

Inside Tourism Column

Time for action on freedom camping

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This summer has seen community discontent about freedom camping reach a whole new level.

There is no question that the negative social and environmental effects from poorly managed freedom camping are unacceptable and TIA is calling for all industry players and councils to do more to get the message across to those who are spoiling it for everyone else.

Two years ago TIA spearheaded the formation of the Freedom Camping Forum in response to growing community unrest around this issue. The forum pulled together representatives from more than 20 organisations, including local government, campervan companies, the NZ Motor Caravan Association, Tourism New Zealand and the Police.

We discounted the option of banning freedom camping as it would have a number of unintended repercussions. Such a move would have severe ramifications for Kiwis who regard freedom camping as a birthright of sorts; it would also penalise the many overseas visitors who enjoy the experience and undertake it responsibly. Enforcement would be impractical given the scale and complexity of our road network. Banning non-self-contained vans was also considered, but again, this is difficult to manage and could create the perverse outcome of more, cheap vehicles being bought by campers.

Instead, our approach has been to welcome well managed freedom camping, but not tolerate the minority who get it wrong. Our message to Kiwis and overseas visitors wanting to freedom camp is “Assume nothing – always ask a local about where and how it is permitted.”

The forum has created and distributed a suite of educational material and messages for campers, including developing a website. We have also developed a set of guidelines to assist councils to establish their freedom camping policies. It is worth noting that one of the guiding principles is that campers must have immediate access to, or on-board, toilet, wastewater collection and rubbish disposal facilities.

Regional Tourism Organisations promote the freedom camping message through their networks. The i-SITE network, Department of Conservation and Holidays Parks are sent pre-summer briefing sheets and checklists to help manage freedom camping, and TIA has given presentations on freedom camping and the role of councils to all South Island council CEOs and Mayors.

However, while there is national agreement on the best way to manage freedom camping, the growing level of adverse publicity is a reflection that not enough is being done.

An educational approach will only be effective if it is delivered strongly and consistently across the country by relevant operators, associations and councils. Some level of enforcement is also likely to be needed by councils, but we want to minimise the need for regulation through strong, consistent information to freedom campers.

It is now incumbent on everyone, and none more so than campervan companies, to tell freedom campers that while we welcome them, they have obligations they must adhere to when they are in New Zealand.

When the forum next meets in mid-April, we will be asking all members to renew their commitment to managing freedom camping, to be clear about their own action plan and what support they need to achieve that.

We are deeply concerned about this issue. Working together to protect our environment, retain community support for tourism and deliver world class visitor experience is absolutely critical and remains a priority for TIA.