

Understanding summer activity

Making sense of what people did in the outdoors over 2023/24 summer

April 2024



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This document is produced to inform DOC staff about how visitor activity is tracking around Aotearoa New Zealand. This document provides insights gleaned from the 2023/24 summer season using most up-to-date information.

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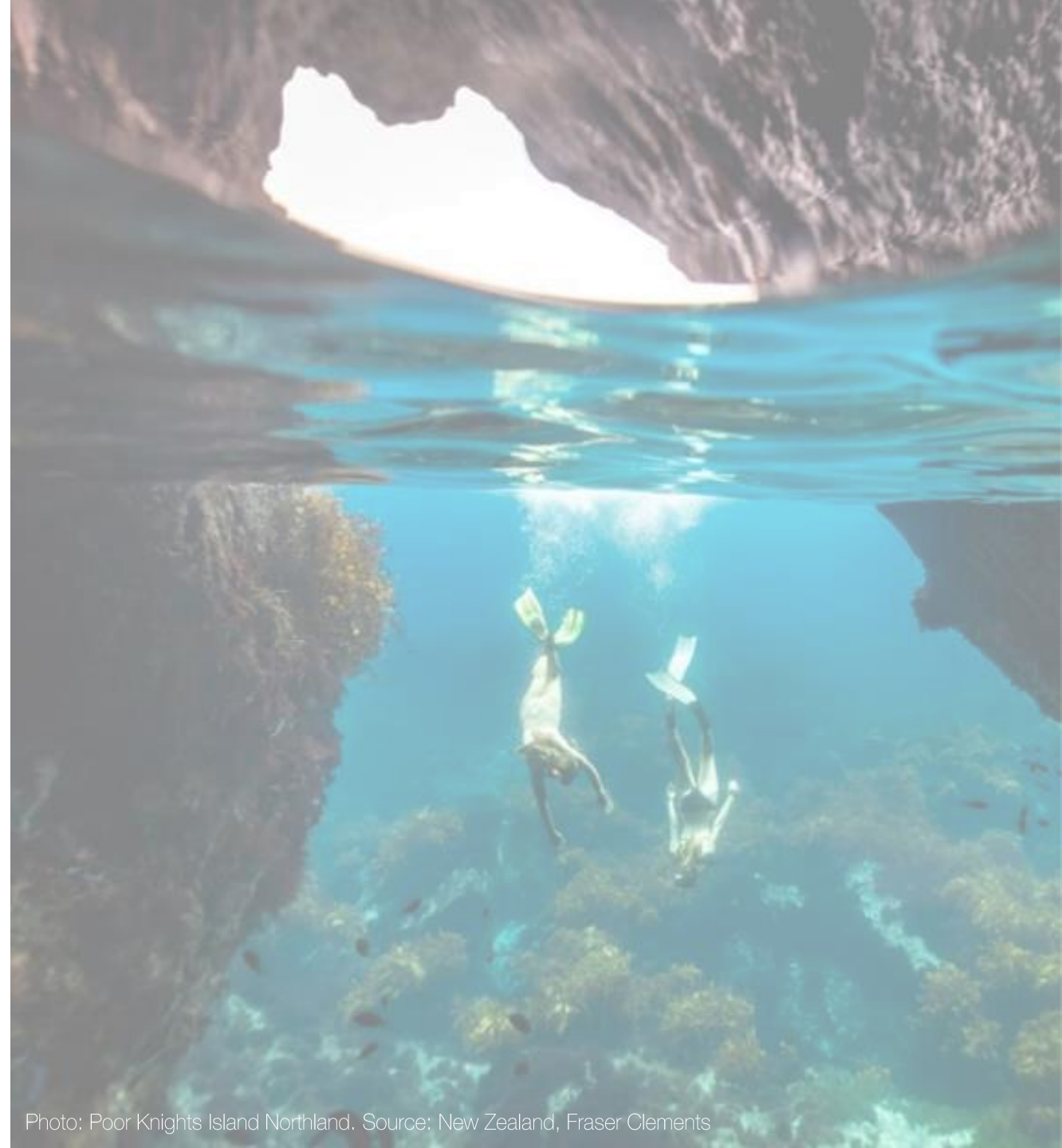
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Executive Summary

UNDERSTANDING 2023/24 SUMMER ACTIVITY

DOC is responsible for around one-third of lands and waters in Aotearoa New Zealand. That equates to more than 8 million hectares and includes native forests, rivers, mountains, wetlands, and other landscapes.

Warmer than average temperatures across nearly all of the country resulted in many New Zealanders heading outdoors. Over the 2023/24 summer; short walks, sightseeing, bird/wildlife watching and photography activities were popular.

“We are just loving how vibrant our community has been over the last two or three months, and it's fantastic just to see so many tourists around and our boats busy.”

- Abba Kahu, Whale Watch Kaikōura Sales and Innovation Manager (January 2024)

Over the 2023/24 summer, around 1 in 2 New Zealanders visited protected natural areas (such as parks and beaches) each month. Just under 1 in 3 New Zealanders visited a heritage site (such as historic reserves).

New Zealanders are visiting more easily accessible places in the outdoors, nearer to urban areas. Eight of the top ten places recently visited by New Zealand adults were in the North Island near coastal areas.

Despite higher airfares, tourism recovery from the impact of

COVID-19 has been quick. From October to December 2023, around half of all international tourists visited a national park. International tourists rated natural scenery

“Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park is a stunning place and it's great to see people enjoying the park. The challenge for DOC is our facilities – our huts, tracks, toilets and especially carparks – are struggling to handle these high visitor numbers.”

- Sally Jones, DOC Aoraki/Mount Cook Operations Manager (February 2024)

and wilderness highly. As tourism volumes increase, over-tourism becomes an important issue. A greater number of New Zealanders noticed visitor damage at protected areas than last summer.

The most significant risk to the sustainability of Aotearoa New Zealand is climate change. Impacts of extreme weather events is putting significant pressure on our visitor network.

Now, more than ever, DOC needs to connect people – locals, New Zealanders, and internationals – to nature to help reverse the decline of the unique biodiversity in Aotearoa New Zealand.

National trends

International tourists are returning to New Zealand and visitor infrastructure is recovering from recent extreme weather events. The next sub-section explores how trends are affecting DOC's work.



December 2023 overseas visitor arrivals is 79% of December 2019

The December 2023 number of overseas visitor arrivals is 79% of the pre-COVID number of 528,200 in December 2019.

Of the 418,900 overseas visitor arrivals in December 2023:

- 40% were from Australia
- 13% were from the United States
- 7% were from the United Kingdom
- 5% were from China.

For 2023, overseas visitor arrivals were 2.96 million in the December 2023 year, increasing by 1.52 million from the December 2022 year.

Source: [International travel: Dec 2023 | Stats NZ](#)

International tourism is returning to New Zealand

Short-term international visitor arrivals to New Zealand (December visitor numbers only).

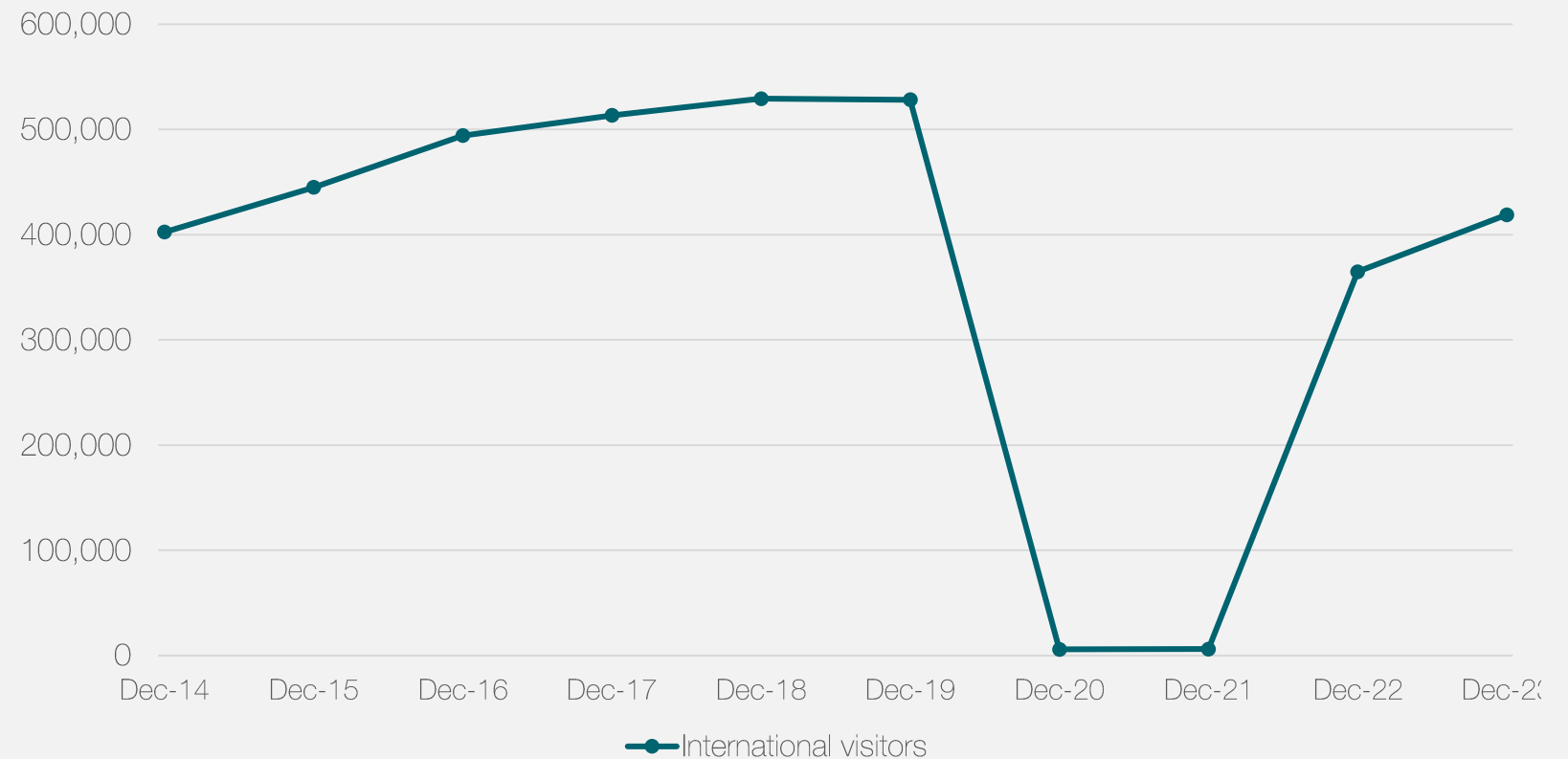


Figure 1: The number of overseas visitors entering New Zealand – December visitor numbers only.

As tourism volumes increase, over-tourism becomes an important issue

Despite higher airfares, tourism recovery from the impact of COVID-19 has been quick.

The World Travel and Tourism Council predicts an increase in international travel of, on average, 5.8% per year between 2022 and 2032 worldwide.

Over-tourism has a direct impact on New Zealanders. There are increasing articles on the topic of overtourism post-COVID.

In Aoraki/Mount Cook National Park, the toilet tank at Mueller Hut filled up faster than expected. The national park had higher than anticipated visitor numbers this summer.



An image taken from the track to Mueller Hut shows traffic backed up en route to a carpark in Aoraki National Park. Photo: Mike Washington. Supplied to RNZ.

Adapting and contributing to the mitigation of climate change

Tourism was identified as a risk in New Zealand's first climate risk assessment. This is because of the dependence on natural and physical infrastructure that is vulnerable to disruption.

The tourism sector in New Zealand is already feeling the impact of global climate change in the form of extreme weather events.

To the right is Okura Bush walkway. It will remain closed for an extended period due to extensive slip damage caused by severe weather events in 2023.



Photo: Landslip at Okura Bush Image: Stefan Sebregts | DOC.

“ Sadly, there are no easy fixes for Okura Bush Walkway. We have sought a geotechnical report and are working closely with mana whenua to continue to explore options for the long-term future of the track. Given the extensive damage to the walkway, finding a solution that will withstand future severe weather events will be challenging and likely very costly. This may result in a decision not to reinstate the walkway.”

- Rebecca Rush, DOC Auckland Mainland Operations Manager (December 2023)

Connecting New Zealanders to nature

Getting a sense of what New Zealanders did outdoors helps build a picture of 2023/24 summer visitor activity. This next sub-section draws on survey data of adult New Zealanders to understand what they did, where they went and how they felt about their recent visit to the outdoors.

Protected natural areas include national parks, conservation areas and marine reserves. Protected heritage places include historic reserves, historic buildings, places important to Māori and places of national significance.



Many New Zealanders continue to head into nature

From December 2023 to February 2024, the proportion of New Zealanders visiting protected natural areas each month has remained near 50%.

For the same period, the proportion of New Zealanders who reported visiting protected heritage places was similar to 2022/23 summer.

The number of New Zealanders visiting protected natural areas was slightly higher in February 2024 compared to February 2023, reflecting the better weather this summer.

Around one in two NZers visited a protected area over summer

Proportion of respondents who reported visiting in the past month



Figure 2: Number of times New Zealanders visited any of New Zealand's [protected areas/heritage places] within the last month.

New Zealanders went to easily accessible places near urban areas

DOC is New Zealand's largest provider of visitor activities. We manage 13 national parks, 36 conservation parks, 44 marine reserves, hundreds of reserves and over 15,000 km of tracks.

Of 200 protected natural areas surveyed, the map to the right shows the top 10 places most recently visited by New Zealand adults over summer.

Most of the top 10 recently visited places are in the North Island, near coastal areas and population centres.

Long Bay-Okura Marine Reserve (north of Auckland) was the most often cited recently visited area in New Zealand. Rangitoto Island (Auckland) was popular with New Zealanders. This reflects where New Zealanders live and travel.

Some of the other popular destinations were less than 2 hours from population centres, including Remutaka (Wellington) and Hanmer (Christchurch).

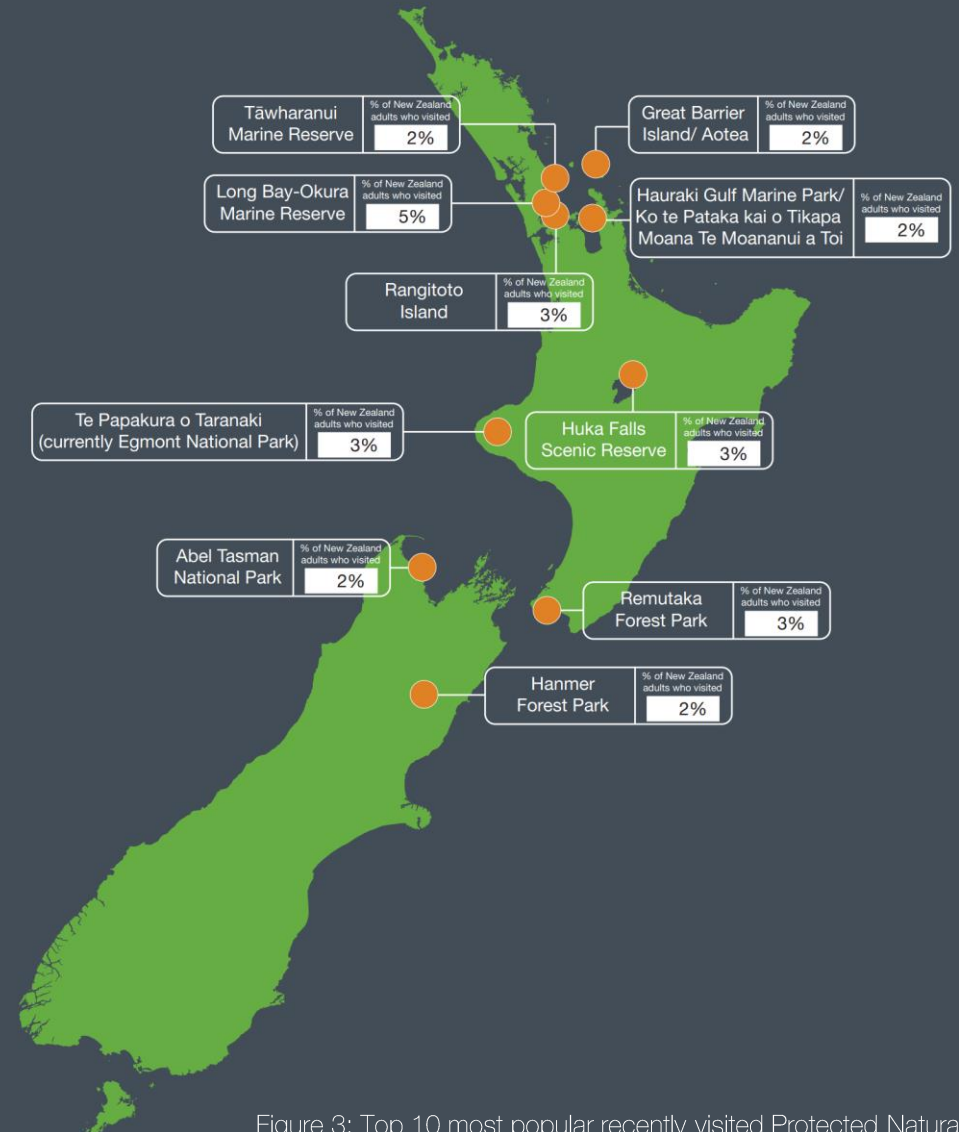


Figure 3: Top 10 most popular recently visited Protected Natural Areas visited over summer 2023-24. Source: Public Pulse of Conservation.

Similarly, New Zealanders went to heritage sites near urban areas

DOC manages the largest heritage portfolio in the country, about 600 archaeological and/or historic sites. DOC cares for places that have shaped our history and helps people to learn about the important stories at those places.

Of 200 protected natural areas surveyed, the map to the right shows the top 10 places most recently visited by New Zealand adults over summer.

Most of the top 10 recently visited heritage places are located near population centres.

Fort Takapuna Historic Reserve (Auckland) was the most often cited recently visited heritage place in New Zealand. Like protected areas, this reflects where New Zealanders live and travel.

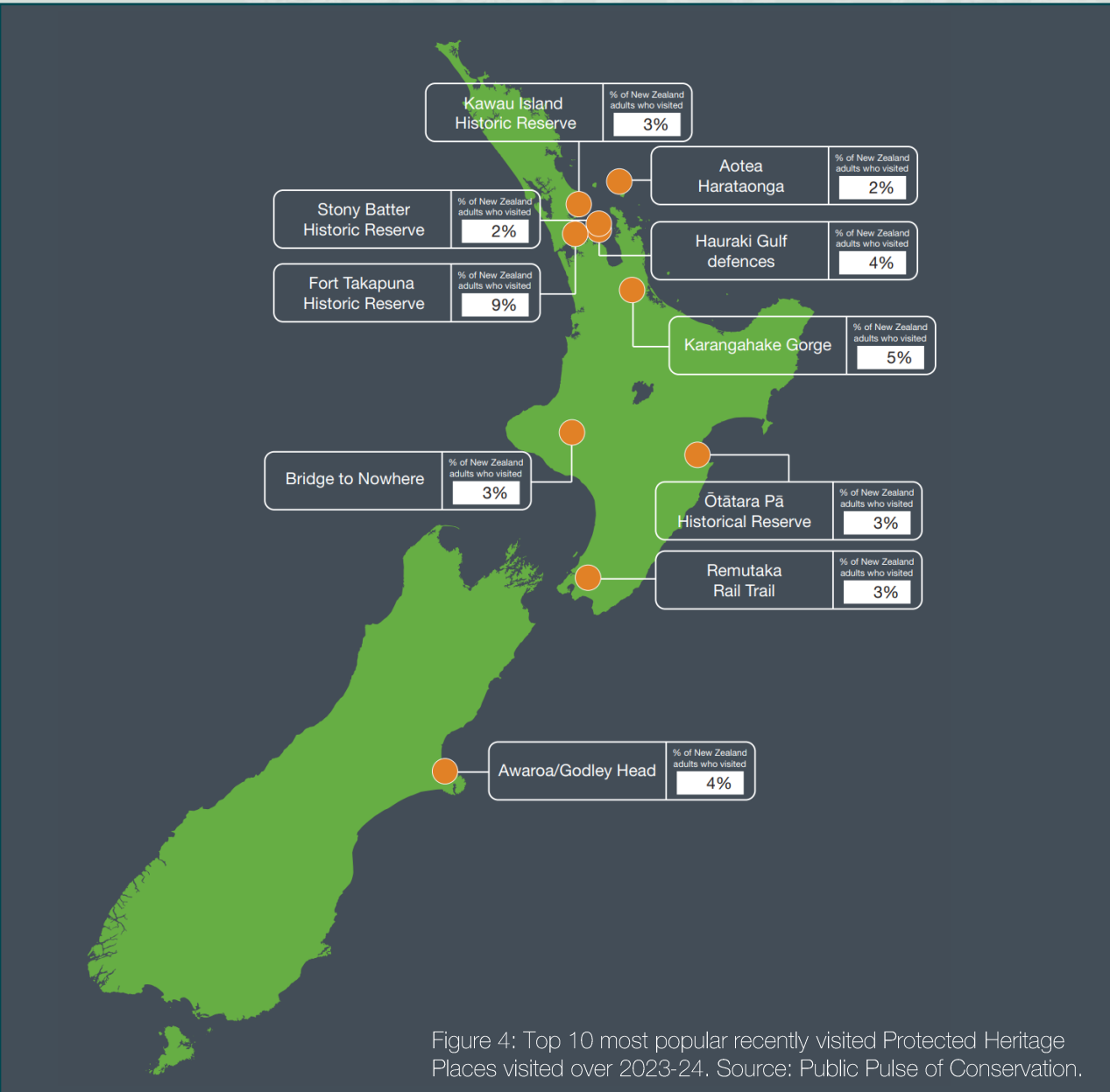


Figure 4: Top 10 most popular recently visited Protected Heritage Places visited over 2023-24. Source: Public Pulse of Conservation.

Shorter experiences remain most popular with New Zealanders

Short walks (42%) remain the most popular activity undertaken by respondents on their last visit to a protected natural area. This was similar compared to last summer.

Sightseeing (32%) and bird/wildlife watching (27%) were also popular activities and slightly increased compared to last summer.

Small numbers also reported fishing in a river or lake (4.1%), mountain biking (2.7%), overnight/multi-day tramps/hikes (2.0%) and hunting (1.6%).

Short walks remain the most popular activity for NZers

Proportion of respondents who engaged in activities during most recent visit (Dec – Feb 2024)

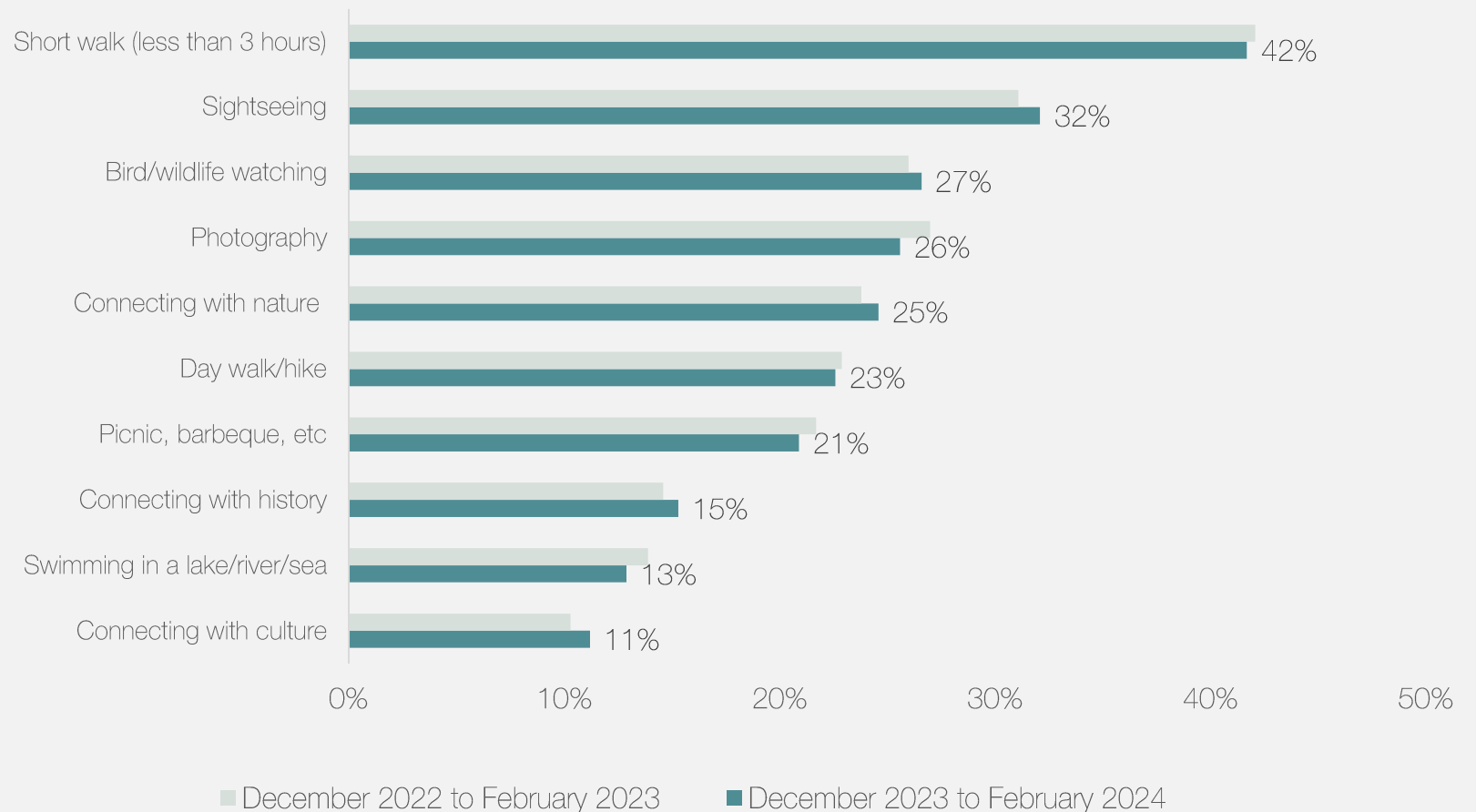


Figure 5: Top 10 activities New Zealanders engaged in during their last visit to a Protected Natural Area. These proportions are weighted averages. Dec to Feb. Source: Public Pulse of Conservation.

Around a third of New Zealand visitors noticed visitor impacts

Between December 2023 and February 2024 around a third of visitors (35% at protected natural areas and 29% at protected heritage places) reported that they had noticed damage from visitors.

Damage from visitors increased for protected natural areas and decreased for protected heritage areas from the previous summer.

At both protected natural areas and protected heritage places, damage to natural landscapes was observed the most (14% and 10% respectively), followed by crowding/too many visitors and damage to visitor facilities/infrastructure.

NZ visitors noticed damage to natural landscapes most

Proportion of New Zealand visitors who noticed damage by visitors (Dec to Feb 2024)

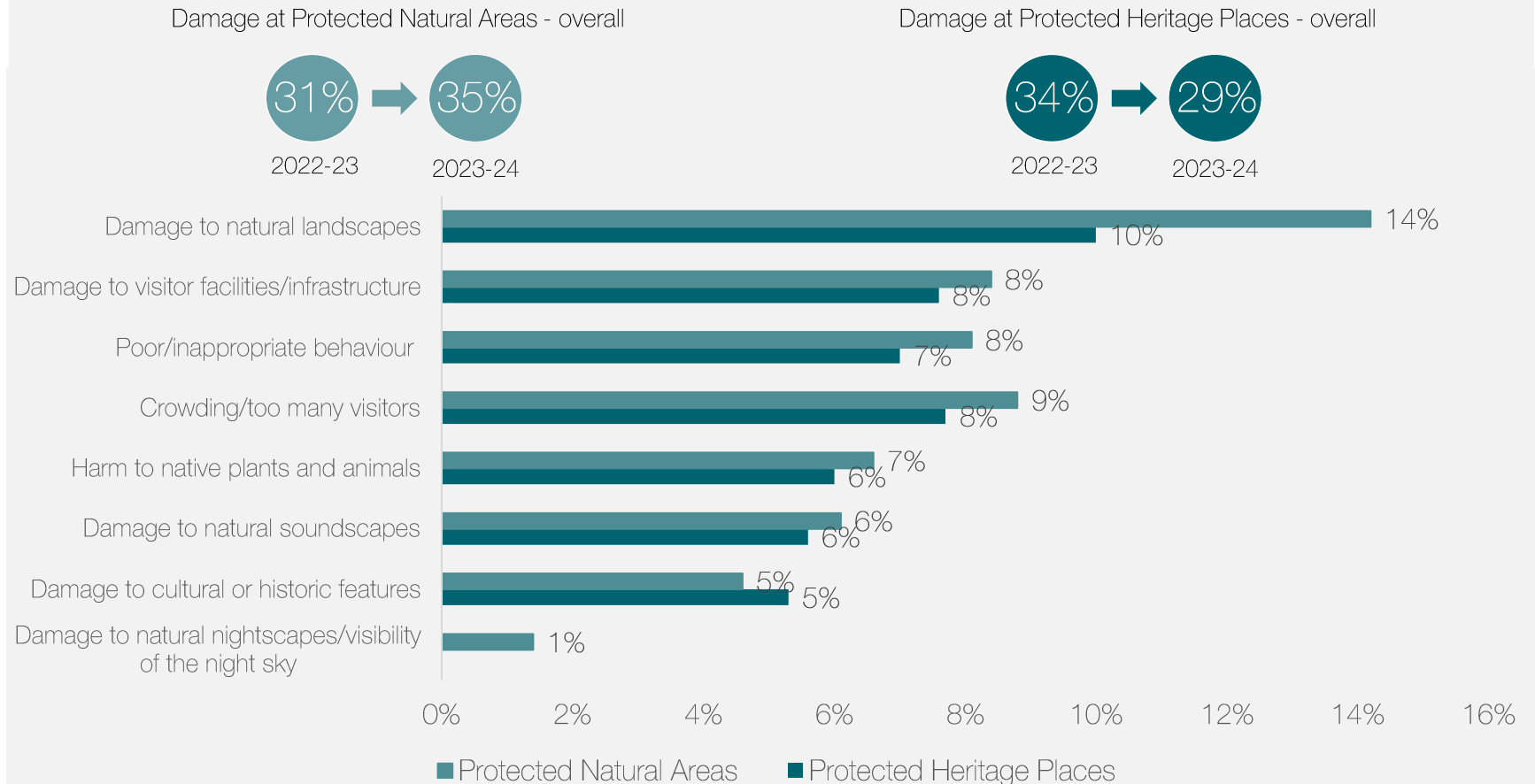


Figure 6: Proportion of New Zealand visitors who have noticed certain types of damage from other visitors, on their most recent visit to Protected Natural Areas and Protected Heritage Places. December to February. Source: Public Pulse of Conservation.

Four in five New Zealand visitors had a good time outdoors

Visitors generally had positive responses to their last experience at protected natural areas and protected heritage places.

The proportion of visitors who had a good time at protected natural areas was higher than those who had a good time at protected heritage places.

Satisfaction with the experience at protected natural areas was slightly lower compared to the previous summer. Satisfaction with protected heritage places was higher when compared to the previous year.

Most NZers who went to protected areas had a good time

Proportion of New Zealand visitors who rated their most recent visit outdoors

Protected Natural Areas

2022-23 summer

86% - good or exceptionally good visit



2023-24 summer

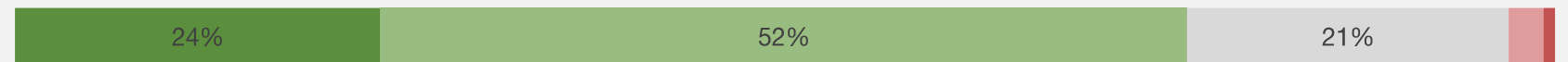
84% - good or exceptionally good visit



Protected Heritage Places

2022-23 summer

76% - good or exceptionally good visit



2023-24 summer

80% - good or exceptionally good visit



■ Exceptionally good ■ Good ■ Acceptable / OK ■ Poor ■ Extremely poor

Figure 7: The proportion of respondents who rated their most recent visit to Protected Natural Areas and Protected Heritage Places. December to February. Source: Public Pulse of Conservation.

Connecting international visitors to nature

The December 2023 number of overseas visitor arrivals is 79 percent of the pre-COVID-19 number of 528,220 in December 2019. This sub-section contains the most recent [International Visitor Survey](#) (IVS) information available. It covers the final quarter of 2023 (October to December 2023).



Many internationals visiting NZ headed out into nature

Beaches (51%) and national parks (48%), were the top-visited specified natural attractions; followed by geothermal parks (27%), glaciers (24%) and places significant to Māori (24%).

Over half (57%) of international visitors had also visited (or done) another type of unspecified natural attraction.

Other popular attractions were breweries/vineyards, etc. (21%), garden visit or flower show (21%) and top end restaurants (20%).

Beaches and national parks were popular with internationals

Proportion of international visitors who went to places and experiences (Oct – Dec 2023)

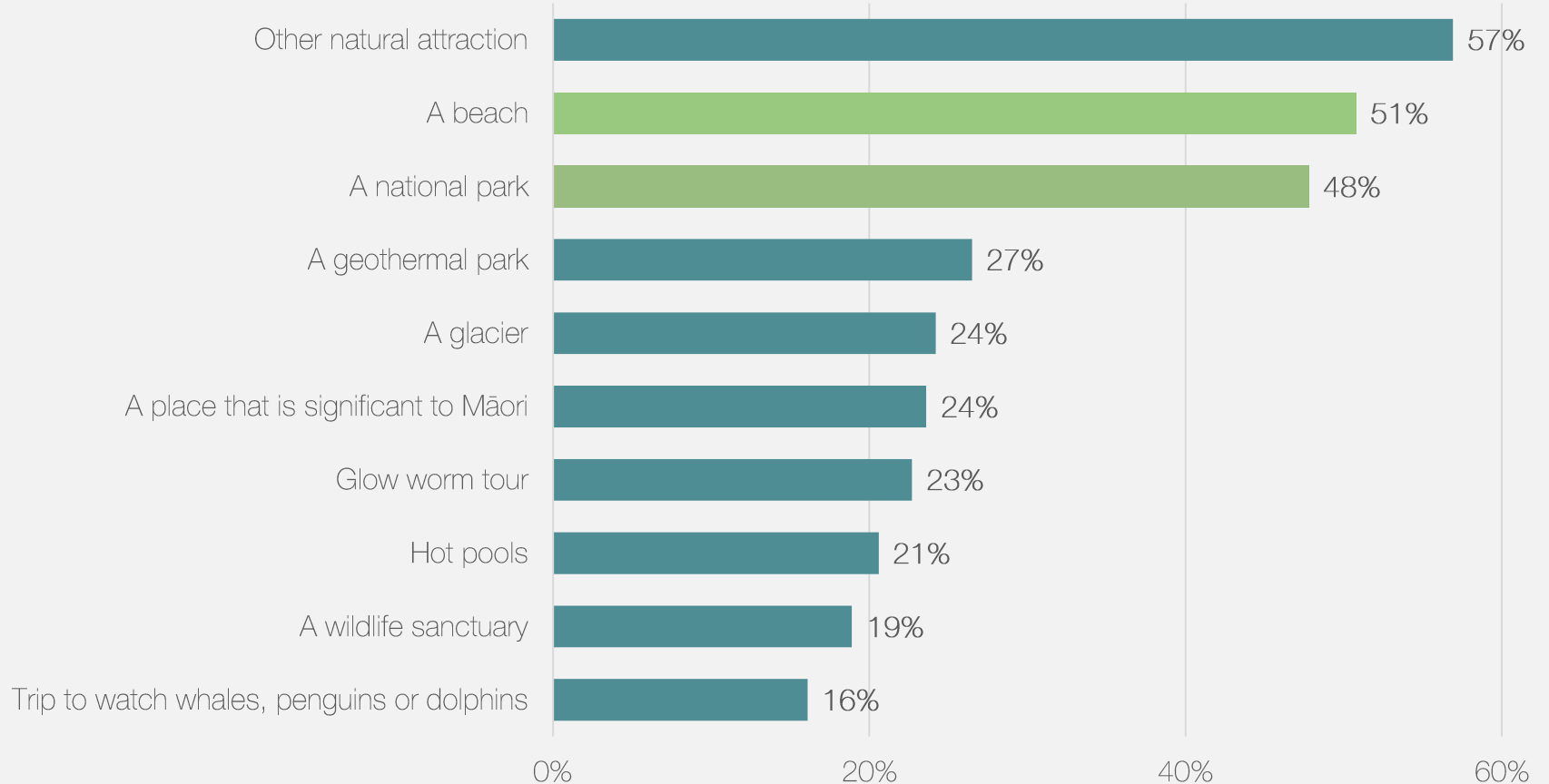


Figure 8: IVS: While International visitors were in New Zealand, which things did they go to? [Top places/experiences]

Te Wahipounamu – South West New Zealand was most popular

Around half (48%) of international visitors visited one or more National Parks.

Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook National Parks had the highest levels of self-reported visitor activity. Other popular South Island National Parks were:

- Westland Tai Poutini: 12%
- Arthur's Pass: 11%
- Mount Aspiring: 10%

Of the three North Island national parks, Tongariro National Park attracted the most (12%) international visitors.

Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook national parks were popular

Proportion of international visitors who visited national parks (Oct – Dec 2023)

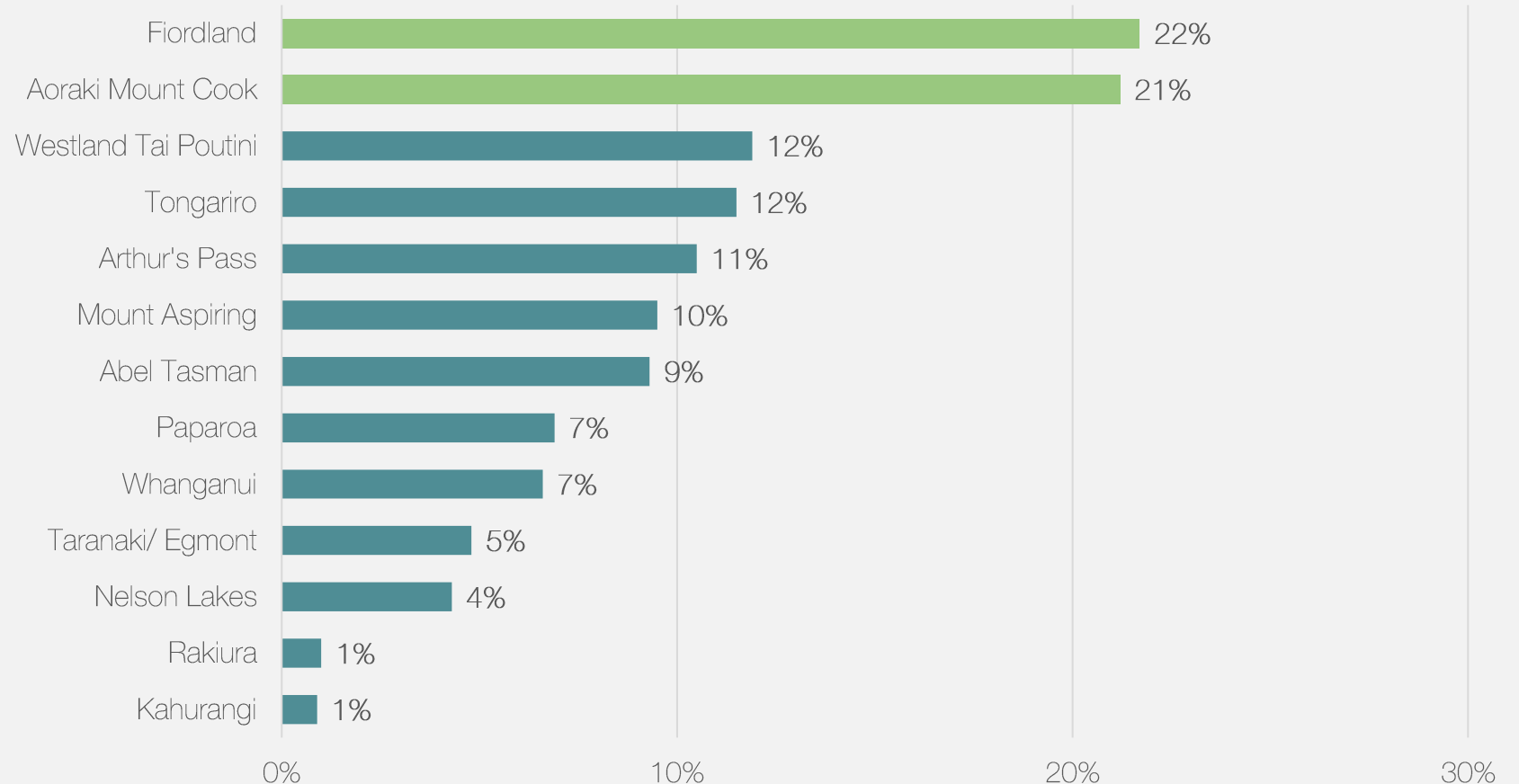


Figure 9: IVS: While International visitors were in New Zealand, which National Parks did they go to?

Note: The survey tool typically included prominent places (e.g. Milford Sounds) in addition to national park names.

Short walks (under 3 hours) were most popular with internationals

To the right are the top outdoor activities undertaken by international visitors from October to December 2023.

Overall, around six out of ten (65%) international visitors did a walk/tramp. Walks (between 30 minutes and 3 hours) were most popular.

A range of water- and equipment-based activities were undertaken by 2-13% of international visitors. Small numbers also reported mountain/rock climbing (5%), Great Walk (4%), fishing (3%), trek/ tramp that included an overnight stay (2%) and scuba diving or snorkelling (2%).

Many internationals undertook day walks in the outdoors

Proportion of international visitors who undertook outdoor activities (Oct – Dec 2023)

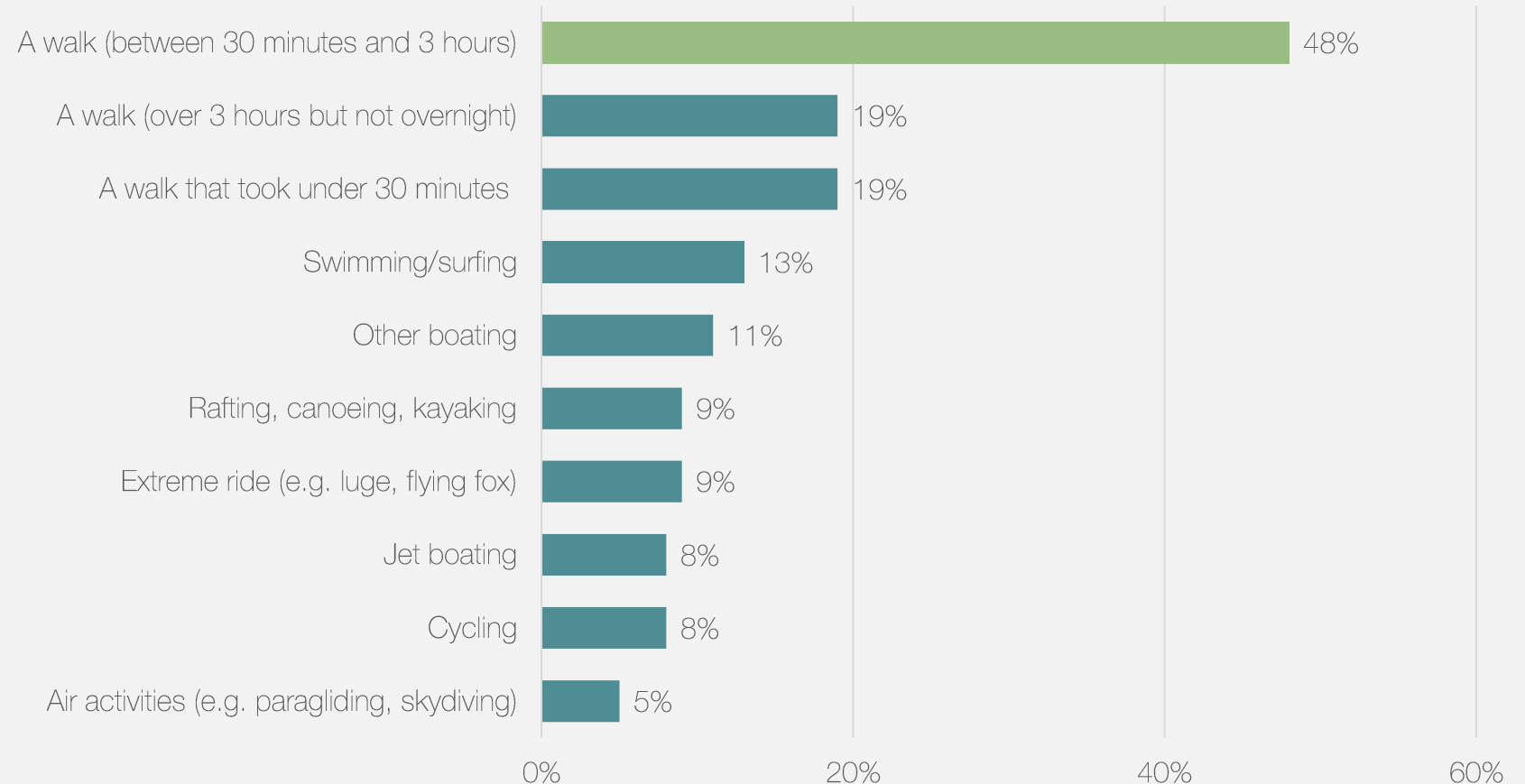


Figure 10: IVS: While you were in New Zealand, which of these things did you go to? [Top outdoor activities]

Most internationals rated natural scenery and wilderness as very good

Around 9 out of 10 (87%) international visitors rated the natural scenery and wilderness as very good. This was the highest rated attribute, with almost all visitors (99%) rating it as good to some degree.

While not as highly rated, other environmental attributes were also well perceived – around nine out of ten rated each attribute as good to some degree. The quality of drinking water and availability of public facilities rated worst.

Visitors felt safe and welcome (94% rated these attributes as good).

Natural scenery/wilderness were rated high by internationals

Proportion of international visitors who rated attributes of visit (Oct – Dec 2023)

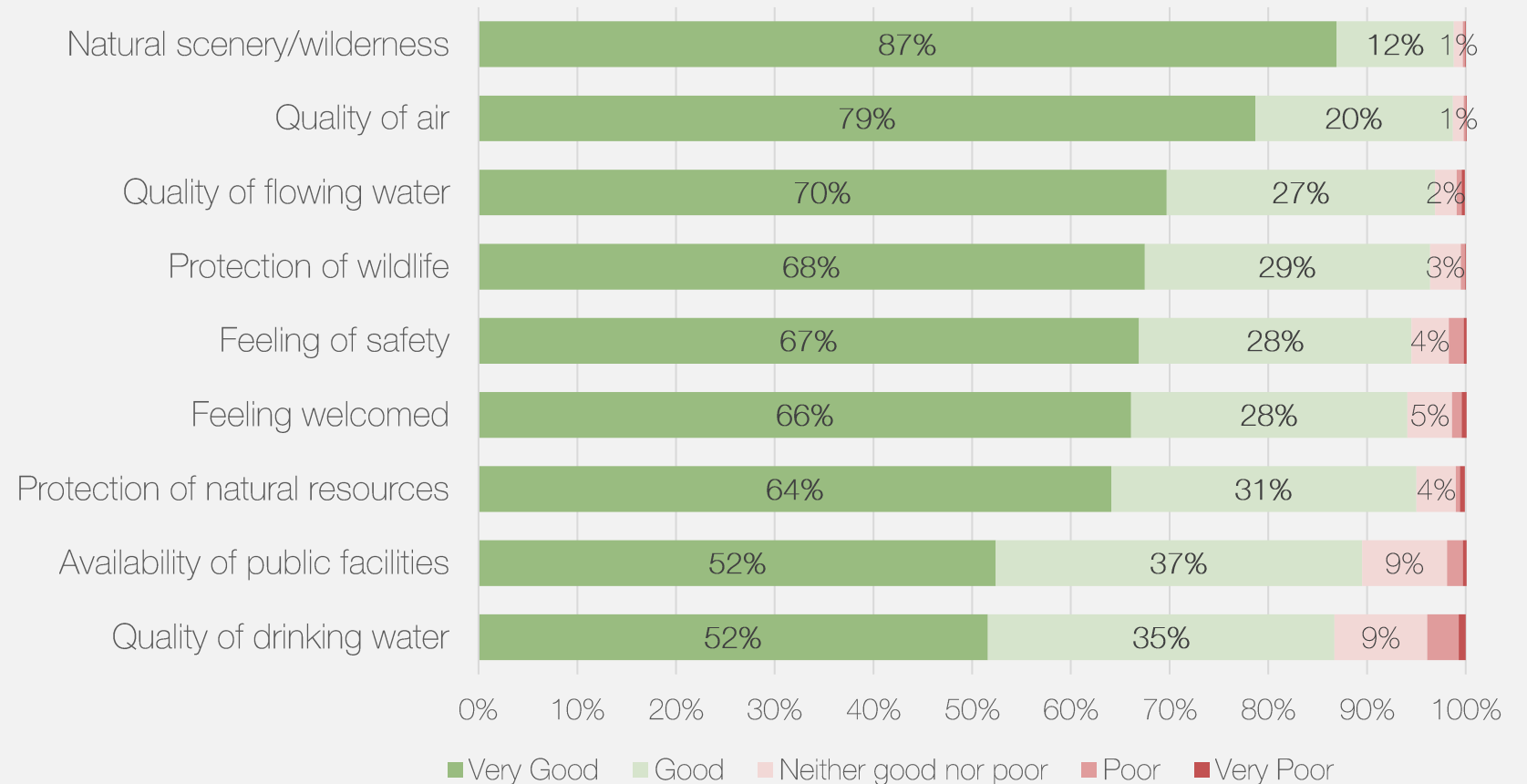


Figure 11: IVS: Based on your experiences during your trip to New Zealand, how would you rate the following? Note: this survey covers all experiences wider than those on public conservation lands and waters. Don't know and not applicable responses not included on graph above.

Most international visitors were satisfied when visiting New Zealand

Nine out of ten (90%) international visitors were either satisfied or very satisfied with their visit to New Zealand. Just under two in three (64%) international visitors were very satisfied.

Of those international visitors who went to Māori cultural experiences,¹ over nine out of ten (92%) agreed they enjoyed their experience.

92%

Agreed they enjoyed their experience of Māori culture¹

¹Experiences were not limited to public conservation land and waters.

Nine out of ten internationals were satisfied with New Zealand

Proportion of internationals who were satisfied with their most recent visit to New Zealand

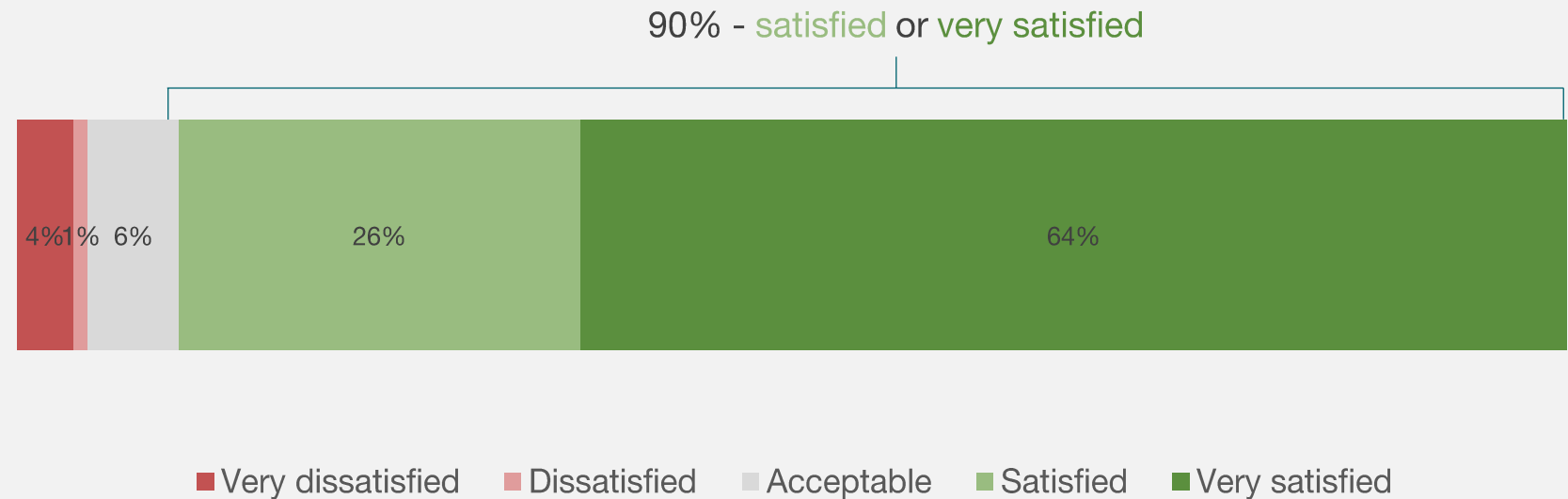


Figure 12: IVS: And thinking about all the aspects of your trip, how satisfied were you with your New Zealand visit overall?

Understanding where people stayed in the outdoors

Overnight accommodation is important to understanding where people stayed outdoors. This sub-section contains data and information for the 2022/23 period (1 December 2023 to 29 February 2024) from DOC's booking system. Note, this sub-section includes people staying on public conservation land only, not all accommodation in New Zealand.



Most Great Walk huts were at or near full capacity over summer

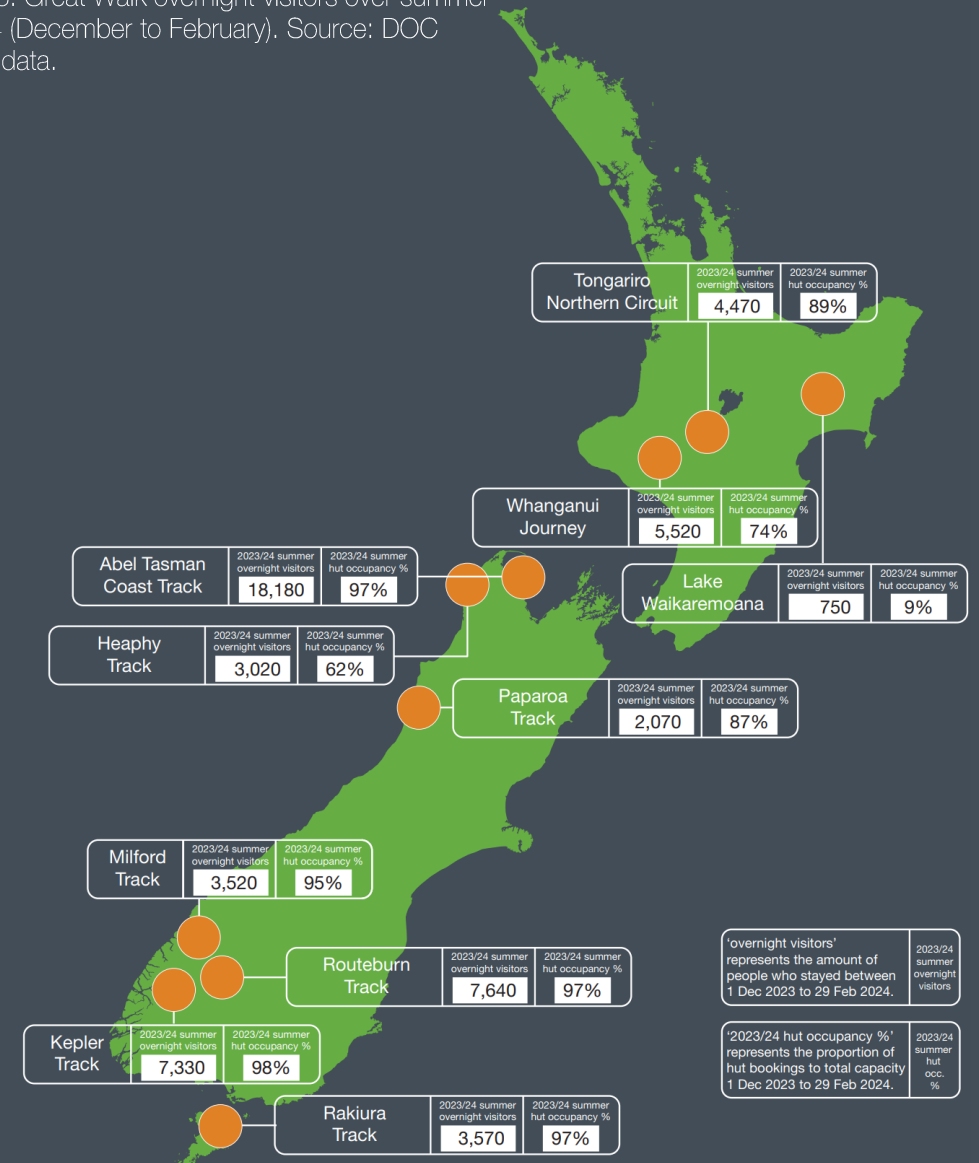
For December 2023 to February 2024, around 50,430 people stayed at Great Walk huts and campsites, up 5% compared to last summer.

Visitors undertaking Great Walks were similar (102%) to the December 2018 to February 2019 pre-COVID equivalent, the last full summer not impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

- The number of New Zealanders undertaking Great Walks grew by 27% compared to summer 2018/19.
- International visitors undertaking Great Walks were 78% of summer 2018/19.
- New Zealanders make up 62% of overnight visitors to Great Walks.

Great Walk huts had an average summer occupancy of 77%. Aside from the Heaphy Track, Whanganui Journey and Lake Waikaremoana, all Great Walks were at or near capacity over summer.

Figure 13: Great Walk overnight visitors over summer 2023-24 (December to February). Source: DOC booking data.



Around 203,000 people camped at bookable campsites over summer

DOC manages close to 300 campsites. 159 of these campsites are bookable. Aside from 45 Great Walk campsites, 114 campsites are bookable.

Around 203,000 people camped at bookable campsites over the 2023/24 summer, up 49% compared to last summer. New Zealanders make up 67% of people who camped at DOC's bookable campsites.

Camping at bookable North Island campsites was up (+60%) compared to 2022/23 summer. A lot of this growth is most likely due to campsites re-opening following Cyclone Gabrielle and warmer weather over summer.

South Island camping is up 43% in visitor numbers compared to 2022/23 summer. This reflects the continual return of international visitors to New Zealand.

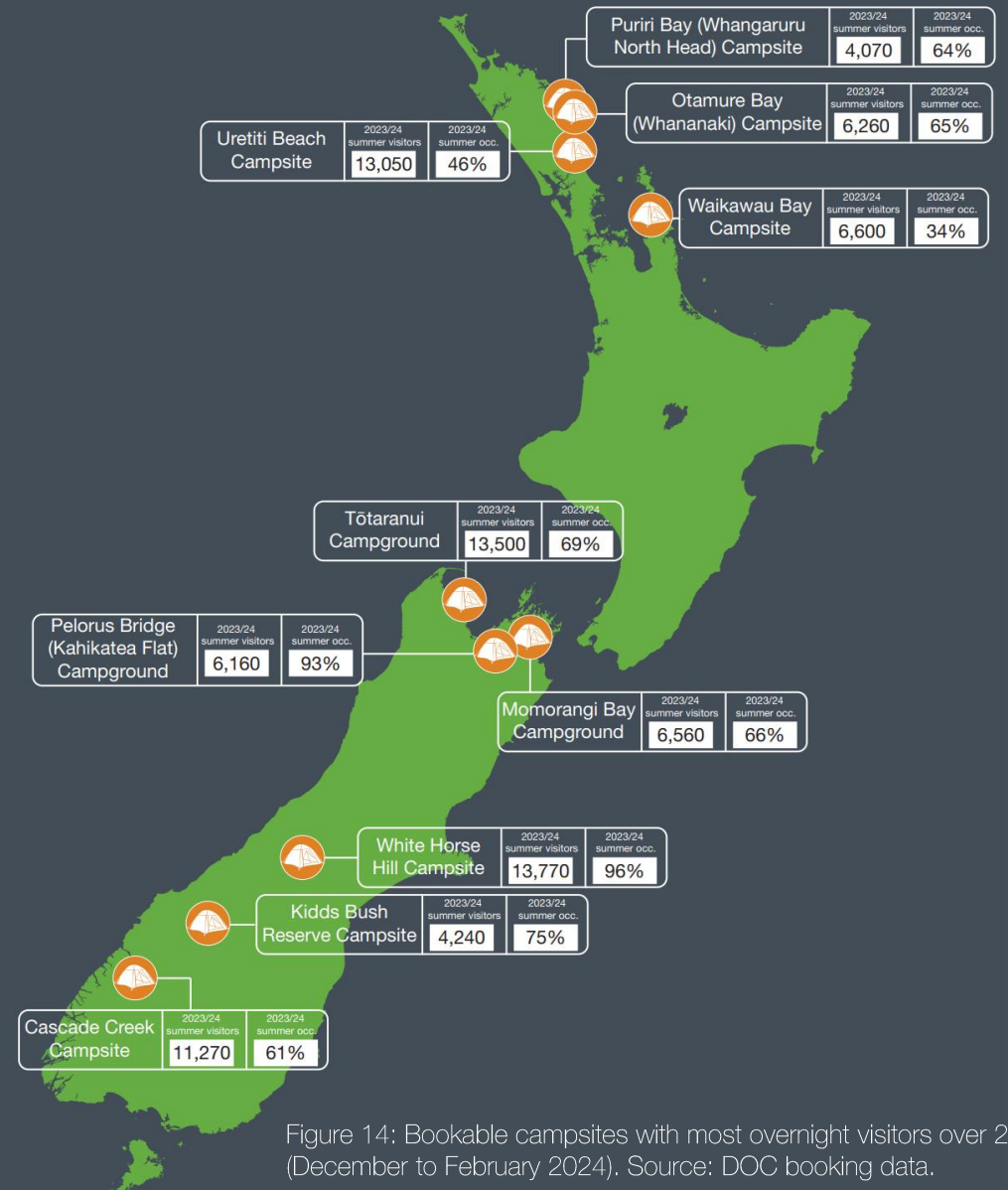
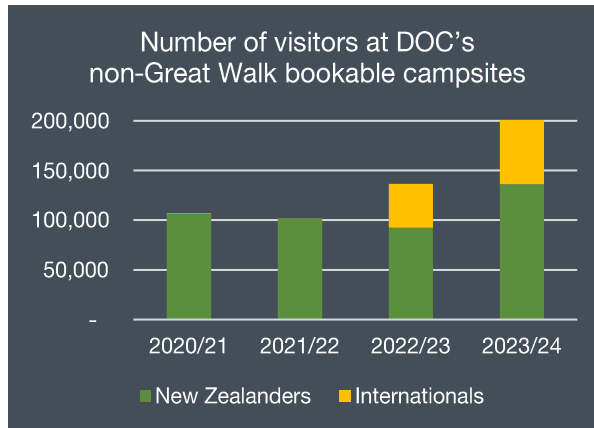


Figure 14: Bookable campsites with most overnight visitors over 2023-24 (December to February 2024). Source: DOC booking data.

Aside from Great Walks around 37,800 people stayed at bookable huts

DOC manages over 950 huts across the country. Aside from Great Walk huts, 70 huts are bookable and many of these huts experienced high visitor demand. Hut occupancy rates average 55% over the 2023/24 summer.

Around 37,800 people stayed overnight at bookable huts over the 2023/24 summer, up 21% compared to last summer. New Zealanders make up 84% of people who stayed at DOC's bookable huts.

The Pinnacles Hut (Coromandel) was the most visited non-GW hut in New Zealand this summer. Pouakai Hut (Taranaki) and Hooker Hut (Aoraki) were the most occupied huts over 2023/24, at 95% and 93% summer hut occupancy, respectively.

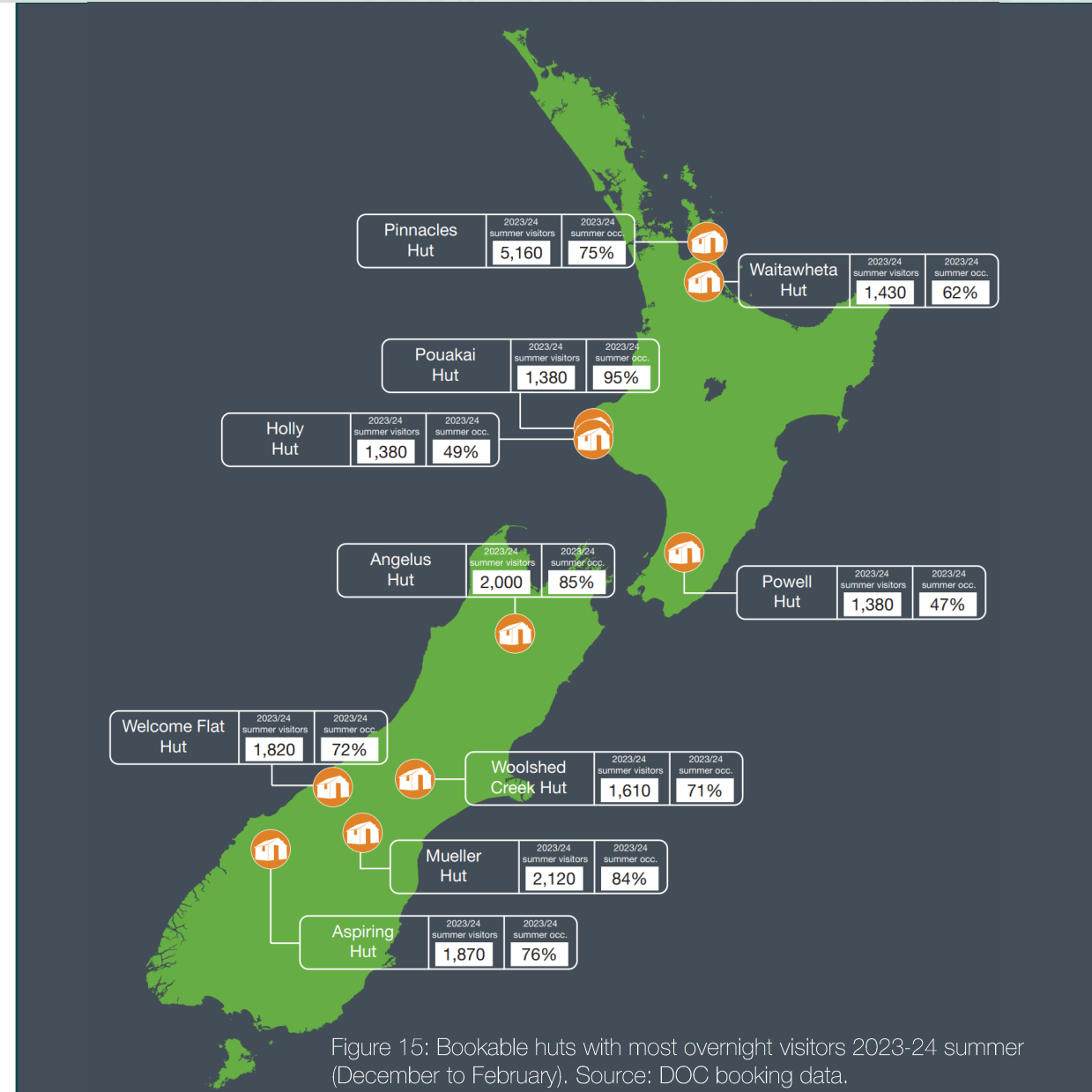
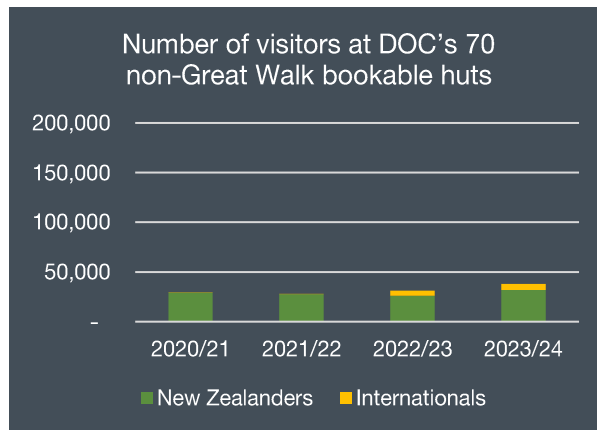


Figure 15: Bookable huts with most overnight visitors 2023-24 summer (December to February). Source: DOC booking data.

Supporting communities to thrive

This next sub-section provides a snapshot into some work DOC is undertaking with tangata whenua, regions and communities to help everyone benefit from protecting and connecting visitors with their natural, cultural and historic heritage.



The Pike29 Memorial Track officially opened in February 2024

The 11.6 km dual mountain biking and walking track connects the Paparoa Track Great Walk to the Pike River Valley.

The new track has been created in partnership between Ngāti Waewae, DOC and the families of the 29 men who died as a result of the Pike River mine disaster in November 2010.

In addition to creating an enduring memory for their family members lost in the disaster, the Pike River families wanted to create long term sustainable economic benefits for those West Coast Communities impacted by the disaster.



Photo: Pike River family members after the ribbon was cut and track open. Image: DOC.

“What a wonderful legacy that is for all of us, not only for the present generations but also for those to come so that they, like us, can reflect on the tragedy of the Pike River Mine Disaster and the lessons to be learned from it, remember those who were lost as a consequence of it and enjoy the beauty that abounds on the track and in the Pike Valley.”

- Colin Smith, Pike River Families Group Committee chairperson (February 2024)

A long-term solution for visitor access at Cathedral Cove

Weather impacts from Cyclone Hale, Auckland Anniversary weekend flooding and Cyclone Gabrielle caused significant damage to the Cathedral Cove track. The track was closed because of the damage and safety risks of land instability and extreme weather.

Five rockfalls occurred on or around the Cathedral Cove Arch between August and November 2023. DOC has commissioned monitoring of the land stability. Results are expected in June 2024.

DOC staff will work alongside Ngāti Hei to develop options and conceptual ideas, which will then be shared for wider public engagement.



Photo: Slip at Cathedral Cove track. Image: DOC.

“Our goal is to reopen the track – but it must be done safely and in a durable and pragmatic way that lasts. Short-term solutions which do not offer an experience resilient to climate change are not viable as far as we’re concerned – we need to invest sensibly.”

- Tinaka Mearns, DOC Hauraki-Waikato-Taranaki Regional Director (January 2024)

Matiu Somes Island wharf to be rebuilt

Matiu/Somes Island is a predator-free scientific reserve and historic reserve owned by Taranaki Whānui, governed by a Kaitiaki Board and managed by DOC.

Since pests were eradicated, the island has become a sanctuary for native plants, birds, reptiles, and invertebrates including tuatara, kakariki, North Island robin, little blue penguins, and weta.

The existing wharf is due for replacement. The island is planned to be open to the public again by spring 2024, although factors like weather may influence this timeframe.



Matiu-Somes Island with Wellington City in the background Image: Jeremy Rolfe | Creative Commons.

“ The kaitiakitanga of the island is paramount, where the island remains pest-free and power systems and houses are maintained. We're looking forward to a brand-new wharf which will ensure Matiu is accessible for all uri, kaitiaki, and visitors in the future.”

- Te Whatanui Winiata, Chair of the Kaitiaki Board (January 2024)



Summary

Many New Zealanders continue to head into nature

Many New Zealanders went to easily accessible experiences near urban areas over summer. Four in five New Zealanders who visited places we look after had a good time. Short walks remain the most popular activity.

International visitors are gradually returning

The number of international visitors is getting closer to pre-COVID summer levels. December 2023 overseas visitor arrivals is 79% of December 2019. Short walks are most popular with internationals.

The impacts of visitors are noticeable at places

As tourism volumes increase, over-tourism becomes an important issue. Around a third of New Zealanders visitors noticed visitor impacts. Damage to natural landscapes was observed the most, followed by too many visitors.

Data and information sources

This document is similar but different from earlier visitor insight reports. This is because DOC does not have current activity counter data reporting available.

- ▶ **Stats NZ International Travel** – International travel covers the number and characteristics of overseas visitors and New Zealand resident travellers (short-term movements) entering or leaving New Zealand. International travel figures are for December 2023 only.
- ▶ **DOC Public Pulse of Conservation (n=3,000)** – There were n=1,000 adults (18+) each month who participated in an online survey. No weighting has been applied to the data in obtaining a representative sample. Instead, quotas were relied upon.
- ▶ **MBIE International Visitor Survey (n=2,283)** – The International Visitor Survey (IVS) measures the expenditure, characteristics and behaviours of international visitors to New Zealand. This document contains results for Quarter 4 2023. Sub-samples vary and are unavailable, but are robust.
- ▶ **DOC Bookable Accommodation** – DOC’s booking system currently collects accommodation booking data for huts, campsites and lodges across New Zealand. Estimated visitor numbers and occupancy rates are from 1 December 2023 to 29 February 2024.