

The Development of Commercial New Zealand Ecotourism: A Longitudinal Study (1999-2004).

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Abstract

The New Zealand tourism industry lacks a rich breadth of information that is evident in other countries with a major ecotourism focus. This is despite the importance of the natural environment and ecotourism for the country's tourism industry and despite New Zealand's reputation for its unique world-class natural environments. The purpose of this study was to provide up to date, in-depth and developmental 'supply-side' perspectives of commercial ecotourism in New Zealand through a temporal, spatial and attribute investigation. This was achieved by utilizing and further developing a secondary data source. Data were inputted into a Microsoft Access database to generate statistics and also where applicable into ArcGIS for map production.

The temporal analysis revealed several operators on the database that have been operating for over 50 years. Otago showed early pre-dominance as the key ecotourism region. Other areas to have an early and consistent involvement were Manawatu-Wanganui, Southland, Canterbury and Northland. The most concentrated development of ecotourism businesses occurred during the 1990s hence most operators are between 5 to 15 years old. Many businesses have also been established in the last five years. The magnitude of the industry was revealed at 294 operators as of 2004, which equated to 5.8% growth over five years. The actual potential for growth was negated by high attrition rates.

Results obtained from the investigation revealed the major ecotourism hubs to be Otago, Canterbury, Auckland and Waikato regions. In addition, Dunedin, Southern Lakes, Auckland City and the Tasman were identified as key ecotourism districts. Several patterns and trends were evident such as the strong growth in the Auckland and New Plymouth city districts, and the decline in growth from Thames-Coromandel and Hastings.

Findings of the attribute examination indicated the activities most commonly offered were wildlife interactions, bush/beach walks, scenic tours and accommodation. More than a third of activities witnessed a minimum of 6% growth per annum over five years. Aside from the obvious major use of forest/bush and coastal/ocean habitats other key resources to be utilized were ornithological, marine mammals, rivers and geological features. Consistent growth was shown for all resource categories, the strongest of which was evident in the alpine environments. Other areas of the attribute analysis revealed a strong overlap with adventure tourism, a growing cultural presence, substantial mechanised vehicle use (especially from boats), the increase away from lull ecotourism product specialisation, and a significant number of operators who could be considered nature-based. The importance of the marine environment for New Zealand ecotourism was also reinforced.

The findings of this research contribute to the knowledge base of New Zealand ecotourism by providing much needed up-to-date information and developmental perspectives of spatial and

attribute data through longitudinal study. The results could have relevance to ecotourism management at several levels. Benefits in establishing planning and policy priorities and regulating development in a proactive rather than reactive manner could be realised for central government policy makers and management agencies. National and regional tourism industry associations could achieve more targeted industry support while territorial local authorities could effectively target their distribution of financial resources for infrastructure, assessing visitor impacts, and monitoring the effects of other industry sectors on potential ecotourism development. Awareness of the importance or potential of ecotourism development could be also made thus encouraging sustainable development or business practices. Benefits in developing collective marketing strategies could also be achieved for national, regional, and district promotional organizations, as well as for the individual operator.