



Heaphy Track Mountain Bike Trial 2011-2013

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photo: © Stephen Roberts

INTRODUCTION

In December 2010 the Department of Conservation carried out a partial review of the Kahurangi National Park Management Plan to allow for a three year trial of mountain biking on the Heaphy Track (on a seasonal basis between 1 May and 30 September). The management plan calls for the trial to be reviewed by the Department. This will determine whether mountain biking on all or some of the identified tracks should continue.

The Heaphy Track is managed as a Great Walk and a 'Gateway' destination and it is valued as an important recreation and tourism destination in the Buller and Nelson regions. The Heaphy Track provides an introductory backcountry experience suitable for a wide range of people, and an opportunity to learn about our history and conservation through multi-day walking and mountain biking.

There have been numerous positive media articles and stories profiling mountain biking on the Heaphy Track, resulting in increased awareness of the Great Walk, conservation and its benefits.

Monitoring was carried out on the following:

- Social impacts – Conflict between walkers and mountain bikers and compliance with National Park Bylaws and mountain bikers code.
- Physical impacts – Impact of mountain biking on the track, surrounds and historical features. Damage to signs.
- Ecological impacts – Impact of mountain biking on *Powelliphanta*, Kiwi and vegetation.
- Economic impacts – Benefits to concessionaire and regions.

REVIEW RESULTS

An average of 1,919 visitors biked or walked the Heaphy Track each year during the trial period. Feedback from mountain bikers, local community, and concessionaires has been overwhelmingly positive.

1. Visitors to the Heaphy Track

Overall Use

Overall use (mountain bikers and walkers) of the Heaphy Track has increased from 4,992 in 2009 to 6,118 in 2013, representing a 22.5% increase in annual visitor numbers. Compared to the overall trend, the increase in use during the mountain bike season (1 May to 30 September) has been significant. 581 people walked the track in 2010. By the end of the third year of the trial, this had increased to 2,223 people, representing an increase of 282.6%.

Walking

While overall use on the Heaphy Track has steadily increased since the trial began, there has been a decrease in the numbers of walkers using the track. This could be attributed to the introduction of mountain bikers to the track, however, it is more likely to be due to two significant weather events resulting in track closure during the summer period of 2010 and 2011. This directly affected the number of people able to walk the track during the peak of the season when mountain bikers were not able to use the track.

It is also worth noting that while the number of people walking the Heaphy Track has declined over the last three years, the number of people walking the Abel Tasman Great Walk also

declined during this period. This can be attributed to a decrease in international visitor arrivals to the region¹, likely to be the result of the global financial crisis and changing visitor patterns as a result of the Canterbury earthquakes. While the Heaphy Track does not have the same level of international visitation as the Abel Tasman Great Walk, it is the general decrease in international visitation, combined with the other aspects noted above, which may have contributed to the decline in the number of walkers, rather than being the result of conflicting use in regards to mountain bikers. It is positive to see that with the introduction of the mountain bike trial over the past three years, the overall visitation to the Heaphy Track has been steadily increasing.

Biking

In the first year of the mountain bike trial 1,992 visitors walked or biked the Heaphy Track. In the second year this decreased to approximately 1,542 people. This is most likely due to the loss of the Lewis swing-bridge during a significant flood in July 2012. At the time the Department issued a track warning notice advising that bikers need to ford the Lewis River and not undertake the river crossing during periods of heavy rain. In the final year of the trial, 2,223 walked or mountain biked the Heaphy Track.

The predominant use of the Heaphy Track is from people over the age of 36 years. Interestingly, the difference between ages of walkers and mountain bikers does not differ.

The average length of stay in year one of the mountain bike trial was 1.79 nights, increasing to 2.20 nights in year three of the mountain bike trial. This indicates that most riders are taking their time and enjoying the experience rather than attempting to ride the track in one long day.

Domestic/International Use

71% of visitors to the Heaphy Track are New Zealanders. This increased to 86% during the mountain bike trial.

2. Capacity on the Heaphy Track

The daily carrying capacity for the Heaphy Track is approximately 110 people per day. Mountain bikers, much like walkers, have a clear preference for the warmer months of the season. During the mountain bike trial there was a strong preference for visitors to use the track in the months of September and May, with June, July, and early August the least favoured. There is capacity to increase use particularly during the months of October, November, and early December. While March and April are higher use months, there is still an opportunity to increase use. Thus it is proposed that the season be extended to 1 March to 30 November, excluding the four days of the Easter holiday weekend. The Easter holiday weekend (Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday) is a very popular time to walk, and the track is at capacity during this period.

An extension to the mountain bike season would ensure that mountain bikers have a reasonable opportunity to use the track during the warmer months of the year. This would also minimise safety issues associated with mountain bikers riding the track over the winter period. West Coast spring rains can dominate in September and October, however the likelihood of strong cold fronts, with snow fall to low levels and short days have passed. It is estimated that an extension to the mountain bike season could result in up to 4,000 visitors mountain biking the Heaphy Track each year and increase the total number of people using the track to approximately 9,000 per annum. Feedback from mountain bikers has been that the cold winter months are a deterrent to riding the track.

¹ Commercial Accommodation Monitor, Nelson-Tasman, July 2013, Statistics New Zealand & Commercial Accommodation Monitor, West Coast, July 2013, Statistics New Zealand.

It is considered that extending the season will not impact on walkers, however, this matter will need to be considered through a review of the Kahurangi National Park Management Plan.

The proposed dates for the extended mountain bike season will be consistent with mountain biking on the Queen Charlotte Track, however the proposal is to exclude mountain biking over the four days of the Easter holiday which is not the case on the Queen Charlotte Track.

3. Social Impacts

Over the trial period, visitors (walkers and mountain bikers) were invited to give feedback to the Department regarding their experiences, and to provide suggestions or general comments on the trial. The Department received 144 responses; the majority of comments were positive and six were negative. The majority of visitors described their experience as great, and hoped that access to mountain biking on the Heaphy Track would continue. The Heaphy Track has been described as *“the best multi-day ride in New Zealand”*.

The Kahurangi National Park Bylaws were amended in April 2011 to allow mountain biking on the Heaphy Track. These bylaws made it possible to enforce the rules of the trial. Over the period of the trial there were no major issues that required enforcement.

Conflict between walkers and mountain bikers has been minimal. It was commented that *“it was great to see the all the users, walkers and mountain bikers, sharing the track and enjoying the experience together”*. This was due to high compliance with the mountain bikers code. It is difficult to fully gauge the effect of mountain bikers upon walkers due to the fact that there were few walkers on the track during the mountain biking trial. The limited number of instances of conflict suggests that both mountain bikers and walkers are sharing the track with consideration for each other.

3. Physical Impacts

Physical impact monitoring was undertaken at five locations. Analysis of monitoring data suggests few impacts as a result of the track being opened up for mountain bike use:

- Monitoring results show that where the track is well formed and constructed, and has the ability to drain freely, the 3 year trial of mountain bike use appears to have had no significant negative impact.
- Certain sections of track are subject to regular flooding and/or being submerged by high tide. They can become muddy when wet and as a result show evidence of use from bikers and walkers.
- Certain sections of the Heaphy Track between Blueshirt Creek and James Mackay Hut, and between James Mackay Hut and Lewis Hut, are poorly formed, wet, and muddy, and require upgrade in order to meet the needs of both mountain bikers and trampers. This work is programmed to occur in 2013/14.
- High rainfall events, such as those that occurred in 2010 and 2011, can severely damage the track and infrastructure. Reports from hut wardens, track workers, and users suggest that these storm events have had considerably more negative impact on the track than mountain bikers and walkers.
- The Heaphy Track has a well defined track corridor and there have been no reports of people mountain biking off the track.
- There have been no reports of damage from mountain bikers to historical features on the track.
- There have been no reports of damage or vandalism to signs on the track.

Much feedback was received about the apparent differences in the standard of the track between Golden Bay and the West Coast. Comments were not necessarily negative, however, some sections of the track from beyond Saxon Hut and Lewis Hut were perceived as muddy, rough, and uneven. A programme of work has recently commenced to upgrade some of the severely eroded sections of the track and this work will continue.

During the trial period the Department replaced the Perry Saddle Hut and the Heaphy Hut. Four of the older style 'six-wire' Forest Service swing bridges were replaced with suspension bridges more suitable for mountain bike use and walkers on a Great Walk. Feedback regarding the new facilities has been very positive.

4. Ecological Impacts

Monitoring was carried out to determine the proportion of crush related deaths of snails on selected sections of the Heaphy track.

Monitoring of *Powelliphanta* land snails was undertaken on 5 June and 5 September 2013. From both inspections a total of 99 snails and shells were found along the sections of track sampled or nearby (96 on the track).

Approximately 64% of these showed signs of predation, 20% of shells were found intact, and assumed to have died naturally, 10% were assessed as having died from crushing, 4% had uncertain cause of death (crushed, but possibly post-death) and 3% of records were live snails.

Overall, predation of *Powelliphanta* is the most significant impact on the species and occurs throughout the whole habitat area. Compared to this, the impact of mountain bikers on the species is considered to be minimal. The percentage of shells where crushing was identified as cause of death was relatively small. In addition, the effect is localised, as the Heaphy Track covers only a small portion of the snails' habitat. The monitoring is not able to determine whether snails have been crushed by foot or bike traffic.

However, as *Powelliphanta* are in serious decline, the Department will continue monitoring, highlight the importance of *Powelliphanta* to visitors and reinforce that riding on the track at night is not permitted.

There were no reports of adverse effects on kiwi.

The Heaphy track has a well defined track corridor and there has been no evidence of damage to track side vegetation.

5. Economic Impacts

Over the period of the mountain biking season the economic benefit to the regions is estimated at around \$ 756,000². Overall the total number of people mountain biking and walking the Heaphy Track contributed an estimated \$2,312,604 per annum to the Regions.

Twelve concessionaires and businesses were asked about the Heaphy Track's direct impact on their business. The majority described the effect as positive and commented that it had contributed to expanding their business during the quiet part of the year. One concessionaire commented that:

"mountain biking on the Heaphy Track gave us the opportunity to expand our business to include the Heaphy Track, and in doing so develop a new part of our business which is multi day mountain biking tours. Being a winter only season it has also had the effect of bringing extra business in what is normally the very quiet winter months, not only for guided tours but also with bike hire, transport, and support for mountain bikers. It has helped us give extra winter work to our guides, and also offer work to summer season guides and drivers in their quiet season. The downside is that very few people want to bike the track in June and July, so having a longer season would help to fill in what is currently very quiet shoulder seasons."

Another observation by a business owner has been that although there have been up to 2,000 visitors using the Heaphy Track during the period of mountain bike season, the majority of people travelled from Golden Bay to Karamea. A comment for the Karamea Information Centre

was that mountain bikers...

"had all their transport and accommodation pre-organised".

They commented that for businesses it was not worth their while to stay open extra hours to support these visitors. However, this may have been a lost opportunity with one mountain biker commenting that in September 2013 ...

"there were 93 hut spaces booked for the weekend and only 5 trampers... we would have stopped for lunch at Karamea but there were no visible roadside signs advertising food or cafe snacks and coffee. We expected to see something at Last Resort, (where we would previously stop) but no, all quiet, so maybe they continue to financially miss out on passing visitor trade and need to get themselves organised, so all the way to Gibby's Café in Westport was our next stop (yummy food !). I hope the people at Karamea do not complain that they don't make much from passing mountain bikers during the winter. They better get themselves sorted."

It is estimated that an extension to the mountain bike season could result in up to 4,000 visitors mountain biking the Heaphy Track each year and increase the total number of people using the track to approximately 9,000 per annum (see section 2). This would increase the economic benefit to the regions to an estimated \$3,402,000 per annum, an increase of \$956,340 per annum.

² Assumption based on average expenditure per trip of \$378.00 for each mountain biker (see *New Zealand Cycleway – Market Research*. September, 2009 page iii).

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the review, this report makes the following recommendations in regards to the future of mountain biking on the Heaphy Track:

1. Allow mountain biking to continue on the Heaphy Track.
2. Extend the mountain bike season to 1 March to 30 November excluding the four days of the Easter holiday weekend.
3. If the season is extended then social monitoring should continue to assess whether there is any conflict between mountain bikers and walkers as a result of the change.
4. There has been sufficient physical monitoring and to conclude that no further physical impact monitoring is necessary.
5. The monitoring of *Powelliphanta* land snail should continue and the Department will highlight the importance of *Powelliphanta* to visitors and reinforce that riding on the track at night is not permitted.
6. All other previous conditions set for the mountain bike trial should be maintained.