



Not 100% – but four steps closer to sustainable tourism

Media release

Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment, Simon Upton, is urging the Government to take advantage of the pause in international tourism to transform the sector to one with a substantially smaller environmental footprint.

Covid-19 has brought international tourism activity to a halt, threatening the livelihoods and commercial viability of many of New Zealand's tourism-related businesses.

But the discontinuity created by Covid-19 also offers an opportunity to address some of the long-standing environmental and social issues associated with New Zealand's tourism industry.

"There is broad support for the idea that protecting tourism livelihoods in the short term should not morph into a slow but inexorable return to the status quo in the long term," Mr Upton says.

The Commissioner presents a set of four policy proposals to combat some of the more pressing environmental challenges faced by tourism.

- Introduce a departure tax that reflects the environmental cost of flying internationally from New Zealand, and use the revenue to support the development of low-emissions aviation technologies and provide a source of climate finance for Pacific Island nations.
- Make any future central government funding for tourism infrastructure conditional on environmental criteria and aligned with mana whenua and the local community's vision for tourism development.
- Clarify and, where necessary, strengthen the tools the Department of Conservation can use to address the loss of wildness and natural quiet at some of Aotearoa's most spectacular natural attractions. This includes tightening up rules around commercial activity on conservation lands and waters.
- Strengthen the existing standard for self-contained freedom camping, improve oversight of the certifying process and require rental car agencies to play a greater role in collecting freedom camping infringement fees and fines.

"These proposals are not 100 per cent of the solution, but together, they just might make a difference," he explains.

Any transition will require real changes to business models and individual tourist behaviour.

Tourists – and the tourism businesses that serve them – should be required to pay for the cost of the environmental services they use.

It is also essential that the wishes of communities and mana whenua are respected when decisions about new tourism developments are being considered.

"Tourism's growth has been built on special attention and subsidies for decades.

"This has been followed by subsidies to cope with the pressures of that growth.

"It is time to consider measures that ask the industry and tourists to meet some of these costs and moderate demand for activities that deliver negative environmental outcomes."

The Commissioner's 2019 report *Pristine, popular... imperilled? The environmental consequences of projected tourism growth* found that tourism is less environmentally benign than it has often been made out to be.

Every time a tourist flies to, from or around New Zealand, we add to the stock of greenhouse gases that are driving climatic disruption.

Tourism contributes to significant claims on water and landscape modification for the extension and hardening of infrastructure to accommodate growing numbers.

There is also a loss of wildness and natural quiet that takes place when each additional tourist is introduced to iconic sites in national parks or special beaches.

"If we act now, we have the chance to transition the industry to one that is less environmentally harmful – as well as more resilient – than its predecessor."

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