Environmental change and tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park:
Stakeholder perspectives

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Abstract

This report presents the findings from a qualitative study investigating the impacts of climate change-induced biophysical changes to resources housed within protected areas. The project follows a study which investigated biophysical changes, tourism stakeholder and management perspectives and challenges, and visitor use and experiences in Westland Tai Poutini National Park. Altogether, 15 interviews – with tourist operators and park managers at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park – were undertaken in November 2014. While environmental (climate) changes were perceived to have directly impacted on visitor use of the park, they were commonly discussed in the context of broader changes in visitor behaviour and demand, and in the supply of nature-based tourism products. Biophysical and social changes to tourism and recreation within the park also impacted on, and were impacted by, management decisions and policies pertaining to conservation and visitor use.

Keywords

Environmental change, climate change, tourism, recreation, Aoraki/Mt Cook, national park

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Chapter 1
Introduction

This report summarises findings from 15 interviews conducted with tourist operators and park managers at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park in November 2014. The research aimed to better understand how climate change-induced biophysical changes to resources housed within protected areas impacts on visitor behaviour, stimulates changes in nature-based tourism products and affects management decisions and policies pertaining to conservation and visitor use. The project follows a study which investigated biophysical changes, tourism stakeholder and management perspectives and challenges, and visitor use and experiences of the neighbouring Westland Tai Poutini National Park (see Wilson et al., 2014a & 2014b). The Aoraki/Mt Cook interviews represent an exploratory first step of a similar study. This chapter provides context for the research with an introduction to the park and its glaciers, a description of the Aoraki/Mt Cook community and an outline of tourism activity in the park. Chapter 2 describes the research methods. The research findings are reported in Chapter 3 and key points are summarised in the concluding chapter (Chapter 4).

1.1 Background

Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park is regarded as the ‘jewel in New Zealand’s crown’ with annual visits to Aoraki/Mt Cook village estimated to be in the region of 250,000 (DOC, 2004). The park is situated on the eastern flank of the southern alps and contains New Zealand’s highest mountain, Aoraki/Mt Cook (3754 metres) and includes most of New Zealand’s peaks over 3000 metres. The park shares a boundary with Westland Tai Poutini National Park for 40 of its 65 kilometre length. The park is home to the Tasman, Hooker, Mueller and Murchison Glaciers with the Tasman glacier being the largest (Purdie et al., 2011), covering an area of ≈95 km² and containing ≈30% of New Zealand’s ice volume (Chinn, 2001). These glaciers are highly dynamic and sensitive to changes in climate (Anderson et al., 2008; Purdie et al., 2011). For example, the Tasman Glacier has undergone significant ice loss, losing volume at around ~0.1 km³ per year (Thomas, 2009), while the proglacial lake increased in surface area by 86% during the period 2000-2008 (Dykes et al., 2010), and now covers an area of ~7 km², and is up to 240 m deep (Figure 1) (Purdie et. al., 2015).

This rapid glacial recession has already had significant impact on tourist access and scenic amenity including the development of proglacial lake tourism activities on the Tasman Glacier. Scientists have made a number of predications as to how large and how fast the Tasman Lake will grow, with latest predications suggesting that the lake may expand a further 10 km up-valley within the next 50 years (Dykes, 2013). However, the development and expansion of proglacial lakes is not the only implication of glacial recession. Access to some alpine huts and routes have dramatically changed and the loss of ice volume has a flow-on effect to slope stability (Deline et al., 2015). Furthermore, sequential impacts from mass movements of ice, debris and/or rock increase the natural hazard potential in the Aoraki/Mount Cook region and potentially put at risk municipal and tourism infrastructure (Allen et al., 2009).
1.2 Aoraki/Mt Cook village

The Aoraki/Mt Cook village, along with Whakapapa village in the Tongariro National Park, are the only communities in New Zealand zoned within National Park (NP) boundaries. The Aoraki/Mount Cook village is a gazetted amenities area under Section 15 of the National Parks Act 1980. These ‘amenities’ include a range of visitor services including commercial accommodation, food and activity businesses as well as a visitor centre and park management operation centre. The National Park Management Plan (NPMP) (2004) requires that the village is managed in such a way that it does not detract from the park’s World Heritage Area status and that visitors should be encouraged to see the village as a gateway to the park, rather than as a destination in itself. The NPMP states:

[The Village] should continue to be subservient to the wider landscape. It is emphasized that the primary purpose of the Village is for it to be a gateway to the Park; a place where visitors learn about the Park and its natural and cultural values. The Village is not to be managed as a place that would act as a barrier to the wider Park, or that would provide activities that would distract visitors from enjoying the Park (Section 5.1.5) (DOC, 2004).

The dynamic natural environment of the NP presents significant challenges in respect of park management, infrastructure and business operations. As the Community Plan (DOC, 2009, p.16) notes:

Costs of operating can be higher at Aoraki/Mount Cook than in other locations that would, at first glance, seem to be comparable. The village is set in an active geological environment and is subject to extreme weather, all of which may accelerate wear and tear on buildings and infrastructure. The department has had to install geotechnical protection
works to protect the village from flooding, rock debris, and avalanche risk from the stream catchments and slopes above.

The original village was shifted in 1969 from Birch Hill to Black Birch Fan to reduce its exposure to weather flooding events and its visual intrusion on the national park landscape. Storm damage in 1979 lead to the construction of storm water control throughout the village. In 1996, the identification of major potential natural hazards in the village, resulted in a halt to all new building until protection work had been undertaken. The first new independent business in the village after this freeze was The Old Mountaineers’ café/bar, which opened on the old helipad next to the visitor centre in 2003.

At the 2013 Census there were 192 people living at Mt Cook, a decrease of 18 people since the previous Census (2006). Table 1 shows some key statistics for the Mt Cook population and the wider Mackenzie District in which Mt Cook is located. These data reflect the tourism-focussed character of the village: a relatively young age profile, limited property ownership and residents living in close proximity to their employment (see means of travel to work). These are similar population characteristics as those reported for the Franz Josef and Fox Glacier villages (Wilson et al., 2014b).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Key Statistics Mt Cook population at 2013 Census (Statistics New Zealand)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mt Cook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median age</td>
<td>32.1 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Born overseas</td>
<td>48.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common birthplace</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common language after English</td>
<td>Japanese (10.9%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold formal qualification</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unemployment rate</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most common occupational group</td>
<td>Community and personal service workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median income</td>
<td>$33,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One-person households</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main means of travel to work</td>
<td>Walking or jogging 74.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dwelling ownership</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For the year ended February 2013, the top five industries in Mt Cook by employee count were accommodation and food services (73.1%), arts and recreation services (11.5%), administrative and support services (5.8%), transport, postal and warehousing (3.5%) and information media and telecommunications (3.3%) (Statistics New Zealand).

The only residential dwellings allowed are for those people required to live there for park management purposes or to run a concession business in the park. Concessions are also required for business owners who wish to build accommodation for staff within the village; Twizel (42 kms away) is the closest place at which private rental accommodation is available. A limited amount of staff accommodation is available in the village.

The village has a Residents’ Association (formed in 1985) which owns a community hall and lobbies for the local community. The local school is tightly integrated into the community with a pool and community book exchange. The first school at Mt Cook opened in 1960 at Irishmans Creek and was relocated to its current site in 1976. The school building was extended in 2007. In 2014, the ethnic composition of the school’s 11 pupils was diverse: New Zealand European/Pakeha (2), Maori (1), Nepalese (2), Fijian (3), Japanese (2) and Chinese (1) (Education Review Office, 2014).
1.3 Tourism in the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP

There is a long history of tourism and tourist services in the park. The first Hermitage Hotel was built in 1884 at White Horse Hill (on the site of the present campground). A new Hermitage Hotel – the first building in the existing village – was built in 1912-13 after the original was damaged by flooding from the Mueller Glacier in 1912-13. This building was destroyed by fire in 1957, but a new hotel was operational by the end of 1958.

![Hermitage Hotel in 2015](Photo by Jude Wilson)

The 1950s also saw the construction of accommodation near the village by recreation clubs. The New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) opened Unwin Hut (now Unwin Lodge) in 1951 and base huts were constructed by the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (Wyn Irwin Hut) and the New Zealand Deerstalkers’ Association (Thar Lodge) in 1956-57. The Hermitage was extended in 1961 (with 42 extra beds), 1977 (the 40-room Wakefield Wing) and again in 2001 (the 60-room Aoraki Wing); the Sir Edmund Hillary Centre, comprising a café/bar and museum complex, 3D-movie theatre, and Planetarium was added in 2007. The current Hermitage Hotel is shown in Photograph 1. Other accommodation options in the village include Chalets (1973), a YHA hostel (1986) and the Aoraki/Mt Cook Alpine Lodge (2005).

The first motor services to Mt Cook began in 1906; the road to Aoraki/Mt Cook from Pukaki was sealed in 1975. Scheduled flights to Aoraki/Mt Cook began in 1961, but the service has been inconsistent in the decades since. The airport, the terminal of which was rebuilt in 2001 after a fire, now services a range of scenic flights (both fixed wing and helicopter) and hosts the occasional charter flight.

In 1885 the Hooker and Mueller valleys were gazetted as Recreation Reserves, followed by the Tasman Valley above the Mueller Valley confluence in 1887. These represent the most visited areas of the park today, and have been the location of the majority of new development in the park over the last ten years. These developments include: the introduction of boat activities on Tasman and Mueller Lakes (Photograph 2); a significant upgrade to Hooker Valley track (including the construction of three new bridges) (Photograph 3); replacement of Mueller Hut; the sealing of the Tasman Valley road to the
new Blue Lakes car park (Photograph 4); and the construction of the opening section of the A20 cycle trail from White Horse car park to the airport (Photograph 5) (DOC, 2012).

Photograph 2
Glacier Explorers on Tasman Lake

(Photo by Jude Wilson)

Photograph 3
Hooker Valley track showing new bridge and Mueller Lake

(Photo by Jude Wilson)
Environmental change and tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park: Stakeholder perspectives

Photograph 4
Shelter and new carpark at Blue Lakes

(Photograph by Jude Wilson)

Photograph 5
The A2O Cycle Trail, Aoraki/Mt Cook – start

(Photograph by Jude Wilson)
In addition to the ‘front-country’ services, a total of 15 back-country and alpine huts currently exist in the National Park, utilised by trampers, hunters and mountaineers. Over time, access to some of these huts has deteriorated dramatically, and others have been removed completely. For example, glacier thinning and slope erosion resulted in the isolation of Hooker Hut, leaving it perched high on the moraine wall above the Hooker Glacier. Hooker Hut used to be a common overnight refuge for climbers completing the east-west crossing of Copland Pass. Despite efforts to maintain access by relocating the hut further back from the edge of the glacier, this historic hut was finally removed in May 2015 (DOC, 2015).

The 2009 Community Plan reported that Aoraki/Mt Cook NP attracts approximately 260,000 visitors per year, with the majority visiting between November and April (DOC, 2009). According to International Visitor Survey (IVS) the wider Mackenzie District attracted 200,445 international visitors in the year ended March 2015. Summer visitors include climbers, recreationists and tourists. A variety of winter recreation activities (heli-skiing, ski touring) attract visitors over winter months, but these are in very low numbers compared to other winter destinations with downhill ski areas such as Methven, Wanaka, and Queenstown. The closest downhill ski areas to Aoraki/Mt Cook are Round Hill (near Tekapo) and Ohau.
Chapter 2
Methods

Respondents were selected from among those individuals engaged within the tourism industry at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park. As noted in background section, the Aoraki/Mt Cook community is small and many respondents were known to the researchers via involvement in previous research projects. One of the researchers had worked (and lived) at Aoraki/Mt Cook and was involved in ongoing biophysical research and monitoring of the Tasman Glacier. In order to explore perceptions of change (to the national park and its glaciers and to tourism) individuals with a long association with tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook were specifically sought. The 15 respondents included representatives from DOC, tourism activity operators, alpine guides and accommodation operators.

Initial contact with potential respondents was by telephone; a follow-up email included a research information sheet describing the project and their participation in more detail (see Appendix 1). The project was reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.

A qualitative research method was employed using face-to-face semi-structured interviews. The same base schedule was used in all interviews, although the order in which the questions were asked (and answered) varied, depending on the flow of conversation. The emphasis in interviews and the specific questions asked were also adapted to suit the particular stakeholders involved. The interview schedule, broadly followed in all interviews, covered the following topic areas (a copy of the full schedule can be found in Appendix 2):

Organisational background
- This introductory set of questions was designed to gather background information on the type of engagement (both personally and professionally) each stakeholder had with tourism in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park. With respect to the DOC representatives, these questions focused on their organisational roles relating to the facilitation of tourism.

Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park
- These questions began with discussion around the importance of the park to each respondent on a personal level. The interviews then moved on to a broader discussion around the perceived importance of the national park in the local, regional and national context, as visitor attractions and in economic terms. More specifically, information was collected on what aspects of the park were perceived to be most important to visitors and how dependent individual businesses/organisations were on these.

Environmental context: climate change
- These questions explored the biophysical changes in Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park observed by respondents. Perceptions and impacts of the recent accelerated rates of change were of particular interest, with specific questions focusing on the access and safety implications of these changes from both business and visitor perspectives.

Visitor experiences: motives, expectations and satisfaction
- Stakeholders’ views on visitor motives, expectations and satisfaction with respect to their Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park visits were explored, again with perceived changes over time (in respect of the visitor experience and understanding of environmental change) of particular interest.
Adaptive strategies: visitors, businesses and managers

• Change in the visitor experience was explored via a series of questions addressing adaptation to environmental change. Stakeholders were asked about adaptations made by visitors, those made by their own agency and others at the broader destination level. The success of these, and the potential for future adaptation was also explored.

Two pages of images depicting environmental and infrastructure changes at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park were used as prompts for discussion around change in the park. One of these pages showed the Hooker Valley, the other showed the Tasman Valley (see Appendix 3 and 4).

The research was undertaken in November 2014 before the busy summer visitor and climbing season. All interviews were conducted in respondents’ workplaces: 13 at Aoraki/Mt Cook and its close environs and two at Tekapo. Most interviews took between 30 minutes and one hour (the exception was one interview which, with work-related interruptions, spanned two hours). Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed in full.

2.1 Sample description

Altogether, five of the stakeholders interviewed either owned or managed guiding companies or worked as guides (climbing, ski touring and glacier guiding) in the park; a number of these guides also worked in other mountain areas (both in New Zealand and overseas) and one guide was involved in other commercial tourism businesses at Aoraki/Mt Cook. Of the remainder, four respondents were involved in other tourist activity businesses and four in accommodation. The two DOC respondents were engaged with concessions, education and community relations.

The stakeholders interviewed had either lived or worked at Aoraki/Mt Cook for between one and 35 years. Only four respondents had fewer than ten years’ association, while five had been associated with Aoraki/Mt Cook for 30 years or more (Figure 2). The average length of association with the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP was 19 years. Overall, as Figure 2 shows, those working as guides, or involved with guiding companies, had the longest association, and those involved in accommodation had the shortest. While some of the variation in the length of association reported by those involved in activity businesses relates to type of activity business (e.g., the longest was involved in scenic flights while the shortest was involved in one of the newer park activities), it was common for respondents to have held different (and often multiple) roles in the park over time. One accommodation respondent had been at the park for only six months, but had been based there for several years in a previous role.

Two respondents had been involved with the park for longer than their formal association suggested (indicated by the grey bars in Figure 1). One of these was interviewed as an accommodation operator who had been formally involved with accommodation services in the park for ten years, but had been recreating at Aoraki/Mt Cook and associated with the New Zealand Alpine Club for 41 years. The other was a DOC respondent who also had recreation experience of the park going back more than 40 years but had only been employed there for 30 years.
To protect respondents’ anonymity, broad descriptors (indicating type of involvement and an assigned interviewee number, as shown in Figure 2) are used in the attribution of quotations. The respondent who had associations with the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) is sometimes identified in that context. There are occasions, however, when the context of a particular discussion point necessitates more detail about a respondent’s position. No business-sensitive information is reported.
Chapter 3
Findings

The research findings are presented in five parts:

- The meaning of the park, and its importance as a visitor attraction;
- The visitor experience;
- Environmental change;
- Changes in Aoraki/Mt Cook NP; and
- The future.

3.1 The meaning of the park, and its importance as a visitor attraction

When asked to describe what the park meant to them personally, three key (and interrelated) themes emerged. The first theme related to the emotional, cultural and historical meaning of the park. The second theme focused on the importance of the park to respondents’ livelihoods and their appreciation for this. The third theme described how Aoraki/Mt Cook was ‘home’ to respondents.

Guides and those stakeholders whose experience included recreating in the park talked extensively about the importance of the park for recreation and its cultural and historical significance as New Zealand’s pre-eminent alpine climbing area as recognised by connection to Sir Edmund Hillary (see Photograph 6). The following quotations show this:

*The attraction of the NP is that it is more grandiose, more emotive, bigger and better [than around Queenstown] – the playground is more varied, more extensive and more challenging and then [there is] the emotional side of it because it is a national park, because it has a cultural and historical background to it that other places don’t have – much more emotional attachment to playing around here compared to other places (Guide 3).*

*Mt Cook is synonymous with alpine climbing in New Zealand – the home of the big mountains – of the big peaks – since the late 1800s it’s been a centre of New Zealand mountaineering – the big names in New Zealand climbing came up here and did lots of things (NZAC).*

One guide, whose company sponsors four Maori students to cross Ball Pass each year, added “that has been an enriching experience for us too, as we have got more of an insight into what Aoraki Mt Cook means to them” (Guide 1). For others, the mountains held great personal significance, often linked to their length of association:

*It’s quite a spiritual thing for me – you know, I have a great connection with this place and that is why I am here – I have been here a lot longer than most people now – so I have a connection – I have guided Aoraki/Mt Cook 28 times and it’s always a special moment – I have great respect for the mountains and when they speak a wise man or woman listens (Guide 2).*
The respondent who had been at Aoraki/Mt Cook for only one year also talked about how their attachment had grown: “It means a lot more than it did when I arrived – I wasn’t sure if I would like it when I arrived – the mountains had a definite draw – I feel very attached to Aoraki/Mt Cook and all its moods” (Accommodation 4). One guide talked about the way Aoraki/Mt Cook NP reflected New Zealand cultural ideals associated with how mountain areas (and NPs) are developed and managed:

I think New Zealand in general has a – and has always had – disconnect with what people from other cultures and other countries have of what a mountain place is – there is not a row of shops and cafés and there is no village – you drive around and there are all these big mountains around and they think ‘we will drive up that valley and there will be a teleferik’ so I don’t think that has changed an awful lot, but it has maybe grown – that disconnect has grown (Guide 4).

The importance of the park to their business or employment was noted by several guides. As one said, “It is very important because I guess in terms of attracting business clientele – our highest mountain is a draw card, although we probably spend more time talking people out of climbing Aoraki/Mt Cook than talking them into it “. Another guide added that “Aoraki/Mt Cook has given me a really good life”. One respondent also talked about challenges of working in the often hostile natural environments of the park:

The more I have tried to work as a mountain guide the more I am conflict with Mother Nature – and I know for a fact if you really want to simplify why I am still here and am still alive it is because I do everything I can to be in harmony with the hills and the nature and it’s a gift (Guide 5).

A pilot who had worked in the park for 35 years summed up the meaning of the park for him, “In a nutshell it has been a privilege for me – it really has – since I got a commercial pilot licence I have been here – it’s been a great ride” (Activity 1). Another commented on how they were only able to remain
at Aoraki/Mt Cook because of their job: “One day we have to move on because you can’t retire here” (Activity 2).

Aoraki/Mt Cook as ‘home’ was a key theme and the strength of this home attachment was linked to length of residence and to family. As the two DOC respondents noted:

*It’s the place I have spent the longest part of my life – it is home – it is interesting because at the moment our son is here and for him it is his home – there is no question about it (we have the only school in a NP in New Zealand) (DOC 1).*

*This is home – our daughter also grew up here and went through the school and she considers this to be home – she came back last year and worked for a couple of months and the first thing she did was walk up [to the] red tarns and take a couple of photos for her Facebook. We certainly don’t tire of it – the colours are always changing (DOC 2).*

Others balanced their enjoyment of the natural environment with the challenges of living in such a remote location and small community. As the quotations below show, however there were also social advantages of life in a small and remote community.

*I have lived here longer than anywhere else – so I have quite an emotional investment in the place and it’s pretty fantastic – whenever I go away I am always keen to come back and become a hermit (laughs) (Guide 4).*

*Um – I mean – this is a real peaceful place for me to come – there is not much in the way of amenities here really – you can’t chose a different restaurant each night, but there is a lot to be said for clean air and clear water and there is a great wee school here (about 10-15 kids) and they have a teacher and a teacher assistant and the school is mixed age group as well (Accommodation 2).*

*It’s just a quiet place – I just love it – you can leave your car unlocked, your house unlocked – your keys in the car – you just feel safe – it is a safe environment and you stress that to people on your tour. It’s a World Heritage NP (Activity 2).*

Others also noted the park’s world heritage status and the responsibility they felt to protect it. One respondent, who had been at the park for seven years, commented that “I am still in awe of it and you can imagine what people think when they first see it” and went on to say:

*You get very attached to it – it is kind of like your own – you treat it like your own and you get a little bit annoyed if you see rubbish and stuff around – on the bus now we say to people that it is a NP, a World Heritage site and if you have any rubbish take it out with you (Activity 4).*

A guide with 30 years’ experience of the park added “Look at the place – it is just magic – even now it is giving us something incredible [it was snowing] in the middle of November – how can you not like it”.

### 3.1.1 The importance of Aoraki/Mt Cook as a visitor attraction

When asked what visitors valued about the park, most respondents referred to sightseeing and front country visitors rather than those who came to climb or to recreate in the back country. According to one of the DOC respondents, for most of these visitors the appeal is “just the visual – Aoraki/Mt Cook”. One of the accommodation respondents also noted the importance of Aoraki/Mt Cook commenting that:
It is a postcard mountain and people just want to see it – they want to see the park and want to be in the nature – they have come from Queenstown, where it is bars, or from Christchurch, which is a town – and I think it is on a lot of people’s tick-off lists as well (Accommodation 2).

This point was reiterated by another of the accommodation respondents who noted that the appeal lay in “the fact that it is an iconic place – it is New Zealand’s highest mountain – it is like in Japan you want to see Mt Fuji or Paris the Eiffel Tower and most places have the places you want to see and most visitors to New Zealand will have Aoraki/Mt Cook on their list” (Accommodation 3). One of the activity operators noted, however, that while visitors come to “[see] the mountains – they always think that Mt Sefton is Aoraki/Mt Cook – that is always the question – ‘which one is Aoraki/Mt Cook?’”

Many comments described the attractions offered in the broader context of the national park experience, rather than those associated with seeing or experiencing specific components within it. As one activity operator noted “I think definitely it is more about the mountains than about the glacier”; another commented that “it has always been that they want to come here and really enjoy nature and get away from the big smoke”. One of the accommodation respondents added that “the tourists love it – they go to Queenstown and party-up, jump off bridges and stuff, and [then they] come here and just relax” (Accommodation 2).

Visitors are also perceived to be motivated by the novel experiences the park offers (e.g., “landing on snow is a thrill for visitors” and “seeing icebergs is what it is about”). When asked why they think visitors come to the park, two respondents (both involved in scenic flight activities) suggested the following:

Good views, the scenery, landing on the glacier is always a big one and I guess they often expect – especially people from countries that don’t have snow – snow, which in summer it becomes a little bit hard to provide because up there is not really snowy (Activity 3).

For Japanese [visitors], to get to somewhere they would not have been able to walk to, [it] is almost spiritual (Activity 1).

Respondents also talked about visitors not being very well informed as to what they were looking at. As one respondent laughingly noted, “People ask why the ice is so blue and where the snow comes from”. One of the accommodation respondents commented that guests coming back from trips on the glacier lake were generally happy, noting that “a lot of people are only here for one day and so just being able to go out and touch the glacier ice is pretty exciting – they are still happy – the boats are still full – I don’t think there is much awareness of the ice changing” (Accommodation 4). The activity operators interviewed also talked about managing visitor expectations and experiences associated with the Tasman Glacier and the glacier lake. Although many visitors were disappointed by the amount of debris cover on the glacier itself this was not as important as seeing icebergs in the lake and, as one guide noted “when they see an iceberg it is not debris covered”.

Others also discussed the superficial nature of the visitor experience and visitors’ poor understanding of physical environment and of change in that environment. This was partly linked, of course, to it being their first time at the park, a circumstance that also applied to some climbing clientele. As one guide explained “they [clients] can’t relate to the past so they are only seeing it in that little window of time. We can explain that people used to step up onto the glacier, but that is very hard for them to imagine” (Guide 1). The interview data also suggested that, while they might understand global warming in the abstract, many tourists have limited awareness of what the evidence in the natural environment represents. For example, one commercial activity operator described teaching their clientele about what they were seeing:
They talk a lot about global warming – they will throw that at you – when you get them to the viewpoint they think the glacier is the lake – then you say ‘no that’s the glacier to the left and if you look up 10 kms and then you look around the corner’ – so I have that and then tell them the lake is roughly 5 kms long. But we do a drawing in the sand of what they are going to see – what the glacier looks like and how it behaves – they love that and then we walk up and see it and then when they get up there they know what you are talking about (Activity 2).

One of the DOC respondents also described educating visitors about the environmental changes they might see out in the park:

I will try and explain that when you are out there you are seeing newly formed proglacial lakes, and prior to that there was severe down wasting, so that is why you are seeing these huge walls and that our glaciers in their lower reaches are covered in these piles of rocks – because I don’t think people know what they are looking at.

One activity operator introduced the notion of ‘last chance tourism’, noting that “It could be more people wanting to experience it whilst they still can – there is that kind of sense of doom and gloom”. This respondent went on to explain that, while they tried not to bring up such a scenario on their trips, they had noticed that “clients will say they have to get here now, because if they wait or come back again it [the glacier] won’t be here” (Activity 4).

While front country sightseeing tourists make up the majority of visitors to Aoraki/Mt Cook NP, several respondents also talked about the importance of Aoraki/Mt Cook to the more active back country climbing and other recreational fraternities. Most of their comments reiterated the historical importance of Aoraki/Mt Cook as the pre-eminent climbing destination in New Zealand. One of the activity operators summed up the multifaceted appeal of Aoraki/Mt Cook NP as follows:

[It has] got to be because it’s a wilderness area – that’s number 1 – then Aoraki/Mt Cook, of course, and then the Hermitage – an international class hotel – and then the recreational opportunities – skiing, climbing, guided walks, picnicking even... (Activity 1).

The iconic nature of the park also extended to incorporate a number of the accommodation options; the Hermitage Hotel, for example, features alongside the mountain itself in a lot of Aoraki/Mt Cook marketing images, whilst the Unwin Lodge and the Aoraki/Mt Cook YHA were considered the ‘flagship premises’ of their respective networks. As one respondent noted, “Although the Aoraki/Mt Cook is not one of the YHA networks busier hostels it would likely survive any proposed stream-lining of the network because it is so iconic” (Accommodation 2).

Several respondents also commented on the importance of the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP to the wider locales of the Mackenzie District:

Places like the NP and the Mackenzie are important as more and more people are living in urban situations and it is an escape and is essentially a natural environment and will become more important (Guide 4).

We lose out domestically – they don’t take a 60 km deviation to come to an iconic spot – that is something I am working on is increasing that awareness. I think that the likes of Twizel and Tekapo – whether they do or don’t realise how important the role of Aoraki/Mt Cook is for them – and they feed off a lot of our market. The beauty here is that at the end of a dead-end road there is a pretty special place (Accommodation 3).
3.2 The visitor experience at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park

Interview data suggest that visitors to Aoraki/Mt Cook NP fall into three broad categories: back country recreationists, tourists (both active front country users and passive sightseeing visitors), and education groups. The wide range of accommodation – including back country huts, recreation club huts, the DOC camping area, hostels, chalets, motels and the Hermitage Hotel – caters to all three visitor groups. DOC facilities, amenities and services also support all visitor groups and activities; the commercial activity products and services are also widely utilised by all visitors, with the exception of the passive sightseeing visitors.

Interview data suggest that for all visitor groups there has been considerable change over time in the visitor experience. In some instances, the visitors themselves have changed (e.g., new markets have emerged while some traditional markets have declined). Other changes relate to changes in opportunities resulting from new visitor interests and the availability of new products and experiences (and the loss of old ones). Visitor expectations have also changed over time. The visitor experience, and reported changes in that experience, are described for each of the three visitor groups.

3.2.1 Back country recreationists

Back country recreation activities include alpine and rock climbing, glacier and ski touring in the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP and its wider environs, including a number of routes which cross the main divide. While some of these activities have historically involved air access, this has become more prevalent in recent years:

*Harry Wigley started glacier skiing using ski planes – I think there is only one plane at the moment because it is mostly helicopters, but flying is not new, but it’s new for climbers to be doing the helicopter stuff – the scenic flights were for the tourists who come up the road and just want a glacier thing – now we have heli skiing in the park so things have changed from a recreational point of view as well as from a geographical/geological one (NZAC)*.

Alpine Club membership has grown slowly over time, although the nature of activity has changed – “it’s like people think they can do anything now – in the old days climbing was special – now everybody mountain bikes and everybody jumps off cliffs and everybody skis”. Several respondents thought that there had been an increase in rock climbing in particular:

*We have a rock face up there on [Mt] Sebastopol and in the 1970s a few keen people put some routes up there, but in the last five years there has seen a resurgence – so much so that at Easter I organised a rock climbing meet here specifically (NZAC).*

The number of international climbers visiting the park have increased over time. The NZAC has a strong Australian section and cheap Trans-Tasman flights to Christchurch and Queenstown has facilitated increasing interest in Aoraki/Mt Cook from this market. Guiding company respondents also noted an increase in the number of international climbers in the park, albeit impacted at various times by external events such as the global financial crisis (GFC) and strength of the New Zealand dollar. As one guide explained, “high guiding always been a premium product in the NP and has always been vulnerable in recessionary times” (Guide 3). Another guide added:

*Australia would be our biggest percentage [of clients], although in 2008-9 in the GFC we had a higher percentage of Kiwis for our Ball Pass operation – because our dollar fell – normally we have more Australians in the summer, after that the Kiwis and then Americans, Germans, UK, and some Japanese (Guide 1).*
Changes in recreational use of the back country was noted by all those respondents who interact with this visitor group. As one of the DOC respondents explained:

*We might have had 10,000 bed nights in the huts back in the 1970s and 1980s which is now down to about 5-6,000 bed nights. That is because of a change in recreational interest and part of it is triggered by the difficulty of access as well, but there have also been changes in recreational patterns – now its short and sharp trips using aircraft for access – so when I first came here in 1974 to climb [Mount] Cook we walked up Haast Ridge to Plateau with all our gear for 10 days and that is very rarely done these days and people are different nowadays.*

One guide described the changes they has seen in their clients’ expectations and level of experience:

*Fitness levels of visitors have fallen – rough ground fitness in particular – because people are not as exposed to outdoor activities – more urban-based. This has changed the nature of products people are interested in – for example, we used to run a 14-day walk-in walk-out course in the 1980s, and now it’s a 9-day course and we fly them in and out (Guide 3).*

Another guide was of the opinion that these types of changes in client expectations were having more impact on some types of park activity than environmental changes. Another noted that they were “restricted in what we can offer by how fit/experienced clients are” (Guide 4). One respondent had been involved for many years with the New Zealand Alpine Club and noted that:

*People aren’t as tough as they used to be – if they are not coming from a tramping background it’s very hard to transcend to a rough mountain experience – sometimes they are trophy hunters and so they are just focused on Aoraki/Mt Cook and have very little interest in the other mountains (NZAC).*

However, many of these changes were positive for commercial guiding companies:

*If I look back over the last 20 years or so there is a trend amongst New Zealanders anyway – more preparedness to engage a professional mountain guide to have a mountain experience and also the trend in more recent years is that you get a lot of professionals who are time poor, but they are earning well and so they are prepared to pay for a guide to just have all the organisation done – especially if it is a one-to-one ascent. That is a more recent trend (Guide 1).*

*There is definitely more discretionary cash for recreation these days. There is also another change – a lot of people want instant gratification – so you come up, you fly in, you do your climb and you are back to work in 2-3 days and they can’t be bothered with taking longer (NZAC).*

The Alpine Club respondent also noted some changes in the types of guests their (upgraded) accommodation attracted over recent years:

*It’s not as if people don’t participate in the outdoors, but the [tramping] clubs that were the bastion of New Zealand society are no longer there – so there are more guiding groups in the mountains now – very few recreational groups – that is one thing I have noticed over the last 14 years – that is not climate change, it is society. We are also finding that it [the lodge] is attracting more member families because it is nice accommodation (NZAC).*

A consequence of these changes in access is that the boundaries between outdoor recreation, as practised by the experienced enthusiast, and the types of experience the casual (tourist) visitor is
seeking have increasingly overlapped. This can present challenges for commercial guiding companies, as one of the guides interviewed explained:

*With the growing Asian market you do have people who look at the beautiful photos and they want to be in those places to take those photos too, and they don’t realise the effort to get there. Even though you have a video and a description of how tough it is they really can’t relate to that (Guide 1).*

The same guide added that their company was seeing “a wee tiny trickle of Chinese at the moment – we are still getting to know that market”. She went on to explain that:

*They are not seasoned climbers, when they look at what is on our website they can’t necessarily relate to it – no matter what information we put up there – that can be a bit tricky... but the Tekapo trek we do in the summer in the Two Thumb Range is suitable for that kind of market – it is not as serious as [trips] over at Aoraki/Mt Cook if they have no experience (Guide 1).*

Most respondents talked about the short climbing season and the high level of challenge and skill associated with climbing in the park. As one guide explained in relation to one of the climbing routes:

*With the Fitzgerald Pass route it is more of a climber’s route – a lovely route, but you need a higher calibre of client and ones who have already used crampons before – the slopes above are not the place to start learning (Guide 1).*

Another guide described the expectations of park activities for the newer generation of recreationists’:

*Somed people like it – they enjoy the fact that they do it New Zealand style and it is a little bit hard core and you know – they do get a buzz out of that. That relates to their expectations and there is also the mere fact that it is a NP and a lot of people can’t get their head around what is allowed in the NP – the restrictions are quite culturally specific to New Zealand as well (Guide 3).*

Many of the commercial guiding companies have broadened the suite of products they offer (in respect of both location and content) to accommodate these changes in demand and changing markets. The increase in availability of heli hiking products (on the Tasman Glacier), rather than heli climbing operations (to access high climbs), at Aoraki/Mt Cook is another example of changing back country recreation in the park. As one guide noted:

*You change where and how you guide – like heli climbing is not going to attract a lot of people, but the heli hiking substitutes a lot of things, but also tourism has changed a lot – a lot of people don’t want long trips – they want condensed, shorter things (Guide 2).*

### 3.2.2 The tourists

According to DOC records, the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP Visitor Centre attracts in excess of 300,000 visitors per year, although there have been no visitor statistics collected for the park since the 1980s. Aoraki/Mt Cook NP offers tourists a range of easy short walks (often to scenic viewpoints) and a number of commercial visitor activities. These include guided walks, motor boat and kayak trips on the glacier lakes, scenic flights and heli hikes, 4WD drive ‘Argo’ tours and star gazing. Horse trekking is one of original activities offered by Glentanner Park Centre, located beyond the park boundary. The opening section of the A2O Cycle Trail is the newest activity development within the park itself and cyclists starting the trail in the NP are required to use a helicopter service to cross the Tasman River.
The park attracts a mix of FIT (Free Independent Travellers) and tour groups. It was generally agreed that FIT visitors stay longer (than coach tourists) allowing time to “go for the walks and try and take it all in”. One accommodation respondent, who mainly catered for FIT visitors, commented that their guests “[only] stay one and a half to two days and my feeling is that it is increasing – because there are a few more things to do in the park. The profile of the park has increased as well”.

Historically, the park was on the international coach touring route, attracting a lot of Japanese visitors, although this market has fallen considerably in recent years. One activity respondent described the vulnerability of Aoraki/Mt Cook in respect of its location: “As a destination the location is an issue – economising coach companies took Aoraki/Mt Cook off itineraries and the loss of flights impacted on visitor numbers” (Activity 1). One of the accommodation respondents also explained how demographic and behaviour changes in origin markets had impacted on coach tour visitors to the park; another described the rapid nature of coach tourists’ travel:

> I think the American market that used to be strong in New Zealand – those clients that we had were in their 60-65 age group and that generation has now moved on and the generation behind that is not travelling in buses the same way. The cruise ship market has taken a big share of that market. We do get some day visitors out of the cruise ship market from Akaroa and Timaru, but not many. The Australians are getting back in the coaches now though (Accommodation 3).

> The [tour] groups are still coming in and they stop here and then go onto Queenstown tonight, Dunedin tomorrow and they are doing it all in 8 days so that is a shame – I think they should stretch it out, but that is how they do their tours and apparently what people want (Accommodation 2).

Respondents also reported changes in the origin markets of visitors to the park, with the growth in Chinese visitors the most significant. There was also talk about the variation in interests and participation associated with particular visitor markets. According to DOC, for example:

> The Indians don’t walk anywhere – the Chinese don’t either very much – they are really into retail – I think they are still getting more Chinese doing that North Island triangle – but they are definitely coming into here, but they are not doing very much. They might go for a flight or go on Glacier Explorers – I think if you talked to both air companies you would find that their markets are strongly Indian and Chinese.

One of the accommodation respondents described their guest mix “At the moment mostly Asian – China, Taiwan, HK, Korean and the next biggest would be Germans. [We have been] getting a few South Americans more recently and Filipinos and Thailand – they are all new visitors” (Accommodation 2). An activity respondent described trends in international visitors as “a moving thing” a notion supported by DOC respondent who reported that although the Japanese market might have “dropped off”, it had been replaced by China and India. They added that “the Japanese are coming up again slowly”. A fall in the number of Australian visitors was attributed to “them going other places”, while “Aoraki/Mt Cook is a bit too expensive for Kiwis”.

Origin markets can to some extent be differentiated by the type of accommodation they use and the activities they are interested in. DOC campground statistics, for example, show that 50 percent of campers in the park are European, whereas the hostels and the Hermitage attract more Asian visitors. One accommodation respondent commented that “I think the Asian market tends to spend a little less on accommodation, but still have the money to do the big ticket things – like the ski plane flights – the big flights and they [a group of 10 people] will all want to go”(Accommodation 2).
The size of accommodation premises also dictates which markets they are able to accommodate with, for example, only the larger of the two backpacker hostels is able to host the large numbers arriving on backpacker buses such as Stray. All commercial businesses in the park had been affected by the global economic downturn and the Christchurch earthquakes. One accommodation respondent talked about the impacts of these external events on their guest demographic:

*It changes every year – the demographic in particular – some years you could say you were definitely going to get Europeans or definitely Japanese and you could predict it, but over the last five years it has been so much of a flux – you can’t pick it year to year – this year is going to be a massive year for Asia (Accommodation 2).*

Another accommodation respondent talked about the changing interests of their guests:

*Interests have changed – we have seen the level of development in the tracks change and the access has improved and that has sparked interest in walking around – if I think back to ’96 a lot of people just came and sat here and took a few photos – so in terms of activities people are certainly looking for more activities to do (Accommodation 3).*

There are, however, some challenges associated with these new markets. As one activity respondent noted, “*[The] Indians are looking for a deal and what we are offering is never good enough – and [the] Chinese are coming and they are hard to deal with, but it is just a matter of getting used to them*” (Activity 1). Another respondent reflected on the influx of Chinese visitors and how these visitors’ behaviour might change over time:

*Obviously the place is getting overrun with Chinese visitors at the moment and I think we are being a bit short-minded because we forget that 20 years ago it was Japanese visitors [who were coming] and they were in buses and they would get out and 40 of them would walk behind someone with a flag. What we saw with that market was that, over time, it developed and got away from the mass touring market into well-versed FIT travellers who are now travelling in twos and threes – what took 15-20 years for the Japanese to develop will happen in only five years with the Chinese market (Accommodation 3).*

For many visitors, the Aoraki/Mt Cook experience is centred on the Hooker Valley and the walk to the viewpoint of the mountain. One of the DOC respondents confirmed that this was the most popular activity for in the park adding that “I think we are looking at 60-70,000 people a year – it is an icon site, but so is Tasman”. The Hooker Valley walk passes the Mueller and Hooker Glacier lakes and there is a chance that visitors will see icebergs (see Photograph 7).

While one of the DOC respondents thought that many people might not go to the end of the track, an accommodation respondent disagreed, noting that:

*Most of them would go to the end – families might turn back – [that is] definitely the most popular activity – it is what we advise if people just have a little bit of time – that is the thing to do - seeing icebergs is the selling point – the one thing they want to do (Accommodation 4).*

Although the Hooker Valley walk is popular with many visitors because it offers access to spectacular scenery at no cost, there were also reports of increasing interest in guided walks in the lower level valley areas of the park. One accommodation respondent described the services they provided for their guests:
We have our trekking guides – we have Himalayan Sherpa and Japanese mountain guides who are very experienced and they are walking through the valleys [rather than climbing Aoraki/Mt Cook] – our customers are with very qualified guides (Accommodation 3).

Photograph 7
Tourists at Hooker Valley viewpoint, icebergs in Hooker Lake

(Photo by Jude Wilson)

According to one activity respondent, commercial activities in the park appeal more to the newer (and growing) “Asian markets (such as Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and China), whereas the Australian, British, American and Japanese [visitors] are more interested in trekking” (Photographs 8 and 9). Others talked about the importance of being able to offer commercial products, such as boat trips on Tasman Lake:

*I think it is important because it gives people a different way of interacting with the park and getting to see the park in a different way – with us, for example, you can get on the water and get up close to the ice (Activity 4).*

It is also possible to take a commercial kayaking trip onto the glacier lakes, a product that is perceived to appeal to the “more active Kiwis, the Australians, the Dutch and Germans, the North Americans and the Europeans” (Guide 2). The Alpine Club respondent suggested that the reason lake boat trips had become so popular were that “people are becoming more risk averse and need things laid on for them” and also, quite simply, that “there didn’t use to be a lake there”. The Glacier Explorer Tasman Lake product is also suited to a wider array of visitor types, as this respondent noted:

*For the kayaking trips people have to be able to kayak, and the elderly and the young won’t be able to and so we can cater for everyone which is a great thing – 80 or 90 year-olds can walk out there and come on the [Glacier Explorers] trip – it is the only way they could ever experience this (Activity 4).*
Environmental change and tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park: Stakeholder perspectives

Photograph 8
Asian tourists on Tasman Lake

(Photo by Jude Wilson)

Photograph 9
Tourists walking to Tasman Lake viewpoint

(Photo by Jude Wilson)
Traditionally, the majority of scenic flights at Aoraki/Mt Cook were by fixed wing plane which suited the larger coach tour market. There has been a change in recent years, however, to more helicopter flights in the park reflecting changing products (i.e., more heli hikes) and changes in visitor demand, related to changing visitor markets and preferences (Photograph 10). As one respondent explained:

> There is the traditional Japanese market who are fine with ski planes and are a bit reluctant to get into a helicopter, but most other nationalities will perceive the helicopter as being more bang for their buck because most people have been in a plane, but how many people have been in a helicopter? (Activity 3).

However, the fixed wing flight operator suggested that the fixed wing flight experience was superior because “[We] turn off the plane engine when we land... although that is an operational cost to us, but it means that people can experience the natural quiet”. Park regulations and concession rules control the minimum flying heights permitted and control landings; these regulations are more stringent in the Hooker Valley to ensure that visitors in that valley have a more natural experience.

Photograph 10
Tourists waiting to take a scenic helicopter flight

Visitors’ interests (and choices) are influenced by the length and price of activities and “if people are only here for the day they have to pick which one to do – and especially if they are a family they might look at what the dollar value of the different options is” (Activity 3). Some commercial activities have appeal because they offer a ‘fun experience’, while others have novelty appeal (e.g., seeing icebergs). As one guide explained:

> The Mueller Lake [see Photograph 11] is a dead duck – that is just dying because the Tasman is the one people want to do – because of the icebergs, but the Mueller is incredibly scenic – all these river ways are opening up and it would be amazing – from a scenic viewpoint unbelievable, but you see there are no icebergs (Guide 2).
The guide went on to add, however, that without regular calving “even the Tasman Lake was not very interesting for visitors”. The development of commercial products in the Tasman Valley, in part facilitated by more relaxed controls in that valley, have raised the Tasman Valley’s profile in recent years. Its importance as an attraction within the park has also increased with the development of these new products, as one guide explained:

_The Tasman is the biggest glacier, the longest glacier. We kayak on the bottom, heli hike in the middle and ski and climb at the top (Guide 2)._  

Photograph 11  
Mueller Lake  
(Photo by Jude Wilson)

3.2.3 Education groups

Education groups make up the third category of visitors to the park. One of the DOC respondents explained that, while they had traditionally offered educational services, these had increased in recent years:

_We got the LEOTC\(^1\) funding in 2010 and set up the programme – we were primary [school] focussed in the first year and then we got secondary [school] focussed and got fully involved in the NCEA and especially Year 11, 12 and 13 – especially Year 12 geography and glaciation is very much part of that – a lot of that is around human impacts and perceptions of change over time – so we are continually working on programmes around that._

The park hosts up to 80 school camps, lasting between two and four days, each year. These camps bring more than 2,000 students to the park annually and they represent a valuable visitor market for

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\(^1\) Learning Experiences Outside The Classroom
some of the accommodation providers. These education visits are more evenly distributed over the year than tourist visitors and also provide a valuable client base for some commercial activities. DOC estimated, for example, that “probably 60-70% of them do Glacier Explorer trips”.

3.3 Environmental change

The questions on environmental change focussed on what changes, if any, respondents had observed and on the implications of those changes for their business. There was widespread agreement in respect of the two key environmental changes reported – the weather (more generally) and snowfall (more specifically) – although there were variations in respect of perceived impacts and the temporal scale of these changes. The most noticeable impact of environmental change in the park was in the Tasman Valley. Environmental changes in the wider environs of the Mackenzie Basin were also noted.

3.3.1 The weather

Tourism destinations located in mountain environments face ongoing weather-related challenges. At Aoraki/Mt Cook NP the weather presents difficulties in respect of operating scheduled passenger services to the park (“the weather is too iffy to have flights landing here”) and affects tourism business operations on a daily basis. Wind can be an issue for some land and lake-based operators and air operators are affected by both wind, low cloud and landing conditions. For flight operations within the park it was noted, however, that helicopters are both more versatile and more flexible than fixed wing aircraft. One respondent described the variability of weather conditions within the park:

“We can be in a little bubble of great weather on the Tasman – even when the Hooker is clagged [in]. So, operationally I was quite amazed at how much I could do on certain days – whereas with the kayaking it can be too windy and that is it (Guide 2).”

In some instances, however, operations might be halted because of compromising the visitor experience, rather than restricting operations:

“It’s low cloud really – and extremely high wind, but it’s mainly cloud. In the old days we used to try and push it – [debate whether] you cancel? – But the people want to go and touch the ice (Activity 2).”

One activity operator estimated that they usually experienced around 15-20 per cent non-operational days; another activity respondent, who operated air services, estimated that were able to operate on five out of every seven days on average, noting that “most of the time we can do something – especially because we have the A2O as well as clients [going] hunting and climbing”. Others noted that the weather can be a disappointment for tourists who had spent a lot of money to visit the park and had no time to return in better weather. One activity respondent reiterated the importance to visitors of being able to see Aoraki/Mt Cook “it’s the mountain that draws people here – especially on a [sunny] day like today – 70 per cent of the time you can’t see it”. Another respondent noted the effect of cloud on visitors’ decision to visit Aoraki/Mt Cook:

“Sometimes you can drive along the bottom of the lake and you can just see cloud over Pukaki, but it will be a beautiful day here and that affects the potential for walk-in visitors (Accommodation 2).”

One of the guides interviewed compared the impact of weather in other mountain regions on recreationists with that experienced at Aoraki/Mt Cook. As the quotation below suggests, the extreme New Zealand conditions actually reduce the likelihood of people taking risks with the weather:
In the Alps – often they are out there giving it a nudge [in bad weather], but the good thing about here for us is when the weather is bad it is really bad. There is a reason we don’t use tents in New Zealand – I like the fact that all of our weather comes with wind (Guide 5).

When asked specifically about perceived changes in the weather, and in weather patterns, opinions were mixed. As one guide noted:

I think I have changed my mind on the equation depending on the weather – I have had theories on it – I remember in the 90s you would have six weeks of rain and thunderstorms in October and November – that was worse than now – you are never sure what is normal – I am convinced that the climate is changing, but the models are all different and just one bad storm event in New Zealand is hard to relate to changes in the overall climate (Guide 3).

One of the DOC respondents was a little sceptical about changing weather patterns commenting that significant weather events were a regular occurrence (“1957 was the Boxing Day storm and then 1979 was a big event and then 1994 and we must be due for another one soon”). Others commented on the “unexpectedness of nature”, proffering the snowfall on the previous (November) day as an example. The ‘expected’ weather sequence was described by one respondent as “normal progression weather – 3 days good weather and 5 days of bad”. Despite experiencing significant weather events (and significant physical impacts on the landscape) one respondent suggested that “nature repairs itself”.

Another respondent also talked about the dynamic nature of the – weather-created/related geographic features of the park, describing the Tasman glacier as “a living creature – you can hear it chattering away” (Activity 1).

The combination of severe weather events (such as periods of heavy rain or snow) with more incremental environmental changes creates challenges for back country users. Severe weather events and associated landslides and avalanches have also been responsible for the destruction of a number of back country huts; as one DOC respondent noted “we lost Ball Hut and Malte Brun in the late 1970s and it has just continued from there – this was before the lake was there and was because of down-wasting – the lateral moraines were coming down and the valley sides were starting to collapse as well”. Several guides also talked about the combined impact of weather events and on-going environmental changes:

Back to the weather situation – the big rock fall events that we have observed – periods of intense precipitation and then clearance and big rock event – seems to me as the glaciers are ablating there is a lot of loose rock and there has to be a lot of underlying deep melt and then the lubricating has got to add to it – if that is a continuing trend that is something we really have to be wary of – the deep-seated ice is disappearing (Guide 3).

It’s not just the big rain events – it is also possibly with the receding glacier you are taking away the support for the sides of the valley – the big landslide off Mt Dixon – the season before last – and then also off Ball Ridge – that was quite a big surprise – is that going to happen more frequently? (Guide 1).

3.3.2 Reduced snowfall

Reduction in snowfall was the most significant weather change reported, with the “contracting snow pack” and “snow falling later in the season” noted by the majority of respondents. The most recent arrival (of those interviewed) also commented on this:

Just chatting with people who have been here for longer and they say that every year there is less and less snow, so the crevasses on the glacier are not filled in anymore, and then
every summer the snow that stays is reducing as well – that base is reducing every year (Accommodation 4).

The climbing season at Aoraki/Mt Cook has shortened due to changes in the balance between annual snow accumulation and the amount of snow and ice melting during the summer season. In years with less snow accumulation, crevasses are exposed at the surface earlier, potentially cutting-off climbing routes and making glacier travel more difficult. As one guide noted, “every year these become an issue earlier and earlier [in the season]”. There is also a greater crevasse hazard in the middle of winter leading to “more people harnessed up” and “more guide to guide contact which changed how many groups were able to use particular areas” (Guide 3). The same respondent also noted that these changes have also “created more complex skiing scenarios – we see people roping up to skin uphill, [which is] something we would never have seen in the past”.

Changes in snow cover have also affected flight operations, particularly for fixed wing aircraft which need a firm snow pack, with no crevasses or snow bridges, for landings. As one operator explained “there is nowhere to land on the glacier in February/March as ice thaws on hot summer days and then freezes overnight – [and it] makes it like a paddock of concrete, which is not good for aircraft” (Activity 1). However, the reduction in snow accumulation has impacted positively on some front country activities. The 4WD Argo trips up the Tasman Valley, for example, are “year round now – just started that in July this year – the roads don’t close the way they used to – we haven’t had the avalanches” (Activity 2).

Others talked about the complex weather interactions, including reduced snow accumulation, that have contributed to glacial recession and the unpredictable nature of some of the changes they had experienced:

I have done 14 years of non-stop guiding and now as the main glacier slumps there are more and more ice cliffs threatening. I think it is too vast to say ‘well this area will go next’ and the way the seracs come down as well – they don’t come down in warm spells – they just come down as part of an ice fall instead of a flowing glacier. The rock ones are really catastrophic and the seracs are an acceptable risk for us, but what happens is that the roof on the glacier is pushing you into those falls lines more and then you have bergschurnds crapping out on the eastern aspects (where they get a lot of sun) – so the West Coast stays in better condition for longer (easily a month longer, maybe two months) compared to the east (Guide 5).

These changes have impacted significantly on both access and safety for back country recreationists. As one guide explained:

To do the Copeland [Pass] now, you either have to go around the side of the Hooker Lake, which is an unstable rock wall, or go up the east Hooker and cross the glacier – the other problem is accessing the bottom of the Copeland Ridge – we used to guide the Copeland with a 1-to-4 guide-client ration, now it is 1-to-1 (Guide 1).

Another respondent described similar changes around the Tasman Glacier:

You used to be able to step off the end of the Ball Hut Road onto the glacier – now you have a more than 300 metre drop – a very dodgy descent and ascent down onto what was the Tasman Glacier, but is now the moraine – in a very short time – 45 years or whatever – the change in the geology and the geography up here has been absolutely enormous and it’s forecast to get worse faster than the previous times (NZAC).
For current back country users, washouts are increasingly restricting access, in some cases closing routes and in others necessitating detours which then adds time onto already long trips and, as the respondent below notes, may – ultimately – compromise Aoraki/Mt Cook climbing experiences:

_The Tasman Lake in the next 50 years will go back as far as the Hochstetter icefall which is way, way back – so was just joking with some mountaineering friends that when somebody makes a first ascent their name is recorded in the books – now the name might go in when they make the last ascent – when it falls to bits and is not there anymore (NZAC)._ 

Another climbing guide commented that access issues have reduced the number of climbers visiting Aoraki/Mt Cook NP, suggesting that other alpine areas with easier access (such as Mt. Aspiring NP) had become more appealing to climbers. One guide pointed out that with respect to safety, there was a “difference in going up on a particular route themselves and taking a client up on that route” (Guide 4).

### 3.3.3 Tasman Valley

In respect of the majority of tourist visitors to the park, the most significant (and visible) environmental changes have been in the Tasman Valley. As one respondent remarked “[Tasman Lake is] unbelievable – it was a sinkhole and now its 5 kms long” (Activity 1) (see Photograph 12). The speed at which Tasman Lake has grown was one of the physical changes most commonly noted by respondents. One respondent reflected on the rapid changes that had occurred during the eight years he had been at Aoraki/Mt Cook:

_It’s a funny thing because eight years ago one of the major activities was canoeing on the Mueller, and the Tasman was not used for that – now the Mueller is nothing – you used to be able to go around the back of the glacier and now you just can’t get to it and that is amazing for eight years (Accommodation 2)._ 

One of the DOC respondents also talked about the speed of change, the growth of Tasman Lake and the other glacier-related changes in the Tasman Valley:

_It has to be the glaciers – the Tasman Lake – when I first started climbing here in 1974 there were no glacier lakes and now there are. And the down-wasting – the huge lateral moraines. I think it’s been more rapid in the last 10 or 15 years._

One of the activity operators also described a variety of more recent (and on-going) changes in the Tasman:

_There is a lot more debris on the snout of the glacier [see Photograph 13], but the lake has changed a lot more in the last few years – the colour of it – the water is clearer than it was and it is warming up as well. That melts the icebergs more quickly – we really noticed that in 2013 – it was amazing – about a week after the calving and it caught me completely by surprise how quickly it was melting – the process was probably three times as fast as it normally was, which meant that calving would normally have lasted 18 months or two years and it was gone within about 11 months (Activity 4)._
3.3.4 Mackenzie Basin

A final environmental change noted was in respect of the wider landscape of the region surrounding the park. These included the spread of wilding pines and the growth of irrigation to support a changing agricultural landscape. Irrigation-led changes in the Mackenzie Basin are perceived to have significant
impact on landscape values, as Brown and Harris (2005, p vii), in a report prepared for the Ministry for the Environment note: “Irrigation of the dry Mackenzie Basin to create greener landscapes may be seen by some as detracting from the general appearance and visual character of a nationally significant landscape”. One of the DOC respondents commented on these changes:

Now the pines are huge and you can’t see the landscape anymore and they are sprouting like crazy. That and the irrigation are huge changes – the Mackenzie has changed colour – it used to be brown and when I first came I thought it was desolate, but now it is green.

3.4 Change and challenges in Aoraki/Mt Cook NP

Discussion of environmental impacts extended to participants’ reflections about the ongoing and future challenges associated with tourism operations in the park. These are described in four sections: tourism business challenges, helicopter activity, the A2O cycle trail, and the changing spatial boundaries of visitor activity. Two key themes – the need to accommodate the multiple types of visitor activity occurring in the park, and negotiating the balance between development and conservation/preservation – underpin these challenges.

3.4.1 Tourism business challenges

The seasonality of visitation and associated seasonal operation of tourist activity businesses presents staffing challenges for all tourism businesses operating in the park. Respondents reported issues with attracting, keeping and housing staff. One guide, who was involved with both activity and hospitality businesses in the park, explained:

Without the working holiday people I would be screwed – if the government stopped doing that it would kill tourism. I have this thing with immigration all the time – it is all very well to want to employ Kiwis but here there are none – there is no pool of people to pick from – I am the only mountain guide that lives in this village permanently – and this is the mecca of ALL climbing in New Zealand and we have one guide living here permanently (Guide 2).

The same respondent also described the infrastructural difficulties associated with operating a business within the park:

“It’s a mining town structure – you can’t own a house or live here without working here – to live here I have to put a lot of money into the infrastructure. I build houses for my staff too – all the concessionaires have housing – it is the only way you can survive as a business here is to house staff and that is a huge economic expense (Guide 2).

One of the accommodation respondents added that “because it [the area] is growing and the staff accommodation isn’t, we are actually looking putting staff in at Twizel and using a van to bring them up here” (Accommodation 3). A DOC respondent also talked about the lack of room for development because the village is gazetted and managed under NP rules and on-going issues associated with this such as the limited car parking availability, traffic circulation issues and under and over-used areas within the village.

In the wider environs of the NP the regulations also restrict development and impose limits on the levels and types of development possible. As one of the DOC respondents explained, “motorised boating and kayaking is permitted on Tasman Lake, kayaking is permitted on Mueller Lake, but no motorised boats and no boats are allowed on Hooker Lake”. With no icebergs, however, the kayak trips on Mueller Lake were “dying a natural death”. As noted previously, there are also stricter flight regulations in the Hooker Valley than in the Tasman Valley. The changing use of helicopters in the park was noted as one of the most significant changes in the park in recent years.
3.4.2 Helicopter activity

Protecting the Hooker Valley from over-development was a common topic in interviews, particularly in relation to the growing demand for helicopter flights to provide climber access. One DOC respondent reported that “I have been getting lots of pressure already from guides and other climbers – people think there is going to be a change there and there might not be”. The same respondent went on to note that:

> What people forget is that in any management plan review it is not just guides and concessionaires but there are a lot more lobby groups out there that we haven’t heard from yet – like Ngai Tahu, and Federated Mountain Club and Forest and Bird (DOC 1).

One of the accommodation respondents also reflected on the impact of more aircraft on those walking in the Hooker Valley:

> The Hooker is quite cool because when you are walking up it you can hear the avalanches and you do feel like you are in an alpine environment, and if you had helicopters and ski planes going over your head it would be a bit of a shame and ruin the illusion (Accommodation 4).

The shortening of the landing season on the glaciers has already increased the use of helicopters in the park. The fixed wing operator has added helicopter to their fleet, also noting that helicopters:

> Are more versatile and flexible with respect to the weather – the helicopter definitely has more operational days than the plane did, because for the plane the cloud base has to be reasonably high, whereas the helicopter can sneak in under it” (Activity 3).

Another respondent noted that while heli hiking was a relatively new product at Aoraki/Mt Cook, compared with the West Coast, it was “here to stay”. All of the climbing guides interviewed reported that they had become more reliant on helicopters for access. One guide reflected on the changes they had experienced over the previous ten years and on what a future scenario might look like:

> Glacial recession makes getting out down the Tasman much harder and walking out of Plateau Hut is almost out of the question – it was very common to fly in with fixed wing, but now the fixed wing landings are more restricted, because the glaciers are much smaller and so in the last 10 years it’s been almost exclusively helicopters – back then Tasman was a one day walkout and now it is two days – eventually I think there will be a ferry terminal at the head of the lake (Guide 5).

The speaker above was not against such a change, going on to say that they would personally be keen on seeing a ferry terminal. Another guide foresaw considerable changes “what we offer and how we offer it” adding that “I think every guide in the company has mentioned that if you want to be guiding in 10 years from now make sure you have good rock shoes” (Guide 3). One of the guide companies was also keen to expand their business interest to include heli hikes which they saw as “a way to get people onto the glacier as well as being a pathway to train guides”. They also noted that “for glacier hikes the helicopter component has become the norm – related to the changes in access to the glaciers on the West Coast” (Guide 4). Others attributed the increased use of helicopters, by both guiding companies and independent climbers, to also “become the norm”, to both safety and access issues. One respondent suggested that there were three aspects to this:

> One is that people haven’t got much time, the second is that some of the people are getting a bit lazy – not like us in the old days where you used to walk in – and third is the danger
aspect of rock fall on the moraine. And people seem to have more money to pay for the helicopter (NZAC).

Several guides noted that being able to fly into the Hooker Valley would be advantageous in respect of some of their climbing trips. There was, however, considerable debate around the use and impact of helicopters. The issue for many was not with the amount of aircraft activity allowed in the park, but with what type of aircraft was flying with many comments about helicopter noise. One of the activity respondents commented that, even though they did not often go up the Hooker Valley themselves, “I don’t want to see them flying over the house – or have that constant heli noise in the background”. Another long-time park user reflected:

Well, it’s a philosophical thing really where various people have different ideas – the traditionalists who think the only way onto a mountain is on their two feet and others don’t mind flying in – I think that unfortunately at Mt Cook NP we are going to have to accept flying as the norm because of safety actually (NZAC).

The appeal for tourists and potential for growth in the number of helicopter flights and associated heli hike products was also recognised. One activity respondent noted that “it would be great if heli hiking increased because it is lovely out there – it is brilliant”. One of the guides interviewed explained both the appeal of heli hikes to particular markets and the quality of the product:

With the heli hiking it is $460 a person – you get a couple of helicopter flights and half a day on the glacier – it’s fantastic so it’s kind of upped the notch a little bit and is getting a little bit out of the price range for the average Kiwi – the Chinese market love it - the Asian market – touching snow – better value than the scenic flight because they are getting 2 [flights] AND four hours with a guide on the glacier doing all this stuff – all this interpretation (Guide 2).

The same respondent went on to note the potential for heli hike demand at Aoraki/Mt Cook to increase as a result of changes in glacier access on the West Coast:

And it’s even better value now because the other side is crapping out – they are all flying, the roads are an issue and it is a bloody long way around there but now you can drive from Christchurch to Queenstown and do a heli hike on the way (Guide 2).

One of the activity respondents agreed, noting that “it will be interesting to see how much it [heli hiking] grows because the Chinese market finds it easier to come here than go to the West Coast – flying to Christchurch and then bus to here and then on to Queenstown”. In part, the growing interest in heli hiking in the park has come about as a result of changes in access at the Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers on the West Coast, although one of the DOC respondents noted that “the heli hiking here [at Aoraki/Mt Cook] is not going to be as competitive as on the other side, because of the flight time”. As the other DOC respondent explained, however:

One of the other things that is changing is access – and also access on the West Coast – and two companies now are doing heli hiking on the Tasman Glacier – where they are allowed to land is higher up the glacier and they would like to get a plan change so they can land lower – that has come out this season (DOC 2).

Another guide company interviewee also talked about the potential of the heli hike product for them, while also questioning the widespread use of helicopters in the park:

Ultimately we recognise that it could be too difficult to access Caroline Hut and what we have in the back of our minds is that we could apply to DOC to run heli hikes – we are
shying away from that in the meantime because it is one area in the NP that is accessible on foot for the people who chose to do it that way – I mean there are plenty of other places you can go with a helicopter (Guide 1).

The respondent quoted above added that “It’s not to say that we wouldn’t consider heli hikes in the future – but at the moment we are sticking to our traditional bread and butter”. Interestingly, while greater adoption of helicopters in the park was widely perceived to be the solution to many of the environmental changes experienced in the park, none of those interviewed mentioned the environmental impacts of helicopters themselves.

3.4.3 The A2O cycle trail

In contrast to the mixed views on increased helicopter activity, the development of the A2O Cycle Trail in the park was universally supported by respondents. Although it was relatively new, a number of respondents thought that the A2O was already attracting additional visitors to the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP. There was also an expectation that A2O visitors would be interested in other park activities during their visits. As a guide explained:

The Mackenzie people [visitors] are starting to go ‘let’s go up to Mt Cook, it’s raining – lets hire a bike and do the Dusky Trail [a local mountain bike track]’ – cycling the A2O and cycling is big business – they still want to come here, but they don’t necessarily want to take up our major products, but we could see a person coming to do the A2O wanting to do a heli hike before they start (Guide 3).

One of the Aoraki/Mt Cook activity respondents noted that, while the A2O hadn’t affected their business as yet, they expected that it would as its popularity increased. They also noted that some cycle tour companies located outside the park (e.g., in Tekapo and Twizel) were benefitting from the A2O and “[the A2O] will eventually have a good impact on our business – they are the sort of people whom I think would enjoy our trip – getting out there and having a look”. Another activity operator also noted the wider benefits of the A2O “[I] love the A2O – it is not just Aoraki/Mt Cook or Twizel benefitting, but everyone along the way”.

There were some concerns about the environmental impacts of the A2O, however, with one respondent questioning the impact of a proposed hovercraft service (to ferry cyclists across the Tasman River) and several noting the potential impacts of increased helicopter activity associated with the required river transfers:

The A2O is great – it’s another key for people to come here and stay the night and go cycling – the helicopters are making a job out of flying people across the river. I think the more the merrier, but you don’t want to make it too big (Activity 2).

It’s great – brilliant –but that’s another funny one – you cycle all that way and then you get a flight over the Tasman – the whole ethic of it is blown away. I was hoping they would stump up and put a bridge in, but it is so early days and it would be so expensive and potentially have wider environmental impacts (Accommodation 2).

Photograph 14 shows signage depicting the new (A2O Cycle Trail) and more traditional (the Hooker Valley and Kea Point walking tracks) activities available in the Aoraki/Mt Cook NP.
3.4.4 The changing spatial boundaries of visitor activity

Historically, the in-park activities of the two main visitor groups – back country recreationists and front country tourists – have been spatially segregated with each focusing on different areas within the park. However, some of the environmental changes reported have blurred the boundaries between these. Some respondents, for example, reflected on the ways in which facility development in the front country areas, which climbers also pass through, have the potential to compromise the back country user experience. As one guide explained:

*The shared facilities of the park are there for all. The track up the Hooker – in some ways you can say it’s an improvement, but on the other hand it is experienced trampers doing the Ball Pass trip and they get onto the so-called ‘cattle-track’ with all the other tourists much sooner and it sort of takes away the wilderness experience, whereas with the old track they had that for a bit longer and it’s also a harder surface to walk on coming down the Hooker Valley, but I don’t criticise DOC because they are trying to cater for large groups and that is prime hike to do in the NP (Guide 1).*

There have been a considerable number of upgrades to the front country recreational facilities and amenities in the park over recent years. Some commercial activity operators have added a lot more infrastructure to facilitate their own operations, but still make an effort to “*keep it as natural as we can*”. As one of the DOC respondents explained, however, even small changes to the park infrastructure can affect levels of use and, in turn, initiate additional upgrades:

*We have upgraded the Hooker track and bridges, and Sealy tarns has been done, and the Tasman Valley road and now we have an issue – now we have sealed the road it is going to change the demographic again and the toilets are not going to be big enough and I think the track – it’s diabolical – it’s a mess – so that will have to be upgraded (DOC 1).*
Many of these changes have been driven by shifts in the visitor demographics and their travel styles. A DOC respondent explained:

[The Tasman Valley road] was realigned for a start underneath Bluff Hill – that was jointly funded with NZTA – there were some safety issues with it – and again that was another change of demographic because Glacier Explorers probably drove some of that because of their clients in the coaches – and also the number of FITs we are getting now in those huge campervans.

Most respondents talked about the need to cater to all types of visitors to the park and the potential for tensions between facility development and preserving the naturalness of the park was widely recognised. When asked if they could see any other development opportunities in the park, one activity operator reflected:

Yes and no – I think you could but it is tougher now to get concessions in and that restricts opportunities, but there is a lot already here that offers a lot – I think it is great what they have done up the Hooker Valley – it is still cool that a lot of the things are free – even our trip is quite expensive for the Kiwis we get – I suppose there is always something that someone will come up, but to be honest I don’t want it to get too developed (Activity 4).

The DOC respondents, and those involved in back country recreation all commented that there are spatial limits to where they might be able to safely and feasibility operate in the park in the future. As one guide noted “in terms of the skiing we might just have to go higher, but that’s a question of the huts and where they are – but how many years can you keep going up?”

There was also perceived to be scope to expand visitor activities further into the back country areas, facilitated by the use of helicopters for access. The prime example of this was the growth in recreational activities that fall in the middle ground between those enjoyed by traditional recreationists and sightseeing tourists (e.g., glacier heli hikes). These were also perceived to have considerable appeal – along with the A2O already discussed – to an ageing population:

I still think there is lots could be done [with what is already here] – we still have problems with Mueller Hut and we could do with another hut – another high altitude backpackers lodge somewhere – I think there is some scope to do some stuff slightly further east combining the NP with the adjacent areas like the Jollie – there is potential for tramping and also in the Ben Ohau Range as well – there could be huts for that, which again suits that demographic of the over 50s tramping club – because we are an ageing population (DOC 1).

The same DOC respondent also commented on the potential to re-locate the – currently inaccessible – Hooker Hut:

We have a couple of locations where it [Hooker Hut] can be lockable and maintain its historical integrity and be booked by people who want to use it – like families or tramping clubs. You can imagine a third age tramping club [booking the hut for a weekend and] taking a few bottles of wine up or whatever.

There have been considerable changes to the products on offer in the park over recent years – some in response to changing visitor demographics, others by changing visitor expectations and others by

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2 The Hooker Hut was removed from its site in 2015 and has yet to be relocated.
environmental change. One of the guide company respondents described how their business had changed in response to both the weather and changes in customer demand:

[Our] original business catering for high guiding in mountains is a difficult business to operate because it is so specialised and weather dependent – we are moving towards offering more accessible tourist activities – heli-hiking is one of these. Having said that, we want to retain focus as a prestige top end product [high guiding] and not become just another glacier guide (Guide 4).

One of the DOC respondents also noted that the growth in demand for Glacier Explorers – at the expense of scenic flights – was triggered by both environmental changes in the park (creating the Glacier Explorers product) and the Glacier Explorers products’ affordability. An accommodation respondent talked about the changes to the Glacier Explorers and Argo products over time:

I think what we have done with Glacier Explorers is taken it from a small two-person operation with one small vessel, to actually keep up with tourism – so we have state of the art boats down there, and we are flying them in and out with helicopters at the start of the season and the motors are completely stripped back because the lake eats them up pretty quick. There is a lot of money invested in that product so that when we get [good] days like this, everything works – we get no failures. With the Tasman Valley tours – the Argos – again, investment into that product. We have new Argos, new trucks just to make sure that the experience the guest is getting is a 2014 experience – not one from the mid-90s (Accommodation 3).

One guide explained that even if the park changes, tourists will continue to visit because such changes would be to “their [tourists] benefit – with the activities that are happening it is better for them”. They went on to say that they didn’t know if there would be different activities available, particularly as operators were already “utilising the lakes and glaciers – and there are the 4WD trips” (Guide 2). Another respondent talked about wider environmental impacts if the number of visitors to the park increased:

It’s a difficult balance because we want people to come – it’s our business – but at the same time we have to be thinking about how this is going to affect the environment and what is going to happen in the future – we have an eye on it for sure. What New Zealand needs to do is either influence people to travel in a more sustainable manner, or try and influence the transport people to change their practices – but again it’s all bound up with profitability (Accommodation 2).

The respondent quoted above also talked about the various measures they were implementing at their accommodation premises to reduce the environmental footprint of visitors. These measures included upgrading their facilities to lessen their own fuel usage costs and attempts to reduce the amount of food and other waste generated by both their business and their guests.

3.5 The future

When asked about the future of tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook NP, respondents commonly referred specifically to the long history of outdoor recreation and tourism at the park and to the attraction of natural areas like national parks more generally. One respondent commented that:

Tourists will still come to the NP – the population isn’t static in the world and people are spending their disposable income regardless to there being a recession and people are going and spending it on experiences rather than TV sets and so on. I think going to areas
that are more remote and more untouched is actually becoming more and more special in the world – there are enough Disneylands out there, so I can’t see any overall death knell to tourism in a NP area (Guide 3).

A land-based activity operator noted that “I think people would still love to see the glacier – it might just be a different way to do that – [it might be] with me, or a ski plane, or a helicopter”. When asked about the future of tourism in the park, two respondents suggested the following:

I think the mountain will always be there and I think that people in the activity industry will always take advantage of that – obviously I think the Mueller [Glacier] disappearing will affect certain trips, but I think the activity guys are very adaptable and I think you will probably always be able to fly in a ski plane up to the glacier and I think you will always be able to walk up the valley (Accommodation 2).

Probably a longer paddle [up the lake] – I don’t think we are going to have much of an issue with the Tasman Glacier itself – I think we have a lot of white ice to last us a long time – we have a management plan coming up for review soon which is going to probably give us a few other bits and pieces and open up a few other little avenues – it is all about adapting to the change in the environment (Guide 2).

While all respondents had identified changes in the park that have come about as a result of environmental impacts they also talked about other factors impacting on park visitation and the visitor experience in the park. These included: the New Zealand and global economies; changing demographic of the New Zealand population and of international visitors; changes in demand associated with changes in recreational habits and tourist expectations; and, changing fashions in both tourism and outdoor recreation. The increase in cruise tourism and safari tourism were given as an examples of changes in tourist demand which impacted on visitation at destinations such as Aoraki/Mt Cook. When asked what they saw as the greatest threats to tourism in the NP one of the accommodation respondents suggested “I guess it’s going to be fuel prices – the inability to travel – the domestic traveller would always come – it’s New Zealand’s alpine retreat” (Accommodation 2). Another respondent also noted changes in visitor expectations associated with attitudes to “risk tolerance – not just governmental [regulations] but the whole culture/acceptance of risk is very, very low and getting lower” (Guide 4).
Chapter 4
Conclusion

The stakeholders interviewed for this research had considerable experience of working (and recreating) in the park and were keenly aware of the environmental changes that have impacted on tourism provision in the park to date. Although many of the physical changes in their environs have, in some instances, triggered activity/operational adaptation, there have also been changes in visitation and visitor experiences brought about by factors beyond the immediate physical environment of the Park. In most cases it has not taken long for changed circumstances to become the norm among our informants, perhaps reflective of the innate flexibility required to operate in such a dynamic physical environment. While respondents expect ongoing challenges, they are relatively positive about their continuing ability to respond and adapt.

This personal experience and familiarity with the park was especially evident in respect of stakeholders’ involvement with back country recreation activities. Their detailed descriptions of changes to various climbing routes and facilities (such as huts) in the park suggest intimate knowledge engendered through personal experience. It is the back country users who have experienced the majority of negative impacts including increasingly restricted access, increased risks and the removal of facilities. While the increasing use of helicopters for access is not seen as mal-adaptation, this does challenge the historical ethics associated with climbing in New Zealand. Some of the stakeholders interviewed appeared to have an underlying sense of regret that the traditional climbing experiences in the park had become unfeasible, although they also admitted that perhaps the impact of changes to these were not as significant for newer generations of climbers.

By contrast, it was suggested that the experiences of tourists visiting the front country areas of the park had improved with new and upgraded facilities and an increasing number of products and experiences available to them. The recent upgrades to facilities and amenities in the park were perceived to be more appealing to those international visitor markets more accustomed to infrastructural development in national parks, than has historically been the norm in New Zealand. The origin countries of international visitors to New Zealand are changing and new developments in the park are perceived to better suit some of the fastest growing and newest of these visitor markets. While most stakeholders were in favour of the introduction of new commercial products, there were more mixed views around some of the recently upgraded facilities.

The importance of the park for educational groups and as a symbol of conservation, is protected by its status as a national park, and the restrictions to commercial operations and concessions that are associated with this status. For the Department of Conservation, maintaining back country facilities presents an increasing number of challenges, some associated with the environmental impacts described by these stakeholders. Other challenges are more generic and relate to the allocation of funding across the park. The numerous upgrades to front country facilities and amenities, while welcomed, are also perceived to have the potential to drive even more developments. All of these changes illustrate the inherent tension associated with perceptions of what the park represents for stakeholders, and how it should be managed. For DOC the challenge of balancing development and preservation/conservation is nothing new. As several respondents noted:

*DOC is treading water really – it is an ever increasing challenge just to maintain the front country, so they are more likely to let things go in the back country (Guide 5).*
That is the balance between keeping it raw and keeping it natural and developing [it]. It is a tough one because you want to make the park accessible to everybody, but you still need to keep the pristine nature of what it is (Accommodation 3).

For many of these other stakeholders, there is a tension between supporting developments which deliver economic benefits to their business (and to others) and concern that such developments compromise the values they associate with the park. As one accommodation respondent noted “if there were no commercial activities I and all my friends would be out of a job”. Achieving this balance at Aoraki/Mt Cook appears complex, with some new developments more readily accepted than others – the A2O, for example, is perceived to fit well with other Aoraki/Mt Cook activities, whereas the increasing use of helicopters in the park is not as universally welcomed. Somewhat ironically, the A2O cyclists are one of the new (and important) client bases using these helicopter services (Photograph 15).

Photograph 15
Helicopter services for the A2O

(Photo by Jude Wilson)

Another tension lies in the changing nature of visitors and visitor activity in the park. The ideal scenario, from both a park management perspective, and in respect of the visitor experience, is a situation whereby all visitors are able to enjoy the park, whatever activity they choose to undertake. Historically, Aoraki/Mt Cook has attracted two quite distinct visitor recreation groups who have had limited interaction with each other. With increasing hazards in the back country, new access regimes and new product development the spatial boundaries between these groups have blurred considerably in recent years, increasing the potential for conflict between different types of visitors. The differentiation between recreation and tourist activities is also not as clear as it was in the past.

This research examined stakeholder perspectives on environmental change and tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook NP. Future research should examine visitor perspectives on change. In respect of the traditional back country recreationists visiting Aoraki/Mt Cook, it would be useful to understand motives, expectations and satisfaction with their experiences, given the changes in the park over recent years. The same questions – relating to motives, expectations and satisfaction – could be asked of the


primarily front country ‘tourist’ visitors, perhaps with a particular focus on what the most important aspect of the park is for these visitors. For example, is ‘seeing’ Aoraki/Mt Cook still the main draw card, or are these visitors interested in more active experiences associated with the glaciers and proglacial lakes? Is the future of tourism at Aoraki/Mt Cook NP a hybrid – of both types of use and users – which represent an amalgam of traditional back country recreation and front country tourism?
References


Dykes, R., 2013. *A multi-parameter study of iceberg calving and the retreat of Haupapa/ Tasman Glacier, South Island, New Zealand*, PhD, Massey University,


Appendix 1
Aoraki/Mt Cook Research Information Sheet
Lincoln University Policies and Procedures

Lincoln University

Environment, Society and Design Faculty

Research Information Sheet

You are invited to participate as a subject in a project entitled:

Tourism and Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park: Stakeholder Perspectives

The aim of the research is to better understand how climate-induced changes at Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park affect visitor behaviour; stimulate a change in tourism products and affect management decisions and policies relating to conservation and visitor use. The research is being undertaken independently by staff at Lincoln and Canterbury universities and is funded through the Lincoln University Research Fund. This project is part of a wider international comparative project with case studies also taking place in Canada and Australia.

Your participation in this project will involve a face-to-face interview of approximately 30-40 minutes duration. This interview will include questions about your organisation and its links to tourism in the park; the rate of environmental change; visitor experiences; adaptations or strategies to deal with environmental change and implications for the future under current climate projections. Your participation in this project is voluntary and you may decline to answer any question. You may also withdraw from the research at any time (up to 6 weeks after completion of the interview) by contacting one of us by email or phone (contact details are listed below).

Interviews will be conducted at a time and place to suit you and will be digitally recorded. The interviews will be transcribed in full and you will have the opportunity to review your own interview transcript if you wish. If you prefer not to be recorded we will take notes throughout the interview - these notes will also be available for review once they are written up.

Some of the results of the project may be compared with the data collected from the other international case studies. The results may also be presented at an academic conference and be published (such as a Research Report or an academic journal), but you may be assured of your anonymity in this investigation: the identity of any participant will not be made public, or made known to any person other than the New Zealand research team and the Human Ethics Committee, without the participant’s consent.

To ensure confidentiality we will be the only people with access to the interview recordings and to ensure your anonymity only broad descriptors will be used in the presentation of any data in both verbal and written forms.

The fieldwork component of the project is being carried out by:
Dr Jude Wilson, Senior Research Officer, Lincoln University Email: jude.wilson@lincoln.ac.nz Tel: (03) 423 0502
Dr Emma Stewart, Senior Lecturer, Lincoln University Email: emma.stewart@lincoln.ac.nz Tel: (03) 423 0500
Dr Stephen Espiner, Senior Lecturer, Lincoln University Email: stephen.espiner@lincoln.ac.nz Tel: (03) 423 0485
Dr Heather Purdie, Lecturer, University of Canterbury Email: heather.purdie@canterbury.co.nz Tel: (03) 364 2987 (ext 6927)

We will be pleased to discuss any concerns you have about participation in the project or you may contact the Dean of our Faculty at Lincoln University:
Dr Greg Ryan, Dean, Faculty of Environment, Society & Design, Lincoln University Email: greg.ryan@lincoln.ac.nz Telephone: (03) 423 0401

The project has been reviewed and approved by the Lincoln University Human Ethics Committee.
Appendix 2

Aoraki/Mt Cook Stakeholder Schedule
STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS:
TOURISM & AORAKI/MT COOK NATIONAL PARK

A) ORGANISATIONAL BACKGROUND

We first want to learn a little about what your organisation/business does e.g.

- Sector and market focus
- Diversity of operation
- Geography (spatial and physical factors within NP)
- Employees
- How long has the organisation/business operated, and how long is your involvement?

B) AORAKI/MT COOK NATIONAL PARK

Can you describe what Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park ‘means’ or represents to you personally; and to your organisation/business.

How important is tourism at the NP locally/regionally/nationally in terms of a) what it ‘means’ or represents; and b) in economic terms?

What do you think are the most important aspects/characteristics of Aoraki/Mt Cook NP as a visitor attraction in the area?

To what extent is your organisation/business dependent on these aspects of the NP? Please provide some examples. [Note: if dependency is described as ‘low’ explore why this is the case].

C) ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT: CLIMATE CHANGE

In your own experience, can you describe how the physical resources/features of the NP have changed over time? Compared with other changes you’ve observed, how would you describe the current rate of change?

Are there any implications for your organisation/business as a result of environmental change in the NP?

Are there implications in terms of access to particular areas in the NP? Are there implications for visitor safety?

Have you considered what might happen to the NP in the future as a result of climate change?

How significant have glacier-related changes been in respect of a) business operations b) park management and c) visitor experiences?

D) VISITOR EXPERIENCES: MOTIVES, EXPECTATIONS, SATISFACTION

Why do you think visitors come to Aoraki/Mt Cook National Park? Have these motives changed over time?

What do you think visitors expect before coming to the NP? What do you think informs these expectations?

Do you think visitor expectations are met as a result of their visit? Are visitors satisfied with their NP experiences? Please provide some examples.

Do you think visitor satisfaction with the NP has changed over time?
How is the visitor experience of the NP marketed/promoted to potential visitors? How does your organisation/business promote the NP to visitors?

Do you think the NP is accurately portrayed in the current marketing/promotional material?

Do you think visitors have a good understanding of the physical changes in the NP?

E) ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES: VISITORS, BUSINESSES & MANAGERS

What actions/strategies have visitors adopted to maximise their experience in the NP? Has this changed over time? What factors make it more likely that such strategies are used?

What actions/strategies has your organisation/business adopted to deal with the changes in the NP? How successful have those adaptations been?

To what extent have these actions/strategies been planned in advance?

How have other organisations/businesses adapted to changes in the NP? How successful have those adaptations been?

What actions/strategies have Park managers taken to deal/cope with changes in the environmental conditions in the NP? How successful have those actions/strategies been?

What actions/strategies would you like to see in the future?

F) FUTURE

Do you think tourists will continue to visit the area if the NP continues to change?

Is glacier-related change a significant concern for the future of tourism in the NP?

What are the implications for residents in the local area (including Twizel); for tourists; for local business and for your organisation/business?
Appendix 3
Hooker Valley sheet

Hooker Valley

Increased walking distance to glacier terminus

Hooker Hut now inaccessible and routes like Copland Pass increasingly threatened by rockfall

Intermittent icebergs on Hooker and Mueller Lakes

Rapid expansion of Mueller and Hooker Lakes, with viewpoints increasingly further from glacier

Upgraded facilities to maintain safe recreational access
Appendix 4
Tasman Valley sheet

Tasman Glacier

- Increased walking distance to glacier terminus and more challenging foot access to glacier
- Possible increase to aircraft activity if more people choose to fly up to reach the ‘white’ ice of the glacier
- Debris-cover expanding further up the glacier
- Increased rockfall activity from exposed lateral moraine walls
- Rapid expansion of Tasman Lake, terminus now 5 km from viewing point
- Impressive icebergs on the lake

Images:
- 30 Dec 1990
- 30 May 2014