

AKAROA CIVIC TRUST

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Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment
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Submission: Supporting sustainable freedom camping in Aotearoa New Zealand

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The Akaroa Civic Trust is a volunteer society that has been working to preserve the historic character and natural amenity of the town and surrounding area, inclusive of the Akaroa harbour, since 1969. In recent years mass tourism has overwhelmed the town with the arrival of freedom campers and large cruise ships. I was invited to comment on the discussion document, Supporting Sustainable Freedom Camping in Aotearoa New Zealand. As an active member for more than 25 years, the following submission has the support of the Akaroa Civic Trust Board.

The Civic Trust supports the preferred option consisting of a package of measures. The package includes the following key features:

- A. Establish in legislation minimum requirements for a vehicle to be certified as self-contained, give a regulatory authority the function of promoting and enforcing adherence to the requirements, and implement a penalty scheme for offences against the new requirements. Establish a government agency overseeing the certification process to ensure it is being properly applied by approved [del to]certifiers.
 - B. Put in place a stronger infringement scheme for offences under the Freedom Camping Act 2011, in particular by making regulations to set out higher fines for breaches of freedom camping bylaws and notices.
2. Require all freedom campers staying in a vehicle to use a self-contained vehicle, as outlined under Option Three package in this paper.

The Civic Trust wishes to acknowledge the problem of individuals living in their vehicle due to being homeless. Homelessness must be viewed separately from issues relating to freedom camping which is used as a means of being on holiday and travelling around the countryside. It should also be acknowledged that many freedom campers comply with existing rules and bylaws.

The problems experienced in Akaroa are not the same as in other parts of New Zealand because of the town's position between steep hills and a stunningly beautiful harbour. The town itself is contained and it cannot expand even if it wished to do so. In addition, the town centre is a registered Historic Area (NZHPT 7443, February 5, 1999). Akaroa's streets are narrow and parking is limited. The town enjoys a national and international reputation that attracts visitors beyond its carrying capacity during the summer months and holiday weekends.

Akaroa has experienced an increase in rented, self-contained campervans as well as young travellers in old vans and cars. The trend became a problem around 2014 culminating in a large parking area adjacent the Akaroa foreshore being taken over by 50-60 campervans, vans and cars every evening over summer. Gatherings were followed by complaints from residents resulting in an amended and updated freedom camping bylaw.

Akaroa has been placed on Level 4 water restrictions for the past two years for various reasons. The town relies upon rain for its water supply and the forecast is for warm winters with less rain. The welfare and wellbeing of the community must take precedence over meeting the demands of tourism inclusive of freedom campers.

Climate change is not in the distant future, it is taking place now. MBIE and the Minister of Tourism must acknowledge the fact. Host communities should not be placed at risk by the demands of tourism just to satisfy perceived financial rewards.

The tourism industry must abandon the language of marketing and instead engage with evidence and policy choices for the wellbeing of the planet, visitors and all New Zealanders. We cannot return to business as usual to satisfy economic activity. Funding more toilets and establishing designated freedom camping areas, essentially funded by ratepayers and not by the tourism industry, will encourage further growth in the sector. Restrictions are needed to contain numbers based on a first served basis in towns such as Akaroa to avoid congestion and being overwhelmed during peak holiday months.

In our view, the discussion document fails to adequately address several important issues.

1. The number of rented campervans, old vans and cars used for the activity has increased to a dramatic degree in recent years. The volume of vehicles can easily overwhelm the carrying capacity of popular tourist destinations such as Akaroa. During the summer season it is difficult if not impossible to find a parking space in the town due to the number of visitors, vehicles and campervans. Residents must complete their shopping and errands early in the morning during summer months to avoid congestion.
2. Some campervans are so large they cannot park safely in the town's small, narrow parking spaces. Historic streets such as Rue Lavaud, with parking on one or both sides of the streets, often makes it difficult to drive safely due to the number of large campervans congesting the street and parking spaces.
3. Freedom campers by their very nature have the ability to spend the night away from public observation in rural areas to avoid fines and being detected. Rural towns such as Akaroa become overly crowded with visitors during summer and long weekends.
4. Anti-social behaviour is sometimes displayed by young freedom campers, usually in old vans and cars. They prefer to defecate and urinate where ever they please. The activity is a rejection of authority, expression of social protest and an act civil disobedience. The activity shows a disdain for environmental and health and safety standards. It remains to be seen if regulations and monitoring can resolve the problem.
5. However, clear, consistent standards, regulation, oversight and monitoring are required on a national level. Tourism New Zealand, travel agencies and tourism operators should inform visitors about freedom camping requirements, enforcement actions and fines prior to their arrival to avoid and mitigate negative and irresponsible behaviour. If visitors are fully aware that regulations and fines will be imposed they can decide if it is worth taking the risk of breaking the rules. Once in New Zealand word of mouth and text messaging will alert others about the cost of non-compliance.

6. Fines and infringement notices need to include the individual's passport information and vehicle registration to ensure that visitors do not leave the country without paying. Alternatively a credit card number could be required for fines and infringement notification. Information relating to the vehicle should be recorded by the enforcement officer which would make it more difficult to on sell the vehicle to a new owner.
7. Rental companies should be held responsible for unpaid fines incurred by anyone who rents a vehicle. Rental companies require a credit card number and/or bond. Should a fine not be paid, the client could be notified that their credit card will be invoiced to cover any unpaid fines.
8. In our experience freedom campers often spend very little money in Akaroa other than on adventure tourism activities such as swimming with the dolphins. Prices at the local 4 Square are higher than in the city so freedom campers generally stock up on supplies in Christchurch before driving over to Akaroa. Some freedom campers brag about not spending any money while in Akaroa and the vicinity. Freedom campers have knocked on our door demanding to pitch their tent on our rural property because they did not want to pay a nightly fee at a nearby campground.
9. Councils that provide designated areas where supposedly self-contained freedom campers can spend up to 2 nights at no charge undercut legitimate and long established campgrounds and holiday parks where kitchen, toilet and shower services are available for a modest nightly fee. In essence Councils compete with local businesses at the expense of ratepayers. Ratepayers pick up the tab while campgrounds and holiday parks are put at risk of going out of business.
10. Christchurch City Council, located 80 or more kilometres from parts of Banks Peninsula, sends Amourguard Security to patrol Akaroa and the surrounding area. The trip takes at least 90 minutes one way. Over the period of 6 months, November – April, it has proved to be a costly exercise (\$74,000.00 or more) based on the probable number of infringement notices issued. The financial burden falls on ratepayers. Local police can also enforce the town's freedom camping bylaw, however they have assumed a lax approach while the district council has taken an "educational" viewpoint rather than issuing fines.
11. New Zealand is viewed as a highly desirable, safe and friendly international destination. Once COVID-19 restrictions are lifted it is doubtful that stricter freedom camping regulations, higher fines and enforcement will hinder the return visitors. More importantly New Zealand is seen as a safe, clean, green 100% Pure holiday destination. The image should be maintained by strictly monitoring and the enforcement of freedom camping regulations for public health and safety.
12. New Zealand is not a cheap holiday destination and tourism is not environmentally benign. The distance travelled by air or cruise ship is tied to greenhouse gas emissions. Visitors travelling on a limited budget can rent a regulated and nationally approved self-contained vehicle. Alternatively visitors can stay in backpackers, holiday parks or shorten their holiday to match their financial resources.
13. Domestic freedom campers must comply with new regulations and fines to ensure the wellbeing of the environment and host communities.
14. The cost of tourism, i.e. related infrastructure, should be funded through the industry and by not local government and host communities.