

Exploring visitor experiences, crowding perceptions and coping strategies on the Milford Track, New Zealand

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Stephen R. Espiner

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Cover: A point of congestion on the Milford Track—Mackinnon monument at the top of Mackinnon Pass.
Photo: Gordon Cessford.

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Exploring visitor experiences, crowding perceptions and coping strategies on the Milford Track, New Zealand

Kay L. Booth¹, Gordon R. Cessford^{2,3}, Stephen F. McCool⁴ and Stephen R. Espiner⁵

¹ Lindis Consulting, PO Box 12036, Christchurch 8242, New Zealand.

Email: kay@lindis.co.nz

² Department of Conservation, PO Box 10420, Wellington 6143, New Zealand.

³ Visitor Solutions, PO Box 26246, Marion Square, Wellington 6041, New Zealand.

⁴ 7215 Beryl Lane, Missoula, MT 59804, USA.

⁵ Lincoln University, PO Box 84, Lincoln 7647, Canterbury, New Zealand.

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the factors that influence visitors' experiences and, in particular, how visitors cope in response to social impacts such as crowding. This topic was investigated via interviews with 56 independent walkers on the Milford Track, Fiordland National Park, New Zealand. Interviews utilised a variety of question styles to elicit information; an approach that provided comprehensive insight into interviewees' experiences. The study set out to identify the factors that influenced walkers' recreation experiences and the relative importance of these; what mechanisms walkers used to cope with negative impacts; and what opportunities are available to managers to influence these factors and, hence, the walkers' experiences. The study identified six primary dimensions associated with 'the Milford Track experience': national identity, scenery appreciation, iconic status, uniqueness, social bonds and personal challenge. The factors that influenced the experience that walkers obtained included management regulations (uni-directional track, booking system, one-night stays, no camping), track/facility standard and design, the weather, and the social interactions within and between groups. Walkers' prior experience exerted a strong influence upon their visit evaluations. Walkers gave high overall ratings to their Milford Track experience, despite also reporting some negative aspects, most of which were related to behaviour around huts and disturbance in the bunkrooms. Walkers demonstrated a very high degree of coping behaviour, and employed a variety of strategies. Most people utilised emotional/cognitive strategies, with a very small number employing direct (behavioural) strategies. Implications for park management and recommendations for further research are presented.

Keywords: visitor experience, coping strategies, crowding, Milford Track, Fiordland National Park, New Zealand

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1. Introduction

1.1 PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND

This study explores the nature of the outdoor recreation experience. It seeks to outline the different facets of the visitor experience and enhance our understanding of the ways people accommodate unanticipated negative aspects of their experience (coping strategies). A case study of independent¹ walkers on the Milford Track was used to examine this topic.

The study grew from Department of Conservation (DOC) managers' concerns about the social impact of outdoor recreation visitors upon the quality of other visitors' experiences. While a substantial body of research exists about social impacts, it remains unclear what factors influence the visitor experience and their degree of influence. Finding out about this is important, because such understanding would enable DOC managers to target actions to enhance the quality of visitors' experiences.

The lack of progress towards understanding the visitor experience and, more particularly, what affects it, largely stems from a preoccupation with the effects of 'crowding' upon the visitor experience (Manning 1999; Vaske & Shelby 2008). In this study, we define crowding as a subjective response to use density and related social setting attributes, such as number of people encountered on a track or at a campsite, location of encounters, behaviour of the people encountered, and so on. Visitor responses to these conditions are also tempered by their own expectations, prior experiences, in-group social norms and other background factors.

Concerns about the impacts of high user densities in natural protected areas have been widely expressed for several decades, including in New Zealand, the USA, Canada and Australia. In New Zealand's case, after a period of dramatic increase in domestic outdoor recreation in the 1960s and 1970s (described by Mason (1974) as the 'backcountry boom'), domestic growth has largely stabilised in accordance with more modest population growth. However, an overall growth in outdoor recreation and visits to natural protected areas has been sustained through increasing participation by overseas visitors to New Zealand.

Accompanying such growth has been a persistent and ongoing concern among park managers, and outdoor recreation researchers and advocates, about resulting pressures of use on the quality of visitor experiences. Research, however, has not confirmed the validity of such concerns, at least not in as simple terms as they are commonly expressed; that is, that higher levels of use lead to more frequent evaluations of settings as 'crowded'. Indeed, visitors to some places, including the Milford Track, report high levels of crowding, but also high levels of overall visit satisfaction. Better understanding of what influences the visitor experience is required.

¹ 'Independent' walkers are those who stay in Department of Conservation huts and arrange the trip themselves. They are a separate cohort to the 'guided' walkers who use the services of the Milford Track guided walk concessionaire (including separate accommodation).

This study responds to this need by seeking to achieve a more complete understanding of the visitor experience beyond a simple investigation of crowding. It pursues an in-depth examination of the factors which exert an influence upon the visitor experience, to what extent they affect visitors' experiences and what role visitors' coping strategies play in the relationship.

1.2 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The study aim was to investigate the factors influencing visitors' outdoor recreation experiences on public conservation land and to examine visitors' coping behaviours in response to social impacts.

More specifically, the study objectives were to:

1. Identify factors that influence visitors' evaluations of their recreation experiences.
2. Examine the relative importance of factors affecting visitors' evaluations of their recreation experiences.
3. Investigate coping processes used by visitors to mediate perceptions of social impact (negative experiences).
4. Identify the opportunities available to managers to influence these factors and, therefore, visitors' experiences.

The study focussed upon exploring visitors' experiences on the Milford Track. This research setting was chosen because it was identified in a DOC recreation survey (DOC 2006) as a place where visitors experience high levels of satisfaction despite frequent reports of crowding. In other words, the Milford Track visitor experience appeared to be influenced by factors other than perceptions of use density.

While the findings of this study will contribute to the conceptual understanding of outdoor recreation experiences, we also draw conclusions that will assist protected area managers understand their visitors and provide practical management recommendations specific to the study site.

1.3 METHODS

A qualitative approach was employed in order to draw out deeper dimensions of the visitor experience and visitor coping strategies than would have been possible using quantitative methods. In this respect, the study was exploratory—it sought greater **understanding** of the visitor experience.

A literature review was undertaken to provide the theoretical context for the research and to ensure the study built on existing knowledge. The review focussed upon definition of the visitor experience, factors known to influence the experience and visitors' coping strategies (i.e. the primary components of the study). The international outdoor recreation literature was searched using academic databases and the study team identified recent relevant literature that was not published.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 56 independent walkers on the Milford Track during March 2008. Interviews were conducted at Dumpling Hut, which is the location of the final overnight stay on the Milford Track for independent walkers. The data collection period was 18–24 March, which included Easter (21–24 March). During this time a high proportion of New Zealanders were booked to walk the Track, and the walkers booked included several large groups.

Forty-three interviews were conducted with the 56 walkers, 30 of whom were New Zealanders. Interviewees were selected based upon nationality, age and gender (a range was sought), and previous trips on the Milford Track (preference given to repeat users, since it was known that the Track attracts a high proportion of first-time users; Cessford 1998). Walkers' attributes were identified from informal discussion with them upon their arrival at Dumpling Hut. Selected walkers were asked if they were willing to be interviewed, and all agreed. Interviews were conducted with individuals or pairs of walkers (from the same party), depending on the initial contact and the walker's preference. In one case, three friends were interviewed together at their request. In total, 30 single-person interviews, 12 two-person interviews and 1 three-person interview were undertaken. One interview was conducted with an Asian walker who did not speak English. A member of the interviewee's group acted as interpreter.

At the beginning of each interview, the purpose of the study was explained and DOC's role identified. Permission was sought to record the interview on audio-tape (there were no refusals) and interviewees were assured that their contribution would be anonymous, as only first names would be recorded. Since participation was on a voluntary basis, a signed consent form was not used. Interviewees were given a small gift (a confectionary chocolate fish) on completion of the interview, which was well received.

Interviews took place at a time convenient to the walker in the ranger's quarters (a separate building from the main tramping hut). The average length of interviews was 25 minutes, and the range was from 12 to 40 minutes. Two researchers conducted the interviews; each usually achieving three interviews per day. The period available for interviews was between walkers' arriving at the hut (the earliest at 1 pm, but most between 3 pm and 5 pm) and the ranger's evening talk (8 pm). Care was taken to interview people across the range of arrival times.

An interview schedule was developed and then refined in the field (Appendix 1). Interviewees filled in a one-page questionnaire (Appendix 2) at the beginning of the interview, so researchers could quickly assess their background. All interviews were recorded (audio) and transcribed. Data were analysed manually by theme. While in the field, researchers recorded their observations and undertook preliminary analysis. This included informal participant observation.

Questions of various styles were used to collect data (see Appendix 1) with question themes deliberately repeated in different question forms. Sometimes this led to repetition in responses but, as anticipated, it proved a fruitful approach in extracting responses that were not initially apparent, including new facets of the experience and reinforcement of key factors. The questioning approach we applied proved to be useful, and is recommended for application elsewhere (see section 7.8).

1.4 STUDY SETTING: CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MILFORD TRACK

The Milford Track (Fig. 1) has been called ‘the finest walk in the world’² and is the best known of New Zealand’s multi-day walking tracks (DuFresne 2002). It is a 53.5 km-long walking-only track in the scenic and remote Fiordland National Park, part of Te Wahipounamu/South West New Zealand World Heritage Area. The Track is one of nine ‘Great Walks’ administered by DOC, all of which provide a high level of facilities which are specifically designed and managed to cater for less-challenging but high-quality backcountry recreation experiences.

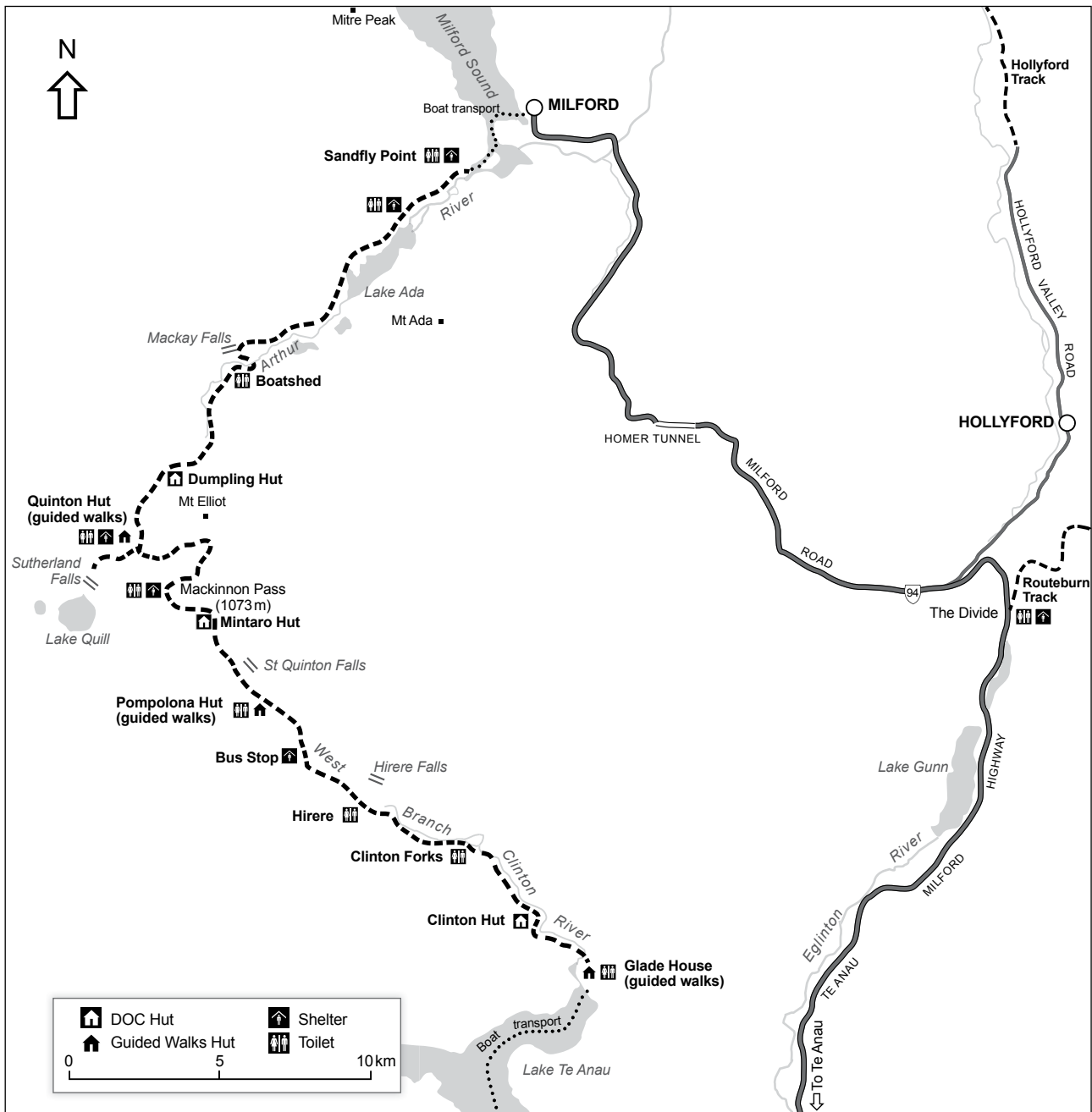


Figure 1. Map of the Milford Track.

² www.ultimatehikes.co.nz/mt_home.asp (accessed 20 July 2008).

The Milford Track has the most stringent visitor regulations of any walking track in New Zealand. It is the only track in New Zealand specifically managed for one-way use; no camping is allowed; only 40 **independent** walkers per day can start the Track; walkers can stay only one night at each of the three huts used for the 4-day journey; and huts must be booked in advance³. The Track is very popular and is fully booked for the duration of the peak season, often many months in advance. Rangers based at each hut give a talk each night (a mix of safety and track information, along with interpretation) and collect hut tickets. During the day, these rangers undertake track maintenance and the Track is maintained to a very high standard in accordance with its 'Great Walk' status. In response to the terrain, the track standard is lower over the alpine crossing of Mackinnon Pass. For 3 nights' accommodation, walkers pay \$135 (adult). Children under 18 years old are free. The Track traverses the Clinton Valley, over Mackinnon Pass (1069 m a.s.l.) and out along the Arthur Valley.

In addition to the independent walkers, **guided** walkers are permitted to use the Track through a private concessionaire, and are similarly managed, with a maximum of 50 starting each day; travelling one-way; and staying only 1 night in each of the three concessionaire lodges. They are accompanied by professional guides and only carry day packs, having food and bedding supplied at their catered lodges. Adults pay from \$1850 for this 5 day/4 night trip (including 1 night in Milford Sound post-walk).

Boat transport is required at both ends of the Track. Transport to and from the Track can be booked in advance, via the internet, as part of the booking package. While there are multiple boat options, the overwhelming majority of walkers use the motorised 'Track boat' transport. At the start of the walk, boats depart Te Anau Downs at 10.30 am and 2 pm, each delivering a large group of walkers to the beginning of the Track. The same occurs at the conclusion of the walk, where walkers pre-book on the 2 pm or 3.15 pm boat to Milford Sound. This results in a

degree of visitor congestion on some parts of the Track, especially on the first section, after walkers leave the boats, and again at the conclusion of the Track, as they walk towards and wait for the boats.

The huts for guided and independent walkers are deliberately sited away from each other to reduce visitor encounters on the Track each day. However, guided walkers and independent walkers do mix on particular sections of the Track. The former are conspicuous with their standard-issue packs, which sport a number on top (Fig. 2). Concessionaires also operate day walks from the beginning of the Track. This contributes additional walkers to the first section of the Track.

Because of the management regulations that stipulate uni-directional progress along the track and 1-night hut stays, walkers travel together in daily cohorts (although not as a single group) for the duration of their Milford Track experience, seeing the same co-walkers every night at the huts. On any one day there may be 360 people on the Track, in daily cohorts of 40 independent walkers and up to 50 guided walkers.



Figure 2. Guided walker with identifying pack.
Photo: Gordon Cessford.

³ Regulations only apply during the peak season, which is from the end of October to the end of April. Outside this period, the Track may be walked without these restrictions.

During the 2006/07 season, Milford Track had 8458 visitors, 28% of whom were New Zealanders⁴. Walkers on the Track are typically first-time visitors and, for many, it is also their first experience of an overnight walking trip (Cessford 1998). The Milford Track can also be experienced from the air, as the area is on the flight path for scenic flights into the popular tourist destination of Milford Sound. In recent years, the land surrounding the Track has become the focus of intensive conservation management effort, including intense predator control, to protect native birds such as the endangered whio (blue duck, *Hymenolaimus malacorhynchos*).

2. Literature review: the visitor experience, factors affecting the experience and coping strategies

This review summarises the research literature relevant to the definition of the visitor experience (section 2.1), factors that affect these experiences and visitors' evaluations of them (section 2.2), and coping strategies (section 2.3).

2.1 THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

A 'visitor experience' can be viewed as a dynamic transaction between a visitor and the recreational environment (Miller & McCool 2003), which evolves as a visit progresses from the pre-visit perspective, through various stages of the on-visit activity (e.g. McIntyre & Roggenbuck 1998), through to the post-visit recall and relating phase. The 'visitor experience' represents a psychological outcome resulting from the individual's socio-psychological and physical interaction with a recreation setting. This includes the physical, social and managerial attributes encountered, and the personal interpretations and evaluations of these elements, as constructed by the individual through his or her own motivations, expectations, preferences and capacity for trade-offs. As noted by Manfredo et al. (1996), the 'experience' provides the reason why people engage in recreation, and analysing what people experience provides guidance on what they want from recreation, and offers insights into how the outcomes might benefit them.

The importance and value of what people experience while engaging in recreation activities has been recognised by park management agencies. The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark & Stankey 1979), which underpins the visitor management philosophy of many park management agencies worldwide (including DOC), is designed to provide for a range of specific physical, social and managerial conditions which then enable a diversity of experience opportunities. Taking this further, Parks Canada bases its visitor management

⁴ www.doc.govt.nz/templates/page.aspx?id=44860 (accessed 20 July 2008).

philosophy on a process of assisting visitors to construct a range of experiences, including the pre-trip, during-trip and post-trip components, with an emphasis on creating memorable experience outcomes (Jager et al. 2006). The Bureau of Land Management in the USA has visitor experience outcomes as a key foundation of its outcomes-focussed approach to land and visitor management (BLM 2007).

The visitor experience is complex and has multiple dimensions. This is clearly evident from the range of 328 individual experience-type items included in the original Recreation Experience Preference (REP) scales (Driver 1983), which were designed to measure the dimensions of an individual's recreation experiences. These items were summarised by repeated factor analyses into 21 experience domains (Box 1), each of which represents a number of individual experience items and their summary factors (Driver 1983; Driver et al. 1991; Manfredo et al. 1996; BLM 2007).

2.2 FACTORS AFFECTING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Early research on, and management attention to, visitor experiences focussed on simple measures of visitor satisfaction, and related these to different levels of use. Much of this work was aimed at identifying levels of 'social carrying

BOX 1. MOTIVATIONAL DOMAINS IDENTIFIED IN THE RECREATION EXPERIENCE PREFERENCE SCALES. ADAPTED FROM DRIVER 1983; DRIVER ET AL. 1991; MANFREDO ET AL. 1996; MANNING 1999; BLM 2007.

<p>A: Achievement/stimulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing your skills and abilities • Having others think highly of you for doing this • Testing your endurance • Gaining a greater sense of self-confidence • Being able to tell others about the trip <p>B: Autonomy/leadership</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiencing a greater sense of independence • Enjoying going exploring by yourself/selves • Being in control of things that happen <p>C: Risk-taking</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying risk-taking adventure <p>D: Equipment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talking to others about your equipment <p>E/F/G: Family together/similar people/new people</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying the closeness of friends and family • Relishing group affiliation and togetherness • Enjoying meeting new people with similar interests • Enjoying participating in group outdoor events <p>H: Learning</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning more about things here • Enjoying having access to hands-on environmental learning • Enjoying learning outdoor social skills <p>I: Enjoying nature</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Savouring the total sensory—sight, sound and smell experience of a natural landscape • Enjoying having easy access to natural landscapes <p>J: Introspection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying being able to be more contemplative • Reflecting on your own character and personal values • Thinking about and shaping your own spiritual values • Contemplating people's relationship with the land 	<p>K: Creativity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing something creative • Enjoying artistic expression of nature <p>L: Nostalgia</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bringing back pleasant memories <p>M: Exercise—physical fitness</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying getting some needed physical exercise • Enjoying strenuous physical exercise • Enjoying having a wide variety of environments within a single park or recreation area • Enjoying having access to close-to-home outdoor amenities • Enjoying being able to frequently participate in desired activities in the settings you like <p>N: Physical rest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying getting some needed physical rest <p>O: Escape personal/social pressures</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Releasing or reducing some built-up mental tensions • Escaping everyday responsibilities for a while <p>P: Escape physical pressure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling good about solitude, being isolated and independent • Enjoying an escape from crowds of people <p>Q: Social security</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being near more-considerate people <p>R: Escape family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting away from family for a while <p>S: Teaching/leading others</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enjoying teaching others about the outdoors <p>T: Risk reduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Having others nearby who could help you if needed • Having a greater understanding about what will happen while you are there
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capacity' for different places (Manning 1999). 'Social carrying capacity' was hypothesised to be a level of use beyond which some satisfaction threshold was compromised, and visitor experience quality declined. Such threshold concepts are very attractive to park managers, as they offer the possibility of a simple measurable standard to which they can manage use-levels in order to protect visitor experience quality. This approach was termed the 'Satisfaction Model' (e.g. Nielsen et al. 1977; Shelby & Heberlein 1986), and many years of extensive research effort were expended on seeking relationships between various constructs of use-levels, crowding perception and satisfaction. Despite these research efforts, such simple relationships linking these variables have proven to be persistently elusive (Manning 1999; Vaske & Shelby 2008), reinforcing the basic proposition underlying the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum—that settings only create opportunities for experiences and do not dictate them.

While perceptions of crowding may be associated with different use levels and use characteristics (Vaske & Shelby 2008), it is not consistently associated with visitor satisfaction or any similar measure of visit experience quality (Kuentzel & Heberlein 1992; Manning 1999). More often, it was found that visitors experienced high levels of satisfaction despite reports of different use-levels, evaluations of settings as 'crowded' or the presence of other theoretically suboptimal visit conditions (Shelby & Heberlein 1986; Kuentzel & Heberlein 1992; Manning 1999; Hall & Cole 2007). This effect was noted from the early years of outdoor recreation research, when Nielsen et al. (1977) proposed 'the last settler syndrome', a situation in which each new cohort of visitors to a recreation site subject to increasing use levels evaluated the experience at satisfaction levels similar to those who experienced the same site some years earlier under lower user density conditions. Schreyer et al. (1976) called this the 'floating baseline effect', whereby first-time visitors with little or no expectation of site conditions, evaluate the conditions found on their first visit as 'normal'. Future visits to the site are evaluated with these conditions as a frame of reference. Thus, for some visitors, a setting may be evaluated as congested; while, for others, the same setting and conditions may be evaluated as uncrowded, based on their initial baseline. Similarly, in the preface to their introduction of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum, Clark & Stankey (1979) described the example of an alpine lake site being changed progressively over time (through reactive management responses to use-level growth) from a wilderness to a highly developed frontcountry setting, yet with sustained visitor satisfaction levels throughout. Where only simple visitor satisfaction monitoring was used to gauge the acceptability of such changing conditions, no indication would be given of any need to control that change.

This effect has been termed the 'satisfaction trap' (Booth 2006), and the resulting changes in the fundamental nature of the visitor conditions and experiences available at a site has been termed a process of 'invasion and succession' or 'recreation succession' (e.g. Clark et al. 1971; Nielsen et al. 1977; Clark & Stankey 1979; Kuentzal & Heberlein 1992; Hoss & Brunson 2000; Manning & Valilieri 2001). Concern about this effect has been widespread from some of the earliest research, and the original development of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark & Stankey 1979) was driven, in part, by a desire to maintain a defined range of recreation opportunities, specifically to prevent the proliferation of such recreation succession effects.

Simple satisfaction measurement has created such unanticipated outcomes, and overall satisfaction can be a superficial and misleading measure of quality in outdoor recreation experiences (Manning & Valliere 2001). Similarly, an over-reliance on simple crowding measurement has excluded consideration of many other important dimensions of the visitor experience. This is demonstrated by the persistent failure to identify a systematic relationship between visitors' evaluation of settings as crowded and measures of visit satisfaction (or any other form of evaluating the quality of their experience). While some perceived crowding measures have been shown to be responsive to some types of site conditions (Vaske & Shelby 2008), it is clear that they often are applied in an oversimplified or inappropriate manner. In addition, measures evaluating use density assume such densities are salient to a visitor's experience, and that the relationship is always negative. In many settings, use density is not particularly salient, and in others, the experience may be enhanced by the presence of high numbers of visitors. In reviewing 30 years of standardised indicator measures for perceived crowding, Vaske & Shelby (2008) noted that the crowding measure alone is not a good substitute for a more complex evaluative study, and may not even be a useful indicator. To undertake the more complex evaluative studies required to better manage visitor use issues, more attention needs to be paid to the wider dimensions of the visitor experience, and the types of coping behaviours visitors engage in when confronted by suboptimal conditions in their outdoor recreation.

Only a small portion of the range of possible visitor experiences (and their related outcome evaluations) relate closely to use density (Box 1). This lack of relationship has been known since Wagar's (1964) study of visitor impacts. The limitations of applying simple satisfaction and crowding perception measures to assessing the quality of the visitor experience are clear, given that only a small portion of the overall visitor experience is really being addressed. This is compounded when account is taken of the considerable capacity people have demonstrated for accommodating suboptimal aspects of their experience, and maintaining a high level of satisfaction overall.

2.3 NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES AND COPING STRATEGIES

People engaged in outdoor recreation may be affected by a variety of suboptimal, unexpected or undesirable physical, social and managerial factors that cause them to feel some stress and which detract from their visit experience. While most early research on this issue has focussed on crowding-related perceptions, it has become apparent that the diversity of positive visitor experience dimensions can be matched by a corresponding diversity of potentially negative visitor experience dimensions. Going beyond a crowding focus, a wider range of negative aspects variously termed 'hassles' (Schuster et al. 2003, 2006), 'detractors' (Miller & McCool 2003) or 'stressors' (Iwasaki & Schneider 2003; Peden & Schuster 2004) may be identified. Recreation 'hassles' are described by Schuster et al. (2006: 99) as the irritating and frustrating demands that occur during recreation experiences, ranging from minor annoyances to major pressures, problems or difficulties. Similarly, 'detractors' are described by Miller & McCool (2003: 257) as any elements within the setting that were perceived by the visitor to be diminishing the quality of the experience.

Between these studies, the list of notable hassles/detractors included a wide variety of negative experience sources such as litter; noise from other people; damage to the site; too many people camping; too many people on trails; dogs; difficulty in route-finding; behaviour of other people; weather conditions; meeting hunters; equipment problems; heavy packs; travel times to the area; physical capability; access to information material; impediments to wildlife viewing; access to facilities; not enough fish or game; problems with others in the group; over-developed facilities; excessive rules and regulations; and more. Summarising the scope of such stressors, Peden & Schuster (2004) suggested four primary stressor domains: resource, social, managerial and personal stressors. This emphasises that the factors contributing to both positive and negative experience elements relate to many more contributory sources than simply use-levels, including the state of the physical environment and the resources in it; the social context and conduct of the visit experience; the way in which the experience opportunity is managed; and the individual's personal interaction with all of these. This classification is similar to the original configuration of setting attributes characterised by the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark & Stankey 1979).

While there are many potential sources of negative experiences, the effects of these are commonly highly mediated by the coping strategies visitors adopt when faced with suboptimal or otherwise undesirable conditions. Recent research on coping strategies in outdoor recreation is extensive (e.g. Manning 1999; Miller & McCool 2003; Iwasaki & Schneider 2006; Schneider & Stanis 2007) and demonstrates that a powerful mediating process can occur between the adverse conditions encountered by visitors, and their overall visitor experience evaluations. Coping strategies refer to the situation-specific behavioural and cognitive responses that people use to 'deal' with any stressors they encounter (Iwasaki & Schneider 2006). As with both the positive and negative dimensions of visitor experiences, there are also many dimensions of coping strategies, and extensive lists of coping items have been used in visitor research (e.g. Miller & McCool 2003; Schuster et al. 2006; Schneider & Stanis 2007). Box 2 presents two typologies of coping strategies—an example that uses traditional coping strategy terminology (column 1) beside another based on the more recent use of psychological stress-theory concepts such as use of the 'Ways of Coping Questionnaire' (column 2). Box 2 demonstrates the large capacity for people to 'deal' with undesired situations.

Whatever their various dimensions, coping strategies are fundamentally either problem- or emotion-focussed strategies. Problem-focussed strategies comprise those types of behavioural responses where visitors may take direct actions, such as managing aspects of the social or physical environment, in order to 'fix' the problem; or they may engage in temporal, spatial, resource and/or activity substitution/displacement in order to avoid the problem. Emotion-focussed strategies comprise those types of cognitive responses where visitors may regulate their emotions, change their definitions of the experience (e.g. product shift), re-evaluate the situation more favourably (e.g. rationalisation), or engage in psychological avoidance (Schneider 2000; Miller & McCool 2003; Schneider & Stanis 2007).

Visitors with lower levels of stress are more likely to engage in the more cognitive and emotional strategies to accommodate the detracting situations, while those with higher levels of stress are more likely to engage in the more direct

BOX 2. EXAMPLES OF WAYS THAT COPING STRATEGIES HAVE BEEN CLASSIFIED.

1. Derived from Miller & McCool (2003) (Examples of responses to some undesired conditions or situations that may be experienced)	2. Derived from Schneider (2000) and Schneider & Stanis (2007) (Examples based on eight factors derived from a 50-item response list in a Ways of Coping questionnaire for an outdoor recreation)
<p>A: Absolute displacement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planned never to visit the park again • Decided never to do that activity here again • Planned to leave park because of the issue <p>B: Temporal substitution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If visiting again—come in a different season • If visiting again—come at a different time of day • See how issue can be avoided by different timing <p>C: Activity substitution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan to do other activities to avoid the issues • See how doing different activity can avoid issues • Decided activity is less important to you <p>D: Resource substitution</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would return at same time but use a different area • Would return at same time but do different activity • Can see how issue can be avoided in different areas • Would seek a different type/standard of resource <p>E: Rationalisation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Saw situation as a chance to grow personally • Could do nothing so enjoyed it for what it was • Saw issue as symptom of some bigger issue <p>F: Product shift</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Realised the issue was actually acceptable • It was unreasonable to expect different conditions • Accepted that conditions were as they should be • Accepted your expectations were not correct <p>G: Direct action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talked with others in group about the issues • Talked with park staff about the issues • Talked to someone who could do something 	<p>A: Distancing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Went on as if nothing had happened • Ignored the issue • Didn't let it get to you <p>B: Confrontive coping</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stood your ground and asserted your position • Expressed anger at person/source of issue • Tried to get person/source to change <p>C: Seeking social support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talked to someone who could do something • Talked to other members of your group • Talked to area personnel about issues • Talked to people in others groups <p>D: Self control</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kept feelings to yourself • Didn't say anything • Kept others from knowing how bad it was <p>E: Planned problem solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Made a plan of action to deal with it • Developed some options and followed them <p>F: Accepting responsibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledged that you were part of the problem <p>G: Escape/avoidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wished the situation would go away • Refused to get too serious about it • Made light of the situation <p>H: Positive reappraisal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coped and grew positively as a person • Thought about how it was a challenge

behavioural responses aimed at changing or physically avoiding the conditions which detract from the experience (Miller & McCool 2003). However, these types of direct action responses were considered by Miller & McCool (2003) to be the last resort for most people, which are only applied when the options of changing one's own behaviour or cognitive understandings are no longer seen as being adequate.

While research has found that use of coping strategies is a widespread phenomenon, it is those types related to the cognitive and emotional 'rationalisation' responses that are the most prevalent, while extremes of behavioural displacement are rare (e.g. Manning 1999; Hoss & Brunson 2000; Manning & Valliere 2001; Peden & Schuster 2004; Cole & Hall 2007; Hall & Cole 2007). It is important to acknowledge, however, that the limited research evidence for direct action coping strategies such as displacement may relate to the difficulty in measuring behavioural responses to suboptimal conditions. The prevalence of such rationalisation responses in the research literature, and across a range of different experiential settings in their study, led Cole & Hall (2007)

to propose an inherent adaptability in humans to accommodate visit conditions that may have otherwise been considered suboptimal before they were actually experienced. Their 'adaptable human' hypothesis is that:

... people do care about how many other people they encounter. However they learn; they plan; they adjust their expectations; they cope; they rationalise; they view things in relative terms—rather than absolutes—they say 'this place provides more solitude than Seattle' rather than 'this place provides no solitude'; they make trade-offs. They adapt ... (Cole & Hall 2007: 129)

Other researchers have also referred to this transactional and continually-negotiable nature of visitor experiences (e.g. McIntyre & Roggenbuck 1998; Miller & McCool 2003; Schneider & Stanis 2007). While adaptability can result in the recreation succession problem outlined earlier, it also offers an opportunity. It indicates that people can be very tolerant of variations from their experiential ideal, as long as there is room for them to compensate through other dimensions of their experience. In this sense, the accuracy of visitor expectations is likely to be key.

A balancing act occurs between different dimensions of the visitor experience, and between what is expected compared with what is encountered. This investigation focusses upon these multiple dimensions and this balancing act. Schneider (2000) observed that the important element to understanding response to conflict was the context of the experience. The present study explores the nature and context of the visitor experience in a particular setting, and relates it to the coping responses applied to negative elements experienced.

3. The Milford Track experience

This section outlines the nature of the recreational experience on the Milford Track, as expressed by interviewees, as well as various factors needed to understand the context within which such experiences occur. Data presented in this section arose primarily from responses to the following interview questions (see Appendix 1):

- Why did you decide to walk the Milford Track? (Reasons and motivations: section 3.1)
- Before you started the Track, what did you expect to experience on the walk? (Expectations: section 3.2)
- How would you rate your experience on this trip? [using a rating scale] (Experiences: section 3.3)
- What have been the most positive and negative things about the trip? (Experiences: section 3.3)

Other questions in the interview elicited valuable information. These questions included:

- Would you recommend the Milford Track to other people? What would you tell them to expect?
- When you get home, what would you most like to tell your friends about your Milford Track experience? [key memories]

Direct quotes from interview transcripts are italicised and indented within the text, or identified by quotation marks. A unique identifier (e.g. 'G20') is used so that readers can recognise quotes sourced from different (or the same) people. Where necessary, quotes are prefaced by a comment to provide context. These are identified by square brackets at the beginning of the quote. Because the quotes represent study data, a selection is presented that was considered by the authors to best represent the concept being discussed.

3.1 REASONS AND MOTIVATIONS

When asked why they decided to come to the Milford Track, interviewees expressed a variety of reasons and motives, with individuals often identifying multiple motivations. Six primary themes were identified from the responses and are discussed in this section:

- National identity
- Iconic status
- Social bonds
- Scenery appreciation
- Uniqueness
- Challenge and personal achievement

While this section disaggregates reasons and motivations, study findings reinforce the multi-faceted nature of motivations highlighted in the research literature (see section 2). Virtually everyone gave more than one reason for being on the Milford Track. A good illustration of how interviewees combined reasons is provided by this Aucklander:

Probably because I heard that it was amazing scenery. And because it is marketed as the Great Walk, and of course something to do. Also, in terms of tracks, from what I've heard, because I haven't done a lot of tracks and stuff, but it's one of the more easier ones. Maybe that was a reason too. Yeah, and in terms of fitness, because I'm not very fit. (G20)

3.1.1 National identity

New Zealanders exhibited a strong cultural motive for visiting the Milford Track, with the Track representing a kind of pilgrimage or manifestation of national identity:

It's something I have always wanted to do ... it is just one of those things probably a Kiwi wants to do, isn't it, walk the Milford Track ... it's kind of on that 'must do' list. (K16)

Well, it's one of those things that you feel you have to do as a Kiwi. (K17)

We felt that this was something quite quintessentially Kiwi. (G10)

Some New Zealanders talked about a sense of experiencing their own country, sometimes comparing this with international visitors' appreciation of New Zealand, or commenting that international travel experiences instilled appreciation of their own country, as the following quotes illustrate:

I think it is really cool that so many New Zealanders are on it, because we should see our own country. The foreigners, they just make a bee-line for this and just think it is beautiful, you know, and we don't appreciate it so much. (K19)

I think being overseas has made us appreciate what we've got in New Zealand, so you—we've got make an effort to go and do these things. (K17)

Others expressed this notion of cultural identity more simply. The Milford Track was a means to see their own country and appreciate it. Underlying this concept is the scenic appeal of the Milford Track (discussed in section 4.2.1):

I expected it would be really beautiful, because I like New Zealand, being out in the New Zealand environment. (G16)

[Why came to the Milford Track] *To see part of our beautiful country, I guess. (K2)*

3.1.2 Iconic status

For international visitors, as well as for New Zealanders, the reputation of the Milford Track prompted their visit. Some interviewees expressed this in terms of knowing that others were seeking out the Milford Track (a form of social facilitation). A tendency to compare and contrast the Milford Track with other places (and others' appreciation of it) arose throughout the interviews and is discussed in section 4.5. Many of the quotes recorded below highlight the importance of 'word of mouth' (recommendations from family/friends) and

guidebooks, as well as the DOC website, as sources of information about the Track. Mention is made of the ‘top ten’ tracks in the world and Milford Track being on that list:

It's relatively famous, for people that don't live around here it's the one they've heard of and the one they want to come and see. They want to come and do the Milford Track, the big star. (G13)

You know, so it's a pretty iconic—it's an iconic thing to do when you're in New Zealand. (K17)

When I started coming to New Zealand everybody talked about the Milford, it was the walk to do, you saw it in all the outdoor magazines. Whichever country I would go to, English-speaking ones, you would always hear—if you are going to New Zealand, Milford is the one to do. (K11)

Yeah and that's its reputation, you hear it through word of mouth, that the Milford Track was one of the most spectacular walking tracks in the world. Yeah, it's always been there, I've always heard of the Milford Track, even as a child, and I've known various people that have done it. Especially with our group, it's the basic reason—some of the people in this group we did the Abel Tasman with, and this was the next one. (G4)

The Milford Track is a ‘Great Walk’, and this elite set of tracks was identified by some people as instrumental in their decision to walk the Track:

Why did I decide to come and walk the Milford Track? I always wanted to do it because [it is] the Great Walk of New Zealand. I knew that it was one of the most popular walks ... I've read a lot, a good bit, about it and people were saying it's a Great Walk and one of the greatest walks. (G6)

We went to the DOC homepage, the website—and found out that there were these different classifications of the walks. So, there were nine walks called the Great Walks; okay, that is a great starting point. Nine walks to choose from, and then we just took four walks that looked different from each other. And the Milford Walk sounded like it was very renowned and very popular, and a fine walk so—okay we said, maybe that should be one of them. (K1)

I think it is probably one of the most popular of the Great Walks in New Zealand that I think we have heard a lot of good reports about, in terms of the landscape, the scenery and the facilities available. So, yes, just from friends, I'd say, mostly. (K8)

However, the Track's reputation also sets trip expectations at a high level:

You always hear about it as being the finest walk in the world and you think 'Jeez, that must be better than, like, everything else'. (G15)

3.1.3 Social bonds

Throughout the interviews, references were made to the social nature of the Milford Track experience. In terms of motivations, this was linked to intra-group interactions—people wanted to spend time with their family/friends and share the Milford Track experience with them. Meeting and sharing with other people on the Track was only occasionally mentioned as a pre-trip motivation/expectation, but developed as an important factor in people's experiences as the trip progressed. This concept of social cohesiveness or bonding is discussed in detail in section 4.4 and, for this reason, is not discussed further here.

3.1.4 Scenery appreciation

Many interviewees identified viewing scenery as a motivation for tramping the Milford Track. It dominated people's expectations of the Milford Trip experience and was frequently mentioned as something that exceeded their expectations. Many interviewees noted scenery as something they would tell other people about (key memories). Words commonly used to describe the scenery included spectacular, magnificent, awesome, mind-blowing, awestruck and wow. Rhetoric about scenery was dominated by comments about large-scale landscape vistas—only a few people noted close-range scenery, such as shafts of light through trees. The 'scenery' factor was sometimes expressed in terms of numbers of photos taken or referred to as views or vistas, as the first quote illustrates:

The vistas that we've had on this trip were just magnificent. (K22)

The scenery is just awesome and this whole area, it's just so spectacular isn't it, it's so dramatic. (K16)

I did not expect it would be this cool. Like this amazing. I kind of thought it would be an interesting thing to do and, you know, see lots of beautiful things, but did not quite expect the sheer experience, like ... the sheer beauty of it all. (K3)

We were coming over the Pass today—you can't even begin to describe to someone what it looks like. You're kind of trekking your way up this tiny little pass out in the middle of nowhere. It's really cool. The photos just don't give it any justice. (G11)

[Recommendations to others] *Don't forget your camera. Because it is spectacular. Beautiful. Amazing scenery.* (G18)

It was unusual for people's expectations not to be surpassed:

The view and scale of the fjords [valleys], they were a lot bigger than what I was expecting. I was not expecting to see this type of countryside. It exceeded what I was expecting. (G1)

Even though it was a bit cloudy up there, Mackinnon Pass was probably more spectacular than I was expecting. (G11)

I expected the great scenery and I was not let down, it is beautiful. The experience has been beautiful. (G18)

A small number of experienced trampers said that the scenery had **not** lived up to their expectations. One person noted that the marketing surrounding the Milford Track affected his appreciation of the scenery:

I thought it would be more scenic. I've been off the Hollyford road, up the Tutuko Valley and up to Lake Adelaide and I thought those were more spectacular than this ... Yeah, but the views [on the Milford Track] were still pretty amazing. This is different, like you get the big Fiordland faces here. (G15)

Because the trek had been built up so much in the literature and in magazine articles that I had read, first-hand accounts in books of trekking the Milford, I expected it to be that much more exciting and dynamic than other tramps in New Zealand. The reality is, because it was built up so much, I think it didn't appear to be any prettier or any nicer in terms of the scenery than the other treks or day treks I'd done in New Zealand ... I actually found parts of the Kepler and the Routeburn to be more magnificent, if you will,

than the Milford. But then again, I didn't have expectations going into those two treks, where I had very high expectations going into the Milford because of its fame. (K4)

In summary, the opportunity to experience scenery was a central feature of the visitor motivation for walking the Milford Track, although not all visitors' expectations of scenery were met completely.

3.1.5 Uniqueness

A sense of uniqueness pervades some walkers' reasons for visiting. This takes two forms: a unique personal experience, and a unique place. The uniqueness of the personal experience is portrayed as something that is new to the individual, in that it differs from their previous experiences of tracks or natural areas. Particularly common are references by international visitors that they do not have 'attribute x' in their own country. The interpretation of the place as unique centred on the opinion that you could not find/see 'attribute x' elsewhere. The uniqueness of the experience and the place were valued by interviewees:

[Key memories] ... not so much the rivers strangely enough. You can see rivers everywhere else. Yes, so mostly it's the big glacial valley country ... Because you spend a day walking up the glacial valley and then you spend a day walking down and you don't really get to see them anywhere else, so it is quite unique to this. (K20)

When we're going for a tramp we actually come down to the Queenstown or South, because as a kid I spent so much time in the Paparoas and the Southern Alps. It's sort of, they don't really ... it's sort of 'been there, done that' stuff ... it's got to be different or there's no point. (K22)

In Canada as well as Taiwan there are no fiords so I specifically came to see a lot of fiords and I didn't realise that this trail ... you don't really see that until the end. (K9)

And it is different to our country [Germany] ... it is a rain forest. We don't have a rain forest. It is very interesting, very different. (K15)

I miss keas, because in the North Island we have no keas, and I remember there were keas here. (K21)

As illustrated in this section, interviewees' assessments of their Milford Track experiences were frequently made in relative terms—comparing the Track and/or area with other places within their personal experience. This notion of a lens of 'previous experience' influencing the experience is discussed in section 4.5.

3.1.6 Challenge and personal achievement

A strong sense of physical challenge and personal achievement pervaded interviews with walkers, especially those who classified themselves as 'beginners', although not exclusively this group. The physical challenge included walking and pack carrying, with Mackinnon Pass a primary feature, for example:

We just have that sense of achievement of actually making it to the top of Mackinnon's Pass with a 16-kilo pack on your back, it is quite something—and then the reward of the views and the photos. (G1)

First-time trampers especially identified with the physical challenge of the trip. Some quotes highlight the individual's assessment that the Milford Track would be suitable for them (this point is discussed further in section 5.1):

I wanted to find out whether I could do it or not. I'm 53 now, and I started tramping not long ago, I'm reasonably active and physically fit. I looked around, talked to various people, checked up on the net. The Milford looked alright. The more I looked it at the more I wanted to do it. (G3)

This is the first time I've done an overnight hike with carrying all my own stuff. So that itself was a bit of a challenge. (G11)

I was scared stiff about today because of the big push up to Mackinnon Pass, and it was much easier than I thought. It just went really well. Yesterday and today, if it had been an hour shorter it would have been nicer. But you feel a real achievement when you get here. (G17)

For some people, completion of the Milford Track bestowed 'brag rights':

I think I was looking forward the most to say 'I've done it'. (G17)

[Most looking forward to] *The experience of saying that 'Yes, I've done the Milford Track.'* (G18)

Concern about level of fitness was a dimension of this factor for some interviewees:

I'd never done pack-walking before so that was something that I was a bit worried about going in to it, whether I was going to be all right, whether I was fit enough to do it. (G11)

It's maybe getting out there and getting a bit fitter too, and you know, it's a goal to work towards. (K16)

Sometimes the reward for their efforts was highlighted, such as:

I think you get rewarded with that [tramping through a remote area and seeing spectacular scenery] and the fact that at the end of it you can say I've walked 53 ks carrying my pack the whole way, so it's like the physical reward. (G11)

Everything is worth it as well. Like just as you are getting to the point where you are really sick of the hill, you get up to Mackinnon Pass and look out over the world and go 'Wow!' It is so worth it. (K3)

The sense of achievement sometimes flowed into a desire to encourage others to obtain the same personal satisfaction:

I'm going to go back home and say it to anybody, if they haven't done the Milford Track, get off your butt and do it. (K2)

Other interviewees explicitly stated that they wanted physical challenge as a component of their experience. Sometimes this was a general reference, while at other times people made a direct link with the standard of the Track (which is discussed in section 4.3.3):

Today was a nice challenge. I like a bit of a challenge in my tramps. (K14)

Personal achievement to a certain extent in a way, 'I've done the Milford Track', but in comparison to some of the other tramps I've done I'd say I won't get that kind of euphoric 'Thank God we've survived' kind of thing.

[Interviewer: Why is that?] *Just because, as I say, the Track is so well cared for* [interviewer clarifies with her that this means it does not present the same challenge] (K14)

We thought it was going to be much harder than what it was ... We found it like very easy ... But honestly, it has been a walk in the park. [Interviewer: Is that a good thing?] *Well, yeah, it is, but it's not as challenging as I thought it was going to be.* (K17)

I would probably rate it [South American track recently walked] *higher than the Milford Track because—now it's harder and maybe for me that makes me rate it a bit higher because I like a level of hardship.* (K7)

One walker commented that, because the trip was easy for him, he enjoyed the relaxation time:

If I find it relatively easy, then what tends to happen is I get to places early and I've lots of time to relax—so I enjoy that part of it. (K7)

Although mentioned by fewer people, the enjoyment of being active in the outdoors was evident, a sense of 'getting out there and doing it' (G7):

The physical exercise. I really like being out just bushwalking and tramping. I really enjoy spending a whole day out on my feet. (G13)

The first time I decided to come here was just to try out tramping and find out what it's like. I hadn't actually tramped as such before, done plenty of day bikes but not extended. The reason this time is I wanted to do some more tramping and met my mate in Te Anau and we came from there. He hadn't trekked before and the Milford is a great one to start off. That's pretty much it. I was planning my next trip and we just happened to be talking and he said: 'Yeah, I wouldn't mind giving that a go some day'. Well, this is some day. (G3)

The positive is the walking. I love the walking. (G4)

What I was looking forward to was fishing. We bought our fishing rods and I was looking forward to seeing the big fat trout. And, I don't really know, I just enjoy the tramping. (G9)

3.1.7 Motives of less importance

Some motivations appear less dominant. This includes getting away from it all, solitude, environmental learning, risk taking and spirituality. Where these do feature, they tend to be in combination with other motives; for example, escape was a motivation for this person but it occurred in combination with experiencing the landscape:

I was looking forward to experiencing the landscape, being away from everything. I really don't mind the idea of staying in huts and that they don't have showers for a few days. It's a whole other way of being for a few days. You spend most of your life in such order where you have to get up and have a shower and go to work blab blab blab. It's really nice not doing those things. Also having a bit of camaraderie and just relaxing really, I was looking forward to being able to get a bit of an exercise, rather than working in the office all day. You get to the point in your life where it's just a luxury to be able to walk all day, and you're not pushed too much. (G16)

For others, one or two of these motivations may be important at particular times on the walk. For example, these two people experienced a sense of solitude at specific places:

Once you get up to the head of the Clinton there, you really feel that you are getting the feel you are in wild country. That's good. That has more of a remote feeling when you are in that Mintaro but area. And then coming over here, it all feels pretty remote. I know we are not far from Milford and tourism, but yes, it has got a good feel, this high country. (G14)

I suppose I was hoping to get up the Pass on my own, and I did. I've had a workmate who did it and she said 'If you get a chance at Mintaro, go up the Pass in the afternoon', and we did get there in time. We got there at 2.30 or something, so I was able to shoot up the Pass yesterday afternoon. That was by far the coolest part of the trip. Yes, there was no one up there at all, absolutely no one. (G15)

The reasons why these motivations are less evident for Milford Track walkers may be related to the particular characteristics of the Milford Track experience—its iconic status, the high degree of marketing and information provided to potential users, social bonding amongst walkers and its outstanding scenery. This result suggests further investigation of experience ‘packages’ is warranted; that is, the influence upon the visitor experience of specific types of recreation opportunities described in terms of their combination of characteristics.

3.2 EXPECTATIONS

Two things stand out with respect to interviewees’ pre-trip expectations of their Milford Track experience. The first is that some interviewees had poorly formed expectations. They did not know what to expect or had not thought much about it. This corresponds with the notion of a ‘must do’ track (there is no need to think about it much in advance since you are going to do it anyway) and suggests that many walkers establish their ‘baseline’ as they progress along the walk; that is, they accept what they find on their walk as ‘normal’ conditions for the Milford Track, a notion encapsulated by the previously mentioned concept of the ‘floating baseline’ (Schreyer et al. 1976). This applies to both New Zealanders and international visitors to New Zealand. An Irish backpacker commented:

What did I expect? You know, I didn't really have a great notion. I guess being in Fiordland I expected there to be fiords, and I think, yes, I'd heard that there was a lot of waterfalls and we had been warned to expect potentially a lot of rain—that would have been it. Other than that, I didn't really know; you know, I didn't know I was going to be walking through beech forest, I didn't know there was going to be suspension bridges necessarily—I probably might have guessed it. (K7)

The second thing that stood out was that prior experience on tracks (or lack of it) influenced interviewees’ expectations of the conditions they would encounter, both for the entire trip and as the trip experience evolved. This was most obvious with respect to the standard of facilities and use densities. With respect to facilities, walkers with experience of other tracks commented on the

high standard of Milford Track huts and described the sort of huts they were used to—explaining that this was what they had expected to encounter on the Milford Track:

We've done the Routeburn a couple of times and we've done the Greenstone/Caples and that, so we know what the huts are like. (K22)

As already noted in section 1.4, the Milford Track has a high proportion of first-time trampers. With respect to facilities, these walkers appeared to set their expectations at the first hut:

I suppose we saw the reality of what it was like on that first night. So we realised on the secondary nights it was going to be very much the same thing. (K3)

I've just arrived here so I don't know what they've got—but at the last but they had a little wash room that you could lock yourself in and have a wash. (K2)

More-experienced trampers compared the Milford Track with other tracks they had walked. This element of relativity was very evident when interviewees were asked to rate their experience (this is discussed further in the following section).

3.3 EVALUATION OF THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

A rating scale question was posed to interviewees, based on a tool developed for rapid visitor experience assessments (Chilman 2006; Chilman et al. 2007). Interviewers used a show card to ask interviewees: 'On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is **very disappointing** and 10 is **couldn't have been better**, how would you rate your experience on this trip?' Ratings were consistently high (mean score was 8.9). Several people commented that they never choose the extremes of scales (and hence did not rate it as a 10). Probing into reasons for each interviewee's rating provided positive and negative aspects of their visitor experience. Interviewees were asked: 'What would have made it a 10?' or 'Could anything have been better?' (see Appendix 1, Question 2b). Responses also provided directions to managers with respect to possible management improvements. Researchers found this approach very fruitful, and believe it is worthy of application elsewhere.

It was evident that all interviewees were very satisfied with their experience. This was frequently reinforced by comments such as:

At this stage I don't think we've found a downfall in the whole trip. I have really enjoyed myself immensely. (G1)

There's nothing that's let us down, there's nothing that we've been disappointed in. (K13)

Walkers expressed few negative aspects of their Milford Track experience, and the issues they raised could, in many cases, be described as 'niggles' or slight apprehension; for example:

The only reservation I had was coming off the Pass and down, because of somebody who had done it, had basically given me a real scare story. That was my only reservation. (K11)

The high level of walkers' satisfaction with their recreation experience, as measured here with a standard satisfaction approach, indicated it could be difficult to identify negative consequences and how walkers coped with these (see coping strategies in section 6). It is also possible that the high level of reported satisfaction may hide significant concerns.

4. Factors influencing the visitor experience

This section of the report addresses Study Objective 1: To identify factors which influence visitors' evaluations of their recreation experiences. These factors are presented in section 4.1 and discussed in sections 4.2–4.5.

4.1 SUMMARY OF FACTORS

Factors identified from the interviewees' experiences on the Milford Track are divided into two sets: factors associated with the recreational setting and factors associated with the recreationist. The setting factors are summarised first (Table 1) and are structured around the dimensions of the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (Clark & Stankey 1979). Each factor, and its associate attributes, was derived from interview data.

Personal factors were also found to influence each individual's visitor experience. Many of these factors were beyond the scope of this study (for example, attitude preferences). However, the influence of walkers' prior experience was a common theme—the Milford Track experience was judged relative to the individual's prior experiences, and especially (but not exclusively), prior tramping experience. For example, when discussing bunkroom arrangements, some walkers referred to experiences in backpacker hostels. First-time trampers⁵ often emphasised the activity of tramping more than the place when discussing their experience.

4.2 BIOPHYSICAL SETTING FACTORS

Biophysical setting factors form the natural environment context for the visitor experience. Interview data indicate that four dimensions of the natural environment helped to shape the nature of the visitors' experience: landscape, flora and fauna, water and the weather. The type and style of each factor's influence is discussed in the following sections.

4.2.1 Scenery

This factor was discussed in section 3.1.4 and is not strictly a biophysical factor. 'Scenery' is the individual's appraisal of a biophysical attribute (landscape) and a visitor's appreciation of scenery shapes their experience of the Milford Track. It is presented within this list because of its close link to the biophysical setting and because it represents an important dimension of the Milford Track experience.

⁵ 'Tramping' is the term commonly used in New Zealand for backcountry walking or hiking. However, people tramping the Milford Track are commonly referred to as walkers. The reason for this is not clear—perhaps because the Track is called 'the finest walk in the world'.

TABLE 1. SETTING FACTORS INFLUENCING INDEPENDENT WALKERS' EXPERIENCES ON THE MILFORD TRACK.

FACTOR	ATTRIBUTE	DESCRIPTION
BIOPHYSICAL SETTING		
Landscape	Scenery	Scenery and views.
	Dominant features	Mackinnon Pass. Sutherland Falls. Glaciated landscape.
Flora and fauna	Close encounters/presence	Close encounters with wildlife. Presence/appreciation of vegetation. Absence of mammals. Presence of blue duck/whio (<i>Hymenolaimus malacorhynchus</i>)
	Sandflies and bumble bees	Sandflies and bumble bees. Mentioned separately to other species (different concept).
Water	Quality	Clarity of streams and rivers. Ability to drink from them. Swimming in rivers.
Weather		
MANAGERIAL SETTING		
Facilities	Hut design	Space capacity in cooking/dining area. Privacy (bunkroom size and shape).
	Hut and track standard	Appreciation of the high standard. Flush toilets mentioned frequently. Showers sometimes mentioned in (partial) jest. Some preferred more basic standard.
	Location of huts/duration	Unevenness of distance walked each day. Especially Day 1 too short.
	Safety	A few mentions re. rock falls, drop offs from top of Pass. General comments that track is safe.
	Cleanliness	Huts very clean. No litter along track.
Interpretation		Seldom mentioned—most comments were seeking improvements.
Rangers	Role	Safety of visitors, interpretation, hut cleanliness, track maintenance.
	Knowledge	Passing this on to visitors.
	Passion	Enthusiasm evident.
	Friendliness and helpfulness	Going the extra mile—proactive about visitor interactions.
Management regime	Evening talks	Only formal means of interaction (ranger/walkers).
	Regulations	Track uni-directional. Hut stays limited to 1 night. No camping.
	Hut booking system	Certainty of bunk space. Need for forward planning.
Access	Off-site information	Website. Brochure. Information accessible and easy to book everything.
	Start/finish transport	Boat trip to start of track part of Milford Track experience. Occasional mention.
Concessions	Guided walk operation	Seldom mentioned.
Historical setting	Individuals who have shaped the place / past use	Seldom mentioned.
Nature protection		Seeing that DOC is protecting the environment and the birdlife (predator control programme, etc.). Seldom mentioned.
SOCIAL SETTING		
Intra-group interaction	Quality time	Quality time with family or friends (no distractions).
	Sharing the experience	Especially with children.
	Fostering use	Organising others to come along. Want to return and bring others (friends and family). Extreme form—ambassadorship.

Continued on next page

Table 3 continued

FACTOR	ATTRIBUTE	DESCRIPTION
Inter-group interaction	Shared experience	Share Milford Track with 40 people. Camaraderie.
	Focal points	Interaction uneven spatially and temporally. Focal points where people congregate (top of Pass / Pass shelter, Sutherland Falls track, huts). Most inter-group interactions are at night in huts.
Guided walker interactions	Level of interaction/attitude	Seldom mentioned—little interaction on the track and separate huts.
Congestion		Disturbance in huts (snoring, rustling). Congestion at shelters on the Track.

4.2.2 Landscape features

Two natural features were identified as trip highlights by many interviewees: Mackinnon Pass and the Sutherland Falls. These features were mentioned by most interviewees. Terms used to describe them included: breathtaking, magical, stunning, gob-smacked and fantastic. Some people specifically mentioned walking behind Sutherland Falls. Both features were expressed in terms of expected and actual highlights of the Track experience, for example:

[Most looking forward to] *Probably going up over Mackinnon Pass, because I knew that would be pretty spectacular going up and over there, and it was.* (G11)

[Will recommend to others] *I'd probably say two things. The Mackinnon Pass and the Sutherland Falls ... Sutherland Falls was stunning, very, very nice, well worth the trip, beautiful.* (G6)

These two features are both encountered on Day 3 of the walk. This led to a couple of interviewees identifying the significance of this day within their Milford Track experience:

The reason why you are on the walk is today. The rest of the days are inconsequential to the walk ... [goes on to explain] It's the walk up to Mackinnon Pass, it's being on the top there. It's the views, knowing that Mackinnon was up there, the kind of explorer thing. It has that ambience up there ... Then coming down, then going off to see Sutherland Falls, lovely, fantastic, great. (K11)

Today has been a really memorable day in terms of what we see. The other days have been great, but I don't think they're—they won't stick as much [as today]. (K17)

A smaller number of people identified the glaciated landscape as an important facet of their experience:

The spectacular views and just the very interesting environment would be what I would tell people to come and see. It is just so fascinating, the big valleys and the big walls and that kind of thing, the high mountains. (G12)

Yes, it is quite breathtaking, just getting your head around the scale of some of the mountain ranges out here; it is just phenomenal. (G1)

[Key memories] I think it's going to be the walls, the steepness of the valleys, the passes—like just standing on top of the Pass and looking around. (K20)

Why the Milford Track? Because it is a very beautiful track. The glaciation, I love, because I teach science, and it is really truly a U-shaped valley, and that's really fascinated me. (K21)

A specific section of Track was mentioned by a few people as a highlight—a long sequence of stairs beside a series of waterfalls. This also occurs on Day 3 of the walk:

[Key memories] Coming over the Pass, just the beautiful weather. Yes, today, it was just spectacular, and coming down. I particularly like coming down all the stairs, part down. That part is really pretty. (K19)

Where you've got the river cascading down, endlessly down, through—yes, beside the track and the track's all timbered and networked [sequence of staircases] and that sort of stuff, so the blend of the two. That was something that I wasn't prepared for and I thought was probably one of the most spectacular bits. You know, we really enjoyed that. (K22)

4.2.3 Flora and fauna: close encounters and presence

Wildlife and vegetation were both frequently mentioned. While a few people commented upon wildlife in a general sense, such as hearing birdsong, people more commonly referred to close personal interactions:

There were lots of little birds there—the tomtits and the robins, they come so close to you. (G2)

Weka coming down the Pass. On this side, about half way down the main exposure, out comes a heard, wanders round this far away, totalling ignoring us, as they do. Just terrific. Nobody else there, absolute quiet. And coming back from Sutherland Falls, another close encounter there with a mum and two chicks. (G3)

Yesterday we saw eels about this big [holds out arms] in the river and I had never seen that before, that was very special... We saw keas and they were hovering around us and they actually, we were taking photos at the cross [Pass memorial] and it sat on the cross and kind of welcomed us to the top. Yeah we saw two or three keas today. (K10)

And the wekas on the Sutherlands Falls track let us get right up to them. (G4)

Then another time we stopped and the weka came up and he attacked our hiking poles—we sat the hiking poles down to take some pictures, and it just absolutely grabbed that hiking pole and lifted the end and anything else and it's 3 feet from me and I'm just sitting there clicking pictures. So certainly, I have some neat experiences that way. (G5)

With a small number of exceptions, respondents reported more birds than expected. Of those expecting more wildlife, most hoped to encounter game animals (hunters) or mammals (international visitors), which reinforces that wildlife help shape the visitor experience:

... very happy to see a lot of different birds but a little disappointed that there aren't many other types of animals. (K10)

But we missed [the] small animals. There are no snail, there is no ... (K15)

Occasionally, people contrasted the two valleys—noting the greater frequency of encounters with birds in the Arthur Valley compared with the Clinton Valley:

I've found some of the birdlife has disappointed me. It hasn't been as loud as what I would have thought. Yes, we noticed it—I'm just trying to think—more in the upper Clinton area. It was pretty quiet, surprisingly amazingly quiet. I said I don't like it, I like—and I'm used to the West Coast where the bird life is really giving you a decent hammering. But coming down this side [Arthur Valley] there's definitely a lot more birdlife. (K22)

References to vegetation were about nature appreciation:

And I love tussock. I actually love that tussock. I love that pass. And I love the red beech, not the mountain beech, but I love and I've always got quite a, I really love, the big old red beech trees. (K21)

Yes, and also the moss on the trees. Yes, I think that's memorable. (G17)

We were, like, on the top and there was no vegetation at all, and then we just walked for 20 minutes and all of a sudden there was these, I do not know what they are called, trees with a lot of flowers—white flowers. Smelled lovely and there was, all of a sudden it felt like we were walking in a botanic garden or something. That was very nice. (K1)

[Will tell others] *Just all the ... flora and fauna as they call it, you know, because it does look like an alpine garden up there, you know, it is real big, it is awesome.* (K9)

4.2.4 **Flora and fauna: sandflies and bumble bees**

Sandflies (*Austrosimulium* spp.) were mentioned by almost everyone and, to a lesser extent, bumble bees (*Bombus* spp.), which were unusually prolific during the study period. Interviewees perceived both sandflies and bumble bees as a negative aspect of the experience, although comments about sandflies were often accompanied by jovial dismissal of them or acceptance of their presence (see section 6 for a discussion of coping strategies):

I suppose that is one of the minuses—all the sandflies and bumble bees. (K9)

Only the sandflies were not good. Sandflies, sandflies! (K15)

So, while sandflies are indigenous fauna, their role in the visitor experience was very different from other species. Indeed, the Dumpling Hut ranger made a joke in his evening talk about not swatting the sandflies because they are native. The frequent mention of bumble bees seemed to vary by day, suggesting this may relate to a unusually high bumble bee presence on one section of the Track (in comparison with sandflies, mention of which was constant throughout the study period, as was their presence).

4.2.5 **Water quality**

Rivers and streams were discussed in terms of water clarity and the ability to drink river water. Some people commented that they enjoyed swimming in the rivers (Dumpling Hut has a small sign indicating the local swimming hole) and that the ability to drink from streams makes the tramping experience easier:

[Better than expected] *The water, it's so beautifully clear ... in the streams.*

That would be another thing, the fact that you don't have to treat your water.

It's at your own risk but, comparatively, like I've always tramped carrying my water and coming to the end of tramps and having to potentially boil your own water if you've run out. That's fantastic that we've got free running water. It makes it heaps easier. (K14)

One [key memory] is the water, it is very, very clean, yeab, and I felt I wasn't hesitating at all to drink from the streams at any point but, yeab, in some [other] places I would, in other trails. (K10)

[Key memories] The rivers, the clarity of the rivers, beautiful clear, really clear water. (K21)

They are really nice swimming holes, but they could be warmer [said jokingly]. (K22)

4.2.6 Weather

During the study period, the weather was mostly sunny with clear skies. This was atypical—Milford is renowned for its high rainfall. Few interviewees experienced rain on their walk, although some experienced cloudy conditions on Mackinnon Pass.

The dominance of this factor's influence upon the recreation experience is evident from the frequency with which it was mentioned within interviews and that all interviewees discussed the weather. In addition, some interviewees made explicit its importance:

I think if it's rubbish weather you will always remember the walk as a rubbish walk. (K11)

Only the weather that could possibly not ruin, but diminish, the pleasure. (K12)

Well I think, honestly, because the weather has been so spectacular it overrides everything else, that makes it a really good experience, well that's the top priority. You kind of worry about the weather, what's the weather going to do, what's the forecast and all the rest of it, then the other things take a kind of minor place, getting a sore knee or whatever, stuff like that. (G16)

But, I also think that we are very, very positive about the Track because we have just had the most amazing weather. (K1)

Climatic conditions mentioned most often were rain and clouds. Occasionally, cold temperatures were mentioned.

Weather was usually discussed in judgmental terms. Most people identified how lucky they were with the weather and some said they had been worried about what the weather would be like, for example:

We were a bit worried about the weather... Cos it rains a lot down here... Yeab, we know you get up to 9 metres of rain, and thought we'd be lucky to get good weather, and we have got good weather. (G14)

I know how beautiful Fiordland is and we wanted to see that and it has been absolutely—we have been so lucky. The weather, it's been a marvellous last few days. We haven't had any rain. We've had great views. We know there's been heavy rainfall down here but, touch wood, we're well over it. (G18)

And, I guess, the weather has been fantastic. And the weather was pretty good last time too, so I have been really lucky. (K19)

A positive opinion of rain was occasionally voiced:

Somebody I know came in and it teemed with rain and she said it was fantastic. And they had horizontal rain, but it didn't deter her at all. (G17)

Maybe if you do get a lot of rain, I think you might have a lot more waterfalls coming off the hills on your left and right, which we didn't really have, but it's there. So I would say that if you get the rain it will certainly add an element that maybe we didn't have. (K7)

So we were, in fact, expecting something like that here as well [similar to wet weather experienced on other tracks recently], we were prepared for very wet weather, in fact. But it is sunny. Fun to walk. But rainy conditions can be special also. (G2)

Because of the fine weather during the study period, there was no opportunity to interview people who had been cold and wet all day (experienced physical discomfort from the weather). There was occasional mention of cold and/or windy conditions on top of Mackinnon Pass. One or two people mentioned that this would have affected their opinions:

But look, the weather has been wonderful. I think if there had been torrential rain for 3 days—and I feel the weather has been a huge factor. I am not that keen on tramping that I'd want to do it in horrible weather. I am not that passionate about it. (G4)

We've been so lucky with the weather. It would be so different if we'd had two days of rain. It would have been just a trudge and not much fun. (G19)

The weather influences other factors, including the ability to see views (and therefore appreciate scenery), the presence of waterfalls (after rain), the ability to stop along the Track, and personal safety:

It's the scenery that you come for and on a day like today—when it's raining—it just isn't happening. (G10)

[When asked what looking forward to the most] *The Pass today, and I was really hoping for some good weather, which we got, which was fantastic. That was really the highlight, I think. (G20)*

Maybe a lot of the waterfalls have not been as impressive. But, I think, that is very natural when it hasn't rained. (K1)

And it was also warmer, like when we got up there today it was quite cold and everybody's sort of rugging up and hands are cold and you can't really stand around. Yesterday afternoon I was kind of walking around [with] a woollen hat and I was just sitting quite happily on a rock looking at the views. This morning it was too cold and windy to do that. (G15)

And because there is a few parts of the Track where I was like 'Oh', I feel a bit nervy, like going up to Mackinnon Pass and it is just a sheer drop on either side and then coming down, I would not have felt comfortable if it was pouring with rain and the rocks were even more slippery. (K3)

4.3 MANAGERIAL SETTING FACTORS

The facilities, staff and regulations associated with use of the Milford Track exert a strong influence upon the visitor experience. Individual attributes of the managerial setting are discussed in the following sections. The collective effect of this set of attributes is discussed in section 5.1.

4.3.1 Hut design

Two aspects of hut design were discussed:

- Capacity (the amount of space)
- Privacy (bunkroom size and shape)

With respect to the amount of space, this was typically expressed as follows:

The huts are more luxurious than I'd imagined. A bigger space. I thought it might be kind of compressed, more people in a dorm, that kind of... I didn't realise the kitchen areas would be so big. That we would be fighting for space all the time, so it has been good. There has been plenty of space. (G14)

I mean, you know the huts are all full, and they are all pretty spacious. (K16)

Just in terms of privacy, I would change into my pyjamas in the bathroom before I came back to the room. But no, I have been pleasantly surprised that it is not as nasty an experience as I thought it would be sleeping in—especially in the bunkroom that had 20 people. (K8)

Generally, interviewees preferred hut designs with bunkrooms separate from the kitchen/dining room, as found at the first and third huts (Clinton and Dumpling Huts). The second hut, Mintaro, is a single building. In contrast to everyone else, one New Zealander preferred Mintaro Hut:

Yeah, if there's 40 of you, [you] might as well be socialising together. (K13)

Otherwise, all interviewees indicated a preference for separate buildings.

Preference for smaller bunkrooms was almost universal; the rationale being that this would minimise disturbance, because fewer people would be sharing each room:

[Explaining why she rated huts as more crowded than the Track] *I think one really large room with a lot of people in it, it just gets very loud.* (K6)

I do like the way you have got the smaller bunk rooms, that is better than, like we went to the Routeburn Falls Hut and, God, they were jam packed and not much room. These are quite nice because they have got more room and they are more spacious, not so many people in them, so I like that better. (K9)

Some interviewees commented on the appropriateness for the numbers of people:

They're very well designed to facilitate the numbers that come through. (K21)

What's good is the design of these [huts] and it may have been accidental, but there's great big eaves [which provides him space to sleep outside to get away from the snoring]. (K5)

4.3.2 Hut standard

One interviewee's comment about the 'hut experience' on the Milford Track underscores the importance of this facet of the managerial setting within the visitor experience, and illustrates that visitors do not compartmentalise their experiences:

The hut experience is part of your tramping experience. (G10)

While this section separates experience dimensions, they are inter-related within visitors' minds.

As noted in section 3.2, expectations about hut standards had been set on previous tramping trips, and this influenced interviewees' perceptions of the Milford Track huts:

We had completed the Abel Tasman 3-day walk a few weeks ago now, so we had sort of a look in the DOC huts so we knew what to expect in terms of the bunkrooms and the services available. So that has met our expectations in terms of what we have witnessed there. (K8)

There was frequent reference to the hut standard exceeding expectations. Showers were the most frequently mentioned 'like to have' facility. The flush toilets were sometimes used as an example of the high standard of hut facilities:

I'd say the set-ups at the huts had been better than what I thought they would be. They're amazing. You feel at home in them, they're comfortable and clean and they're easy to manage, you know, it's [got] everything—running water and gas. (K17)

I am impressed with the huts. The hut facilities overall were very good. Oh yes, I was expecting them to be really rough, to be honest, along the lines of DOC forestry huts, but no, I found them good and they've all got gas and good facilities. (G18)

Another great thing is the toilets. I haven't been in a long drop. I know that there are long drops [along the Track], but I don't have to because there's flush toilets [at the huts]. (K14)

The high standard of huts was not to everyone's liking, with a small number of interviewees preferring more basic accommodation because 'basic is more of a challenge' (K13). However, one of these people noted that the high standard of facility had the effect that 'it would get a few people out and about on these tracks who don't like to rough it too much' (K13) and confirmed that he considered this to be a good thing. Another person put it this way (the same person expected the Milford Track would be 'too commercial'):

Then there were flush toilets, and there were electric lights [solar power]. And all that sort of thing detracted a little bit from why we were here ... So it was really a lot more luxurious, I guess, than what we expected. (G9)

The number of walkers influenced one person's perception of the appropriate standard of facility on the Milford Track:

The facilities—some might say they're a bit out of place for the backcountry—but for the sheer number of people going through, you've got to have high-quality facilities to stand up to it. (G19)

Another person raised the electricity issue, saying:

[Asked what could have been better] *The thing is, if there was electricity, but then, that really takes the romance out of things ... No [doesn't want*

electricity in the huts]. *It's a fine line, isn't it, because you want to feel that you're outdoors and you're roughing it a bit and doing something a little outside the ordinary.* (K14)

Cleanliness was a facet of the hut standard mentioned occasionally, such as:

Most of the huts are spacious, plenty of elbow room, plenty of space in the kitchen area, plenty of burners, all the burners worked, very clean stainless steel, it's pristine when we come in in the afternoon. (K4)

4.3.3 Track standard

As identified in section 1.4, the Milford Track is maintained to a very high standard—a factor mentioned by many interviewees. The majority of people perceived this to be positive:

I think the track itself is really well maintained, which is what I kind of expected, and it is a pleasure to walk on. (G12)

I thought the track quality has been very good. Exceptional, particularly the first couple of days, which surprised me a bit, it was so good. (G14)

The track standard influenced attainment of the 'personal challenge' experiential dimension. For example:

I was actually fearing the thing, climbing the Pass and my fitness ... And I think the fact is that the grades on the Track are so well thought out, and they're just a constant acceptable grade. And we did get up to the top of the Pass in 2 hours from the hut. And I had fears that I might not be able to do that and similarly the descent. I went quite well—though my knees are complaining at the moment. So if anything, it has been better, it's been easier than I anticipated. (G10)

A small proportion of respondents suggested the standard made the walk less challenging:

The track itself is well maintained. You can see where they have been busy trying to improve places, the whole path. But too much improving is also not good, it has to be challenging. (G2)

I didn't expect like the Milford Track to be so wide and that, you know ... it is good because it is easier walking. But it is not good in the way that it is a bit more like taking a 'walk in the park' than going for a tramp. (K9)

It's kind of weird. You have this impression of it being a total highway, nice and smooth, almost tarmaced. But it wasn't. That surprised me. You do get your little manicured sections and you're thinking 'This is great', and then the next minute, bang, it's just like 'Hey, this is just a normal walking track', and it's not as easy—easy is not the word—it's not as smoothly as all the guide books and everything you read and what you have heard. You expect you are just going to stroll, it's going to be a stroll in the park, and it's not. It was actually harder than I expected, which was actually quite a pleasant surprise. [Interviewer: so was that a good thing?] Yeab, I think for some people it would be quite a scary surprise, but I quite liked that. Despite my handicap at the moment, [sore leg] it meant that it gives it what I call a touch of reality. It's not just a plain walk. If it was all manicured all the way up and all the way down and everywhere, it would get boring ... I mean I might as well not have bothered then. (K11)

The track standard is lower over the Pass and this was noted:

I think the standard of the track is exceptionally good over 99% of it. In the parts where it's a little rougher, well, that's because nature deems it be so and it would just take away from the experience to change it—it's part of the reality of coming over [the Pass]. (G10)

We were expecting it [the whole track] to be more like over the Pass ... more like going over the top of the Pass really, you know how it is, you know, rocky and mountainous. (K9)

During discussion about the standard of facilities, some people identified they wanted a more basic standard of facilities, but rationalised that a high level was necessary because of the numbers of people using them:

But then you would not get the tourists through and, I don't know how you keep it as untouched as it is, with the amount of traffic through here. (G9)

While few negative comments about the track *per se* were given, this advanced tramper commented that she did not like the concrete reinforcement work on the track:

There's a hell of a lot of concrete on this side, that's quite bizarre. A lot of the track seems to be concreted. That seems a bit weird, like they had drainage issues or something. It's pretty weird to stand on concrete. It's just slightly weird. Here you are on the Milford Track walking along in this remote area and all of sudden you've got a bit of sand, this concreted bit. (G15)

Many people mentioned the signposting (favourably), although occasional comment was received about times being too optimistic.

Some interviewees commented that the high track standard facilitated scenery appreciation:

Where you have got the boardwalks coming down the Cataract ... that's absolutely stunning, it's just wonderful. You are not just going and getting a glimpse of that area, you're following [it] down all the way. I think that's one of the best things. Doing that obviously costs money, time and effort, but it's well, well worthwhile. (G10)

I can look at the view more because I'm not looking where my feet are going. (K21).

And I think all the walkway just made it so much easier. If that was the old—like I've sort of done the Hump Ridge as well—if that was like sort of swinging off down the Hump Ridge from big tree root to tree root, then you wouldn't have appreciated those views. (K22)

Perception of safety was also related to track standard:

I think the Track is very well maintained and it is nice, you feel safe walking on the Track. (K8)

[Messages to others] I'll say that it's hard to get lost, which is very important for many trekkers, very hard to get lost. (K4)

The Track's reputation suggested to some people a high level of facility provision:

But I'm not expecting that [rough track conditions] at Milford because of the prestige and age of this Track. Because you expect it to be like the best one in New Zealand. (K20)

4.3.4 Location of huts and duration of each day's walk

Variation in the length of each day's walk was raised. In the Milford Track brochure, DOC provides distances and suggests walking times for each day (Table 2). Interviews were conducted at the end of Day 3.

TABLE 2. DAILY WALKING DISTANCES AND TIMES (DOC 2008).

DAY	DISTANCE (km)	SUGGESTED TIME (hours)
1	5	1-1.5
2	16.5	6
3	14	6-7
4	18	5.5-6

Most comments on this topic related to the shortness of the first day. The majority were of the opinion that the day's walk was too short:

I think it is a bit annoying that you only walk 5 kilometres on the first day. (K1)

I think the first day [is] too short. It is too short a day for walking ... That makes then the next day too long. The first but needs to be further up ... You're there at the hut at 2 o'clock and you're twiddling your thumbs and everybody else was there before me. I was the last person to turn up. It's just too early. (K11)

In contrast, another person liked the shortness of the first day and the way the walk was 'paced':

And it is a very well paced track. The huts are a good distance apart for the days ... Your start day is very short. Because most people have travelled to get to the start anyway. So, therefore, from Te Anau, get the ferry, easy jaunt, stretch your legs, carry your pack for a little while for the first day. Really good. Next day, flat again, little bit of climb, bit longer and then you are ready for the climb. (K18)

Occasional comment was made about the variation from day to day. One person expressed this as follows:

[Talking about Day 3] *Just a bit too much, and I heard that from everybody out there, even the ones that were here a lot earlier than me. They're all going 'It's just that tad too long a day' ... It's just the timing things. Either the day is too short or it's too long. There's no happy medium in between. (K11)*

[Talking about the Hollyford Track] *What's nice is it's spaced evenly. I think that's what attracts me. The even spacing of the days on the Track. That's what I like. So you know that one day you are going to do X amount, probably in distance, and it's going to take you so long and the same again and the same again. That's a nice thing. (K11)*

A few people commented on the long days throughout the trip:

I've found the days quite long, but apart from the first day obviously, but I didn't expect it to be quite that long, especially today. (G20)

The only thing with today and tomorrow, maybe it would be quite good if they were slightly shorter, maybe if there was another but ... so we didn't have to walk quite so far today and it wasn't such a long day and then tomorrow is quite a long day as well, so it would be quite nice, I sort of like ... 4 to 5 hours walking is me rather than sort of 6 to 8. (K9)

4.3.5 Safety

A small number of interviewees mentioned safety, most commenting that they considered the Track to be safe. A couple of people expressed the opposite view—they considered that some parts of the Track were dangerous:

I thought that's quite dangerous there because there's a little wee spot where there's—just next to the Track it's just a rock surface and it just goes to just a sheer drop off. If you were in the snow like they were last year, and you were walking in the snow, you wouldn't see that. (K5)

4.3.6 Interpretation

Very few people commented upon interpretation facilities, although interpretive signage exists along the Track and at each hut. Given the high proportion of first-time trampers, they may have little experience on which to judge this (their baseline). A small number of people sought more information:

He said that there could be an improvement in the amount of information provided. He seems to have a very keen interest in the types of animals and vegetation here so he said that either on the trail like on certain markers or in the lodges if you could just put more photos and descriptions. (K10—via interpreter)

4.3.7 Rangers

The rangers (previously called hut wardens) based at each hut were sometimes discussed by interviewees. Comments were made about the role of the rangers, their knowledge, passion, friendliness and helpfulness, and the talks they gave each evening (the Dumpling Hut warden spoke for about 1 hour, starting at 8 pm).

Dedication and the breadth of their role was noted, as expressed by an American visitor:

I guess I was very impressed with the comportment of the hut wardens. I didn't realise beforehand that they are responsible for a long list of things. So I'd say what greatly exceeded my expectations were the job responsibilities and job description of the hut wardens. They are not just PR people. They get out and they get their hands dirty ... So I'm really impressed with the work ethic, the long hours, the dedication and the concern for safety that the hut wardens have. I think it's a very tough job. (K4)

Knowledge sharing was frequently mentioned, such as:

The rangers have been brilliant, they've come up and spoken at night and they're very clear and good at information, and any questions, they know the answer straight away. (G6)

Several people commented on the rangers 'going the extra mile' for walkers and their passion for the job:

There was somebody whose pack was too heavy and he [ranger] took it and put it in his pack and carried it to the but. Did he need to? No he didn't. Then he comes along and takes us to see the blue ducks and it's just so beautiful. (G17)

It is great that at the first but he took us—he asked if anyone wanted to see the glow worms and he just took the assembly out and we saw the glow worms. And just now we met [ranger's name]. And he just told us, have you seen any blue ducks today? Oh, no. Oh, leave the packs. And we just left them and walked around. We did not see any, but still it was a great ... Yes, because he did not have to. (K1)

The magnificent work of the hut wardens in keeping the huts clean and tidy and very hospitable and friendly and creating an ambience at the huts. That's very important. (K4)

One person commented that he was surprised at the rangers' commitment, given they work for a government agency; while another noted their regulatory role:

I suppose what has surprised me is this is a government-run organisation and you know, you can obviously see that they are very committed to what they do, but they have done it well in respect of the tourist. (K3)

And they are friendly and they are not just saying 'Where's your bloody tickets'. You know, they are nice about it. (K18)

One respondent thought the rangers could have been more hospitable—'like the hut wardens on the Hump Ridge Track' (which is operated by a trust).

4.3.8 Regulations (one-way track, 1 night per hut, no camping)

The uni-directional nature of the Milford Track was referenced by interviewees occasionally when discussing encounters with other people. Most people viewed this positively, with only one negative comment expressed:

It's all one directional so—and that's possibly I think a wee bit sad. I know doing the Greenstone it was quite good to pass some people going the other way and they'd pass on whatever, or a conversation or whatever, you know. (K22)

General comments about regulations on the Milford Track were usually supportive, as epitomised by the first quote, while the second quote indicates the sense, expressed by a couple of people, that they felt 'controlled'.

But we can understand how—because this is such a magnificent track that it has to be like that. You have got to make it work. You have got to keep the people moving through. If you let people come through in dribs and drabs and stay two nights at the hut, it wouldn't work. (K18)

I understand why they're [regulations] there but it would be great to have a bit more licence, I mean, yeah, you feel quite controlled here, whereas it would be nice to think you had a bit more control over your own day ... But that's just how it works I suppose, because it's such a popular route and you've got to manage someway. (K17)

The influence of management regulations upon the visitor's sense of crowding is discussed in section 4.4.4.

4.3.9 Hut booking system

A couple of points were commonly raised when interviewees mentioned the hut booking system: guaranteed bunk space and control over numbers of walkers. With respect to knowing they had a bunk each night, typical comments were:

You're guaranteed of a bed for the night, so in fact it doesn't really matter if you walk it in 4 hours or 5 or 6 hours, you will have a place to sleep. Take the time and stop wherever or whenever you want for how long you want. That's good, it makes it more relaxed. (G2)

I really like the idea that you had to book, so you knew that even if you're walking slowly, that there'd be a bed for me and I wouldn't have to compete for that with other people. And I liked the fact that it was organised, cos I know that on really popular tracks like the Abel Tasman, it's quite competitive and quite hard to find a bunk and that kind of thing, and I didn't really want to have to think about during the day. (G16)

You know you've got somewhere to sleep when you get there. There's no worries about that, and you know that there's not going to be too many people who aren't—people sleeping on the ground and stuff. (K20)

The link between the booking system and the avoidance of congestion was expressed by comments such as:

I don't want to be meeting people all over the place on the Track either, so I like the fact there is a booking system. (K7)

A different perspective on the booking system is that it favours people who plan well in advance or can allow flexibility in their plans:

I was thinking of coming and having a look one day. It's just kind of hard to organise compared to other places. You can run up the Routeburn or the Rees/Dart anytime from Queenstown. You don't have to think about booking 3 months in advance, there's a bit more logistics to come on this one. (G13)

But, like, they have to book now and expect to wait a year to get in. My cousin did that. I'm not very much a booker kind of person. I think it's good, like I think it's really necessary for this Track. It's a bit strange but it's obviously working. (K20)

[English backpacker who had been trying to get on to the Track for 12 years]
Every time I came it was too late, it was full or I was off going to do something else, so it clashed with what I wanted to do. I could never get in when I was here or wanted to do something. I mean I even spent, in 2000, I spent 2 months in Te Anau in a desperate hope that I would at least get on the Milford. (K11)

The latter point was highlighted by some other backpackers who chose not to book very far in advance since that would have 'tied them down'.

The booking system (and the ability to see daily bookings on the DOC website) provided walkers with a cue about the Track visitor numbers (see section 4.4.4).

Interviewees did not discuss the restriction upon 1-night hut stays. This appeared to be subsumed within discussion of the hut booking system.

4.3.10 Off-site information

Five people mentioned the DOC website or the Milford Track brochure. Comments on the latter were of a detailed nature (such as suggestions of additional information). A couple of people praised the website, for example:

I really liked the online side of it [booking], you know, I'm not ringing somebody up, and what I also liked about—I don't know there's a question or whatever, is that all the ancillary bits as well, like the bus from here today, or the boat to here and there can all be done straight away ... And I particularly like the fact that I can look online whenever I want, see if there is a place available and press a button and that place is now mine. I think that's brilliant. (K7)

4.3.11 Access: start/finish transport

A small number of people mentioned the boat used to reach the beginning of the Track, when discussing their Milford Track experience. To these people this transport formed part of their experience. Comments included:

And I've done quite a lot of walking in China and New Zealand and different places, and I still think, it's just kind of neat to start a trip on a launch. (K21)

And the first day was awesome on the boat trip. (G2)

The ferry was quite informative. That was good. I liked that. (K11)

4.3.12 Concessions: guided walk operation

Interviewees seldom raised the presence of guided walkers on the Milford Track. However, some attitudes toward the concession on the Track were evident. One person held a strong opinion about this:

I don't think they deserve to pay 1500 bucks or whatever and do it the easy way and then at the end of the day there's 'Yeah I did the Milford Track'. Only because [they paid for it] ... I'd be alright with that, as long as they're carrying everything ... I think a lot of them wouldn't be able to manage to do it the way we're doing it. And if they can't manage to do it on their own then they shouldn't be here. (K13)

Another person mentioned the different standard of huts, while a couple of men commented they noticed people with beer at Quintin Lodge (the guided walks lodge near Sutherland Falls), which made them envious:

When you walk past it's like, I think today it was more obvious because I didn't even look at Pompolona [guided walks lodge]. You see Glade House [guided walks lodge] and you walk past and you think 'Oh yes', but I didn't linger there so I didn't really think much about it. I think it was today that it struck because you dump your bags off, your rucksack off, to go to Sutherland Falls. It then, especially when the guy came out and he goes 'That was a lovely shower'. (K11)

A couple of people expressed the opinion that the guided walks option increased the range of people able to walk the Track:

No, I think the guided walk is good. I think that, I'm not against it at all, because it gives people who don't have confidence a chance to see something beautiful ... when I'm older I would like to think I could do walks and not carry a pack. (K21)

I kind of think it's quite nice that the Track is so accessible to people from all walks, people that can't walk it can still see it. Like the guided walkers, if you don't want to take your pack then it's still accessible to people like that too, so that's quite a good thing. (G20)

4.3.13 Carry in/ carry out rubbish policy

While rarely mentioned, the rubbish rule for visitors to 'carry it in / carry it out' attracted these comments:

A good thing as well is carry-in carry-out. And we have not found any papers or any rubbish thrown away or left behind. (G2)

It's good that you take in and out your own rubbish because it makes you aware of how much you are taking in and out rather than just going to dump it on DOC. (K20)

4.3.14 Cost

The cost of the trip was mentioned in four interviews. Some backpackers commented on the high cost of walking the Track, as did a local person, who got his father to bring them to the start of the Track in his boat to save money. In contrast, a couple of other people thought the Track was cheap—for example:

And the Track itself is really cheap. I was really surprised when I went to book it, how cheap it was. Everything else around it, [is not], getting here and back can be expensive ... I think it is as cheap as chips for the experience. (K3)

One person commented that the low cost may facilitate getting people into the backcountry, which they considered to be a good thing:

I think it is too cheap [hut price]. I think DOC undersells themselves really. But then you have got to get people there. (K19)

4.3.15 Nature protection

The national park / world heritage status of the area was not raised by interviewees. Four people commented upon conservation work, such as the predator control programme, or expressed their interest in nature protection generally, such as:

And the good job that everyone is doing to protect it as well and protect the birdlife and try and get a bit more of that coming back, I think, which is really important. (G7)

It is not surprising, given this low degree of awareness/mention, therefore, that environmental education/learning was not apparent as a facet of the visitor experience on the Milford Track (see section 3.1.6).

4.3.16 Historical setting

Very few interviewees mentioned historic setting attributes or interpretation of the same. Those mentions that were made included:

I find it completely fascinating that someone—in 1888—even thought to go up and over that pass and the fact that they wouldn't have had a path, they would have had to have macheteed bushes out of the way to get right through. I don't even know what would possess someone. (G11)

Yeah, the [Day 1 boat] skipper told some stories about the place Mackinnon might have drowned, with the small monument they made, he told us about the island where the Māoris used to rest during the night, or for a retreat, yes it was very nice. (G2)

4.4 SOCIAL SETTING FACTORS

The third cluster of setting factors is associated with visitors on the Milford Track—the social setting. Two key dimensions were evident from interview data—the relationships between people within the walker’s own group (intra-group interactions: section 4.4.1) and the relationships between different groups (inter-group interactions: section 4.4.2). Both of these types of relationship exerted considerable influence upon the visitor’s experience (discussed in section 5.3). A small number of people mentioned the guided walkers (section 4.4.3), and interviewers specifically asked walkers about their perceptions of crowding on the trip (section 4.4.4).

4.4.1 Intra-group interactions

One factor underlying the Milford Track experience was time spent with family and friends on the trip. This had three dimensions:

- Spending quality time with friends or family
- Sharing the experience
- Fostering use through friends or family members organising others

Insight into the social nature of the Milford Track experience is given by the following two responses:

[Looking forward to the most] *Oh, just hanging out with friends for a while. I could come up here anytime, but it was more about catching up with these guys that don’t live round here, haven’t seen it.* (G13)

Tramping trips are usually about the people as well, that you normally go with people you know. It’s actually quite weird to go in a group where you don’t know anyone. You’d normally go out with four or five mates that you’ve been out with lots of time before. (G15)

Sometimes reference was made to the quality time available for socialising while walking the Track, compared with back home:

[Most looking forward to] *Catching up with my sister-in-law, which has been great, great quality time ... Yes, because often people come and go and everything is busy, isn’t it, when you have got family around [referring to limitations to catching up at home]. It has been great.* (K16)

[Key memories] *Socially, it’s just good tramping with Dad. He’s 75 years old, you know. And my wife, you know, I just really enjoy it. She walks at a good pace and we enjoy it. We don’t get to spend a lot of—well, we do in a way because at the moment because I’m driving a lot and she travels with me occasionally. But it’s [Milford Track] sort of good time. No cell phones, no computers.* (K22)

So it was just having time out with them without their boyfriends, things like that, just, you know, having girl time. (K19)

The importance of sharing the experience is emphasised by the following interviewees:

There were keas flying on the other side. They are all there. I was just thinking in terms of my kids, that would have been a memorable thing. They had some idea that the Milford Track involved some keas flying around. (G10)

[Scout leader—looking forward to the most] *Oh, just the kids doing it, seeing them do it. It's not easy for kids, and the fact of carrying a fair chunk of their requirements, and just seeing them do it really. And there's no choice about it really, you can't just stop and say 'Oh, I don't want to do it'. You're on the Track and you're away. So I guess that was it, seeing the kids' experiences.* (G19)

Being with them [her daughters with whom she was walking], sharing it with them, them seeing some of New Zealand because Anna, the second one, hasn't been down to the South Island and engendering some enthusiasm to continue tramping. (K19)

The importance of family tramping trips was identified by some respondents—their significance in people's lives. One woman, on the Milford Track with a family group including her son, discussed the importance of these trips and their memories, while another noted the impact a family trip on the Milford Track had upon her when she was a teenager:

I would really recommend that they do it in families and groups. Yeah, and I just think it's good for families ... When we went around Waikaremoana we joined two other families and like, he [reference to her son] remembers those. And we all feel warm about them and when we went round Ruapehu we all felt warm about that. Now they've all grown up, we no longer, it's impossible because they're all over the world, to get us together, but when we do get together they reminisce back to those times. (K21)

I was 13 years old, came on a family holiday, parents thought they would bring us on the Milford Track, came on the guided walk and I distinctly remember walking up the Arthur Valley thinking this is the most beautiful place I have ever seen and it really stuck in my mind and affected me through those kind of teenage years ... To encourage me to be outdoors more, to realise that that was what I really enjoyed and that led through university to, you know, kind of combining a career and what I loved as well. (K6)

Another dimension of this factor was the way that family and friends fostered use, by organising the trip and inviting people along. Many interviewees commented that they had come to the Milford Track because a friend or family member asked them along. The pre-planning necessary for the Milford Track may heighten this factor compared with other tracks that do not require advance bookings. This effect occurred more often for New Zealanders, but was also evident for international visitors and New Zealander / international mixed groups:

[Speaking of his friend] *He's been here, he organised the trip, so it was basically just say 'yes', buy an airline ticket, show up in Queenstown on a certain date. All the rest is taken care of, so it was Dave's organisational ability and gentle persuasiveness to join him and this other group of friends. That's how it all started.* (K4)

So they [friends from the North Island] were coming down to walk it. I think it was after the Hollyford, Kirsten sort of said we should walk the Milford Track. Yeah, if it wasn't for Kirsten we probably still wouldn't have done it. (K13)

Several people mentioned that significant birthdays (40th/50th) were a catalyst for tramping. One father/daughter group were on their first overnight tramp because she had booked the Track as a surprise present for her father's 50th birthday. Others noted:

Actually, me and my friend when we turned 40 we thought 'Oh, we have got to go out and start doing these tramps'. We have got, you know, several good years, let's do one of these Great Walks every year sort of thing. (K9)

Originally we did the Abel Tasman for my 40th, so then we did this one 4 years later. We were going to do one every year after the Abel Tasman but we're doing one every 4 years. (G4)

A succession or flow-on effect appears to be operating, linked to word of mouth recommendations:

I did it 3 years ago and I thought it was something that would be really good to do with my daughters before I got too old. [Later in interview] And my girls have both said, oh, they would really love to bring their partners down and do it. (K19)

My folks did it, probably that's why [we came]—my folks did it about a year ago and they had a fantastic time and said 'You have to do it', so we've sort of it had on our 'things to do'. And then these guys [friends] actually instigated a trip. (K17)

Several interviewees were part of regular tramping groups. A common arrangement was annual tramps with the same party of friends or family group:

We tramp, and there's 11 of us ... and John is kind of like the camp leader and he's the organiser. Last year at this time of year over Easter we did Waikaremoana and so this year we're doing the Milford Track. So we tend to do a big walk each year. Same group of people ... It's like people hear about the tramp and they'll go 'Yeab, I'm keen to do that'. So he probably started planning it and getting numbers in October last year. (K14)

My wife and I have always tried to do a walk in March—or around about March—or at least one walk a year, but generally around about March and the option of the Milford Track came up ... We were asked if we wanted to join the family group. (K22)

An extreme form of fostering use was evident with one American interviewee visiting every year for the past 6 years, bringing different friends with him each time from the USA. This person was acting as an 'ambassador' for the Milford Track:

Yeab, the first time in 2004 I bought a good friend of mine, another scoutmaster, and he went back and raved about it, and so then and I had all these other people who wanted to come. So I thought—yeab, I'll come back again, and I'll bring some more down to get the experience. (G5)

Some interviewees discussed how the nature of their group influenced their experience:

[Scout leader] *I'm into photography and if I'd been walking with the family or whatever I would have gone on my own and stopped and spent a lot more time taking photos. But it was more a 'keep going' thing. It wasn't a trip for me really. (G19)*

[Discussing why his Milford Track experience was different from his Routeburn Track experience] *Maybe because I've got my son here. (K5)*

4.4.2 Inter-group interactions

Inter-group interactions seldom featured in interviewees' pre-trip expectations, but social interactions with others in the 40-strong cohort were discussed in relation to the actual Milford Track experience. Usually, this was unprompted comment about their experience, although interviewers specifically asked about this aspect of the experience if it was not raised.

The importance of inter-group interaction was discussed by a couple of interviewees, and identified as a facet of the Milford Track experience:

[Inter-group interaction] makes the Milford better than any of the other tracks that I've walked. (G5)

Okay, this has its beautiful parts—so does the Routeburn, so does the Kepler—but this has the incredible but life. (G5)

To me it's [inter-group interactions] huge; it's what it's all about I think. (K13)

Unusually, an American, visiting the Milford Track with a friend who had been before, noted that he **expected** inter-group interaction. His comments illustrate that social interactions between groups can enhance (or may detract from) the visitor's experience:

I expected also to meet a lot of fascinating people from different parts of the world, different languages, different cultures. I had heard about a lot of conversations with different people at different tables, people rotating tables to have a nice chit chat with people that were from different places. So I expected kind of an all-encompassing experience from the trekking to the hut experience, beautiful scenery, good camaraderie with good friends and to meet new friends. (K4)

A sense of camaraderie amongst the trip cohort was evident, with people helping and sharing with each other:

People are on a track, they're all getting to know each other, they're having a bit of a laugh. It's bonding, you know? (K11)

It's funny, because we have had a bit of a team, you've got to walk as a team now. It's weird, man. No, well, that's in my family, right? But also on a larger scale, it's the whole but you know. We have got to get all good you know; oh, so-and-so didn't make it yet. Oh, did you hear about the guy's ankle ... So there is a sense of that we are all going to make it together, right? (G8)

Being up on the top of McKinnon Pass, being at the memorial with the people there, bit of a laugh. Then in the [Pass] but 'Do you want some hot water Kim for a tea or coffee?' That's nice, didn't just put it on for themselves, asked around, having a bit of a laugh there and everybody's worried about going down. I think that would be a good thing as well, to get that kind of a horror story because it wasn't just me. (K11)

[Speaking of Milford Track tramp in March 2007 in heavy snow] I loaned one girl my thermals, and somebody else lent stuff to somebody else, and the group took care of the group, which was something we push in scouting, and I've seen people take weight off strangers if they're struggling. And so you really do form a bond. And this works particularly well on the third day—the hard day—so you've had 2 nights in the huts and you've already formed that bond and people help each other. (G5)

A couple we met, because we were not scout people, there was another couple who have had the same rooms as us throughout, and she's been very good. And she's taken photos of us and is going to send them to us. So that is good, we will get some photos out of this [no-one in family group had brought a camera]. (G18)

Indeed, a sense of commonality amongst the cohort was discussed by a couple of people:

I mean, people that do the Track aren't going to be bad people; I mean, you're going to have a lot in common, aren't you, with people that are interested in doing that stuff. (K17)

I'm really glad, even though I couldn't afford the guided walk—and even if I could—I'm really glad I did this one. I think the people were really nice, some people have similar motives for doing it ... There was just a nice feeling amongst everyone, you know. And I think they're the kind of people that like doing it that way, so everyone's a bit of similar in that way. (G16)

The person previously identified as an 'ambassador' for the Milford Track (who was a social extrovert) noted the social benefits he derived from meeting people along the Track:

You move around the tables and you get to know them, and I had groups where we share food, we shared booze, you know and every year I take names and addresses back and I stayed in touch with those people. You know, I get Christmas cards from all of them, and with some groups, there are some Canadians and some New Zealanders and some English that I have stayed in touch with, a couple of Australians too, actually, now I think about it. That every year somebody wants information, wants to stay in touch. (G5) [Elaborates that he meets up with people in other countries and hikes with them.]

Several foreign couples commented that they enjoyed talking with people in the evenings, since they were travelling by themselves around New Zealand—it provided an opportunity to meet New Zealanders—while about 5–6 New Zealanders commented that they enjoyed meeting overseas people:

Last time I did it, I really enjoyed the fact I think there were only seven New Zealanders in the group, and that was fantastic ... Just, oh, it was lovely meeting those people. [Interviewer asks if less interested in meeting New Zealanders] Well, it is interesting, but it is not the same. (K19—New Zealander)

We met some nice people, good company from other countries. They are all very different, of course, but you get to meet up sitting around and about the butts. (G18—New Zealander)

It is a good mix of international and there is quite a lot of New Zealanders on this trip, so that has been quite good too. Just talk to some of the local New Zealanders. (G14—Australian)

An experienced trumper (on the Milford Track with her mother) was surprised by the experience of fellow walkers on the Track. She was expecting 'bumblers':

Yeab, when you think about the OUTC [Otago University Tramping Club] you've always got a bumbler. You do always have one idiot who rocks up

without his boots or he turns up with sand shoes or something like that. There's always some idiot. I actually thought there would be quite a lot more [here], but most of the people that we've been in the butts with have actually been pretty experienced walkers, and a lot of them are sailors or they do some other sport in their spare time. Yeah, I was expecting a few more couch potatoes, but the people haven't actually been like that at all. (G15)

Within the cohort of 40, sub-groups may form:

I've found them all lovely, really friendly too. Yes, well, we've got our little crowd that in fact are perhaps more friendly. They sat down at the same table on the first night and then we exchanged things, and we were in the same room, so that was just easy. (G17)

You tend to get nice straightforward people, friendly people who want to get there, who want to meet people, who want to do things, who want to experience things. Something different. That group I was playing cards with before ... we met up on the first day and, basically, I think we met up on the first day at the docks, and we said are you doing the Milford, and we just sort of gravitated. (G3)

Some large groups may claim territory within communal rooms, making others feel less comfortable. This was suggested by people travelling with a cohort that included a group of 12 people:

On this particular trip I think there is a group of, I have not counted, but of about 12 people. And I think as you travel as a group you take over a certain area, and it is quite territorial, so other people who are maybe travelling in ones or twos, don't feel as comfortable in that area. (K8)

It was just that first impression of that crowd because they came in and they were talking about their hors d'ouvres and their wine that they were having and they spread out over the whole counter top to make all their stuff. And it just felt that that first night that they were quite imposing. (G9)

Some people noted that their interactions with others in the cohort had developed over the trip:

I noticed sort of everyday it [inter-group socialising] gets better and better. You know the first night people are sort of standoffish and then by last night people are starting to come together. And then I noticed on the Track today you say 'Giddy' or whatever to most people and they say 'Giddy', you know, sort of 'alright' and could have a bit of a yarn. And I'd say, yeah, by tonight they should be, you know, you'd be probably talking to them. (K13)

The unique nature of the Milford Track social experience was identified by a few interviewees:

You know, we've met some interesting people on the other tracks but again, you just talk to them one night. It's the reality—by the time you change tables a little bit and mix with another group one evening, as opposed to the three [evenings] like here. So the social dynamics are very different [on this] trail than from the others. (G5)

Many people realised that the one-way track system facilitated social bonding because of shared daily experiences over four days/three nights:

It's one-way, so you're with the same people for 3 nights, you really get to know them; whereas on the Routeburn and the Kepler, you know you've got people going both ways, and so you don't get that bonding. (G5)

[Recommendations to others] *I'll say that they can expect to meet a very diverse eclectic group of people from different parts of the world, that they have the opportunity to bond with because they will be staying with them in huts 3 nights consecutively and on the trail 4 days. (K4)*

The people. I like the—I didn't think I'd like the regimented thing, saying you had to be at this hut the next day and then you had to be at that hut the next day. But we have seen the same people all the way along and we chat to them and we have sort of—I wouldn't call it friendships, but you know the acquaintances that we have made and met have been nice. It's just—you get to know the people. (K18)

Some of the people travelling with the large 32-person scout group commented that it had brought them (a couple) closer to the other (non-scout) walkers:

I mean we're quite introverted people I guess. If there'd been a big bunch of different people we probably would have stuck to ourselves more. But in a way, because of the scout group being such a big group, there were, like, eight of us who weren't scouts and we kind of hung out a little bit together. It's actually been quite nice. (G20)

Spatial and temporal focal points were evident—places and times when inter-group interaction was concentrated. This was primarily at the huts and, secondarily, at gathering points along the Track, especially the shelters. The latter acted as congestion points (discussed in section 4.4.4).

4.4.3 Guided walker interactions

Comments about guided walkers were eclectic and only raised by a small number of people. Comments included the fact that guided walkers were seldom seen, and that they were friendly when passed on the Track. When raised, there was a tendency to use 'us' and 'them' rhetoric:

I guess it's the posh people you know. (K13)

It's just strange having two separate groups and it definitely creates two kinds of separate—you know—they're them, you're you and you kind of stay away from each other. (K20)

The elite group—the guided group or whatever they call themselves ... You can see how that level of tramping suits them. (K22)

[Discussing an incident on the boat where guided walkers' packs given priority over independent walkers' packs] *I feel like saying, you know, we're all New Zealanders, we're all out there to enjoy the beauty so treat us all the same. (K21)*

4.4.4 Congestion and crowding

One facet of inter-group interaction often raised in recreation studies is crowding, as discussed in section 2. Since previous quantitative research has indicated high levels of concern from walkers about congestion and crowding on the Milford Track (e.g. Cessford 1998), interviewers specifically enquired

whether interviewees felt crowded. Interviewers asked ‘Do you feel the Track is crowded?’ and showed a card depicting the 9-point crowding scale (Shelby & Heberlein 1986; Appendix 1). Most interviewees recorded low scores (mean of 3.3, median and mode of 2.5). Probing identified that huts (mean score 4.2) were perceived to be more crowded than the track (mean score 2.8), although a small number (four people) suggested the opposite. Five people scored the huts and the track the same. The character of the experience, as already noted, reinforces this finding. Visitors often indicate that encounters with others led to positive outcomes rather than negative ones, suggesting again that the relationship between use level (or encounters) and the experience is anything but simple, linear and negative.

While previous studies (Cessford 1998) have identified high levels of visitor dissatisfaction with aircraft noise and crowding on the Milford Track, these were seldom mentioned (aircraft was mentioned by four interviewees and crowding was raised by two interviewees prior to interviewers asking about it). Researchers noted that, despite the good weather, aircraft activity was low on most interview days. When activity increased, so did the comments. The effect of aircraft was not specifically probed by interviewers. Comments received about aircraft were provided in the context of disturbance to peace and quiet and ruining the wilderness experience. People who raised this issue felt strongly about it.

As noted in section 3.1.7, solitude is not a primary motivation for walking the Milford Track. This suggests that the encounters with other people may not impinge upon their experience (compared with those seeking solitude) and they are, therefore, less likely to feel crowded. Nonetheless, some people commented upon numbers of people during the interview and coping strategies were evident (discussed in section 6). Any trampers displaced by the numbers of people walking the Milford Track, or selecting not to visit for this reason, would be absent from the Track and therefore excluded from this study.

Some interviewees commented that the booking system provided a cue to the numbers of people to expect:

We already knew that there were only 40 beds, so we knew what [number of] people to expect; and also, we already booked through the internet and saw that it was completely booked. (G2)

You know it's the Milford. You know there's going to be 40 people on it. You expect it. You're not surprised by it. (G15)

We were prepared for a lot of people, so compared to that, I do not think it is crowded. (K1)

A few experienced trampers noted that they expected that the 39 other walkers may make the Track crowded or cause conflict. Some people went on to say that their expectations did not match their experience—they did not feel crowded on the Milford Track:

The expectation the first time was that there would be crowds, that we would have people around us all the time. (G10)

I was worried that if you've shared a party of 40 there might be someone who is a bit odd, that you'd have difficulty getting on with, but that has not happened. (G14)

I just thought it would be too crowded. Like you've got 40 people plus guided walkers all in a big line like a parade. But it hasn't actually been

like that [later in the interview when asked what had been different from what he expected] Yeah, definitely hasn't been crowded, well it hasn't felt like it. I know it's booked out every day throughout the whole year, but it hasn't felt like it's been crowded. (G13)

When discussing their crowding scores, many people emphasised that the huts and facilities were not congested:

I've been in much more crowded huts. I've been in huts where people are sleeping in the porches and stuff. This definitely isn't like that [Later in interview] You don't feel that you've got to queue for cookers and you don't feel like you're tripping over each other's gear in the bunk room or that you can't find somewhere to hang your boots or whatever. No, it doesn't feel crowded. I've certainly been in worse. (G15)

But it [the hut] doesn't feel overcrowded, so you know, there's only 40 people, so, let's see—there always seems to be a ring available to put a pot on, there always seems to be a seat on which to sit. (K7)

Other factors influencing the choice of crowding score were evident:

[Discussing why feels crowded] *It is just volume of people, it is just interactions, it is just meeting the number of times that you are meeting people to me is what makes it crowded. (K6)*

I wouldn't want any more people, I wouldn't want to see any more people on it. Because that gives you the wilderness experience. (K5)

I wouldn't want to be walking with people—you know, I wouldn't want to be bumping into people all the time. That is part of the beauty of it. You can walk fairly in isolation most of the way. (K19)

The huts are a bit noisy because there is lots of people in them at night doing their cooking and that and so it is quite hard, if you go for a walk outside at night, there is usually lots, you know, other people there. [Husband goes on to explain] There is too much going on, you go out there and you want to listen to the quiet to see what you can hear and there is just too many people yakking, you know. (K9)

Because I think in other international treks I've done I've seen it both ways. I've seen where it's almost unlimited people on the trail with open access and I've seen it where they limit maybe as few as 10-12 people a day on certain trails. So I would put 40 people on the trail a day right in the middle. It's controlled access which is great, but if you call up 8 months in advance, unless it's between December 15th to January 10th, you'll get a place I understand. So it's limiting access. I like the 40 people, that makes it accessible but reasonable, but I've seen the other extremes. twelve would be down at about a 2 [on the scale] and 100 people a day would be on your scale, I'm sorry, up at 9. (K4)

It was not unusual for people to give a medium-high crowding score and then state that this was not a problem to them, suggesting a problem with the crowding score measurement approach. Some went on to discuss coping strategies they employed to deal with crowding. This Auckland woman exemplifies this phenomenon (crowding scale score at 6, with huts at 7.5 and the track at 6):

Interviewer: *I've specifically asked you this question [about crowding]. You didn't raise it with me, so is it a problem for you?*

Interviewee: *No. The good thing about, I think, and I'm sure you've probably heard stories that are against the grain of this, but the people who choose to come and do the Track are like-minded people who are quite respectful and they tidy up after themselves. I haven't observed anybody being reckless or untidy or not carrying their rubbish with them and that kind of thing. I'm astounded with all the foot traffic how tidy that they keep all the huts. I really don't think the ranger would be able to do that by himself or herself unless people actually did do a good job each day.* (K14)

Interviewer: *Because you think the place is moderately crowded, have you done anything in the way that you're operating, what you are doing during this trip, to mediate or cope with that sort of sense?*

Interviewee: *Like you found me tonight, I was sitting by myself reading a book. I will often do that because I need a bit of time out so I will go and find somewhere.* (K14)

Interviewees identified that the one-way system and the spacing of the huts (guided/independent) 1 hour's walk apart reduced interactions with other walkers on the Track. In places, the track is wide enough to allow people to pass alongside, if they want to overtake. One person described it thus:

No, no it [expectation of feeling crowded] didn't happen. The way that the walk is operated is in two groups separated by—enough time that the overlap is minimal. You only ever—you see maybe a dozen people during the day, essentially the same dozen people who were travelling at a similar pace, and because there's no movement in the opposite direction you had the impression that you've got your part of the Track pretty much to yourself. So I think it's run extremely well. I think that the crowding issue was never really an issue. (G10)

It was common for interviewees to believe the management regime was necessary to avoid crowding (and environmental damage):

It [management regulation] has to be there because if not you risk abusing the environment, the wildlife, you risk damaging the trail and you'd probably make life miserable for the hut wardens. It has to be controlled, it has to be limited. I would not want it more than 40 people a day. (K4)

It has to be controlled because there are so many people who walk this Track. If it was not controlled... it would be a problem—[there would be] 80 people in the hut. (K1)

One interviewee expected to feel crowded on the Milford Track, but his experience was different. His responses suggest the role of the management regime, both in terms of suggesting it will be congested (40 people each night), but also in terms of managing this potential congestion:

I'd give it about a 3 [crowding score for huts]. I was expecting worse. I thought that cos they're booked out during the night that they [huts] would be crowded, sort of like the Caples or Greenstone or something, where you can get every bed taken, every space. I thought that if it's fully booked, it's going to be like that—jam-packed. I mean it was slightly crowded, but not bad at all. (G13)

I didn't even notice people. Like everyone is walking the same way. But on the Routeburn you'd be passing people the whole way, like going both ways, and day walkers coming up, and it feels real busy. (G13)

A common theme was that people sought to retain the status quo. Commonly interviewees made comments such as:

I mean, you accept there is 40 here and that is it really. You wouldn't want any more but I don't think—I mean personally I would hate to see it. (K19)

Along the Track, specific sites acted as bottlenecks; notably, the shelters at the Pass (especially in bad weather) and opposite Quintin Lodge (where independent walkers gather for a side trip to the Sutherland Falls).

The size of the individual's party and their motivation was influential in these judgments. The second quotation is from the only person who specifically identified that he was seeking solitude. This was unusual—and it is notable that he had not done any research about the Track prior to the trip:

There is a lot of people, but that's from—I've obviously chosen to come with a group of 11—so I'm not obviously that precious about having that solitude. (K14)

I certainly didn't think there would be a feeling of so many people around, that's probably been—it's probably been more crowded than what I thought... So I think my expectation before I got down to Fiordland, the Milford Track would be of, you know, absolute isolation, and I mean it's—and it's not like that. And I understand you've got to get people through and they've all got to stay somewhere and you feel quite intimate with the 40-odd people in our group. (K17)

Four people said the track was more crowded than the huts. Two people explained why:

Because it is [my] expectation again. Because I think during the day I am after a bit more of an isolated experience. (G14)

I'd rather the track was not crowded and you felt crowded at the accommodation because at least then you're getting more of a remote experience. (K17)

Other people commented upon the track and huts differences:

I would say when you spread 40 people out amongst as much as 18-20-22 ks [km], that's a lot different than having them in close quarters, obviously. I think the environment can handle that many people a lot easier than a structure. I would say, having said that, I don't want to leave the impression that the huts are crowded. Most of them are very spacious with lots of elbow space, not much competition for the facilities in terms of the burners, in terms of the sinks, in terms of the toilets and those types of things. It's just when you see all your 39 other trekking friends in the same place at the same time, and the only time you really see that happen is when the hut wardens talk, because the other folks are out in a hammock or on the porch or in the bathroom or still coming in on the trail or leaving. (K4)

During the day on the track it's not at all crowded. There's lots of space between people, you don't have people coming the other way. It's easy to stand aside if someone faster is coming up behind you. The huts at night

are pretty crowded, like there's only just enough room—on the first night there wasn't enough room for everyone to sit inside—I think that was quite difficult, some had to sit outside. (G16)

A few people made reference to the guided walkers during this discussion, but mainly that was to note that they seldom saw them (see section 4.4.3). Only one interviewee raised guided **day** walkers during interviews:

I guess you know from the outset that it's 40 people plus another 40 guided [incorrect: up to 50 guided walkers]. The first day it was a bit, yeah, that was more crowded because you had the day trampers going up and going out again. That felt a bit strange to me. (G20)

One of the walkers on the cohort with the 32 scouts, thought that travelling with the large group may reduce congestion, in comparison with a cohort of many smaller groups:

They're very courteous and they're very well run, so perhaps that may be there. If there were 40 people and, you know, people from different cultures who aren't quite as courteous. (K22)

I mean we've talked about it [being with 32 scouts] along the way, and there's been some quite positives about it because they've stuck together as a group. Quite often we've been walking and we are just completely by ourselves. Whereas if there's heaps of other groups of walkers, you might cross paths lots more. (G20)

4.5 VISITOR FACTORS

Personal characteristics of visitors influence their evaluations of attributes encountered. Interview data illustrate the importance of the individual's prior experience when forming expectations and evaluating the Milford Track trip. While many other personal factors are known to affect the visitor experience, this study did not seek to examine them. Prior experience is discussed specifically because of its prevalence.

As noted previously in this report (see, in particular, section 3.1.4), assessment of the Milford Track experience frequently was made in relative terms—interviewees used a benchmark or baseline to judge the Track and/or area. Therefore, the individual's depth of previous experience is relevant to his or her evaluation of the Milford Track experience. A few examples are presented here to provide the flavour and scope of these types of comment.

A backpacker who had been travelling the world for 8 months noted the high relative assessment level set by his current travels:

It's a bit unfortunate, possibly, that—all I do at the moment is travel from one amazing place to another amazing place, you know, that's all I do. Therefore, had I just come on a 2-week holiday or a 3-week holiday from Ireland and done this tramp I might have gone 'Oh my god, wow, amazing—the waterfalls!' (K7)

The most common comparisons were with home, both for New Zealand and international visitors:

When you come from Denmark, where it is just flat and just boring. I think we had a very great expectation for this, that it would be the most beautiful scenery ever. (K1)

We obviously have nothing like this [scenery] in Australia that I am aware of. (G1)

[Discussing that expected to see more birds than have experienced] *We're from Auckland and have been to Tiritiri [Tiritiri Matangi Island] and the birds are fantastic. (G4)*

Or other places they had visited:

But that waterfall was bigger. I thought it would be high, but not as much volume. Like Angel Falls over Venezuela way, but it was actually quite powerful, quite impressive. (G13)

Others compared previous tramping trips with the Milford Track experience:

[Discussing wildlife encounters] *The Routeburn there wasn't a lot. Got one cheeky bird but that was about it. But here, quite a lot. (G3)*

[Discussing standard of facilities] *It is certainly more flash than what you would get up on the Overland Track [Tasmania]. (G12)*

If you compare it with the Abel Tasman and the Routeburn then it will be in the middle. (G2)

First-time trampers, who had no reference point for comparison, sometimes used non-tramping experiences as their basis of judgment. This was most apparent with respect to the bunkrooms, for which comparisons were made with backpacker hostels, marae sleep-overs and school camps.

About one-third of interviewees described themselves as beginner trampers. Some aspects of the experience were specific to, or more dominant for, first-time trampers (defined as people on their first overnight tramp).

First-timers often had a strong activity rather than place focus. Comments were often centred upon learning the activity (e.g. what to wear, what food to cook). For example, when asked what they would tell others about the trip or do differently next time, they would discuss what to bring, and comments indicated this sort of advice had been part of their trip preparation:

I had lots of advice before I came from ladies that were tramping and knew all the ins and outs and told us what to get ... All the food and everything, only bring enough for each day. (K2)

I mean, there is a whole lot of things we'd do differently if we set out again. [Asked what they would do differently] Oh, just in terms of preparation for it. Just what you bring and what you would not bring. (K3)

Some interviewees gave the hint that this trip may be the only tramping trip they ever did, and they had chosen the Milford Track for this trip. However, the nature of a one-off on-site study restricts the examination of this factor.

5. Relationships between factors

This section of the report addresses Study Objective 2: To examine the relative importance of factors affecting visitors' evaluations of recreation experiences. First, a set of factors is discussed which combine to position the Milford Track as an introductory tramping experience (section 5.1). The influence of individual factors upon other factors is examined in section 5.2, while the final section (5.3) presents a model that suggests the relative importance of factors.

5.1 FACTOR COMBINATIONS

Collectively, a set of factors form 'suitability' criteria that define the tramping niche or role of the Milford Track. Interviewees sometimes commented that the Track was suitable for novices and families (everyone, beginners, anyone). This opinion was related to the standard of the track and huts, the management regime, track accessibility, information provision and reputation. Together, these factors coalesce to provide a setting attractive to novices and families:

[Messages to others] *It's a nice easy track to do, well organised with facilities, cooking, good bathtubs, water that we can drink ... in the huts. And, hopefully, the views are going to be beautiful and awesome and crazy. But at this point, I think it's a really nice [tramp] to do and not so difficult to do. It's accessible for a lot of people.* (K12)

I would tell them that it is a very well maintained track to introduce you or to an experienced walker as well, but certainly as an introductory walk. I think it is a safe walk, people would feel comfortable on the track. They would be comfortable in terms of the huts. They do not have to carry tents, you know, all the ancillary bits and pieces that go with that. And so it is a nice introduction that way. (K8)

[Recommendation] *What I would say to different people is different, like to my Mum and Dad I would say 'Yes, it is awesome—you have got to go and do it.' With my mates I'd say 'Oh, it is a bit of a walk in the park, it is probably too commercial, I don't know how you guys would like it' because they are real bush people ... But the majority of people, I would say 'Yes, amazing'. And a good walk to do first if you wanted to do other walks because you know, you have got your talk each night and they tell you what to expect and what to take and all those sorts of things.* (G9)

The high standard of track was explicitly linked to its suitability for novices:

I'll tell them to expect a very well maintained trail, a very [hesitates] a trail that's do-able for the rookie trekker as well as the most experienced trekker. I didn't mention this before but when I say 'well maintained trail' I want to clarify. On every part of the trail there's always an obvious place to step. You are not scrambling, you're not climbing up and down slimy rocks and things. You can use your feet wisely. A safe trail, a well-maintained trail, plenty of bridges, no river crossings, no creek crossings, a manageable trail, if you will. (K4)

This assessment of suitability occurred before the trip (to assess whether they could do it) and during the trip (to assess whether family/friends will be able to do it in the future). The management regime and reputation provided cues prior to the trip that it is an introductory tramping track suitable for families:

[Why the Milford Track?] *I think the Milford was probably the most well known. It sounded really beautiful. It is also a good length, like he wanted to do the Heaphy, but it is longer. And so this is kind of a good introduction because a lot of people do it, you know it is not going to be too advanced.* (K3)

[You can] *bring people from a variety of fitnesses and experience levels into a place that is just stunning. I don't know if this valley is any more spectacular than the next one over, or the next one over, but the fact is you can get here and you can get here in comfort. One thing, when you're taking a family, when you get to the hut you want a bunk, you don't want to be carrying your tent just in case you haven't got room, but here you have got a bunk. The other thing is that you know, almost certainly, when you're going to be out ... whereas if you come to other places in Fiordland, off your own bat, then you would have to add a day or two of contingency because you may not be able to get out.* (G10)

I thought, seeing that it was such an internationally renowned track, I thought it would be sort of catering to anybody's fitness level. (G4)

Interviewees' comments confirm the success of DOC's Great Walk concept as a marketing brand that facilitates family-friendly, introductory tramping opportunities. Similarly, it was evident from participant observation that the Track facilitates inter-generational family groups (young and old walking together). During the study period, walkers ranged in age from 12 to 74 years. Many inter-generational family groups were observed. While a broad range of types of trampers use the Milford Track, it is likely that its role as an introductory track will set expectations about the recreation opportunity that it offers.

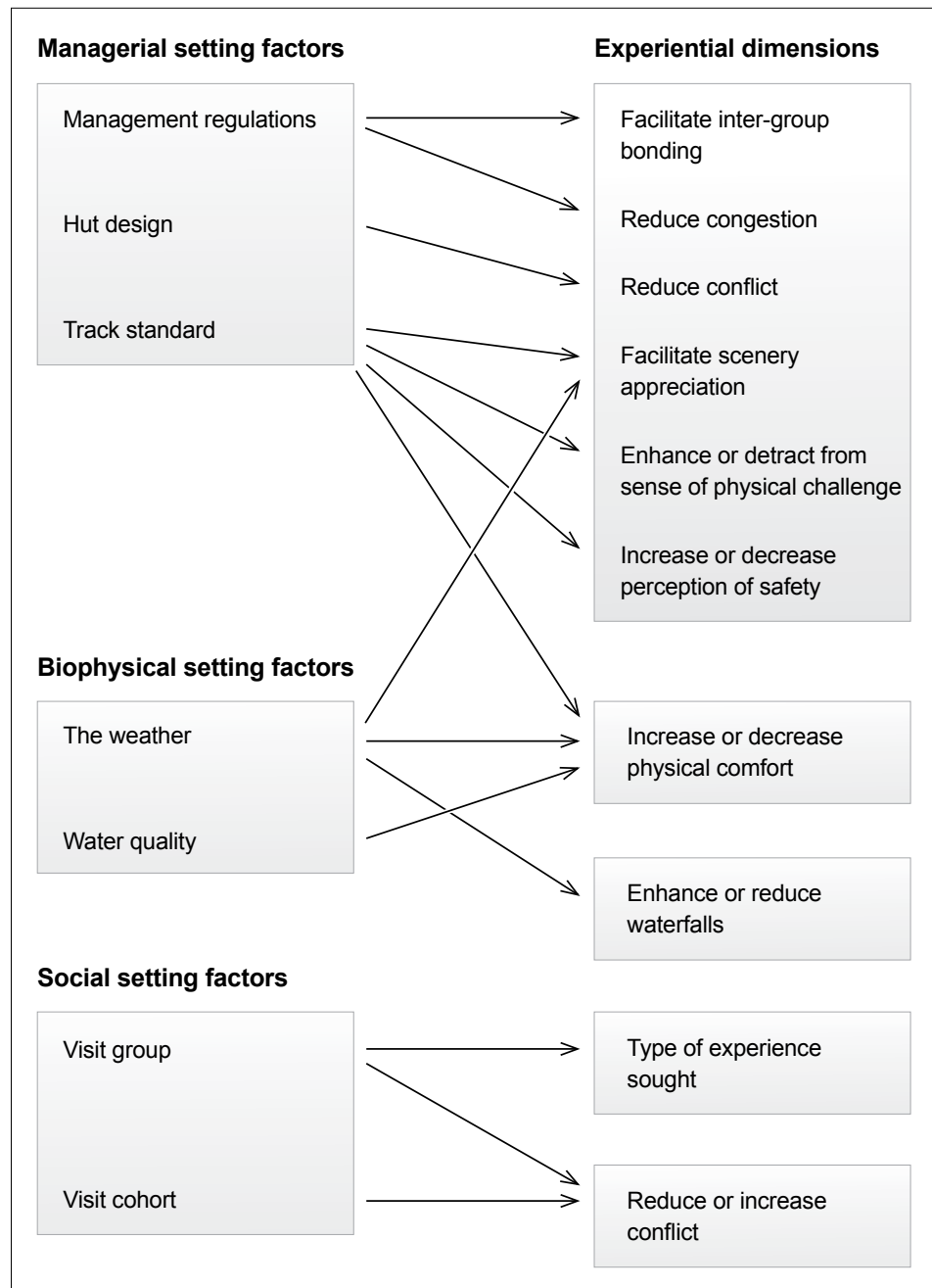
5.2 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

In section 4, various relationships between factors were highlighted. This section pulls together these inter-relationships, which are summarised in Fig. 3.

In combination with each visitor's recreation activity history, certain biophysical, managerial and social setting attributes (characteristics of the setting) influence the attainment of experiences on the Milford Track. The setting attributes may either hinder or facilitate individuals' achievement of specific dimensions of their experience.

Figure 3 illustrates the dominant influence of the management regime upon the visitor experience. A strong influence was exerted by the standard and design of the track and huts, and the application of regulations (such as a booking system). This affected walkers' interactions (a sense of bonding was engendered within the cohort), it reduced congestion and conflict, and increased security in knowing that a sleeping space was available at the end of the day. This latter factor allowed people to have the time and opportunity, if desired, to enjoy the scenery and other biophysical attributes. The track standard may positively

Figure 3. Individual factor relationships.



or negatively affect an individual's sense of personal challenge, depending on whether they were inexperienced or more experienced trampers. In a similar manner, perceptions of safety were influenced by the managerial setting.

Because walkers must stay in huts (camping is not permitted), and the length of stay is limited to 1 night, the cohort stays together for the duration of the Track experience (that is, they stay each night in the same huts). This 'being together' may be exaggerated by the travel arrangements required to get to and from the Milford Track (boats at both ends) and the long distances people travel to get there. The researchers met many future walkers on transport en route to the Track (tramper bus network, boat to the start of the Track). As a result, social bonding may begin before people reach the Track.

The influence of biophysical setting factors is largely centred on the weather, which determines visitors' ability to appreciate scenery—a significant relationship, given the importance of scenery appreciation to the Milford Track experience. During this study, the weather was atypically sunny, resulting in highly positive and frequent references to scenery that may not have been so prevalent during inclement conditions.

The nature of the visit group influenced the type of experience being sought, often providing a strong sense of intra-group cohesion. The 40-walker cohort appeared to mediate inter-group conflict.

5.3 PRIMARY FACTORS AFFECTING THE VISITOR EXPERIENCE

Some factors exert a stronger influence upon the visitor experience than others. These factors are called 'primary factors' in this study, and have two characteristics:

1. They are the main factors identifiable within interviews (raised by the greatest number of people and (re)raised the most frequently within interviews)
2. They exert influence upon several dimensions of the visitor experience

Primary factors provide the foundation stones for the visitor experience, in that they are almost always present and, in some cases, act as a prerequisite (or precursor) for other factors.

From our interviews with independent walkers on the Milford Track, the primary factors identified were:

- The weather
- Management regulations
- Facility (track and hut) standard and design
- Social interactions (intra-group and inter-group)

Sandflies, which were commonly mentioned by interviewees, were not defined as a primary factor, as they did not appear to exert influence upon the experience.

Section 5.2 highlights the importance of the first three factors, as they were the primary setting attributes that influenced dimensions of the Milford Track visitor experience. The fourth factor, social interactions (inter-group), was the only factor for which any quantitative measure was given in interviews, and the magnitude of this measurement suggested that it had significant influence upon the visitor experience.

When asked what proportion of her enjoyment of the trip was related to the cohort, a solo tramper replied 'A good third, easily, a third to probably a half' (K11). It is acknowledged that solo trampers may appreciate other groups more than larger parties, given their lack of intra-group interaction. The only other person who offered a quantitative assessment noted that 'Hut-life is, like, 50% of the experience' (G5). The same person, an experienced tramper, went on to comment that inter-group interaction '... makes the Milford better than any of the other tracks that I've walked' (G5). The same point is presented in the following quotation (solo tramper again):

I think if you're with a crappy group, you're going to hate the walk no matter what, because you're stuck with another 39 people whether you like it or not. (K11)

It is this expression of importance (and other expressions of social significance—see section 4.4.1), and the frequency with which social interactions was mentioned by most interviewees, that dictates the place of social interactions as a primary factor influencing visitor experiences. These interactions, together with other factors, shape the experiential dimension of social bonding or sharing. It is difficult to identify the relationships between social interactions and other factors from the data, because of the influence of the management regime in shaping the nature of the social situation.

The visitor experience is interpreted through the lens of the individual's previous experience. Repeatedly in interviews, walkers made reference to previous tramps, huts and tracks, and communal living experiences (first-time trampers). First-time trampers' recollections were underlined by a focus upon successful achievement of the activity. This suggests that achievement of the day's activity may be a more important factor for inexperienced trampers (than those more experienced), and may dominate other factors (i.e. physical challenge is a primary factor). In this manner, this factor may operate like a prerequisite: unless you are experienced enough to enjoy the activity, other factors are diminished (still present but less important to you). However, these conclusions are speculative, because of insufficient data. It is a point worthy of further examination.

The weather was the only biophysical setting attribute discussed by interviewees as an influencing factor, perhaps because it is variable. In this case, visitors indicated pleasant surprise at the weather conditions they experienced. Most other biophysical setting attributes are fixed (such as the mountain landscape), and therefore offer less opportunity for a sense of surprise. The presence of wildlife, the nature of the landscape and so on, appeared to be taken for granted to a greater extent—they were known and expected. Even though visitors' experience was greater (or, occasionally, less) than expected, this differed from the sense of 'luck' associated with the weather.

It is hypothesised that primary factors may influence secondary factors, although this study was not designed to investigate such a factor hierarchy. The influence of primary factors on secondary factors is a worthy topic for future research (see section 7.3).

Figure 4 presents the relationships discussed in this section. It illustrates the dominance of the recreation setting by showing setting attributes as the primary influencers (outer ring of the model) upon the Milford Track experience. The model indicates that 'previous experience' mediates between these setting attributes (managerial, social, biophysical) and the psychological experience dimensions (housed within the inner circle of Fig. 4). While 'previous experience' could be placed elsewhere within this model, its placement highlights its importance and its apparent mediating role.

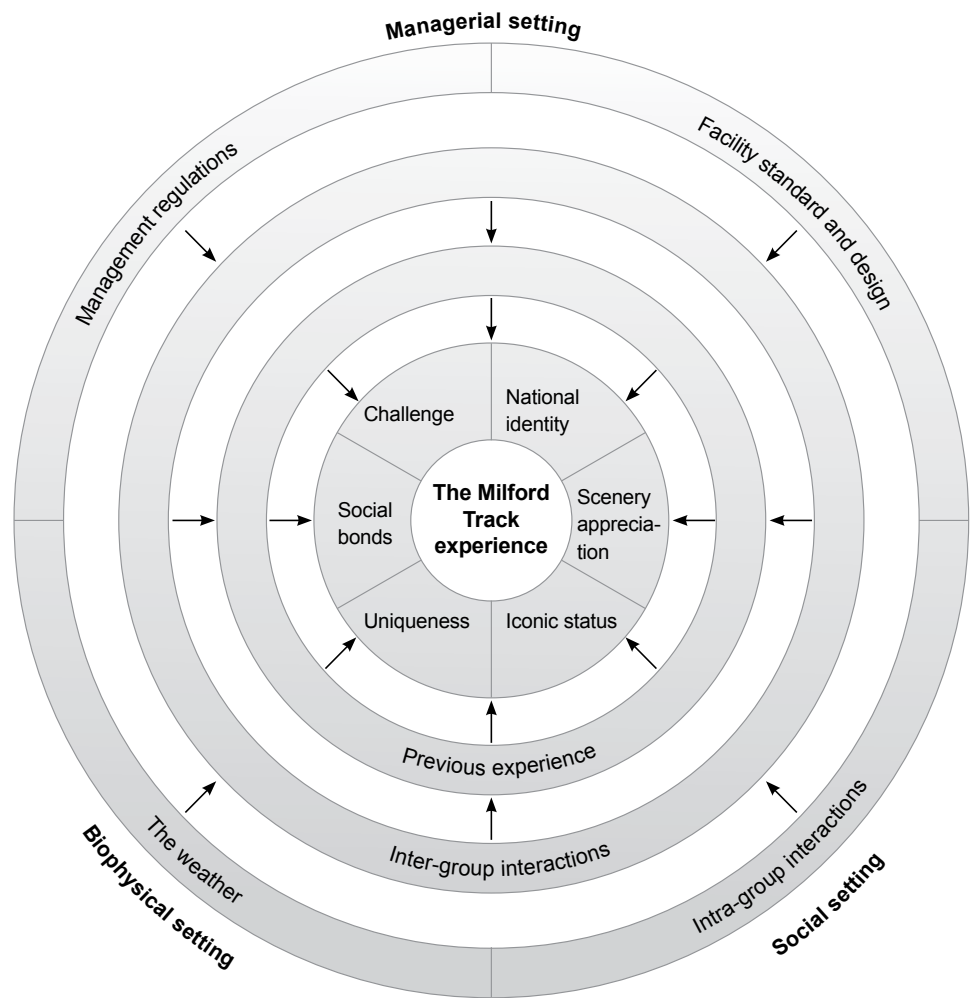


Figure 4. The influence of primary factors on the Milford Track experience.

6. Coping strategies

This section of the report addresses Study Objective 3: To investigate coping processes used by visitors to mediate perceptions of social impact (negative experiences).

It was common for interviewees to highlight that they were happy with their experience; for example: 'I've loved everything about the Track. Basically everything has been fantastic' (G6). Interviewers specifically sought comment on any negative aspects of the experience, asking: 'Was anything worse than you expected?' and 'What have been the most negative things?' In almost all situations, interviewees confirmed that the issues they raised were minor annoyances or inconveniences—often stressing they were not a problem to them on the trip. The types of disturbance discussed in this section must be considered in this context. Only a couple of people held strong objections to specific aspects of their experience, associated with guided walkers using the Track, and aircraft noise.

It is likely that the well-publicised nature of the Milford Track (specifically, the high degree of management regulation and high visitor numbers) will be effective in encouraging people to self-select; that is, choose not to visit if these conditions were likely to annoy them. This may help explain the relative absence of negative dimensions of the visitor experience.

Section 6.1 outlines the types of disturbances discussed by interviewees, while section 6.2 identifies the coping strategies employed by interviewees on the Milford Track to deal with these. Factors which influence the perception of conflict and the choice of coping strategy are discussed in section 6.3.

6.1 ADVERSE EFFECTS UPON THE EXPERIENCE

When asked about things that affected their experience negatively, many interviewees mentioned the need for consideration or courteousness by fellow walkers:

It's about being considerate to the other trappers, that's what it comes down to. (G19)

I've been a little bit surprised at some, shall we say, insensitivity of certain trekkers to others ... Simple things like you know about the flies and the bees here, leaving doors open, walking through a door to the kitchen and just leaving it open for bees to come in or swamp flies or whatever. Things like that. (K4)

The issues most frequently raised were associated with behaviour of other walkers at the huts. Particularly singled out were snoring and disturbances in bunkrooms associated with people going in and out and packing (especially rustling plastic bags):

The snoring is a hassle, [and] people shuffling around and making noise in bunkrooms. It's just broken sleep when sleeping in the huts. (G4)

The first hut I'm sure I didn't sleep a wink all night. I know that it's a bunk room, you know, so you don't mind snoring and carrying on, but the first

night it sounded like there was always forever somebody just rustling in their pack to get something out of plastic and it just went on all night. (K2)

Oh, you know what I didn't like, I don't like the fact that some people get up at sparrow's fart, like 5 o'clock in the morning, and wake you all up; you know, it's like 'Oh, God, get a life'. (K5)

Some people linked inconsiderate behaviour to a lack of understanding or practice of hut etiquette:

Not demonstrating I guess what I'd call standard international trekking etiquette ... So there's a few people here that either don't have much experience tramping or they haven't refined their manners and their etiquette to the extent that should be exemplified on a trail of this stature. (K4)

Hut etiquette relies on people recognising the reason that everyone is there ... those sorts of things [music, excessive drinking] can put some people offside ... if you're not prepared to include everyone in the hut then you should bear their needs in mind. (G10)

One person mentioned that conflict within their own group had affected her enjoyment of the trip (K21). She was the only person to mention intra-group conflict.

A range of other issues were identified, from car security to bumble bee stings. Overwhelmingly, social conduct occupied the majority of concerns. This may reflect the high level of satisfaction with track and facility standards (as discussed in section 4.3).

6.2 COPING STRATEGIES

Both problem- and emotion-focussed responses to adverse social effects were evident, despite their low level of impact. Emotion-focussed responses dominated, in accord with findings from other studies (discussed in section 2.3). Problem-focussed responses were less common, perhaps because of the high degree of rationalisation that was evident. Some New Zealanders identified their lack of action, reinforcing the generally-held notion that New Zealanders seldom complain. It is also acknowledged that, by design, the study omitted recreationists who may have been displaced from the Milford Track as a result of undesirable setting conditions. Sections 6.2.1–6.2.4 discuss emotion-focussed responses. Sections 6.2.5–6.2.8 outline problem-focussed strategies.

During the study period, a range of potential social conflict situations arose, including a cohort that comprised 32 scouts and their leaders, plus 8 other people. Even this potentially challenging social situation resulted in non-scout walkers reporting a positive experience:

We have struck a scout group, and apart from the first night with a couple of kids making a bit of noise—they were excited, pretty natural, but they were very good—they've been fine. [Later in interview] The eldest daughter who is with us, she's a school teacher, she says 'Oh my God, I'm here to get away from this'. But they turned out to be good, nice kids. (G18)

We certainly weren't expecting a big scout group. It was a shock to start with, but they've been fine and it's worked out really well. (G20)

This contrasts with one of the two emphatic statements about negative effects (this example concerns aircraft):

[Interviewer asks whether aircraft activity he had raised was a big deal to him] *Yeah, it is. Because, I'm not saying I've got the answer, but I don't see that they mix [Milford Track tramping experience and aircraft] ... as an independent trumper it is obtrusive.* (G19)

6.2.1 Rationalisation

Rationalisation is the process whereby individuals make cognitive adjustments in order to achieve a satisfying experience and, as a result, they report a high level of satisfaction (as reported by all interviewees in this study). The Milford Track walk requires a substantial degree of commitment in terms of effort, cost and time. Walkers also exhibited a strong social investment in the trip—for some visitors it was a 'once in a lifetime' experience or the chance to spend quality time with people close to them. This suggests that a high level of rationalisation is likely to be present, since the walkers have a strong incentive to 'have a good time' (the theory of cognitive dissonance). This supposition proved to be correct.

The most noticeable feature of the array of coping strategies employed by interviewees was the heavy reliance upon rationalisation, which supports Cole & Hall's (2007) 'adaptable human' hypothesis. Many interviewees displayed some form of rationalisation, for example:

And the sandflies have been more [than expected]. But you come here, that's part of the deal, so they don't count. (G3)

[Discussing where feels crowded] *Only the bunk house, but you've got to sleep somewhere don't you?* (K2)

[Discussing disturbance from rustling of plastic bags] *And, to be quite honest, you expect that on a tramp anyway.* (G7)

There's a few people that rustled stuff, but usually you had to get up anyway. (G11)

6.2.2 Acceptance / do nothing

A specific form of rationalisation was evident from the interview data. This has been called the 'acceptance / do nothing' option because it involves people acknowledging that they did nothing while being aware that they could have taken action.

Snoring and hut disturbance provide good examples of the high level of this type of behaviour. Most people did nothing (except talking about it with the researchers when they were asked about negative aspects of their experience). For example:

Two young girls woke up at 6 o'clock in the morning and woke us all—repacked their bags with every bit of plastic bag they could possibly muster, for an hour ... as soon as they left the room, we all burst out laughing. The other guy was kind of like 'I was waiting for someone to stand up and tell them to get out'. But we all sat there ... we just laughed, but it was quite frustrating at the time. (G13)

Everyone is very quiet about it and they don't mention it [speaking of a snoring incident where four other people moved out of the bunkroom during the night] ... no-one said anything, that we all had a disturbed night or anything. I guess it's just the New Zealand way. (G16)

There was some Aussies turned on some music, two bunks from me. Normally I love music, but I am not used to it, especially in the bush ... Ab—be asked [for permission]. My inclination was to say no, but I didn't. (G10)

It was common for people to internalise the situation and accept responsibility for dealing with the issue (rather than expecting the other person(s) to alter their behaviour). Speaking about irritating behaviours (like drinking, people leaving the door open, or closing windows when people are cooking and need ventilation):

When you see people doing stuff that they shouldn't be, that is kind of annoying. But people often don't know stuff ... I don't really think there is anything you can do about it. (G12)

This quotation illustrates that the individual did not feel any action was open to him or her—and therefore differs from the examples above. The point raised by this interviewee about 'knowing stuff' is linked to the notion of hut etiquette which is discussed in section 6.2.4.

Some people stated that they accepted the situation: 'I mean you accept there is 40 here and that is it, really' (K19). A common turn of phrase was that you needed to 'just get on with it'. For example:

[Discussing walking the Milford Track with 32 scouts] *Oh, it's best to get on with it, you know.* (K22)

[Discussing disturbance in bunk rooms] *You have just got to bear it I suppose, you know, you have just got to harden up and there is not really a lot you can do about it so, you know, just go with the flow, get on with it and go with the flow.* (K9)

I found the hut concept challenging [Interviewer: in what way?] *Oh, just that, you know, I suppose because I am of an age where I like to have a bit more space and a bit more personal privacy. But I see that, in this environment, as something for me to get over.* (K3)

Occasionally, there appeared to be a compensatory aspect to acceptance—that if other things are good, then you can accept the disturbance. Alternatively, sometimes people made reference to things that could have been worse, for example:

[Discussing being disturbed by people getting up early] *It was just one of those things. It was better than having a snorer all night.* (G13)

I think if I was doing it for a number of weeks on end that would get to me but I know that it's for 3 nights and it's quite bearable. (K14)

[Discussing disturbance at huts] *As long as I can have some little luxuries, I'll be okay.* (G4)

6.2.3 Product shift

The concept of product shift, whereby an individual redefines the nature of the recreation opportunity to ensure congruence with the conditions experienced, was not common. This may relate to the many cues prior to the trip (such as the booking system) that assist walkers to set realistic expectations. However, product shift was apparent with respect to the following interviewee:

[Discussing communal living] *Just deal with it. First night was a bit of a struggle ... And over these last couple of days we have kind of got our heads around it.* (K3)

6.2.4 Agents of social control

When discussing the means available for mitigating or avoiding social issues, many people made suggestions that the ranger should do something. In other words, they identified an agent of social control. One person stated that parents should teach their children about how to minimise bunkroom disturbance. However, reference to parents as an agent of control was not common, perhaps because few young children were on the Track (with the exception of the group of 32 scouts). The study period did not coincide with school holidays.

This suggests that rangers could teach hut etiquette, as suggested by this New Zealand interviewee:

Well, the park rangers, maybe they could mention the codes of behaviour, the protocols and etiquette. I think that people in New Zealand that tramp a lot are pretty good, they know what the behaviours expected are, like if there's a pot-belly stove then someone will light it, and they'll clean up afterwards, but I just wonder whether other nationalities do that, and maybe there should be things like bottom bunks should be for older people in the night. Some of those behaviours could be spelt out a bit more. Otherwise, you worry about getting to the hut and if young people have taken up all the bottom bunks, old people have to get up two or three times in the night... Just be a little bit courteous. I think being courteous has to be spelt out a bit to people, quite often to young travellers, things they aren't aware of. (G16)

6.2.5 Temporal separation

The most common forms of problem-focussed response were temporal and spatial management. These related to behaviour on the track, undertaken in order to minimise the number of encounters with others, and in the huts, to avoid congestion.

A common response was adjustment of the morning departure time in order to avoid other people on the Track. Several interviewees discussed how they assessed their fellow trampers (cohort) on the first day and decided where they would fit within the cohort in terms of speed of travel:

After the first night, you sort of know, like when you get to the hut, you sort of know, right, they are going to be the people that are going to be blasting and then you watch the next sort of people come in and you can sort of pick their fitness and things like that. (K9)

The purpose of this assessment was to 'try and time it so you are behind this crowd and ahead of that crowd [and therefore] it is not as crowded when you are walking along because everyone is more spread out' (K9).

One option within this approach was to depart early, a strategy employed most often by international backpackers (compared with other types of interviewee):

We get up very early because it is difficult to sleep when there are so many people. But instead of just sitting around and waiting, we try to get on our way as fast as possible, because we knew then that we are the first and we have the track for ourselves. (K1)

One interviewee made an explicit reference to the one-way track system, which facilitated this separation, while others highlighted the separation of guided walkers from independent walkers, as huts are spaced apart. The final quotation notes bottleneck points where people gather (see section 4.4.4):

Everyone is walking in the same direction and you can go, head out in the middle of the pack and just cruise at a speed and you might see a few people in fact. You see them up at the top and then you know, other places, but not when you are walking ... What I am saying is that when you are walking on an ordinary track, you see people because they are going the other way. (G8)

Well, the track's not crowded at all. I love the design where you basically have the guided walkers an hour behind the rest of us. In our group I've always gotten up early in the morning and gotten going near sunrise—around 7.30 [am]—and most of those people aren't getting going till 9 am or so, so they're really 2 hours behind. (G5)

We've hardly bumped into the private but people, which has been a good thing. There's less crowding because of that. They are behind us most of the time. (G14)

Well, on the track everyone separates out, so you don't really—you cross over a little bit. Today, probably, was the most day because there were lots of people stopping on the Pass and then stopping at Sutherland Falls. (K17)

A temporal response also was evident with respect to cooking in the communal kitchen:

Cooking is slightly crowded. The first night was very crowded. But the last 2 nights people have cottoned on—the earlier they get in, the quicker they can cook meals. (G11)

Because everybody wants to cook at the same time, go to the toilet at the same time. So, on the first day I was caught in the crowd, but now I do everything early, so I avoid [the busy times]. (K12)

The desire to minimise sleep disturbance led some people to attempt to arrive at huts early (to get a bunk away from the door). Others noted that the booking system overcame the need to rush to huts (discussed in section 4.3.9). This coping strategy appeared to be operating in a low-key manner, as suggested by these interviewees:

There is always the rush to get to the hut to get the good beds each day ... You obviously want to try and get away from the entrance door to the hut, so you don't get woken up by people coming and going ... I would not go out of my way to sort of rush past all the scenery to get to the hut first. (G1)

But I actually do like a bottom bunk, so I would actually turn on the gas [walk faster] a bit as we get close to the hut just to get in there and get one. So I would not have minded being able to book a bottom bunk. That would have been nice. (G12)

Another form of temporal adjustment was:

I actually try and go to bed last to make sure I am really, really tired. So I can fall asleep easier. (K9)

6.2.6 Spatial separation

Spatial separation is the individual's deliberate movement away from the site of conflict. Few opportunities for spatial separation occur along the track, because of the terrain—it is not possible to move off the track. However, one group sought separate lunch spots:

We definitely made a conscious effort to eat lunches where we thought no one else would go. (K17)

The strategy of spatial separation was employed at huts, although it was limited by the nature of the communal spaces (which caused the issue in the first place). As these interviewees indicate, sandflies made outside areas unattractive:

Sometimes I try to go out of the hut, but not for a long time because of the sandflies. (K15)

Sometimes I put lots of the anti-sand fly stuff on me and go outside and just sit outside, maybe for a little while, before the buzzing around me got too much and then you go in. Or, if I got to the hut early enough, I would have a lie down and just a snooze, not a hard-out sleep, but just a snooze. People then sort of go 'Oh, somebody is sleeping there', and they leave you alone. That was my way of coping with it [lots of other people] the last couple of days. (K11)

Relatively frequently, people moved their mattresses out onto the deck or into the dining area to get away from snorers. This behaviour was so common that the Mintaro Hut ranger mentioned it in his talk—he asked people to remain inside, as keas destroyed mattresses taken outside.

6.2.7 Confronting the cause of conflict

This set of responses relates to individuals seeking behavioural change in the person causing the disturbance. This was virtually always reported in terms of sleeping disturbance, as these examples illustrate:

They [scouts] were just excited and talking a lot late in the night in the bunkroom and I eventually yelled up 'Shut up'—and they did, so no worries there really. (G18)

I got up and lifted his mattress and he still kept going [snoring]. (K18)

I got up, and because I was already awake, I mimed to him that he could take everything out [person packing up in the bunkroom early in the morning]. (G8)

I did say to them today, if you are going to get up at 6 [am], you know, you should put your pack in the kitchen. (G12)

6.2.8 Displacement

Given that this study is a one-off, single-site study, examples of displacement were not expected—that is, where individuals chose not to return to a specific place or not to return at a given time (or self-select not to go there in the first place) because of social issues, especially crowding. However, a few people mentioned friends who did not want to walk the Milford Track, believing they had perceptions such as 'It's all tourists, it's too easy, it's not this, or whatever' (G8). One interviewee commented that:

I am often disappointed that I think it does stop a lot of young Kiwis from doing Great Walks. Yeah I do, my peer group, my age group, will shy away

from doing a Great Walk because there is too many people, it is not what they want and that disappoints me; but personally, for me, it wouldn't stop me from coming. (K6)

6.2.9 Pre-, during- and post-conflict strategies

Pre-conflict 'preparation' response

Careful research by individuals in order to set appropriate expectations has not traditionally been considered a coping strategy, as they have yet to experience the social conflict/crowding. Nonetheless, this behaviour could be considered as coping strategies established prior to the visit (strategies with a temporal scale as their basis) in order to minimise adverse effects. Individuals were taking measures to ensure their expectations matched their experience. It was clear that many people expected certain conditions (such as numbers of people) based on information they obtained prior to the trip (especially from the DOC website and the Milford Track brochure).

One interviewee identified a coping strategy associated with mental preparation and setting expectations:

I would have to have in my head like 'remember there is going to be a whole bunch of people' so, you know, just remember that, so I don't get disappointed when I get to the hut and go 'Oh, far out'. (K6)

During-conflict 'immediate' response

'Immediate' strategies are those that are used 'on the spot' to deal with the issue at the time. An example of an immediate strategy came from a couple who were in the pulse of walkers off the boat on Day 1, moving along the Track closely together. The couple did not feel comfortable stopping and taking photos, since they felt this would hold up the people immediately behind them:

It is not the people, the problem is that—the feeling [that] if you want to stop and take a photo and you feel that people are coming from behind, you do not want to delay them. So, we were standing on a bridge and [name of partner] wanted to take a picture and I was like, 'No, no, we cannot stop the other people'. So, I think that was the feeling. (K1)

Another person reported that she stopped talking to people (avoided conversation) when she felt there were too many people around her. Other people reported that they had brought (and used) ear plugs (which are listed in the gear list in the Track brochure). Many other people commented that they would bring ear plugs next time for use in the bunkrooms (an example of a 'planned' response, which is discussed further in the following text).

Post-conflict 'planned' response

Many of the coping strategies discussed in the previous sub-sections are examples of 'planned' responses—those that are thought through and implemented following the realisation of a conflict situation.

6.3 FACTORS INFLUENCING EFFECTS OF SOCIAL CONFLICT AND COPING STRATEGIES

Inter-group interactions appear to mediate the perception of social impact and influence the type of coping strategy employed:

[Discussing group that interviewee initially thought was 'quite imposing']
But, I mean, it is quite funny because your first impressions always change of people anyway. They seemed quite loud and obnoxious the first night, but then, by the second night you get to know people a little bit more and, you know, things are a bit different. (G9)

As previously noted, initial concern was expressed by interviewees about the 32-person scout group. However, social bonding may have mediated the potential conflict situation: 'We've got to talking to some of the kids and so we've got to know them a bit' (G20).

The social bonding of the cohort also appears to influence the coping strategies employed: 'You are going to be in the same hut, you know, every night. So you really don't want to be sitting next to them at dinner, you know, after telling them off last night' (K3).

Discussing the adverse effect of aircraft noise, one parent (with the large scout group) made clear the importance of the nature of the experience being sought:

[Discussing aircraft] *In some ways it hasn't spoilt my trip, as my focus has been on the kids. But if I had been walking it as a wilderness-remote experience, I'd be highly peeved off. And that's the thing—it only takes one or two planes to destroy that.* (G19)

Size of facilities was raised with respect to crowding:

The huts are so big, so the facilities, there are a lot of them, so I do not think it is a problem for the cooking. (K1)

Hut design (separate bunkrooms) helps minimise sleep disturbance, as it cued behaviour, as explained by one person:

You have that separateness [from communal area] and the moment you go into the bunk room it's quiet and people know that if you go in there at that time of night, people are going to be asleep and people are much more quieter. They think 'Somebody is asleep there', and they're much more cautious about making any noise, so you don't usually get disturbed. (K11)

7. Conclusions and recommendations

This section of the report responds to Study Objective 4: To identify the opportunities available to managers to influence these factors and, thus, visitors' experiences. It outlines the study's primary conclusions (sections 7.1-7.6) and highlights areas for future research (section 7.7). Preliminary study findings were supplied to Track managers part-way through the study analysis (to coincide with the Milford Track rangers' end-of-season debrief). See Appendix 3.

This study was, by its innovative and qualitative nature, an exploratory approach to addressing visitors' experiences, crowding and coping dimensions in field research. For this reason, some points raised in this section are suggestive rather than conclusive. However, some clear themes and 'messages' are apparent from the study findings, many of which complement findings from other recent research on related topics.

7.1 THE ROLE OF THE MILFORD TRACK

The Milford Track appears to be operating as park managers intend it to be. The Track is important to New Zealanders as a place with which Kiwis identify, which offers an introductory walking experience suitable for all skill levels, and facilitates shared experiences between families and groups of friends. This matches, and perhaps surpasses, the intentions of DOC's 'Great Walks' concept. The findings of this study suggest that dismissal of the Track as a 'tourist track' (as mentioned by some study participants and commonly in anecdotes elsewhere), is misleading and fails to acknowledge the important role it plays for a wide variety of New Zealanders. This is demonstrated in later discussion of its social significance (see section 7.4).

7.2 THE INFLUENCE OF MANAGEMENT ACTIONS

Management attributes, particularly the regulations and booking system, have a strong influence upon the visitor experience on the Milford Track. In short, management actions make a significant difference both in the quality of the experience, the frequency, intensity and type of negative intrusions, and the resulting range of coping strategies available to walkers. The management regulations as a whole (uni-directional track, booking system, 1-night stays, no camping), plus the track standard, and hut standard and design, influence many aspects of the visitor experience, whether by design or by accident. This dominance of management setting attributes upon the visitor experience (Fig. 4) suggests that any changes to regulations or facilities will have broad consequences, some of which may be unintended.

The management regime has both direct impacts (such as regulating access and reducing congestion on the Track); and indirect impacts (such as influencing the structure, timing and location of inter-group encounters). In turn, these 'impacts' influence walkers' satisfaction with their visit, the achievement of various

dimensions of the experience, and a reduction in stress. The regime provides an opportunity for walkers to experience some valued social dimensions; in particular, the opportunity for families and friends to bond (see section 7.3).

There appears to be scope for enhancing the value of the experience walkers obtain, by addressing the following management areas:

- Providing more opportunities for environmental learning
- Providing more opportunities for historical interpretation
- Educating visitors about hut etiquette (which may reduce conflict at huts)
- Reinforcing the world heritage and national park status of the area

The Milford Track is sited within a World Heritage Area. Given the well-educated nature of New Zealand backcountry users (Booth & Peebles 1995), the ‘enforced’ time spent at huts, and the UNESCO ‘world heritage’ mandate to present the outstanding universal values leading to inscription of the site, a lot could be done to enhance walkers’ experiences and increase their understanding of the environment and ecological processes occurring in the vicinity of the Milford Track. On the other hand, not much needs to be done to address their perceptions of crowding and congestion.

An aspect of Track management which received particularly favourable reports from visitors was the track information on the DOC website. The influence of pre-trip information upon visitors’ experiences (such as data on the number of walkers), illustrates the power of information as a management tool. It appears that appropriate promotion of the Track has contributed to the formation of reasonably accurate visitor expectations, which has resulted in fewer situations in which visitors feel surprised by social conditions. While some visitors expressed some ‘niggles’ about the Track brochure, their comments showed that the information was carefully read and followed.

Since the boat trip to the start (and from the end) of the Track is considered by at least some visitors to be part of the Milford Track experience, managers have the opportunity to influence all walkers before they begin their walk (as they all must catch a boat). This aspect also illustrates the importance of concessionaires’ behaviour. One group described an incident related to the skipper’s behaviour on board the Lake Te Anau boat that upset them. Equally, the positive incidents reported between staff, guides and visitors at various other stages of the Track experience serve as an example of the sort of constructive relationships that may be developed by making use of the ‘boat opportunity’.

7.3 THE FUNDAMENTAL IMPORTANCE OF THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT

Various facets of the biophysical environment were highlighted as important by walkers—particularly the landscape (for scenery appreciation) and the weather. The reputation of the biophysical environment is primarily what people said attracted them to the Milford Track—in addition to it being considered something a Kiwi ‘should do’. Manipulating that environment through more track development may be viewed negatively by walkers, although this is speculative. Things that intrude into the naturalness of the environment (artificial intrusions such as buildings) are likely to affect the visitor’s experience in a negative way, although walkers’ apparent adaptability (evident from interviews and discussed

in section 7.6) suggests that caution is required when basing management actions on visitor expressions of tolerance and desire. Management actions that are designed to enhance the visitor's appreciation of the natural environment (e.g. interpretation) may lead to positive or beneficial effects.

The importance of scenery and nature to walkers on the Milford Track is consistent with the findings from studies at other places, but is also different. The iconic status of the Milford Track appears to create unrealistic expectations about the grandeur of the place for some people. However, as is apparent from the other findings of this study, many other dimensions of the experience emerge as memorable aspects.

7.4 SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MILFORD TRACK EXPERIENCE

The Milford Track walk is not just about interacting with nature—the social benefits of the tramp are also very significant. As a result, management changes (such as changes to walker numbers or concessionary activities) are likely to have far-reaching implications.

Walkers indicated that the opportunity for social interaction with family and friends within the visit group, as well as within the trip cohort, was an important aspect of the Milford Track experience. The **quality** of this interaction was mentioned by walkers. The Milford Track provides an important setting for people to form and develop social relationships. For many walkers, the focus for this was their visit group (family and friends); while some international visitors noted that walking the Track provided them with an opportunity to interact with New Zealanders.

The international iconic status of the Track was apparent. It is clearly important for New Zealand's tourism industry to maintain this good reputation. In order to do so, the qualities which attract people (the scenery, etc.) must be retained.

The notion that the Milford Track was part of the New Zealand identity (for Kiwis) suggests that the Track is as much for New Zealanders as international visitors—despite substantially fewer New Zealanders walking the Track than international visitors. The Track holds a special place within the 'hearts and minds' of the nation.

The common use of the Milford Track as an introductory tramping experience suggests that this track fulfils all of the aims of the 'Great Walk' concept, and reinforces the point that the Track provides more than just an opportunity for nature appreciation. Its social function is also important. The introductory role played by the Track provides an opportunity for DOC to 'teach' tramping—by encouraging New Zealanders who are on their first tramp to continue to visit the backcountry and enjoy other tracks.

Interactions with others (inter-group) were notable for two reasons: as the factor that appeared to develop most during the course of the walk, and the factor that was raised most commonly as a 'negative' aspect of the experience. The social bonding that develops within each daily cohort appears to mediate social conflict. This result is almost paradoxical—by setting a relatively high level of use, and keeping the cohort together for the whole tramp, managers

may (probably unintentionally) reduce conflict. However, the low expectation of 'solitude' and 'escape' as motivation for walking the Milford Track is likely to be instrumental in this finding. Nonetheless, the effect of the high level of management intervention on reducing conflict suggests this may be a useful management approach to apply elsewhere.

Because the relationship between use level (or encounters) and the visitor experience, even in the highly regulated Milford Track system, is neither clear nor simple, actions that change use levels, itineraries, timing, etc. will lead to consequences that are hard to predict. Any such changes should be implemented incrementally, and be accompanied by monitoring of conditions and walkers' responses.

7.5 DIMENSIONS OF THE MILFORD TRACK EXPERIENCE

The complexity of visitors' motives for their visits, the dimensions of their experiences and the influence of the setting attributes upon these all illustrate the complex nature of managing the visitor experience. This complexity reinforces the need to **understand** the visitor experience and highlights that any management intervention will have multifarious repercussions that cannot be easily predicted.

Visitors' motivations for walking the Milford Track were not the same as the dimensions of their actual experience. In particular, the degree to which inter-group (cohort) interactions featured within the Milford Track experience was much greater than indicated by visitors' motives and reasons for walking the Track. These inter-group interactions generally enhanced the walkers' experiences and did not detract from them. This contradicts the common assumption in other studies that raising encounter levels reduces experiential quality.

Given the breadth of walkers' motivations (from a 'must do' track, to seeking quality time with family), it is likely that managers' objectives for the Milford Track are more narrowly focussed than those of the walkers. This presents DOC with social investment 'brownie points' because the public ascribes a wider set of values to public conservation land than appears to be commonly recognised by DOC managers. However, it also suggests that DOC managers should appreciate what motives people to walk the Track, and should aim to facilitate their motives or goals. The lesson here is that managers must stay attuned to and closely monitor visitor experiences, and not make uninformed decisions about what they may or may not like.

The significance of each walker's prior experience, whether associated with tramping or other activities (such as communal living in backpacker hostels), in terms of its influence upon their Milford Track experience, suggests that managers may learn much from informally asking visitors (to the Milford Track and elsewhere) about their prior experience. This would provide an understanding of the floating baselines (Schreyer et al. 1976) that may be operative amongst visitors.

The high proportion of first-time visitors on the Milford Track and the obvious influence of the floating baseline have implications for managers and researchers. In particular, the use of single item measures to assess visitor satisfaction, and the assignation of numerals to crowding perception levels, may be of limited

utility in such settings. Furthermore, for the Milford Track users, the context for the desired experience was key. Many respondents revealed particular reasons for visiting Milford that were not representative of their usual style of outdoor activity. In this sense, conditions that would probably be undesirable elsewhere appeared to be accepted and even viewed positively on the Milford Track.

7.6 ADAPTABLE VISITORS: COPING WITH ADVERSE CONDITIONS

Walkers on the Milford Track demonstrated a capacity to tolerate the negative aspects of their experience. This was most evident with respect to sleeping disturbance in the bunkrooms. In this respect, Hall & Cole's (2007) notion of the 'adaptable human' is strongly supported by this study.

While many issues were raised, the actual degree of social conflict reported was low. Those things affecting visitors adversely primarily related to behaviour around huts—perhaps one of the more easily influenced areas of behaviour, given the presence of rangers at each hut. It appears that negative experiences resulted from visitors' behaviour rather than the number of visitors *per se*. This finding reflects the findings from extensive research literature on crowding and conflict.

The validity of reliance upon simple crowding and satisfaction scores is questionable—many visitors in this study reported high crowding scores, but stated that other people were not a problem to them, and gave a high overall rating score. This begs the question—what does a high crowding score really mean?

The setting is a dominant influence upon visitor experience. What the setting is managed for, and what people expect to get from their experience in that setting, are the key variables that enhance our understanding of the visitor experience.

Simply put, crowding is not the generic problem it has been portrayed in the visitor experience literature. A more sophisticated understanding of visitor experiences, and the role of management in creating opportunities for certain dimensions of these, seems a key requirement of 'smart' visitor management.

7.7 CAN THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY BE GENERALISED TO OTHER TRACKS AND SITUATIONS?

The factors discussed in this report, such as the Milford Track's international reputation and the high proportion of first-time trampers that use it, represent a particular experiential context for the track. This highly specific context influences the extent to which results from this study can be generalised to other tracks (which will have their own particular experiential contexts). In particular, this study has found that the managerial setting has a strong influence upon the visitor experience. The Milford Track has the highest level of management intervention of any New Zealand backcountry track. This highlights the need for care in making comparisons between visitors' experiences of the Milford Track and other tracks, or drawing conclusions about other tracks based on the outcomes of this study.

However, it does appear that the management actions implemented to create the highly regulated multi-day walking opportunity are proving successful on the Milford Track. If this type of regulated opportunity is considered a valid part of the range of recreation opportunities that should be provided by public land management agencies such as DOC, then such management interventions may be considered at other locations. They play a key part in the outcomes achieved on the Milford Track and highlight the role of management actions in creating the setting for desired visitor experiences. The role of managers is recognised in the management-driven ‘memorable experiences’ focus of Parks Canada (e.g. Jager et al. 2006) and indicates that park managers may need to adopt a more proactive and directive management approach if visitor experience outcomes are to be the management focus.

7.8 RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS

7.8.1 Reflections on the method employed

This study was designed to be innovative in terms of using qualitative methods in a manner not commonly employed to address experience and coping dimensions. The ‘success’ of the method is discussed in this section, including the methodological challenges faced by researchers who might wish to use it.

First, the approach was successful. The qualitative approach identified many facets of the visitor experience and visitor coping strategies, beyond simple crowding concerns, and suggested possible linkages between, and hierarchies of, influencing factors. Other research questions flow on from these findings (section 7.8.2).

Second, the style of questioning was fruitful. The interview schedule deliberately used several different types of question to enquire into the topics of interest. This approach deliberately risked being repetitive, but justified this risk by uncovering new information late in the interviews. This information would have been missed without persistence in asking the same question in different ways. It is clear that this approach has potential for informing researchers and managers, but it needs to be tested in other situations to determine its capability.

Third, the use of a simple rating and query tool (Appendix 1, question 2b), with its very specific, probing questions, was very effective, and prompted deeper consideration by visitors of their experiences. The tool is promising as a means to elicit in-depth information from interviewees and could be applied usefully to a variety of investigatory and monitoring contexts.

Fourth, the logistics of running two interviews concurrently within a backcountry hut setting was very challenging. After 2 days of trying various locations, the only places that worked were the bunkrooms within the rangers’ quarters. Using these required the full cooperation of the resident ranger (which was forthcoming and gratefully received). Other small difficulties were also encountered, such as the loudness of rain on the roof (the renowned Milford rainfall), which overpowered the microphones used for the audio recordings. Giving a chocolate fish to interviewees at the end of each interview proved very popular and is recommended! (A chocolate fish is an iconic New Zealand confectionary—this was explained to international visitors.)

7.8.2 Research prospects

While this study has identified the main factors contributing to the visitor experience, it was not designed to seek empirical relationships between factors, nor to identify cause-effect relationships. A useful follow-on project would focus upon linkages between factors (following Lachapelle 2005). Other areas worthy of future research effort are noted below.

Factor relationships

Close examination of relationships between the factors influencing visitor experiences was beyond the scope of this study, but warrants further research. In particular, findings from this study suggest that primary factors may influence secondary factors. Information on linkages between factors would be helpful for public land managers, as it would facilitate direct manipulation of known factors in order to influence others. This sort of knowledge could be used to try and identify experience ‘packages’. These would be characteristic clusters of particular experiences—related to specific visitor motivations, expectations and outcome achievements that may occur together. By exploring the social dimensions of the Milford Track experience, for example, managers may gain insight into how people cope with negative aspects of their experience.

Spatial displacement

Spatial displacement is a visitor coping strategy whereby the visitor chooses to recreate elsewhere. Examination of this visitor coping strategy requires an off-site approach because people who are displaced will not be found on site. Future research about coping strategies could usefully examine displaced visitors, in order to gain understanding of their coping strategies. The current study (of users of the Milford Track) was limited to people who were prepared to accept or adapt to conditions they knew they would encounter (high management presence; busy social setting). Because these conditions are especially well publicised (e.g. DOC website, guide books and word-of-mouth), it is likely that self-selection will be efficient. The key management implication here is the need for accurate pre-trip information provision. This study suggests that information provision for the Milford Track is working well.

8. Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Visitor Experience Investigation (3966)

Interview schedule coversheet

Completed by interviewer

Interviewer / Date / Interview length	
Home location: Country / NZ region	
First time on Milford Track?	Yes No
Number in group	
Gender	Male Female
Age	15–19 20–29 30–39 40–49 50–59 60–69 70+
Notes (summary of key points, emerging ideas, future interview questions)	

Continued on next page

1. Motivations and expectations

Theme: why did they come here and what did they expect?

<p>1a. Motivations for walking the Track</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why did you decide to walk the Milford Track? <i>Prompt for <u>underlying</u> reasons</i>
<p>1b. Expectations before the trip</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Before you started the Track, what did you expect to experience on the walk? <i>Prompt for <u>good things</u> and <u>things didn't expect to like</u></i> <p><u>Context prompts...</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>walking during day</i> ○ <i>in huts at night</i> ○ <i>meeting other people</i> ○ <i>other factors/issues?</i> <p style="text-align: right;">(note negative topics on paper)</p>
<p>1c. Salient expectation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overall, from all the things you were expecting, what were you looking forward to most on this trip?
<p>1d. Expectations v. experiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has anything been <u>different</u> from what you expected? • Was anything <u>better</u> than you expected? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What was that?</i> ○ <i>Why was it better?</i> • Was anything <u>worse</u> than you expected? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>What was that?</i> ○ <i>Why was it worse?</i> <p style="text-align: right;">(note negative topics on paper)</p>

Continued on next page

2. Experience rating and contributing factors

Theme: their trip evaluation and factors that might compromise it

<p>2a. Overall experience rating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How would you rate your Milford Track experience? <p style="text-align: center;"><u>SHOW CARD</u></p>
<p>2b. Key contributing factors?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If it wasn't a 10, what would have made it a 10? • If it was a 10, could anything have been better? <p>Context prompts...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>walking during day</i> ○ <i>in huts at night</i> ○ <i>meeting other people</i> ○ <i>other factors/issues?</i> <p>In summary—</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What have been the most positive things? • What have been the most negative things? <p style="text-align: right;">(note negative topics on paper)</p>
<p>Park managers are interested to know about things that are not working so well. So we want to quickly ask a bit more about any negative experiences you've had, things that might have bothered you, or just things that could have been better. We've noted down a couple of comments you've made so far...</p>	

Continued on next page

3. Coping strategies

Theme: what was the problem, how important was it and how did they deal with it?

<p>You mentioned that you experienced some negative things—refer to notes...</p> <p>Thinking about <negative thing>... [ask for each <negative thing>]</p>	
3a. Problem details	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What was the problem? [if unclear] • Where and when did that occur?
If problem is CROWDING:	<p>Prompt: numbers, behaviour?</p> <p><u>SHOW CARD</u></p> <p>Context prompts...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ walking during day ○ in huts at night ○ meeting other people ○ other issues?
3b. Assessment and importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you feel about that? How did it affect you? • How big a deal was it to you?
3c. Coping strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you deal with it?
3d. Coping strategy outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did that work for you? • Why / why not? • Is there some other way you would have preferred to deal with that <negative thing>? • Is there anything the park managers could do?
3e. Future cognitive/behaviour change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would that stop you coming back there? • If you were coming back, would you do anything differently because of our experience with <negative thing>?
<p>If CROWDING not mentioned:</p> <p>Prompt: did you have any problems with other people on the Track?</p> <p>Ask questions above</p>	

Continued on next page

4. Future outcomes

Theme: longer-term outcomes

4a. Recommendations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would you recommend the Milford Track to other people? • What would you tell them to expect?
4b. Key memories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When you get home, what would you most like to tell your friends about your Milford Track experience?

On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is *very disappointing* and 10 is *couldn't have been better*, how would you rate your experience on this trip?

Very disappointing											Couldn't have been better
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10		

Do you feel the Track is crowded?

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

Appendix 2

INTERVIEWEE PROFILE QUESTIONNAIRE

A few questions for you...

1. Where are you from?

- New Zealand → Please tick one box from this list: Southland
 Australia Otago
 United Kingdom Canterbury
 USA Other South Island
 Canada North Island
 Germany
 Other: _____

2. Who are you walking the Track with?

- I am by myself With a family group
 With my partner / wife / husband With friends and family
 With a friend / group of friends Other: _____

3. How many people are in your group (including yourself)?

- 1 (I am by myself) 6–10
 2 10 +
 3–5

4. Is this your first time walking the Milford Track?

- Yes No

5a. Is this your first overnight tramping/hiking trip ever?

- Yes No

5b. IF NO: On average, how many times do you go tramping/hiking overnight in a year?

- Less than once a year 6–9 times
 1–2 times 10+ times
 3–5 times

6. What is your level of tramping/hiking experience?

- Beginner Intermediate Advanced

Thank you very much

Appendix 3

PRELIMINARY STUDY FINDINGS FOR MILFORD TRACK MANAGERS

Visitor experience investigation: preliminary notes for Te Anau Area Office, Southland Conservancy, Department of Conservation

From Kay Booth and Gordon Cessford (24 April 2008)

This is a preliminary summary of the interview comments from research undertaken in late March, 2008 at Dumpling Hut, Milford Track. We interviewed 56 visitors over 7 days (30 New Zealanders and 26 international visitors). Each interview took approximately 25 minutes, and we did drill down where issues (positive and negative) were apparent. Detailed comments from visitors more relevant to Track management will follow, once analysis is complete.

Overall, it's good stuff for DOC, and a real endorsement of our 'Great Walk' management on this track, and the staff we have out there doing it. We summarise the interview comments below under several headings.

Rangers (hut wardens)

- Very positive comments, especially where the ranger went out of his way to help the visitor have a good experience (e.g. showing them blue ducks, taking the nature walk, roping-off a 'non-scout' bunk room).
- Interviewees were impressed that rangers do track work during the day, as well as looking after huts and visitors generally, and people complimented the good job, especially in terms of track standards and hut facilities.
- People like the evening talks, though some had difficulty understanding everything if talks were spoken too fast or in a strong kiwi accent.
- Comments about the rangers being passionate about their work, their friendliness, knowledge (and sharing it), helpfulness, advice (e.g. people arriving at Mintaro Hut appreciated the ranger's advice to go up onto Mackinnon Pass that afternoon if the following day's weather forecast was bad), sometimes doing more than they expected (e.g. reserving bunks for non-scout group people), suggesting early-risers put gear in kitchen areas the night before to minimise disturbance to others.
- Many referred to the role of rangers where issues of potentially inappropriate behaviour or annoyances were concerned—they seemed to want rangers to reinforce appropriate hut behaviours (e.g. w.r.t. early risers and snorers).

Track and hut standard

- The high standard of the Track was frequently mentioned and the majority of people saw this as a good thing; most said it was better than they expected.
- The descent from Mackinnon Pass was noted as the most challenging/difficult section of the Track.

- Some people noted that the high track standard allowed them to enjoy themselves more—they could look at the scenery (since they didn't need to look at their feet all the time).
- Some people commented that, personally, they liked a more challenging tramp, but that they did not expect to be challenged in this way on the Milford Track (so that was okay).
- The track standard makes the Milford Track suitable for all people (which is good).
- Most people thought the huts were better than they had expected them to be; some had really not much idea about what they expected—many had done only minimal 'homework' pre-trip (usually New Zealanders), while others had done a lot (usually the international visitors).
- Many people made positive comments about the flush toilets and the cleanliness of the huts.
- Some negative comments were received about the chemical toilets located between huts in the Clinton valley.
- Hut design influenced reported night disturbance. Mintaro was the worst, because everything is in one building. Dumpling was considered good, its smaller rooms minimised the impact of disturbances.
- Hut ambience was very important to people, and it seemed that the hut designs mostly facilitate this well.
- Hut etiquette—some users' lack of understanding of etiquette, and appropriate behaviour was an issue for a few people.

Suggestions (some of which may be bad ideas!):

- Showers—a few mentioned it, usually in jest ...
- A separate bunkroom for snorers or early risers (perhaps jokingly labelled in some way).
- Ranger to suggest snorers sleep in kitchen/dining area, and early risers to leave gear there so they can pack and go without disturbing others with endless plastic bag rustling. This 'suggesting by rangers' was noted as happening on some occasions, but that it wasn't consistently carried out or reinforced.
- An information sheet on hut etiquette should be provided, and reinforced by ranger talks.
- Add ear plugs to list of things to bring.
- Note the snoring theme! (we're sure its 'old hat' to you).

Motivations—why come to the Milford Track?

- Because it's famous—'greatest walk in the world' etc. It's the Milford—i.e. because of its reputation—often based on recommendation from family members or friends.
- Scenery and scale.
- Social aspects were prominent—such as spending time with group (family, friends), introducing others to tramping or the outdoors generally (especially older parents or kids) and, for some people, meeting new like-minded people.

- National identity was notable from some Kiwis—e.g. comments like ‘all Kiwis should walk the Milford Track’.
- Personal challenge was mentioned, especially for first-time trampers unsure of their capabilities.
- Sometimes because the management set-up and level of difficulty was family-friendly (for older and younger family members).

The good and bad things

- Weather and sandflies and bumble bees—these were the negative things most commonly reported (surprise surprise).
- Otherwise, very few negative comments—people were very happy with their experience.
- Disturbance in the night was mentioned by quite a few folk (especially snoring), although many had some expectation of this and had brought ear-plugs.
- Disturbance in the mornings was noted by some as well, usually involving plastic bag rustling and inconsiderate early-morning packing-up in the sleeping areas.
- Great scenery—the ‘wow’ experience was frequently mentioned. Views from Mackinnon Pass and of Sutherland Falls were also frequently mentioned.
- The natural environment received many positive comments—flora (especially alpine flowers, forest type, alpine vegetation, the ‘bushline’ effect), wildlife, water quality (aesthetic, happy to drink from streams, fishing). Being in nature.
- Interactions with wildlife were often noted—weka mostly, and also bellbirds, tomtits, kea, and blue ducks (when shown by a ranger). The comments seemed to emphasise higher wildlife encounter levels in the upper Arthur Valley to Dumpling Hut. Links with stoat control were noted and traps were spotted, often prompted by the information given at Clinton Hut.
- The historic environment and resources were seldom mentioned—the historic aspects of the Track and wider area weren’t getting through to people, although we observed people reacting positively to the ‘old-timer’ stories that Ross (Dumpling Hut ranger) gave.
- Social—many people liked being with same group of 40 on consecutive nights, as they got to know other trampers better. This aspect played some part in reducing social impact perceptions as the trip progressed (people ‘had a word’ with some folks, people generally sorted things out). Nobody had strong negative feelings toward others, despite some large groups (e.g. boy scouts, Taiwanese hikers) and occasional behavioural issues (e.g. use of iPod speakers in bunk rooms, early-rising, snoring). Folks also tended to help each other out, and it was suggested this was related to the better social connections established.
- Several people have commented that the Track is ideal for family groups, and seems to be filling a niche area in that respect.
- This links to the high standard of the track—it is suitable for older people and younger people, across the generations. Also, the security of knowing that beds were booked makes it easier for family groups of mixed capabilities and patience.

- Some people found the first day too short, and were at a loose end at Clinton Hut. This was compounded on one day when the gas ran out before the changeover ranger arrived, and when a ranger was delayed and the nature walk didn't happen (they love that). Many people commented that if they had known how much time they would have at this hut they would have bought some books etc. with them, while others wondered about some more 'walks' around that location. Given the captive audience and the time people have available, Clinton Hut might provide a good 'interpretation-focus' opportunity for DOC.
- There were hardly any negative references to the guided walkers or the guided walk operations. Most walkers were quite understanding of the different opportunity the guided walk represented, and some said they would have done it if they could have afforded it, while others said that while they thought that initially, now they would go for the independent walk, because they knew they could manage it.
- Some people commented on the things that were done for walkers by the guided company—the tea spot at Quintin Shelter was mentioned. Kay and Gordon noted the very good relations between the DOC rangers and the guided walk guides—we believe that general 'good vibe' actually adds value to the walkers' experiences (both guided and non-guided).
- Oh, and of course, Ross's scones! (that is a comment from Kay and Gordon!)

Overall experience rating

- Very high (8-10 on a 10-point scale where 10 is 'couldn't be better').
- Those who didn't rate it as a 10, still said they were not disappointed, but had a variety of reasons for their lower score, most of which were beyond DOC control (e.g. weather, sandflies, fitness).
- Few people reported feeling crowded on the track or in the huts, because of the one-way management, varied timing of groups, and sufficient cooking and social space in most huts.
- Many people noted that the Track was less crowded than they had expected, and also understood the distinction between the 'crowding context' of the track experience during the day and in the huts at night—different scores and reasoning were given.
- When asked, people said they would not want any more people on the Track, although most noted that they didn't see guided walkers most of the time.
- There were no negative comments about the management regime (1-way system, booking system, etc.), this was generally seen as a key factor that facilitated the Track experience, in a way that many did not expect.

Recommend to others?

Everybody would recommend the Track to other people, with different advice themes depending on who they were talking to. Experienced trampers would get told different things than novices, or family-oriented groups.

- What would they tell others?—scenery wow factor, potentially bad weather, 'every Kiwi should do it' (national identity), wildlife, social experience, physical challenge (be fit).

- Many said they would tell people to make sure they grab any chance to see Mackinnon Pass. If they arrive at Mintaro Hut and the weather is clear, then get up there.
- Sutherland falls was emphasised as a must-see.

Preliminary notes

Kay Booth and Gordon Cessford

2 May 2008

What makes a good trip experience for walkers on the Milford Track?

This study grew from Department of Conservation managers' concerns about the social impact of outdoor recreation visitors upon the quality of other visitors' experiences. A case study of independent walkers on the Milford Track was used to examine this topic. Walkers demonstrated a very high degree of coping behaviour, employing a variety of strategies. Most people utilised emotional/cognitive strategies, with a very small number employing direct (behavioural) strategies. Implications for park management and recommendations for further research are presented.

Booth, K.L.; Cessford, G.R.; McCool, S.F.; Espiner, S.R. 2011: Exploring visitor experiences, crowding perceptions and coping strategies on the Milford Track, *New Zealand Science for Conservation 313*. Department of Conservation, Wellington. 91 p.