



Visitor Care Codes

Description

Visitor care codes are lists of rules, guidance or expectations, usually written, aimed to encourage appropriate visitor behaviour or attitudes. They express good practice ideals to modify behaviour rather than focus on behaviour defined by legislation. Codes aim to enhance the visitor experience by protecting the environment and the visitors themselves. The environment can include landscapes, wildlife, heritage and archaeological features, cultural interpretations, and local communities and economies.

Visitor care code types range from informal, as adopted by a small group of visitors or operators among themselves, to formal, as adopted by a tourism organisation, management agency, or host community. Some codes are written to explain general principles for a particular kind of, low-impact, visitor behaviour, while others are designed for specific areas or sites. Often the care code will be part of the [interpretation](#) plan for an area.

The content of visitor care codes varies according to the purpose and expected audience, and reflects codes of ethics or best practise. Usually the appropriate visitor behaviours are briefly stated and sometimes explanations of either the behaviour or how that helps the environment or host community may be included in additional layers of information.

How and when the tool is used

Visitor care codes are devised to meet specific needs, which in some cases are defined by a policy, guidelines or management plan for a natural area. By instituting a code of visitor behaviour, those responsible for a tourist destination can avoid having to restrict access by visitors to sensitive areas by managing their behaviour instead. Codes usually aim to encourage the visitor to act safely and with minimum impact, while feeling sufficiently connected to the experience to learn about the area. The codes may be related to codes of practice for tour operators or concession holders. Codes may be mandatory, for tour operator licenses or concessions, but most often compliance is voluntary and dependent on the visitor's knowledge, ability or inclination to comply.

Along with other forms of interpretation, the information in visitor care codes is directed at pre-trip planning to raise awareness and ensure the visitor is as knowledgeable and correctly equipped as possible, as for instance in codes explaining appropriate behaviour in Antarctica. In some cases the code is part of a permit system to enter or work in an area, as is the case with photographer behaviour codes in Africa. But the voluntary use of care codes by self guiding visitors can also be effective, once the visitor has become aware of the code. Such codes or guidelines will suggest, for example, planning ahead, carrying out litter and continuous learning about the host environment.

As with other forms of interpretation, visitor care codes are presented in a variety of ways:

- in [signage](#) and on posters and information boards;
- as part of displays and exhibits;
- in [visitor centres](#), offices and shops;
- in the information provided in static audio visuals, talks and lectures;
- in guide books, pamphlets and brochures;
- in local area newsletters;
- on websites.

Visitor care codes need regular monitoring and evaluation of their effectiveness. They should be evaluated along with other forms of interpretation, as part of visitor education that contributes to the visitor experience and effective visitor management. Contribution of codes to goals for conservation or site management will be evaluated as part of the management plan for the area. Codes used by concession holders or tour operators will normally be monitored as part of their permit.

Testing the effectiveness of visitor care codes can show some surprising insights into visitor thinking. For example, a woman interviewed in the Catlins, when asked to comment on seeing the local care code, commented "Oh, this place must be special ...they [the locals] must really mean it".



Evaluation of visitor care codes involves assessing and updating the relevance of the content to visitor behaviour, the suitability of the format or formats it is presented in, and the means of distributing the code. If, however, the code is produced in an expensive format that is difficult to change, there may be problems updating it.

Application

Local area tourist groups are using visitor care codes as a means to get key messages across and assist with visitor management. With increasing numbers of visitors coming to New Zealand and to the attractions offered by natural areas, there is increasing diversity and range of experience or understanding of impacts, attitudes to managing risks, and consciousness of health and safety issues in the outdoors.

Some visitor care codes, such as the New Zealand Environmental Code, are national in scope and sponsored by government agencies and or sector groups. This means the code appears in many forms throughout the country and a large number of New Zealand residents and international visitors are aware of it. However, voluntary organisations in USA, Britain, Australia and New Zealand also have care codes, as do trekking destinations or tourist areas based on fragile environments throughout the world. Care codes often support campaigns to “tread lightly” or “leave no trace”.

Generally visitor care codes are brief with positive, clear and concise language. They are typically presented as a straightforward list, a list with headings and highlights, or more layered codes with additional detail about each point. Visitor care codes need to balance:

- visitor appreciation of protecting the environment;
- host community concerns about visitor behaviour and impacts;
- analysis and understanding of the visitor audience and information requirements;
- the information available to visitors in a variety of forms;
- production and distribution costs of providing information by means of a code.

Codes need to be put where visitors will see them either before or during their visit. The most effective way to raise visitors' attention to local area codes is when local people, including accommodation providers or guides, mention or discuss them with their visitors.

Our evaluation

Visitor care codes have been used as a means of demonstrating to visitors what the community thinks is ‘special’ about its area or community. The purpose of the code needs to be carefully thought through - whether to provide information, or to change behaviour.

With a proliferation of visitor care codes, it is important to ensure there is some consistency between them, and with other forms of interpretation, or the messages are likely to be lost in tourist information overload.

When developing a visitor care code it is important to think how to evaluate the effectiveness of the code, and how to keep it up to date and meaningful.