

SUPPORTING THE KIWI WAY

In the second in our series on Commissions, SHELLY BISWELL talks with Walking Access Commission chief executive Eric Pyle about the Commission's work and why walking access is crucial to our Kiwi way of life.

Most New Zealanders probably take the ability to get into the great outdoors for granted – that is until we come to a locked gate that we previously could get through, or signs go up that say “no trespassing” near our favourite camping spot.



Eric Pyle

Walking Access Commission Chief Executive

Walking Access Commission chief executive Eric Pyle says that most New Zealanders value the ability to access the outdoors, but they may not realise what it takes to maintain that access. In fact, public opinion research undertaken on behalf of the Commission in 2015 found that 95 per cent of those surveyed believe free and easy access to the outdoors is important, and 92 per cent had used the outdoors for recreation within the previous 12 months.

“A big part of the Commission’s work is raising awareness about what areas are accessible, as well as providing information and education

on the roles and responsibilities involved with access,” Pyle says.

Gaining entry to public lands, waterways and the coast is covered by a range of statutes across central and local government. As one look at the Walking Access Mapping System [see box out] that the Commission maintains will show, access to the outdoors is often fragmented.

Established under the Walking Access Act 2008, the Commission is the only government agency with a primary focus on walking and other forms of access. It’s a small but high-performing team that includes a five-person Board, a staff of 10 in Wellington and part-time regional field advisors around the country.

Aside from developing the Walking Access Mapping System, to improve information about accessing our public lands, waterways and coasts, the Commission has developed the New Zealand Outdoor Access Code that outlines the responsibilities associated with accessing the outdoors. The Commission has also created the educational website “Both Sides of the Fence” so that school children can gain an understanding of the range of viewpoints associated with access.

Previously, much of the work of the Commission sat within the Department of Conservation. It was a natural fit in many ways; after all, more than 30 per cent of New Zealand’s land area is administered by DOC and much of this is publicly accessible. Establishing a standalone

Crown entity, however, has put a greater emphasis on the issue of access.

“In our first years as an organisation we found that much of our energy was devoted to addressing a backlog of access disputes,” Pyle says.

A large proportion of the enquiries the Commission receives are centred on individuals or organisations limiting public access to legal formed and unformed roads. In some cases, there might be lack of clarity about whether a road is a legal public road or in other cases there may be concerns about safety or property.

Last year, the Commission resolved 24 access disputes and received 26 new access dispute enquiries. Combined, this work contributed to creating or protecting 43 access opportunities.

“With access rights there are responsibilities, so we often work with communities to address underlying issues that have led to the dispute,” Pyle says.

“We expect to see these types of disputes decline over time, which means the Commission can focus on other areas, such as raising awareness of people’s rights and responsibilities in the outdoors, and advocating for public access in planning processes.”

Pyle says that New Zealanders’ relationship with the land is changing, which impacts on the work of the Commission.

“With more people living in urban areas and

Belmont walkway - regional community park walk



changes in rural communities where there is a move to larger, corporate farming, walking access rights and traditions have weakened," he says.

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Too much of a good thing?

While tourism – both international and domestic – is largely seen as a positive for New Zealand's economy, it also puts additional pressure on existing access arrangements.

As Board member Penny Mumford wrote in the Commission's April 2017 newsletter, "Many New Zealanders are not aware that farmers and other landholders often allow people to have access across private land so that they can get to their special recreational spots. This generous practice has been going on in New Zealand for generations and underpins some of the spirit of being a rural New Zealander. Being a custodian of the land and sharing rural experiences with others is for many an integral part of Kiwi nature."

As pressures increase, however, some private landowners have withdrawn public access because of lack of respect for their property or increased safety concerns.

Pyle says, "for example, The Roaring Meg

Pack Track near Queenstown was closed by the pastoral lessee due to concern about the number of mountain bikers, the speed they were travelling at and the impact on farm animals and the farmers. The Walking Access Commission negotiated reopening the route for walkers and horse riders and developed signage for the route so visitors knew what type of access was allowed.

"The Commission is investigating the potential implications of tourism on access so that we can find ways to address these pressures. It may mean looking for alternative solutions, such as temporary closures during parts of the year (such as during lambing season) or only certain types of use. It may also involve thinking more holistically about all the infrastructure associated with access, such as parking and toilets. Unless we address issues now, there's a risk that we could lose a significant amount of public access."

Everyday access

While access to outdoor recreation is the primary aim of the Commission, Pyle says it's important to think about access in an urban context.

"It's crucial that we ensure New Zealanders can walk or ride their bikes not only for recreational purposes, but also to and from school, work, their local shops, their GP – the list goes on," he says.

"There are individual health benefits to a more active mode of transport such as walking or cycling, but there are also wider benefits, such as reduced air pollution and better-connected communities. More and more we find the government, regional councils and local

communities are recognising those benefits."

Auckland Council has a Greenways Programme that is developing trails across Auckland, while the Wellington region is developing an integrated trails strategy.

While there's growing political support for active modes of transport, there are also challenges. A report prepared for Auckland Transport in 2015 found the number of Auckland residents who said they regularly used walking to get around dropped from 46 per cent in 2014 to 42 per cent in 2015.

Pyle says the Walking Access Commission has a clear role to play in advocating for community walkways and bicycle paths, and to support community and regional planning that promotes active modes of transport.

Free and enduring access to the outdoors is fundamental to our way of life as New Zealanders, and contributes towards the health and wellbeing of our communities. It's also an important aspect of our burgeoning tourism industry.


Pyle sees incredible opportunities for improving access into the future.

"Access to our public lands, waterways and coasts is the 'Kiwi way', but that way requires active participation. It requires an understanding of the responsibilities that are associated with access, as well as a commitment on the part of government and communities to support the infrastructure required to maintain these important links to our New Zealand heritage."

Walking Access Mapping System

WAMS is an online tool that uses geographic information system (GIS) technology to show land that is publicly accessible. The information can be viewed over topographical maps or aerial photographs.

Launched in 2012, WAMS was updated last year to better meet the needs of users. Upgrades included refined drawing and measuring tools. The tool also allows people with GPS devices to export data and upload route plans.

 wams.org.nz

What's accessible?

- More than 30 per cent of New Zealand's land area is administered by DOC and much of this is publicly accessible. Other Crown-owned land may be open to public access at the Crown's discretion. Crown lands that are leased for specific purposes such as pasture, however, are in the exclusive possession of the leaseholders and have similar access controls to those of private land.
- Local authorities are responsible for significant amounts of land, including 56,000 kilometres of unformed legal roads, which provide public access.
- A range of legal instruments supports public access to about 70 per cent of New Zealand's waterways (known as the Queen's Chain).
- Public access along the foreshore is covered by the Marine and Coastal Area (Takutai Moana) Act 2011. Most of the foreshore is open to public access except for some areas that have been affected by erosion or where private title extends across the foreshore.
- Permission must be obtained for public access across private land. Access may be granted under formal (such as through covenants made under the Queen Elizabeth the Second National Trust Act 1977) or informal (such as a verbal agreement between a landowner and user) arrangements.