



Submission to

Department of Conservation

on the

**Tongariro Alpine Crossing Visitor Management
Consultation**

Date: 10 June 2022

Tourism Industry Aotearoa (TIA) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Department of Conservation's Visitor Management Consultation on the Tongariro Alpine Crossing.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. TIA supports the introduction of a booking system to manage visitor volumes on the Tongariro Alpine Crossing. The Crossing, attracting about 140,000 walkers annually, is one of New Zealand's iconic tourism experiences. An effective system for managing walker numbers is welcomed by all stakeholders.
2. We are concerned that a planned launch for the 2022/23 summer season will be insufficient time to develop a high-quality, future-proofed system and propose that implementation is delayed until May 2023. This provides the necessary time for trialling of systems to occur and the proposed changes to be well-communicated to domestic and international visitors.
3. There are some concerns about the proposed limit of 800 pax/day and the impact on businesses and regional visitation. We provide areas for consideration in Section B of our submission that may enable a higher cap while still meeting the needs of the various stakeholders. We encourage officials to engage with the wider tourism sector to draw on the experiences of large commercial tourism attractions who manage large daily numbers of visitors.
4. TIA supports a booking system that ensures concessionaires and commercial guiding operators are considered as strategic partners alongside DOC (Department of Conservation) and tangata whenua in the management of TAC. We propose an inclusion in the booking system that allocates a percentage of the total daily visitor numbers to concessionaires.
5. There is some concern the booking system may have an unanticipated dampening impact on the regional economy. We propose that modelling and community consultation is undertaken to develop a good understanding of the possible impacts on the local economy.
6. We encourage DOC to implement a monitoring group to regularly review the impacts of the booking system and amend accordingly.

INTRODUCTION

7. TIA is the peak body for the tourism industry in New Zealand. With approximately 1200 members, TIA represents a range of tourism-related activities including accommodation, hospitality, adventure and other activities, attractions and retail, airports and airlines, transport, as well as related tourism services.
8. The primary role of TIA is to be the voice of the tourism industry. This includes working for members on advocacy, policy, communication, events, membership, and business

capability. The team is based in Wellington and is led by Chief Executive, Rebecca Ingram.

9. Any enquiries relating to this paper should in the first instance be referred to Lori Keller, TIA Industry Advocate by email at lori.keller@tia.org.nz or by phone on 0210 868 5356.

STAKEHOLDER CONSULTATION

10. In preparing this submission, TIA has engaged with its members in the Ruapehu region, including members that operate with DOC concessions.

COMMENT

11. Our feedback on the proposed booking system covers five areas:

- A. Timing of implementation
- B. Projected visitor numbers
- C. Concessionaires and enhanced outcomes
- D. Wider impact upon the community
- E. Monitoring and review

12. We would like to acknowledge the efforts of officials to provide strong stakeholder engagement during the consultation hui and for subsequent engagement opportunities.

A. Timing of implementation

When would you like to see the trial booking system take place? What challenges or issues do you see with the trial booking system?

13. Each year about 140,000 people walk the 19-kilometre Tongariro Alpine Crossing (TAC). The new booking system should aim to meet the needs of visitors and concessionaires, enhance the desire of tangata whenua to convey important cultural and environmental messages, and ensure enhanced safety outcomes. Any system that does not meet or exceed these expectations at launch may negatively impact upon the visitor experience, the reputation of the Department, as well as Brand New Zealand. This is an opportunity to create a world-leading booking management system.

14. Given that the TAC is one of New Zealand's iconic tourism experiences, and the proposed booking model is potentially a complex new system for managing walks of high use and significance, we strongly recommend the implementation date should be delayed from prior to this summer to May 2023. This eliminates any likely disruption to visitor bookings already in place for this summer and provides operators and the region the much-needed confidence they need to progress their economic recovery over the coming months.

15. Additionally, it will ensure adequate time for information and messaging to reach the New Zealand public, offshore agencies, and potential visitors about the implementation of a booking system.
16. It will be important that this 2023 date is signalled as early as possible in 2022. Concessionaires are already taking bookings for the 2023/24 season and will need to know the impacts of the bookings system on these forward bookings to reduce disruptions to itineraries.
17. TIA would support a series of targeted system trials for the public and concessionaires prior to full implementation in 2023 in order to reduce any problems that may occur when the full system goes live.
18. The final MBIE (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment) report on the Review of Natural Hazards and Adventure Activities is still to be released. The recommendations from this report will likely have implications for the proposed booking system such as enhanced safety messaging and visitor management recommendations. We acknowledge that DOC is already well across this safety work, and we would recommend delaying implementation of the booking system until the final report is released (which we understand to be this year) and its implications understood.

B. Projected visitor numbers

19. The pandemic has significantly impacted the tourism and hospitality sectors over the past two years. Following the reopening of the air border earlier this year forward bookings are looking encouraging, and our members are significantly more optimistic. Allowing tourism operators to trade for the upcoming summer season without navigating a new untested booking system would be highly regarded by the industry.
20. Visitor numbers to New Zealand will remain very manageable over the coming year. International air capacity is expected to grow to about 2/3 of the pre-Covid capacity this summer. China, our second biggest international market, is currently closed to international outbound travel and no date yet announced when that might re-open. Government, in the Budget 2022 forecasts, expect international visitor numbers to gradually recover to 2/3rds of pre-pandemic levels by 2024.
21. The gradual nature of the recovery is due to a variety of reasons including aircraft capacity, closed markets such as China, re-establishment of international flight routes, and hesitancy as confidence to travel internationally is rebuilt. For these reasons and those noted earlier TIA does not see the need for the booking system to proceed this summer. It seems unlikely that daily limits of 800 pax/day as proposed in the consultation would be regularly exceeded for the 2022/23 season.
22. The TAC attracts about 140,000 walkers annually. Considering a walking season of about 200 days over October – April, allowing for bad weather days, the daily average would be approximately 700 pax/day. However, we understand numbers can peak

closer to 1500 on some high-use days. While commercial operators can use levers such as dynamic pricing to manage high demand such options are not available to DOC for the TAC.

23. Some operators have expressed concerns that the proposed limit of 800 pax/day is unnecessarily low and the impact this will have on tourism businesses and regional visitation. There have been a range of suggestions made to better manage visitation and enable a higher cap, including allocating a booking time to commence the walk and more use of commencing the walk from each end. Initiatives such as these could be tested during the proposed trial period.
24. Operators are also concerned about the impacts a daily limit may have on bad weather days when visitors are unable to complete the crossing. Previously visitors may have waited it out for a day or so or rearranged their travel itinerary. Consideration will need to be given to this policy to manage both safety and visitor expectations.
25. We encourage officials to engage with the wider tourism sector during the planning stages to understand how some of the significant commercial attractions manage large daily numbers. There are several attractions around the country that effectively welcome and care for thousands of visitors a day and there may be useful information and exemplars that would benefit this work. We would be happy to provide industry contacts and introductions to enable this.

C. Concessionaires and enhanced outcomes (safety, cultural, environmental)

26. Concessionaires (both transport and guided hikes) play an important part in the management and visitor experience of the TAC, supporting environmental protection and visitor safety aspirations. They are an important link between visitors, DOC, tangata whenua, and the local community.
27. The review creates a good opportunity to promote and recognise the role concessionaires provide across the areas of safety, cultural and environmental protection. The TAC is known as a challenging day-walk, and we acknowledge the efforts of DOC over the years to manage visitor safety and protect the environment. Initiatives such as TAC-TAG (TAC Tourism Advisory Group) have gone some way in creating a model for improved management of the TAC. By encouraging international travellers to use concessionaires for transport and guiding it will assist the department to better manage the conservation estate, reduce risk, and enhance the visitor experience.
28. TIA would strongly encourage DOC to consider within the booking system a process that allocates a percentage of the total daily visitor numbers to concessionaires. Concessionaires would have a 'fixed window' of time to take up that allocation before it is returned to the general pool. Current concessions will provide the detail on current allocation requirements and there should be an ability for this to be reviewed and increased in consultation with concessionaires.

D. Wider impact upon the community

29. According to the Ruapehu District council website Ruapehu is one of New Zealand's largest districts by land area but with one of the smallest permanent population counts made up of many small, diverse, and geographically spread-out rural communities. It has an area of 6,730 square kilometres and a stable resident population of around 13,000 but this increases dramatically with visitor numbers.
30. We raise the importance of understanding the potential implications a booking system might have upon the regional economy. Traditionally TAC walkers often spend 2-3 days in the region, spending money with local businesses pre and post trip. A requirement to book the walk, or no availability due to full bookings, may deter visitors to the region. The TAC is often undertaken by overseas visitors as it is a convenient activity location mid-way down the North Island. If bookings become a requirement, and a suitable day was not available for these travellers, there seems a reasonable likelihood that these potential visitors may 'skip' the region altogether as they travel through the North Island. We propose that over the coming months modelling and community consultation is undertaken to develop a good understanding of the proposed limits on the regional economy. We also recommend a strategic information campaign directed at domestic visitors is necessary to ensure they are aware of any booking system implementation well in advance of their arrival. This will help to ensure the traditional 2-3-day visit to the region is maintained, and they get to do the walk as planned rather than leave highly disgruntled they could not undertake the walk as intended.

E. Monitoring and review

31. Like any new system there will be changes required over time as the effects of the new processes are better understood. TIA proposes a government/industry monitoring group is in place to evaluate the success and management of the booking system against the projected outcomes. An enhanced TAC-TAG could perform this function.
32. The agenda would include a review of season outcomes and projections and initiatives for the upcoming season. Such a group would also enable meetings to be quickly convened about other matters as/when required.

Closing

33. TIA would like to be involved in any further work and discussions on the booking system including its implementation.