

5 Aoraki / Mount Cook Village Management

5.1 BACKGROUND

5.1.1 Village Management Plan Area

The Village section of this Management Plan applies to the area marked in Figures 6, 6A and 6B. In the previous Mount Cook National Park Management Plan (1989), the National Parks Act 1980 was interpreted to say that the plan was applicable only to those parts of the Park that were administered by the Department. The parts of the Village administered by the then Tourist Hotel Corporation, in accordance with Section 10 of the Act, were not considered to be subject to the jurisdiction of the 1989 plan.

This situation has changed. The 'Tourist Hotel Corporation' area is held under a lease by the current hotel owners, and the land covered by the lease is subject to this Management Plan. As in previous Plans, the long established and obvious presence of visitor accommodation in the Village will continue to require a close working relationship between the concessionaire, the Department and the Canterbury Aoraki Conservation Board.

5.1.2 The Amenities Area Status

As stated in section 2.1.1, an amenities area under section 15 of the National Parks Act was gazetted in July 1999 for the Aoraki/Mount Cook Village, in accordance with the *Mount Cook National Park Management Plan 1989*. For such areas the Act states:

"While any such area is set apart, the development and operation of recreational and public amenities and related services appropriate for the public use and enjoyment of the park may be authorised in accordance with this Act and the management plan.

The principles applicable to national parks shall, notwithstanding section 4 of this Act, apply only so far as they are compatible with the development and operation of such amenities and services." Section 4 of the National Parks Act states, in summary, the principle of parks being maintained in a natural state, and the public having the right of entry.

The world heritage area status still applies to the amenities area.

5.1.3 Management in the Absence of District Plan Provisions

Villages with special landscape, historic or alpine character would normally be subject to a range of specific district plan controls, under the Resource Management Act 1991. This approach can be seen for Arthur's Pass village in Selwyn District, Russell in Far North District and Whakapapa Village in Ruapehu District.

Arthur's Pass and Russell substantially comprise freehold land and district plan rules seek to control private developments so as to avoid adverse effects on the villages' special characteristics.

The same type of district plan controls can be applied under the Resource Management Act to private developments in villages within national parks. This is the approach taken by Ruapehu District for Whakapapa Village which, like Aoraki/Mount Cook Village, entirely comprises national park land.

As far as the Aoraki/Mount Cook Village is concerned, the Mackenzie District Plan has left all land management control under the Resource Management Act to this National Park Management Plan, even for concession developments not exempted by section 4 of the Act (see 1.2.4 The Resource Management Act 1991).

Preparation of the Village section of this Management Plan therefore, involved deciding what level of planning detail was needed in the continuum between a Resource Management Act district plan approach and a policy/methods approach, as in part 4 of this Management Plan. Consideration was needed on the extent to which the issues normally covered by a district plan were issues for the Village. The answer was that many of the issues are present or likely to arise during the 10-year life of the Plan. While the Department's control as land manager is potentially strong, there is a need for considerable policy/methods guidance to give continuity, consistency and clarity on how the Village should be managed and be allowed to develop.

5.1.4 Village Development Studies

The first Village planning exercise was a non-statutory one undertaken in 1969, followed by the 1976 *Mount Cook Village Review Committee's Report*. The first statutory Village planning came into effect with the *Mount Cook National Park Interim Management Plan* 1983. This 1983 plan guided Village development throughout the 1980s and 1990s, although it was amended slightly by the *Mount Cook National Park Management Plan* 1989.

The Department produced the *Mount Cook/Aoraki Village Development Review 1994*¹ (Findlay, 1994). This prompted in 1995, the Minister of Conservation request to the then Aoraki Conservation Board to prepare a new Village Development Plan to be incorporated into the National Park Management Plan review (this current Plan review process). The Village Development Plan process involved a Village Development Steering Group consisting of key stakeholders and consultants Ernst & Young and Beca Hollings & Ferner Limited, and resulted in the *Mount Cook/Aoraki Village Development Issues and Options Report* in January 1997.

The *Issues and Options Report* is thorough and was generally well accepted in its identification of a preferred Village development option. Subsequent to publication of the report and affecting the report's findings, were the final outcomes of the geotechnical studies and protection works and the flood debris flow hazard mapping. Also, the economics of Village development have proved to be

¹ Note that the *Village Development Review* and the later *Issues and Options Report* pre-date the Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998 so place names may not reflect the current terminology (e.g. Mount Cook/Aoraki and Mount Cook National Park instead of, in both cases, Aoraki/Mount Cook).

changeable, depending upon what the Department and the concessionaires can realistically fund or choose to fund at any point in time.

Currently the Village has several matters that direct its development. As shown on Figures 6 and 6A these are:

- a firmly defined amenities area boundary;
- the flood debris flow hazard zones that strongly limit allowable land uses;
- the existing Village layout and buildings and services locations, to the extent that these are not all easily changeable;
- the existing Hermitage accommodation concessionaire's lease areas;
- the remaining native vegetation areas within the Village (e.g. Bowen Bush and matagouri stands).

Development is ongoing in the Village. The old tavern has been moved and become the Department's administration office, a 90-room extension and refurbishment to the Hermitage was completed in 2001 and a new café opened in 2002. New house sites are being occupied in the residential area, a Village centre parking area is planned and landscape restoration work is continuing for the flood control earthworks. A stand-alone emergency services building is to be built and a major upgrade of the Visitor Centre is planned.

All of these matters and developments were envisaged in some manner within the *Issues and Options Report*. To a large degree, the principal findings and the preferred option of the report still have validity. There is little apparent reason to depart far from the report's guidance. This is reflected in the Village zoning approach, as set out in 6.1.1 Village Layout and Site Allocation.

The premise arising from the *Issues and Options Report* and the later geotechnic studies and now being followed, is that the Village is justified in remaining in the Park at its current site and that flood hazard mitigation measures will be undertaken, while they can be economically justified and any adverse effects on Park values can be avoided, remedied or mitigated.

Generally accepted by the Department and the *Issues and Options Report*, is that the current Village is somewhat run-down in parts and overdue for a 'face lift'. Also, that a Ngāi Tahu presence is desirable and appropriate in the Village, probably both as a *whare mahana* and/or as part of a re-developed Village centre or Visitor Centre.

5.1.5 Village Vision and Principles

A "Village vision" was developed through the *Issues and Options Report* process and is adopted here:

Aoraki/Mount Cook "...has the potential to become New Zealand's best known visitor destination. It should exhibit an exemplary level of environmental quality and visitor experience. It should reflect a distinctive New Zealand natural and mountain character in relation to its site planning, design and architecture. It should explicitly demonstrate the relationship that the *tangata whenua*, Ngāi Tahu, has with the area."

The *Issues and Options Report* identified four key principles:

- “Explicitly recognise that it is located in the [Aoraki/Mount Cook] National Park, part of the Te Wāhipounamu World Heritage [Area], one of only two [now three in 2001] World Heritage [Areas] in New Zealand;
- That [the Village] should continue to be subservient to the wider landscape;
- That the reality of existing stakeholder and lease arrangements has to be taken into account; and
- That the importance of Aoraki to Ngāi Tahu be acknowledged and incorporated in appropriate ways.”

Additional to these principles, an earlier one was established for the Village in the 1970s. The Honourable Whetu Tirikatene-Sullivan, then Minister of Lands, instructed that the Village provide for a range of accommodation types, so that all New Zealanders could afford to visit and stay in the National Park. This decision reinforced the National Parks Act principle of freedom of public entry and access to national parks.

As a further refinement of the principles of the above *Issues and Options Report*, it is emphasized that the primary purpose of the Village is for it to be a gateway to the Park; a place where visitors learn about the Park and its natural and cultural values. The Village is not to be managed as a place that would act as a barrier to the wider Park, or that would provide activities that would distract visitors from enjoying the Park.

In the objectives, policies and methods set out in this Village section of the Management Plan, the findings of the *Issues and Options Report* and its preferred option are incorporated where they still remain relevant and applicable.

5.2 VILLAGE MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

These objectives apply only to Aoraki/Mount Cook Village, as defined by the amenities area gazetted in July 1999.

5.2.1 Primary Objectives

Having regard to the National Parks Act 1980, the primary objectives for the Aoraki/Mount Cook Village part of this management plan are:

Objective 1

To maintain and enhance Aoraki/Mount Cook Village as a location of national and international standing, while providing recreational and public amenities and their related services, including different accommodation types that reflect a range of affordability.

Objective 2

To preserve the landscapes, indigenous ecosystems and natural features of Aoraki/Mount Cook Village, to the extent that this is compatible with Objective 1.

Objective 3

To give effect to the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi/the Treaty of Waitangi, to the extent that the provisions of the National Parks Act 1980 are clearly not inconsistent with them.

Explanation

1. This objective follows from the Village Vision and Principles (see 5.1.5) and the legislative requirements for an amenities area under section 15, National Parks Act (see 5.1.2).
2. This objective also follows from the Village Vision and Principles and the amenities area requirements, as well as recognising that there are many natural values remaining in the Village and that these contribute to the Village's character and locate the Village within the wider National Park setting.
3. Primary Objective 3 for the whole National Park (see 2.2 Management Objectives) is repeated here because the Department's statutory obligations under the Treaty of Waitangi are not lessened in any way in the Village amenities area.

5.2.2 Additional Objectives

The following additional objectives flow from these primary objectives. The Department seeks to achieve these objectives in so far as they are compatible with the primary objectives above:

1. To exterminate all introduced plant and animal pests in the Village, as far as possible;

2. To preserve the Village's heritage of places, artifacts and archaeological sites;
3. To manage the Village in such a way that it does not detract from the Park's World Heritage Area status;
4. To encourage visitors to see the Village not as a destination in itself, but as a gateway to experiencing first-hand the unique natural and cultural environment of the Park.
5. To provide for a range of visitor accommodation within the Village;
6. To ensure any commercial use within the Village is compatible with the primary objectives in 5.2.1.