

Grace's Stream | Background Context

September 2022 | DOCCM 6275638

Introduction

[Grace's Stream](#) is a unique and beautiful back country camping site located in the front country. Nestled amongst mature, old growth beech forest next to Grace's Stream, the ten-site campsite is only 15 minutes' walk from the Catchpool Road end carpark. On site is firewood and a single Norski Alpine "dry vault" toilet.

Like our huts nearby, Graces potentially offers visitors their first night in the bush in a tent given its accessibility and natural beauty.

Fees are \$6 per night for adults and \$3 per night for children under 18 years. Fees can be paid at the Catchpool Valley Campsite iron ranger or through the Wellington Visitor Centre however, for most users, the site is considered "free" – as there is no current signage, nowhere obvious to pay, and no enforcement. The site will be bookable only from October.

Grace's Stream is popular based on anecdotal evidence, like firewood usage, caretaker feedback, and onsite impacts, but we have poor actual data to underpin this team process. We have recently moved the [Five Mile Track counter](#) onto the track to Graces to collect better data on potential usage. The initial data suggests 800-1200 visitors to the site over the last year.

We know from observation that the site occasionally gets used by school class groups which could be as big as 40 people – double the number recommended by the service standard for a single toilet pan. Backcountry campsite service standards can be found [here](#).

The Wellington CMS 2019 states that "A number of recreational destinations within Central Spine Place help introduce New Zealanders to the outdoors and improve their understanding of conservation". Examples are given, which do not include the Catchpool Valley, but the valley is listed as a Gateway destination and Graces Stream Campsite listed within this. Campers can still get a good camping experience at the nearby Catchpool campground, and there is backcountry camping occurring regularly on the riverbed of the Orongorongo Valley for those wanting a more 'in nature' experience.

Recent management actions

One of the consequences of its popularity and usage patterns has been the unmanaged growth of the campsite's footprint throughout the forest. Another consequence is the rapid loss of undergrowth and die back of the beech forest. This is leaving many dead, standing trees overhanging the campsite – a major risk of tree fall.

Suzi Tuffin was the first to notify many dangerous trees and the response was escalated into a high priority task to address. We took several immediate management actions.

1. *Utilise Risk Manager*

We opened a new risk in Risk Manager and updated it on an on-going basis.

2. *Understand the problem and what's causing it*

We engaged Jez Partridge of Treecology – a consulting tree arborist – to provide a report. Compaction at site was the likely cause of the dieback, but it's also a feature of the surrounding forest to a lesser extent.

3. *Install new signage*

We decided not to close the site as it was winter, but we installed warning signage immediately to empower visitors with information.



4. *Tree felling*

We identified and marked high-risk trees within the campsite and had them removed. This required a climbing tree arborist so we engaged Dan Jackson of Wilding Wood Management at a cost of \$10,500 to remove approximately 20 dead trees, five of them being large and complicated drops.

5. *Follow-up visit*

We revisited the site with Brian Dobbie and John Taylor (DOC's new high-risk tree specialist) to discuss the steps already taken and to identify further possible actions, if any.

6. *Further signage*

We subsequently installed "no camping" pegs throughout the site to try to limit the gradual expansion of the footprint of the site. We also used these pegs to also highlight dangerous trees that we chose not to drop outside of the camping area.

7. *Bookable site*

From October, this will become an online bookable site only.

8. *Updated AMIS*

We have a yearly scheduled maintenance task before spring to reassess the trees at the campsite. There are currently three significant old growth trees at risk of falling. They are being monitored by professional arborists at a cost of \$500 per visit.

Finally, Grace's Stream was a site visit of a Wellington regional recreation ranger's hui. The hui brought up many potential management questions and possible actions. This Team Process was one of them. Other ideas/observations included:

- More dead and dying trees were identified at the site. A further 25 trees were marked for dropping and completed.
- The toilet was dirty, encouraging campers to toilet elsewhere.
- Signage is haphazard. Bring all signs together into one signage board and inform users on how to camp sustainably as for many, this will be their first experience camping. Consider 'Golden Rules' on the back of the toilet door.
- Interpretation is absent. Why not tell the story of what's happening at this site to empower campers to tread more lightly?
- Temporarily relocate the Five Mile Track counter onto the track into the campsite to get better data on usage. This was done.
- Be clear on fires. Existing firewood and fire circles are at odds with the "Total Fire Ban" sign screwed to a tree by the Remutaka Conservation Trust.

- Better demarcate camping sites and specify an absolute limit on numbers, like this DOC site in the Coromandel.



DOC campsite in the Coromandel

- Revisit the purpose of the site and consider closing it if it's no longer being met, given the difficulty of managing the treefall risks and/or ongoing environmental damage.
- Access from the campsite to Grace's Stream is not easy. Consider signing a safer route or upgrade the track down.
- Consider fencing the campsite to physically constrain its ongoing expansion.

Fire

DOC has the following [clear advice](#) about fires:

You can light campfires at DOC campsites or day amenity areas only if:

- there is no fire ban in place, and
- you use the designated fire places/fire pits.

Only some campsites and amenity areas have designated fire places/fire pits. During a fire ban these facilities are not available to use.

The Kapiti-Wellington district currently has no campsites where fires are allowed.

FENZ (Steve Wadsworth, Senior Risk Reduction Advisor, Wellington, 027 568 0545) says fire permits could be one way to allow fires in the front country without designated fire pits. He recommends “how to have fires safely” information be included at booking time and/or at site.

Finally, it is a legal human right to have a fire to cook food or keep warm.

Battle Hill campsite has an example of very low impact fire bases for people to use.



GWRC campground at Battle Hill

Appendix

Two of the three large trees within the Graces Stream campsite have been identified as dangerous trees and require regular inspection or felling. Cost to fell is around \$4,000 each:



