

# AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF VISITOR CONFLICTS IN NEW ZEALAND'S SOUTHLAND CONSERVANCY - THE CASE OF HUNTERS AND TRAMPERS ON STEWART ISLAND

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In the second semester of 2006, the Department of Conservation offered a Visitor Research Grant program that provided a full time post graduate student with a scholarship to conduct research on aspects of visitor use and recreation on public conservation land in Southland. Three topics were considered most relevant for the management of the area during the following year. This report focuses on the first topic "*Is there visitor conflict between hunters and trampers?*" The results presented in this report reflect the responses of trampers and hunters who visited Stewart Island during the summer of 2006/2007. It is expected that this document will further contribute to the drafting of the Management Plan for Rakiura National Park.

This study adopted a multi-method approach to data collection. Three procedures were used to gain information: Questionnaire Surveys, In-depth Interviews and Participant Observation. Surveys were delivered on site to both trampers and hunters, using four different strategies: personal delivery (on an encounter basis), delivery by commercial operators, delivery by the New Zealand Deerstalkers Association, and delivery by the Department of Conservation Field Centre staff. In total, 469 questionnaires were distributed and 220 valid questionnaires were returned (46.9% response rate).

In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 recreationists that visited the island during the summer of 2006-2007. Interviews were transcribed and themes that emerged during the 'conversations' were identified and coded. The insights derived from this strategy were used to enrich the analysis of the different results encountered in the survey responses.

Participant observation constituted the third research method. Observation of hunters and trampers during the survey period, both on tracks and at huts, assisted the understanding of issues and behaviours of the two groups. The results of this process were also used to enhance the survey analysis.

Responses for each individual survey were plotted into a statistical analysis tool, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

This study has identified a number of reasons for conflict between trampers and hunters, but the degree to which such conflict is actually occurring and influencing visitors' experience seems to be relatively low on Stewart Island.

In respect to the conflicts documented through this study, four contributing factors were identified. The first factor relates to the trip characteristics of the two user-groups that were included in the study. It was concluded that, in general, when a group gathers to go on a hunting trip to Stewart Island, they conform to some behavioural characteristics that might be disturbing to the ones of a tramping trip. That means that possible conflict does not necessarily rise due to differences in values or recreational choices but more so due to the style of the trip (e.g. length of stay, pre-trip organisation).

The second contributing factor relates to hut behaviour and etiquette. The results indicate that some visitors are not fully aware of the expectations in terms of hut behaviour and etiquette in New Zealand and may therefore infringe some norms socially established for the use of backcountry huts. This seems to happen more often with inexperienced visitors and especially with international tourists.

The third factor is associated with crowding, a well reported source of conflict in outdoor recreation. This issue was more common in an intra-group environment (trampers vs. trampers) than between trampers and hunters. Therefore, these results confirm previous research that concludes that crowding *per se* is a managerial concern and source of conflict, despite user groups.

The last contributing factor for conflict concerns the use of firearms and the ethical feelings related to the killing of animals. The handling and presence of rifles around huts seems to apprehend some visitors, but, in general, hunters seem to be aware of this unease and tend to hide rifles and are considerate of trampers in this situation. This feeling of anxiety seems to be more common amongst international visitors. Likewise, the results indicate that the killing of animals causes more offence to foreign visitors than to domestic tourists on the island.

Overall, reports of conflict were not significant. In general, visitors seem to cope with and tolerate the presence of others well, as long as numbers are kept in control, as this may otherwise lead to feelings of crowding.

While there does not seem to be an urgent need for immediate management action to address conflict on Stewart Island, some directions to further enhance visitor experiences and prevent escalation of conflict are considered appropriate:

- The construction of separate huts for each group has been suggested as an adequate solution. However, from the results of this study, it seems that this is not a cost-effective and environmental-friendly solution as well as it does not seem to be the most advantageous strategy. The existing level of conflict alone does not warrant the construction of additional hunter huts. If more hunting huts are to be built, they should be allocated at remote hunting blocks where only old camp sites exist so as to improve camping conditions and put less pressure on the environment.
- In order to deal with the crowding issue and, therefore, improve conflict management, a booking system for some of the most popular huts seems to be a good alternative. For hunters intending to book the hunting blocks in these areas and staying in the huts, a maximum party number should be defined. In smaller huts around the North West and Southern Circuit, a maximum number of hunters using the hut during the high season should also be enforced.
- Tourists should receive information about hunting on the island as a cultural asset of their visit. Brochures/Information sheets could be developed and presented to trampers prior to their visit with information about exotic animals and the participation of hunters in trying to keep numbers manageable. Information panels in huts could display the history of hunting in that particular area. Brochures could also display the importance of hunting for New Zealand identity and its cultural relevance.
- Tourists should be informed that hunting parties may be encountered during their visit, with this possibility as a highlight of their experience, and not as a possible nuisance.
- Management should increasingly focus on participatory involvement of all stakeholders.