



Visitor Centres

Description

Visitor centres are, ideally, 'one-stop shops' for visitor information often situated in the main streets or centres of towns and cities, and at airports and stations and other key access points. Visitors can obtain information, find out about particular activities or begin the process of discovery about an area. They can contain information resources in the form of brochures and other material about local tourism-related attractions, products and services, local maps and guide books, and view static and interactive displays. However, the most important visitor centre resource is often the staff (who may include paid and/or voluntary workers) who can provide local knowledge.

How and when the tool is used

Visitor centres can be set up for a number of purposes, including:

- to inform and educate visitors (i.e., deliver interpretation) about a general visitor destination, about a specific natural area like a national park, and about individual products and services at local and regional levels;
- to act as a local, distribution channel for tourism information, providing impartial information verbally and in brochures and other media about local activities, accommodation, transport and retail outlets;
- to provide information about attractions and products in the wider region and in other regions;
- to provide a booking service.

While visitor centres attract visitors to particular attractions or products in their locality, their purpose is usually not to draw people to the locality as they are already there. However, as visitor centres are often located at the access point to an area they can influence people to pass through and spend time there. Also, if a visitor centre has information about other regions it can be used to attract visitors to those regions later on in a travel itinerary.

Visitor centres are an essential component of the wider tool of [interpretation](#) and are closely linked to [visitor marketing](#). They provide information that:

- attracts visitors to particular products and services and gets them to stay longer;
- increases visitor enjoyment of attractions, products, and services;
- increases visitor knowledge, understanding and respect for the environment, heritage, culture and ways of life, and property, including knowledge of any local [visitor care code](#);
- changes visitor behaviour, such as where they go and the timing of their visit.

The data that Visitor Centres collect about their 'customers' provides local destinations with important monitoring data about visitor trends. Sometimes the data is limited to door counts and sometimes more detailed demographic and country of origin data is collected at the point of contact with Visitor Centre staff or through short, self-administered surveys. Often this is the only detailed information about visitors available to local tourist operators. However, there are gaps in such data as all visitors to a destination do not visit the Visitor Centre or engage directly with staff.

Application

A network of easily identifiable visitor centres is typical of most countries with a developed tourism industry and an expected part of the tourist infrastructure. In New Zealand, that network is called the Visitor Information Network (VIN). The VIN was established in 1990 and has increased to over 80 individual centres. Each VIN centre is required to meet a set of quality criteria to operate as part of the network and use the recently re-branded i-SITE signpost. Recent research has shown that 87% of visitors to New Zealand are likely to use an i-SITE. Over 75% of all i-SITE users are international visitors. In 2003, there were 10 million visits to the i-SITE network.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) provides another nationwide network of visitor and information centres. Their centres focus on visitor information for natural areas and are usually in, or adjacent to, national parks and other reserves, or in regional centres. They exist to help visitors plan their time and activities in conservation areas. They also provide a booking service for DOC administered amenities (e.g. huts) and advice and information about weather conditions and other factors that might affect visitors' experiences.



Many have flora, fauna and cultural and natural heritage displays, and information about active conservation work.

There is some overlap between the VIN and DOC visitor information systems. The functions of some park visitor centres have been transferred to the VIN network and some DOC centres operate under the VIN network. However, the latter has created problems as customers who have visited DOC centres affiliated with VIN often then expect to be able to book for private sector accommodation and transport in other DOC visitor centres.

As well as the official visitor information networks of VIN and DOC there are a myriad of community and private visitor centres that are not affiliated with either network. Often they use [signage](#) that is reminiscent of the i-SITE branding, for instance using a similar 'i' but in a different colour. While they might provide similar information, they are not required to meet quality standards and are not required to provide impartial advice.

Visitor centres therefore currently provide a wide range of products and services and are funded through a variety of mechanisms. As part of the integrated management of natural areas visitor centres strategically located at the entrances to, or administrative centres of, parks provide:

- information on landscape, fauna, flora, heritage sites, recreational amenities and other local features;
- an opportunity for face-to-face contact with knowledgeable staff, operators and local volunteers (see [honorary wardens](#));
- recognisable and prominent sites where visitors can obtain information as well as access a wide range of interpretation techniques (audio visual presentation, verbal interpretation, interactive displays, original objects).

Our evaluation

Visitor centres are integral to an integrated planning and management approach to tourism. They have the capacity to influence visitor numbers, expectations, knowledge and travel plans and behaviour in and around natural areas. They are closely associated with a set of more specific tools that fit under the broad topic of interpretation.

However, they can be expensive to set up and it may be difficult to provide facilities that suit a wide range of audiences (for instance, Free Independent Travellers, school groups and bus loads of visitors require different facilities). The funding basis of visitor centres varies from region to region (e.g. from totally independent commercial enterprises to those supported by local government). Because of these different funding bases, there are different charging regimes. For operators that might mean that there will be a charge/commission for service ([user charges](#)), which also varies from region to region.

There is a need for effective training of visitor centre staff in communication techniques and knowledge of the area. If there is heavy reliance on volunteers, and they are poorly trained, the effectiveness of visitor centres can be undermined.

There is also a need for coordination in planning and locating visitor centres, including, in particular, district and regional tourism organisations and DOC, but also operators and relevant community organisations.