

Cathedral Cove track factsheet

What you need to know

Background

Weather impacts from Cyclone Hale, Auckland Anniversary weekend flooding and Cyclone Gabrielle in early 2023 caused significant damage to the Cathedral Cove track. The track was closed because of the damage and safety risks of land instability and extreme weather.

Five rockfalls occurred on or around the Cathedral Cove Arch between August and November 2023, during a variety of weather conditions.

The track is in a Recreation Reserve in Hahei. There are several laws guiding the management of the reserve. It is next to the Te Whanganui-o-Hei Marine Reserve, and the Arch itself sits within the marine reserve.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the track was used by about 250,000 visitors a year, 75 percent are international. The typical visitor to Cathedral Cove is low skilled at dealing with natural hazards. So, we manage this type of site closely to reduce exposure to risk from natural hazards compared to other tracks that don't have this type of visitor.

In 2020 GNS Science developed a Natural Hazard Risk Assessment methodology for DOC to assess natural hazard risks for visitors using DOC facilities and to inform mitigations. This methodology was used by consultancy firm Tonkin + Taylor to carry out an independent assessment of the landslide risk at Cathedral Cove on behalf of DOC.

What we know

Landslides and rockfalls have long been an issue for Cathedral Cove. The weather in January and February 2023 caused many of these to activate.

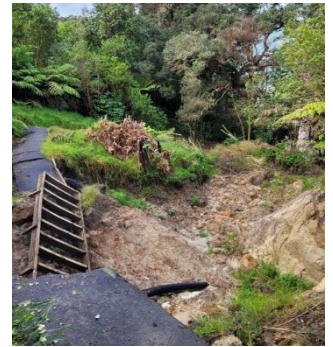
After the cyclone, DOC staff did initial safety assessments. This was followed by site visits by geotechnical experts from Tonkin + Taylor to understand the level of landslide risks to visitors.

Between March and July 2023, Tonkin + Taylor did a landslide risk assessment. They looked at the tracks from Hahei Beach to Grange Rd carpark, Cathedral Cove Beach, Stingray Bay, and Gemstone Bay.

The risk assessments have been done at a site-wide scale.

The greatest level of risk is for visitors using the whole site (both the tracks and beaches) as they are exposed to all landslide hazard areas. The longer a visitor stays at Cathedral Cove, the higher risk they are exposed to.

The tracks and structures are damaged, and the greatest concern is the ongoing instability of land.



Tonkin + Taylor and DOC concluded:

- The risk is at the high end of DOC's acceptable threshold for a site like this, and for the typical visitor and numbers using it. Before reopening the track, mitigations are necessary to reduce the risk to visitors from landslide hazards.
- Several areas are assessed as hazardous with limited practical or effective mitigations possible. These areas are beach cliffs at Stingray Bay, parts of Cathedral Cove Bay, the rock arch itself, and the track from Hahei to Grange Road carpark.
- Reducing visitor numbers during and after rainfall events would reduce potential for harm to visitors from landslide hazard, however this is very difficult to practically implement.
- DOC staff are exposed to the highest level of risk from landslide hazards when they work at these locations. Reduced time onsite mitigates this – an approach already being taken.
- Overall, this track is categorised as one that should not be re-opened to the public without reducing the risks. Given the typical type of the visitor, DOC needs to reduce risk to as low a level as reasonably practicable and allow visitors to make informed risk decisions about visiting the site. Any solutions also need to be cost-effective and resilient.
- Currently, and when compared to other similar sites DOC manages, visitors to Cathedral Cove are exposed to a higher level of risk of serious injury or death.
- Based on these safety elements DOC decided the Cathedral Cove track could not open for summer 2023/24.

The options

A range of concepts to re-route the track have been outlined by Tonkin + Taylor. Ideas from community groups have also been received.

Re-routing the track will not be undertaken until there is confidence the preferred route will reduce the level of risk to as low a level as reasonably practicable. This confidence can only be gained from monitoring proposed routes.

Other tools to manage the level of risk to visitors could be considered- e.g., guiding, controlled access, alternative structures.

Effective and clear communication of risk to visitors prior and as part of their visit will be important and has been implemented at place and online.

Any mitigation approach must be in line with legislation, recognition of cultural values (including meeting Treaty Settlement commitments to Ngāti Hei) acceptable cost, and risk.

What we've been working on

A minimum monitoring period of six months has been recommended before remedial work is undertaken. This monitoring will start in January 2024. It will include physical surveying and specific sites will be monitored for land movement by Tonkin + Taylor. The goal is to better understand landslide and rockfall frequency, and to identify land areas where we could reroute the track on.

While monitoring work is done, DOC has taken action to:

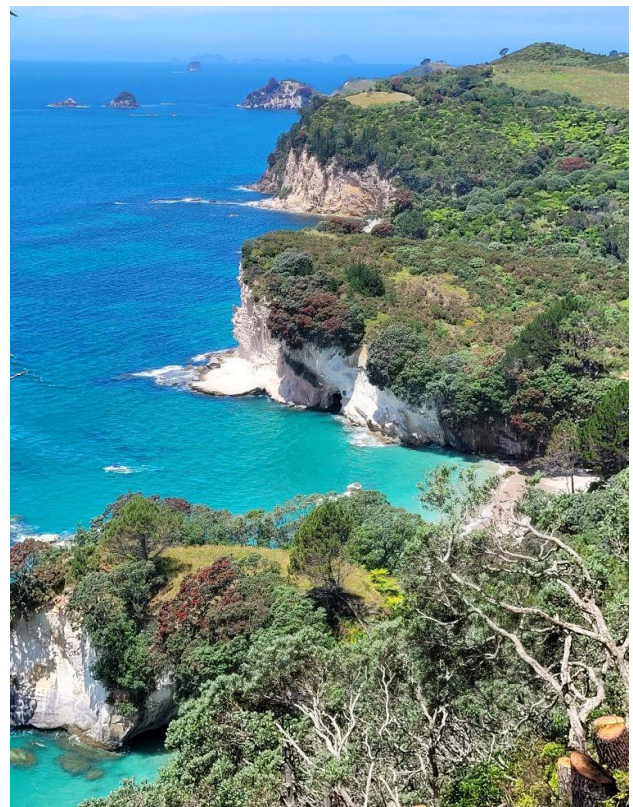
- Work with Ngāti Hei on lifting a rahui to enable marine access for a viewing experience of the arch and short-stay beach landings.
- Work with commercial operators, emergency services, councils to emphasize safety in the marine experience.
- Deliver three alternative walking/sightseeing experiences in the area to provide opportunities for visitors, community, and businesses to use.
- Introduce at-place Tiaki Rangers, employed by DOC and Ngāti Hei, to share safety messages and information on alternative experiences in Coromandel.

What next

1. January 2024: A high-level review will start to shortlist options to reduce the visitor safety risk to an appropriate level for visitors to walk to Cathedral Cove.
2. February – April 2024: Preferred options will be developed with Ngāti Hei and in consultation with the wider community. A visitor survey will be undertaken in February to understand visitors' expectations.

3. June 2024: We will have the information from the land stability monitoring.
4. June – August 2024: Options will be assessed against the stability information, legislative, strategic, cost benefit and risk requirements. This will include stakeholder and community communication and engagement.
5. September 2024: A decision will be made on re-routing the track or developing an alternative option. This will be communicated widely so community and businesses can leverage opportunities.
6. A business case will be finalised to confirm the delivery plan and resources needed to be successful. Timing for implementing the preferred option will depend on the complexity of the solution chosen.
7. Communication will continue throughout 2024 through proactive information sharing on our website, via media, and relevant channels.

The forward approach and timeline are subject to change as options are tested, and engagement is undertaken.



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