

FREEDOM CAMPING

WHO SHOULD PICK UP THE BILL?



Freedom campers: Coromandel Peninsula.

David Hammond argues that a travel tax must benefit all communities.

New Zealand communities celebrate with the tourism sector the success of our 2015 visitor industry boom. It seems that international tourism is set to become our country's top export earner at over \$13.5 billion. Much of that tourism benefit falls in our smaller regional and rural communities where people rely on the fortunes of both farming and tourism.

Combined with a further \$11.8 billion for domestic tourism, we are on track to achieve our national annual tourism revenue goal of \$41 billion by 2025. But are we also on track to manage the effects of this growth?

The issue of freedom camping occupied the media throughout the summer months where the public was presented with each new horror of rubbish or worse deposits left in iconic scenic locations, and congestion and offensive behaviour in others.

Over the course of this summer a freedom camping issue which used to be connected primarily with the Coromandel and Queenstown has spread to McKenzie, Waitaki, Christchurch, Tasman and Milford, to mention just a few.

The New Zealand reality of tourism growth is that much of the pressure centres on beautiful locations in small council areas which struggle to afford tourism infrastructure.

A lot of the popular camping spots are on council reserves. Having worked directly on regulatory issues I believe these areas can be better managed nationally through bylaws and enforcement regimes.

Many of the problem spots are also on state highway (NZTA) or Department of Conservation (DoC) owned land. Our government ministries have historically accommodated freedom camping on public land, and today this extends to modern non-self-contained vehicles. They do so without investing what is actually needed today into toilet and refuse facilities. The government position on its public lands is at odds



Campers in a prohibited area.

with the views of many communities located around these spots.

So who should pick up the bill for tourism growth and destination pressure?

Recently I asked councils how much they spent on the tourism industry in 2015. Seventy councils responded that they spent \$140.4 million. Of this, \$54 million was spent on regional tourism organisations and I-Sites, and a further \$86 million on a range of diverse investments from grants to cycleways.

This excluded spending on public toilets, expanded sewerage and water schemes to cope with peak period growth, bylaws regulation and additional rubbish services over the peak period.

The real figure is undoubtedly well in excess of \$200 million each year. Our local communities get enormous benefits from tourism in terms of employment, the visitor spend and use of the same businesses that service visitors. But their councils make a significant contribution to supporting the tourism industry and the regulation of its effects.

There is wider scope for local councils to make more money from travellers to pay for this rate-funded investment. Queenstown is leading the country in exploring a local bed tax, although not without difficulty. Such a blunt tax is unlikely to fall on the growing online rental accommodation market notably led by Airbnb, nor capture day trippers.

The paid car parking model operating in Hot Water Beach, Coromandel, is yet

another innovation. Some \$169,000 raised since 2013 is to be ploughed back into a new high-quality toilet and shower block at the car park in 2016 by the Mercury Bay Community Board. This model should be taken nationwide.

But paid car parking may prove to be small beer compared to the investment in tourism infrastructure needed nationwide on council, DoC and NZTA lands for New Zealand to continue to be a world-class destination and protect our environmental brand at the same time.

Communities are asking how DoC and NZTA will fund infrastructure on their reserves where they allow non-self-contained freedom camping.

A travel tax at the airport is gaining traction in local government. But instead of that money being used for border control issues it should be sheeted back to communities which need the funding to build more infrastructure to cope with growth.

In my view there needs to be a regular national forum around the sustainable achievement of our Tourism 2025 strategy involving industry, government and their agencies, and councils representing communities and bringing to that table \$139 million of sector investment. It is long overdue. **LG**

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