Franz Josef Glacier/Fox Glacier

Key issue(s)
Management of large number of people in a physically constrained area where there are safety issues. Management of aircraft noise in a constrained physical environment.

Background

Glacier guiding
Currently two companies hold concessions for glacier walks out of Franz Josef. One (more recent) concession sets a limit on the number of people. The other concession dating back to about 1990 does not have a limit, but the concession holder is sensitive to the issue of social carrying capacity, and does restrict numbers to some extent on an ad hoc basis. A similar situation exists at Fox Glacier, except that at the present time there is only one operator. There have been reports that safety measures on the Fox Glacier are generally better than on the Franz Glacier.

On a fine day, there are very large numbers of people on the glaciers, in particular the Franz Josef glacier including independent travellers, tour groups, and guided groups. Many independent travellers walk to the foot of the glacier, and in some case on the glacier. Signs indicate where it is safe to walk. Guiding companies lake trails, cut steps and in some cases metal ladders. As the trails are one person wide, it can be difficult for people to pass in different directions.

Aircraft noise
Three helicopter firms operate out of Franz Josef Glacier and Fox Glacier, with both overflights and glacier landings on both the Franz Josef and Fox glaciers. Each of the two guiding companies has a link with one helicopter firm and the third helicopter firm does not do any heli-hiking work. The helicopter pads are close to the centre in both communities and take-off and landings are very noisy.

There is one company operating fixed wing ski-plane services (linked to Mt Cook operations). The Westland National Park Management Plan states that “Concessionaires shall be made aware of and required to adhere to the Mount Cook and Westland National Parks Resident Aircraft User Group Environmental Policy and park operational procedures” and continues “… “Aircraft facilities and services shall be consistent with the visitor management setting and shall particularly respect the quality of natural quiet within the remote experience settings”. The main concern with fixed wing aircraft is aircraft noise in the valleys.

Stakeholders
● Department of Conservation
● Guiding companies
● Aircraft companies

Tools, models or approaches

Voluntary restrictions on numbers on glacier in guided groups
People on the glacier itself include climbers (day climbers on the glacier and those using the glacier as access to the high huts) and guided groups (heli-hikers who often walk one way down the glacier, and groups who take a short walk up and back). Individuals from both groups have reported that their experience has been adversely affected by the number of people. The guiding company that does not have a numbers limit

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1 This case study provides an example of the application of some individual tools to specific issues. The case studies are not of themselves examples of a fully integrated approach as they preceded the development of the kete. Links to the individual tools have been added to illustrate how agencies and groups facing similar issues might draw on available tools. Case study Prepared March 2003, updated December 2006.
has indicated that it is aware of this issue and restricts numbers to some extent on an *ad hoc* basis (it is unclear how this operates).

**Westland National Park Management Plan**

The Westland National Park management plan ([Conservation Act Framework](#)) sets limits on total numbers on the glaciers for new concessions ([concessions](#)) based on research undertaken by the department that looked at issues of safety and perceptions of crowding Limits of Acceptable Change’ ([LAC](#)). These limits do not affect current concessions unless these are up for review. The plan states that there should be no more than two companies guiding on each glacier (both glaciers are considered to have the same carrying capacity characteristics) with a total number of 300 persons per day on the glacier (below the 900 m contour) with groups being a maximum of 15 people including guides. Heli-hiking is limited to four trips each of 15 people and this total of 60 is to be included in the 300.

**Aircraft User Group**

There is resident aircraft users group that meets regularly and sets voluntary limits/rules on flight plans. While this has worked fairly well to date, there has been a significant change in operators which may have an impact in the future.

The Westland National Park management plan refers to the Mount Cook and Westland National Parks Resident Aircraft User Group Environmental Policy (see [Aoraki Mt Cook case study](#)). Since there are strong links between the aircraft companies operating between Mt Cook and Westland, the companies in most cases are members of both User Groups.

**Commentary**

Glacier guiding is very profitable, and the financial stakes are high. The original company at Franz Josef Glacier has demonstrated a strong commitment to the Franz area, in contrast to many of the motel operators who typically stay between two and four years. The company at Fox Glacier has links to Alpine Guides at Mt Cook (established in the 1960s).

One of the Franz Josef guiding companies feels aggrieved because their concession has a restriction on numbers on the Franz Josef glacier while the other company operating on the glacier does not. They have applied to the Department of Conservation for an increase in numbers and also for a concession on the Fox Glacier, and have been turned down. The other company operating from Franz Josef believes that they have adopted a ‘responsible citizen’ perspective using voluntary restrictions.

There is limited flexibility in terms of the ordinary glacier walks, but likely to be strong competition with heli-hikes, though the current total number cap will mean that there may not be much flexibility here either.

**Towards an integrated Approach**

It should be noted that mediation has not been tried at Franz Josef glacier (see [conflict resolution](#)). The main tool that has been applied is the use of the Westland National Park management plan. This will not be able to be implemented completely until the revision of the existing concessions for guiding on the glaciers. At that stage application of tools such as LAC should improve perceptions of crowding. Use of the kete could assist managers and developers by allowing them to explore new ways of addressing issues.

**References**

