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Committee Regional Sustainability
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Visitor monitoring framework - update 4

1. Purpose

To update the Committee on progress with the implementation of the Visitor Monitoring Framework. This year the project was aimed at:

- Establishing an understanding of the number of visits to the Akatarawa and the Pakuratahi Forests.
- Assessing visitor satisfaction through conducting a number of on-park “intercept” surveys.

2. Significance of the decision

The matters for decision in this report do not trigger the significance policy of the Council or otherwise trigger section 76(3)(b) of the *Local Government Act 2002*.

3. Background

3.1 Introduction

This summer was the fourth year in which we implemented the Visitor Monitoring Framework for the network of regional parks and forests. Studies have been conducted in Belmont Regional Park (2006), at Queen Elizabeth Park, Battle Hill Farm Forest Park and Kaitoke Regional Park (2007), East Harbour Regional Park (2008). This year it was the turn of the two future water collection areas - the Akatarawa and Pakuratahi Forests.

These two areas differ somewhat from the regional parks in several ways:

- Their large size and remote nature. The Akatarawa Forest is nearly 15,500 hectares (ha), while the Pakuratahi Forest is around 8,000 ha. As a comparison, Queen Elizabeth Park is 650 ha. Some entrances to the forests are located near urban areas and are well used, while others are very remote.

- Their lower service levels. Each regional park has a designated park ranger; one forest ranger services both forests. The Akatarawa Forest, in particular, provides visitors with very basic facilities.

Several of the forest entrances attract most of the casual visitors. In the interests of time and resources we decided to survey only these entrances:

Akatarawa Forest	Pakuratahi Forest
Maungakotukutuku (Kapiti Coast)	Rimutaka Rail Trail
Karapoti Road	Tunnel Gully
Bridge Road	Maymorn Station
Tulsa Grove	
Valley View	
Not surveyed: Cooks Road (via Moonshine Road), Battle Hill Farm Forest Park entrances	Not surveyed: Rimutaka Trig Track (State Highway 2), Kaitoke Hill, Mangaroa Forest entrances

Through this exercise we were aiming to better understand:

- The level of usage at the surveyed entrances
- What activities visitors were engaged in
- How satisfied they were
- What they valued about the forest
- The benefits they received from visiting
- Improvements they would like to see
- Some characteristics of those visitors

We also wanted to check the accuracy of the vehicle counters in place, so that we could gauge whether the current calibration factors applied were a reasonable estimate of forest visitation.

This information complements that which we receive via community phone surveys, management plan submissions, ranger reports and other feedback. Motorised entry to the Akatarawa Forest is monitored through issuing permits and keys to firewood collectors and 4WD club trip leaders.

The Karapoti Classic mountain bike race takes place in early March each year and attracts around 1,300 riders from New Zealand and overseas. In 2010 the event will celebrate its 25th anniversary. Many of the visitors to the Karapoti entrance were practising for the event later in the summer.

4. What happened

4.1 Introduction

Temporary employees staffed the eight entrances over selected weekends and weekdays from 31 January to 14 March. They counted people - and vehicles

where relevant - entering each entrance on two weekend days and one weekday for “major” entrances, and two weekend days for “minor” entrances. They also interviewed visitors at a range of park entrances. A total of 31 surveys were collected at the Pakuratahi Forest and 47 at the Akatarawa Forest.

Most of the interviews conducted in the Akatarawa Forest were with people either walking or cycling in the forest.

Issues

Road counters at both forests are situated on gravel roads and were over-reading (estimating) numbers of vehicles entering the relevant areas. Further investigations reveal that this is typical on gravel roads as cars slow down, sometimes enough to cause a double reading. There was insufficient information gathered to get a reliable estimate of the level of over-reading.

It was noticeably more difficult this year to recruit, train and retain reliable staff. This affected the quality of the information gathered and will mean we need to approach the exercise differently next time.

Other factors, e.g., counter vandalism meant that in future surveys we will plan to be more closely involved with the survey projects to address issues as they arise to ensure that the data is as complete as possible.

4.2 Visitation numbers

Despite these issues, we can roughly describe how many people entered the forest on each day at each location during the survey period:

Akatarawa Forest

- An average 110 people entered each weekend day at the Maungakotukutuku and Karapoti entrances.
- Approximately 60 people entered the Cannon Point walkway at Tulsa Park; 80 at Bridge Road, on weekend days. This was more than expected and is comparable to counts at Kowhai Street (East Harbour Regional Parks) or Raumati South (Queen Elizabeth Park)
- An average 54 people entered at Valley View Road on weekend days, many of whom were collecting firewood or on 4WD trips. Others were walking or cycling into the forest or along the stopbanks.

Pakuratahi Forest

- Around 110 people per day at the Rail Trail entrance; 140 people at Tunnel Gully.
- 30 people were observed during one day of counting at the Maymorn entrance.

4.3 Visitor satisfaction survey results

	Akatarawa Forest	Pakuratahi Forest
Most frequent activity	Mountain biking	Mountain biking
Second, third most frequent activities	Walking, other, walking or running with dog	Walking, walking or running with dog
Main reason for visit	Mountain biking/Karapoti practice; because they live close	To carry out their chosen activity; recommended by other people
Level of "very satisfied" with forest as place for their activity	56%	69%
Who do you visit with?	Friends (45%), with family/partner (33%) or alone (20%)	Either alone (39%), with family/partner (36%) or with friends (25%)
How did you get here?	Car (78%); walk (17%)	Car (79%); walk (11%)
How long do you spend here?	Between 1-4 hours (56%); more than 4 hours (27%)	Between 1-4 hours (75%)
How often do you visit?	First time (29%); 2-4 times per year (22%)	2-4 times per year (50%); this is the first time (21%)
What do you value most about the forest?	Nature (33%); easy access (29%), contribution to my well-being (25%)	Nature (46%); contribution to my well-being (30%)
What benefits do you get from visiting?	Better physical health (63%); mental/emotional well-being (40%)	Better physical health (85%); mental/emotional well-being (33%)
What would you change about the forest?	Develop more or better facilities, e.g., tracks, toilets, signage (50%); make no change (16%)	Develop more or better facilities (48%); improve natural environment (19%)
"Very satisfied" overall with forest? With network?	46% 42%	67% 43%
How can we describe you?	44% from Upper Hutt; 22% from Wellington City; 10% Kapiti Coast. 54% have household income above \$70k 54% aged 30-50yrs; 15% are 20-29yrs. 90% NZ European/ Pakeha/ New Zealander 69/31 male/female	63% from Upper Hutt; 22% from Lower Hutt City; 7% Wellington City; 7% overseas. 48% have household income below \$70k 64% aged 30-50yrs. 85% New Zealand European/ Pakeha/New Zealander 62/38 male/female

5. Comment

While both forests have been popular recreation destinations for many years, the advent and growth of mountain biking is now a significant influence on the usage patterns, visitor benefits and feedback through this survey. In allowing people to explore further and faster, mountain biking is opening up areas in the forests that were previously accessible to a relatively fit and hardy few.

Both forests are reasonably well used, keeping in mind the terrain and opportunities available. Interestingly, the significant proportion of first time users in both areas indicates that with more mountain biking we should expect to see further growth at both locations. However, limited visitor facilities and rugged terrain, particularly in the Akatarawa Forest, may limit the pace of this growth. These factors will almost certainly ensure that the user profile (mostly pakeha male aged 20 to 50 years and with somewhat higher income) remains the same.

Gateway to the historic Rimutaka Incline, the Pakuratahi Forest has better facilities and provides easy mountain biking opportunities, so it is more attractive to a wider range of people.

It is clear from the feedback that visitors (particularly mountain bikers) are comparing the two forests with other parks around the Region and the facilities offered there, e.g., Hutt River Trail, Makara Peak or Belmont Regional Park. In all other park user surveys conducted as part of the visitor monitoring framework, people have most often answered “nothing” when asked about the one change they would like to see. In this case most people have readily identified improvements that could be made to make the areas comparable with other locations.

In response to feedback we will look to address minor issues at both forests, e.g., easier access for bicycles; more signage advising visitors of tracks and/or degree of difficulty, distance to facilities or shelter, etc.

While there was some desire expressed by walkers and mountain bikers not to have motorised recreation in the Akatarawa Forest, there was certainly appreciation expressed by the motorbike riders in having somewhere to go and enjoy their sport. This survey includes little feedback from 4WD clubs but our continued liaison with them indicates that the many members are frequent and enthusiastic visitors to the forest.

Given the number of visits at both entrances to the Cannon Point walkway, we will install pedestrian counters at Tulsa Grove and Bridge Road. We will also relocate the road counter at the Maungakotukutuku entrance, as it currently counts residential traffic as well as visitors. As part of this exercise, we will set up a project to assess the level of “over-reading” that should be built into the calibration calculations.

The Department of Conservation is planning to install a visit counter at the Cross Creek entrance to the Rimutaka Incline and conduct a visitor survey in the spring.

We are planning to work with them on a joint project, which should enhance our understanding of the issues and give us a more complete picture of visitors to the Pakuratahi Forest.

6. Recommendations

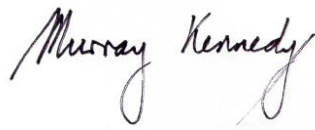
That the Committee:

1. *Receives the report.*
2. *Notes the content of the report.*

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