



Holdsworth – Jumbo Circuit Bookable Hut Trial

Findings

The Mt Holdsworth - Jumbo Circuit is a two to three day tramp involving a climb through beech-podocarp forest to some of the best alpine tops travel in the Tararua Forest Park.

Introduction

In 2012 the Holdsworth - Jumbo Circuit was moved onto the Department's National Visitor Booking System as a trial, in response to a rise in popularity and a decision to promote the circuit as an opportunity for new trampers. The trial is now complete and enough information has been gathered to lead to a recommendation.

Context

The Holdsworth Jumbo circuit fills a niche in the Tararua Forest Park, where there are limited opportunities for a weekend tramp that ventures onto the tops but doesn't require specialist high alpine skills and experience. The coupling of these attributes with the high population density in the lower North Island has resulted in a very popular circuit with a strong demand for beds that needs to be managed.

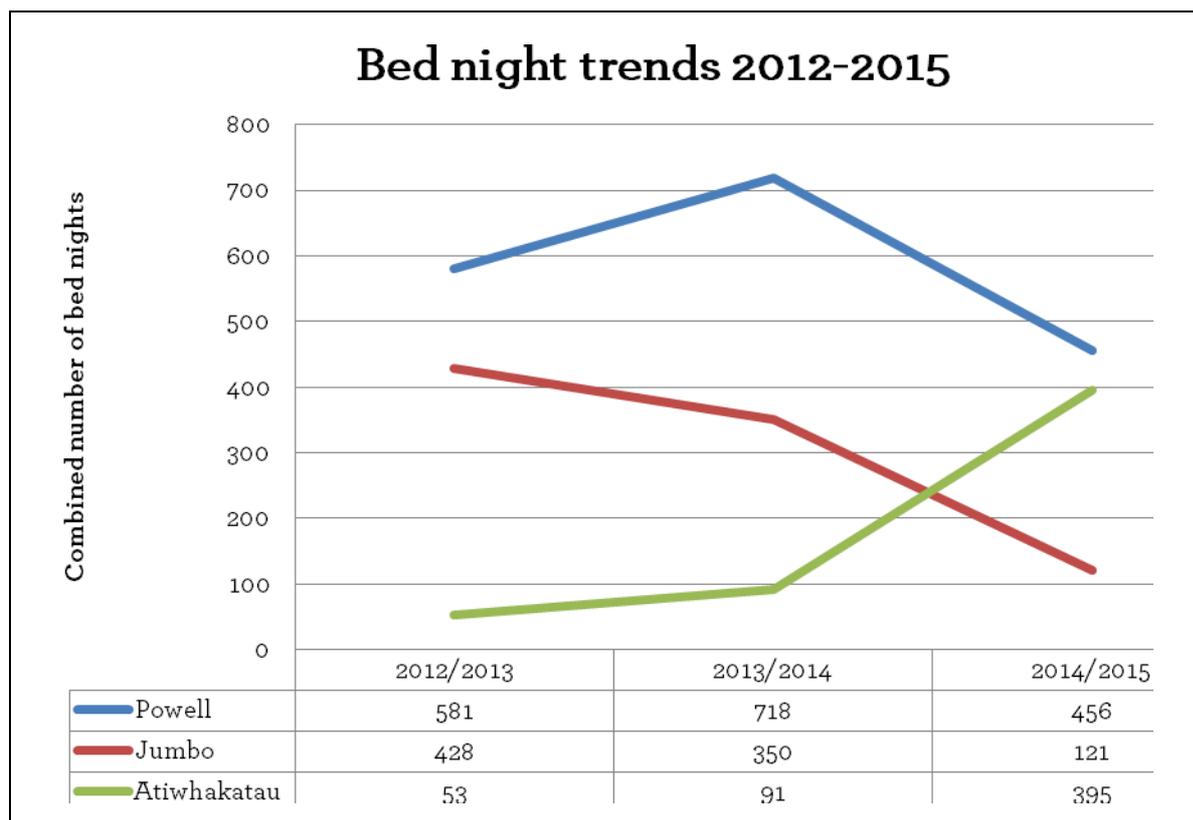
The service provided reflects this, in that Powell, Jumbo and Atiwhakatu huts are all maintained to 'serviced' standard and a hut warden is present on a semi-regular basis at one of the huts along the circuit throughout the peak season.

Findings

Trial

The first two years of the trial saw Powell and Jumbo huts added to the booking system from October to April and in the following summer Atiwhakatau hut was added to the trial and Jumbo was temporarily removed.

The graph below shows the bed nights (bookings and recovered hut tickets) recorded by the Department between November - January (inclusive) each year. Note that the data range is limited to November - January to ensure an accurate comparison can be made, as data for 2015 has not been collected after February.



Emerging trends

- Bed nights at Powell initially went up but decreased in 2014/15. This trend could be attributed to the lateness of the huts coming onto the booking system in 2014/15, as usage had increased for the same period in the previous year. However anecdotal feedback received at the time was not recorded.
- In the summer of 2014 /2015 Jumbo was taken off the trial and the recorded bed nights decreased by 65%.
- Atiwhakatau Hut showed a similar trend where recorded hut usage increased 149% after being added to the trial.

Bookings made by user group			
	2012 / 2013	2013 /2014	2014 / 2015
18 yrs plus	67%	62%	55%
Youth 11 - 17 yrs	32%	32%	34%
Children/ infants 0 - 10 yrs	<1%	4%	10%

The above information shows three distinct trends. The share of adults using the hut is slowly decreasing, youth use remains steady and the percentage of children is increasing.

It was not possible to extract group booking data from the booking system; as such it is difficult to attribute the increasing number of children to either school-like groups or families.

Research

In 2014 the Department commissioned research on public preferences for bookable or non-bookable accommodation. It was a mixed method project with surveys and focus groups in Auckland, Tauranga, Wellington and Christchurch. The focus groups were a mixture of people who had booked DOC accommodation within the last 3 months and potential users. The full report is available here

<http://www.doc.govt.nz/Documents/about-doc/role/visitor-research/preferences-for-booked-DOC-facilities.pdf>

The research shows that most people are supportive of more serviced huts (in addition to a number of other types of accommodation) becoming bookable and a minority were against it. It also showed that when some huts become bookable it can increase the likelihood of certain groups using this type of accommodation.



On the way to Mt Holdsworth, Malcolm Peacey, Creative Commons

The advantages of being able to book DOC hut and lodge accommodation were identified as follows

- Having guaranteed indoor accommodation and more specifically a bed
- Not having to carry a tent
- Ensuring that all members of your 'group' will have the same accommodation
- Being able to see if a hut is getting 'booked up' and therefore choosing to change plans if it's busy (some people prefer to go to huts that are less busy). On this note, one of the barriers for some people using 'free for all' accommodation is a perception that it will be full (and there being no means of determining the likelihood of this prior to travelling)
- Ease of payment - you can pay online before you leave
- No need to hurry to the next hut or lodge in order to get a bed, no need to leave so early - many people spoke about there being a 'race' to get to the next hut on the tramp in order to secure indoor accommodation, which detracts from the enjoyment of the tramp or hike itself.
- It is more likely to mean that the people using the hut or lodge have paid and are therefore contributing to the upkeep of the accommodation
- Perceptions of safety - both in terms of knowing that you will have warm, dry accommodation if the weather is not good and in terms of DOC knowing (approximately) how many people are in an area at a given time
- It might reduce the likelihood of people just turning up and the huts being over crowded.
- Most people also said that they had experienced over-crowded huts (with people having to sleep on the floor) but that this mainly occurred when the weather was bad. People said that they didn't mind unexpected and unbooked 'visitors' even if they had pre-booked the accommodation themselves. there was a view that (under certain circumstances i.e. when the weather is bad) having to make space for others in a hut (whether the hut or lodge is bookable or free for all) is part of the New Zealand tramping experience and what tramping is all about.

Adapted from 'Department of Conservation - Identifying Preferences for Booked DOC facilities in New Zealand',

M Irving, Mobius Research and Strategy, 2014



View from Powell Hut, Andy McDowall, Creative Commons

Preferences for the type of bookable accommodation were for huts (and other types of accommodation) that are equipped with 20 or more beds, in the front country and have less than 10 beds, part of an overnight trip, within 3-4 hours of roads, popular and on popular tracks, and lastly, huts on a fixed loop . Notably where some huts on a circuit may be bookable and others were not meant a tent would have to be carried for the whole trip. This echoes feedback received by the Department of Conservation office in Masterton, where some trampers were frustrated about the confusing mixture of systems where Powell and Atiwhakataua huts were on the booking system and Jumbo was left off in 2014/15.

Disadvantages of bookable accommodation

While most of the people taking part in the focus groups were supportive of (most people) or ambivalent towards (some people) increasing the amount of hut/lodge accommodation able to be booked, some people (a minority) raised concerns. One of the key concerns was to do with needing to change plans just prior, or mid-way through a tramp if the weather turns bad and therefore forfeiting the money paid in advance for the accommodation. Another key issue raised was to do with the prior purchase of backcountry passes, which cannot be used for bookable accommodation.

Other issues raised with respect to 'having to book' were as follows:

- Needing to book too far in advance to secure inside accommodation at small huts e.g. huts with only 12 beds - rather than it being free for all and first come first serve
- The possibility that errors will be made during the booking process - "you know, you think you've booked"
- People who book accommodation and do not turn up - especially for lower cost accommodation. This would mean that people who want to book and use that accommodation would not be able to do so. Note that there is a perception that people do in fact book DOC accommodation and simply don't turn up
- Some people might choose to stay an extra night at a hut (but only booked for one night) - again, often a weather related decision
- That people will still just turn up (even if the hut is now bookable) and the huts will still be overcrowded. This was a concern with huts where there is no warden. In this respect there was a perception that this may lead to confrontation among hut users (although overcrowding appears to happen now under certain circumstances at least, and confrontation between hut users does not seem to be an issue).

Adapted from 'Department of Conservation - Identifying Preferences for Booked DOC facilities in New Zealand',

M Irving, Mobius Research and Strategy, 2014

Perceived disadvantages to a booking system that can be overcome

The use of backcountry hut passes is provided for in the booking system. Bookings can be made over the phone or in person at a DOC visitor centre.

Furthermore the research stated that

- trampers who'd experienced bad weather and needed to stay in a bookable hut but didn't have a booking, were gladly be received by the other users who would make space.
- there was a concern that some people will book accommodation and not turn up. However it also stated that some people will choose not to book and will use the hut regardless. These effects may cancel each other out.
- the perception that confrontation from overcrowding will occur despite the booking system (especially when no warden is present) is unfounded, as overcrowding happens on occasion now, and the research noted that it wasn't raised as an issue.

Conclusions and recommended outcome

The following conclusions can be drawn from the booking system trial and national level research

- Quantitative findings from the trial show that when huts are added to the booking system, recorded use increases and when a hut is removed from the booking system the recorded bed nights decrease.
- Furthermore the feedback and research findings show, when one hut within a circuit is not bookable it forces users to carry a tent, even if they have booked accommodation where provided for, and therefore reduces the likelihood of people getting out and enjoying the conservation estate.
- The research suggests that the wider public would be supportive of Powell, Jumbo and Atiwhakatau Huts becoming bookable huts. These three serviced huts meet all of the suggested criteria for preferred types of bookable accommodation suggested by the research (serviced, >20 bunks, part of established circuit, close to road etc).
- The amount of children using the hut is increasing, and the research states that families prefer bookable accommodation.
- Without enough 'lead in time' of the huts being on the bookings system prior to the peak season usage can suffer. Therefore it would be advisable to leave the huts on the booking system year round.

It is the Department's recommendation that Powell, Jumbo and Atiwhakatau huts should be placed on the booking system year round.

Feedback

The Department will be inviting feedback from **7 August to 1 September 2015**, to allow enough time for a final decision to be made before the 2015/16 peak season.

To provide feedback, please contact

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