

Oparara Arches Feasibility Study & Business Case, July 2018



To: Penny Bicknell – Tourism West Coast
From: Mark Davies – Director Operations Western South Island, Department of Conservation
CC: Bob Dickson, Operations Manager, Buller
Date: 17 August 2018

Purpose

- To provide comment on the Tourism West Coast (TWC) Feasibility Study and Business Case for the proposal for visitor improvements at the Oparara Arches, Karamea dated July 2018.¹

Review

This review and comment has been undertaken by Operations and Recreation and Tourism Planning staff in the Department of Conservation.

Summary of the Feasibility Study

The study identifies that the Oparara Basin is a spectacular and sensitive part of Kahurangi National Park.

The Oparara Arches has been visited by a small number of people for many years (approx. 15,000 PA) and has recently been identified by Tourism West Coast as having the potential to attract larger numbers of visitors and make a positive contribution to the local economy.

The study recommends:

Improve access to the Oparara Arch by upgrading the walking surface and building new cantilevered track around the rock faces and realigning the track to avoid from areas of rare mosses and to achieve step free access into the arch. Estimated cost \$594,000 - \$654,000.

Extend the track through the Oparara Arch and form a loop track back to the carpark. This would involve a raised walkway through about 250m of the Arch and 300m of new track beyond the end of the arch, with a new suspension bridge across the river and a 1.7km return track. Estimated \$995,000 - \$1,070,000

Improve the Mirror Tarn Track by forming 300m of new track so visitors can avoid walking back down the road to the car park. Estimate \$60,000 - \$66,000

Construct a new cantilevered jetty at Mirror Tarn to improve the visitor experience and manage impacts of people trampling on lake edge. Estimate \$80 - \$100,000

Increase security of the Honeycomb Hill Specially Protect Area by installing a road barrier.

Establish a small car park, lookout and interpretation on the Oparara Valley Road which can overlook the basin. Estimated \$300,000

¹ Oparara Arches Feasibility Study & Business Case, TRC Tourism for Tourism West Coast July 2018,

Seal the access road and make culvert improvements. Estimated \$4,600,000.

There is potential for an overnight educational experience on K Road. Estimated \$2,000,000

The feasibility study did not support the use of mountain bikes on the Oparara Valley Track.

Comments

- Arch Track upgrade – Support as this is a necessity for visitor safety and to improve the visitor experience for all at this site.
- Track through the Oparara Arch – Support, subject to detailed geotechnical inspection and cultural assessment. Will considerably enhance the visitor experience whilst providing a formal mechanism to manage visitors and their safety in this location.
- Loop track beyond the arch to connect back to the road – this presents potential environmental concerns within a significant and sensitive cave & karst landscape and is very close proximity to two significant cave systems; one of which contains very high value intact formations noted as one of the best within the basin. This is not supported.
- A small loop track beyond the arch which doubles back into the arch which was the previous preferred option after the other had been tested and discarded. This option would be supported.
- Mirror Tarn Loop Track – feasible option, no undue issues perceived to construct, would remove visitors having to walk back to the carpark via the road. Present use suggests that this is not an immediate need as conflict between vehicles and visitors is very low.
- Access to Moria Gate – installation of a handrail is a sensible option and supported.
- Cantilever jetty into Mirror Tarn – feasible and has merit. Supported.
- Increase security of Honeycomb Hill Specially Protected Area /Lockable gate at Nimrodel Creek - A gate already exists. We have no authority to block access within the National Park. The presumption is to prevent access to Honeycomb Hill Cave Specially Protected Area to which the public are not permitted to enter currently.
- The present restrictions of a gate, signage and cameras (being presently upgraded) are deemed sufficient at this point in time. Ultimately people can bypass the gate by simply fording the creek however, there is little evidence of intrusion within the cave system. Caves are also “monitored” by OVPT cave concessionaire plus Karamea staff.
- K Road Education Space – at approx. \$2m capital and with no demonstrated demand and at a site which isn’t particularly easy to get to or inviting, it seems aspirational and without any real value and we do not support this proposal. Any kind of education and or visitor accommodation type development would be better located in the township of Karamea where it would directly contribute to the Karamea community.
- Opportunity: The reestablishment of the cultural footprint and storytelling. –There is no reference in the Feasibility Study regarding the reestablishment of the cultural footprint and storytelling for Ngati Waewae and Ngai Tahu. In addition to this “telling the biodiversity stories of the basin to visitors” from Gondwana through to present day biodiversity challenges is a significant opportunity.
- The opportunity to enrich the visitor experience at place could be the game changer for Oparara. It offers single point of difference that no one else is doing and at a site where the evolution of NZ is so well presented.

- The current shelter at the main arch carpark is a prime location to do this. The current displays are dated and limited in extent. This site has significant potential to deliver a full cultural and biodiversity story to visitors and to enhance their experience and understanding of our culture and our nature.
- The SWOT analysis does not identify a weakness that the Oparara Arch is a 2.1-hour drive from Westport. The lack of proximity to the main tourism route and the nature of the drive from Westport to the Oparara Arch is a barrier to increasing the number of visitors to this destination.
- As well as targeting existing Heaphy Track users, marketing and promotion should target users of The Old Ghost Road, who now exceed 11,000 per annum.
- The target of achieving 66,837 visitors to the Oparara Arches by 2021 is ambitious and in our assessment unrealistic.
- A more realistic estimate of 40,000 visitors per annum in the next 5 years² is achievable and this can be managed effectively with the improved infrastructure proposed. This level of visitation would be able to be managed within this sensitive environment with these improvements in infrastructure place.
- An AEE including a cultural impact assessment will need to accompany any proposed works; Geotech investigations are mandatory for any proposed work within the karst landscape; proposals will need to meet legislative compliance; engineering design work must accompany all works;
- Both the Tai Poutini West Coast and Nelson/Marlborough Conservation Boards advice will be required.
- Use of the Oparara Valley (Fenian to Oparara) for mountain biking. TRC rationale for not supporting use of this track is contrary to our social science information/local experience of managing shared use mountain bike experiences. Evidence of the concerns need to be identified and explored further. Currently few people use the Oparara Valley Track and not supporting the use of this track for mountain biking is a lost opportunity.
- Oparara Road – This is the Oparara limiting factor. From a road safety perspective, the road has numerous hazards including the road being narrow and windy, has several steep drop offs which are not protected, steep gradients in places, during rain the surface is likely to get slippery and rutted and there is limited visibility on curves.³- TRC advocate option 2 (culverts and entire seal). This has a low safety rating.
- Past experience with surface upgrades suggests you end up with the road remaining narrow with improved surface leading to increased vehicle speeds, which leads to more incidents.
- We recommend that any work focus on a combination of Option 2 and 3 i.e culvert upgrades, additional vegetation clearing, earthworks, targeted road widening, and swale drains and targeted pull offs, laybys and widening of corners to reduce head on risks. We support the safety improvements proposed but we do not support sealing of the road.
- Orientation outlook point on access road – seems a very high cost (\$300k) for a comparatively low value benefit. We do not support this.

² Comments in letter from CEO Tourism West Coast on the Oparara Feasibility Study

³ Oparara Arches – Access Road Upgrade – Engineering Options Report – OPUS.

Recommendations and next steps

As discussed with Penny Bicknell and Jim Little in late July:

- It would be useful to have both Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu and Te Runanga o Ngati Waewae' s views on this and for that to be incorporated into the final proposal.
- Ngati Waewae have indicated to the department their support for this and for the opportunity to re-establish their cultural footprint and to tell their story at this place in the Oparara Basin.
- It would be useful to also have the broader Buller Districts and broader community views on this and for those to be incorporated into the final proposal.
- TWC need to run their own internal process with the feedback they have received from stakeholders and the Mayors and Chairs regional forum. This can then be taken forward into both a Provincial Growth Fund (PGF) application and then a formal application to the department for consideration.
- The Provincial Growth Fund applications that involve conservation land do come to the department via MBIE for review and comment. The department will be seeking to see in any final proposal the consideration of both our feedback and the feedback from stakeholders included in that PGF application.
- I suggest that TWC need to consider the cost of further design of any proposal they may wish to submit, also the cost of the development of a full Assessment of Environmental Effects (AEE) including a Cultural Assessment and any project management needs.
- These will be key elements that the department will require before we were able to consider any proposal.
- If TWC are successful with a Provincial Growth Fund application for this then at some point there is a need to formally apply to the department for a Works Approval and at that point we would need a full design of any proposal, a full AEE and a clear picture of who was leading the work and who was going to be the owner of any work.
- Our recommendation is that the Oparara Valley Trust who already own assets in the basin are more than likely the best to lead that sort of process.
- At that point we would do the full assessment against the Kahurangi National Park Management Plan and the West Coast Conservation Management Strategy policy provisions.
- We would also seek the advice of the Nelson Marlborough and Tai Poutini West Coast Conservation Boards before a decision was made.

I am available to meet and discuss the above with you if you wish.

Mark Davies
Director Operations
Western South Island