

Report 99.274

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Report to the Landcare Committee
From Susan Edwards, Manager, Regional Parks (Strategy & Marketing)

Findings of Akatarawa Visitor Survey

1. Purpose of the Report

To present results and findings from the Akatarawa Forest Recreation User Survey and outline the implications of the findings for the Council.

2. Why Undertake the Survey?

Regional Parks and Natural Forestry commissioned a user survey for the Akatarawa Forest because we had very little data on recreational visitor use patterns and numbers in the Forest. There is anecdotal evidence that use of the Forest is increasing (e.g. more applications for access permits for activities where permits are required and concession rights). We are also dealing with more planning issues and enquiries relating to the Forest than in the past. An example of this is the formation of the Akatarawa Recreational Action Committee (ARAC) in 1997 to address recreational users concerns. Also, during the last year, the Regional Parks Strategy and Marketing team dealt with approximately the same number of licences and concessions in the Akatarawa and Pakuratahi Forests, as in all five Regional Parks.

The Akatarawa Forest User Survey is designed to provide us with data that we can use in future planning for the Forest rather than relying on anecdotal evidence and observation. Information was sought on:

- Who is using the Forest and how often
- What recreational activities they undertake
- Which areas of the Forest they are using and for what activities
- Demographic information on Forest users
- What users like and dislike about the Forest.

3. **Conducting the Research**

Chris Cosslett from Corydon Consultants undertook a series of focus group sessions with representatives from the various recreational groups using the Forest. These sessions provided detailed information on which areas of the Forest are being used, what activities are being undertaken and what users preferences are for future planning.

Corydon Consultants also prepared the survey questionnaire for visitors entering the Forest. Chris Cosslett and Council officers interviewed visitors at all entrance points to the Forest on selected days during January and February. The interviewers asked one person from each group entering the Forest a series of questions. A summary of the key findings is outlined in the attachment. (Copies of the full report are available from Susan Edwards.)

4. **Key Conclusions**

The survey shows:

- That the Forest is a unique and important recreational resource in the Wellington Region (particularly for mountain biking and motorised recreation) – more demanding and challenging than the Regional Parks.
- Forest roads and tracks are important recreational resources. Recreational users want higher maintenance standards than necessary for the Council's operational purposes (e.g. plantation forestry or fire-fighting access).
- More intensive development and higher standards of tracks, signage, etc., are desirable closer to the entry nodes, while leaving the interior of the Forest for those users seeking a more remote experience. (This is a common practice in the Department of Conservation estate)
- The plantation forests have higher recreational values and use than expected.
- Recreational users do not distinguish between plantation and natural forests when they undertake their activities. The Council's management boundaries are seamless to the users.
- Inter-user conflicts are becoming a problem in the Forest. These could be resolved by developing single purpose tracks and/or "one-way" track systems. Although this needs further work, assessment and consultation with users to determine the most appropriate and cost effective solutions.

- Some entry points (e.g. Karapoti) are coming under pressure from high use. There are opportunities for future development of additional entry points into the Forest. Picnic and toilet facilities would enhance the Forest for some users.
- Loop tracks are popular (e.g. Totara Park to Birchville Dam or Karapoti).
- The Akatarawa Forest provides a link between the Council's other estates (e.g. Battle Hill Farm Forest Park and Kaitoke Regional Park).

5. **Implications of the Report Findings for the Council**

Although not brought out by this one-off survey, Ranger observations and anecdotal evidence suggest that use of the Forest is increasing substantially. However, the survey has shown that the Forest is receiving a significant amount of use. A second survey in one or two years, would be useful to determine if use is increasing and, if so, at what rate.

Certain parts of the Forest appear to be under more pressure (e.g. environmental impacts, overcrowding of tracks, and multiple use conflicts) than other areas. This is particularly the case from motorised recreation and concession activities. These have the potential to impact on the sustainability of environmental values in the indigenous forest areas. Further monitoring should be undertaken to determine the long-term impacts of recreational use and the limits of environmental sustainability.

In the past, the Forests were seen as places to direct recreational users when pressure came on the Regional Parks or when people wanted remote experiences. However, with the apparent increasing use of the Akatarawa Forest, it may be approaching its sustainable carrying capacity for recreational activities (evidenced by the perceived conflicts between user groups). Without further development of facilities and tracks, the remote experiences can now only be found in the Forest interior. Therefore, it is no longer appropriate to consider the Forest as a "safety-valve" for the Regional Parks.

The current use of the Forest is increasing work loads for Regional Parks staff (e.g. track and road maintenance, user conflicts, planning and policy developments, concessions, licences, etc).

The survey identified some potential developments to improve the recreational experiences of users. The Council has strategic opportunities in the Forest, as with the Regional Parks. These will be considered (along with the other items identified in the *Future Directions for Regional Parks* report [Report 99.18] and the related "Porcupine Diagram") when setting service levels (i.e. "bigger, better, different, the same or even less") through the next full review of the Long Term Financial Strategy.

The report has been useful for a better understanding of the recreational use in the Forest and the needs of users. This information assists us to identify potential “hot-spots” and conflicts. It also helps show areas we should focus maintenance and any future developments, therefore, improving our effectiveness as land and recreation managers.

6. Recommendation

That the report be received and the contents noted.

Report prepared by:

Approved for submission:

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Attachment: Key Findings from the Research

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The report from Corydon Consultants contains the results from the focus groups and quantitative surveys. The key findings are summarised as:

- The most common recreational activities in the Forest are mountain biking (36.6%), walking (31.4%), trail/quad bike riding (12.1%), although a wide range of activities were undertaken to some degree. Mountain biking is likely to be slightly over-represented in the sample as the survey was done just before the Karapoti Classic mountain bike race. Motorised recreation is likely to be under represented as many regular users keep out of the Forest when mountain bikers are training for the Karapoti Classic event. The highest motorised use periods appear (from the Ranger's diary of events) to be from March to May and from September to December.
- The most commonly used entrances are Karapoti (32.8%), Totara Park (24.5%) and Bridge Road (16.2%). Although Battle Hill (11.4%) and Maungakotukutuku (11.2%) also received reasonably high use. There was evidence of crowding at the Karapoti entrance on some survey days.
- The most used areas within the Forest are Valley View Forest (26.4% of visitors), Puketiro Forest (13.5%), the Pram Track (13.3%) and Karapoti Classic route (10.7%). The plantation forestry areas within the Akatarawa Forest received much higher use than was expected and most of the Forest (even the tracks in the remote indigenous forest in the interior of the Akatarawa's) received some use.
- The highest proportion of visitors live in Upper Hutt (43%), followed by Wellington (19%), Hutt City (14%), Kapiti Coast (9.5%) and Porirua (7.1%).
- People visited the forest with friends (33%), family (28.5%), or alone (31.4%).
- Forest users are largely male (75.8%), New Zealand European (88.8%), and aged in their 20's (26.6%), 30's (31.1%) or 40's (20.2%). This is reasonably common of users in the Regional Parks Network, but is even more pronounced in this Forest, particularly the emphasis on males. Only 2.4% of visitors identified themselves as New Zealand Maori.
- People generally visited the Forest for between 1 – 4 hours at a time (58.7%).
- Return visits to the Forest were very high, with only 14.5% of visitors having not visited the Forest before within the previous year. Only 16.6% of visitors had not visited any other Wellington Regional Council park or forest within the last year. The majority of visitors have been to several.
- There are a variety of features that users like about the forest, the top feature being good tracks or terrain for users chosen activity (41%). The most common complaint about the Forest was conflicts with other users (27.8%).