

## Information search and booking behaviour of visitors to Lake Waikaremoana: Distribution in rural New Zealand

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### Abstract

Distribution channels in tourism are the link between tourists and the suppliers of tourism services. They include the ways in which suppliers provide, and tourists access, information. They also include facilities used for making bookings and payments for tourism services. This work extends research on the use of distribution channels in New Zealand through considering the relationship between visitor characteristics and pre-visit planning for trips to Lake Waikaremoana, an isolated rural area.

Lake Waikaremoana is found in Te Urewera National Park in the North Island of New Zealand. The park is one of New Zealand's biggest national parks and is home to a 'Great Walk'. Nature-based tourism is predominant and, with the exception of facilities provided by the Department of Conservation, tourism supply in the area is characterised by very small-scale commercial operations.

The remoteness and lack of development in the area are seen as prohibitive by many tour operators and most visitors are independent travellers designing and organising their own itineraries. Transport into the area is predominantly by private vehicle and around 75% of visitors to the area are domestic tourists.

In January and February of 2006 an administered survey of 191 visitors to Lake Waikaremoana was carried out. Within this sample trip planning and booking behaviour was found to vary by visitor characteristics.

Alongside the usual classifications of age and origin, respondents were classified according to their history of visiting the area and their expectations of whether they would visit again. *New Visitors* were people visiting Lake Waikaremoana as a 'one-off' experience or a very rare visit. *Repeat Visitors* were people who had been to the area before and considered it likely that they would visit again. *Habitual Visitors* were those visitors who had visited on numerous previous occasions (median number of visits was 20) and definitely intended to return.

Findings suggest that *New Visitors* and *Habitual Visitors* have quite different pre-visit planning behaviours, with *Repeat Visitors* occupying a mid-point. *New Visitors* were likely to include Lake Waikaremoana as a part of a longer trip, they were most likely to

have sought out information about the area before their arrival and they were more likely to have booked accommodation for their whole stay in the area than were other groups of visitors. *New Visitors* were also least likely to know where they would be spending the night after leaving the Lake Waikaremoana area – suggesting that (despite their propensity to book accommodation in advance) there remains some flexibility in their itineraries.

Domestic visitors were more likely to have booked their accommodation than were international visitors. Those domestic visitors who did book accommodation did so further in advance than did the international visitors who booked accommodation. Older visitors were slightly more likely to book accommodation in advance than were younger ones.

Guide books were the most popular source of information used by international visitors. Recommendations from friends or family, brochures and the internet were all popular amongst domestic visitors.