



# Recreational Specialisation

## Description

Recreational specialisation is a key concept with specific practical applications in the analysis of outdoor recreation behaviour. The essence of the theory behind the recreational specialisation concept is that outdoor recreation participants can be placed on a continuum from general interest and low involvement to specialised interest and high involvement. Each level of specialisation carries distinctive behaviours and orientations. A further related concept is the idea of “leisure careers,” where people move through different levels of increasingly specialised behaviour in a particular leisure pursuit. In angling, for example, the interest and behaviour of the angler might evolve from a general preference to fish for large numbers of fish (no matter their size) on live baits, to catching small numbers of large fish on light tackle and specialised lures. The specialised angler will have a particular interest in resource conservation and is likely to practice catch-and-release. Fishing gear will become more specialised and expensive as the angling career develops. Another example is increasing specialisation in snow skiing - seeing a move from the use of easy runs to powder-hounds who prefer the off-piste slopes. There are similar “leisure careers” definable in many pursuits, such as climbing, tramping, scuba diving, river kayaking, rock climbing, etc. An important dimension of this concept is the relationship between the type of use and the availability of resources (see [Recreational Opportunity Spectrum ROS](#) 🌿) to meet the needs of users. One aspect is that there may be limited resources to meet the needs of a particular group on the continuum. Another is that specialised users in particular may be more sensitive to crowding during their pursuit.

## How and when the tool is used

Recreational specialisation is effective for managing recreational uses particularly in improving tourist yield where there are increasing problems of crowding and visitor management. It appears that there will be difficulties for the tourism industry to meet the needs of all types of visitors when New Zealand is faced with three significant challenges:

- increasing interest in outdoor recreation overall
- increasing numbers of specialists later in their leisure careers
- in many places a reducing recreation resource.

Management has to avoid causing unacceptable impacts on the areas or resources in which tourism activities take place, particularly in remote or fragile areas, and creating additional impacts on the visitors themselves and other users.

The most practical use of recreational specialisation is in [crowding management](#) 🌿 where it is utilised through detailed information about the behaviour and attitudes of recreationalists, and how they might have their needs satisfied from a range of environmental settings by appropriate management techniques. Of most interest is the potential to avoid or manage user conflicts through substitution of resources or trade-offs between user groups, along with allocation tools such as [concessions](#) 🌿 and [user charges](#) 🌿. Research to date is largely conducted in outdoor-recreation contexts.

With knowledge about the expertise, behavioural characteristics and environmental preferences of participants in a recreational pursuit, resource managers can potentially link demand more closely to supply using inventories of available resources. There are simple ways of doing this through [interpretation](#) 🌿, such as signs about the difficulty of ski trails or information about the available resource in tramping or fishing guides. In addition to information about resources, management techniques are used to direct users to particular resources (including resource substitution and any resource charges) and to determine the kinds of facilities provided (tramping huts, ski lifts, helicopter landing areas or river access points, etc). An understanding of recreational specialisation can also contribute to management of recreational conflict (also see [Limits of Acceptable Change LAC](#) 🌿 and [Recreational Opportunity Spectrum ROS](#) 🌿) by providing knowledge about the values, preferences and behaviour of definable social groups. Conflicts to be managed include conflict between types of recreationalists in one pursuit, such as between generalist and more specialised users, and also between different pursuits (such as between sea kayakers and water skiers, or trampers and mountain bikers).



## **RECOGNISING AND SETTING LIMITS**

### **Recreational Specialisation**

Recreational specialisation lends itself readily to the [monitoring](#) of visitors and visitor activity - for instance through specific questions in visitor surveys about previous experiences or visits, user preferences, activities carried out, attitudes to resources, and equipment carried, etc. This monitoring is linked to monitoring of visitor satisfaction and crowding (as discussed in [visitor satisfaction survey](#)).

### **Application**

There are specific applications of recreational specialisation to eco-tourism development and visitor management. Possibly the greatest opportunity, as yet incompletely explored, is for the combination of social analysis based on the concept of recreation specialisation and leisure careers to distinguish attitudes and behaviour of visitors, along with bio-physical analysis and the classification and inventory of recreation resources using the Recreation Opportunities Spectrum ([ROS](#)). This more integrated approach should result in more sophisticated visitor management. In addition there are direct, as yet unexplored, links to the Limits of Acceptable Change ([LAC](#)) concept such as the ability of both tools to manage potential conflict.

While recreational specialisation has largely been applied in rural, outdoor settings, there is no reason to assume that the associated concept of leisure careers cannot be applied in urban settings and activities. There are spatial and economic considerations for the integrated management of tourism types and destinations, and for strategies that distribute visitors between and within regions. Most especially, there is now a specific interest in NZ in "higher yield" tourists. Specialised recreationalists, however, are not necessarily going to be higher yield tourists. For instance they might prefer walking to using helicopters, backpacking to an expensive lodge, or bringing their own equipment rather than hiring it on site. On the other hand, it is possible that specialised recreationalists might be more inclined to stay in an area for longer periods. Furthermore, it may prove difficult to meet the resource demands of large numbers of highly specialised visitors.

In applying the recreational specialisation concept, there is an obvious difference between public and private resource ownership. Legally guaranteed "free" access for the public outdoor recreation estate partly removes pricing as a mechanism for allocating scarce resources to more specialised uses (although charging for facilities and services is permitted). Specialised activities might therefore become a focus for privateer source providers, potentially enabling their provision to become increasingly elitist in nature, such as fees to access fly fishing streams on private land, or use of private walking tracks. Ownership of resources by Maori, trusts and community organisations creates another potential opportunity to implement management strategies based on specialisation theory, compared to opportunities on public land. The concept of recreational specialisation might be applied either specifically or through surrogate approaches. For example, Department of Conservation staff might, informally, advise visitors about where they should go for particular activities by screening their level of competence, experience and equipment.

### **Our evaluation**

The concept of recreational specialisation offers important understanding of the social characteristics of visitors involved in outdoor recreation activity. It has potential that has not necessarily translated into specific management tools as might have been expected. Nor has it been well integrated with bio-physical approaches to develop an understanding of limits to acceptable change.

The concept helps to inform integration with related approaches, including destination marketing, interpretation, assessment of visitor satisfaction, crowding management, and management of recreation conflict. There appears to be a lack of specific tools derived from recreational specialisation so far through research-based applications - for instance, rapid and unobtrusive visitor screening tools.