

Photo by PAT BARRETT/KARAVAN ADVENTURE TREKS



Tourism and the conservation estate—who pays? Government management of private businesses on public land.

Report by ROB GREENAWAY



YOU'RE HOWLING DOWN THE FUNNEL OF A GNARLY rapid. Never been on a raft before. The guide told you about leaping to the downstream side of the boat when it hit the rock, but—hey—who's letting go of the hand-grip? The raft kicks at the bottom of the drop and you're flying through the air like a flea off a hotplate.

A managed experience? Every inch of the way—if your guide was worth their salt. But how do you know? How do you gauge that your guide has the skills to keep you onboard, and if not, then at least alive? And beyond considering your own safety, then the survival of the environment. What code of practice does your adventure operator follow to ensure that you aren't being led into an environmentally unsound activity?

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL TO SEE A TOUR operator claiming membership of, or training by, a chosen association. The commercial rafting fraternity, for example, created the NZ Rafting Guides Association after a few operators of the late 1980s recognised that poor safety practices put the viability of the entire rafting industry at risk. Rafting companies would have relatively few clients if the activity had a reputation for drowning people. Even though the rafting companies were in competition for clients, they had to pull together to create a safe reputation for the industry.

Several other specialist adventure activities—such as bungy jumping—have also developed independent safety guidelines. For the adventure seeker, being shown clear links with a recognised industry association is an ideal means of gaining an assurance of safety.

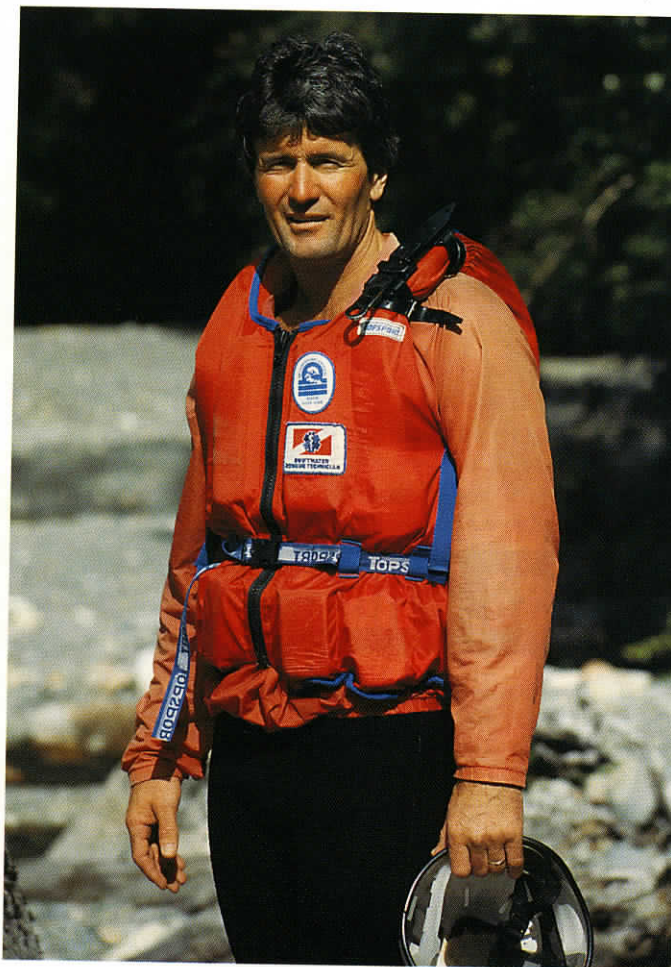
The buyer must be aware, however, that compliance with an association's guidelines is entirely voluntary. Beyond the legal requirements for safety that are set in law, and apply as strongly to manufacturers of aluminium windows as they do to rafting guides, the operator must make a commercially driven or moral decision to belong to an association and to follow their rules.

Conversely—in terms of environmental management—there is one organisation that manages most of the land that adventure operators use, and implements the law that applies to it. The Department of Conservation (DOC) manages just over a third of New Zealand for conservation purposes. This land is where virtually all of the country's big rivers, big mountains, big scenery and big skies lie. If this public land is to be used for commercial purposes the operator must apply for a licence, pay for that licence, and follow the rules that DOC attaches to it.

The Department of Conservation, is basically a bureaucracy designed to fulfil a set of legal responsibilities prescribed by Parliament. In short these are (in order of importance): to conserve for future generations the resources under the Department's care, to foster recreational use of that land (if such use doesn't conflict with conservation values), and to allow tourism.

More than 500 private businesses rely directly on the conservation estate for some or all of their livelihood. It is estimated that over 1500 other operations rely on periph-

eral use of conservation land. To manage the businesses that operate on the conservation estate the Department administers a concessionaire system, much the same as operates in the USA and many other national park systems around the globe. Businesses are charged a fee for resource use and are vetted to ensure that the activities they promote fit comfortably within the overriding aim of conserving natural ecosystems.



Damien O'Connor, Member of Parliament for the West Coast, Labour's associate spokesperson on tourism, and private rafting operator.

DOC spent just under \$37 million in the 1993/94 year on visitor services—about 30 percent of its total budget of \$126.3 million. That percent covers the maintenance and administration of more than 250 campsites, 960 backcountry huts, over 100 picnic areas, 10,000 kilometres of walking track, 40 visitor centres, and numerous roads, jetties and landing strips.

Although DOC's empowering legislation makes it currently illegal to charge for access to the conservation estate, it can charge visitors for the use of some services and facilities. By charging for the use of huts, some information and services, and through concession fees, the Department raised \$11

million last financial year. Approximately \$2.5 million of that income came directly from concession fees, from which \$1.5 million was spent on assessing, granting and managing concession applications and holders.

DOC aims to reduce the gap between income and expenditure. Concession holders are one group being targeted. In the epoch of user pays this does not come as a surprise. However, many tour operators are

concerned that the existing concession system suffers several serious flaws and these will be accentuated if the Department continues to milk the tourism industry for income without reinvesting in the necessary infrastructure and administration to help the environment—and thereby the tourism industry—survive.

According to Rodney Russ, once a wildlife officer with the Wildlife Service (which became part of DOC in 1987) and now owner and operator of Southern Heritage Expeditions, DOC's concentration on money-making has reduced its focus on policing its core responsibility—conservation.

"People come to see the New Zealand that we offer because it has unspoilt wilderness. By the year 2025 I believe we won't have any wilderness left," Rodney warns. "This will be the result of poor budget allocation by government and the Department of Conservation granting concession licences willy nilly."

Southern Heritage Expeditions has been offering wilderness cruises around the coast of Fiordland, New Zealand's sub-Antarctic Islands and Antarctica for the past ten years. The company has won numerous tourism awards,

including the Air New Zealand Ecotourism Award and the American Express New Zealand Tourism Board Award for best natural history attraction. The company was also highly commended in the British Airways Tourism for Tomorrow awards.

Southern Heritage was one of the first to hold concession licences for some of New Zealand's wilderness areas. Russ is concerned that there are now many operators with concessions for the same areas. He worries little or no attention has been given to the combined effect that the operators will have on the environment or on those seeking a wilderness experience.

According to Russ, the issue of over-

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crowding comes to light in places like Fiordland. "The anchorages there are very limited," he says. "We offer our clients a wilderness experience, but on the last trip we spent one night in the same bay as another tourist vessel. The problem was not necessarily their presence but their announcements over a public address system of how their ablution system worked. That noise in a perfectly peaceful fiord is anathema to the wilderness experience, and activities like it are becoming too common. DOC should be managing the behaviour of the concession holders, but they have neither the skills nor the resources to do so due to budgetary constraints."

Russ has since developed his own code of ethics in accordance with those set out by the International Association of Antarctic Tour Operators. He even hired a lawyer to interpret them for wider application to his operations in New Zealand.

"We've got the code of ethics now, but besides follow them ourselves there's nothing we can really do with them," says Russ.

willing to be named in this article. One recounts using a lawyer to see his concession granted within the year he needed it—having applied two years previously. A BBC film team recently visited to produce a conservation-based television programme to find that New Zealand is the only country in the world to have ever required their paying a filming concession fee, and that the rules for filming appeared to differ widely within each conservancy they visited. Filming location managers feared that such inconsistency would encourage outdoor operators to avoid approaching DOC for permission to use conservation land, risking impacts within delicate ecosystems.

Ken Arnold, operator of White Heron Sanctuary Tours at Whataroa on the West Coast, has a very good relationship with DOC and is happy to discuss his only concern.

Arnold's operation offers access to the only New Zealand nesting place of the kotuku—or white heron—which is located within a DOC managed nature reserve. He

for the West Coast, Labour's associate spokesperson on tourism, and private rafting operator, takes strong issue with DOC's management problems, but from a different stance. He believes the Department has a serious inability to manage concessions, but warns that anything he says should not be viewed as 'DOC bashing'.

"Individuals in DOC will see any complaint laid against the Department as a personal affront. This is not a case of accusing DOC of being incompetent," he states. "DOC is a vital Department and needs support to get the right funding to do its job. I've seen plenty of good people with the right attitudes, but no money and no resources to implement what is needed."

"The result is a growing number of people in DOC who see the increasing number of tourists and the potential for impacts, and rather than managing for use they just want to exclude it. There is also a good stock of new idealistic yuppies in the Department with no understanding of commercial reality trying to impose their views on professional

unspoilt wilderness," Russ says. "But by the year

"DOC should be paying more attention to the quality of the operator and their product or service rather than looking for a quantity of operators to raise funds. If they get the quality right then the country is assured of a sustainable resource—beyond the year 2025."

Russ also considers that DOC needs to apply concession policy consistently and equally throughout all its conservancies, and to engender greater government support for funding. "Currently individual personalities play too large a role in the granting and management of concessions, and those personalities can't be separated from the Department's business functions. The different conservancies (regional DOC representative organisations) all operate with different agendas. They aren't sure where they stand legally with commercial land use. Basically the Department is wandering in the wilderness in terms of direction with tourism."

The personality issue looms large enough to make many tour operators who have, or are applying for concession licences, un-

currently has an exclusive concession licence for his business and is assisting with an environmental impact assessment programme to gauge what affect visitors have on the reserve and the birds. His problem lies with the destination of his concession fee.

"If we are paying for the use of a resource, we should really see that money going into the maintenance of that resource," he believes. "Currently ten dollars from each person visiting the colony goes into DOC's coffers—into their consolidated fund. That money is not being spent on protecting what earns that money."

Arnold fears that an unexpected environmental emergency could affect the colony and the Department would not have the funds to correct the problem.

"We should be looking at the viability of supplementary feeding programmes, in case something happens to Okarito Lagoon where the birds find their food. Or putting funds aside for land works to protect the lagoon from erosion."

Damien O'Connor, Member of Parliament

business people whose livelihood—and the country's tourism industry—is dependent on the use of the environment."

O'Connor's hard words surprise the Minister of Conservation, Denis Marshall. He is quite clear about his Department's management of concession money. "The Department," he explains "operates like a private landowner, but with a focus on protecting the environment. However, many operators consider the conservation estate to be a free good—land freely available for them to make a dollar. That is not the case."

"When we do receive an income from land use, we take a broad perspective on how it should be spent—just like any other landowner would. We have our national priorities and we spend our budget on those things that we consider to be nationally important, such as endangered species protection. The aim of taking a concession fee is not to enhance a tour operator's private operation," he states. "It's a matter of our being as efficient as we can with limited resources."

"DOC is no different from any other

2025 I believe we won't have any wilderness left."

government department. We have faced reduced funding, but have done well in some priority areas. Three million dollars was recently granted for possum control and we have gained \$4 million through employment programmes. We will continue to look at our priorities and will also look at opportunities for users to contribute more to the management of the land that they use."

To support that last statement, Marshall produces a new booklet entitled the Visitor Strategy Discussion Document. The document lists DOC's proposed priorities for visitor services and raises options for funding these services. The suggestions range from charging a 'green tax' to all international visitors to New Zealand, to introducing extra charges for certain road end sites, to gaining more funding for conservation from government.

Some conservation groups, such as the Royal Forest and Bird Society, favour the green tax, while others support moving a proportion of government funding from tourism promotion to conservation management. Such debate is the objective of the discussion document, which seeks submissions up to January 16, 1995.

"When I first became Minister," recalls Marshall, "I did detect differences in the management of the conservancies, and a lack of direction in some areas. Conservancies have put a lot of effort into professionalism and are taking positive action to be consistent. We are in a state of evolution in terms of catering for rapidly increasing visitor numbers. The discussion document is an important step in this direction."

In the meantime it appears that concession holders will have to be proactive in the management of the resources that they rely on.

Skippers Canyon, for example, shows potential for private operators to make a major contribution to the management of the conservation estate. The area is used by a range of tourism businesses, including rafters, bungee jumpers, vehicle tours and mountain bike adventurers. Operators have joined the Upper Shotover Management Committee and in association with the Queenstown Lakes District Council, DOC and local residents administer their collective DOC concession fees to pay for the upkeep of the local resources. There are healthy debates running over where the money should be spent—not surprisingly rafters generally want it spent on the river while road users generally want it spent on the road—but by working with the Department of Conservation as it evolves, they appear to be getting their priorities sorted out. One major achievement has been the building of a \$40,000 toilet block.

Such an arrangement would be very attractive for concession operators throughout the country, but it has not been applied widely. On a case by case basis operators who suggest such a scheme will have to discover where the resources they are proposing to use lie within DOC's priority list, and how the Department's regional managers have interpreted the national policy guidelines for concession administration. A 'suck it and see' approach is difficult when trying to manage a business, but when rapid change in resource management systems coincides with a national lack of financial resources for conservation, then it is almost inevitable.

The solution is not an easy one. DOC must evolve into a Department that can effectively juggle commercialism and conservation, central and local governments must recognise the long-term economic, social and environmental benefits of investing in conservation management, and outdoors operators must ensure their commitment to resource management is fair and honest. It's not going to be easy, but the alternatives aren't pretty. ☸

Rob Greenaway has worked for both the Department of Conservation and private outdoor tour operators as a consultant in tourism and recreation development, marketing and management.