

Submission to Auckland Council on the Draft Regional Parks Management Plan

New Zealand Walking Access Commission Ara Hīkoi Aotearoa

The New Zealand Walking Access Commission Ara Hīkoi Aotearoa (the Commission) is the Crown agent responsible for providing leadership on outdoor access issues. Our role is to advise on — and advocate for — free, certain, enduring and practical access to the outdoors.

We administer a national strategy on outdoor access, including tracks and trails. We map outdoor access, provide information to the public, oversee a code of responsible conduct in the outdoors, help resolve access issues and negotiate new access.

Summary of key submission points:

In the Commission’s submission on the draft Regional Parks Management Plan (RPMP), we:

- support enhancing public access to, within and between Auckland’s regional parks
- support partnership with mana whenua to strengthen public access
- do not support the road stopping policy as drafted, and advise that the council limit the scope of the RPMP’s road stopping proposals and other restrictions on public access
- support using this opportunity to integrate Te Araroa into its regional park network, and
- urge council to investigate ways to create more public access to alleviate the pressure on outdoor recreation arising from Kauri Dieback access restrictions.

Principles

In compiling our submission, we considered the following:

- the huge importance of regional parks — recognising the mauri (life force) of each park, its life-sustaining qualities
- the people of the parks: iwi/hapū who whakapapa to the whenua, visionaries who planned and achieved protection for the network of regional parks, and those who visit and enjoy parks
- the Commission’s role as the government agency responsible for advocacy on public outdoor access, and the statutory underpinnings of public access in Aotearoa
- existing legal public access provision across the motu— and opportunities to enhance this in Auckland
- significant population growth and impacts on availability and quality of outdoor public access in Tāmaki Makaurau
- our work with groups and individuals in the region with outdoor access interests and aspirations
- the changing and evolving uses for outdoor spaces and how people recreate
- threats to ecological health and aspects of public access that can help or hinder environmental wellbeing, and
- climate change impacts on access, including increasing coastal inundation impacts, greenhouse gas emissions from transport to and within Regional Parks, and the critical role that parks can play in moderating climate change impacts.

Our submission

In respect to the above considerations, we offer the following points:

1. Legal public access provision and land tenure

Ref Draft RPMP Book one, Introduction pp.9-11

The Commission notes that there are widely varying degrees of legal public access across the array of land classifications and tenures in Auckland's regional parks portfolio. Being "parkland" does not itself confer legal public access rights or responsibilities on the Council and the public. With this in mind, we are providing advice on the draft plan — helping formulate a Regional Parks Management Plan that enhances public access protections, provisions, and use across the Regional Parks network.

2. Partnership with mana whenua

The Commission acknowledges the Council's intention to engage with mana whenua treaty partners over governing and managing regional parks. The impacts and outcomes we share and hope to see from this include:

- sustainable long-term provision of public outdoor access to and through regional parks
- public access that is appropriately managed to support mana whenua aspirations and interests alongside protecting park values
- stronger connections to cultural landscapes for and with mana whenua
- a better understanding of mana whenua traditions and roles in relation to te Taiao. This, in turn, will inform and enrich public recreational access

Accordingly, the Commission strongly supports objectives 6-9 and policies 14-18 for:

- greater mana whenua involvement and partnership in park management
- creating opportunities to express Māori identity and culture and connections to cultural landscapes
- building capability and capacity in the council to support ongoing relations with mana whenua
- support for delivering on Māori well beings in alignment with the outcomes of Kia Ora Tāmaki Makaurau

3. Proposals to enhance public access to, through and between regional parks

We are pleased to see that the draft plan aspires to enhance recreational access in some policy proposals and in many individual parks' chapters. The Commission supports, in general, such intents and efforts, and we strongly support proposed policy 74 (Draft RPMP Book One — 9. Sustainable Management and Climate Change Sustainable Access, ref p 72-73), providing for enhanced connections to Te Araroa and the emerging regional trail network.

The Commission strongly supports draft policy 182 (ref Book One — 11. Managing visitor experiences, p. 118), seeking to:

“Expand and enhance the track network to complement Auckland's regional track network, with particular emphasis on:

- a. improving the connectivity within the regional parks and to other public open spaces
- b. endeavouring to provide one accessible track in each park (more in larger parks) for people with low mobility.”

We strongly support policy 123 (ref Draft RPMP Book One — 11. Managing visitor experiences pp.97), which sets out a range of recreational activities and proposes allowing and providing for informal recreation and access where such activities do not detract from park purpose, values or enjoyment by other users.

The Commission supports the draft RPMP policies 133 — 137 for access on foot.

We also generally support policies 138-141 covering access on the water.

We suggest that connections into the emerging regional trails network be added as an assessment criterion for landing, portage, and providing access on Regional Parks.

We support policies 146- 151 providing for horse riding recreational access.

The Commission supports policies 142-145 covering bicycle access. We strongly support policy 142:

“Provide and maintain, and where appropriate expand and enhance the network of recreational cycling and mountain biking opportunities on regional parks to complement Auckland’s regional cycling network in consultation with relevant user groups, including consideration of improving connectivity within the regional parks and to other public open spaces or destinations.”

4. Proposals for restricting public access

Ref Draft RPMP Book One — 11. Managing visitor experiences, p.111 Restrictions on Access

This section of the draft plan proposes policies that enable access to be restricted. It notes that such restrictions are subject to statutory and bylaw requirements. This section of the draft RPMP intends to enable the management of access and to plan for sustainable long-term access.

Some parkland property holdings have public access as a core purpose or requirement — for example, Recreation Reserves, Scenic Reserves, Local Purpose (Esplanade) Reserves. We do not support Draft objective 56 and the policy 166 listed beneath as drafted these mechanisms undermine that principal public access purpose of parks when used to restrict public access for exclusive use purposes or for “operational requirements”. However, we do support the requirements for ensuring the health and safety of park users. Therefore, we would urge Auckland Council to include in the RPMP active safeguards against non-emergency restrictions on access.

5. Proposal to seek road stopping for Unformed Legal Roads adjoining parkland

Ref: Draft RPMP Book One — 13. Administration, p.152: Managing Unformed Legal Roads

The primary intent of this section of the draft RPMP is to protect park values.

We note that legal road parcels are not “within” parkland, as they are a separate land parcel that is not parkland. These legal road parcels adjoin parkland and are vested in Auckland Transport. Whether formed or unformed, Legal roads have the primary purpose of enabling public access.

As depicted in the Land Inventory (Draft RPMP Appendix 8), the surrounding parklands comprise a range of different land classifications. Some prioritise and support public access, and some do not have any legal protection for public access.

Given that the current network of legal roads can assist the aims of the RPMP, the Commission supports draft policy 269 seeking formal agreement with Auckland Transport over management of unformed legal roads adjoining or adjacent to regional parkland. We propose that the NZ Walking Access Commission, as the government’s advisory body for outdoor public access, be a party to this agreement.

However, the Commission does not support policy 270. We object to the Council seeking to progressively close unformed roads in regional parks without first engaging with the public on the access impacts of the proposed policy.

Instead, the Commission would support additional policy wording such as:

“Where the presence of legal road parcels negatively impacts specific park values, Council will approach the NZ Walking Access Commission to assess public access implications of road stopping, and this advice will be taken into consideration. Any road stopping proposal will be publicly notified”.

The Commission offers the council its services in assessing the public access implications of stopping specific legal road parcels (whether the road itself is formed or unformed). This assessment would be part of the public record. It would assist the council in identifying the core purpose of each land classification and recognising the level of protection afforded to public access in general.

Council, for its part, would identify the specific park values to be protected through road stopping and the specific “other reasons” for retaining the ULR.

6. Public utilities land and providing for recreational access and connectivity

We note that some of the regional park lands are owned by public utilities, and they manage such land on behalf of the public. We strongly support efforts to enhance public access on these lands wherever possible. This is particularly important where such lands provide critical access connectivity — for example, Watercare land in the Hūnua Ranges provides landscape-scale cycling and walking connectivity.

7. Te Araroa and the regional parks network

There are several mentions of regional connectivity and connections into or through regional parks in the draft plan. The Commission strongly supports Te Araroa (TAT) using regional parks for connectivity and connecting trail walkers to significant stories and places of the region along the route. For Omana and Duder, we support the intention to route Te Araroa through the parks in the future.

8. The Commission sees much to support in Book Two of the draft RPMP:

The Commission supports maintaining and expanding recreational access wherever possible across the regional parks network.

- For Āwhitu Regional Park, the Commission supports management intentions to maintain recreational access where possible. We support the intention to continue maintaining the access route through the golf course for operational purposes and public access such as horse riding, mountain climbing, biking and walking (ref Book Two p27).
- We are pleased to see the inclusion of better connectivity from and into Ambury Regional Park connecting to surrounding cultural, historic and recreational landscapes.
- We support the continued provision for horse-riding at Ātiu Creek, Ambury, Āwhitu, Duder, Hūnua, Muriwai Te Ārai, Te Muri, Te Rau Pūriri, Pae ō te Rangī (Waitākere Ranges), Waitawa and Whakanewha — as well as new equine infrastructure being considered for Tāpapakanga.
- In the case of Muriwai Regional Park, the Commission commends recent work the council has undertaken on assessing options for better management of vehicle access onto and along Muriwai Beach adjoining the parkland. We support further work on integrated management of access — as required in the National Coastal Policy Statement. We note that the council has obligations under policies 19 (walking access) and 20 (vehicle access) to manage coastal access
- We draw the council’s attention to issues arising around preventing customary use of the shoreline for or by mana whenua. Some individual iwi members are unable to access the beach without vehicular access. We encourage the council to consider this aspect of access management and its potential impacts on treaty partners.
- For Hūnua Ranges Regional Park, the Commission is pleased to support enhancements for public access proposed. We also propose that the council prioritise and facilitate Te Araroa access through the park.
- For our submission on the Waitākere Ranges Regional Park chapter of the draft plan, see below.

9. Waitākere Ranges Regional Park track closures and regional impacts on recreation

Ref Draft RPMP Book Two: Waitākere Ranges Regional Park — pages 198-232

“Meeting the national standards and protecting the core natural and cultural values of the area means remote back-country tramping or running experiences are unlikely to be provided in future on Waitākere Ranges tracks. Assessment of closed tracks through the proposed recreation plan / track network plan will inform this assumption.

Review of the track network in the Waitākere Ranges is considered timely. The tracks were developed over decades without an overall plan. Many entry points have limited or dangerous parking on roads that are becoming busier. This review will assess recreational demand for a variety of tracks from short and accessible through to multi-day tramps.” (Ref Book Two, Waitākere Ranges p.204)

This chapter of the draft plan is of immense interest to recreational groups — some of whom support, and others reject the need for continued access restrictions in tackling the twin challenges of Kauri Dieback and exponential growth of visitor numbers to the park.

The permanent loss of backcountry tracks is of particular concern for many.

While the Commission accepts Council must fulfil a range of requirements — for example, to prevent, contain and manage biosecurity risk, to meet statutory and Treaty Partnership obligations, and to protect the long-term health of the ngāhere — we also recognise the immense wellbeing benefits park users receive from landscape-scale access, particularly in the Waitākere Ranges Regional Park.

We urge the council to prioritise developing alternative public outdoor access options. Alternative access options include using existing legal public access elsewhere, such as trails along unformed legal roads, investing in trails linking existing parks, reserves and public spaces and formalising access over other forest lands in the region, where possible.

We note local grief over the loss of recreational opportunity and further comment that compliance with biosecurity controls has been problematic in some parts of the park. We suggest that giving priority to establishing access connecting nearby regional parks, reserves, forest land, unformed legal roads, and critical linkages over private land is key to providing alternative landscape-scale access. It is likely to assist with acceptance of the broader change in access (that is, the withdrawal of recreational activity from the central forested areas of Te Wao Nui o Tiriwa).

One example of a nearby landscape-scale trail opportunity is the Cross-foothills walkway envisaged by Waitākere City Council.

Concluding comments

In summary, we support the intentions of the RPMP and much of the content, and we thank you for the opportunity to comment and have input into this draft.

We request the opportunity to speak to the hearings panel about our feedback.

The contact person for the Commission in relation to this submission is:

DOT DALZIELL | Regional Field Advisor - Auckland | Kaitohutohu ā-Rohe - Tāmaki Makaurau

New Zealand Walking Access Commission Ara Hīkoi Aotearoa | P: 021 379 132

E: dot.dalziell@walkingaccess.govt.nz