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Freedom camping in Aotearoa New Zealand: an exploration of stakeholder perceptions

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The global COVID-19 health pandemic has shaken the most stable political systems, and left deep economic scars across industries. With global and national travel at a standstill, the tourism industry is among the most heavily hit. The gradual lifting of restrictions has already fuelled tourism demand, and previous hopes of rebuilding and transforming tourism more sustainably are vanishing. To ensure that pre-COVID-19 situations of unsustainable development do not resurface, it is of critical importance to go beyond economically driven crisis recovery. Instead, governments need to reconsider pre-crisis challenges, such as imbalances between tourists and residents, infrastructure shortages, and questions around the efficiency of regulations and policies. In New Zealand, issues related to freedom camping have fuelled these debates, with headlines relating to tourists defecating in public space, dropping garbage, and being 'freeloaders' with little economic value. Adopting a multiple stakeholder approach, this research note empirically explores stakeholder perceptions of challenges associated with freedom camping in the context of New Zealand. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 stakeholders representing host communities, local councils, national agencies, tourism businesses, and regional tourism organisations. Qualitative data analysis reveals positive changes and reduced impacts as results of additional infrastructure funding, educational measures, and locally enforced bylaws. However, participants also noted the need for a national framework, and clear statements and messages regarding domestic demand. Considering that nature-based experiences that allow for social distancing, such as (freedom) camping, have grown significantly during the pandemic and that domestic tourists will be crucial to post-COVID tourism recovery, this original multiple stakeholder approach delivers policy-relevant insights and provides avenues for future research with regard to a responsible and sustainable tourism restart.

Keywords: *freedom camping, responsible camping, legislation, COVID-19 recovery, sustainable tourism development, New Zealand, multiple stakeholder perspective*

1 INTRODUCTION

The sudden and impactful outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020 resulted in a shift from over-tourism to under-tourism, and in some cases virtually no tourism. With the reopening of borders and slow steps towards a new normal,

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questions around sustainable tourism development were rekindled. Although international arrivals were set to drastically decline in 2020 (World Tourism Organization 2020), the gradual lifting of national restrictions comes along with growing domestic tourism and the early realisation that behaviour has not changed. Images from crowded beaches in Bournemouth (England), for instance, recalled pre-COVID scenarios (Moore 2020), and the reopening of European borders lends early evidence for little change, as observed by TravelMole (2020): 'Coronavirus fears don't appear to have dampened the antics of some young Brits in Magaluf [Majorca] just days after Spain re-opened its borders to holidaymakers.' Not only is this anti-social behaviour, negligence of civic duty and ultimately a health risk, but also a sign that situations of unsustainable growth and imbalances might return faster than hoped for.

In New Zealand, pre-COVID discussions addressed infrastructure shortages, particularly toilets and waste stations, which are often localised and influenced by seasonal fluctuations. While state constitutions regulate free access to public land, concerns are voiced about inadequate regulations and a lack of national policies. While small taxpayer bases are unable to fund the required infrastructure, national policies restrict or slow down infrastructure planning. Furthermore, demand changes – including the growth of more autonomous, flexible and adventurous forms of travel (off the beaten track) – require amendments to regulations and policies (Seeler et al. 2020). These demand trends are reflected in the growth of second-home ownership and freedom camping (Caldicott et al. 2014; Collins et al. 2018). Although freedom campers aim to be close to nature and host communities, there is criticism about their environmental and social footprints and shortcomings in economic value (Collins et al. 2018; Fieger et al. 2020). Despite growing antagonism, freedom camping is expected to grow. During low alert levels of the COVID-19 crisis, New Zealanders already undertake camping trips in record numbers, and post-COVID both international and domestic tourists are expected to look for outdoor recreation and isolated nature experiences. They prefer private transportation, particularly by campervan and motorhome, and accommodation that supports social distancing and hygiene (FUR et al. 2020). This research note explores the (perceived) impacts of freedom camping regulations and legislation on sustainable destination development. It uses New Zealand as a case study, and adopts a multiple stakeholder approach to assess how these different stakeholders perceive freedom camping impacts and challenges associated with it.

2 FREEDOM CAMPING IN NEW ZEALAND

Fieger et al. (2020: 266) define freedom camping as 'mobility practice whereby domestic or international travellers choose to occupy an automobile or RV [recreational vehicle] as a mode of accommodation in an open or public space that is not bound by market-based commercial norms and camping and/or caravan park regulations'. Freedom camping has a long tradition in New Zealand, with many New Zealanders having spent their family summer holiday along the coastal areas in campervans and motorhomes. National legislation, the Freedom Camping Act 2011, was implemented prior to the 2011 Rugby World Cup to facilitate travelling across the country during the event. The Freedom Camping Act permits freedom camping in public spaces under certain conditions, and defines it as camping in a tent or vehicle in a public space within 200 metres of a road, coastline or Great Walk hiking track (New

Zealand Government 2020). With the introduction of this legislation, freedom camping gained legitimacy as a valued part of the country's tourism portfolio.

However, freedom campers often receive negative publicity and are criticised for being freeloaders (Fieger et al. 2020; Kearns et al. 2017), and freedom camping is portrayed as an 'illegal, destructive and parasitic activity' (Caldicott et al. 2014: 418). Headlines relating to freedom campers being dirty, low-value tourists – defecating in public space, dropping their rubbish on the go and occupying public spaces (New Zealand Herald 2020) – are common, and have more recently fuelled political debates on whether the country's legislation suffices (Foon 2020b). Amid the country's endeavours towards more sustainable destination development, voices became louder to ban freedom camping in vehicles that are not self-contained (Sivignon 2019). This request was further intensified with a petition that called for a total ban on freedom camping for non-residents after COVID-19 (Foon 2020a), but this is not supported by the country's tourism association spearheading the Responsible Camping Forum, Tourism Industry Aotearoa (TIA). TIA (2020a) understands that freedom camping is regarded as a 'birth right' by New Zealanders and that a ban would 'unfairly penalise the majority of overseas visitors who behave appropriately'. As a reaction to the growing criticism, central government announced additional investments of NZ$8 million in public amenities and education as well as the use of innovative technology, such as the Ambassador app to facilitate monitoring of freedom campers (Davis 2019). Local governments are empowered to pass bylaws that regulate freedom camping more tightly. For example, one of the most popular freedom camping regions, Westland District on the South Island, passed a bylaw in 2018 expanding the distance from 200m to 500m, and limiting freedom camping to two consecutive days and no more than ten nights in a 30-day period at any one spot (Westland District Council 2018: 3). Bylaws support positive regional development, yet the pressure of managing the activity remains within the communities. TIA (2017) noted that more engagement with different stakeholders is needed to monitor their perceptions and sentiments related to freedom camping.

3 METHODS

This exploratory research gave different tourism stakeholders a voice to empower them to share their experiences, and an interpretive lens was used to explore their perspectives on the complex and multi-faceted issues related to freedom camping. As is common in qualitative research in the social sciences, participants were selected using non-probability sampling strategies. Purposive sampling is suitable when the research is exploratory in nature and information richness and depth are pursued as participants with the best fit for the research can be deliberately selected (Denscombe 2017). Snowball sampling techniques were complementarily used in a second stage of participant selection. Participants were invited using direct emails and informed about the aim and ethical considerations of the research. A total of 20 representatives from regional tourism organisations (RTOs), regional and local councils, central government agencies, tourism businesses, community groups, and local residents were interviewed. All semi-structured interviews took place in February 2020 and were completed face-to-face in the participants' local settings, meaning ten destinations across New Zealand. This approach supported a better feel for the place through additional observations. An interview guide was used, including questions such as 'What is the situation of freedom camping in your destination?' and 'How effective

are freedom camping measures in your destination?' All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants and transcribed after interview completion.

Qualitative data analysis implies a dynamic process of inductive reasoning, which means that ideas and conclusions are drawn from the collected data and emerge through the analysis. Braun and Clarke's (2006) principles of thematic analysis were followed as they facilitate an iterative process and allow backwards and forwards movement during analysis. Familiarisation with the data took place during transcription, and transcripts were manually and digitally coded using Nvivo 12. This resulted in the generation of themes and the emergence of central findings. To ensure that all information is kept confidential and no personal identifiers are exposed, participants are grouped into three general groups, and pseudonyms and placeholders are used Group 1: community member/resident (n = 6); Group 2: regional or local council/ central government agency (n = 8); Group 3: tourism business/RTO (n = 6).

4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 From freedom camping to responsible camping

Participants agreed that freedom camping has experienced significant media attention as 'it is having a direct impact on people's backyards and their quality of living, because of the personal pollution that it is creating' (Group3_1). As a result of heated discussions and intensified pressure on governments to intervene and revise policies, central government agreed on additional funding to combat infrastructure shortages; however, participants remained inconclusive on whether such investments really help mitigate the problem or intensify it:

> It is like in the Joni Mitchell song 'they paved paradise to put up a parking lot' – here they put up a parking lot at the foreshore [Figure 1]. To me, one of the biggest most obvious signs of litter is actually the line-ups of motorhomes and cars that people sleep in – they are the litter! They are littering our beachfronts and our carparks. They are ruining our views … I think it is an absolute privilege and, on some occasions, I feel that privilege should be revoked, but I don't think it will. I suspect we are too far gone … it seems to me what councils are doing increasingly is, they are, in fact putting in further infrastructure, rather than restricting, that seems to be their response, is it the right response? (Group3_4)

Participants also referred to the shift in terminologies from freedom camping to responsible camping, and anticipated that this can be helpful to communicate roles and responsibilities better. Educational elements gained centre stage to inform visitors how to camp responsibly and eco-wisely (TIA 2020b). Guided by the Tiaki Promise (Tourism New Zealand 2019), freedom campers are supported in embracing the principles of Kaitiakitanga – meaning to care for New Zealand by travelling socially and being environmentally responsible – and becoming guardians of the places they visit. Through a more positive lens, one participant understood freedom campers as part of the successful economic transformation from a 'depressed economy to a tourist town and an environmentally aware tourist town' (Group2_2), and highlighted the importance of welcoming them and overcoming the assumption that they are low-budget tourists.

Figure 1 Carpark right on the oceanfront, 'littered' with freedom campers

4.2 Freedom campers: really no-value tourists?

Tourism New Zealand (TNZ), the government body to promote tourism overseas, aims for value over volume and a sustainable tourism development (TIA 2019). Given that freedom campers are often assumed to leave environmental and social footprints and have little economic value, they were put in the spotlight of media and political discussions (TIA 2017). Participants were indecisive on whether freedom campers are indeed low-budget travellers or whether these are stereotypical assumptions and it is rather the industry that needs to facilitate the needed services and experiences:

> The campervan market, particularly the little … vans, they are not the enemy. They are at the end of the day often also high-value consumers because they stay much longer than the high-value international consumers. They actually spend more because they just stay longer. Our task is to keep them here and provide them with activities that they want to do, this is why we need amenities. (Group2_7)

Fieger et al. (2020) note that freedom campers make use of free activities to afford the overall stay, but that does not mean they are not engaging in high-value experiences and activities. This issue was also addressed by one participant who described the hybridity of freedom campers regarding expenses and their likelihood to return:

> Talking to campers in freedom camping places … they came, looked around when they were younger and they wanted to come back … and they said 'We just came back and walked around the peninsula today.' And I thought well that is rather cheap, that is a free trip. 'And tomorrow we are booked in for a flight and [to] do Wings over Whales [whale-watching flights, costing from NZ$350]. (Group2_2)

The same participant shared a personal interaction with an Australian couple that demonstrates domino effects and interlinkages between freedom campers and other groups of travellers:

> Well my son came around and travelled around New Zealand in a little campervan and he sent us back all these photos and we just said to ourselves 'What an amazing country! Let's go and have a look at this amazing country', and then I asked them 'So how are you travelling around?' 'We booked tours and are staying in high-end accommodation, we could have possibly been doing it how my son has done, but we probably wouldn't be seeing some of the things that he saw.' And that raises a very interesting question around what is low-end and what is high-end tourism? And how are these two interlinked? (Group2_2)

In New Zealand, international campers are often blamed for negative freedom camping issues (Fieger et al. 2020; Kearns et al. 2017), yet evidence that they can be held solely responsible for freedom camping's negative impacts is lacking.

4.3 Domestic freedom campers: required perspective shifts

Participants described the traditions of freedom camping in many New Zealanders' lives as most of them had camped remotely and freely since childhood. With the increase in freedom campers from overseas, New Zealanders feel restricted in their own rights, which is then mirrored in their dissatisfaction with the freedom camping situation. Participants remarked that some New Zealanders have unrealistic expectations as they are comparing their situation with the past, and deny changes in their own demand and consumption habits.

> My theory is, that most New Zealanders have had the pleasure, thanks to some friendly farmers, in the past to being able to camp wherever they like and they do believe that [it] is a God-given right. Even though no longer they have a little car and a little tent, but they all have these larger motorhomes. (Group3_4)

TNZ (2017) noted that there is often a general blaming of freedom campers without clear evidence. In this vein, a participant shared a story from a case on the South Island that demonstrates the misconceptions about (international) freedom campers:

> [T]hey had some serious problems, you know, diapers, empty bottles of booze, cans in a popular freedom camping spot where it wasn't illegal to do freedom camping. Some locals got together and set up a camera and they watched it back and they noticed that pretty much every person that left some rubbish wasn't the freedom campers, it was local teenagers from […] and the freedom campers, by and large, picked up their rubbish and took it with them. That was kind of interesting that these locals got together to gather evidence to stop freedom camping only to find out that it is their nephews and nieces and neighbours that were causing the problems. (Group2_6)

This example demonstrates the involvement of locals in managing and monitoring freedom camping. This local and community involvement is also anchored in the Freedom Camping Act as local authorities are empowered to pass bylaws.

4.4 Bylaws: empowering communities or a cause of irritation?

Bylaws help communities define specific sites and therewith regulate freedom camping, and so positive effects through stricter bylaws were reported:

> Every night they were absolutely jam-packed, they were more than there would be allowed to have … Gosh, it was like a little city there and they regulated it this year and there are only limited numbers for freedom campers. (Group3_3)

Bylaws also support restricting the duration of stays, particularly in townships, which then encourages people to stay in more rural areas. Generally, freedom campers are known to stay in more remote areas, and therewith positively contribute to regional dispersal and mitigation of crowding and over-tourism (Collins et al. 2018; Fieger et al. 2020). However, participants noted issues and laissez-faire policies associated with the certification of being a 'self-contained vehicle':

> We restrict to self-contained vehicles … which means that a toilet has to be accessible at all times. That has created some debate, our ambassadors have been out and about in the community, because a lot of people said it is certified self-contained, but their toilet is under the bed. … It is a national issue, I think. It is not a local issue. (Group2_2)

Participants urged revisions of the certification scheme, and hold car rental agencies and the free market partly accountable as they often fail to educate and clearly inform their customers. One participant acknowledged related paradoxes as there is not enough space for decent self-certified vehicles to park. Another participant admitted that bylaws have minimised some issues yet controls are needed. This required management, and monitoring of freedom camping activities poses further challenges due to geographical constraints, particularly in areas that have 'more backroads than front roads' (Group3_1), as well as the need for additional funds and resources, such as wardens. Findings reveal ambiguities as some participants saw it as a burden and others as an opportunity to create new jobs. Overall, participants' main concern was with the management of freedom camping at local rather than national level:

> The one thing that I think could help is if there is a national framework for freedom camping and basically saying, 'You're welcome to responsible camping but only in these zones across the country.' … But that is not the case and it is just bizarre the approaches from all the different local governments. It is absolutely confusing. (Group3_5)

Participants also came to the campers' defence as the management and regulation of freedom camping is confusing for visitors who are not necessarily familiar with the local geography:

> Each local authority [is] sort of making its own rules and it is very difficult for an individual to know what the rules actually are and they don't know which local authority's area they are in. When they are driving through New Zealand, they don't have a clue. (Group1_1)

Overall findings identify questions around the effectiveness and feasibility of locally enforced bylaws for such complex issues, and were critical of whether sustainability aims can be achieved and issues related to tensions between local residents and tourists mitigated if the management of freedom camping remains too fragmented.

5 CONCLUSION

Freedom camping has received a disproportionate level of media coverage despite its relatively small market share in New Zealand. This is potentially due to the nature of freedom camping, which often occurs close to the oceanfront and at the roadside, making it highly visible. Another reason may be the mostly negative yet unsubstantiated stereotypes existing around freedom campers. With the revised Freedom Camping Act, the empowerment of councils to pass bylaws as well as additional funds to minimise infrastructure shortages, freedom camping has been addressed on several levels. However, questions around the feasibility and effectiveness of these initiatives and stakeholders' perceptions thereof remain, and knowledge gaps exist regarding to what degree these can positively contribute to sustainable destination development. An exploratory qualitative, multiple stakeholder approach was used to address these knowledge gaps and explore multiple stakeholder perspectives with reference to freedom camping challenges. Findings reveal that freedom camping perceptions were similar across stakeholders. On the one hand, they felt that recent initiatives, additional funds and particularly the relabelling from 'freedom' to 'responsible' camping contributed to the mitigation of issues related to freedom camping. On the other hand, participants were inconclusive on whether infrastructure projects really help or further aggravate some of the tensions. Instead, they highlighted the need for effective educational measures that do not only address international guests but turn the lens inward as domestic freedom campers are a significant part of the equation and of vital importance in post-COVID-19 recovery. A revitalisation of domestic demand through responsible camping can also positively contribute to the industry's long-term aims to develop a truly sustainable destination.

The strongest takeaway from this research is that participants were very dissatisfied with the fragmented management of freedom camping, and criticised the local bylaw approach. Instead, a stronger and more guiding national framework was requested to reduce ambiguities for all participants, meaning hosts and guests alike. Given that data for this research were collected at a very early stage of COVID-19 and the actual magnitude of the impact was not yet anticipated, future research will be needed to explore the role of freedom camping in New Zealand's sustainable tourism recovery post-pandemic, and to investigate whether there will be changes in state legislation with reference to public access. In addition, a comparative study with other destinations that face similar challenges related to freedom camping, such as the Nordic countries, is recommended. In Norway, for instance, the concept of *Allemannsretten* (the right to roam), which is part of the Outdoor Recreation Act, is deeply ingrained in the national identity and lifestyles, and facilitates freedom camping; however it has experienced increasing criticism and has been blamed as a driver of tension between local communities and visitors (Pearson 2019). It would also be interesting to compare whether perceptions of freedom camping are different among stakeholders in destinations with stricter regulations.

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