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Report 01.517

2 July 2001

File: R/6/1/2

Report to the Landcare Committee
from Anne Manley, Landcare Planner - Policy, Regional Parks (Strategy & Marketing)

East Harbour Regional Park Issues

1. Purpose

- To update Councillors on progress towards resolving access and land rationalisation issues at East Harbour Regional Park (including results of the recent visitor research at the Park); and
- To seek agreement to:
 - Retaining the Northern Block in East Harbour Regional Park;
 - Officers entering into discussions with the Hutt City Council on transferring control and management of the Northern Block in the Park to the Regional Council;
 - Officers initiating discussions with key landowners adjacent to the Park, (on a without prejudice basis), with a view to addressing the access issues and protecting significant ecological values.

2. Background

In 1999, the Landcare Committee approved the *Future Direction for East Harbour Regional Park* (Report 99.352) which outlined a strategy for resolving issues in, and future management of, East Harbour Regional Park.

Strategic priorities for East Harbour Regional Park were identified as:

- protecting the unique, undeveloped and rugged coastal environment (incorporating coastal escarpments, bush, wetlands and lakes), the sea and the city views that distinguished the Park;
- enabling more people to experience the Park's outstanding natural environment;

- developing a long-term vision for the Park, so as to safeguard it for future generations; and
- taking a lead role in managing the Park.

Councillors agreed that (refer **Attachment 1**):

- the Lakes Block, Baring Head and the coastal margins are the key elements of the Park;
- the fundamental issues to be resolved for the future of East Harbour Regional Park were land rationalisation and access (and that these issues need to be addressed before progressing with plans for new recreation, environmental or heritage initiatives in the Park);
- serious attention be given to alternative road access to the southern end of the Park; and
- officers should explore opportunities with the other Park landowners, (i.e., the Department of Conservation and the Hutt City Council) for the Council to become the lead agency in the Park.

At that time Councillors preferred to defer the decision on retaining the Northern Block in the Park until public consultation was undertaken. It was noted that public consultation would be undertaken through a visitor survey (see section 3 below) and the review of the Management Plan. Public consultation would incorporate discussion on retaining the Northern Block in the Park, and Development Concept 2 for the Lakes Block. (This concept, discussed in Report 99.352, would provide for regeneration of bush, retention of open space on the ridge tops and no grazing at the Lakes Block.)

3. **Visitor Research**

Earlier this year, Corydon Consultants Limited was contracted by Parks and Forests (Strategy & Marketing) to undertake visitor research at East Harbour Regional Park. The visitor survey intended to get initial feedback on the issues outlined above which would inform the review of the Park Management Plan, due to commence this financial year.

The research comprised an on-site visitor survey and a series of focus group meetings with current user groups. The visitor survey was conducted over four days in February and early March. Fine weekend days and fine afternoons/evenings were chosen to maximise the sample size. Four focus group meetings were held with environmental organisations, trampers, runners and rock climbers, waterfowl hunters and mountain bikers. Participants were asked specifically to comment on:

- rationalisation of control and management of land in the Park with one agency taking overall responsibility for day-to-day management of the Park;
- the preferred agency to take overall management responsibility of the Park, if one agency is nominated;

- access to and through the Park, particularly along the Pencarrow Coast Road to the Lakes Block, and priorities for improving it;
- the future of the Lakes Block, (i.e., continue to graze or retire from grazing and let the area regenerate - either naturally or through active planting; and
- retention of the Northern Block in the Park.

The issue of the Park name was also included for consideration.

The two information gathering processes yielded quite distinct data. The visitor survey produced an essentially quantitative picture of the visitor population, visitors' behaviour within the Park and their preferences in terms of recreational experiences. This data helps to build a profile of current recreational use patterns in the Park. Conversely, the focus group interviews yielded a more qualitative perspective on a range of key management issues.

4. **Key Findings**

In short, the survey has largely reiterated or confirmed the key issues and trends in the Park that were identified by officers in 1999. It is clear that the issues in need of resolution back then have not changed significantly. While progress has been made, the complexity of the issues means that it will take some time before many of them are resolved.

Full copies of the study are available on request. Key findings from the survey include:

- that East Harbour Regional Park is very important as a local recreation resource for residents of the Eastbourne coast (31.3 percent of visitors surveyed live in Eastbourne/Eastern Bays; 37 percent live within Eastbourne and Wainuiomata; and 84.3 percent of visitors surveyed live within the greater Wellington area);
- that East Harbour Regional Park visitors have similar gender (slightly more men than women) and age profile (highest percentages between 20 and 49 years) to the average regional park user;
- there is a slightly higher proportion of Maori, Pacific Island and Asian visitors at East Harbour Regional Park than is the case in other regional parks and forests (we assume that this relates to the coastal recreational opportunities and culturally significant fishing grounds available at East Harbour and not at other parks);
- only 3.7 percent of visitors surveyed intended spending more than four hours in the Park (compared with 12 percent for Wellington's regional parks as a whole);
- most people travelled to the Park in private motor vehicles, although a large number of visitors walked to the Park from home;

- very few visitors used public transport, despite the availability of a bus service direct to all the western entry points and ferry access from Wellington City to Days Bay;
- all the high use areas were within an hour's walk of the main entrance points (refer **Attachment 2**);
- use of the Southern Block appeared to be slightly heavier than the Northern Block;
- dominant recreational activities in the Northern Block included walking, tramping and running; ancillary activities tended to be associated with the bush and streams, such as picnicking, swimming and botanising;
- features of most importance to Northern Block visitors were native bush, views/scenery, the presence of suitable tracks for their choice of recreation, (e.g. family walks), opportunities for seclusion/peace and quiet, and location relative to home;
- features of most importance to Southern Block visitors included the wild coast, views/scenery, availability of the flat coastal road and seclusion/peace and quiet;
- the Pencarrow Coast Road remains popular with cyclists and walkers and the adjacent coast is well used by people involved in fishing, diving, canoeing and swimming. Baring Head is a significant rock climbing area for greater Wellington;
- relatively few dislikes were identified by respondents in relation to the Park;
- complaints generally related to the condition of tracks in the Northern Block, lack of visitor facilities (signage and track markers in the Northern Block and toilets in the Southern Block); and conflict with other users, particularly vehicle traffic on the Pencarrow Coast Road (many people who mentioned this also expressed a concern about the possibility of traffic increasing on this road); and
- the proportion of people who thought access to the Southern Block was inadequate (17 percent) was far greater than for the Northern Block (8 percent); and comments from those respondents included the need:
 - for clearer signage and better parking at entrance points to the Northern Block;
 - to provide vehicle access further south along the Pencarrow Coast Road; and
 - to improve access for bikes and prams through the Burdans Gate turnstile (in the Southern Block).

Feedback from discussions with the focus groups is set out (by issue) below.

4.1 **Inclusion of the Northern Block in East Harbour Regional Park**

The general consensus of the focus groups was that the Northern Block should be retained within the Park so that the diverse range of landscape types and recreational opportunities are maintained. Currently a reasonably comprehensive “mountains to sea” experience is provided and people wanted to see this maintained.

4.2 **Overall Management of the Park by One Agency**

Focus group participants generally agreed that it would be advantageous to have one agency responsible for overall management of the Park because this would help achieve consistency and integration of park management. The Council was favoured to be that agency, largely because of its experience and expertise in managing other regional parks and forests.

4.3 **Access to the Lakes Block**

This was easily the most contentious issue discussed. Extending vehicular access along the Pencarrow Coast Road was supported by some in the focus groups but others expressed reservations. While it was generally recognised that the Lakes Block is too far away for most people to visit, and that moving Burdans Gate south, (so that the Lakes are within an hour’s walk of the car park) would open the area up to a greater range of visitors, it was also noted that the aesthetic qualities and environmental values of the Coast Road, Pencarrow Head and the Lakes could be greatly compromised by doing so.

A number of alternatives for accessing the Lakes Block were suggested by the focus groups including access from the east (via a new road from the Wainuiomata Coast Road); from the south (via the existing route across the lower Wainuiomata River and over the low saddle north of Baring Head to Fitzroy Bay); and via the existing farm road over the Mount Cameron ridge from Burdans Gate to Gollans Valley. These options would require negotiation with private landowners and the construction of new roads into the area as alternatives to vehicular access along the Pencarrow Coast Road. The suggestions have not been investigated in detail by officers. Work by officers on improving access to the southern end of the Park and other issues is outlined below (refer section 6.3).

Access to Baring Head was also considered by the focus groups to be problematic, as it is often necessary to wade across the Wainuiomata River to get there.

4.4 **Park Name**

The general consensus by the focus groups on the Park’s name was that although “East Harbour Regional Park” is not widely known, it does accurately describe the Park and may just need to be more widely promoted.

There was discussion on the use of “Pencarrow Regional Park” but it was thought that this may serve to perpetuate confusion as to which areas are included in the Park. The issue will be tested further through the Park Management Plan review.

4.5 Other Issues

Two issues raised that surprised officers were the keenness of mountain bikers to gain access to the Northern Block and the high usage of the Wainuiomata Coast Road entrance to access Baring Head. The most heavily used sections of the Park, in order of visitor density, were the Pencarrow Coast Road immediately south of Burdans Gate, the coast between the Wainuiomata Coast Road and the Wainuiomata River mouth, the track from Williams Park to the Main Ridge and the coast between Wainuiomata River mouth and Baring Head (refer **Attachment 2**).

These results highlight the importance of improving access to Baring Head and the Wainuiomata Coast Road as well as the Lakes Block. This issue will need to be considered when assessing options for improving access to the southern part of the Park and as part of the Management Plan review. The types of recreational activities permitted in the Park (and activity zones within the Park) will be addressed during the Management Plan review.

Another suggestion made by a significant number of respondents was that the Council investigate options for securing public access to the private land between Butterfly Creek and the Lakes Block (either through purchase or negotiating access) in order to both improve the Park's coherence and improve recreational opportunities. This has implications for the inclusion of Northern Block and resolving access issues in the southern end of the Park (refer 6.2 and 6.3).

Two of the focus groups mentioned that they would like to see a management advisory committee established, comprising representatives of all stakeholders in the Park to facilitate community involvement in Park operations (akin to a Park Board). The Council has a statutory obligation to manage East Harbour Regional Park and it is important that there is clear accountability between the Council as the agency funding the Park, and ratepayers. Therefore, we consider a "Friends of the Park" group to be a logical way of managing issues with the public and co-ordinating volunteers who work in the Park. Friends groups have proved to be a successful way of achieving community liaison in other parks and forests. Council retains its direct involvement while also encouraging community participation in the Park.

We note that there will be extensive public consultation during the review of the East Harbour Regional Park Management Plan. We also intend to recommend that a Management Plan review advisory committee be established in the next few months, which will directly involve key stakeholders throughout that review process (refer section 5).

5. Park Management Plan Review

The issues identified during the survey and focus group meetings largely reflect the issues and trends identified when the *Future Direction for East Harbour Regional Park* was written in 1999. Officers will endeavour to continue progress on and resolve those issues through the review of the Park Management Plan.

Preliminary work with other Park landowners (the Department of Conservation and the Hutt City Council) is already underway as outlined below (refer section 6).

Key landowners adjacent to the Park were informed about the survey. We intend to meet with those landowners, the Eastbourne and Wainuiomata Community Boards, and local iwi to discuss key issues arising from the survey and then to publicly notify the intention to review the Plan early this financial year (2001/02). Under section 619I of the Local Government Act 1974, the Council is required to publicly notify its intention to review the Plan and to invite interested persons and organisations to submit written comments or suggestions on the proposed review of the plan.

After the intention to review the Management Plan has been publicly notified, we intend to recommend to the Landcare Committee that some form of advisory committee be established to assist with the preparation of the revised management plan. The advisory committee could either be park specific or part of a region-wide advisory committee established to assist with the review of all the Park Management Plans. Officers will report back to the Landcare Committee on these options.

The Council has appointed advisory committees in the past to assist with the review of its park and forest management plans. The advisory committees have had input into draft plans prior to release for public comment by the Council, have reviewed public submissions on draft management plans, and have recommended amendments to draft management plans. Final resolution of particular issues and approval of both the draft and final management plans always rests with the Council.

6. Progress on Key Issues

6.1 Land Rationalisation : Department of Conservation

Parks and Forests officers have written to the Department of Conservation outlining the Council's desire to rationalise management of land in the Park and in particular, requesting the Department to appoint the Council to control and manage (under the Reserves Act 1977) the lighthouse reserve at Pencarrow Head and Lakes Kohangatera and Kohangapiripiri.

We are aware of the ecological significance of Lakes Kohangatera and Kohangapiripiri and that as a result, special conditions would be placed on the Council if it were appointed to manage these areas. At this stage we understand that the Department wishes to undertake further scientific research at the Lakes before a decision on appointment is made. In the meantime, we will endeavour to progress the transfer of management of the Pencarrow Lighthouse Reserve. The Historic Places Trust would remain responsible for the Lighthouse itself and a small footprint surrounding it. However, the majority of the Lighthouse Reserve would transfer to the Council.

The reserve is directly adjacent to the Council's Lakes Block and would therefore make a logical addition to the Council's area of control.

6.2 Northern Block : Hutt City Council

Hutt City Council has recently released the document *Hutt City Council Reserves, Draft Strategic Directions*, for public comment. This document refers directly to transferring the Northern Block from Hutt City, to the Wellington Regional Council. Hutt City Council officers also indicated an interest in investigating this option during recent informal discussions.

As noted earlier, the decision on retaining the Northern Block in the Park was previously deferred by Councillors, pending public consultation. Given that Hutt City Council has raised the issue for public comment and given the clarity of views during the recent visitor research by the Council, officers consider it timely to raise the matter for your consideration again.

6.2.1 *Discussion on the Northern Block*

In summary, there are high environmental values in the Northern Block, moderate recreation values, and low heritage values. This area is a distinct environment, quite different from the rugged coastline experienced at the southern end of the Park. Nevertheless, the environmental values of the Northern Block warrant its inclusion in the Regional Park, and there are advantages from having contrasting experiences and recreational opportunities like the Northern and Southern Blocks, within one park.

The survey and focus group discussions supported this view. The consensus was clearly in favour of retaining the Northern Block in East Harbour Regional Park so that the diverse range of landscape types and recreational opportunities currently in the Park could be maintained.

In addition to providing an attractive setting for running and walking, the Northern Block represents the nearest area of “real” bush to Wellington. It provides an opportunity for easy overnight camping trips into the bush and is used to introduce many people, particularly young people, to tramping and camping. Current management of the Northern Block is greatly assisted by volunteers in groups like MIRO and the Eastbourne Rangers.

The Northern Block has significant landscape values, particularly in terms of the view across the Harbour from Wellington City and the Hutt Motorway. The identification of the Northern Block as a key native ecosystem also warrants the protection afforded by regional park status.

The survey results support previous anecdotal evidence that visitors to areas like Butterfly Creek are not only local but are region-wide, adding to the arguments in favour of the area’s inclusion in a regional park, e.g., 24 percent of visitors surveyed using the Northern Block tracks for less than 1 hour were from Wellington/Hutt Valley (excluding Eastern Bays and Wainuiomata residents). Prior to the survey, there were views that the Northern Block was akin to a town belt with largely local use.

Furthermore, a significant number of focus group participants suggested that the Council investigate options for securing public access to the private land between Butterfly Creek and the Lakes Block in order to improve the Park’s coherence and improve recreational opportunities between the Northern and the Southern Blocks.

These comments were based on the premise that the Northern Block would remain in the Park. Some people regarded the retention of the Northern Block in the Park as key to creating an opportunity to acquire or gain access to that private land.

We concur with the focus groups’ view that the Northern Block should remain in the Park in order to protect the regional environmental values in the Block and to maintain the range of ecological experiences and recreational opportunities currently in the Park. The retention of the Northern Block could be addressed by the Council during the review of the Management Plan. However, given that Hutt City Council has placed the issue in the public domain for consideration and given the level of support for retaining the Block during the recent visitor research, we are seeking direction on this matter now.

Consideration via the management plan review will be some months away when decisions on rationalisation of control and management of land in other areas of the Park are likely to have been made. If the Northern Block is to be retained, we see merit in dealing with rationalising control and management of that area in conjunction with other land rationalisation issues in the Park.

We are therefore seeking agreement to retain the Northern Block in the Park and approval to enter into discussions with Hutt City Council on transferring control and management of the Northern Block to the Regional Council. We would then report the matter back for your consideration.

6.3 **Other Hutt City Council Issues**

We have indicated to Hutt City Council that we are keen to rationalise control and management of land in the Southern Block, particularly the esplanade strips owned by the Hutt City Council around the two lakes.

We have also had informal discussions with the Hutt City Council on access issues and options for improving access in the Southern part of the Park. Discussions are continuing. In order to progress the issue of access further, we are also seeking a clear mandate from Councillors to enter into discussions (perhaps in conjunction with the Hutt City Council) with landowners adjacent to the Park on this matter. This would be on a without prejudice basis and we would report back to the Committee on the outcome of those discussions. We would also like authorisation to discuss protection of ecological values with those landowners.

7. **Communications**

Parks and Forests staff will prepare a press release in conjunction with Corporate Communications to publicise the results of the visitor research. We also intend to publicly notify the intention to review the Management Plan as required under the Local Government Act 1974 (refer section 5 above). This will involve placing advertisements in regional newspapers and preparing press releases to publicise the upcoming review.

8. **Recommendations**

That the Landcare Committee:

- (1) *Receive the report and notes the contents.*
- (2) *Agree that the Northern Block should be retained in East Harbour Regional Park.*
- (3) *Authorise officers to enter into discussions with Hutt City Council on transferring control and management of the Northern Block in the Park to the Wellington Regional Council, noting that officers will report back on the outcome of those discussions.*

- (4) *Authorise officers to undertake initial discussions with landowners adjacent to the Park, on a without prejudice basis, with a view to addressing the access issues and protecting significant ecological values, noting that officers will report back to the Committee on the outcome of those discussions.*
- (5) *Note that officers intend to consult with key landowners adjacent to the Park, the Eastbourne and Wainuiomata Community Boards and local iwi on key issues prior to publicly notifying the intention to review the East Harbour Regional Park Management Plan early in the 2001/02 financial year.*

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Attachment 1 : Recommendations from Report 99.352

Attachment 2 : Map of East Harbour Regional Park Track Visitor Numbers

Tabled Document : East Harbour Regional Park Recreation Study, June 2001