



Assessing the Impacts of a New Cycle Trail: A Fieldnote

Mike Mackay, Senior Social Scientist, AgResearch
Nick Taylor, Principal Partner, Nick Taylor and Associates

Introduction

In this note we consider the need for social impact assessment that focuses on sustainability outcomes of tourist trails across *multiple* dimensions, and in an *integrated* manner, to better inform the planning, implementation and management of trails and tourism more generally in rural regions (as per the recommendations of Reis and Jellum, 2012 and 2014). The note arises from work conducted under the auspices of New Zealand's Building Better Homes Towns and Cities National Science Challenge (*Mackay et al., 2018*). The study focused on the Alps to Ocean (A2O) cycle-trail and associated tourism initiatives, and how they are working together to improve the economic, social and environmental performance of settlements in the Waitaki Valley (South Island, New Zealand). The work was not part of the planning process for the trail, but was instead undertaken as research that followed through key aspects of the SIA process: scoping, building a baseline, assessment and evaluation.

The A2O

The A2O is a 300km, mostly off-road, cycle trail that descends from the base of Aoraki Mt Cook in the national park, through several small settlements located in the Waitaki Valley, before reaching the town of Oamaru (population 13,950) on the Pacific coast. It is still in development, both in terms of the trail itself, and the businesses and infrastructure along its path. The trail crosses mountain landscapes, alpine lakes, hydro-electricity canals, a large braided-river system and several geological features.

The A2O is one arm of the government-backed Nga Haerenga/NZ Cycle Trail, an extensive and interconnected network of publicly accessible on and off-road bike trails, some newly built, others pre-existing but now formally linked into the national network (*Kennett, 2013*). A key characteristic of the Nga Haerenga/NZ Cycle Trail projects is their emphasis on partnerships between central government, territorial authorities and local communities, in their planning, co-funding and development.

The A2O originated in the efforts of an enthusiastic local group concerned to develop a project with positive impacts on small towns along the trail, and the larger town of Oamaru. Positive outcomes are expected for local business and employment, along with an enhanced recreational environment and heritage protection. While the A2O began as a local initiative, it importantly received funding from central government through the Nga Haerenga initiative (*Bell, 2018; Wilson, 2016*) and strength from the involvement of Waitaki District Council in

project management and dealing with local issues, such as property access over private farm land.

Social Impacts

The starting point for the assessment was to map and characterise the range of regeneration initiatives in the Waitaki District and the periods over which they developed (scoping and baseline), and then to examine in greater detail the A2O as a case of a regional cycle trail. Key stakeholders were identified in the scoping analysis and their input helped the assessment of the effects of the trail, through the central themes of better, more integrated planning and assessment of regeneration initiatives – such as the A2O – and more sustainable development of tourism in the longer term. Data collection used mixed methods, including in-depth interviews and participant observation. Secondary, qualitative data included historical records, documentary research, reports, studies, media coverage, census data, economic and employment data, and GIS maps.

The assessment found that the A2O is helping to diversify and revitalise the District's economy and small towns along the way. This has happened in four key ways.

(1) A direct positive effect of trail-related expenditure, which has boosted the revenue of many tourist service providers.

Some stakeholders noted that the challenge is to ensure tourists and tourism revenue are dispersed evenly through the District to ensure the *whole* trail is a success, rather than parts of it, as was then the case. Furthermore, many stakeholders recognised that burgeoning visitor numbers combined with rapid growth in bikers on the trail have implications for the capacity of local infrastructure, the natural environment and heritage resources. Thus, the dispersal of tourists along the whole trail was viewed as one key way to alleviate tourist pressure at key sites. Community leaders recognised that burgeoning visitor numbers will increase the popularity of the A2O and test the capacity of local infrastructure and the environment, including heritage resources, calling for the monitoring of tourism and its impacts.

(2) A positive effect of trail-related investment in heritage buildings.

The A2O has prompted some locals (including farmers), often with help from outside investors, to purchase and convert old rural buildings (e.g., churches, woolsheds, old rail stations, disused pubs) into accommodation, agri-tourism attractions, bike shops and/or hospitality services (such as cafes) for visiting cyclists. The A2O is thus contributing in a very significant way to the conservation of built rural heritage across the region, a process that has happened in less than five years along the trail. Rapid change, however, has tested the adaptive capacity of communities and raises the likelihood of host resistance to further tourism developments, as residents sense a loss of place, potentially undermining the localised relationships necessary to initial development of the A2O.

(3) A much-needed economic boost for some small rural towns and the impetus for local entrepreneurial experimentation in tourism.

This is particularly evident in the small neighbouring villages of Duntroon and Kurow, where

old buildings have been, or are in the process of being repurposed to accommodate new enterprises that serve cycle tourists. Another particularly interesting example is the experience of the village of Otematata, a small rural community (population 186) situated near the mid-point of the trail. In the late 1950s, this was a hub for workers and their families who were constructing two hydro-electricity dams – the town's population peaked at around 4,000 people in the 1960s. Since then the town's population and economy has dwindled. The residents expect that the trail will diversify and revitalise their local economy and pointed to examples of new local business activity that was prompted by it (*Mackay, Wilson & Taylor, 2015*).

(4) Local tensions about the best ways to promote the area and sites to visitors in a cohesive way.

In addition to the A2O, the region is the site of a geopark, and home to Steam Punk and Victorian Heritage communities, who host numerous festivals and events. Multiple naming of areas, festivals and events reflects the ad hoc nature of these initiatives over time, each with leadership, energy and local organisation. This multifaceted approach has served to capture and maximise a diverse base of social entrepreneurship, organisational capacity and volunteerism (*Mackay, Taylor & Perkins, 2018*). On the other hand, in the longer term, and for larger-scale initiatives such as the A2O, a common approach is needed for promotion with a consistent marketing message. To sustain multiple local efforts, care is needed to balance enterprise, site and event promotion with any wider branding in the district, so that enterprises and individuals are not discouraged. The possibility arises for the A2O to act as an integrating mechanism for planning within the valley as it links several communities, a range of business initiatives, and local conservation and heritage projects. The integrative potential of the trail, used effectively, could see communities adopt a common approach to sustainable tourism management and enhanced social wellbeing.

Summing-up

The assessment shows that (with caveats) the A2O is helping to diversify and revitalise the local economy beyond cycles of economic development and activity typical of resource-based communities (Taylor, Fitzgerald & McClintock, 2001). Stakeholders recognise positive effects and sustainable futures depend on their ability to scale up and integrate multiple tourist initiatives and opportunities. Much more is needed in planning and implementing new tourist trails, such as the A2O, in a sustainable way. A narrow focus on increasing visitor numbers, nights and expenditure, as in the current visitor strategy (Gaskill, Elliot and Currie n.d.), is unlikely to meet sustainability objectives. To underpin sustainable tourism development, ongoing impact assessment, with monitoring, needs to cover all aspects of Waitaki tourism: bio-physical environment, cultural, heritage, economic and social.

SIA for tourism initiatives such as cycle trails will be most effective when undertaken within a sustainable planning framework to ensure the results are integrated into future strategic plans, natural resource plans, and infrastructure investment by local government. Key gaps faced by SIA teams will include information on visitor satisfaction and the social carrying capacity of sites, employment and skills. These gaps present opportunities for applied social research, including academic scholarship, to provide the in-depth analysis that SIA practitioners can draw on for future assessments of trails.

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