

Visitor satisfactions, impact perceptions, and attitudes toward management options on the Abel Tasman Coastal Track

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This report is the fourth from the Great Walks visitor research programme. Reports from surveys of other tracks are published through this same series. While the data in this report were collected predominantly during January-February 1994, the visitor responses still provide valid indications of visit experiences and evaluations. Any significant management or use-pattern changes since 1994 can be interpreted in light of these results. The main change on the Abel Tasman Coastal Track has been a steady increase in use-levels. Management reports indicate there has also been a more rapid increase in visit diversity, with more day-users, sea-kayakers and use of campsites.

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Abstract

Walkers doing over-night trips on the Abel Tasman Coastal Track were surveyed during January-February 1994 as part of a wider study of Great Walk track-users in New Zealand. Their visit evaluations were highly positive, suggesting little dissatisfaction or any need for urgent management action. Other results indicated that further improvements to visit quality would be best achieved through reducing campsite littering impacts, improving water supplies at huts and campsites, and improving visitor perceptions of water hygiene. Perceptions of crowding were high, and assessment of social impacts indicated that visit-experience problems would emerge with future increase in use-levels, particularly due to social congestion difficulties with seeing too many others on the track, seeing too many big groups, and disturbance by motorboats. Visitors favoured information-based management to address these increasing use-pressures rather than more regulatory controls, although many favoured controls on motorboat access.

Executive Summary

This report summarises key results from a survey in January–February 1994 of 657 walkers on the Abel Tasman Coastal Track. The survey was undertaken to complement results of a broader study of people doing overnight trips on tracks managed as Great Walks. It provides information about visitor satisfactions with their visit experiences, about which aspects of visits may be detracting from the quality of these experiences, and about management options to address these issues.

Evaluation

Evaluations of the visit were very positive. Overall satisfaction scores were high, and few visitors considered the experience was in any way below their expectations. However, the overall satisfaction measure was not linked to any other variables in the survey, which limits its practical value as a possible tool for any monitoring of visit-experience quality. High crowding perceptions indicated visit experiences were being compromised, and were found to have some association with impact perceptions related to track and campsite congestion. In general, crowding scores appear to represent a more sensitive measure of compromises to visit-experiences.

Satisfaction with facilities and services

Satisfactions with specific facilities and services were high, and no substantial sources of dissatisfaction were apparent. There were no links between these specific satisfactions and overall evaluations of the visit. While satisfaction scores did not highlight any important issues, should additional improvements to facilities and service become a priority, initial actions should address water supplies and information signs on tracks (distance/times). Overall, these results suggest no immediate need for significant management interventions based on visitor satisfactions.

Impact perceptions

Most visitors noticed physical and social impacts related to uncertain water hygiene, track trampling damage, overdeveloped tracks and signs, water and toilet facilities, too many people at huts/camps and on the track, too many big groups, hut noise, and disturbance by motorboats at beaches. However, the proportions of visitors specifically bothered by these impacts were generally much lower, indicating considerable impact tolerance. The main exception was uncertain water hygiene, which bothered almost 70% of visitors. The only other impacts bothering more than 25% of visitors were related to motorboat disturbance, seeing too many people on the track, inadequate water supply, track trampling of shortcuts, and campsite littering. Any compromises to the quality of current visit experience appear likely to be related mostly to these impact sources. Overall, these impact perceptions most indicate a need for management to correct perceptions of water quality. Currently, other issues do

not appear to represent priority needs for immediate management action beyond normal maintenance programmes.

While overall impact perceptions highlighted mainly physical impact issues, variation in the impact perceptions of different visitor groupings highlighted a variety of impact issues relating to crowding perceptions (uncrowded/crowded), age-group (under and over 40 years) and nationality (New Zealand/overseas). In summary, crowded visitors were significantly more bothered by most types of impact perceptions, and social impacts in particular; younger visitors were more bothered by impacts related to water, toilet, and hygiene conditions and facility over-development; and while older overseas visitors were most bothered by impacts related to boat disturbance and physical damage, older New Zealand visitors were least bothered.

These results indicate that any detrimental effects on future visit experiences from increasing use pressures will arise first among the perceptions of social congestion associated with daily track use. These responses included: seeing too many people on the track each day, too many big groups, and motorboat disturbance at beaches. Increased day-trip use of the track and boat-use in the in-shore waters of Abel Tasman National Park are likely to contribute to growing social congestion perceptions. Perceptions of social congestion related to overnight stays at campsites and huts will be an important secondary area of concern. Other social and physical impact perceptions may also become more pronounced, but to a much lesser extent. These results also emphasise that management actions to minimise any future compromises to visit-experience quality should focus first on general congestion conditions on tracks and in accommodation facilities, as should any related monitoring. Distinctions due to age-group and nationality may be of more importance should the composition of the visitor group change, or should management attention focus on specific visitor groupings.

Attitudes toward management options

Visitors were most positive toward the use of information to encourage better choices of trip timing and appropriate behaviour on them. A majority of visitors also agreed with options limiting the use of motorboats (e.g., control motorboat access, limit water-taxis).

Attitudes were more evenly divided for and against, or distinctly negative toward options involving rationing use to reduce visitor numbers (e.g., booking systems, permits); manipulating-use to channel or direct visitors (e.g., peak pricing, one-way walk, reduce facilities, promote smaller groups, cheaper alternatives); and development options to increase accommodation capacity (e.g., more hut capacity, more campsite capacity, guided trip options, alternative tracks).

While most visitors appeared opposed to additional management (apart from using information), significant differences in these attitudes between different visitor groupings highlighted issues relating to nationality, age-group and crowded perception. In summary, New Zealand visitors were more opposed than overseas visitors to manipulating use-conditions, rationing/use-limits, and limiting boat use, but less opposed to increasing accommodation options; older New Zealand were distinctly most opposed to manipulating use-conditions,

rationing/use-limits, and limiting boat use, while older overseas visitors were distinctly least opposed; and older crowded visitors were distinctly most opposed to rationing/use-limits. While a simplified summary of complex interactions, these points highlight areas where attitudes to management options were most variable, and distinguish the visitor groupings more resistant to management options. Only in attitudes toward information services were visitor responses consistent across the different visitor groupings investigated.

Recommendations

While there were no current problems requiring immediate management actions, the most productive directions for preventative actions to minimise future compromises to the quality of visit-experiences appear to be:

- Identifying and reducing any physical impact hot-spots, particularly related to litter
- Improving water supply services to huts/campsites
- Improving some track marking and enhancing provision of distance/time signs
- Provision of information on water hygiene (including pre-visit approaches)
- Provision of general information about the features of using the Abel Tasman Track, and for planning visits to it
- Provision of information approaches which forecast visitor numbers, hut/camp loadings, and boat use patterns in advance, accompanied by suggestions on visit timing and operation to minimise 'crowded' experiences.

Most initial gains should be made by concentrating upon short-term physical changes along the track, and on water facilities at huts and campsites. These could be complemented by more long-term promotion of beneficial changes through information approaches. Appropriate research and information back-up, not necessarily confined to the Abel Tasman Track system, could include:

- Identification of visitor preferences for facility and service standards at huts and campsites
- Investigating the widespread negative perception of water hygiene, and its effects
- Assessing the effectiveness of information-based techniques in influencing visitor use
- Investigating differences in the expectations, evaluations and perceptions of different visitor groups where management assessments or priorities identify a particular need
- Investigating differences in the expectations, evaluations and perceptions of hut and camp users
- Investigating the greater perception of social congestion impacts by crowded visitors, including elements of hut, campsite and track congestion perceptions

- Investigating the distinction between noticing and tolerating an impact, and being bothered by it (e.g., why it becomes negative)
- Investigating the more negative visitor attitudes to direct management options, particularly by New Zealand visitors
- Identifying the use patterns on the track, and particularly those associated with boat use, day-trip use, and the distinctions between hut and campsite use.

Any monitoring of visit-experience quality should concentrate first upon social congestion conditions at key huts, campsites and track sections. Emphasis should be on a variety of approaches as simple measures of overall satisfaction are unlikely to provide a useful means to monitor changes in these conditions. Some assessment and periodic monitoring of activity patterns and facility loadings should be undertaken on the Abel Tasman Track, and should include boat-based use and day-trip use.

Acknowledgements

The overall Great Walks study covered a wide variety of different track and recreation situations, and raised a number of large operational and analytical challenges. Help and advice on statistical approaches to these analyses was provided at various times by Margaret O'Brien and Ian West of Science and Research Division, Department of Conservation, and Roger Wilkinson, Landcare Research. Data entry for the project was carried out very effectively by the Tourism Green project team of Michael Chan, Victor Keo, and Sulia Aumua. Ian Mackenzie, Science and Research Division, provided editorial assistance for final production of the reports. Thanks are also due to other Departmental staff who viewed the draft reports and made useful suggestions on their overall approach and contents.

For the Abel Tasman Coastal Track survey, overall co-ordination was managed by Brendon Clough of Nelson/Marlborough Conservancy, Department of Conservation, and the staff of Motueka Field Centre. The actual application of the survey in the field was carried out by Kate Crick as part of the Tourism Green project team.

1. Introduction

The Abel Tasman Coastal Track is a 2–4 day walk along the coastline of Abel Tasman National Park. There is also considerable activity by day-trip users, sea-kayakers and motorboat-users. This survey of overnight track walkers was undertaken as part of a broader study of people doing overnight trips on the Great Walks. Tracks classified and managed as Great Walks are the primary locations for multi-day walking trips in the New Zealand backcountry. They are of high scenic and recreational value, and are characterised by high and increasing use-levels. This use pressure, and the need to provide for quality outdoor recreation experiences, requires that these tracks be specifically managed to provide high levels of facility and service provision without compromising the quality of the visit experience. To achieve this outcome, managers require information about visitor satisfactions with their visit experiences, and what aspects of visits may be detracting from these experiences. On this basis, the objectives of the Great Walks study were to:

- Provide brief description of overnight visitors to the Great Walks
- Identify visitor satisfactions with the facilities and services provided
- Identify visitor perceptions of crowding and use-impacts
- Identify visitor attitudes towards management options

Departmental staff at key huts administered standardised questionnaires to visitors on each track¹ on their last trip night. Overall, 657 Abel Tasman Track visitors completed the survey questionnaire. After data coding and entry, preliminary results were initially presented to managers as percentage tables. These descriptive results are summarised here in the questionnaire format (refer Appendix 1).

Other analyses were carried out on the database, and this report summarises the main findings derived from these descriptive and analytical results. The report presents overall evaluations by visitors of their visit experiences, and then investigates the specific aspects of facility and services satisfactions, social and physical impact perceptions, and attitudes toward different management options. Analyses are undertaken which assess how these specific responses vary between different groups of visitors, and how they relate to the overall evaluations. This approach enables any significant current or potential compromises to the quality of visit experiences to be clearly identified.

¹ A standardised questionnaire (Appendix 1) was developed for overnight walkers on the Great Walks system, which comprises the Abel Tasman, Heaphy, Kepler, Milford, Rakiura, Routeburn, Tongariro, and Waikaremoana tracks, and the Wanganui River journey. Surveys of the Travers-Sabine and Dart-Rees track circuits were also included, although flooding prevented any work being possible on the latter. A sample of sea-kayakers was also collected in Abel Tasman National Park. Some site-specific questions were used where required, particularly for questions related to boat use on the Lake Waikaremoana and Abel Tasman tracks and on the Wanganui River; some non-applicable questions were omitted on the Milford Track; and it was possible to survey at Easter on the Tongariro, Heaphy and Kepler Tracks. German and Japanese translations were provided.

2. Visitor information

In summary, visitor characteristics were representative of a young and international group of people, largely unfamiliar with the Abel Tasman Track and generally inexperienced at the backcountry walking activity. Short trips predominated, usually including at least one night camping. Some summary findings included: (refer Appendix 1 for details)

- An even proportion of males (52%) and females (48%)
- Most (67%) were from overseas (33% New Zealand), with German (22%), British (11%), American (10%), and Swiss (9%)
- Most (80%) were aged between 20 and 40 years, with only 7% under 20, and 13% over 40 years
- Most (89%) were on a first visit to the track, 22% were on their first overnight walking trip, 45% had done from 1 to 5 similar walks, and 11% had done more than 20 such trips
- Their group sizes averaged close to 4 people
- Trip durations were mostly 1 night (20%), 2 nights (36%), or 3 nights (27%)
- Many (54%) stayed only at campsites, others (18%) used a combination of huts and campsites, and the remainder (28%) used only huts. Overall 33% used mostly huts on their trips (allowing for one camp night), and 64% used mostly campsites (allowing for one hut night).

New Zealand visitors represented a broader age-range, came in larger groups on longer trips, made greater use of campsite compared with huts, and had more previous experience of the Abel Tasman Track. Overseas visitors were more often in the 20-40 year age-range (89% *vs* 61% for New Zealand visitors), came in smaller groups (mean of 3.3 *vs* 4.6 for New Zealand visitors), made shorter trips (means of 3.0 *vs* 2.3 nights for New Zealand visitors), were less likely to use mostly campsites (58% *vs* 73% for New Zealand visitors), and were more often on first-visits to the track (95% *vs* 76% for New Zealand visitors).

Visitors who indicated they were either 'crowded' or 'uncrowded' were compared. (Refer to Section 3.2 and Appendix 3 for descriptive discussion of this crowding distinction.) The most notable differences were that more overseas visitors felt crowded (74% *vs* 58% for New Zealand visitors), crowded visitors had smaller party sizes (means 3.4 *vs* 4.6 for uncrowded visitors), and uncrowded visitors were more often on first visits (30% *vs* 19% for crowded visitors). Overall, apart from nationality, the crowded and uncrowded visitors could not be substantially distinguished from each other on the basis of their simple descriptive characteristics.

Comparisons were also made of the characteristics of visitors who indicated they were predominantly hut users (34%) or camp users (63%). Each group included 1 night in the alternative type of accommodation (only 3% exceeded 1 hut-night and 1 camp-night). The only notable distinctions were that camp users came in bigger groups (mean of 3.5 *vs* 3.0 for hut users), and included more New Zealand visitors (58% *vs* 73% of overseas visitors). Overall, apart from these differences, hut-users and campsite-users could not be substantially distinguished from each other on the basis of their descriptive characteristics.

3. Evaluation of the quality of visit experiences

Overall evaluation of the quality of visit experiences was assessed through four questions related to overall satisfaction and perceptions of use-levels (refer Appendix 1 for question details).

3.1 EVALUATION OF OVERALL SATISFACTION

Two questions allowed visitors to evaluate the quality of their overall visit experiences:

- An *overall satisfaction* score (how satisfied or dissatisfied with the trip—Question 5)
- An *expectation fulfilment* score (was the trip better or worse than expected—Question 4)

Positive responses from visitors to these questions represented their evaluation that they had achieved high quality recreation experiences on their visit.

Figures 1 and 2 show that satisfaction on the Abel Tasman Track (and other tracks) was very high (92%), and most experiences were as good as had been expected, or better (88%).² Virtually nobody indicated that they were dissatisfied with their trip. The main conclusion drawn from these overall evaluations is that visitors are achieving quality experiences on the Abel Tasman Track, and that these are frequently better than expected.

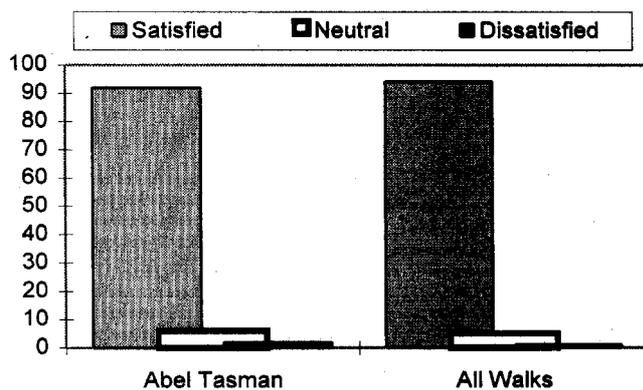


Figure 1. Overall satisfaction.

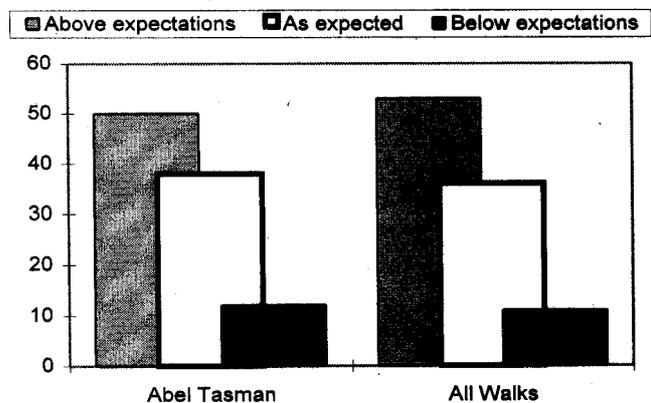


Figure 2. Fulfilment of trip experience expectations.

² These responses were similar in degree and moderately correlated with each other ($r = 0.47$).

3.2 EVALUATION OF USE-LEVELS

Two further questions allowed visitors to evaluate the quality of their visit experiences in relation to use-levels:

- A score for perception of *crowding* (overall, did they feel crowded on the trip — Question 2)
- An evaluation of *expected visitor numbers* (seeing more/same/less than expected — Question 3)

Positive responses from visitors indicating low levels of crowding, and not seeing more people than expected, would have reinforced overall evaluations of achieving high quality visit experiences. Figures 3 and 4 show that crowding perceptions were high, and that many visitors saw more others than they expected. These crowding and expected use-level evaluations were weakly correlated with each other ($r = .31$), indicating those who experienced higher use-levels than they expected generally tended to have higher crowding scores³. Levels of reported crowding were higher on the Abel Tasman Track (69%) than on other tracks (59%).

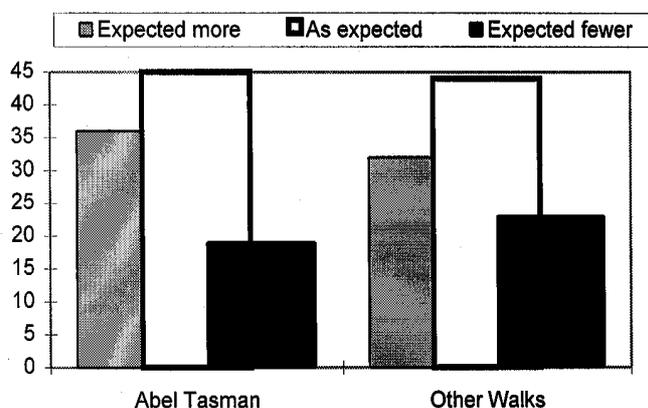


Figure 3. Crowding perception summary.

Other questions were asked which aimed to identify any focal points for crowding perceptions on the Abel Tasman Track (Question 3). Overall, 69% of visitors ($n = 437$) indicated that some places were more crowded than others, and of these visitors, 69% included hut sites in their examples, 23% included campsites, and 22% included sections along the track. Appendix 1 summarises other crowding information from Question 3, which indicated that visitors who indicated some focus for hut crowding ($n =$

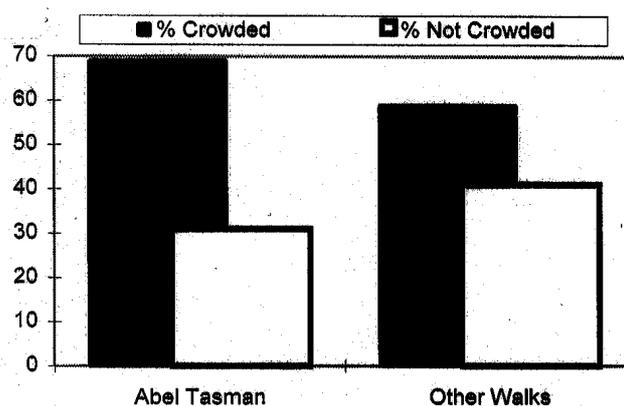


Figure 4. Fulfilment of visitor number expectations.

³ In addition, an ANOVA test ($F(2,574) = 38.45$, signif. $F = .000$) showed mean crowding scores increased from those expecting more people (3.23), through those expecting the numbers seen (3.58), to those expecting fewer people (5.11). Similar analyses found no significant differences with overall satisfaction mean scores.

303) specified Anchorage (40%), Bark Bay (31%) and Awaroa (31%) huts; visitors who indicated some focus for campsite crowding (n = 100) specified Anchorage campsites (31%); and visitors who indicated some focus for crowding on sections on the track (n = 98) specified track sections at Bark Bay, (24%), Anchorage (23%), and the Totoranui road end (19%). These results indicated that a variety of issues contributed to crowding perceptions, with hut issues particularly prominent, but with campsite and track issues also being important secondary sources. Track crowding issues in particular suggest some influence from day-use visitors.

Although substantial crowding perceptions were reported (69% crowded), and these could be interpreted as representing use-levels which are 'more than capacity' (refer Appendix 3) for this visit experience, these were not significantly linked with the overall satisfaction evaluations. In other words, higher crowding perceptions were not associated with higher evaluations of dissatisfaction with the trip, or with it being considered worse than expected. While many visitors indicated they did experience crowding, this did not appear to affect how they felt about their overall trip.

Despite this finding, the high crowding levels themselves suggest strongly that some degree of compromise to the quality of visit experiences was occurring (refer Appendix 3). Subsequent sections in this report present analyses which indicate where some of these compromises may occur in relation to satisfactions with particular facilities and services (refer Section 4.2), or with perceptions of particular social and physical impacts (refer Section 5.2).

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