

## Interpreting Culture: Visitors' Experiences of Cultural Landscape in New Zealand

*Anna Thompson (nee Carr) Graduated 2004*

### Abstract

This thesis examines visitors' awareness and experiences of cultural values for natural areas of importance to Māori. The South Island/Te Wai Pounamu contains natural landscapes with scenic and recreational values that attract large numbers of domestic and international visitors. Many of these areas have a cultural significance for members of the South Island's Ngāi Tahu *iwi* and *hapu* groups. The *Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998* legally recognised the traditional relationships between the *iwi* and the natural world, whilst other Acts of Parliament provide direction to government agencies for encouraging *iwi* involvement in the management of natural resources. Measures include increased participation in the management of national parks through *iwi* representation on regional conservation boards, the New Zealand Conservation Authority, and the inclusion of Ngāi Tahu values within subsequent national park management plans.

National park interpretation may influence visitors' awareness of cultural values for natural areas as visitors encounter information panels, displays, publications such as visitor guides or brochures, experience guided tours and/or audiovisual shows and view other interpretive medium. The researcher investigated visitors' awareness of Māori values for landscape at three South Island case study sites: Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, Fiordland National Park, and Lake Pukaki. An understanding of the Ngāi Tahu values for these areas was achieved through site visits, a literature review and informal interviews to enable comparisons of the management history of interpretation at the case study sites. Visitors' experiences at each site were explored with interviews, participant observations and a survey that provided qualitative and quantitative data. The survey was administered between January and April 2000 to 716 visitors, yielding 472 valid returns (65.9%).

A comprehensive profile of visitors' demographics, social and environmental values was developed from the survey data. Visitors were well educated with 70% having a tertiary education and the majority of visitors were employed in professional occupations. When asked about their previous experiences of other cultures, many visitors reported prior encounters with Australian Aborigine and Native Americans. Visitors considered Rotorua and the Bay of Islands as the locations most closely associated with Māori whereas the study sites were not regarded as significant to Māori, despite the presence of on-site interpretation conveying Maori values for each area. Māori culture was not an important travel motivation for most visitors to these areas and the research revealed diverse reactions from the survey respondents towards cultural interpretive material. Despite this a small percentage of visitors (14%), of domestic and international origins, had an extremely strong interest in fixture opportunities to experience cultural interpretation of the landscape, particularly in material that tended towards the narrative, for example mythology and legends.

It was concluded that a niche demand for Māori perspectives of natural areas could be further met with increased resources for interpretation at visitor centres. It was also proposed that such interpretation could attract a Māori audience, increasing Māori visitation to national parks. The

participation of Māori and other host community members in the development and delivery of cultural landscape interpretation would provide broad perspectives and unique educational opportunities for the visiting public. At the case study areas, and throughout New Zealand, the cultural landscapes encountered by visitors had complex and diverse meanings to a wide range of peoples, on individual circumstances. Similarly, the diversity of visitors requires the development of interpretation which responds to visitor demand as well as management needs, the multitude of meanings for the landscape being but one of many possible themes.