



Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri Assessment Panel Report

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Executive summary

Operating a commercial business on public conservation land within the Abel Tasman National Park, Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve and Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve is regulated by the Department of Conservation (the Department). This regulation aims to ensure environmental protection of the area and compliance with statutory obligations, as well as ensuring the values of the Park are upheld.

The Department requires, all land or water based commercial activity operating on Public Conservation land to hold a concession issued. Current concessions are due to expire 30 April 2027. The Department issued a section 17ZG(2)(a) notice under the Conservation Act 1987 on September 2024 to restrict new applications for commercial activities at these locations until the new allocation process was developed.

In Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri, 34 operators currently hold concessions enabling them to carry out commercial land or water-based activities. These activities are limited supply opportunities with activity limits specified in the Abel Tasman National Park Management Plan, the Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve Management Plan and the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve and Kaka Point Historic Reserve Management Plan. The current operating environment of this area is shaped by varying utilisation of existing activity allocations, with some operators exceeding limits and others below capacity.

In addition to these plans, the governance of the Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve is distinct within New Zealand's conservation system. It is the only foreshore reserve managed through a statutory co-management arrangement between the Department of Conservation and a territorial authority. Bylaws for the Foreshore Scenic Reserve were implemented in 2016 and are jointly implemented by the Department and Tasman District Council in accordance with their statutory functions. Oversight of the Reserve is carried out by an Administration Committee comprising of a Department Conservator and the Tasman District Council Chief Executive, who hold delegated powers under the Reserves Act 1977. This unique governance model ensures that decision-making reflects both national conservation priorities and local community interests.

During the development of the new allocations process the Crown resolved the Nelson Tenths litigation with Te Here-ā-Nuku Trust (the Trust). This saw ~3,000ha of land in the Nelson/Tasman region restored to its owners which included parts of the Abel Tasman National Park. The Department and the Trust have been working alongside each other to develop and run an allocation process which works for both parties, and new concessionaires, while ensuring the protection of the land.

As part of the new process, an Assessment Panel (the Panel) was established to evaluate applications against a set of predetermined criteria and make recommendations to the Department as to the ranking of applicants. This ranking will then inform the allocation of concessions by the Department.

The Panel received 30 applications from operators expressing an interest in holding a concession for water and land-based activities in the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri area. Some applicants are wanting to hold multiple concessions. There is a variety of applicants with some being new operators to the area, while others are long standing community embedded operators. Applications also covered locally owned and operated commercial businesses through to national and international organisations.

The Panel found that applications contained a varying amount of detail. Some applicants provided extensive description of how they demonstrated the criteria and included wide ranging evidence, others had a lighter touch. Overall, Panel members found the information provided was sufficient to assess the applications.

After conducting a detailed assessment of each applicant against the criteria, the Panel recommends the following rankings to the Department. Justification of the ranking assessment is outlined in the report including how each application ranked against each of the criteria.

Score range	Applicant
40-44	Abel Tasman Soul Limited
	Abel Tasman Waka Experience
35-39	Abel Tasman Charters
	Abel Tasman Sailing Adventures
	Active Earth Holdings (Hiking New Zealand)
	Awaroa Sea Kayaks
	Kahu Kayaks
	Mārahau Water Taxis and Sea Kayaks
	R&R Kayaks
	Sea Shuttles
	Wilson's Abel Tasman
	Abel Tasman Eco Tours
30-34	Abel Tasman Guides
	Awaroa Lodge
	Heritage Expeditions
	Kahurangi Guided Walks
	Whakarewa (Ngāti Rārua Ātiawa Iwi Trust)
25-29	Wine, Art & Wilderness
	Adventure South NZ

Bigfoot Adventure

Intrepid (ANZ Nature Tours)

Kontrax Ltd

Māpua Adventure Charter Ltd

New Zealand Trails

Split Apple Rock Cruises

Terra Nova Tours

Active Adventures

Coastal Sailing Adventures

0-24

Duchess Holdings

The Extra Mile Travel Ltd

Context

The Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri areas currently support 34 commercial operators under concessions that enable land and water-based recreational activities. With more than 50 concessions due to expire on 30 April 2027, a new allocation process was designed to govern operations from 1 May 2027. A section 17ZG notice issued in September 2024 prevents new applications being considered until a new allocations system is in place.

Three conservation management plans set the regulatory framework for this area, each specifying activity limits to protect conservation values and ensure high quality visitor experiences. The Department administers concession processes across both the Abel Tasman National Park, and Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve, with shared decision-making responsibilities with the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve Board for activities within the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve. The Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve is co-managed by the Department and Tasman District Council.

The Department has implemented a competitive allocation process that uses a set of transparent criteria to assess applications and determine concession allocations. Concession allocations will be granted for a ten-year term, with a review every three years to ensure compliance and utilisation is upheld.

As part of this new process, the Panel was established with the purpose of using its knowledge and experience to assess applications against a set of criteria. The Panel was tasked with making recommendations to the Department as to the ranking of applications. This report contains a summary of the Panel's assessment and concluding recommendations to inform the granting of concession allocations.

Overview of Panel and process

The Panel has extensive knowledge of the conservation and cultural values of the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri, the impacts of managing tourism in the area and regulatory processes. Membership of the Panel consisted of voting and non-voting members as outlined below:

Voting members:

Siobhan Quayle (Director Regulatory Systems Performance at the Department of Conservation)- Panel Chair: Siobhan brought in-depth regulatory system knowledge, as well as ensured decisions were made in line with the Department's values and strategic direction.

Rob Smith (Tasman District Council) General Manager, Environmental Services: Nominated by Leonie Rae, the Council's CEO, who was unavailable to attend the meetings. Leonie Rae is part of the Administration Committee for the Abel Tasman Foreshore Scenic Reserve, which is appointed by the Minister of Conservation under Section 9 of the Reserves Act 1977, with delegated powers and functions to administer and manage the reserve.

The Council is responsible for management of activities under the RMA, LGA, Biosecurity Act, Marine Transport Act, Building Act, CDEM Act (among many others), management of some reserve land next to National Park, and administration and enforcement of Navigation Safety Bylaws that apply to operation of vessels in the coastal marine area.

Mason Fitzgerald (Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve Board): The Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve Board is appointed by the Minister to control and manage the recreation reserve. As CEO, Mason is responsible for the day-to-day management and operation of the reserve which includes supporting the accommodation, retail, food and beverage outlets and customer service in the reserve. Mason and his staff are the first point of contact for concessionaires operating within the reserve and understands the context within which these concessions operate.

Non-voting members

Craig Wilson (Nelson Regional Development Agency): Craig is a Strategic Tourism Advisor/Partner to the NRDA and has extensive commercial tourism experience. The NRDA brings expertise and perspectives relevant to the regional tourism industry.

Peter Renshaw (Tasman District Council Harbourmaster): The Harbourmaster is responsible for patrolling Tasman's waters to ensure maritime rules and safety bylaws are being adhered to; they also deal with all maritime issues from removing hazards/wrecks, dangerous boating, mooring/anchoring and responding to marine oil spills. The Harbourmaster is in regular contact with all of the commercial water-based operators.

Other Panel arrangements

Dave Johnston (General Manager Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō): David is the Iwi representative and brought extensive knowledge and understanding of iwi, hapū and mana whenua's connection to and aspirations for the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri.

Due to conflicting commitments, David was only able to attend the meeting on recognising Treaty rights and interests in person. To ensure mana whenua views were considered throughout the process the Department sought his comments on the draft Panel report prior to finalisation, which allowed for any additional context, comment and justified changes to any rankings.

Te Here-ā-Nuku Trust: during the allocation process, the Crown reached an agreement to resolve the Nelsons Tenth's litigation. The Trust will hold and protect the assets being returned to the customary owners of the Nelson Tenth's Reserves, which includes parts of the area involved in the allocation process. The Trust were unable to attend the Panel meetings but have reviewed the draft Panel report and provided comment and justification for any changes.

Panel methodology

The Panel received the Terms of Reference and conflict of interest information on 20 January 2026. This was followed by all applications and the accompanying assessment information on 30 January 2026. Each Panel member individually assessed operator applications against each criterion. Individual assessments do not form the official record for the assessment, instead they provided a starting point for each member to engage in discussions and appropriately consider rankings as a collective.

The Panel met five times. The first four meetings went through each criterion with a further meeting covering feedback on the Panel's draft report.

To establish a consensus ranking, individual panel members' scores for each criterion were aggregated to produce a total score. These total scores determined the rankings under each criterion and provided the basis for the scores under each criterion.

Final rankings were then calculated by adding together the scores for each operator under each criterion. The Panel moderated both the overall and criterion specific scores and rankings to ensure the assessment criteria were applied consistently and fairly.

Panel Conflict of Interests

All members agreed to manage conflicts of interest (perceived or actual). All conflict-of-interest management plans were agreed to by the independent probity advisor, the Chair and the member in which it concerned.

All Panel members agreed information shared with the Panel, discussed in Panel meetings and the draft report would be treated as confidential.

Assessment summary

Applicants were assessed against five criteria that were equally weighted.

- Operator experience
- Impacts on and benefits to conservation
- Recognising Treaty rights and interests
- Offerings to visitors
- Benefits to the local area

Each criterion is individually discussed below, including a high-level general summary of the Panel's discussion.

Criteria one: Operators Experience

The Panel was asked to assess operator experience by judging the applicant's past performance and experience in the area, or similar operations if new to the area, through demonstrations of compliance with concession conditions, evidence of constructively working with the Department and/or other regulatory agencies/functions, as well as providing timely notification of incidents. This criterion recognised the Department's need to be confident that the applicant can comply with all necessary regulatory requirements.

Panel discussions highlighted clear differences between higher and lower scoring operators, driven primarily by compliance behaviour, operational maturity, documentation quality, and the strength of local engagement. Across all applications, the Panel placed strong emphasis on operational integrity, responsiveness to incidents, clarity of safety practices, and demonstrated commitment to the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri environment. The Panel found that the level of information provided varied between operators with some providing detailed information and supporting evidence of their ability to meet the requirement, whereas others provided more generic information that lacked detail and was not tailored to the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri context.

Areas that set higher ranked applicants apart from lower ranked applicants were:

- Long standing operational history in the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri area.
- Strong regulatory compliance including progress on AIS requirements.
- Consistently positive customer feedback.
- Detailed and transparent applications, supported by evidence of safety, high quality operations and constructive engagement with DOC, TDC, and the Harbourmaster.
- Newer operators or national operators with limited presence in the region often struggled to articulate their value or demonstrate meaningful connection to the Park.
- The Panel noted the importance of leadership culture with respect to regulatory matters is critical to ensuring confidence in their partnership approach with regulators.

Criteria Two: Impacts on and benefits to conservation

The Panel was asked to assess applications against impacts on and benefits to conservation by judging the applicant's in-kind returns to conservation, contributions to conservation, scientific and mātauranga research and how the operator mitigates the impact of visitors in the area. This criterion recognised the Department's need to be confident applicants contribute to achieving conservation outcomes, including mitigation of visitor impacts and the preservation of historic and natural values of the area.

Across all applications, the Panel placed strong emphasis on demonstrated stewardship, operational integrity, low impact practices, and clear contributions to protecting the Abel Tasman environment. These factors consistently distinguished the higher performing operators.

The Panel found significant variation in the level of detail provided. Some applicants supplied comprehensive, tailored evidence of their conservation role, while others submitted light or

generic information that did not clearly relate to the Abel Tasman context. Newer operators or national inbound operators with limited regional presence often struggled to demonstrate meaningful connection to the Park or to articulate how their activities do or would deliver tangible conservation value. Several relied upon broad sustainability statements or national level commitments rather than park specific outcomes.

Lower scoring operators showed gaps in operational discipline, including unresolved biofouling issues, or applications that relied on regulatory compliance as a conservation contribution (the Panel considered this is merely the minimum expectation applying to every operator). Several applications lacked detail, used generic language, or offered little evidence of active engagement with local conservation groups, further distinguishing them from the higher ranked operators. Areas that set higher ranked applicants apart from lower ranked applicants were:

- Demonstration of long-term commitment to conservation within Abel Tasman, including sustained contributions to the Birdsong Trust, longstanding restoration involvement, or early adoption of giveback initiatives.
- Active participation in local partnerships such as the Mārahau Pledge, Birdsong Trust, and other regionally focused groups, with clear evidence of in-kind support, volunteer hours, or logistical contributions.
- Clear, well evidenced applications that articulated park-specific environmental practices, detailed examples of stewardship activity, and transparent reporting of conservation outcomes.
- Proactive environmental management, including low impact vessel operations, noise minimisation, and attention to biosecurity risks such as biofouling.
- Operators embedded in the community, contributing through education, youth engagement, transport solutions that reduce visitor impacts, and ongoing collaboration with local organisations.
- Consistency between stated practices and water/on-the ground behaviour, with high scoring operators demonstrating alignment between policy and practice and showing responsiveness to concerns or previous incidents.

Criteria Three: Recognising Treaty rights and interests

The Panel was asked to assess applications against how well operators recognise and uphold Treaty rights and interests by demonstrating meaningful engagement with mana whenua and elevating Māori knowledge, values, and aspirations. This criterion recognises that the Department must be confident operators actively support mana whenua connections to place, including through accurate and respectful interpretation of cultural narratives, tikanga, and mātauranga Māori.

In assessing this criterion, the Panel considered the applicant's cultural capability, and evidence of an active and positive relationship with mana whenua. The Panel evaluated how applicants promote visitor understanding of the significance of taonga, encourage kaitiakitanga and customary practices, and raise general awareness of the cultural, historical, and spiritual values associated with the area.

The Panel placed strong emphasis on clear, place-based cultural integration and the extent to which operators demonstrated authentic, ongoing relationships with mana whenua of Te Tau Ihu. The Panel viewed applications that paired well-developed written material with verifiable, on the ground practice particularly favourably. Inbound operators with a national presence struggled to show how their strong cultural credentials across the motu translated into the Abel Tasman context. Operators who showed strong capability in day-to-day operations but did not adequately reflect this in their written applications tended to score in the midrange, while well written applications unsupported by tangible examples scored lower. Areas that set higher ranked operators apart from lower ranked operators were:

- Demonstration of authentic, ongoing relationships with mana whenua to gain local and place-specific knowledge to ensure a genuine and site-specific experience to visitors.
- Embedded cultural capability into daily operations and staff development, such as investment in upskilling of staff through Te Ao Māori workshops and employment and development of local whānau as guides.
- Demonstration of long tenure and continuity of practice in the area, with evidence of continual improvement.
- Development and use of robust and tailored material for visitors and guides that reflect the Abel Tasman cultural history.

Criteria Four: Offerings to visitors

The Panel was asked to assess applications against the quality and suitability of the operator's offerings to visitors, including how well these align with the vision and outcomes set out in the relevant Management Plans. This criterion recognises the Department must be confident operators can deliver high quality and meaningful visitor experiences that uphold the natural values and management intentions for the area.

In assessing this criterion, the Panel considered the overall quality of the experience proposed, the applicant's readiness to begin operating, and the robustness of systems in place to ensure safe and consistent delivery. The Panel also evaluated the extent to which the operator provides visitors with accurate and engaging information about the natural history of the park, ensuring experiences contribute to visitor understanding, appreciation, and protection of the environment.

Across the range of applications, the Panel observed significant variation in the quality, clarity, and distinctiveness of visitor offerings. Higher scoring applicants tended to provide well-articulated, high value experiences supported by strong safety systems, expert guiding, and thoughtful interpretation of environmental and cultural values. These operators often demonstrated clear points of difference such as small group formats, premium experiences, specialised equipment, or deeply embedded environmental practices which enhanced the overall visitor experience within the park.

In contrast, lower scoring applications frequently lacked detail, offering generic descriptions that did not clearly illustrate the quality or uniqueness of the product. Several operators relied heavily on other concessionaires for core delivery, with limited evidence of added value or strong alignment with park objectives. Overall, the Panel emphasised that distinctive, well planned, and low impact visitor experiences stood out markedly from those that were adequate but undifferentiated.

Areas that set higher ranked operators apart from lower ranked operators were:

- Distinctive, high quality visitor experiences, often characterised by small groups, expert guiding, unique or premium offerings, consistently strong customer feedback, and a clear point of difference that adds value to the wider visitor mix.
- Clear articulation of the visitor journey, with well-evidenced operational planning, safety systems, and thoughtful interpretation of natural and cultural values.
- Strong alignment with park values, including low impact practices, environmental education for visitors, and responsible behaviour messaging.
- Investment in quality and capability, shown through accreditation (e.g., NZOIA), safety vessels, detailed training programmes, and long-term experience in the region.
- Innovative or well-developed offerings that broaden the range of experiences in the park (e.g., sailing, specialised kayaking, immersive nature tours).

Criteria Five: benefits to the local area

The Panel was asked to assess applications against the extent to which they provide meaningful benefits to the local area, including economic, social, cultural, and educational contributions. This criterion recognises that the Department must be confident operators positively enhance local communities and support outcomes that extend beyond their core commercial activities.

In assessing this criterion, the Panel considered the employment and training opportunities, the applicant's ability to enhance cultural, historic, or conservation narratives, and evidence of enduring relationships with mana whenua and community groups. Location-specific benefits were also assessed, such as actions by applicants in the Kaiteriteri Recreation Reserve to help address parking pressures. Overall, the focus was on each operator's capacity to support community wellbeing, reinforce local identity and values, and contribute to sustainable outcomes.

Stronger applications demonstrated deep local involvement, meaningful economic contribution, and long-standing commitment to the region. These operators typically employed and trained local staff, supported youth development, engaged constructively with local challenges, and proactively contributed to community initiatives. In contrast, lower scoring applications tended to offer generic or limited statements about community benefit, lacking specific examples or evidence of local impact. These applicants often showed minimal local employment, weaker community connections, or only reactive engagement. The Panel observed that operators who actively invest in the social, cultural, and economic wellbeing of the region clearly distinguished themselves from those whose contributions were limited or poorly articulated.

Areas that set higher ranked operators apart from lower ranked operators were:

- Demonstration of a long-term commitment to being embedded in the local community. This was often shown through staff returning over multiple seasons, youth development pathways, strong regional presence, and contributions that build local capability and continuity.
- Proactive community engagement and problem solving, including active participation in conservation initiatives, local events, and collaborative responses to challenges such as parking pressures at Kaiteriteri and during emergencies.
- Demonstration of high standards of environmental stewardship, with operators adopting low impact practices, carbon positive goals, strong safety systems, investment in staff training, and a focus on educating visitors about the environment and cultural context.
- Strong collaboration and meaningful regional economic contribution, through partnerships with concessionaires, local suppliers, and community organisations.

Final Panel Ranking

Overall, the Panel's assessment highlighted clear differentiation between local and well-embedded applicants and those who struggled to demonstrate connection to the region.

Higher scoring operators consistently provided well-evidenced, locally grounded applications that demonstrated operational maturity, environmental leadership, meaningful cultural integration, and a clear commitment to delivering high quality visitor experiences. These operators showed a depth of connection to place, supported by long term practice and proactive give back to the local region. In contrast, applications that ranked lower tended to rely on generic statements, limited evidence, or high-level commitments that did not translate into demonstrated practice. Common gaps included insufficient detail on operational capability, limited conservation contribution, weak or undeveloped relationships with mana whenua, and an absence of distinctiveness or clear added value for visitors.

Taken together, the assessment reinforces the importance of applicants demonstrating genuine partnership approaches with regulators and mana whenua, providing transparent, well-evidenced applications and showing their connection to the region goes beyond a business decision. Applicants who showed clear stewardship, strong cultural and environmental responsibility, and authentic connections to the community distinguished themselves as those best placed to support the long-term growth and protection of the Abel Tasman and Kaiteriteri area. The Panel’s assessment highlights the behaviours and practices that most effectively contribute to positive outcomes for conservation, visitors, and local communities.

Based on the Panel’s assessment, the Panel recommend the following overall ranking.

Score range	Applicant
40-44	Abel Tasman Soul Limited
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Wine, Art & Wilderness	

	Adventure South NZ
	Bigfoot Adventure
	Intrepid (ANZ Nature Tours)
	Kontrax Ltd
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	Terra Nova Tours
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