Taxing questions about investment in the conservation estate

By Chris Roberts – 03 March 2016

I noted with interest recent comments in the media that the Conservation Authority is investigating different charging mechanisms in response to tourism growth.

It was reported that "the authority hosted a meeting with DOC, Tourism New Zealand and the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment to start brainstorming ways to address the impacts on conservation from increased tourism. A key topic was considering ways to charge tourists so that taxpayers or DOC did not have to foot the bill for managing more tourism on conservation land. Options included charging for car parking, a border tax, or fees to access national parks".

TIA and DOC have a partnership agreement and work closely together across a range of tourism related issues. We are very keen to contribute to the 'brainstorming'. DOC has welcomed our interest and meetings have been scheduled.

We will go into those discussions prepared to look at all sensible options. But we are opposed to any suggestion of a border tax.

As a first principle, new taxes are rarely the best answer to any funding shortfalls. A border tax would be unjust. The majority of international arrivals have no interaction with the conservation estate. Research by Tourism New Zealand suggests that around a quarter of international holiday arrivals go walking/hiking at least once during their stay (the definition excludes short bush walks).

Any funds collected at the border and given to DOC might provide an initial boost to their budget.

But it is inevitable – and probably sooner rather than later – that a government would take the opportunity to reduce its own direct funding of DOC, which would end up no better off. Meanwhile New Zealand would be telling our international visitors that we see them as a burden by taxing them at the border.

So we would like a border tax taken off the table. However, we are very open to looking at greater use of user pays and how there can be better alignment between the costs DOC incurs in providing facilities like camp grounds, huts, car parks and toilets, and the income it receives from them. There will be mechanisms which would allow DOC to have realistic charges, while at the same time protecting New Zealanders' birthright to access the conservation estate.

TIA also believes that private sector investment in infrastructure serving the conservation estate needs greater encouragement and significant existing barriers to achieving this need to be removed.

Dispersal is key to managing visitor growth. For DOC, there are only a handful of pressure points at certain times of the year. Most of the conservation estate is still under-utilised. TIA is keen and ready to work with DOC on ways to encourage regional and seasonal spread of visitors, both domestic and international.

*This post first appeared on TIA's LinkedIn page and was publishe