

CHANGING GEAR: THE IMPACTS OF TOURIST ACTIVITY AROUND A NEW CYCLE TRAIL

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INTRODUCTION

- Cycle trails are a feature of many regional tourism destinations.
- Research shows that tourist trail-related activity can:
 - ✓ Bolster the economies of small towns
 - ✓ Provide new business opportunities
 - ✓ Widen employment choices for residents
 - ✓ Provide new recreational opportunities for locals
 - ✓ Spur redevelopment of underutilised sites and (heritage) buildings
 - ✓ Provide the impetus for new environmental restoration projects
 - ✓ Offer an alternative (low-emission) travel experience
 - ✓ Disperse tourists within a region
 - ✓ Link visitors to a region’s people, places and products
- Our research is part of New Zealand’s Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities National Science Challenge.
- It has considered the impacts of tourist activity around a new cycle trail - the Alps to Ocean (A2O), located in the Waitaki Valley of New Zealand’s South Island.
- The A2O is one arm of the government-backed Nga Haerenga/New Zealand Cycle Trail (an expanding national network of on and off-road bike trails).
- In the Waitaki Valley it is a partnership between central and local government and community trusts to support development by attracting visitors, creating jobs and revitalising rural towns.
- The A2O starts in the upper reaches of the Valley at Aoraki Mount Cook and finishes in the settlement of Oamaru, on the Pacific Coast.

METHODS

- Our research asked: how is the A2O improving the economic, social and environmental performance of Waitaki settlements, and what are the impacts?
- Key stakeholders were identified in the scoping analysis and helped to examine the effects of the trail and sustainable development opportunities.
- To assess the impacts of the A2O we used:
 - ✓ 30+ in-depth interviews and participant observation
 - ✓ Historical records, documentary research, reports and media coverage
 - ✓ Census, economic and employment data

THE SETTING: WAITAKI VALLEY

- The location of the A2O is the Waitaki Valley of New Zealand’s South Island. Here, land-uses have diversified considerably over the last sixty years, from mainly extensive dryland sheep farming to a multi-functional combination, including:
 - ✓ Intensive irrigated (dairy) farming
 - ✓ Hydro-electricity generation
 - ✓ Viticulture
 - ✓ Salmon farming
 - ✓ Heritage conservation
 - ✓ Environmental restoration and protection
 - ✓ Domestic and commercial outdoor recreation
 - ✓ Domestic and international tourism (including the A2O cycle trail)



KEY EFFECTS OF TRAIL-RELATED ACTIVITY ON LOCAL ECONOMY AND COMMUNITIES

- 1 Trail stakeholders noted the direct positive effect of trail-related expenditure, which has boosted the revenue of many tourist service providers. Caveat: Some stakeholders noted that the challenge now was to ensure tourists and tourism revenue was dispersed more evenly through the Valley to ensure all communities benefit.
- 2 Trail stakeholders noted the positive effect of trail-related investment in new building activity and property development – including the adaptive repurposing of old rural buildings – over the last 10 years. Caveat: Some stakeholders were concerned that rapid trail-related changes would test the adaptive capacity of communities and raise the likelihood of host resistance to further tourism developments, potentially undermining localized relationships that underpinned the trail.
- 3 Trail stakeholders reported that the trail was providing the impetus for local entrepreneurial experimentation in tourism, especially agri-tourism. Caveat: Entrepreneurial activity was most obviously occurring in towns and on farms directly adjacent to the trail. Stakeholders noted the importance of connecting towns and sites that were off the beaten track, to ensure they also had opportunities for business development.
- 4 Trail Stakeholders reported that the A2O was effective in connecting tourists to a wide and diversifying suite of regional attractions and activities. Caveat: Some stakeholders noted that an integrated approach was needed for regional promotion, as the region is also the site of a geopark, nature conservation attractions, and home for the NZ Steam Punk and Victorian Heritage communities, who host numerous festivals and events. The A2O is a potential integrating mechanism for regional promotion as it links communities, businesses transport, cafes and accommodation providers, and local conservation and heritage projects.



CONCLUDING COMMENTS

- Our research shows that the A2O is helping to diversify and revitalise the local economy beyond cycles of economic development and activity.
- Stakeholders recognise sustainable futures depend on the ability of the affected area to scale up and integrate multiple tourist initiatives and opportunities – but that this needs strategic thinking to ensure benefits are shared across all communities.
- Planning and implementing new tourist trails in a sustainable way requires thinking beyond a narrow focus on increasing visitor numbers, nights and expenditure.
- Ongoing impact assessment, with monitoring, has to move up a gear and cover all aspects of tourism: bio-physical environment, cultural, heritage, economic and social effects.
- A sustainable planning framework must ensure impact assessment is integrated into natural resource plans and decisions, and infrastructure investment.