

**SUBMISSION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE  
WAITAKERE RANGES VISITOR MANAGEMENT PLAN  
From Combined Residents and Ratepayer Group  
Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area**

1. These submissions are presented by a Combined Group comprising representatives from Ratepayers and Residents Associations across the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area including Piha, Karekare, Laingholm, Titirangi, Henderson Valley, South Titirangi, Oratia, Waiatarua, Swanson and Huia-Cornwallis. This Combined Group has been in existence since 2010 and is in itself a reflection of the strong community of interest that exists within the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area. The consensus of opinion among these groups in developing submissions has been remarkable and we anticipate continuing to work together in future on issues that affect our community of interest.

## 2. Overview

This submission has been prepared against the background of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area Act 2008 and the documents *The West Coast Plan*, the *Regional Parks Management Plan 2010*, and the *Waitakere Ranges Visitor Management Plan Background Report*.

We appreciate the Waitākere Ranges Local Board's desire, through the Plan, to:

- minimise the impacts of visitors on the environment and local communities;
- ensure infrastructure for visitors (e.g. paths, signs, parking, toilets) fits in well with the natural environment and does not detract from the heritage features;
- guide the location of any new visitor attractions and visitor-related economic opportunities;
- not address issues of promotion/marketing of the ranges as a visitor destination.

However, we feel that the successful management of visitor impact on the Heritage Area is dependent to a large extent on how the area and its heritage features are regarded by visitors and this is influenced by information made available to them.

The heritage features of the area are of course the main reason why visitors come. When visitors recognise and respect the heritage features of the area, they are more willing to observe codes to limit damage. Where the differentiation of the area is not understood or respected, it is hard to get compliance with codes that limit damage. Where these heritage features are celebrated and understood, they also inform – and can even inspire – infrastructure design, shape decisions around visitor attractions, economic opportunities, what activities are encouraged, the management of concessions, and so forth.

## 3. The Purpose and Approach of the Plan

The primary purpose of the Plan is to protect the heritage features expressed in the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area Act s7 (B), and we feel this should be brought out expressly in the Plan and the alignment between the Plan and the key purposes of the Act emphasised.

We feel that the full intention of the Act needs to be supported by the Plan in order to succeed, i.e. to:

**(a) recognise the national, regional and local significance of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area; and**

**(b) promote the protection and enhancement of its heritage features for present and future generations.**

We believe that it will be by achieving (a) that the achievement of (b) will be greatly facilitated, and will explain this further in paragraphs below.

If the Plan is faithful to the Act, it should not be seen as a set of constraints and prohibitions. No inherent conflict exists between the Heritage Area and the existence of visitors. The purpose of the Visitor Management Plan is not to constrain people from experiencing the Heritage Area or prohibit any necessary and appropriate infrastructure provision to enable them to do so safely and enjoyably. The Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area Act clearly states that among the Heritage Features (s7 (B)) of the area are:

(g) the opportunities that the area provides for wilderness experiences, recreation, and relaxation in close proximity to metropolitan Auckland

(m) the Waitākere Ranges Regional Park and its importance as an accessible public place with significant natural, historical, cultural, and recreational resources.

For the plan to achieve its purpose, we believe that emphasis needs to be given in the plan to:

- Recognising - and encouraging recognition and promotion of the significance and heritage features of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area, its distinctiveness and worth nationally and regionally, and as an international heritage asset, and its value to current and future generations;
- 'Institutionalising' the recognition, appreciation and celebration of these heritage features by Council departments and CCOs, businesses and residents, in the culture and communities of the Heritage Area itself, and by communicating this recognition to visitors and encouraging and 'norming' a shared sense of kaitiakitanga.
- Identifying and working with robust indicators and measures of environmental and community health in the WRHA, celebrating progress against these in communications with stakeholders and applying learnings in planning reviews. Monitoring is essential in order to recognise, quantify and manage change.

**4. What the Plan needs to factor in:**

**a. To 'recognise the national, regional and local significance of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area', it is essential to understand it properly.**

- It is essential that understanding of this 'asset' is continually and vigorously developed, along with an understanding of the indicators that constitute its health or decline. Without this understanding, it is not possible either to monitor its health (since there is no baseline), or take appropriate decisions around its use.
- Both initial and on-going assessment are essential: the nature and extent of its current features and strengths must be understood, and also knowledge clarified on what constitutes risk, and the identification of vulnerabilities and threats, using good science. Biodiversity and the health of the forest are key features to monitor in line with the park's status as a Class 1 Conservation Park in the Regional Parks Management Plan.
- Research and assessment must not only be carried out on the natural heritage features, but on cultural heritage. Māori and other archaeological heritage sites in the area are in great need of cataloguing, and many are not even identified.
- It is essential that on-going scientific research, evaluation and monitoring of the area be maintained and resourced for the future if visitor management is to be effective.
- Through science again, it is important to clarify the heritage features that are there. For example, is kauri just 'nice to have', an 'amenity', or 'heritage' icon? What is its

value to forest, landforms, other flora and fauna, and what is the cost of its loss to the health of the Heritage Area and our culture? Clarity makes planning decisions much easier and better propelled. Where the significance of kauri dieback is uncertain, then response will be uncertain.

- Data should be used constructively, for example in:
  - deploying resources to respond to trends and to 'police' protections in the critical 6 – 8 weeks of the year, using attendants, rangers, coordinators where required.
  - Evaluating the impact of interventions: what worked? What didn't work?
- It is important to include the whole of the WRHA in this understanding, to evaluate what constitutes 'health', and how this is impacted by visitor patterns, behaviour, needs and issues: The Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area is not just the Regional Park, but the cultural, social and economic elements of the community, as well its local parks, beaches and built areas. The significant heritage features of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area include:
  - ‘(i) the individual identity and character of the coastal villages and their distinctive scale, containment, intensity, and amenity; and
  - (ii) the distinctive harmony, pleasantness, and coherence of the low-density residential and urban areas’.
- We believe that without some substantial initial evaluation, and on-going follow up, the Plan cannot support these objectives of the Act (s8):
  - ‘(b) to ensure that impacts on the area as a whole are considered when decisions are made affecting any part of it:
  - (c) to adopt the following approach when considering decisions that threaten serious or irreversible damage to a heritage feature:
    - (i) carefully consider the risks and uncertainties associated with any particular course of action; and
    - (ii) take into account the best information available; and
    - (iii) endeavour to protect the heritage feature’

**b. Recognition requires 'institutionalised' acknowledgement and respect, in practice and culture, and through promotion to shape visitor response and behaviour:**

- The recognition of the heritage features / values of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area must be 'ratified' within Council and CCOs (e.g. AT and ATEED) in policy and procedure, and aligned in outcomes from all providers and 'stewards' in the area.
- It must be systematically conveyed to all staff and decision-takers, so that decisions that impact the area are aligned. It must be clearly communicated that activity within the Heritage Area is 'flagged for specific treatment', and why this is the case.
- This recognition and appreciation must be embodied by any organisations bringing visitors to the area, both in their practices and in the information they provide to their customers.
- It must be demonstrated in all infrastructure decisions and design, and in how concessions are managed, so that parameters around what is appropriate and what is not appropriate are more clearly evident, choices become more 'self-generated', and parameters become norms.
- This recognition needs to be promoted so as to shape respectful visitor behaviour that minimises damage to the WRHA, e.g. litter, dogs, fishing gear, use of trails, use

of vehicles, responses to the spread of PTA. It needs to be embodied in all promotions, through businesses (particularly tourist-related) working in the WRHA, as well as recreation organisers, fishing and sporting clubs, etc.

- The systematic 'enshrinement' of the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area as a special area creates a culture of recognition and respect (and peer pressure) which can influence visitor responses and behaviours as well as those of providers.
- It is very important that the physical 'gateways' to the area are clearly and substantially heralded by appropriate gateway design including prominent signs which create a sense of threshold. The signage should not resemble any kind of traffic management sign, but be distinctive and resonant with the area and its heritage features and culture. The signs should convey a message that the traveller is entering a different and special area, which is worthy of celebration and safeguarding. There should be a short legend on the sign, which evokes respect and conveys the value of stewardship.
- In general, the messaging in relation to the heritage features of the Heritage Area, its worth and its protection need to be carefully designed and actively promoted to encourage appropriate behaviours.

**c. Recognition confers prestige and priority and influences investment.**

- The more the WRHA is publicly valued for its special nature, the more a sense of prestige and high worth attaches to the area in the minds of Aucklanders. Alignment of activity to reflect this recognition can become a prestige factor for economic activities in the area, and for the reputation of local government in its investment choices.
- All messaging in relation to the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area needs to convey this sense of prestige, and differentiate the area and the activities that take place within it.
- The clear identification of the WRHA as a special natural environment of high worth creates something worthwhile to reflect through design and through general conduct. For example, good eco-friendly building and environmentally friendly behaviours become identified with the Waitakere Ranges Heritage Area. They are seen as 'the right thing', 'what people want', and not a matter of 'irksome compliance'.
- When the significance of the area is properly recognised, resources and decisions required to sustain the heritage features of the area are more likely to be prioritised in Council and through CCOs.

**d. Protection (and enhancement) must be based on defined targets and commitments which are dynamic – and engaging**

- Goals related to the restriction of loss *per se* tend not to be very motivating. In the use of goals for protection vis-à-vis visitor impact, measures and targets need to be more dynamic and engaging.
- What is the on-going 'profit and loss' account, in relation to visitor management and the health of the WHRA? What has been enhanced and what has been degraded? We believe that this must be the key question in all future reporting against the Visitor Management Plan.
- In establishing 'profit and loss', the value(s) of the asset must be viewed in the same way as any other value:
  - If the value of this 'asset' is defined and recognised, how much can the value be enhanced? How can it be enhanced?

- What is the 'budget'? What level of 'cost' (loss of value) is allowable? What signifies an unacceptable variance? Where does value need to be added? This is very much a 'business' approach, but it applies well in this scenario.
- What are the key indicators of the health of heritage features, and signals of threat to health? How regularly must these be reported? A clear monitoring and reporting regime must be adequately resourced, developed and implemented.
- 'Performance' must be managed by tracking outcomes: what is working?
- 'Performance' must be reported publicly, and learnings must be applied in order to improve performance. Successes can be shared across the region and best practices established.
- When the Waitākere Ranges Heritage Area is properly valued, success in relation to the health of the area can be celebrated and successes modelled.

## **5. Solutions and approaches to management must endeavour to meet people's needs, not just to focus on deterrents**

We believe that some questions around visitor management need to be approached in a more integrated way around the region.

- It is important to avoid blanket approaches, but to foster creative and enriching solutions.
- For example, the increased numbers of people exercising their dogs at Kakamatua Beach are coming from all over the region. This is not because people necessarily want to drive long distances to the Waitākere Ranges, but because they want a place to let their dog off the leash, and are driving from Howick in order to do so. This is clearly not desirable.
- Central information services – web pages, and certainly apps – need to be developed to inform people in which scenic areas they can run their dog in the Auckland region, where they can ride and where they can trail bike or mountain bike, what parking or tidal restrictions apply, and so forth. Local Boards across the region need to be advocated to identify areas for these activities to be included in these apps.
- Within the WRHA, certainly the Plan needs to be 'market led' insofar as the 'nodes' have been chosen by visitors because of their scenic value, and damage to these nodes needs to be mitigated because people want to do particular activities there. However, the Plan can also 'lead the market' by identifying resilient areas (that are also scenic) where desired activities can take place. Which scenic environments in the WRHA have the carrying capacity / resiliency for large events? Sporting events? (E.g. Muriwai / Woodhill Forest area as an alternative to the sensitive bush areas).

## **6. The Role of the Waitakere Ranges Local Board**

We feel that it is very important that the Local Board defines its role in relation to the Plan.

- The Board is the primary monitor of the Plan, and whether targets are being achieved.
- It must also hold Council and CCOs to account in their 'ratification' of the Plan elements in policy and procedure.
- There need to be sufficient resources available to enable this.
- It needs 'to keep the right things on the agenda' to enable this.
- The Board can add value across the board in the implementation of the Plan

- It can send a specific set of messages promoting the heritage features of the WRHA and its significance as a 'culture' of kaitiakitanga.
- It can promote cross-sector responses, engaging local government bodies, businesses and business organisations, educational institutions, the public and civil society in this 'duty of care' messaging.
- It can engage residents, local stakeholders, voluntary organisations, schools, etc. in supportive activity, particularly monitoring.
- It can publish information on its website and through social media and other avenues, reporting triumphs (and any tragedies) in relation to the quality of visitor experience and the levels of protection and enhancement achieved.
- Here, it must make known the details of Council's accountability for the protection and enhancement of the WRHA heritage features; the public need to know what Council has promised.
- It can liaise with other local government bodies to share learnings and successful approaches.

## **7. The West Coast Plan**

- We would like to advocate strongly for the West Coast Plan to be adopted as a foundation document to guide all planning in the WRHA. This plan established a coherent vision for the Heritage Area, and the implementation of that vision and stewardship of its related values and was based on extensive consultation over a prolonged period with good community buy-in.
- This plan, in our view, still accurately mirrors the desires and aspirations of residents. However, it is also fully inclusive of visitors ('Ensure everyone is able to experience and enjoy the West Coast and Waitakere Ranges') and all stakeholders, and involves all local and national agencies and authorities in its achievement.
- The targets of the West Coast plan are realistic and comprehensive, and the means to achieve them are robust. It is specific about infrastructure, generally emphasising suitability rather than prohibition; it is highly supportive of quality of experience and amenity for residents and visitors, and supports local economies.
- The West Coast Plan is unique in that it promotes a strongly cooperative approach. It is not prescriptive, but its guiding principles frame a very positive stance both on development and on protection. It recognises the heritage features of the area clearly, and engages all stakeholders in the promotion and safeguarding of those heritage features.

## **8. Other comments**

- There are elements of the infrastructure of the Heritage Area communities which are not adequately covered in the Background Report, but which are of huge significance to the environment and are heavily impacted by visitor numbers. Sewage treatment and pollution is one. Water supply, particularly in summer is another. Given the non-reticulated status of many of the area's villages, the ability to expand this infrastructure to cope with increased numbers is limited. This is one of the factors, like car parking, that will limit the ability of some locations to absorb significant increases in visitors. This should be recognised and clearly stated in the Plan.
- We would like the Plan to recognise that there is a balance required between the economic benefits provided by visitors to those running businesses that directly benefit from them, and the negative effect of visitors on the wellbeing of those who

live in the Heritage Area for the peace, quiet, and wilderness values. The Background Report clearly articulates the concern of both locals and visitors which has been expressed over many years and via many consultation opportunities, that commercialisation of the Regional Park is undesirable and will damage the heritage features that people come to see.

- We would not like to see the range of activities permitted in the Regional Park, expanded to include those currently prohibited, such as mountain biking, horse riding and motorised sports. If such activities are located in the Foothills adjacent to the Regional Park, we are concerned that there could be overspill from such activities into the parkland itself. To avoid this, there should be a significant buffer zone between the location of any such activities and the boundary of the Regional Park to avoid this.
- We are concerned at ATEED's proposed promotion of the Waitakere Ranges and the inaccurate premise on which it is based, e.g. P18 of the Background Report: *" . . . many walking trails, including the Hillary Trail . . . which are not well used either by locals or visitors . . ."* and the proposal to develop attractors such as "a canopy walk".

The Background Report states clearly that most visitors to the Waitakere Ranges Regional Park come to walk, tramp, swim, surf and picnic - all low impact activities - and that 95% of visitors have a high or very high level of satisfaction with their visit. This suggests that they do not need more "attractors" in order to better enjoy their experience and that they are coming to do activities that are already provided by the minimal facilities currently existing. Camping sites and beds in the Heritage Area are stated as being used well below their current capacity, which implies that new developments to cater for increased numbers of visitors are not required.

- One of the main impacts appears to be car parking. The provision of some form of public transport service to popular sites such as Piha, Cascades and Arataki – and even Wainamu, Te Henga and Karekare – would negate the need to develop new car parks and would enable visitors without access to a car to visit more easily.

Low impact small buses (to cope with the winding roads) during peak times should be considered and costed against the wear and tear on roads and the need to upgrade current car parking in future. Providing such transport would also play a role in directing visitors more easily to the sites better able to cope with large numbers and in protecting more sensitive locations. For example, specific visitor bus services and the promotion of the use of trains and bicycles would reduce parking pressure around the entrances to the Twin Streams walkway, and it would be better to plan for this than react to the problem when it arises by putting in car parks.

- Tramping is popular but the Background Report suggests more loop walks should be developed to encourage young and old to enjoy the bush more easily. Provision of a bus service to link up the ends of tracks would have the same effect as loop walks, and providing more loops around busy sites such as Arataki may take the pressure off other sites that are more sensitive.
- To encourage more ethnic diversity among visitors to the Regional Park, more permanent BBQ facilities should be considered in locations that can accommodate these without damaging heritage features.
- We feel the impact of boating activities on Manukau Harbour communities has not been adequately considered. The Little Huia boat ramp attracts significant numbers of trailer boats and Cornwallis Wharf is a very popular site for kayakers to launch.

These activities have increased significantly in recent years and will continue to do so.

- The Background Report states that the number of concessionaires in 2012 actually totalled 54 but gives no indication of the total number of participants for these. Therefore the number of people participating in commercial discretionary activity in the Regional Park is significantly underestimated.
- Enforcement of bylaws and regulations appears to be a consistent theme for effective management of impacts. It should be noted that Rangers (by their own admission) do not consider themselves to be dog control officers. Since dogs are one of the major subjects of conflict that arise in the area, enforcement needs to be highlighted and adequately resourced in the Plan.
- It is interesting to note that shade and trees are identified as something that visitors would like to see more of. Trees provide many services such as stormwater treatment, soil and slope stabilisation, habitat and privacy in addition to shade. A planting programme for large specimen trees around existing visitor facilities (benches, picnic tables etc) where they do not currently exist should be considered.
- The lack of information regarding use and impacts in Local Parks compared to the Regional Park suggests that similar policies and procedures being applied to Regional Parks would be of benefit to Local Parks. In particular, it would be of huge benefit to extend the management of Kauri Dieback Disease to Local Parks in the Heritage Area. In Titirangi, the disease is taking a terrible toll; many of the local tracks do not have trigene stations and compliance with using those that exist is low. Public education, especially of locals, is critical to improving compliance with understanding. We fully support the closure of tracks to protect healthy kauri and would advocate for this to be more widely used.
- Weed control and spread throughout the Heritage Area is a huge issue and a great threat to the heritage features. Visitors do spread weeds, bikes being a particular issue, and this is of concern particularly in the Foothills. Education regarding weeds and support for locals removing them on private land should be part of the Plan.
- It is good to see the significant role of volunteers recognised in the Background Report. Adoption of a Volunteer Charter by Council would be a positive addition to the Plan. Perhaps the Waitākere Ranges Local Board could champion this approach for the Heritage Area and encourage its spread throughout the rest of the region.
- We strongly support the statement made in the Background Report that "*site hardening could create a vicious cycle whereby more facilities encourage more visitors, so more facilities are required*". This is a real concern and should be clearly stated as a risk in the Plan.
- We also strongly support the policy of Council not to actively promote the Heritage Area as a destination for overseas tourists "*to help protect the valued qualities of the Ranges*". We note that the Background Report's Conclusions state that "*these management policies are working*". We would like the Plan to recommend strongly the continuation of this approach.