

Visitor monitoring report:

The Darran Mountains and Homer Hut 2006/07-2007/08



(Photo: E Oyston)

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Executive Summary

This report details the findings of two successive seasons of visitor monitoring at Homer Hut during 2006/07 and 2007/08 that were part of a larger visitor monitoring programme for Fiordland National Park. The purpose of the monitoring was to assess the experience of visitors who use the Darran Remote visitor setting, an area that is managed to protect its quiet atmosphere and wilderness characteristics as well as its unique remote rock climbing and alpine climbing opportunities. Homer Hut was identified as the most appropriate location to sample this user group.

Monitoring was performed using a self administered questionnaire that contained primarily quantitative questions. Surveying took place on a total of 40 days during the 2006/07 and 2007/08 summer seasons. A total of 102 individuals completed the survey, with a response rate of 69.2%. This is a relatively small sample size meaning that the estimated margin of error is relatively high ($\pm 9.7\%$).

From the results a profile of a typical visitor to Homer Hut was constructed. The standout features of this profile include the predominance of males and a high level of previous climbing experience. Visitors to Homer Hut are likely to have a relatively strong degree of “place attachment”, as over half of the respondents had previously been to the area and twenty percent of respondents had been there more than five times. The quality of scenery and the surrounding environment, the climbing opportunities, and the isolation and wilderness of the Darrans are key values for these visitors.

Typically visitors will base themselves from Homer Hut and pursue a variety of one day trips with Gertrude Saddle, the Babylon and Chasm crags, and opportunities on the Moir Massif being the most common locations. Gertrude Saddle and Homer Saddle were identified as relatively well-used locations that provided access to remote recreational opportunities further afield.

An issue raised in the discussion of the findings is that the most visited and unique climbing opportunities in the area have been excluded from the management setting that would best protect and retain their values. These opportunities include the Moir and McPherson-Talbot Massifs.

Aircraft activity is significantly affecting the ability of visitors to Homer Hut to experience the important values of remoteness and solitude in the surrounding area and is detracting from the experience for many visitors. Approximately two-thirds of respondents felt annoyance at aircraft activity. It was suggested that high annoyance levels, even compared to the adjacent day walk opportunity at Gertrude Valley, were exacerbated by a number of factors. These include proximity to the flight paths, low levels of ambient noise and the likelihood that respondents have high levels of attachment to both the place and their chosen activity.

Crowding and visitor conflict were identified as occurring at low levels. More spatial data may be required regarding these problems in order for management to maintain an environment that fosters positive visitor experiences.

With these points in mind, the following recommendations are made:

1. Follow recommendations proposed by Harbrow (2008) regarding appropriate numbers of aircraft landings at Milford Aerodrome
2. Undertake an exercise mapping levels of visitor activity in the area in order to recommend a ‘least impacting’ flight path for aircraft travelling to and from the Milford Aerodrome
3. That the Moir-McPherson-Talbot Massif area is managed to be consistent with the Darran Remote visitor setting
4. Maintain the current low key approach to promoting the Gertrude Saddle/Valley walk
5. Repeat visitor monitoring at Homer Hut with the following adjustments
 - a. Optimise the time at which the questionnaire is conducted
 - b. Request respondents to state what recreation activities they engaged in and where
 - c. Provide a more detailed map to allow respondents to accurately demarcate their trips
 - d. Request respondents to identify the locations of their negative experiences

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Introduction

This report details the findings of two successive seasons of visitor monitoring at Homer Hut in Fiordland National Park. The visitor monitoring was conducted during 2006/07 and 2007/08 as part of a larger programme carried out by the Southland Conservancy, to fulfil the management objectives of the Fiordland National Park Management Plan¹.

The purpose of the visitor monitoring programme is to assist with decision making and ensure efficient and effective resource allocation, as well as identify and resolve problems to ensure the environment and visitor experience are not degraded (DOC, 2007). The surveys at Homer Hut aimed to do this by assessing visitors' demographics, group characteristics, likes and dislikes, experiences of key site values and their interactions with other park visitors. Homer Hut was chosen as a survey site to represent the Darran Remote setting (see **Figure 1**) and to sample individuals from the more remote end of the visitor group spectrum. The surveys at Homer Hut were also intended to monitor the effect of aircraft noise – an issue which had been identified as potentially having a detrimental effect on the visitor experience for these visitors and in the national park generally. Other locations in the vicinity that have been monitored as part of this programme include Key Summit (Visser and Harbrow 2007), the Hollyford Track (Visser & Harbrow, 2009), and Gertrude Valley (Harbrow & Squires in progress).

The purpose of this report is to present the combined findings of the surveys at Homer Hut, and to raise any management issues in the area that were identified in the research. This report does not discuss issues regarding aircraft noise in detail as the results relating to aircraft for all survey locations, including Homer Hut, are detailed in two earlier reports (see Harbrow, 2007, 2008).

This report describes the physical setting and management context of Homer Hut and the surrounding area, details the methodology utilised in the research, and presents and discusses the results of the survey. The report then concludes by making several brief recommendations for the management of Homer Hut and the adjacent visitor settings.

¹ See Fiordland National Park Management Plan, Sections 5.5.2 & 5.16 for the rationale, objectives, and implementation methods for Visitor Monitoring in Fiordland National Park.

Site context

Homer Hut is situated approximately one kilometre east of Homer Tunnel, near the entrance to Gertrude Valley, in Fiordland National Park (see **Figure 1**). The site is located just beyond the Gertrude Valley carpark off the Milford Road, the main corridor for transport for the approximate 500,000 visitors to Milford Sound per annum.

Owned and maintained by the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC), the hut contains three bunk rooms with a total of 30 bunks and a common room with tables, chairs, gas stoves, utensils, stainless steel kitchen benches, and a solid fuel burner. The rooms are insulated and have double glazed windows, and the kitchen benches have running water available from taps connected to the water tank system. A solar powered lighting system is also present, and two toilets are provided, detached from the main hut. The hut has a warden's quarters which contain its own bunks, gas stove, kitchen sink, running water, and shower. The NZAC charges \$15 per night for members, \$25 for non-members, \$15 for non-member's children aged 11-17, \$5 for member's children aged 11-17, while children under 10 years of age are free. Limited camping opportunities are available around the hut for half the price charged for hut accommodation. Fees are paid directly to a hut warden when present over summer, or posted to the NZAC national office. Booking is not required and bunk space is available on a first serve basis.

The NZAC state that the primary purpose of the hut is to "provide ready access to the Darran Mountains, New Zealand's premier alpine rock climbing area" (NZAC, 2008:1). Between October 2006 to April 2007, 780 bednights were recorded at the hut (Ollie Clifton pers. com.), however the real figure could be higher than this as volunteer hut wardens are only present during the summer months and volunteers are not always available.

Surrounding environment

The area surrounding Homer Hut includes Fiordland's highest peaks, with uplift and glacial and post-glacial processes producing a dramatic alpine landscape. The predominant hard erosion-resistant crystalline block diorite geology of the Darrans has produced rock faces that provide excellent friction, which combined with the sheer exposed faces of the mountains provides excellent rock climbing and mountaineering opportunities. For these reasons the Darrans has become a renowned area in the national and international climbing communities.

Recreational use and visitor context

Homer Hut has traditionally been used as a base for mountaineers and rock climbers accessing regions of the Darran Mountains to the north and Earl Mountains to the south (although the peaks of the Northern Earl Mountains are part of a separate range, they are often grouped and referred to as part of the Darran Mountains). In more recent times Homer Hut has also been used as a base for climbers using the developing sport climbing crags in the Cleddau Valley, kayakers using the surrounding rivers and nearby fiords, winter ice climbers, and visitors walking the popular Gertrude Valley/Saddle track. The valleys and saddles in the Darrans also provide unique scenic flight paths for passengers aboard aeroplanes and helicopters on a flight path to or from the Milford Aerodrome.

The area has historic recreation values, as routes were pioneered as far back as the 1890s by the likes of Homer, Holmes, and Grave; and major peaks began to be ascended in the 1920s by the likes of Grave, Moir, Sinclair, and Slater. Mountaineering in the area increased in popularity after 1953, as access became easier with the completion of the Homer Tunnel, and further first- ascents of the surrounding peaks took place.

Multi-pitch traditional climbing has been increasing in the Darrans, especially since the 1980s as rock climbing hardware and technology has evolved to become safer and lighter. The most popular rock climbing sites that are able to be reached within a day are the Homer Saddle crag, Black Lake, Moir's Mate and Mate's Little Brother, and the North Face of Barrier Knob (Jefferies 2006). These areas are those closest to Homer Hut, while other more remote sites present numerous opportunities for longer expeditions. Sport climbing predominantly occurs at the Chasm and Babylon crags, located in the Cleddau Valley. Both traditional and sport routes in the Darrans are aimed at experienced climbers, and offer difficult but rewarding climbs. The difficulty of the routes and nature of the alpine environment make the area unsuitable for beginner or inexperienced climbers. The NZAC have released several new publications

on the Darrans in the past decade to help raise the profile of climbing in the area. These publications include a comprehensive Darrans guide book for mountaineering and alpine rock routes, a Cleddau Valley cragging guide, and a history of mountaineering from the Milford Road.

Parties based around the Homer Tunnel are, weather permitting, exposed to a wealth of one to two day mountaineering and climbing excursions. Most mountaineering based around the Homer Tunnel area is thought to centre on Mt Crosscut, Mt Mcpherson, Mt Christina and Mt Talbot (accessed from the Upper Hollyford Valley). Other popular peaks in the area include Mitre Peak in Milford Sound; Mt Tutoko and Mt Madeline (accessed from the Tutoko Valley); Mt Grave and Mt Pembroke to the west; the peaks around the Adelaide cirque; and Pyramid Peak and Ngatimamoe Peak in the Northern Earl Mountains. Numerous other peaks are often attempted. Visitors seeking mountaineering opportunities that are not in the immediate vicinity of Homer Hut may be less inclined to stay at the hut as they will be more likely to camp or bivy en-route to their destination. For these visitors, staying at Homer Hut may only be considered if their party does not have enough time to reach a suitable campsite, or complete the drive home within a reasonable time frame.

The peak period for the hut is thought to be between the months of December and April, with February and March identified as the premium months for recreational activity due to the lowest levels of precipitation generally occurring in these months. Winter, autumn, and spring see relatively few visitors, due to a number of hazards including extreme avalanche danger, and high precipitation levels which quickly render rivers and streams impassable, and make travel on slick granite slabs and snowgrass particularly hazardous. Road closures due to avalanche danger also limits access to the area in winter and early spring. However, in the past decade, high grade sport climbs have been developed on crags in the Cleddau Valley that may be used in winter providing the road is open, and small numbers of climbers have been undertaking ice climbing in winter.

The area receives some use from day visitors and short stop travellers who use the Gertrude Valley walk, which is sign posted from the Milford Road. The Gertrude Valley walk is a 3-4 hour return route that ascends the Gertrude Valley to Gertrude Saddle where rewarding views down the Gulliver Valley to Milford Sound can be enjoyed. Visitors who walk to Gertrude Saddle may continue up to Barrier Knob, which becomes accessible at the end of the season (March - April) and exposed rock allows alternate travel to the snow field. The route to Gertrude Saddle is also used as an access route for other climbing and mountaineering opportunities in the area. The track along the valley floor is managed to BCA (Backcountry Adventurer) standard while beyond this the route is not marked by the Department. In reality the predominant visitors are likely to be the day visitors and short stop travellers due to the proximity of the track to a major visitor flow on the Milford Road and therefore there is a mismatch between the track standard and the predominant visitor type. However, the terrain and frequency of avalanches makes it impractical to maintain a high standard day visitor standard track is this location however.

The beginning of the Gertrude Valley walk is adjacent to Homer Hut, and as a result, some day visitors stop in on the way to or from the track. Track counter data indicates that approximately 2150 people walked some part of the Gertrude Valley track during the 2007/08 season. The Department attempts to control visitor numbers and the type of visitor using the Gertrude Valley Track through the content and amount of pre-visit information available to visitors; advice provided by staff at the FNP visitors centre; and the standard of the track.

There is no data available on the number of commercial visitors that use the Darrans area but information relating to the number of allocated commercial day walk opportunities on the Gertrude Valley Track and the limited amount of commercial activity in the wider areas relevant to visitors at Homer Hut are listed in **Table 1** below.

Table 1: Concession allocation as of December 2009 (Source: Permissions database)

Site	Number of operators	Total annual number of permitted visitors
Gertrude Valley (day & short walks)	18	4495
Gertrude Valley (rock climbing)	1	25
Gertrude Saddle (day walks)	11	2399
Gertrude Saddle (mountaineering)	1	15
Gertrude Saddle climbers circuit (mountaineering)	1	30
Homer Nature Walk (short walks)	11	15528
Homer Nature Walk (day walks)	2	720
Homer Saddle (day walks)	1	70
Homer Saddle (mountaineering)	3	30
Grave Talbot track (day walks)	2	1064
Lake Marian Climbers Circuit (mountaineering)	1	30
Tutoko Valley track (short walks)	1	727
Tutoko Valley track (day walks)	3	546
Tutoko Valley track (mountaineering)	1	50
Turners Biv (mountaineering)	1	50
Darran Remote (overnight walks)	1	84
Mitre Peak climbing area (mountaineering)	3	318
Total	62	26,181

Much of the quotas are unused but there are a number of reasons for this. Some quota is held by operators to allow for future growth. In the case of the Gertrude Valley / Saddle walk, operators also hold quota to give them the flexibility to offer different walks along the Milford Road depending on weather and on the fitness, experience and interests of their clients. Some quota exists on paper only. For example an operator may be allowed a number of visits per month or per week but conditions onsite during winter don't allow this quota to be used (Harbrow & Squires, *in progress*).

Planning and management context

The Darran Mountains, Earl Mountains, and surrounding areas are part of Fiordland National Park and are managed under the Fiordland National Park Management Plan 2007 (FNPMP). The FNPMP incorporates the policy requirements set out in the Conservation General Policy 2007, and National Park General Policy 2005 and gives effect to the 1998 Mainland Southland - West Otago Conservation Management Strategy (DOC 1998).

The FNPMP establishes a zoning system for visitor settings in the park, with each visitor setting containing rules, and implementation methods aimed at achieving effective recreation management within the park. The settings relevant to Homer Hut are displayed in **Figure 2** and described below.

The NZAC run Homer Hut under a structure lease/license concession (PAC-14-03-05), as well as a permit concession for camping in the area around Homer Hut (PAC-14-03-05-01). Both of these sites are in the Milford Road frontcountry visitor setting, and immediately adjacent to the Darran remote and Northern backcountry visitor settings. It is anticipated that visitors to the hut use the Darran Remote setting to the north and east; the Eastern Remote setting to the west; and the Northern Backcountry and Milford Road Frontcountry settings to get access to the two aforementioned remote settings.

The FNPMP states that the general objectives of Remote visitor settings are:

“To manage all remote visitor settings for low impact recreation opportunities distant from high use areas; while protecting the areas’ other national park values. The following key attributes will be protected:

- a) A predominance towards self-reliance;*
- b) Few encounters with other visitors (not more than one encounter with other visitor groups per day) and small party sizes;*
- c) Relatively free of recreation facilities;*
- d) Access is generally non-mechanised; and*
- e) Visitors expect to be away from sights and sounds of human influence.”*

(DOC, 2007:124)

Furthermore, the plan recognises the unique climbing opportunities in the Darrans in objective 1 for the Darran Remote setting:

“To manage the Darran Remote Setting to protect the following:

- a) Its remote rock climbing and alpine climbing opportunities that are world-renowned; and*
- b) Its quiet atmosphere and wilderness characteristics.”*

(DOC, 2007:126)

Commercial activities in the Darran Remote setting are very limited, with a combined total of 25 trips only being permitted for all concessions.

The Gertrude Valley Track sits within a separate corridor managed as part of the Northern Backcountry setting. Backcountry areas are managed to

“...provide opportunities for a variety of recreation experiences in a natural setting that may be challenging but can be accessed relatively easily; while protecting other national park values. Key attributes defining backcountry include;

- a) Catering for less experienced users who are prepared to experience a degree of risk and discomfort;*
- b) Visitors being reasonably self-reliant;*
- c) Facilities comprising basic huts and well-marked tracks;*
- d) Some reliance on mechanised access; and*
- e) Visitors expecting to have regular interactions with others (meeting up to ten parties per day).”*

(DOC, 2007:136)

The Gertrude Saddle itself is managed to be more consistent with the surrounding remote setting to reduce the potential for impacts on remote users. Commercial party sizes are limited to seven people including guides, each concessionaire is limited to one group per day and there is an annual limit of 2000 guided day walk visitors (excluding commercial mountain climbing groups who are transiting the area).

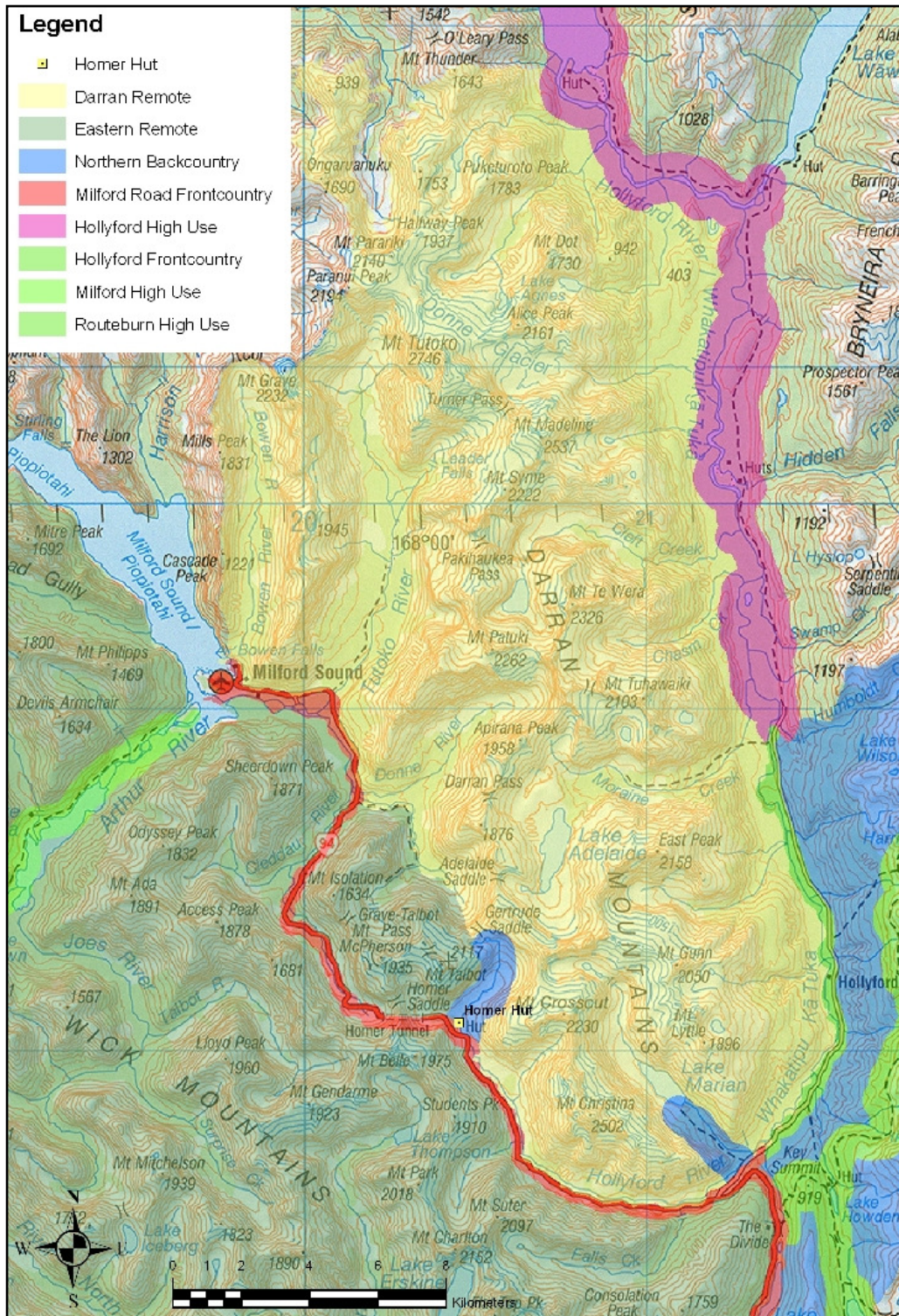


Figure 1: Visitor settings in FNP and location of Homer Hut and the Darrans area

Methodology

Visitor monitoring was conducted with surveys consisting of a written response questionnaire. The majority of questions in the questionnaire collected quantitative data, although four open ended questions/comment sections did provide a degree of qualitative data. A copy of the questionnaire can be found in **Appendix 1**.

Survey procedure

Surveying at Homer Hut was carried out over a total of 40 days, 21 in the 2006/07 season and 19 in 2007/08. Generally this took place when day visitors were being surveyed on the adjacent Gertrude Valley Track. Surveyors would typically visit Homer Hut at the beginning and end of each survey day and would also survey any overnight visitors encountered on the track. In 2006/07 survey days were evenly distributed between January, February and March. In the following season the Fiordland Integrated Coastal Management Programme (FICOMP) survey was being carried out during February so surveying at Homer Hut was undertaken during December, January and March instead to avoid the possibility of respondents being overburdened by multiple questionnaires. In order to compensate for the loss of the peak period in February, additional survey days were included in late January and early March. Where possible, survey days were chosen to spread survey effort out across the summer period and to capture an appropriate number of weekends and weekdays. This was important to reduce potential sources of bias caused by variation in patterns of visitor use within the summer season and between different days of the week. It was not possible to choose days randomly because of the need to avoid periods of bad weather, when there is almost no day visitor use at Gertrude Valley and because of the requirement to survey at a number of sites along the Milford Road each season in an efficient and cost effective manner.

On surveys days all non day visitors aged 16 and over were approached by DOC staff and asked to fill in a questionnaire. Participants could return the questionnaire to the surveyor onsite or, alternatively, they were given the option of returning the form in a pre paid postal envelope.

Respondents were asked to fill in a self-completion questionnaire and return it onsite. Forms and prepaid envelopes were also left for visitors who had not yet returned to the hut. These forms were typically left with the visitor's gear and the hut warden or other visitors were asked to make respondents aware of the surveys on their return.

The questionnaire design was consistent between the two survey periods with the only exception being the omission of the question relating to respondents' recommendation to other visitors in 2007/08.

Data analysis

Responses from the questionnaires were then recorded on a computer, and responses to individual questions were tallied. This data was then plotted on bar and stacked bar graphs and represented as a percentage. Responses for open-ended questions and comments were themed and categorised under their respective theme.

In most instances, when a question received no recorded response from an individual, the response was not included in the data. However, for open ended, lack of comments and responses were noted.

Limitations

The main limitation that should be considered for this study when interpreting results is that the data reflects the opinions and values of a 'snapshot-in-time', as the survey was conducted at a certain time of year (December-April), and the results may not be representative of visitors and their experiences during other times of the year. Winter use is thought to attract different mountaineering opportunities, as well as ice climbing opportunities.

As the results are also from two periods over two years, meaning that potentially management actions within that time frame may have caused change to visitor experiences. However, no major changes in management 'on-the-ground' have been identified so this is unlikely.

Results

There were 59 respondents to the survey out of the 75 visitors approached in 2007, and 43 respondents out of the 72 visitors approached in the 2007/2008 survey; providing a total of 102 respondents with an overall response rate of 69.4%.

The estimated margin of error for this survey is calculated to be $\pm 9.7\%$. Efforts were made to reduce the potential margin of error by merging the survey responses from both years to provide a larger sample. The number of respondents for each question is referenced in the figure title (e.g. n=102).

Demographics and group characteristics

The results identify the predominant visitors at Homer Hut to be males between 20 and 59 years of age from New Zealand. They will typically be highly experienced independent parties, made up of two to four people. For some it will be their first time to the Darrans but many would have visited the area previously.

Question 1: Age

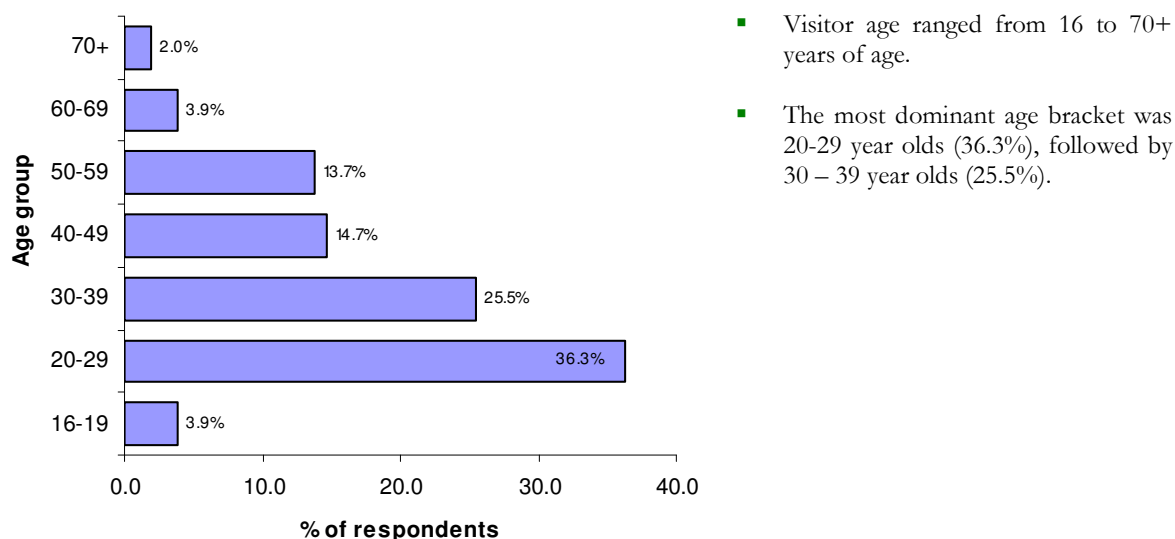


Figure 2: Visitor age (n=102)

Question 2: Gender

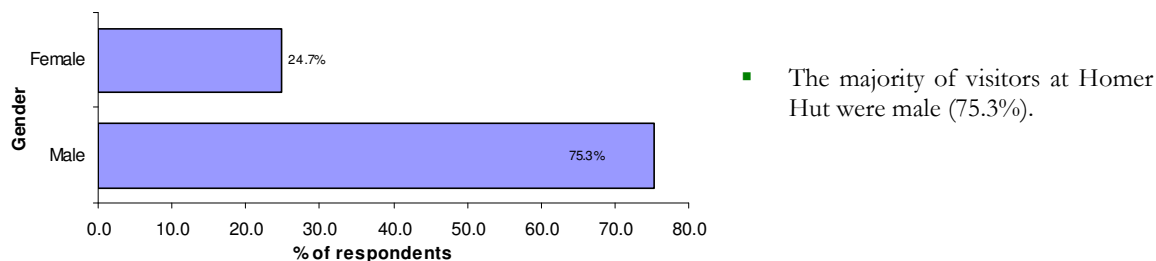


Figure 3: Gender of respondents (n=97)

Question 3: Usual country of residency

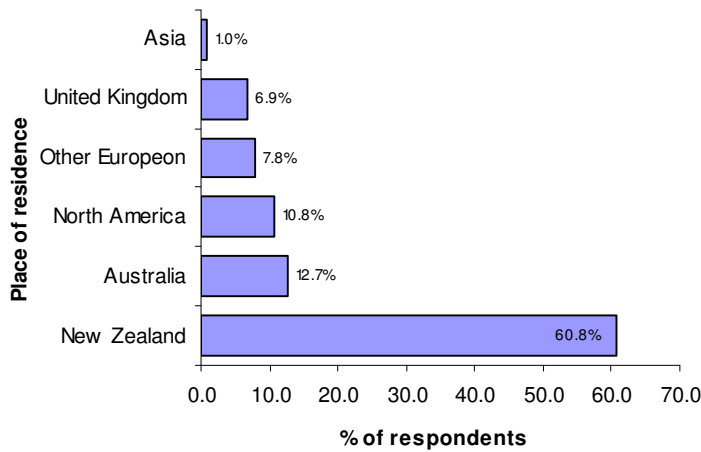


Figure 4: Nationality of respondents (n=102)

- The majority of visitors were from New Zealand (60.8%).
- Australians were the most common international visitors (12.7%), closely followed by North Americans (10.8%).
- 84% of New Zealander visitors were from the South Island.

Question 5a: Party type

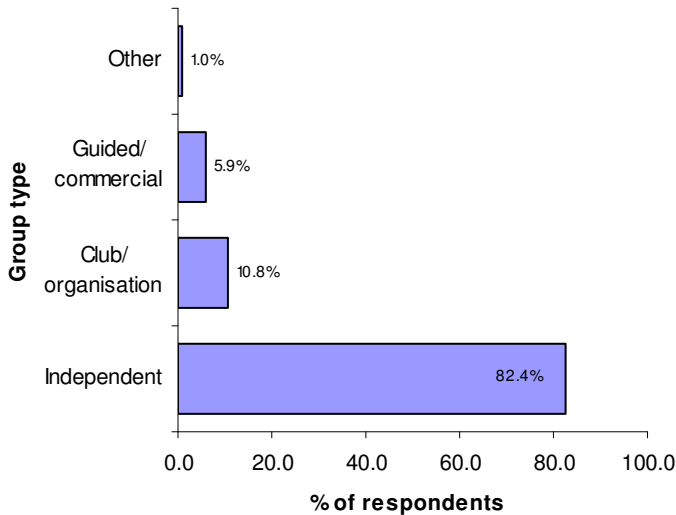


Figure 5: Group type (n=102)

- Visitors were primarily independent (82.4%).
- There were a small number of visitors associated with clubs (10.8) and visitors on paid commercial/guiding experiences (5.9%).

Question 5b: Number of people in party

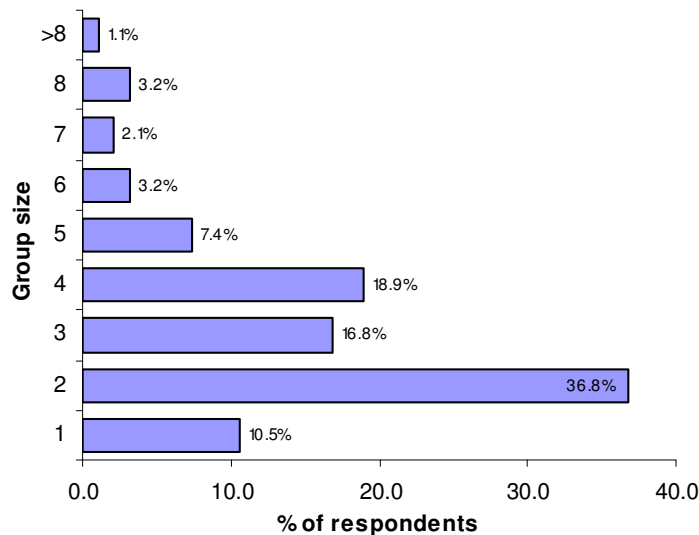
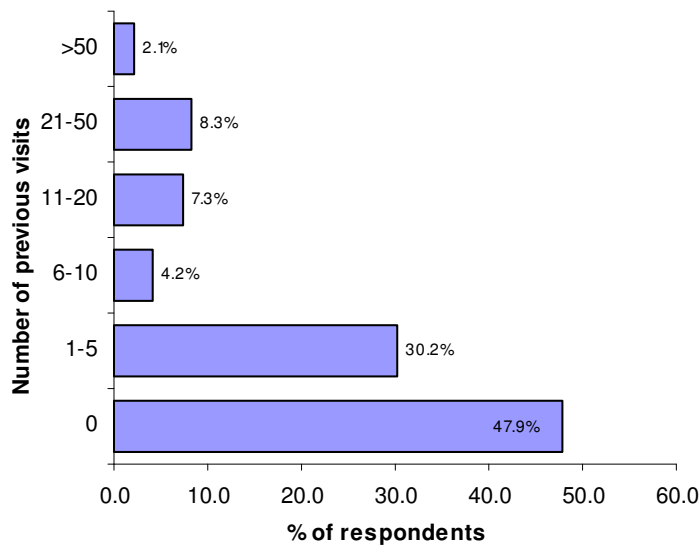


Figure 6: Group size (n=95)

- The most common party size was two people (36.8%).
- The majority of visitors had a party size of four or less (83%).

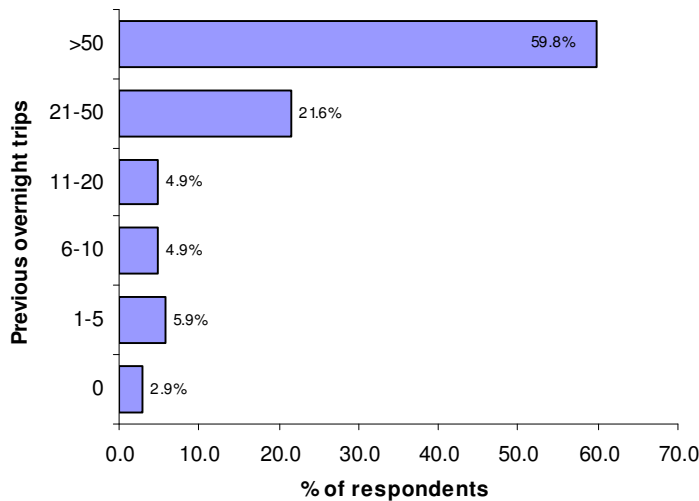
Question 6a & b: Number of previous visits to the Darran Mountains



- For 47.9% of visitors, it was their first visit to the Darran Mountains.
- 30.2% of visitors had 1-5 previous trips in the Darrans.

Figure 7: Previous visits to the Darran Mountains (n=96)

Question 7: Number of previous overnight tramping/climbing trips



- The majority of visitors (81.4%) had completed over twenty previous climbing or tramping trips, with 59.8% having completed over 50 previous trips.

Figure 8: Previous overnight climbing and/or tramping trips (n=102)

Location of trips

Visitors to Homer Hut participated in recreation opportunities a variety places including sites in remote, backcountry, and front country visitor settings.

Question 15: Areas visited in the Darrans on this trip

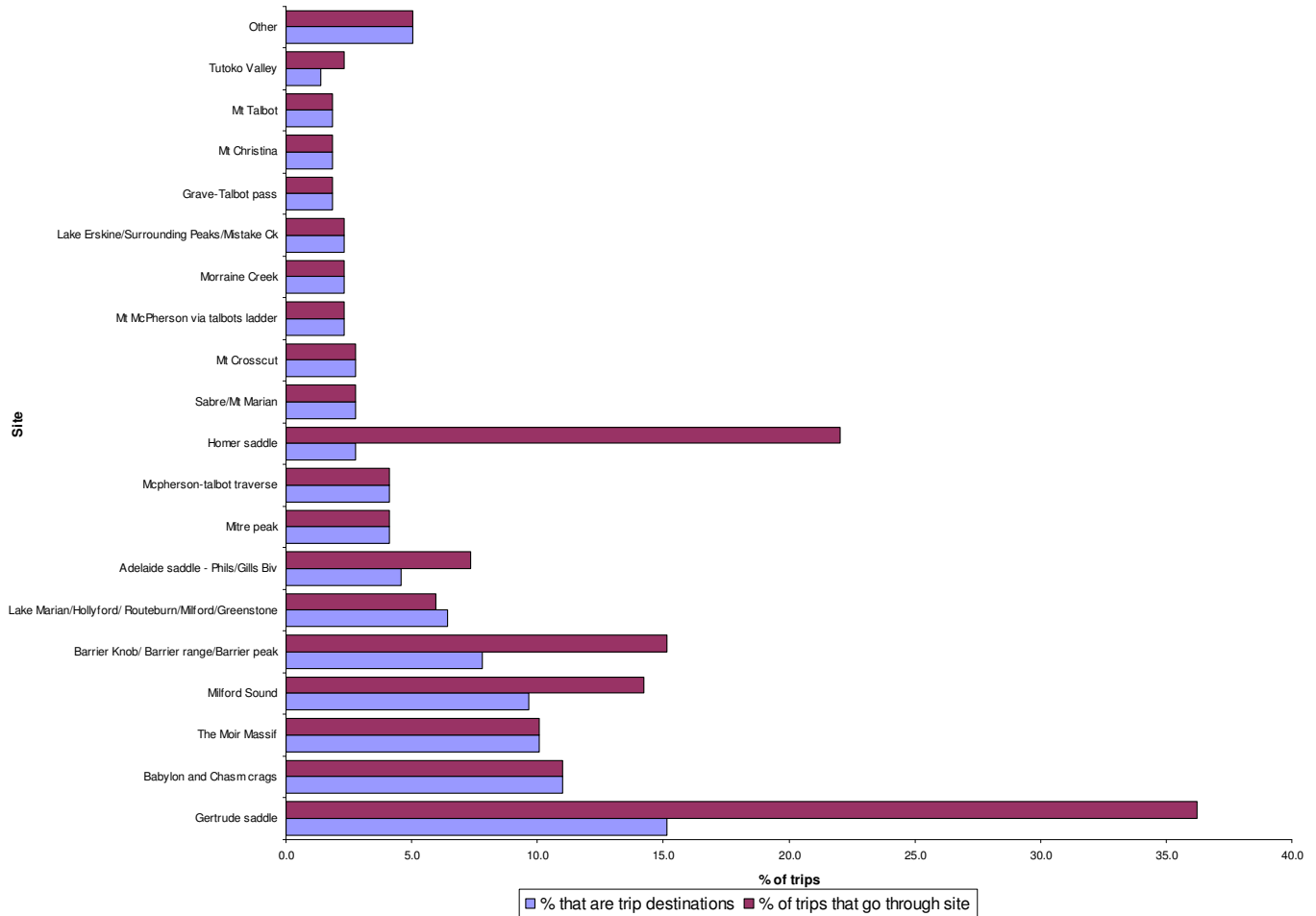


Figure 9: Location of trip destinations and sites travelled through (n of trips=218)

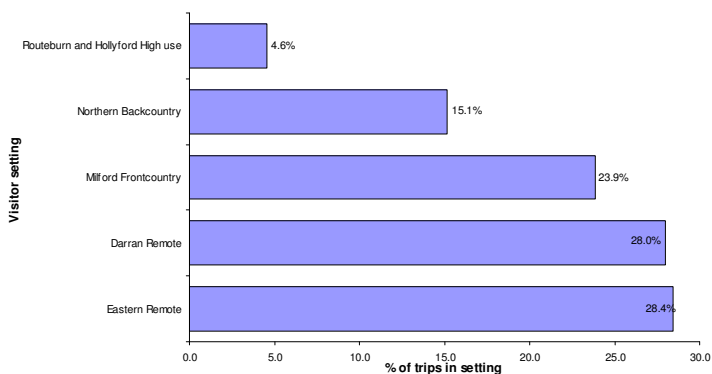


Figure 10: Location of trips by visitor setting (n of trips=218)

- A wide range of trips were undertaken by respondents
- Most trips occurred within the Eastern and Darren remote visitor settings; although a significant proportion were in the Milford Front Country (the Babylon and Chasm climbing crags contributed nearly half of those trips)
- Gertrude Valley was the most visited destination (15.1%), followed by the Babylon and Chasm climbing crags (11%), and the Moir Massif (10.1%)
- The sites most commonly travelled through were Gertrude Saddle (36.2%); Homer Saddle (22%), and the Barrier Range (15.1%)

Accommodation

The results indicate that a typical visitor to Homer Hut is likely to spend two to five nights at the hut during their visit to the Darrans, and a night camping or bivying en-route on a trip.

Question 9a: Number of nights at Homer Hut during visit

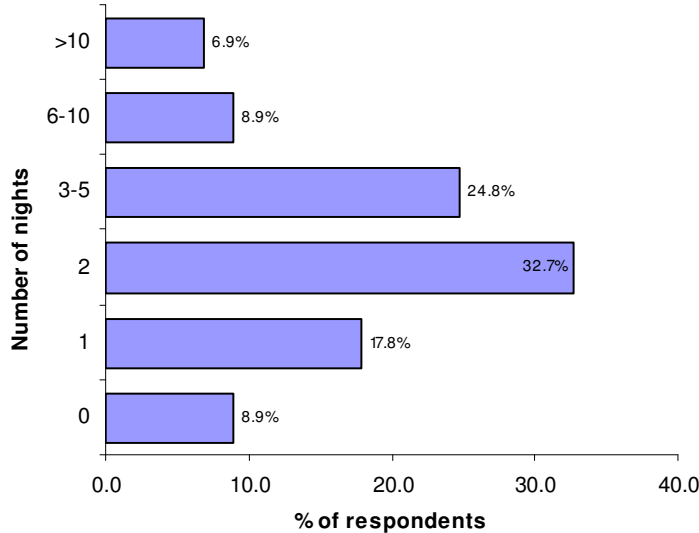


Figure 11: Nights stayed at Homer hut (n=101)

- There was a wide range of responses, from 0 to 45 nights spent at Homer Hut.
- The majority of visitors spent at least one night at Homer Hut, with 8.9% of visitors not staying a night.
- The most common length of stay was for two nights (32.7%).
- A minority of visitors stayed six or more nights at Homer Hut (15.8%).

Question 9b: Number of nights camping or bivying during visit

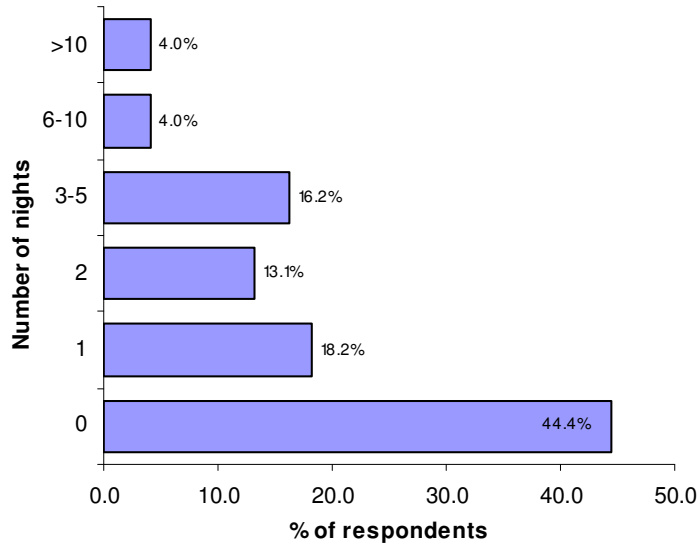


Figure 12: Number of nights spent camping/bivying (n=99)

- There was a wide range of responses, ranging from 0 to 30 nights spent camping or bivying.
- A large portion of visitors (44.4%) did not camp or bivy-out during their visit.
- The majority of visitors spent at least one night camping or bivying (55.6%).
- The most popular camping or bivy site was Gertrude Saddle (20%), followed by the Adelaide Cirque (18%), and Homer Hut (18%). **Appendix 3** lists all the camp and bivy sites identified by respondents.

Performance aspects, likes/dislikes, and effects of other visitors

The three aspects that respondents enjoyed the most about Homer Hut and the Darrans area were the scenic appreciation of the surrounding environment, the climbing opportunities, and the isolation and wilderness of the Darrans. However, it was found that a significant portion of visitors (19%) were not able to enjoy natural peace and quiet, nor solitude (20%). A similar amount of visitors (24%) were annoyed by large groups during their visit.

In addition to aircraft/helicopter activity which has previously been identified as adversely impacting visitor experience, Tour buses and campervans; tourists; and tourists feeding keas were identified as negative aspects of the Darrans by visitors to Homer Hut.

Question 8: Desired experience aspects sought by visitors on their trip

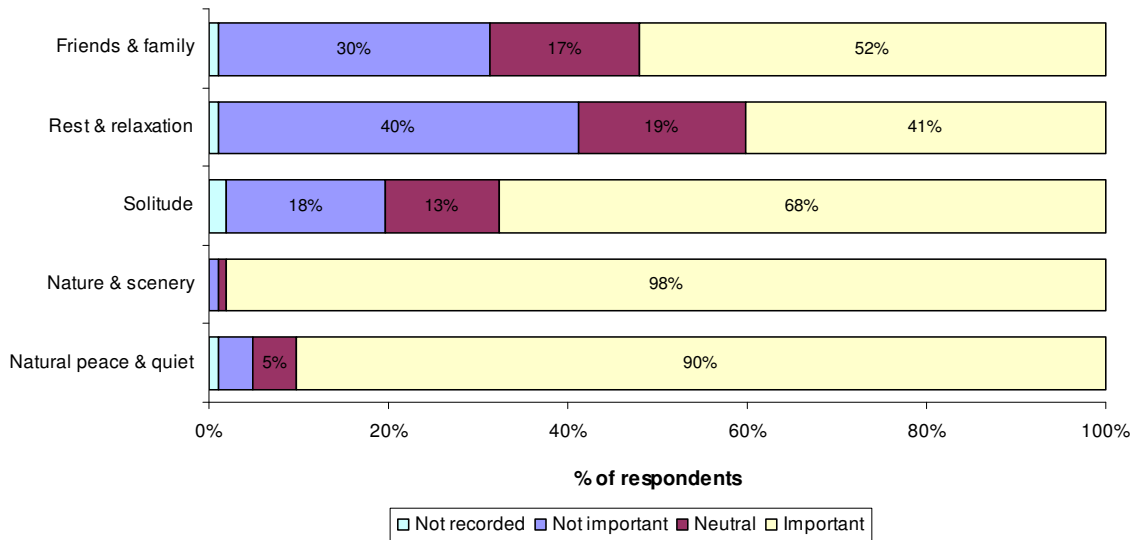


Figure 13: Aspects of visitor experience desired during their visit to the Darran Mountains (n=102)

- The three most important aspects of visitor experience that people were seeking were nature and scenery (98%); natural peace and quiet (91%); and to a lesser extent solitude (69%).

Question 12: Were you able to enjoy...?

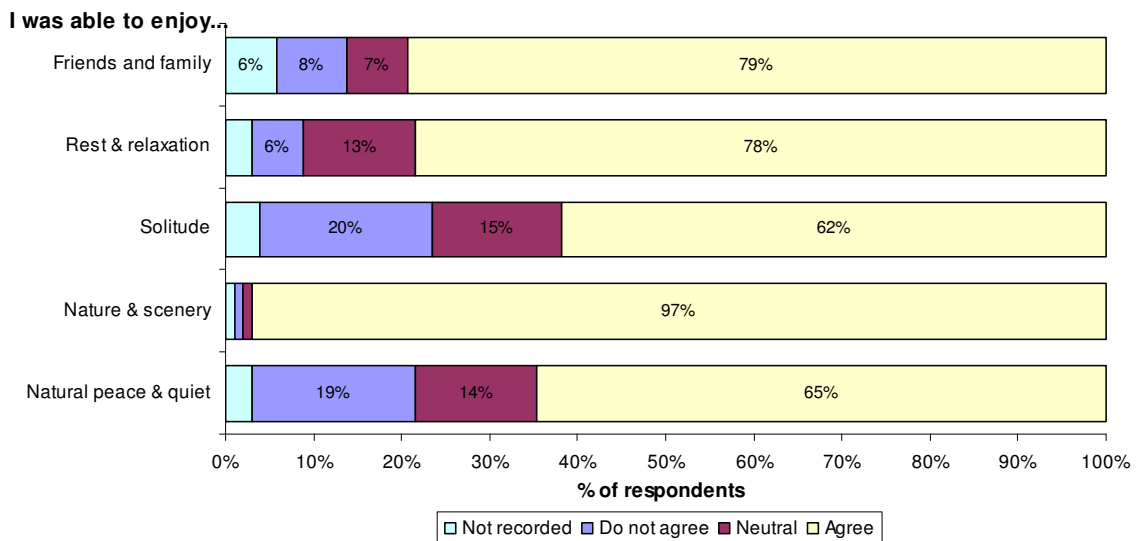


Figure 14: Aspects of visitor experience achieved in the Darran Mountains (n=102)

- The aspect of visitor experience that received the most contention was natural peace and quiet, with 19% of visitors not agreeing and 14% being neutral about whether they were able to enjoy it. This is a large discrepancy considering in Question 8 90% of visitors indicated that natural peace and quiet was considered to be an important aspect of the visitor experience.

Question 10: Most liked aspects of experience

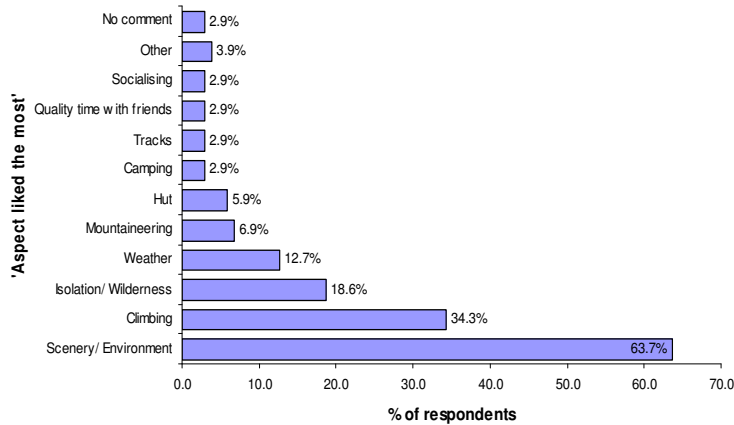


Figure 15: Most liked aspects of the Darrans (n=102; multiple responses allowed)

- 63.7% of visitors commented that they liked the scenery and environment (native flora and fauna included) of the Darran Mountains the most.
- 34.3% of visitors liked the rock-climbing (including routes and quality of the rock) in the Darran mountains the most about their visit.

Question 11: Least liked aspects of experience

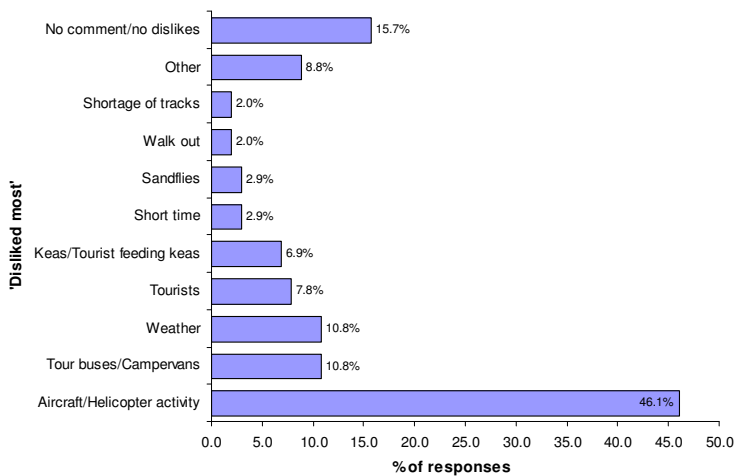


Figure 16: Least liked aspects of the Darrans (n=102; multiple responses allowed)

- Nearly half the visitors (46.1%) found that their least liked aspect of their visit to the Darran Mountains was the Aircraft and Helicopter activity.
- Combined tourist activities (25.5%) also constituted a negative element of the Darran Mountains for visitors, with tourist feeding keas (6.9%); the presence of tourist (7.8%); and tour buses/campervans (10.8%) being the least liked element of visitor trips to the Darran Mountains.

Question 13: How activities of other visitors affected visitor experience

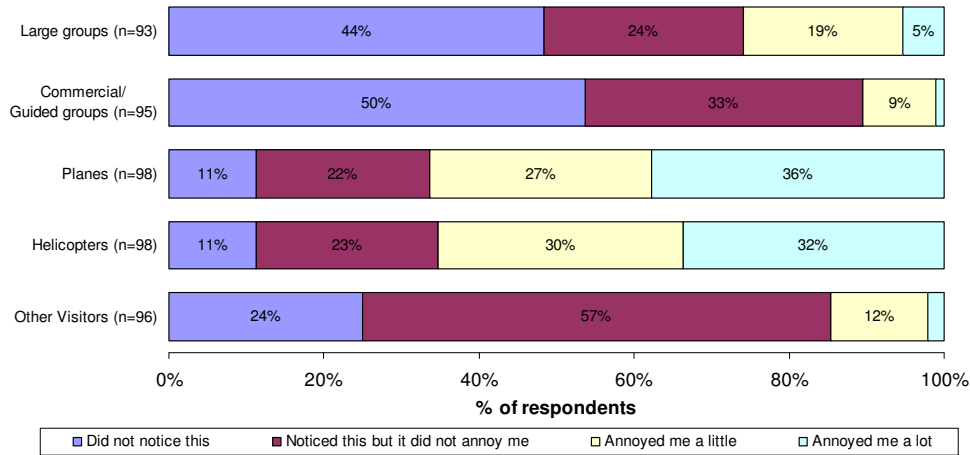
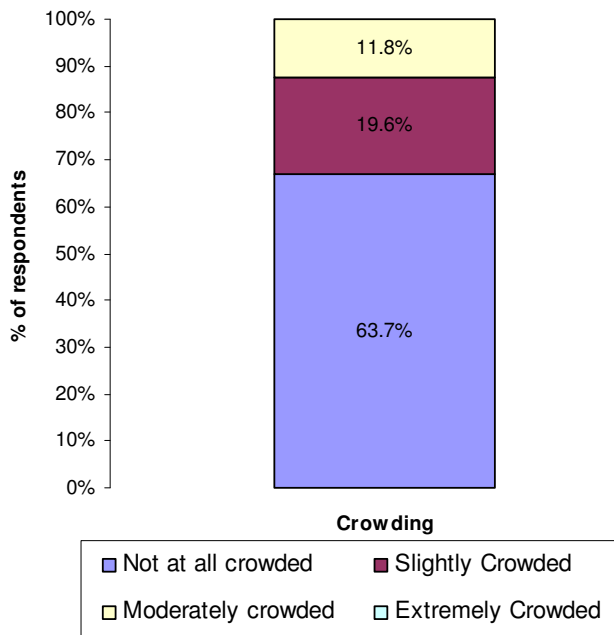


Figure 17: Level of annoyance with the behaviour of other visitors

- 24% of visitors were annoyed to some extent by large groups
- Few visitors (10%) were annoyed by commercial/guided groups
- The majority of visitors (63%) were annoyed to some extent by planes, while a similar proportion of visitors (62%) were annoyed by helicopters
- A small proportion of visitors (14%) were annoyed by other visitors

Question 14: Perceived crowding levels



- 63.7% of visitors did not feel crowded; 19.6% felt slightly crowded, 11.8% felt moderately crowded. No respondents felt extremely crowded. Overall 31.4% felt crowded to some degree during their visit.

Figure 18: Levels of crowding in the Darran Mountains (n=97)

Discussion

Visitor profile

The results from the two years of visitor monitoring at Homer Hut have provided a baseline and snapshot of visitors who use the surrounding area. As the number of respondents was small (102), it would be worthwhile repeating the survey on the basis that a larger sample size would reduce the margin of error in the study.

The results identify the predominant visitors at Homer Hut to be males between 20 and 59 years of age from New Zealand. They will typically be highly experienced independent parties, made up of two to four people. For some it will be their first time to the Darrans but many would have visited the area previously.

The most popular trip destinations for visitors are Gertrude Saddle, the Babylon and Chasm climbing crags, and the Moir Massif. Gertrude Saddle and Homer Saddle are used by many visitors to access other sites. Visitors to Homer Hut participate in recreation opportunities in a variety of places (see **Figure 11**) including sites in Remote, Backcountry, and Frontcountry visitor settings, with the majority of trips being based in the Eastern Remote and Darran Remote visitor settings. More information is required to determine the range of recreational activities that are pursued by visitors to Homer Hut.

The results indicate that a typical visitor to Homer Hut is likely to spend two to five nights at Homer Hut during their visit to the Darrans, and a night camping or bivying en-route on a trip.

The three aspects of Homer Hut and the Darrans area that were most enjoyed by respondents were the quality of scenery and surrounding environment, the climbing opportunities, and the isolation and wilderness of the Darrans. However, it was found that a significant portion of visitors (19%) were not able to enjoy natural peace and quiet. A similar number / percentage of visitors (24%) were annoyed by large groups during their visit. The most significant impact of all was the effect of aircraft (planes and helicopters), which annoyed approximately two-thirds of visitors.

Classification of visitor group at Homer Hut

Table 2: Characteristics of the Remoteness Seeker visitor group (DOC, 1996)

Visitor group	Remoteness Seeker
Setting and accessibility	Natural setting (remote or wilderness). Contains few or no facilities. Access is largely on foot except where air or boat access is permitted. Foot access to the edge of remote/wilderness areas is usually by tramping track or route.
Nature of visit and activities undertaken	Visits range from 3 to 7 days (or longer). The main activities are tramping, hunting, mountaineering, cross-country skiing, rafting, all require the highest degree of self reliance.
Experience sought/ degree of risk	Seeking a wilderness experience with limited interaction with other parties. Seek the challenge and complete sense of freedom that comes from prolonged contact with wild nature. Because of their high skill level and experience, this group accepts the higher level of risk associated with travelling through remote wilderness areas.
Facilities/ services sought	Seek no facilities once in remote country. Seek pre-visit information to help plan their trips, including maps, snow/weather conditions and route guides.
Make-up of visitors and visitor numbers	This group is made up of fit, experienced, predominantly male New Zealanders. Compared with other visitor groups, remoteness seekers numbers are very low.
Projected use	Numbers are expected to increase slowly. Although remote experience has international appeal, it is difficult to assess the growth of overseas visitors seeking remoteness.

The survey results indicate that visitors to Homer Hut pursue recreational opportunities predominantly spread over remote (56.4%), Frontcountry (23.9%), and Backcountry (15.1%) visitor settings. Visitors pursuing these unique recreation opportunities are likely to be part of the Backcountry Adventurer (BCA) or Remoteness Seeker (RS) visitor groups along with users of remote areas. **Table 2** outlines the visitor characteristics of the RS visitor group as defined by the Department's Visitor Strategy (1996). These characteristics generally match with the survey results at Homer Hut, with the exception of the nature of activities. Visitors at Homer Hut generally pursue a number of day trips during their stay; hence the hut is used as comfortable accommodation to base oneself from as opposed to overnight accommodation en-route.

It is recommended that any future surveys question the recreational activities respondents pursued on their visit in order to obtain a more accurate profile of the visitors using the area. Spatial information regarding the location of trips could also be improved by providing a more detailed map for respondents to demarcate their trip location on. The 262 series map provided in the questionnaire did not provide an adequate level of detail on trip location (many peaks are not shown on the 262 series), and respondents often mismarked their trip location (for example, some mistook Barrier range for Gertrude saddle due to the way the labels are positioned on the maps). Having a map with more detail (such as a 1:50,000 scale produced in the 260 or 50 series) and with the prominent peaks labelled should help mitigate this problem.

Location of trips

The results provided interesting insights regarding the locations visitors to Homer Hut visit. **Figure 19** maps the proportion of sites visits by survey respondents. This analysis shows that the majority of trips undertaken by visitors who stay at Homer Hut are located outside of the Darran Remote visitor setting, and within the Eastern Remote, Northern Backcountry, and Frontcountry visitor settings.

The area surrounded by the yellow line in **Figure 19** indicates an area of relatively high use by visitors to Homer Hut. This area contains the Homer Saddle, the Moir Massif, and the McPherson Talbot Massif. As no information regarding specific recreation activities was extracted from the survey, it is not possible to use survey data to pinpoint the variety of recreation activities undertaken here. Anecdotal evidence suggest that visitors to Homer Hut use this area for unique multi-pitch climbing opportunities on the Moir Massif; climbing opportunities on the slabs above Homer tunnel; climbing and mountaineering opportunities on Mount Talbot (accessed from both the Gertrude saddle side and McPherson side); and mountaineering opportunities from Mount McPherson down to the Esperance Valley. The mapping analysis also indicates other one-day trip locations were popular, with the Babylon and Chasm crags; Milford township; and Mitre Peak² representing a significant proportion of trips undertaken by visitors to Homer Hut. The fact that visitors can access these unique one day remote recreation opportunities while having a comfortably base is a key value and appeal of Homer Hut.

One point of concern is that the recreation opportunities in the area bordered by the yellow line in **Figure 19** are not being managed consistently with similar opportunities with similar users in the Darran Remote setting. The FNP 2007 states the objective of the Darran Remote setting is to manage the area to protect the 'remote rock climbing and alpine climbing opportunities that are world-renowned'. A large and well used portion of these renowned climbing opportunities have been excluded from the Darran Remote Setting. These opportunities lie within the highlighted area in **Figure 19** and it is recommended that this area is managed consistently with the Darran Remote setting.

² Although climbing Mitre Peak is possible as a long day trip, it is common for visitors to camp overnight on the 'Footstool' ridge.

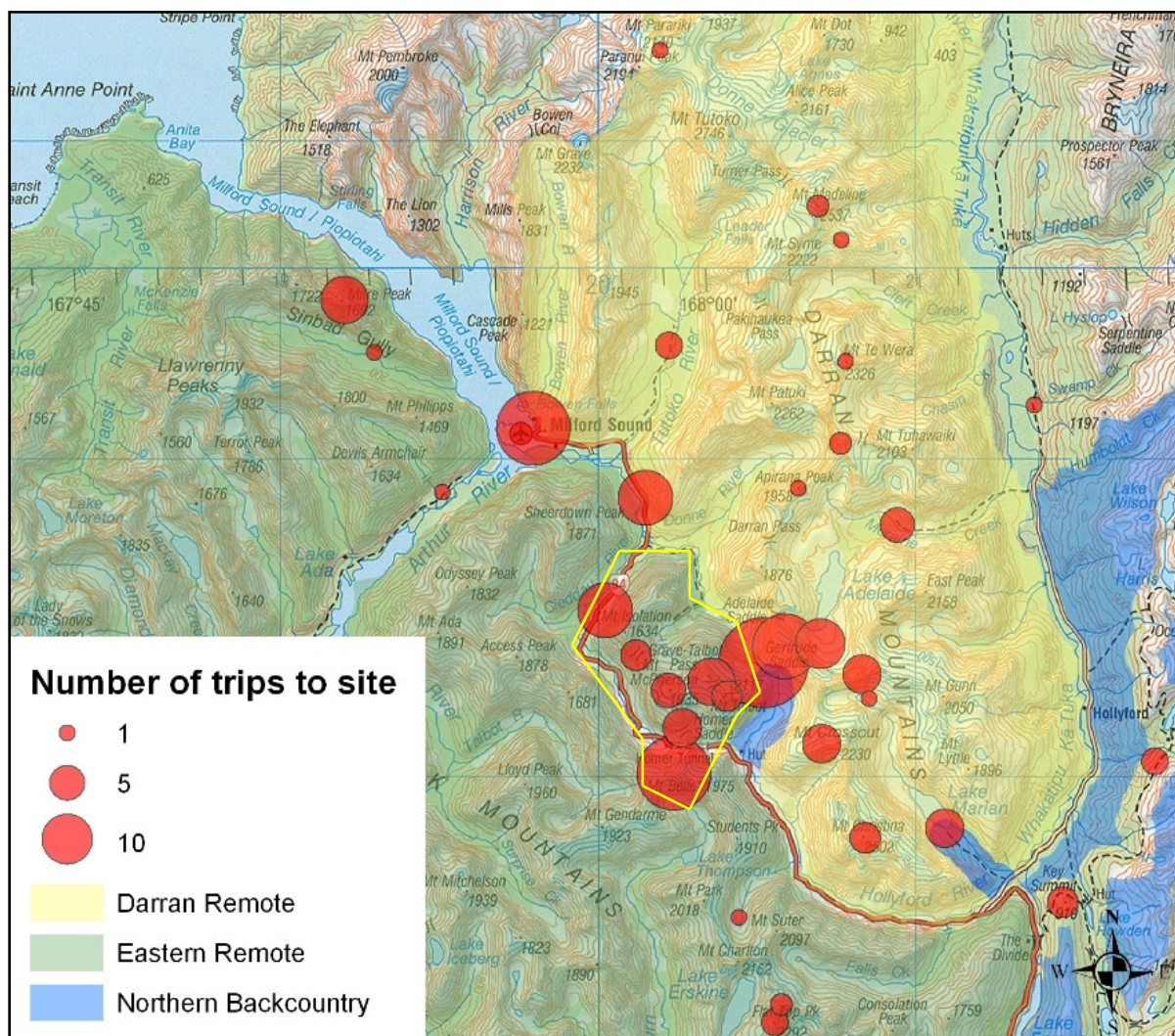


Figure 19: Destinations and number of trips of respondents. The yellow line roughly indicates the area which is proposed to be managed in a similar manner to the Darran Remote setting

Comparison of visitors at Homer Hut with other sites

When compared to visitors at other sites in the area (see **Table 3**), unique characteristics that differentiate visitors to Homer Hut include the predominance of males; the predominance of New Zealanders; over half of the visitors to Homer Hut have already visited the area before; and a large proportion of visitors having a high degree of experience in the backcountry.

The identified gender imbalance is not an uncommon finding, as young males are frequently over-represented in active outdoor recreational pursuits (Booth and Pebbles, 1995). As this imbalance is not present in the other surveyed visitor sites, a differentiation in gender may be correlated to the perception of risk involved with the recreational activities associated with visitors at Homer Hut (e.g. climbing and mountaineering). However, this is only speculative and further research is needed to determine true causality.

Compared with other surveyed sites, Homer Hut has a considerably larger proportion of visitors from New Zealand. 84% of visitors from New Zealand were from the South Island. The survey also indicated that relative to the other survey sites, far fewer visitors at Homer Hut are first time visitors, and they are often already familiar with the area. These results indicate that Homer Hut and the Darrans are unique areas that have a strong importance to the active outdoor recreation community in New Zealand. This provides a strong case for the Department to maintain its management actions in the area, such as limiting concessionaire activity and encouraging smaller group sizes; work relating to the effect of aircraft; and carefully managing the pre-visit information available on the Gertrude Valley area so as not to encourage

inexperienced visitors to an area where a moderate level of fitness and ability is required. In future surveys it would be useful to request the respondents region of residence if they are based in New Zealand (the 2006/07 survey did not do this). This would provide a better picture regarding the ratio of use of the area from international visitors, national visitors, and the local community.

Table 3: Comparison of visitor profiles at various surveyed sites in FNP

Location	Gertrude Valley	Hollyford track	Routeburn track	Key Summit	Milford track	Lake Marian	Mount Aspiring	Homer Hut
Predominant age bracket/s	20-29 (38%)	20-29 (30%); 50-59 (19%); 30-39 (18%)	20-29 (25%); 50-59 (20%); 60-69 (20%)	20-29 (28%); 30-39 (24%)	20-29 (27%); 30-39 (23%); 50-59 (22%)	20-29 (25%); 30-39 (22%)	30-39 (40%)	20-29 (36%); 30-39 (26%)
Predominant gender	Even	Even	Even	Even	Even	Even	Male (84%)	Male (75%)
Most common country of origin	UK (21%), NZ (17.8%), Germany (12%)	NZ (45%)	NZ (22%), Australia (18%), UK (15%)	UK (18%) USA (15%), Germany (15%)	Aus (30%), NZ (27%)	NZ (25%), Germany (15%)	Overseas (country not specified): 60%	NZ (61%)
Predominant party type	Independent (84%)	Independent*	Independent (68%)	Independent (79%)	Independent (97%)	Independent (90%)	Independent (61%)	Independent (82.4%)
Predominant party size	Two (53%)	Between one and three	Two (43%)	Two (48%)	Two (37%)	Two (56%)	Three (avg.)	Two (37%)
Previous visits	First time (92%)	First time (77%)	First time (87%)	First time (95%)	First time (95%)	-	First time (58%)	First time (48%)
Level of experience	-	>50 trips (33%)	1-5 trips (40%)	-	1 - 5 trips (42%)	-	'At least 3 trips per year' 44%	>50 trips (60%)
Important aspects	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet	Unknown	Nature and scenery; Natural peace and quiet

*NB: Commercial clients were not included in the surveys administered on the Hollyford track and therefore an accurate predominant party type can not be specified

Predominant demographics for visitors pursuing mountaineering opportunities around Mount Aspiring (see Wood, 2007) are shown in the green column of Table 2. Significant differences between the visitors in the two surveys are that visitors to Homer Hut are more likely to be a younger age, come from New Zealand, be independent parties as opposed to guided, are more likely to have visited the area before, and are more likely to have a higher degree of experience.

Management issues raised by responses

Aircraft

Aircraft (aeroplanes and helicopters) were identified as causing annoyance to approximately two thirds of visitors at Homer Hut. The effect of aircraft in this area and the greater Milford Sound area has been previously identified in several visitor monitoring reports in other locations, and has been summarised and addressed in Harbrow, 2008.

Aircraft activity is significantly impacting on the ability to achieve a quiet atmosphere and solitude in the Darrans and Eastern Remote visitor settings. Visitors to Homer Hut had significantly higher levels (at least double) of annoyance compared to visitors at the other seven sites surveyed. This clearly breaches the 25% annoyance threshold that is set out in the FNPMP. Cessford (1998) comments that the context in which the effect is felt is often more important than the effect itself. This is relevant as aircraft activity may be similar to levels at other monitored sites, but visitors to the Darrans are likely to have a lower tolerance due to their expectations of their remote setting (Booth *et al.*, 1999). As previously identified, the Darrans seems to be a unique area for the New Zealand recreation community, meaning that there was a high likelihood that respondents have high levels of attachment to both the area and their chosen activity. As a result they are likely to be highly sensitive to effects from aircraft such as the proximity of flight paths to the areas they visit, and the low ambient noise aircraft produce:

"I have been coming to the Darren's for 30 years. Little has changed except the aircraft intrusion. This is a special place - please limit helicopter landings and place controls on aircraft movement"

KI 50 (2007)

There were several reports of potentially illegal helicopter activity, including landings at Lake Erskine, Lake Adelaide, and by Homer Tunnel:

"We went to a remote lake, Lake Erskine, helicopters land there every couple of hours on a fine day"
KI 53 (2008)

"Aerial intrusion occurred everywhere we went - including the eastern side of Lake Adelaide and Lake Erskine (where helicopters were landing). The heli's dropping people at their buses at the Homer tunnel works depot, over flying Home Hut, was also appalling"
KI 52 (2008)

When commenting on impacts from aircraft, most respondents referred to the intrusive noise of aircraft, and did not cite annoyance with visual impacts:

"It's not the visual affects of planes and helicopters just the extensive noise"
KI 65 (2007)

"I like looking at planes and helicopters but the noise can be irritating at times"
KI 1 (2007)

The results from this survey and the breach of the annoyance threshold set by the FNPMP support the recommendations of Harbrow, 2008, which are referred to in the recommendations/conclusion section of this report.

Crowding

Shelby *et al.* (1989) suggest at 50% crowding annoyance threshold before management action is taken. **Figure 20** below compares the level of crowding perceived by respondents from Homer Hut to the crowding model produced by Shelby *et al.* Although approximately a third of respondents perceived some degree of crowding on their visit, it is still considered minimal crowding and is not thought to significantly interfere with visitor experience.

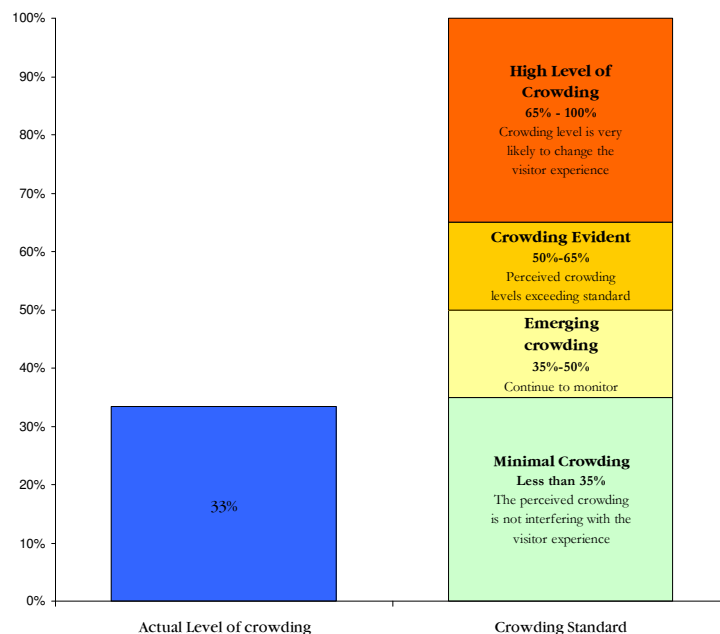


Figure 20: Respondents' perceived levels of crowding in comparison to the crowding model produced by Shelby *et al* (1989)

As specifying locations was not required in the survey, the location of the perceived crowding can not be determined. It is likely that respondents are referring to levels of crowding within Homer Hut, or

potentially areas near the road as they were commonly cited in additional comments as having high levels of crowding.

Others commented that crowding was not so much of a problem as it could be easily avoided. In the busier months of December to March, parties in the area should expect to experience a higher number of other remote users in the area, due to its level of accessibility and proximity to a base such as Homer Hut. This is a vastly different setting visitors could expect to find in more remote areas such as the upper Tutoko valley, Neale Burn, or Cleft Creek. Some respondents indicated that they did not associate the area with remoteness values:

“One doesn’t come to Homer for solitude; if I wanted that I’d go to the Olivines or Lake Poteriteri”

KI 11 (2008)

It is recommended that in future surveys respondents are asked to refer to the locality where they experienced a perceived issue to allow management to identify any potential crowding issues.

Visitor conflict

Approximately 30% respondents commented that their most disliked aspect of the Darrans were ‘tourist’. This included the general presence of tourist; the congestion of buses and campervans associated with tourism; and tourist causing behavioural change in keas by feeding them. It is assumed that respondents were referring to visitors en-route to Milford Sound. These findings reinforce the potential for visitor group conflict at sites such as Gertrude Valley and Homer Saddle, where two different user groups use the same resource but have different goals and levels of experience. Visitors who pursue more remote recreation opportunities may feel displaced by or feel annoyance at the large numbers and behaviour of tourist who wish to use the same resource. As Homer Hut is located within the immediate vicinity of the Milford Road and the Gertrude Valley track, there is potential for visitor conflict between these different user groups.

Noise intrusion produced by tourist related vehicles was also frequently cited as causing annoyance amongst respondents:

“why haven’t you mentioned noisy buses and campervans [in your survey]?”

KI 28 (2008)

“Seeing and hearing buses annoyed me a lot...”

KI 44 (2008)

As buses and other track are using the road, they are technically outside the national park (the New Zealand Transport Authority also manages land 200m on either side of the Milford Road). This makes the effects of vehicles difficult to manage.

The Department’s current management of this issue is to discourage inappropriate visitor groups from visiting sites such as Gertrude Valley by refraining to provide information about these locations on the DOC website, and encouraging less experienced visitor groups to other Frontcountry sites on the Milford Road, such as the Chasm and Mirror Lakes. The track standard and lack of bridges in Gertrude Valley is also a deliberate management action to deter inexperienced users.

As conflict and crowding are currently determined to be at an acceptable level, it is desirable to maintain the deliberate low profile of the Gertrude Valley walk to avoid increased numbers that may in turn reduce in additional conflict and crowding.

Summary and recommendations

The results from the two years of visitor monitoring at Homer Hut have provided baseline data from which a basic visitor profile has been established. Results indicate that the majority of visitors to Homer Hut are likely to use the Darran and Eastern Remote visitor settings, with a significant number also using sites in the Milford Road and Milford Sound Frontcountry areas. The results have also raised several management issues in the area that affect the achievement of objectives for the visitor setting as set out in the FNPMP. Most significant of these issues is the effect of aircraft noise on visitors in the area, which reiterates the problem of aircraft in the wider Milford area as previously identified in other visitor monitoring surveys.

1. Follow recommendations proposed by Harbrow (2008) regarding air traffic to the Milford Aerodrome, specifically:

- a) *“No further quota of landings should be issued for Milford Aerodrome until impacts on the Milford flight path are within acceptable limits”*
- b) *“The Department should continue with the implementation of the Fiordland National Park Management Plan 2007 with regards to aircraft landings in general. In particular it should limit the number of landings in the vicinity of Gertrude Valley, the Hollyford Valley and at Lake Quill and aim to reduce the number in the long term until the level of annoyance with aircraft activity falls within acceptable limits.”*
- c) *“The Department should collect information on levels of aircraft activity and further develop the survey methodology to allow for a dose-response analysis at sites where this is achievable”*

2. Consider undertaking a mapping exercise of visitor density in the known aircraft noise problem areas to determine a ‘least impacting’ flight path for aircraft travelling to and from the Milford Aerodrome

3. That the Moir-McPherson-Talbot Massif area identified in Figure 19 is managed to be consistent with the Darran Remote visitor setting

This area holds unique remote trips that are used and valued by the experienced end of the visitor group spectrum. The area holds the values identified for the Darran Remote setting, thus making it deserving of management and protection consistent with the Darran Remote setting.

4. Maintain the low profile of the Gertrude Saddle/Valley walk

The Darrans and Homer Hut areas were identified as being highly valued by experienced NZ outdoor recreational users, who more than often repeat visits to the area. Gertrude Valley is highly accessible and provides unique scenery for less-experienced visitors to access, but at the same time is an access route to more remote opportunities for more experienced parties. The low profile of the Gertrude Valley walk is primarily to reduce risks to inexperienced visitors, but it may also serve to reduce potential for visitor conflict and user displacement within Gertrude Valley.

5. Repeat visitor monitoring at Homer Hut.

The sample size of survey respondents was relatively small (102) but provided a baseline for future monitoring in this area. It would be worthwhile repeating the survey to gain a larger sample size to increase the accuracy and integrity of this data, and to establish a longitudinal dataset. The frequency of this monitoring would depend on priorities within the conservancy. It is recommended that surveys are not repeated more than once every two years, as visitors have been identified as repeat visitors, and repeated surveying may cause an undesirable visitor experience.

The original survey questions should be used with the following modifications outlined below.

a) Optimise the time at which the questionnaire is conducted

It was noted that the majority of surveys were completed between 1pm – 5pm. It is highly likely that most visitors undertaking trips to areas other than Gertrude Saddle would not return to the hut until later on in the evening as many recreation excursions in the area can take up the majority of a day or longer. A higher response rate and/or sample size may be achieved if the hut was visited later (perhaps 8-9pm in summer) when visitors were back from their excursions; or if surveyors used the Hut for accommodation at times.

b) Request respondents to state what recreation activities they engaged in and where

This will help to build a more accurate visitor profile, and provide more accurate information regarding recreational opportunities that occur in the area.

c) Provide a more detailed map to allow respondents to demarcate their trip locations with accuracy

The 262 series map may have caused inaccuracies when respondents were marking the location of their trips. An A3 sheet of 1:50,000 scaled map and a text box to record the names of locations would reduce the margin of error when demarcating the location of trips undertaken.

d) Request respondents to identify the locations of their negative experiences (e.g. "Experienced crowding on Gertrude saddle")

This may help managers identify 'hotspots' that need to be managed to prevent negative impacts on visitor experience. The visitor monitoring thus far has identified problems such as crowding and visitor conflict, but has not successfully pinpointed specific locations. Negative experiences could also be marked on the map described above. This tool could also be used to determine common and/or problematic flight paths of aircraft.

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8. What were you looking for during your visit to the Darran Mountains?
(circle one number on each line)

How important was?	Not at all important						Very important
a) Natural peace and quiet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b) Nature and scenery	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c) Solitude	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d) Rest and relaxation	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e) Spending time with friends & family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Now we'd like you to tell us about your experiences during your visit

9. a) How many nights have you stayed at Homer Hut during this visit? ____

- b) How many nights have you camped or bivved during this visit? ____

10. What have you liked the **most** about your visit to the Darran Mountains?

11. What have you liked the **least** about your visit to the Darran Mountains?

12. How much do you agree or disagree that...?	Strongly disagree						Strongly agree
a) I was able to experience natural peace and quiet	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
b) I was able to enjoy nature and scenery	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
c) I was able to experience solitude	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
d) I was able to relax and reduce stress.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
e) I was able to enjoy the experience with friends & family	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

13 a) How did the activities of other visitors affect your visit?

	Did not notice this	Noticed this but it didn't annoy me	Annoyed me a little	Annoyed me a lot
• Behaviour of other visitors				
• Hearing or seeing helicopters				
• Hearing or seeing planes				
• Meeting commercial/ guided groups				
• Meeting large groups				

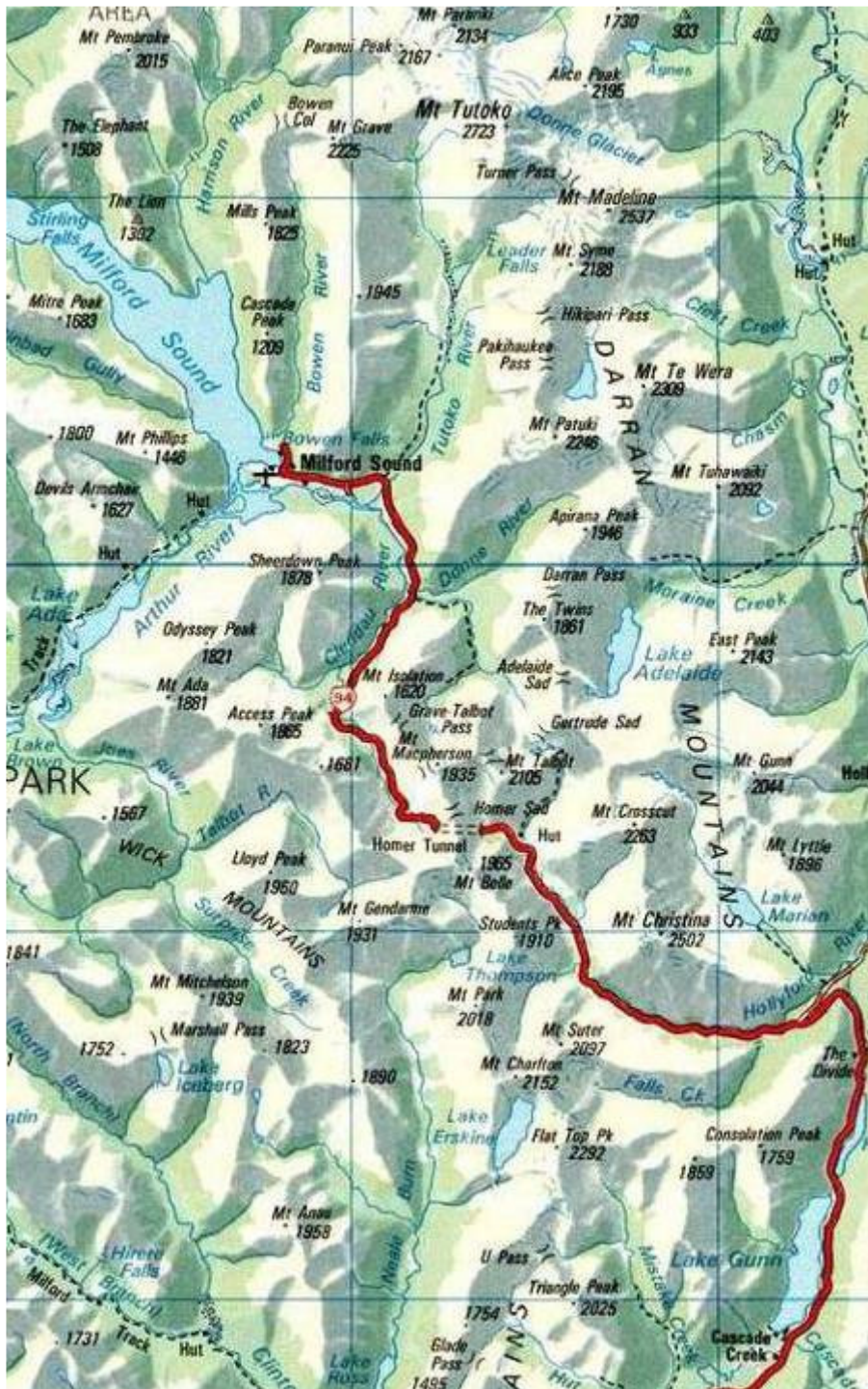
b) Please tell us more

14. a) Did you feel crowded at all during your visit to the Darran Mountains?
(circle one number)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Not at all crowded		Slightly Crowded			Moderately Crowded			Extremely Crowded

b) Please tell us more

15. Please draw lines on this map to show where you went during this visit. If you camped please draw a cross (X) to show where.



Thank you for your time!

If you have any feedback about this survey please contact Michael Harbrow, Southland Conservancy, Department of Conservation, PO Box 743, Invercargill. Ph. 03-211-2400. Email: mharbrow@doc.govt.nz

Appendix 2: All locations used for camping/bivying by visitors at Homer Hut

Area	% of campers who used site
Gertrude Saddle	20.0%
Adelaide Cirque (Gills/Phils Biv)	18.2%
Homer Hut	18.2%
Mitre Peak	5.5%
Cleft Creek	3.6%
Lake Erskine	3.6%
Turners Biv	3.6%
Marian Valley	3.6%
Milford Township	3.6%
Sinbad Gully	3.6%
Caples Creek	1.8%
Cascade Creek	1.8%
Chasm Crag	1.8%
Donne Valley	1.8%
Homer Saddle	1.8%
Leader Creek	1.8%
Monkey Creek	1.8%
Moraine Creek	1.8%
Ngapunatoru Glacier	1.8%