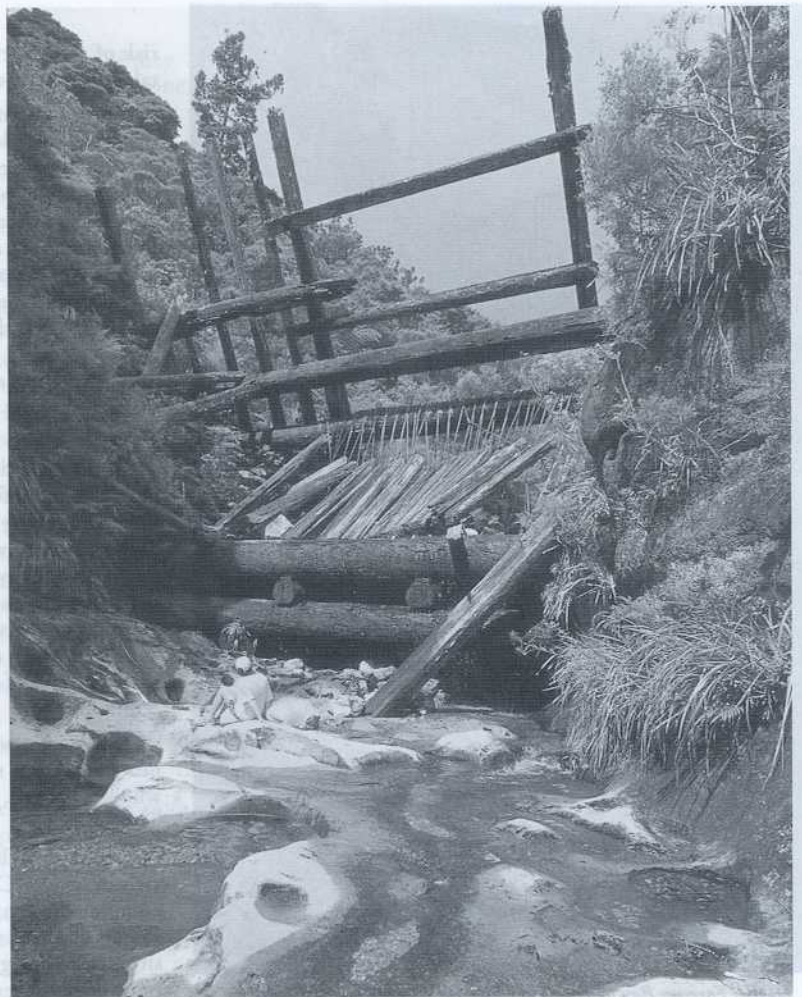


DOC's management of visitor facilities

The Department of Conservation is launching a rationalisation programme for its front and backcountry structures. The department believes it has sufficient information to ensure the decisions it makes will keep most of us happy most of the time.

Rob Greenaway



Kauri dam in Great Barrier Island Forest Park

The Department of Conservation has been working very hard this year to ensure New Zealand has a clear understanding of its strategy for the management of its built structures.

If you have been reading any of the publications issued by DOC, and those appearing in the media, you will be familiar with the following figures. DOC manages 15,400 structures on 3,700 visitor sites, at a cost of \$53 million annually. Once information centres are removed from the balance sheet, we're left with a \$46 million annual budget for tracks, huts, signs, bridges and all those facilities we used to take for granted in the front and backcountry.

If DOC needed to replace all those assets in one hit, the bill would be approximately \$242 million.

DOC has completed its first round of structural tests for 3000 of those assets and is now starting the task of implementing a national strategy that will see priorities set for the retention, development and, in some cases, closure of what it calls 'visitor facilities'. You will recall Cave Creek's influence on this process.

In case you were wondering, this is not an article about whether DOC is underfunded. It surprises me that the media continues to suggest DOC's budget is a beleaguered poorer cousin to Health, when there has never been a public

suggestion by any agency about how much money could be spent to achieve a defined conservation wish-list.

Suggestions have been made, for example, that international tourist contributions to GST should be added to the Conservation budget, since many visitors are attracted to New Zealand because of its environmental qualities, and they must have an impact. The questions remain: how much money is needed, where would you spend it, and to what benefit?

No help at all

The answers commentators have generally given in the past are, respectively: more, everywhere, and for the public good - which is of no help at all.

The Department is seeking to provide the information that will allow a more measured means of setting expenditure priorities. Mike Edginton, a senior conservation officer, has been leading the charge.

"The department certainly could spend more money to provide more facilities in the backcountry," he says. "But we are far better off deciding which facilities provide a strategic advantage in terms of the department's visitor and conservation objectives, and how can we ensure those facilities are provided at the right standards and in the right locations."

It has taken some considerable investment by DOC to identify those standards,

and to assess just what facilities are on the books. This is largely a result of the department's history. "Since DOC's asset base was contributed by two pre-existing agencies - the Forest Service and Lands and Survey - it inherited a large number of structures of varying standards and design," says Edginton.

"While many of those structures might have been appropriate to a local requirement, they may not have represented the most effective allocation of resources when you consider national strategies."

The process of asset management that DOC is undertaking replicates that being carried out by all local authorities in New Zealand. After the process of local government reform was completed in the late 1980s, new city and district councils with expanded boundaries found themselves with a greatly increased asset base.

In late 1996 - still with Cave Creek in mind - the Local Government Act was amended to force local authorities to complete long-term financial strategies that would illustrate how each authority intends to maintain all its assets, and how it intends to fund its activities over a ten year period, at the minimum. The amendment also enshrines in statute the concept of 'beneficiary pays'.

As a user of the outdoors, you might therefore encounter some changes in 'resource allocation' in the backcountry,



DOC's Forestry Bay wharf in Port Fitzroy, Great Barrier Island – a watering point for visiting yachties

the frontcountry, and just down the street at your local park.

DOC and the local authorities are coming from the same angle by asking: what assets do we administer, what condition are they in, do they perform a strategic function, how much will it cost to maintain them, and where will that money come from?

The big difference between local authorities and DOC is that city, district and regional councils can fund their activities out of such things as rates, user charges and developer levies, and so the cost impacts of a revised funding policy will be felt, and decided, locally.

Big picture

DOC's income is from user charges (such as huts fees and commercial concessions) and, mostly, from central government. The department's challenge is to ensure that resource allocation decisions are both locally relevant and compliant with the 'big picture'. DOC appears to be fully aware of this.

DOC completed an inventory of its facilities in 1996. The 15,400 facilities were prioritised for inspection by engineers according to such considerations as height, length and type of structure. In addition the number of people who use the structure, and their assumed level of skill, as well as the potential engineering

risk of the structure were taken into account.

Three thousand structures were selected and have now been inspected by professional engineers to determine their condition, and to identify what maintenance is required to meet DOC's construction and maintenance standards. Those 4500 structures of medium priority are now being assessed.

In the meantime, DOC has sufficient information to begin making long-term decisions about which of the 3000 priority structures offer a 'strategic advantage', and what will happen to them as they reach the end of their economic life.

This will inevitably mean that some structures will be removed. But which ones?

Remember those 3,700 visitor sites? DOC has completed a ranking exercise to assess each site's relative significance. Four criteria were used and each site was scored from a total pool of 28 points, made up of:

- current visitor numbers (maximum score of 10 points);
- expected visitor numbers in the future (3 points);
- importance as a recreational and educational experience (9 points);
- and potential to increase people's appreciation of New Zealand's natural and historic heritage (6 points).

Four hundred and fifty-three sites gained scores of more than 16, and, in general these sites will have priority for funding.

To ensure that backcountry sites, with low visitor numbers, did not miss out on their slice of the pie, backcountry visitors were weighted over their frontcountry compatriots by a factor of 20 to 1. That means that one visit by a backcountry trapper to a remote site is considered to be as significant as 20 visits by picnickers to a road-end reserve.

Structures on low ranking sites that have reached the end of their economic life will have a low chance of being replaced.

"If a structure on a site that has a low ranking does not meet the department's standards or is unsafe and is not required," says Edginton, "then we will apply to the local authority for the necessary building consent and remove it.

However, if the site is ranked low and the structure has some local importance then we will discuss with the local community what the options are. Structures on sites which score less than six, and which do not meet the department's standards, will most likely be removed unless there is a clear safety or environmental reason for them to be replaced.

"We are faced with a constant and dynamic process of estimating what is strategically appropriate in terms of resource allocation," he says. "Interests wax and wane. At the moment there is an expectation that high use huts will be of a high quality. For example, cooking facilities are now desired. We have been moving resources in that direction, but our resources are limited and this level of provision may have to change. Our funding decisions have to reflect the fact that there is a limit to what can be spent and that all resources must be targeted to give the greatest benefit, and to be safe."

To ensure the application of consistent standards to the design and maintenance

Management options to be investigated

The Department of Conservation will investigate possible management options for Mt Cook Village to replace the existing in house administration.

At present a team of four DOC staff work as a mini local authority responsible for administering and planning maintenance and upgrading of the town's essential services. Funding comes from rates levied on all buildings in the village.

While most services such as rubbish collection, road and track maintenance water reticulation and sewerage disposal are already handled by outside contractors, Area manager Bob Dickson says other changes will be looked at to see if further efficiency improvements and cost reductions can be achieved.

"Contracting out all functions including administration is a possibility and we will also investigate the merits of setting up a stand alone business unit."

Despite possible changes in how the village is administered, Dickson says the department has no plans to withdraw from running the national park visitor centre.

"The visitor centre is very strategic for us as it is the focal point for the 250,000 people who visit the park each year. We will continue to actively manage the centre."

Without a hands on management role, the department would not be able to properly fulfill their advocacy role nor their search and rescue functions, says Dickson.

"The visitor centre is the first port of call for people in distress and only DOC provides a professional search and rescue service in the park."

— by Richard Worrall

of visitor facilities, DOC has developed a document titled, The Department's Means of Compliance with the Building Act for Outdoor Visitor Structures. The standards in the document are not yet approved by the Building Industry Association, but it is hoped that this will be achieved shortly. All local authorities, when assessing an application for a structure on land administered by DOC, will then accept the standard as meeting building code requirements.

This is important since DOC, and its consultant engineers, have developed a range of design load standards which assume that the design requirements for a structure will vary depending upon the number and type of visitors that use it.

For example, it is a little silly to require handrails on a one metre high backcountry structure that can be only be reached after three days' clambering over a series of rugged cols and couloirs. If you didn't fall off the mountain, then you are unlikely to fall off a low footbridge. This will clearly differ for the building standards for a bridge near a carpark.

According to Edginton, every structure built or modified henceforth will have an engineering design report and a statement of compliance with the Building Act. "It will be up to the local authority to make the final decision as to whether it

complies," he says. "If they agree, the work will be done, if not the structure will be redesigned."

As the amount of information about structures and visitor sites grows it will be more and more easy for both DOC staff and resource users to make informed decisions about how the country's conservation assets are managed. It will, however, be a challenge to ensure that the logical processes of analysis undertaken does not appear to users as just so much bureaucracy.

DOC is stating that communication over resource allocation decisions will be taken seriously. On the same tack, any resource user should get a good understanding of how the process works before asking for more money to be spent everywhere.

DOC's process for discussing site and structure decisions with the public began in June.

The Department states that this is not a one-off process, as it will take several years until the level of provision of structural assets reaches a steady state, with all assets complying with the desired standards. With an asset base of many



Kepler Track, Fiordland

thousands of structures spread over one third of the country it is a pretty massive job to manage our huts, tracks, bridges and toilets so that every visitor is happy. If you need to know more about your local situation, contact your nearest DOC office. But take a hint - get a good grip of national issues before focusing on your favourite bridge. By putting your concerns in perspective you'll be a lot more effective. ★

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