

Planning for the Future

An Alternative View for Oban, Stewart Island.

Background

The settlement of Oban on Stewart Island, based around Horseshoe Bay, Halfmoon Bay and the Golden Bay / Thule shore of Paterson Inlet has been in existence since the mid 1800's, and has gone through several "phases" of focus, with timber milling, fishing and tourism all having had their day in the sun. Equally, there has been significant variations in the Islands population, from a high of approaching 700 immediately prior to the great depression of 1929, when timber, tourism and fishing all supplied a living, to a low of perhaps only 330 in the 1990's when the Island was suffering markedly from a downturn in the fortunes of the fishing industry and the early days of the quota management system. The present population of 381 (last census) reflects a stable, although small fishing fleet, a significant DoC presence, aquiculture and a growing tourist industry.

Directly or indirectly tourism employs almost 50% of the community's work force, and by any metric has grown significantly since the late '60s. Then a visitor wishing to stay on the island had the choice of the Hotel (but without the annex) Ferndale guest house (and it burnt down in the early '70s) a 5-unit motel and, from memory, 1 bed & breakfast. Anything else was a friend's holiday "crib" of generally basic facilities.

Since then, and particularly post "National Park" in 2002 the Islands accommodation has increased exponentially, with now over 70 properties offering well over 700 beds for guest accommodation.

Transport to and from the Island has been enhanced over the holiday season by the ferry service offering 3, sometimes 4 inward sailings, and the air service capable of two 9-seater flights per hour, if demand requires.

Worldwide tourism is seen as the great growth industry, serving a world population with a hunger for travel. And while the high-profile New Zealand resort destinations of Queenstown, Milford Sound, Mt Cook, Rotorua et al will continue to attract the bulk traveler, smaller boutique destinations such as Stewart Island will also continue to grow, especially for those wishing a less frenetic and more nature focused destination and experience.

The Islanders Experience

And it is those values which attracts and retains the resident population. Compared with "the Mainland", life on Stewart Island is perhaps not so easy, but for each and every Islander the positives of Island life far outweigh the negatives. It is perhaps not surprising that when questioned about an individual's vision of the future the predominant prayer is "Please, Not like Queenstown"

The Visitors Experience

Talking with our own guests is enlightening as well, as so many of them wonder why their travel agents sent them to Queenstown, and if they return to New Zealand Queenstown will NOT be on the itinerary. But here on Stewart Island they can relax, walk the tracks, enjoy the wildlife, the sea, the forest, generally "smell the flowers", and absolutely no pressure to "do things"

Gems Destroyed

One of the problems with living in an “Undiscovered Secret” is that they don’t stay secrets for ever. And being overwhelmed with visitors has a very real possibility of destroying the very essence of what attracts both residents and visitors to Stewart Island.

World Wide Responses to Tourist Pressures

- **The Isles of Scilly** Situated off the SW coast of Cornwall, most, but not all the available land is owned by the Duchy of Cornwall. Tourism is the main occupation, although there is some horticulture. The Island is a “Red Hot” destination, with accommodation properties regularly showing booked out (100%) for over 12 months in advance. Although a contentious issue, it is extremely difficult to obtain permission to build on private land, and impossible to build on the land leased from the Duchy. This is a local Authority response to a perceived “Visitor Overload”
- **Assorted Cruise Ship Destination Islands.** The most cursory Google search will reveal many destinations which now put limits on landings by Cruise Ship Passengers. Again all in response to “Visitor Overload”

We are starting to hear from our own guests do not go to Dunedin if there’s a Cruise Ship in.... you can’t get to Larnach Castle, the Albatross colony is booked out, so is the Taieri Gorge Train. As a community we should be aware that Cruise Ships may well be “cream”, but we should not ever annoy our bread and butter for an occasional helping of cream

- **Venice** Looks to limit tourist numbers
- **Barcelona** Approves new law to limit visitor numbers
- **Iceland** Considers limiting tourist numbers to protect its natural wonders
- **And so on**

But one thing is obvious when reading these accounts on line. Most, if not all, are reactive, attempts by communities to deal with significantly “excessive visitor impacts”.

As Oscar Wild wrote:-

Each man kills the thing he loves

*Some strangle with the hands of Lust,
Some with the hands of Gold*

My guess is most who live on Stewart Island do not see our visitor numbers as presently excessive.

But put in place “The Perfect Storm” with most of our commercial beds occupied (over 700), a goodly day tourist influx (maybe an additional 150 persons) lots of family holiday cribs occupied, and a large cruise ship landing 1900 passengers and unknown numbers of crew, into a community of around 400, and 28 K of roads, and all of a sudden we get a glimpse of a very dysfunctional future.

Already we have a local water taxi operation advertising “get away from the Cruise Ship Congestion” trips, aimed, dare I say it, at locals.

So how, as a community should we plan for this future???

The following are my thoughts on how I would approach the situation (if I were god !!).

It should be noted that I have no idea if some of what I'm proposing would be allowable with the current legal frameworks in place, but I make no apology for that other than to observe that laws should reflect reality, and the community's wishes. I am also focused on the availability of commercial accommodation as a vehicle to limit visitor numbers. But the basic premise could easily be extended to day visitors, both from the existing operators and from cruise ships.

As mentioned earlier, we have over 700 commercial beds available, and apart from big cruise ship days, overall we cope quite well with these numbers, and little sign that the community facilities are overwhelmed

This includes power, sewage disposal, walking trails back in the hills, and general amenities. There certainly is a case for rapidly extending the village footpaths, especially to Golden Bay, To Leask Bay, up Main Road to the bottom of the airport hill, , and to Horseshoe Bay. The latter two being to the two National Park entrances and the start of the DoC hiking network. We also need more toilets. Every beach should have at least one as close as possible to the beach entrance. Horseshoe Bay should have two, one at each end. Every single visitor to Stewart Island will walk and flush a toilet. These should have a higher priority than any other use of the visitor levy

Council Accommodation Compliance Requirements.

Currently SDC requires all commercial accommodation, regardless of number of beds to contribute to the sewage rate and to a roading levy. This is NOT at the domestic rate but is higher to reflect the commercial nature of the property. And for properties with 6 or more beds (pillows) Council requires that properties are compliant as commercial accommodation providers and that they meet several specific minimum standards.

Council are demonstrably lax in enforcing their own regulations, and although I do not know what the compliance rate is I doubt if more than half the available beds meet their obligations.

"If I were God"

Nb, numbers are for arguments sake only

First Step

1. All commercial accommodation providers regardless of size be licenced as of now. No Exceptions. *Basic registration be simple, and as financially painless as possible... this not to include long term landlord/tenant agreements.*
2. All commercial accommodation providers will meet their rating obligations as of now.
3. Accommodation providers with 6 beds or more be required to meet Council compliance requirements. For properties not currently compliant a grace period of not more than 18 months be allowed to meet

standards. After 18 months if not up to standard they lose their licence.

4. With around 700 + beds currently available it would be reasonable to expect that 1000 beds might be sustainable. So, Council would put a bed ceiling at that number. Organisations wishing to supply commercial accommodation would be licenced within that ceiling, with licence valid for no more than 2 years unless completed and operating. Licences should be “locked” to the property concerned, and thus not transferable. Although properties can of course be sold. If a licence is relinquished, then that that number of bed licences becomes available on a first come first served basis.
5. Every 5 years (??) council and community review the visitor targets.

A Were all our beds ever full, and if so how did we cope over that period

B Is the sewage system coping ??

C Is the power system coping ??

D Do we have enough foot paths ??

Pedestrian safety is paramount, and with increasing visitor and resident numbers plus more, and larger vehicles as well as hire cars, scooters and bicycles is already an issue

E Do we have enough walking tracks (Ulva Island and other destinations) ???

F Do our roads cope with both wheeled and foot traffic

Already becoming an issue. Our roads are footpaths that grew, initially to horse & cart roads, and then for cars and trucks. Although improved markedly when tar sealed 40 odd years ago many are less than 2 carriage ways wide, are often steep and with many corners and poor visibility. There is often limited or in some cases no verge or pedestrian space. Our vehicle numbers are increasing, and now with increasing numbers of hire cars, scooters and electric bicycles. All the latter driven by visitors, who for a variety of reasons may not cope well with the many and varied road issues they will encounter.

G Are the wharves coping ????

H is anything else impacting the visitor experience ??

Visitor experience is critical. Stewart Island as a destination lives and dies on the visitor experience. We hear from our guests don't go to Dunedin when there is a cruise ship in. You can't get to the Albatross Colony, Larnach Castle is booked out, and the Taieri Gorge Train is booked out. This is a serious negative impact on their Dunedin Experience. I am not proposing banning Cruise Ships, we hardly notice the smaller ones and of course, the visitor levies they leave behind is significant. But how we deal with vessels with over 700 passengers, plus an unknown number of crew on shore leave needs to be looked at very carefully, and possibly limit numbers ashore at any one time.



I Is resident's life experience being degraded.

Quite apart from anything else an unhappy resident population will lower the visitor experience

6. After each 5 yearly review the bed number "ceiling" be reviewed. If the above parameters are acceptable, then the total number of commercial beds available could (should ??) be allowed to increase to a pre-set limit (say) 10% higher. The economic viability of accommodation suppliers should NOT be a factor in determining this.

Pro-active rather than reactive

The whole rationale behind the above proposal is NOT to ensure the viability of accommodation providers, but rather by being slightly restrictive we as a community can manage our visitor numbers so as to maximise their experience, while also ensuring we have some control over our own lives, and not overwhelming our ability to cope. Pro-active rather than reactive

I have not mentioned day visitors, and of course a similar overview and control would have to be put in place for them as well.

The Short Objective

I guess the shortest vision of all this is to have visitors be saying, as they wave us good by from the plane or ferry,"-

"That was everything I expected, beautiful scenery, wonderful birds and nature, not wall to wall people and a great community"

And as we wave them good by we are saying: -

"We did enjoy having them stay and enjoy what we love about living in such a special place"

Addendum to item # F regarding roads.

While our "main" roads ... To Horseshoe Bay, Golden Bay, Leask Bay and Main Road are wide enough for two vehicles to pass easily, all need footpaths, which should be a present priority. Many of our other roads are at best a carriage and a half wide. These generally have no foot paths and in places little or no verge. Add to this vehicles parked on the road side, occasional large heavy trucks and a possibility of larger buses and it is easy to foresee real issues.

The cost of widening these side roads to double carriage plus footpaths would be extremely high and would arguably seriously detract from the character of the village and surrounds.

We already have Rankin Street as one way, and this appears to work well, and has the side benefit of diverting some of the Thule bound traffic, thus reducing the westbound traffic load from Golden Bay to Watercross.

With this in mind there is a case to be made to introduce a one-way system up over Observation Rock, possibly from the Anglican Church past Observation Rock and down to the Golden Bay Road corner.

Another avenue which would reduce roading congestion would be for Council to require all properties to provide off street parking for all vehicles which habitually “live” there, plus one, (for visitors) and to allow roadside parking only in designated areas, possibly by use of yellow dotted no parking lines where necessary. Most properties would have no issues complying with this requirement., Some, with high banks between road and property may have an issue, which could be addressed by allowing property owners to embed a garage into the bank, as long as the outer door was recessed (say) 2 metres back the line of the bank even if the boundary was further in. This roadside lease would be with the requirement that if the road is later widened, the garage would have to be either removed, or altered to comply with the above outer door recess requirements.

An example of the issues caused by roadside parking is presently illustrated by the red car which is parked outside Turner Cottage on the Golden Bay Road. There, the carriageway is reasonable for two vehicles, but the red car effectively reduces this to a carriageway and a half, without even considering the issues of pedestrians.

In Conclusion.

An easy option is for us to do nothing, and just react to whatever happens. My personal view is that this would ultimately lead to tears, perhaps a good time in the future, but tears never the less.

I’m also cynical enough to realise that if we were to implement the above plan, then we would find things that didn’t work quite as we wished.

But for me the secret to good governance is to realise we got that wrong, tug our collective forelocks and then ask ourselves how we can fix it, knowing what we know now.

Sincerely..... Peter Tait

8th November 2017