



4th February 2020

Via Andrew McCarthy <Andrew.Mccarthy@pce.parliament.nz>

Dear Mr Upton,

RE: FEEDBACK – PRISTINE, POPULAR... IMPERILLED

Thank you for enabling the Queenstown Lakes District Council (QLDC) to present feedback in response to the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment's (PCE) latest report on the environmental consequences of projected tourism growth. The release of this report presents a welcome impetus in opening a dialogue across a disparate tourism system and QLDC would like to offer its assistance and insights in the process ongoing.

Tourism is important to the economic wellbeing of the residents of the Queenstown Lakes District and this must under no circumstances be minimised or underestimated. However, our residents are also highly climate-conscious and passionate about the integrity of the environment. Most people move to the district because of an emotional connection with the lakes and mountains; it's this connection that drives many to participate in sustainability and conservation initiatives.

The landscapes and environment of the Queenstown Lakes District attract a steady stream of visitors, providing a daily reminder of the tightrope the district walks. As a high-growth council, QLDC is experiencing significant growth in both visitor and resident numbers, which needs to be reflected in long term planning, policy, operations and management.

Manaakitaka* and kaitiakitaka*¹ run deeply in our tourism industry and many are taking significant steps within their spheres of influence to effect positive and meaningful change. However, most of our businesses are small to medium enterprises, facing economic survival challenges on a number of fronts. Their ability to prioritise sustainability is variable and further support may be needed.

The district is also proud to have a number of highly active community groups that are focussed on sustainability and environmental protection. Groups such as ONE New Zealand, Sustainable Queenstown, Sustainable Glenorchy and Extinction Rebellion have contributed to the development of an engaged, informed and diverse network of activists across the district. In June 2019 (due to a groundswell of community support) the Council declared a climate change emergency.

QLDC's approach to the provision of visitor infrastructure is well documented, but increasingly it's recognised that a more joined-up approach is needed across the wider tourism system. Achieving sustainable tourism is a complex problem for the district, with tourism contributing to the income of most households in some form and amplifying the revenue of different types of business across the board. It's an area in which we are facing growing pains –

¹ Manaakitanga and kaitiakitanga in the local Kāi Tahu dialect.

how do we transition from the legacy of a resort town to an increasingly diversified economy where people live and build complex, diverse communities?

Many of the challenges noted in your document are things with which QLDC and its communities have been grappling over recent years:

National Strategy – QLDC (in partnership with one of the district’s Regional Tourism Organisations – Destination Queenstown) provided feedback to the NZ Aotearoa Tourism Strategy during its consultation process last year. A key recommendation was that the strategy was delayed until after the PCE’s report on tourism’s impact on the environment. Whilst the strategy references sustainability and destination management, there’s little support in terms of operationalisation. The strategy continues to focus on growth, which requires further scrutiny in an era of climate conscience. Further exploration is needed in relation to the risks of losing wilderness and a potential crisis of the commons.

High Value Visitors - QLDC has previously supported the approach of attracting high value visitors, but is open-minded to new ways of thinking. In a district of ‘limitless desirability’ the price lever has done little to control the market, with escalating prices pushing many experiences out of the reach of residents and domestic visitors. Consideration should now be given to the role of the values-based visitor. As QLDC progresses in its journey to take meaningful climate action and become increasingly sustainable, it would be good to understand the value that like-minded visitors may bring to the district.

Regional and Seasonal Dispersal – Again, this is a concept that QLDC has previously supported, but increasingly sees little evidence of success or progress. Most visitors to New Zealand are undertaking a trip of a lifetime. As such, they seek the ultimate itinerary within seasonal bounds. The district has well-defined seasons and an established ski industry. It’s difficult to encourage seasonal dispersal due to the types of activity visitors want to undertake, particularly when regional neighbours have a more limited range of tourism products and attractions to offer. For example, Milford Sound visitors typically start and end their excursion from Queenstown, largely due to a lack of established attractions retaining them in the deep south.

The Role of Community – Whilst QLDC understands that the role of the PCE must necessarily be to focus on environmental impacts, as a local government body QLDC faces considerable challenges in relation to the community and social aspects of sustainable tourism. Tourism’s social license may be at risk here, if both the environmental impacts are not addressed and the community voice is not heard, as this will negatively impact quality of life. Understanding the representative community perspective is an ongoing challenge, as loud voices and strong positions dominate. With an exceptionally high visitor to resident ratio, there is a risk of the culture being swamped and the warm welcome being lost. QLDC increasingly looking through the lens of ‘sustainable host communities’ rather than ‘sustainable tourism’, as if the environmental and social impacts are addressed well for the community, it will provide an authentic, sustainable experience for visitors and industry.

Arguably more than anywhere else, the spectrum of community in the district traverses a broad range of mobility – the binary of local or visitor no longer resonates as there are many permutations inbetween. For example, the district’s communities include people who are only resident for six months of the year, people who work remotely and travel one week in four, seasonal workers and holiday home owners. QLDC requests that the PCE continue to keep the social aspects of sustainable tourism in mind in relation to future work and recommendations.

Data and Intelligence – A challenge across many aspects of QLDC’s work is a dearth of comprehensive data, which is especially pronounced in relation to information about visitors. A standardised, centralised set of data that speaks to domestic visitors, international visitors, modes of travel, accommodation, disruptive developments and changing visitor models would be of significant benefit in planning for infrastructure, sustainability initiatives and conservation. Different models and markets require a nuanced response. Currently, the different groups and agencies responsible for these activities are working to a disparate and incomplete set of information.

Destination Management (DM) – DM is often used synonymously with sustainable tourism and whilst it’s a promising conceptual model, QLDC is still working through what it looks like in a mature, tourism-dominant economy. A strong component of the model is its promise of a ‘whole of system’ approach. This is something that the district needs to find a way to do better, which will be addressed in our forthcoming Destination Strategy (working title) next year. Many of the groups that are part of the system work well at the moment, if a little separately. Longer term tourism planning, collaboration and community voice are likely to be key features of the Destination Strategy; an approach that’s evolutionary, rather than revolutionary.

Capacity Management – QLDC supports any opportunities to better understand the ecological thresholds of certain locations. This is a commitment outlined in the draft Climate Action Plan and any methodologies, tools or approaches that the PCE can offer would be appreciated. To date it has been challenging to identify models beyond the academic and conceptual.

Visitor obligation – This is an aspect that is often missing from discussions of sustainable tourism and should be given greater consideration. Good behaviours and ‘give back’ to local sustainability initiatives could be key to building a tourism system that treads more lightly. The Tiaki promise is a good start but needs significant work to make it more meaningful.

Traditionally, the public sector has taken a hands-off approach to the tourism system on the basis that the market will regulate itself. But when it comes to environmental protection and regeneration, QLDC understands that the market alone will not provide a co-ordinated response. The range of actors across the tourism system (industry, government, iwi and community groups) are willing and proactive, yet disconnected. This is something that QLDC is looking to lead in this district, as an organisation with longevity and influence.

We are at an early stage in the journey, but our focus areas include:

- Spatial Plan – being developed in partnership with Kāi Tahu and central government, including DIA, MfE, Transport, Health, Treasury, NZTA and MHUD. The spatial plan supports DM principles in taking a longer-term view of growth in the district. Sustainability, resilience and wellbeing are the core principles underpinning our concept of Whaiora / Grow Well. The project is the first holistic spatial plan being undertaken in New Zealand and will shape the development of not only our communities, but also our tourism industry. A specific tourism work stream is included. A draft will be available in June / July 2020.
- Destination Strategy – this will be a key output of the tourism work stream and will be the opportunity to define a ‘whole of system’ approach, define data requirements, identify a mechanism to hear the community voice and consider in the detail the role of tourism in the district.

- Climate Action Plan – a final version of this will be adopted in March 2012. One of the five outcomes is ‘our economy and environment thrive together’. This is emergent work for the organisation and some of the actions are foundational. However, one of the actions focusses on the district becoming a leader in the delivery of sustainable tourism. An ambitious action, reflecting the importance with which we want to unpick this problem.
- Economic development – working with the tourism industry to improve productivity, efficiency, labour market availability and wages.
- Advocacy – responding to a range of policy tools and processes using a ‘high growth, visitor economy’ lens

This submission represents a very high level overview of QLDC’s strategic direction in relation to improving the sustainability of tourism and protecting the environment. QLDC is keen to work with the PCE to help deliver a tourism system that is both more sustainable for the environment and for local host communities. Given the dominance of tourism in this district and the importance of the district to the national tourism industry, it is hoped that QLDC’s insights, expertise and experiences will be valuable to the PCE’s further consideration of the matter.

Please accept this letter as an offer of assistance throughout the process in the hope that QLDC can continue the conversation with you further in the near future.

Yours sincerely,



Mike Theelen
Chief Executive, QLDC