drawing on the history of local people's interactions with land and sea (including Māori and European maritime history, and that associated with the Maheno hospital ship and the region's World War II heritage). Could include land-based journeys (such as an e-bike trail from Dunedin through the District), as well as water-based activities (including scuba diving, snorkelling, or spear fishing excursions), and opportunities to engage with local wildlife (including the famous local penguins). Cultural interpretations of landscape features could be incorporated (including Kātiki Point and the Moeraki Boulders | Te Kaihīnaki) alongside classes in traditional techniques for preparing mahika kai.

Mining and architectural heritage: Draws on cultural mining experiences including contemporary mining operations such as Macraes Mine and the Golden Point Battery as well as historic prospecting along the Pig Route. Disused railway lines (including the Dunback-Maheno line) could be used to enhance the region's cycle networks and capitalise on the existence of both the Alps to Ocean cycleway and the Central Otago Rail Trail. Horse trekking through the area may provide an alternative to biking that might link even more strongly to the region's mining history. Could include attractions featuring the quarrying of limestone and construction of landmarks such as Totara Estate, Clark's Mill and buildings in Oamaru's Historic Precinct. Development of the District's culinary culture, including meat freezing and shipping could connect to local gastronomy experiences.

Networks

One of the most appealing aspects of a Geopark for many of the interviewees was the potential for improved integration of activities and networks between the different businesses in the District. Interviewees described networking challenges posed by busy lives, geographic isolation (especially for those outside Oamaru), and an absence of overarching network coordination. They described the Geopark as a potential network facilitator.

Most interviewees said that the Geopark had not yet resulted in new or stronger networks, but anticipated that it might do so in future. However, some interviewees did report new conversations emerging amongst people who had attended earlier geogastronomy meetings, increased awareness of other enterprises and products in the area, possible new product sourcing arrangements, and an impetus to reflect on possible new features or activities for their businesses.

I met [someone new at one of the geogastronomy meetings] and I hadn't met him before. And then I just happened upon him at the wholesaler that I go to...so we had a good chat.

Interviewees noted a need to ensure against exclusion from any new and strengthening networks (for example on the basis of business location or business type).

The anticipated benefits of greater networking associated with a proposed Geopark included businesses being able to promote each other to the benefit of all businesses, reductions in feelings of isolation, an ability to coordinate things like opening hours to ensure a more complete visitor service, better tourist experiences and longer visitor stays, more local buy-in, more local employment, and more sharing of knowledge and expertise.

Conclusions

Most interviewees in this research saw much to celebrate about the proposed Waitaki Whitestone Geopark. They were broadly supportive of the idea of having a park in the District, they liked the idea of showcasing the District's food, drink, geology, history, and stories, and they thought that improved collaboration had the potential to bring considerable benefits.

Interviewees also raised a wide range of issues about how the Geopark would function, including its funding, inclusion criteria for geogastronomy businesses, fairness of distribution of costs and benefits, adequate provision of local infrastructure, and the ability of existing agencies to deliver professional services like a branding strategy.

Particularly, interviewees reported that transparency, communication, and consultation about the Geopark could be substantially improved and there was a lack of a clear understanding of the Geopark by some interviewees. Many interviewees argued that they wanted to see much more open and frequent engagement and collaboration between WDC and the people of the District.

The key message from this report is, then, that the proposed Waitaki Whitestone Geopark has exciting potential, but will require concerted effort by the WWGT for that potential to be met. WDC, and TW need to engage further and collaborate with the local community and a wide range of stakeholders. Engagement can be challenging when stakeholders have different (and sometimes conflicting) points of view. However, this report demonstrates that although there are considerable challenges ahead there are also areas of broad agreement and enthusiasm on which to build.

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