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Pisa / Criffel Ranges vehicle use

New Zealand Four Wheel Drive Association Inc. (NZFWDA) comment on the “Issues and Options” document.

The NZFWDA is the national body for a large proportion of the organised 4WD clubs around New Zealand. Individual NZFWDA memberships exceed 2300 people, within 52 clubs. These numbers do not reflect the families of the individual members.

The evolution of the 4WD vehicle (4x4) and the numbers imported into NZ over recent years, has allowed a wide spectrum of the population to consider using their 4x4 vehicle to travel to areas that may in the past only have been seen by tramping club members. Those tramping clubs traditionally used modified trucks (often 4x4) to transport walkers as far as possible, before they got out and walked to their intended destination. Today’s families want to do the same, but in the more flexible 4x4 and usually still in the company of others for safety. It is the children of today who will be the future guardians of our lands and unless they have experienced the variety and grandeur, even if mostly by 4x4, their enthusiasm is unlikely to be as passionate.

The ageing population is another factor, with many who were outdoor enthusiasts in their younger days, still wanting to explore and enjoy the back country but are now often limited by the physical capabilities of their bodies, often as a consequence of the exuberance of their previous outdoors activities.

The discussion document “Options and Issues” states (xi) 1. That “the Pisa /Criffel range is the only block mountain range in Central Otago to have no formed roads or designated legal vehicle access”. It does however have legal roads across the ranges, with routes that largely follow the legal road alignment. To suggest that these are not “formed” is disingenuous, as route formations can be clearly identified on aerial images. These old routes are part of the history of New Zealand and must be retained as our heritage.

One of the purposes of conservation, as defined in the Conservation Act 1987, is providing for the appreciation and recreational enjoyment of natural and historic resources by the public. Accordingly, one function of the Department (under section 6(e) of the Act) is “to the extent that the use of any natural or historic resource for recreation or tourism is not inconsistent with its conservation, to foster the use of natural and historic resources for recreation, and to allow their use for tourism”.

The Department is also guided by the purpose and principles of the Historic Places Act 1993. The purpose of the Act is “to promote the identification, protection, preservation and conservation of the historical and cultural heritage of New Zealand”. It is based on the principle that historic places have lasting value in their own right and provide evidence of the origins of New Zealand’s distinct society.

The Department of Conservation (DOC) has a wide variety of heritage and historical buildings and structures on the land that it manages, but appears to have a policy to eliminate old vehicle access routes whenever possible. That policy is contrary to the management of other heritage structures and sites, where invariably the most effective way of ensuring retention, is through use and recognition.

The overall purpose of the Conservation Act 1987 is “to promote the conservation of New Zealand’s natural and historic resources” (Conservation Act, long title). The Conservation Act defines conservation as “the preservation and protection of natural and historic resources for the purpose of maintaining their intrinsic values, providing for their appreciation and recreational enjoyment by the public, and safeguarding the options of future generations”.

The NZFWDA has found that the use of the words “off road” imply the wrong context, as in almost every case the vehicle travel is on specific routes and not cross-country. A preferred reference is “off highway” as that then includes lesser roads and other defined routes.

The often fragile vegetation and slow regeneration of alpine areas is acknowledged and all recreations have some impacts. The NZFWDA would like to work with the Department of Conservation (DOC) to highlight the need for extra care and not straying from existing routes in alpine areas in general. An excellent example is the “Stay the Trail” project in Colorado USA.
<http://staythetrail.org/>

For the Pisa / Criffel Ranges the main area of interest for 4x4 recreation is at the southern end below Mt Pisa. Land to the north of Mt Pisa could be reserved for passive recreation.

Open access to existing routes is the ideal for the suggested southern end of the Pisa / Criffel Ranges, in line with the existing Otago CMS’s view of “4WD backcountry”.

The reality is that some management will be needed and it has been demonstrated elsewhere in NZ that management can work with modest controls and is generally well respected by the 4x4 community. On the West Coast, the Denniston Plateau 4x4 area is one example and in the Coromandel there is the Maratoto area. Both are 4x4 community efforts with their respective DOC conservancies.

The Maratoto has used a restricted season for many years, but a relatively flexible one, based around prevailing conditions. Advice on the status of the Maratoto 4x4 area is available through a telephone message. This allows people to easily check on whether the area is open for 4x4 use before they travel. It also allows the area to be closed if needed, due to weather or other problems that can arise. Operating costs are minimal using an old or cheap cell-phone and the messaging service. Check the Maratoto notice on 027 5242132.

The DOC suggested restricted season for 4x4 recreation use is overly restrictive, as it eliminates the main holiday periods and thus limits families whose options to enjoy the Otago region are constrained by the public holidays. The preference would be to at least use the period from 1 December to 30 April for general public access and ideally the spring opening would be at Labour weekend. Permitted access outside of the agreed time frame could be allowed by negotiation for specific organised events (that could allow some limited use to drive identified and marked routes on snow).

A “Code of Conduct” could be developed in parallel with the restricted season. Such a Code would be compiled in consultation with the 4WD community and land managers. It may not need to be as detailed as the suggested content itemised in the DOC options.

Within a Code of Conduct could be reference to remaining on marked routes and these would be identified on the ground and on maps available to the community. The use of GPS data would be an advantage.

Relationships between organized four wheelers and farmers is generally very good and there is strong emphasis by the NZFWDA for the need to ensure that permission is sought for travel on other than legal roads. Where those roads might be old or unformed, advice and permission is also sought where possible. The assistance of DOC, with data they hold on relevant land owners affected by a vehicle use plan, would be welcomed.

Restriction of 4x4 numbers is unnecessary, as the Pisa / Criffel Ranges are comparatively remote from population centres.

The Conservation General Policy 2005 outlines the DOC stance on personal safety which the NZFWDA endorses and we suggest that it is included in future documents such as area Management Plans and CMS.

A management structure for Pisa / Criffel Range vehicle recreation use would involve some expense for DOC.



This would include gates/ barriers to control entry to the specified routes (such gates might be built and erected using 4x4 volunteer skills, as has been done at Maratoto).

The marking of route alignments would be needed, but that can be assisted by volunteers from the 4x4 community. Route maintenance would be predominantly by the 4x4 community, with assistance from DOC where necessary.

The supply of information signs would be DOC responsibility, but again the erection might be with volunteer labour.

All the identified legal roads must be retained as present and future options. Any gates or unauthorized obstructions to traffic must comply with the relevant roading regulations as administered by the District Council.

While recognising that some portions of some travel routes do fall outside the legal road alignment for convenience; those sections must be regarded as having an equivalent value. After all, the bypassed parts of the surveyed alignment still exist as a practical part of the landscape and environs.

Suggested marked 4x4 routes;

From the Snow Farm to Mt Pisa

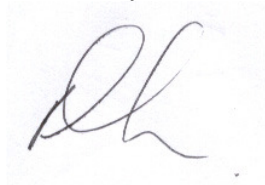
Mt Pisa to the Column Rocks

The existing legal roads and the related out of alignment sections.

It is not expected that all these options would be immediately available for public 4x4 use but that within Department plans they will be allowed for and protocols established, so that assistance from the local 4x4 community can be utilised.

We want to maintain the heritage routes created by our forebears and thus ensure that our children will be able to enjoy and appreciate our countryside and the past that influenced it. The sooner in life that children can be introduced to the outdoors and the wonderful landscapes that NZ offers, the greater the appreciation of those benefits. A four wheel drive vehicle can be the start of such a relationship and while some people may regard them as anti- social, the reality is quite different. We are willing to work with the Department of Conservation to ensure that there is a future where we and our children, can access our public lands by vehicle.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'P. Vahry', is positioned above the printed name.

Peter Vahry

NZFWDA northern public relations