

National Parks

What do we think of them?

by Kay Booth from the Department of Conservation who has carried out a survey on New Zealand's attitudes to and perceptions of national parks



The myth (left) opposed to the reality (right) of the majority of national park visitors. Most people like to walk, see the scenery or picnic in national parks. *(Photos: Christine and Gordon from Department of Conservation)*

While you relax and enjoy reading this latest issue of *Forest & Bird*, here are a few questions to consider:

- should New Zealand have national parks?
- have you visited one recently?
- how many are there and can you name them?

No doubt you answered a firm yes to the first, and probably second question, and a good chance you replied '11 to the last (not forgetting our newest national park on the Wanganui River!)'. But what do *other* people think?

A recent study in Christchurch¹ put a number of questions, including those above, to over 300 members of the public

and found some interesting results:

- total support for national parks
- most people had visited a national park at some time but only half had visited one recently (in the last two years)
- not everyone knew what a national park was
- people thought national parks were primarily for preservation and secondarily for recreation.

By examining the public's use and attitudes towards parks more closely, a picture of how New Zealanders use and appreciate this resource may be built up. What better place to begin than within the parks themselves...

Who uses national parks?

The image of national park visitors as rugged, outdoors, macho-types is a myth! The three most popular activities undertaken in parks are viewing scenery, walking (rather than tramping) and picnicking. Indeed tramping and climbing comprise only about one eighth of all activities pursued in national parks. Furthermore, a high proportion visited a national park just for the day, probably influenced to some extent by the closeness of Arthur's Pass National Park, just two hours drive away from Christchurch.

If a national park user is defined as someone who has visited in the past two years, and a non-user as someone who has not, park visitors are more likely to be:

- 'better' educated
- in professional or skilled occupations
- male
- inclined to undertake active pursuits and visit the countryside
- regular patrons at cultural events.

Surprisingly, there was no difference between users and non-users of parks on the basis of age, marital status or presence of children in the home. These factors have sometimes been used to characterise a 'typical' park user. While such a description appears incorrect, these factors may influence the type of activity undertaken in parks.

The million dollar question: Why doesn't everyone visit a national park?

When the national park system is considered in terms of a national asset, an estate belonging to every New Zealander, the million dollar question is not who visits them, nor what they do there, but why one person visits when another does not. Just under half of the Christchurch respondents indicated they had visited a national park recently — more than half had not! As the city is quite close to Arthur's Pass National Park compared with other urban areas, a reasonable estimate of national usage could be even lower, perhaps one third — a ratio of one park user to every three non-users.

The following reasons were given by non-users to explain why they had not visited a national park recently:

- 77 percent wanted to visit but were unable to do so
- 16 percent did not want to visit a national park
- 7 percent knew nothing about them.

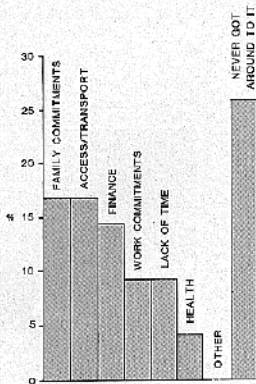
Clearly the majority would like to use national parks but are constrained in some way — yet it appears that they just 'never got around to it'. The oft-quoted physical, social and economic factors such as lack of transport or time, are less important in restricting use of national parks (graph 1). Obviously there are other factors influencing the decision to visit.

Everyone knows about national parks... don't they?

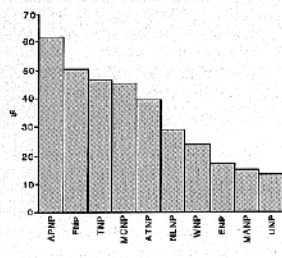
The results above suggest that some people do not know about national parks. When asked to list as many national parks as they could name from memory, one third of all

respondents (both users and non-users) either could not name any or listed an area that was not a national park. For example, Hagley and Spencer Parks (Christchurch urban parks), Lake Taupo, and the Southern Lakes were all called national parks. Out of the 10 parks that existed at the time of the survey, each person named only 3.4 on average.

Graph 2 shows how many people named the different national parks. Predictably, the closest park to Christchurch, Arthur's Pass National Park, was mentioned the most often. However, distant parks were also quite prominent in people's minds (Fiordland and Tongariro). Furthermore, Mount Cook National Park, our highest peak and a renowned tourist focus, was mentioned by less than half of all respondents. Apparently it is not commonly recognised as a national park.



Constraints on use. The bars illustrate the proportion of respondents that gave each reason.



APNP	Arthur's Pass National Park
FNP	Fiordland National Park
TNP	Tongariro National Park
MGNP	Mount Cook National Park
RPNP	Abel Tasman National Park
NLNP	Melrose Lakes National Park
WNP	Westland National Park
ENP	Egmont National Park
MANP	Mount Aspiring National Park
UNP	Urewere National Park

Some national parks are better known than others. This graph shows the proportion of people who named each park from memory.

Use and beyond

Most park visitors probably know when they are within a national park, although it is not necessary for enjoyment of the experience! Interestingly, just over half of park visitors indicated that the area's designation as a

national park was not a major reason for their visit. Hence it is what is contained within park boundaries rather than the status per se that attracts most people.

But one need not visit national parks to appreciate them. New Zealanders place a lot of importance on preservation of the natural environment. The public thought that the principal purpose of national parks was preservation, with recreation placed second. Similarly, park rangers were seen foremost as guardians of the environment. Less than one quarter of respondents suggested that rangers were there to assist the public.

This strong statement about preservation indicates that benefits other than recreational use are derived from our national parks. Some writers² have suggested the following benefits may also flow from protected natural areas:

- simply the knowledge that they exist
- the option to visit in the future
- preservation of the environment for future generations.

Such benefits, however, can only be realised if one is aware that national parks exist!

For the benefit, use and enjoyment

The National Parks Act states that national parks are set aside... for their intrinsic worth and for the benefit, use, and enjoyment of the public³. While it has been shown that a relatively small proportion of New Zealanders regularly visit our national parks, enjoyment of these areas is not restricted to use. The knowledge that these lands are being preserved brings benefits itself. Perhaps in the year ahead the celebration of the national parks centennial and the advent of the new Department of Conservation will increase the public's awareness of these lands and nurture a stronger conservation ethic. By doing so, it can only enhance the benefits derived from our national parks, those areas also called 'parks for the people'. ⚡

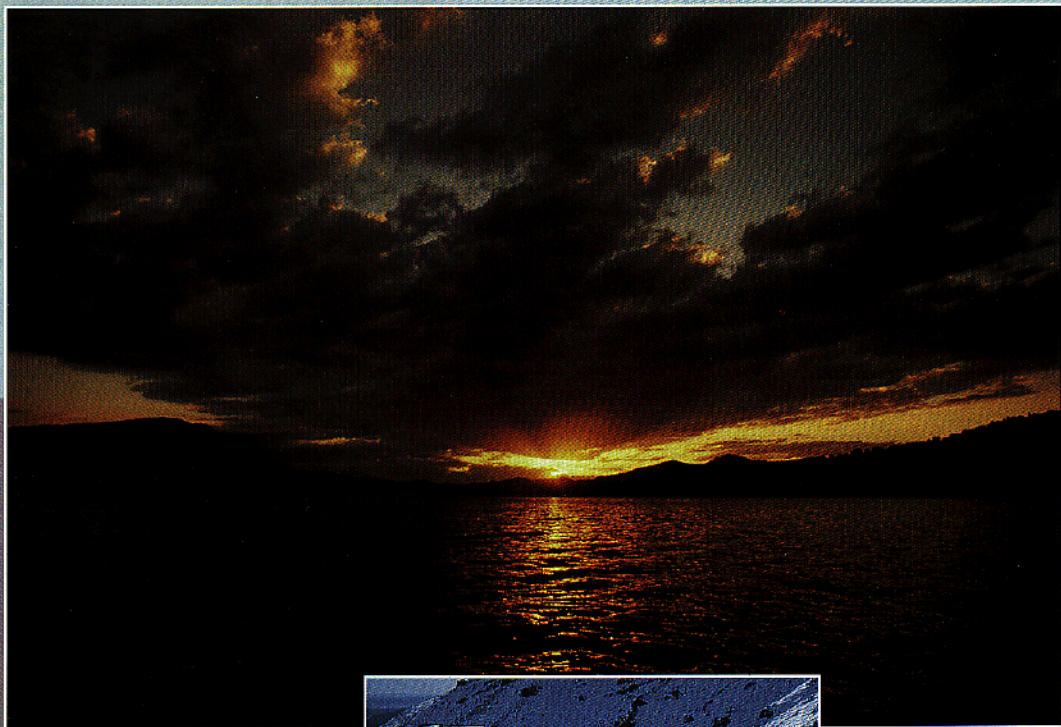
References

1. Booth, K.L. 1986 — National Parks and people: An investigation into use, attitudes and awareness of the New Zealand national park system. Unpublished MSc thesis in geography, University of Canterbury.
2. See for example: Kerr, G.N.; Sharp, B.M.H.; Gough, J.D. 1986 — *Economic Benefits of Mt Cook National Park*. Lincoln Papers in Resource Management No. 12, Centre for Resource Management, University of Canterbury and Lincoln College.
3. National Parks Act 1980, Section 4(1).

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Kay Booth carried out this research for her master's thesis in Geography at the University of Canterbury. She is now working for the Department of Conservation as a scientist, specialising in tourism/recreation research in protected natural areas.



The mere fact that national parks exist is sometimes cited as a benefit — making people feel good that areas are being preserved for future generations. Lake Waikaremoana, Urewera National Park.

Photo: Eric Taylor



Above: Most people surveyed regarded preservation as the principal purpose of national parks, with recreation placed second. Some would argue that national park staff spend more time catering to the public than preserving the natural environment. Tongariro National Park skifield. *Photo: J. Mazzi*



Above and right: The national park system caters for different types of visitors with facilities that range from interpretative centres to huts and tracks in remote areas. Mangatepopo Hut, Tongariro National Park. Photos: Conservation Department; Gerry McSweeney (right)

