



Pristine, popular... imperilled?

The environmental consequences of projected tourism growth

Frequently asked questions

What is this report about?

This report addresses the environmental and cultural impacts of tourism in Aotearoa New Zealand, and what ongoing business-as-usual growth could mean both for the environment and the vulnerability of the tourism sector.

The report describes a business-as-usual future out to 2050 to illustrate how tourism activity – and the environmental and cultural pressures resulting from it – might evolve in the absence of major discontinuities and if current policy settings remain unchanged.

The report is the second time a Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment has examined tourism. The first tourism report was published in 1997 by then-Commissioner, Dr Morgan Williams.

Why did the Commissioner decide to undertake this investigation?

Because he considered that there was no clear governmental or industry understanding of the likely environmental consequences of projected growth in tourism. Tourism has long been seen as a benign alternative to industries like agriculture, mining and forestry whose environmental impacts have been widely remarked by the public and policymakers. But tourism also has impacts on the environment, some of which are becoming increasingly visible even at today's level of activity. Two to four-fold growth over the next three decades can only add to those impacts – hence the Commissioner's interest in understanding what this may mean.

What are its main findings?

Tourism places a myriad of pressures on the environment. The report identifies six main areas of pressure:

- visitor density and loss of natural quiet
- water quality degradation
- solid waste generation and management
- infrastructure development and landscape modification
- biodiversity loss and biosecurity risk
- greenhouse gas emissions.

With increasing concern about tourism's environmental and cultural pressures, various policies have been developed by the government. The report concludes that these policies appear to be insufficient to head off a continued worsening of the environmental impacts of tourism growth. The report concludes that environmental pressures are likely to grow in line with the size of the tourism sector – a sector that could grow two to four times greater by 2050.

Why is this report important?

This report is important because it indicates the pressures tourism is placing on New Zealand's environment today and what expected growth in tourism could mean for those pressures in the future. It includes a calculation of the environmental footprint of the tourism sector (e.g. carbon emissions and solid waste generation) and what that footprint might look like in the future. The report focuses on a long-term horizon. Previous attempts to establish the sector's footprint have been more present-focused.

Why are there no recommendations?

The report aims to provide an appraisal of tourism's impacts on the environment, identifying the problem rather than immediately coming up with policy solutions. Possible solutions will be offered in a later report.

Who is a tourist?

The definitions of tourism and who is a tourist are often debated. A broad definition is used in the report. A visitor is anyone travelling outside of their normal place of residence, whereas a tourist is a domestic or international person staying overnight away from home. When not staying overnight a visitor is considered an excursionist or same-day visitor. However, the term tourism often encompasses all of these definitions. The distinction between domestic and international tourists is not particularly useful when considering environmental impacts so this report uses a broad definition of tourism to capture the key impacts of all tourism on the environment.

How has tourism changed in Aotearoa New Zealand?

The biggest change has been in the number of people drawn to iconic sites, numbers that are escalating with population growth and technological development. Central government was historically heavily involved in developing and operating tourism infrastructure and services, but in recent decades its role has shifted to a focus on international marketing and oversight. This affects how we effectively manage environmental impacts.

Don't some tourism activities (such as freedom camping) have a greater impact than others?

Yes, but it depends on a range of factors. Tourism places pressure on the environment in many ways, from site-specific biophysical effects, like the introduction of diseases and pest species, to global effects such as greenhouse gas emissions. Importantly, these pressures are often cumulative, tied to the wider consumptive pressures that society places on the environment and occur in places with unique and vulnerable ecosystems.

Why did the Commissioner single out three Māori principles for special attention?

Many more principles could have been included in this report, but the Commissioner chose to focus on manaakitanga, tino rangatiratanga and kaitiakitanga as they were the main ones identified by Māori connected to the tourism industry. Manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga are also tikanga values identified as important in the *New Zealand-Aotearoa Government Tourism Strategy*. The Commissioner acknowledges that other principles are relevant and connected but suggests that if the principles used in this report are adhered to, the other ones are also likely to be achieved.

You say that tourism will grow, but we have seen a slowdown in growth this year – won't this resolve the problems?

Slower growth would help to slow increases in many of the environmental pressures generated by tourism. It is true that international arrivals have slowed recently, but this follows a period of extremely rapid growth. Tourism – like many other industries – is cyclical: people travel more when they feel well off, and less when they don't. The forecasts of tourism growth presented in the report align closely with longer-term growth trends of 3–4 per cent per year. If future growth is slower than that, then the environmental pressures analysed in the report could be expected to be more subdued. However, there are good reasons to believe that future growth could be similar – or even faster – than what we have seen in the past. Continued economic growth, as well as ageing populations and urbanisation in Asia will create a significantly larger pool of travellers with the means, time and desire to visit nature-based destinations like New Zealand.

Is the future you outline in the report realistic?

The business-as-usual future described in the report is just one of many possible tourism futures. It is realistic in the sense that it represents what could happen if all else – visitor preferences, policy settings, technology – stays the same. This future is fully consistent with the Government's forecasts of future tourism activity, as well as with several other third-party forecasts (e.g. the United Nations World Tourism Organization and United Nations Environment Programme) of how international tourism demand could evolve. Many of these forecasts (particularly those focused on New Zealand) only extend a decade or so into the future, so the Commissioner relied on the extrapolation of these historic and forecast trends to extend the analysis out to 2050.

Should I stop going on holiday? Am I a problem?

Whether we like it or not, every tourist – domestic or international – has an impact on the environment. This report does not recommend people stop going on holiday. Rather, it identifies the environmental and cultural pressures of all tourism in New Zealand, and what might happen if we continue our projected trajectory of tourism growth.

But both the industry and the Government are always talking about sustainability in their strategies?

Tourism's footprint is starting to become a source of environmental concern in New Zealand. Some key players in the tourism sector do acknowledge the risks and have been responding. However, current policies for tourism (e.g. value-led growth and seasonal and regional dispersal) are unlikely to be sufficient to fully mitigate these pressures. In some cases, they may even be exacerbating them. Several current initiatives hold promise (e.g. destination management planning), but there are harder, more wide-reaching questions to be tackled. The Commissioner would like to hear from those who have suggestions or ideas on what the policy response could look like.

Isn't the strategy of pursuing value over volume going to resolve the environmental pressures?

It depends what environmental pressures you're talking about. When value-led growth results in slower volume growth it can help to mitigate some pressures associated with visitor numbers, e.g. the loss of natural quiet. But decoupling value from volume is difficult. During recent decades, visitor numbers have grown significantly faster than visitor spending (once inflation has been taken into account).

The potential of value-led growth is less clear for environmental pressures more closely related to economic consumption. By definition, higher-value visitors consume more goods and services than low-spending visitors, and these goods and services come with an associated environmental footprint. For instance, viewing glaciers from a helicopter is a higher value service but one that has a heavier environmental footprint. A more luxurious level of accommodation can often mean more solid waste generation. There is little evidence that higher-spending visitors create any less environmental pressure than their lower spending peers.

Many of the pressures you analyse result from broader societal trends. Is tourism really the problem?

It is true that the vast majority of New Zealand's solid waste generation, wastewater production and infrastructure development is associated with New Zealanders going about their day-to-day lives. That said, it is undeniable that tourism contributes to many environmental issues and, given the growth projections, is likely to continue doing so. Furthermore, in New Zealand, the places where tourists generate environmental pressure – those that they visit most frequently – also tend to be those that have the highest levels of natural amenity. These are places where environmental damage has significant consequences.

Won't the Zero Carbon Act solve the climate and other environmental pressures outlined in the report?

The Climate Change Response (Zero Carbon) Amendment Act will stimulate decarbonisation in New Zealand and help to reduce the emissions that tourists produce during their stay. That said, the Zero Carbon Act does not apply to the emissions generated by tourists flying to and from New Zealand. The modelling undertaken for this inquiry suggests that any fall in domestic tourism-related emissions resulting from the implementation of the Zero Carbon Act could well be completely offset by continued growth in aviation-related emissions. Furthermore, greenhouse gas emissions are just one of several environmental pressures discussed in the report. The Zero Carbon Act will do little to solve other identified pressures like solid waste generation or biosecurity risk.

How will the trajectory of tourism affect Māori?

Tourism can be seen by Māori as a huge opportunity for investment and job creation, and an opportunity to practice kaitiakitanga. However, it also comes with the risks of increasing environmental pressures. These opportunities and risks need to be balanced to ensure the environment is not impacted adversely by investing in tourism, and so Māori continue to stay connected to their places and keep their whakapapa links strong.

Will the environmental pressures from tourism affect tourism growth in New Zealand?

The Commissioner has identified that current strategies will not be sufficient to manage the environmental impacts of tourism growth in New Zealand. Much of our tourism relies on areas that are seen to be pristine, unique, remote and wild. If we lose these areas because of new infrastructure, climate change or other environmental degradation, we may 'kill the goose that laid the golden egg'. The tourism sector is vulnerable to its own growth because of the pressures tourism imposes on the very landscape and environment it entices people to visit.

What other vulnerabilities does the tourism sector face?

The tourism sector is vulnerable to changes in the environment (including as a result of tourism growth itself) and wider shocks to the sector more generally. Acute vulnerabilities, such as biosecurity incursions or reputational damage due to environmental disasters, could cause swift changes to international travel patterns or visitor preferences for New Zealand. More general vulnerabilities may also alter the attractiveness and viability of international tourism in New Zealand over the longer term. These include the physical effects of climate change (e.g. glacial retreat), behavioural changes (e.g. *flygskam* or 'flight shame'), regulatory responses to limit warming (e.g. CORSIA), and the breakdown of the environmental management system under a range of biophysical and human stresses.