

## **Wilderness Perceptions of International Visitors to New Zealand. The Perceptual Approach to the Management of International Tourists Visiting Wilderness Areas within New Zealand's Conservation Estate**

*James Higham – Graduated 1996*

### **Abstract**

The New Zealand Tourism Board's commitment to the international marketing of destination New Zealand creates a dilemma for the future of the tourism industry. Projected tourist arrivals of three million per annum, an increasing proportion of whom seek to experience New Zealand's natural environment, promotes the importance of the careful management of popular tourist sites. Many such sites are designated within New Zealand's conservation estate. At present the pressures of use focus on a small number of key sites. However, this situation is not static. Tourist preferences are continually evolving. Increasing numbers demonstrate the preference to visit New Zealand's recreational backcountry in the expectation of achieving subjective qualities of wilderness experience. A management problem arises from increasing pressures of recreational use being placed upon locations that are designated primarily for conservation.

This thesis examines the subject of wilderness management for recreation. This involves an examination of the perceptual approach to wilderness management. An increasing number of international visitors, from a diverse range of social, cultural and experiential backgrounds, are likely to bring a fantastic range of wilderness perceptions to the recreational setting. This being so, it is impractical to expect international tourists to derive satisfactory wilderness experiences from the intensive use of a small number of high profile backcountry tracks. Furthermore, concentrated patterns of recreational use, as is currently the case, pose a threat to the social and physical carrying capacities of fragile and finite wilderness settings within the conservation estate.

The perceptual approach to wilderness management proposes that a comprehensive appreciation of the qualities of experience sought by visitors is essential to the effective management of wilderness resources. This research programme involves the design and administration of a questionnaire in order to obtain an understanding of the wilderness perceptions of inbound Visitors. This methodology allows an appreciation of the degrees of purism of wilderness perceptions held by international visitors to the conservation estate. Tourist preferences are examined on the basis of four key wilderness properties, they being artefactualism, remoteness, naturalness and solitude. Degrees of purism within each are analysed and presented. Variables that contribute to the purism of wilderness perceptions held by international visitors are also examined.

It is concluded that the perceptual approach holds great relevance to the management of increasing international tourist use of wilderness recreation resources. An appreciation of wilderness perceptions facilitates several important aspects of the wilderness management equation. It allows (a) resource guardians to manage sites to provide for specific qualities of wilderness experience at given locations and (b) the dispersal of recreational use patterns while (c) affording international visitors the opportunity to best approximate wilderness experiences with the expectations they

hold. A framework outlining the most effective channels of information transfer between heritage visitors and managers is advanced.

### **Profile**

Having completed my PhD in 1996 I was appointed a Lecturer in the Department of Tourism. Since that time I have continued with research interests in the field of tourism and the environment and have enjoyed a number of research collaborations and supervisions with staff and students in the Department of Tourism and other Departments in the University. In 1998 I began a international research collaboration with Prof. Tom Hinch (University of Alberta, Canada) in the field of sport, recreation and tourism. That collaboration will continue in 2010 as when we will work together on a second edition of our first co-authored book which was originally published in 2004.