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Thoughts on How New Zealand Could Progress as a More Regenerative Tourism Host

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Thoughts on how New Zealand could progress as a more regenerative tourism host

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Abstract: New Zealand has a chance to reset the way we view and manage tourism. We must take this chance to make some changes that will ensure that we have a clean green country to promote as a high quality tourism destination in the future. This perspective advocates that measures such as a high visitor levy, educating tourists and better management of the way tourists travel around the country, can lead to achieving more sustainable tourism industry.

Keywords: camping, Covid-19, environment, regenerative tourism, New Zealand.

Author profile



Stephen Bradley has been working in both the tourism and hospitality industry for over 20 years both in New Zealand and overseas and owned his restaurant on the famous tourist town of Akaroa for ten years. He has also worked on several research and conservation projects around the country. Having grown up in rural New Zealand, he has a strong connection to the land and the environment and has seen the detrimental impacts of over-tourism and budget tourism first hand.

Introduction

Before New Zealand borders closed as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic a growing number of New Zealanders were dissatisfied with the impacts of tourism and were expressing visitor fatigue. In 2018 a record of forty percent of New Zealanders surveyed were worried about the effects of the growing number of tourists upon the infrastructure, way of life of New Zealanders, and the environment (Cropp, 2017, 2018). As our culture and natural environment are the biggest attractions that lure tourists to New Zealand, this dissatisfaction shows we were not on a sustainable path.

In 2019 the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment released a report on the impacts of tourism on the natural environment that clearly stated that despite a long standing emphasis on sustainability, the existing policy mix is unlikely to prevent a worsening of tourism's environmental burden (Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, 2019). The report was a clear signal that we could no longer be complacent and needed to change our tourism management. Any return to a business-as-usual approach post-Covid and to the return of the high and growing tourism numbers would have devastating consequences for the natural environment which is the major drawcard for our tourists.

New Zealand has attracted the admiration of the world through our Covid-19 response, with coverage in outlets such as The New York Times, The Washington Post and CNN (The New York Times, 2020). From this international attention it is likely the demand for travel to New Zealand will remain high once borders open, so we must be ready for tourism to return and have the plans and systems in place to earn the right to market ourselves under the Tourism New Zealand longterm campaign '100%

Pure'. But there is a lot of regeneration to be done before we deserve that label. Of course, tourism must be a balancing act between looking after our environment (this is our product we are trying to sell after all) and generating income for the country and the tourism operators. Suppose we are going to reduce the number of tourists that visit New Zealand every year. In that case, we need to think carefully about what kind of tourist brings the most value to our economy with less impact on our environment.

Rethinking of tourism in New Zealand

It would be easy to assume that aiming for the highest end of the tourism market would be the best way to go, but this is a little bit of a misguided assumption. Very often the high-end tourist only visits for a very short time, often staying in only one or two high end resorts. Off-shore investors often own the places they stay in and even the activities they get involved in, so very little of what they spend ends up helping the country's grassroots economy.

It is the middle to high wealth bracket, that is, people that have time to spend a month or more exploring our country and spending time and money in the smaller centers that benefit the country the most. The kind of tourist that will spend a number of days in numerous small towns around the country, utilising restaurants and cafes and tourist attractions in the area as well as staying in local B&Bs or camping grounds, shortly this helps the country and economy more than people staying large of shore owned hotels, or international cruise ships.

New Zealand tourism minister Steve Nash has clearly stated his goal to target the global 1% of wealth as the key tourism market for New Zealand in the post-pandemic market (The Guardian, 2020). On a global scale, an individual must have upwards of one million New Zealand

dollars to be considered in the top 1% of the world's wealthiest individuals (Credit Suisse, 2020).

One of the problems with this though is we do not have a transport system that encourages this kind of travel unless the visitors hire a camper van. Consequently, we need to look at solutions for both managing the number of camper vans on the roads and in the camping grounds, and be much stricter with the quality of the vans and investing in the infrastructure facilities for them. So that we do not go back to having every spot along the road you can park a car scattered with human waste. Self-contained campervan stickers are just too easy to get and are meaningless if the inhabitants of the van have no intention of using their self-contained facilities.

New Zealand has a regional approach to managing visitors, with each regional or local council responsible for providing facilities and enforcing local rules. This creates an area of confusion for the tourist with the need to constantly check the local rules and availability of free 'freedom camping' parks. With this obscurity market forces filled the gaps in legislation by providing online apps such as CamperMate.

This problem can probably be solved as much by education as it can be by legislation. Maybe we need to educate our visitors upon arrival of what to expect in New Zealand and what we expect of them in return. The Air New Zealand safety videos (2020) are well received, something along those lines shown to all arriving passengers to New Zealand, welcoming people to tell them a little about what to expect here culturally and environmentally.

If we are going to continue with freedom camping as an option for our visitors there must be much stricter regulations on what standards the camper van must meet to be

considered suitable for freedom camping. And maybe regular visits to these sites by some sort of freedom camping ranger, with some nationally standardised camping rules.

As far as public transport is concerned, we would like to have fewer vehicles on the roads but still have people visiting and spending, which needs to develop some transport solutions. Currently, it is difficult to comfortably and enjoyably travel New Zealand on public transport. This will not be an easy problem to solve and will also require a simultaneously tackling of environmental and climate change issues. Establishing national transport networks could be offset by visitor levies.

One way we could ensure that we are appealing more to the end of the market that is happy to spend more money on high-quality tourism would be to significantly increase the visitor levy on arrival from the current \$35 to something like \$500. This could be promoted as payment for arrival and amount towards our national parks or freedom camping sites, rather than charging people to enter National Parks as they do in parts of Australia. That way we would have a significant budget for improving and maintaining our facilities, and improving our product (or a clean green New Zealand) so we continue to be seen as a premium destination, well worth the cost involved in visiting.

One of the issues with charging a high levy is that it may put off the working holiday travelers who are important to supplementing the workforce in many of the smaller centres or rural areas of the country and add to the country's diversity. But there could be an incentive scheme in that they get a proportion of the levy back for working in high need areas such as fruit picking or hospitality. That way, we would limit the number of young people who just come from working

holiday visas to bum around and increase that number that come in the working holiday scheme's true spirit.

Conclusion

For New Zealand to reduce and manage the host community's visitor fatigue, to reduce and manage tourism's environmental impacts, there must be a reset to a more regenerative tourism model. With higher wealth tourists to New Zealand that travel for longer and spend more during their stay that will increase the benefit that the host community receives. A visitor levy and educating tourists would ensure the provision of better facilities and ultimately result in a better visitor experience.

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