

## **Tourism NZ Guest Editorial**

**By Geoff Ensor, Advocacy Manager, Tourism Industry Association NZ**

Mining on conservation land, freedom camping and managing capacity were all up for debate at the recent West Coast Tourism Forum, held as part of the Westland *Tai Poutini* National Park 50<sup>th</sup> celebration weekend.

Initiated by TIA member Mark Quickfall, Executive Director of Totally Tourism, the forum was an opportunity to consider how to foster quality, safe commercial recreation in the park that was linked to great conservation outcomes. It included a two-hour panel discussion with six panellists – Conservation Minister Kate Wilkinson, Conservation Director-General Al Morrison, West Coast Tai Poutini Conservancy Conservator Mike Slater, TIA Chief Executive Tim Cossar, Tourism West Coast General Manager Matt Ewen and Mark Quickfall.

Opinions from the 70 plus participants diverged widely, but positively, everyone came from the same shared value of *kaitiakitanga* - guardianship, care and protection of the park for current and future generations.

It was acknowledged that tens of thousands of visitors have had quite extraordinary and often life-changing experiences within the park, many provided by commercial operators, and that the underpinning value of those experiences, now and into the future, must always be grounded in the value of *kaitiakitanga*. How we might achieve that was open to debate.

Not surprisingly, the removal of land from Schedule 4 to open it up for the possibility of mining was one of the hot issues with strong views from both sides of the fence. The panelists acknowledged this was an emotive issue and no one underplayed the seriousness of the Government's proposals. Ultimately, it was agreed that it was public land, and the process would allow the public to decide what happens.

It was noted that tolerance for freedom campers (New Zealanders and international) who camp in the wrong places and damage the environment, was at an all-time low. The forum welcomed national efforts to influence freedom camping actions that meet with community expectations. The work of the Freedom Camping Forum was discussed, including the website [www.camping.org.nz](http://www.camping.org.nz).

Questions were asked around capacity and how the intrinsic values of the park can be preserved with growing visitor numbers. It was agreed this was something that needs to be considered constantly, and it involves being clear about determining what values should not be corrupted and managing those in a way that preserves the park's integrity.

The point was made that the peak visitor season only lasts about six weeks, and that as markets change, the desire to visit the park may change, i.e. it's not a given that increasing visitor arrivals will result in a corresponding increase in park visitors. Also, there are more management tools, such as number limits on guided walks and helicopter landings in sensitive areas, to one per day already available which could be applied, and as long as they are applied sensibly, they have the support of commercial recreation operators.

It was stressed that the balance between those who want a more remote, independent experience in the park versus commercial recreation be maintained so that both can extract the most value from the experience. A flag was raised that tension could grow if the balance became skewed.

Positively, from DOC to tour operators, what commercial recreation success would look like was well aligned. Westland Tai Poutini National Park is a revered place, a national park where people can be challenged and amazed, and have a great experience.