

Summarised History of Ocean Beach Baches

There are 37 private baches located on public conservation land at Ocean Beach, within the Ocean Beach Conservation Area, and in the Remutaka Forest Park.

The baches trace back to the 1940s. The bach owners advise that permission was given by the then land occupier to establish the baches on the land, by the coastline; And that at the time, this was seen as mutually beneficial to the landowner and the bach owners, given the inclement weather of the area and numbers of vehicles pulled out of rivers and sand, and rescues of boats and people from the sea, undertaken by the land occupier. The bach owners largely took over this role. By the late 1950s, the area had around 40 baches.

In 1958, the Commissioner for Crown Lands surveyed the site, and it became clear the baches were not all on private land – some had been established on State Forest land and some on public road, without lawful authority.

By 1960–61, authorities agreed that bach owners should be given 20 years to remove their baches, and formal notices were served prohibiting further improvements and requiring complete removal by 31 December 1980, with owners being reminded of this at regular intervals. The bach owners consider the 20-year term related to a proposed road that was intended to be built around the coastline, which never eventuated.

As the Crown and Council moved toward a policy requiring eventual removal, bach owners wanted to secure ongoing, long-term occupation rather than accept the 20-year removal deadline imposed in 1961. The bach owners had developed a very strong sense of connection to their baches and the community that developed as a result and considered them central to their family and community life. Some bach owners asked whether they could purchase their sites or otherwise obtain approval to remain.

From the 1970s onwards, the bach owners formed a residents' association and engaged directly with Council and Ministers, petitioning for the baches to stay. For a time, the Council explored a potential subdivision, which bach owners strongly supported as a pathway to regularisation and permanence.

In spite of the deadline being reaffirmed by Ministers and departments over the years, bach owners continued to pursue options to remain in their community and avoid removal. They sought meetings with senior officials, submitted detailed representations, and requested stays of enforcement while alternatives were explored.

The bach occupants continued to make representations to their MP and the Minister of Lands, and in May 1988, the then Minister of Conservation, Helen Clark, announced that “the Department of Conservation is to introduce a licence system which will allow the bach owners at Ocean Beach on the Wairarapa Coast to keep their baches for the lifetime of the licence holder”. She directed the Department of Conservation to initiate a public process to amend the relevant management plans to enable lifetime licences to be issued, and to issue licences for 30 years, to be supplemented with an exchange of correspondence to the effect that a further licence would be issued under the same conditions at the end of the 30-year period, a total of 60 years.

In November 1988, the Director-General's delegate (the regional Conservator) made a decision to “approve the issue of site occupation licences”, and in January 1990, the bach occupants were invited to sign and return a copy of the licence document, along with payment of requested licence fee. An unknown number of bach occupants signed and returned licences to the Department, with the requested fee, and some licences were granted, for a term that expired on 1 July 2019. The Director-General was not able to execute all of the licences, as it became apparent that for the baches on legal road, the Featherston County Council did not have legal authority to enable the Department to issue

licences on its behalf. Those applicants with baches on legal road were advised that “all transactions will be placed on hold for the present time”.

On 9 May 1994, the Department of Conservation (DOC) wrote to the bach occupants stating it had a mandate to offer licences in terms of the Minister’s decision of 1989, attached a draft licence for a term of 60 years, and said it intended to offer “this licences to all bach owners”, noting that the Conservation Act had since been amended to allow a longer term. For reasons that are unclear, no further licences were ever executed.

On 23 March 1994, the draft Wellington Conservancy Draft Conservation Management Strategy (CMS) was publicly notified for submissions. The Ocean Beach Residents Association made extensive submissions. On 13 February 1997, DOC wrote to the bach owners advising that the new CMS had been approved (the Wellington CMS 1996-2005), containing a new policy of phasing out private accommodation, and that if the baches were to remain, they would require a concession.

At that time, DOC commissioned an environmental assessment, and cultural heritage assessment. The cultural heritage assessment stated that: “The Ocean Beach baches are significant as a surviving group of baches from an important era in the development of the New Zealand bach. Bach communities as they are a steadily declining part of the New Zealand landscape and cultural experience. The bach owners are an active evolving community which continues with much the same spirit as it did nearly 50 years ago. Despite the moratorium and later official threats to the Ocean Beach bach community's existence, bach owners have demonstrated their attachment to this place and to the community”.

In June 2017, hearings were held for the draft Wellington Conservation Management Strategy 2019. The Ocean Beach Residents Association also took part in hearings. The Wellington CMS states the Department “Should phase out the private-only use of the private accommodation and related facilities in the Ocean Beach Conservation Area, in accordance with Policies 4.10.1–4.10.7 (Section 4.10 Private accommodation) and in consultation with the Ocean Beach bach owners.” It states that by 2023, decisions on the future use and management of baches with expired licences will have been made, and that all unauthorised baches and accommodation will be managed under temporary licence or management agreement; and by 2029, any baches or accommodation not subject to licence or management agreement will be removed.

The current Conservation Management Strategy states there is a strong expectation that the policies relating to private baches will be given effect, unless there are exceptional circumstances.

The bach owners consider that given the long history of their baches and the promise and decisions made by Helen Clark, that there are exceptional circumstances that apply here.

Given the 75 odd years the baches have been in existence, the bach owners feel a very strong sense of connection to the bach community, with many baches remaining in the same families for generations. , While the bach owners consider themselves a family, the users are a wider group consisting of a network of further family and individuals who are friends and relatives who frequent the bach and environment for recreation. T

The bach owners have also always emphasised the public-service value they consider their presence at Ocean Beach has provided over many decades, with bach owners providing shelter in their huts and assistance to many, many, stranded fishermen, hikers and members of the public caught out by rapidly changing weather the area is subject to.

The bach owners now seek a licence term to expire in 2054, in line with the promise made by Helen Clark.