

Understanding summer activity

Making sense of what people did in the
outdoors over summer

May 2023



Department of
Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

New Zealand Government



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This document is produced to inform DOC staff about how things are tracking around the country. This document provides insights gleaned from the 2022/23 summer season. It is not comparable to previous visitor insight reports due to changes in activity data reporting.

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Executive Summary

UNDERSTANDING SUMMER ACTIVITY

This summer New Zealand saw two consecutive **extreme weather events that damaged tracks, particularly across the North Island.**

As a result, many DOC tracks, facilities and sites are still closed by storm damage and flooding, especially in the North Island.

While the weather was terrible at times, over the summer, short walks in the outdoors were still popular with New Zealanders and international visitors.

“This was going to be our big summer season coming out of COVID, we were expecting a fantastic January, and to have this bad weather totally out of our control is really disappointing.” - Fergus Brown, Holiday Parks Association (January 2023)

Generally over summer, **easy-access coastal areas near urban centres were popular with New Zealanders.** Many of the most visited destinations by New Zealanders were coastal areas and marine reserves located at or near the Auckland region. This reflects where New Zealanders live and travel.

Fewer New Zealanders than 2021/22 summer undertook a Great Walk, went camping or stayed at a bookable hut.

This summer saw a change in visitor patterns. **Internationals returned at near 65% of pre-COVID summer arrivals.**

“A pretty good [international tourism] recovery so far, but what we have seen in recent months is after a very speedy increase in those tourism traveller numbers coming into the country, they have started to plateau off...” - Brad Olsen, Infometrics (March 2023)

International visitors engaged with a range of natural and cultural attractions. The most popular national parks were in the South Island, including Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook. Nine out of ten (90%) international visitors were either satisfied or very satisfied with their New Zealand visit.

The number of people camping at South Island campsites more than doubled when compared to 2021/22 summer.

Expect international visitors to gradually return to New Zealand and re-connect with public conservation land and waters over the coming years.

Understanding what rangers saw and heard across New Zealand.

DOC has rangers across the country, from Te Tai Tokerau (Northland) to Rakiura (Stewart Island). So, a good place to start understanding what happened over summer is by collecting insights from rangers. They are the eyes and ears of DOC and can spot emerging trends. This next sub-section reports on observations from some rangers over summer.



Front-country places were perceived to be busier than 2021/22 summer

DOC rangers reported that front-country areas (short walks, day walks, easily accessible huts) were busier than the same time last year. 39 of 53 staff reported front country areas being busier.

Districts that had historically high proportions of international visitors reported places being busier than 2021/22 summer, including Te Anau and South Westland.

Districts affected by weather events, such as the East Coast and Hauraki, were among those who reported places being less busy.

Front-country places reported as busier environments

The number of staff reporting places, busier, about the same or not as busy

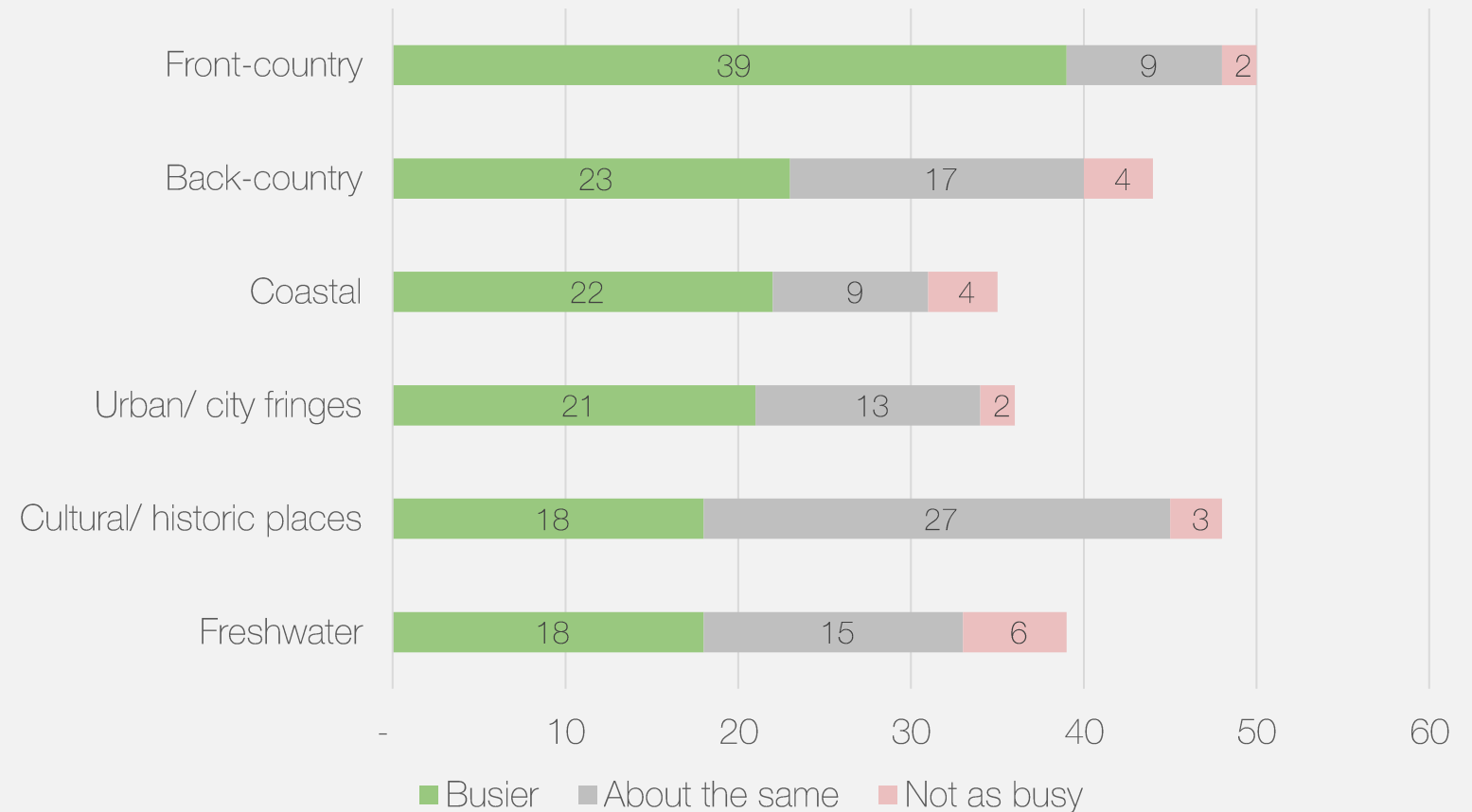


Figure 1: DOC Local Ranger Survey: In the last two months do you think the following places in your district were busier or not as busy compared to the same time last year? n=53. Unsure= varies. Note: this survey is not reflective of all DOC ranger staff.

Making sense of visitor activity

We asked rangers what they thought could be contributing to places being busier in their districts.

65%

of rangers surveyed thought **more international visitors** could be contributing to places being busier

57%

of rangers surveyed thought having **fewer COVID-19 disruptions** this summer could be contributing to places being busier

39%

of rangers surveyed thought **more domestic visitors** could be contributing to places being busier

31%

of rangers surveyed thought **more local users** could be contributing to places being busier

“On good weather days [it was] busier, but very disrupted summer so lots of very quiet days.”

- Auckland Inner Islands ranger (February 2023)

Some rangers noticed poor visitor behaviour

Visitor impacts most commonly observed by DOC rangers included 'poor visitor behaviour (litter, human waste)' and 'visitors taking dogs where they are not allowed' (of 53 staff, 48 and 45 reported these impacts, respectively).

'Poor visitor behaviour' was also reported as having high impact (21 of 53 staff reported it having 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of impact).

While fewer rangers observed poor boating and jetski behaviour compared to other visitor behaviours, a higher proportion of those who did notice this, noticed it a great deal.

Poor visitor behaviour reported as having high impact

The number of staff who observed visitor behaviour

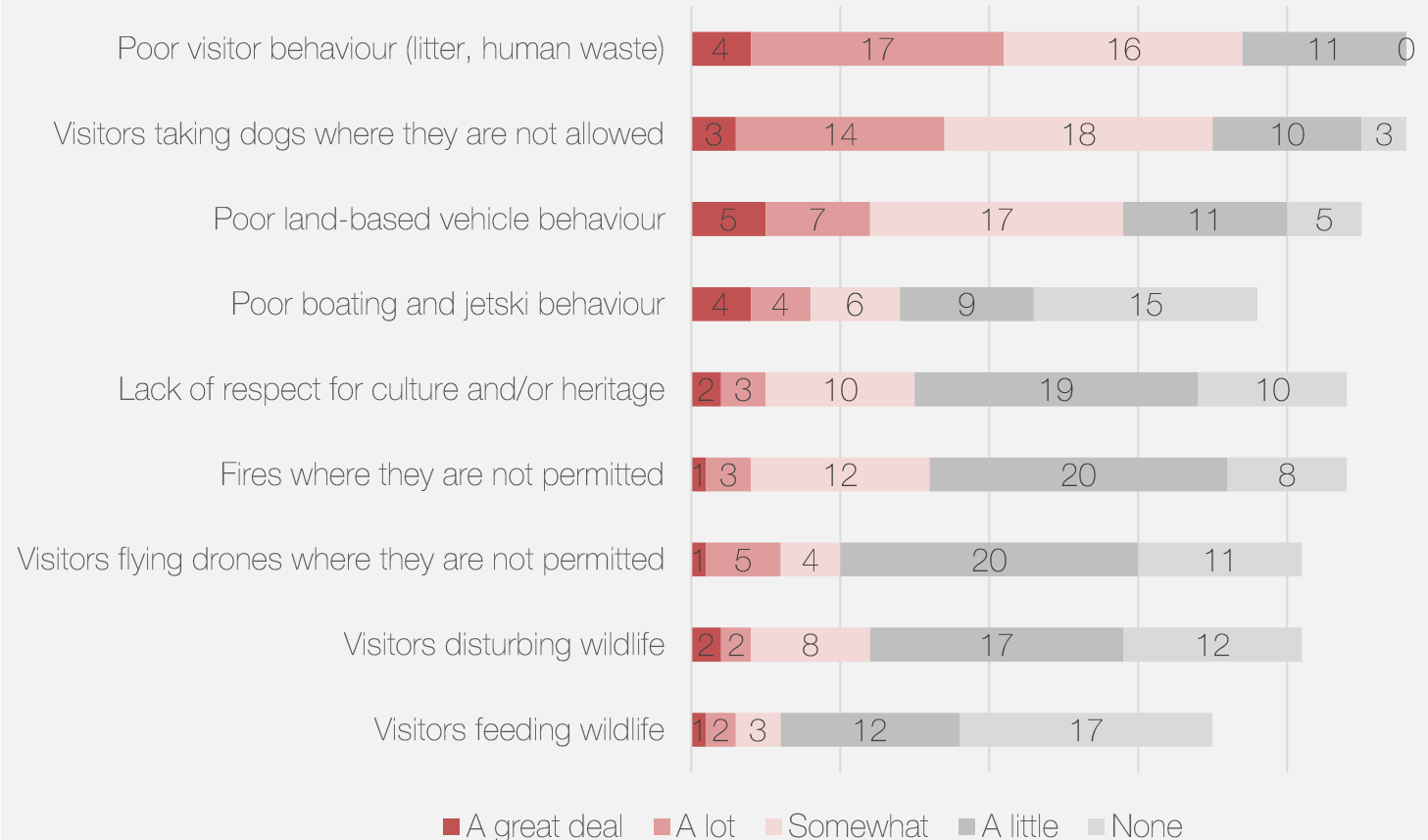


Figure 2: DOC Local Ranger Survey: Thinking about the behaviour of visitors, how much of the following did you notice in your district? n=53, skipped = 5. Unsure = varies. Note: this survey is not reflective of all DOC ranger staff.

Understanding New Zealanders in the outdoors.

Getting a sense of what New Zealanders did over summer helps build a picture of summer visitor activity. This next sub-section draws on survey data of adult New Zealanders to understand what they did, where they went and how they felt about their recent visits to the outdoors over summer.



New Zealanders accessing the outdoors

The proportion of respondents who reported visiting protected natural areas at least once this summer was similar to that at the same time last year. Both summers observed a slight downward trend in this proportion throughout summer.

The proportion of respondents who reported visiting protected heritage places at least once this summer was similar, but slightly more varied than the same time last year. This summer, the greatest reported visitation was in mid-summer.



Figure 3: the proportion of respondents in the Public Pulse of Conservation survey who reported visiting protected natural areas or protected heritage places at least once in the past month, comparing summers 21/22 and 22/23.

New Zealanders accessing the outdoors

At protected natural areas, the average number of monthly visits was similar to 2021/22 summer for the first two months, but dropped in late summer compared to last year. This may be the result of [severe weather and site closures](#). The greatest average number of visits was in mid-summer (surveyed in February).

At protected heritage places, figures are variable compared to 2021/22 summer. The surveyed average number of visits was greatest in mid-summer but dropped off in the last month of summer (surveyed in March) compared to last year. Again, this may be due to [severe weather and site closures](#).

The data collection period captured the entirety of Cyclone Gabrielle's disruption. Also, it encompasses the wettest January for the upper North Island in decades, including the January 27 Auckland floods.



Figure 4: from the Public Pulse of Conservation survey: average reported number of visits to protected natural areas or protected heritage places in the past month, comparing summers 21/22 and 22/23.

Easy access sites and coastal areas were popular over summer for NZers

DOC is New Zealand's largest provider of visitor activities. We manage over 21,800 visitor assets and 15,000 km of tracks.

Of 200 protected natural areas surveyed, the map to the right shows the top 10 places most recently visited by New Zealand adults.

The top 10 recently visited places are all located in the North Island, with most near coastal areas and population centres.

Long Bay-Okura Marine Reserve (north of Auckland) was the most recently visited protected natural area in New Zealand over the summer. Rangitoto Island (Auckland) was popular with New Zealanders.

Many of the most popular destinations were marine reserves located in or near the Auckland region. This reflects where New Zealanders live and travel in the warmer summer months.

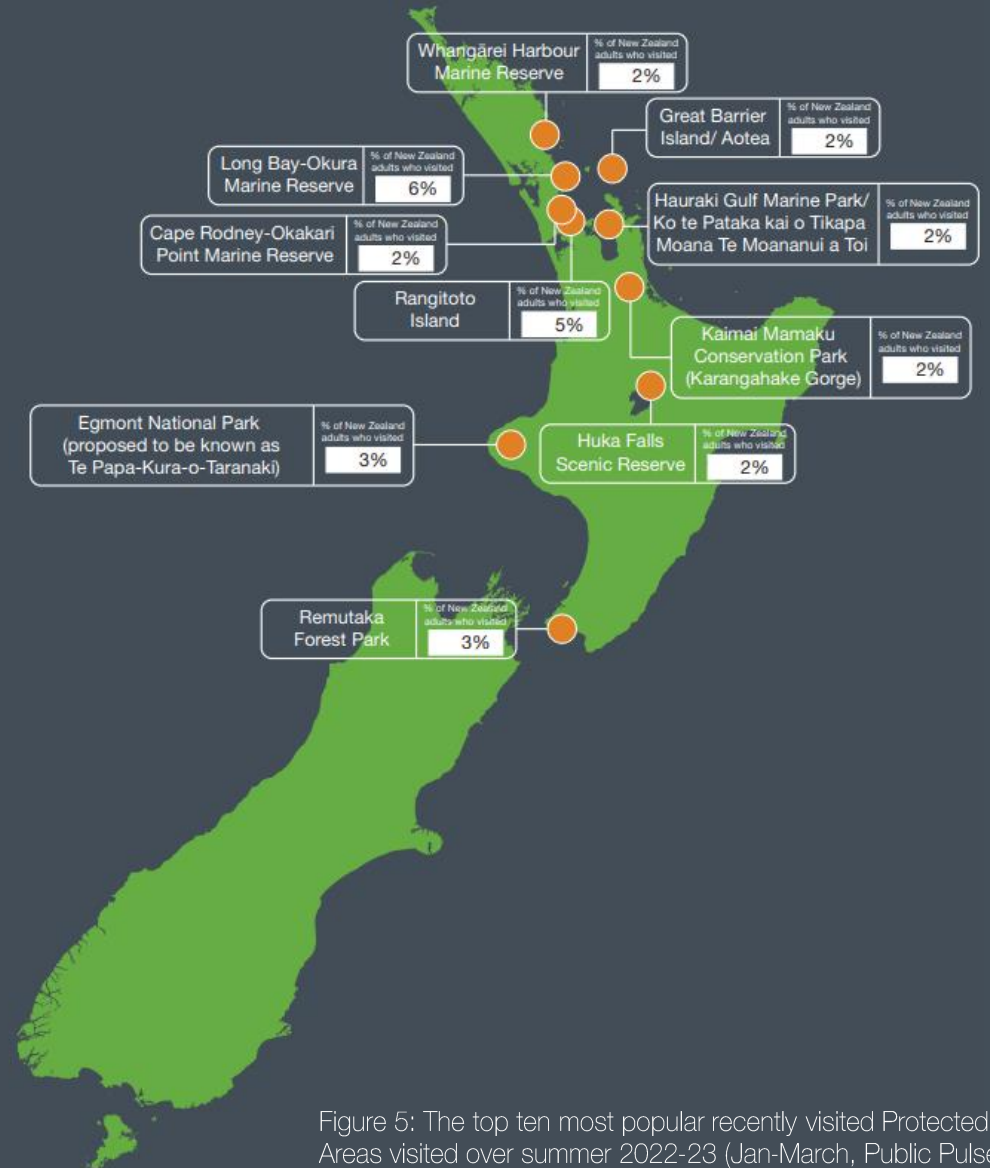


Figure 5: The top ten most popular recently visited Protected Natural Areas visited over summer 2022-23 (Jan-March, Public Pulse of Conservation survey).

Similarly, NZers visited easy access heritage sites near main centres

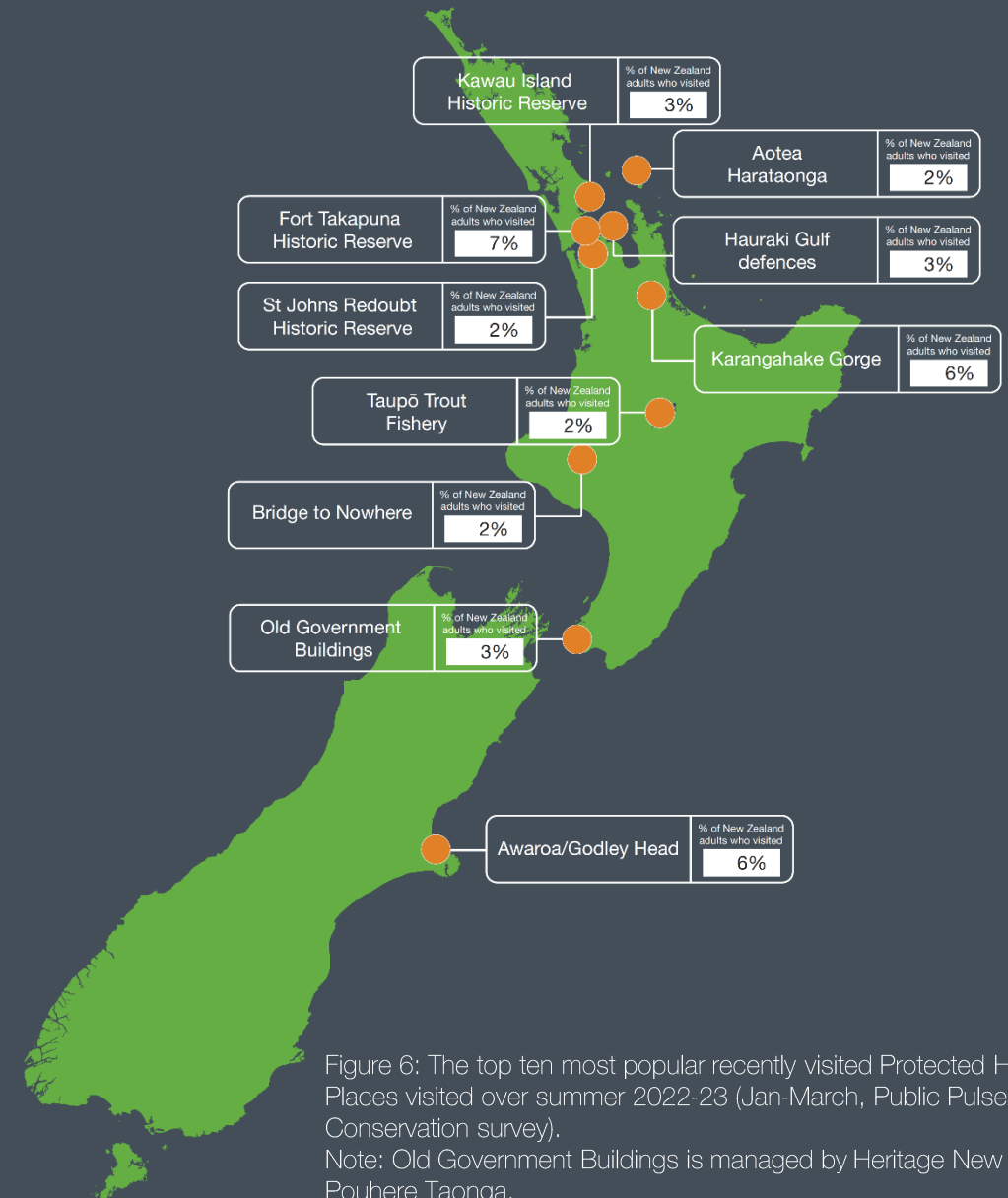
DOC manages the largest heritage portfolio in the country, caring for and telling the stories of the places that have shaped our history.

Of 105 protected heritage places surveyed, the map to the right shows the top places recently visited by New Zealand adults.

The top 10 recently visited places are all located near population centres.

Fort Takapuna Historic Reserve (Auckland) was the top recently visited protected heritage place in New Zealand over the summer.

Karangahake Gorge (Bay of Plenty) and Awaroa Godley Head (Canterbury) were tied for second place in the most popular recently visited protected heritage places.



Short walks were the most popular activity for NZers to natural areas

Short walks (43%) remain the most popular summer activity when visiting protected natural areas across New Zealand.

There was an increase in New Zealanders undertaking short walks and a decrease in New Zealanders camping compared to 2021/22 summer – camping may have been particularly affected by [severe weather this summer](#).

Sightseeing (31%), photography (27%) and bird/wildlife watching (25%) were also popular activities.

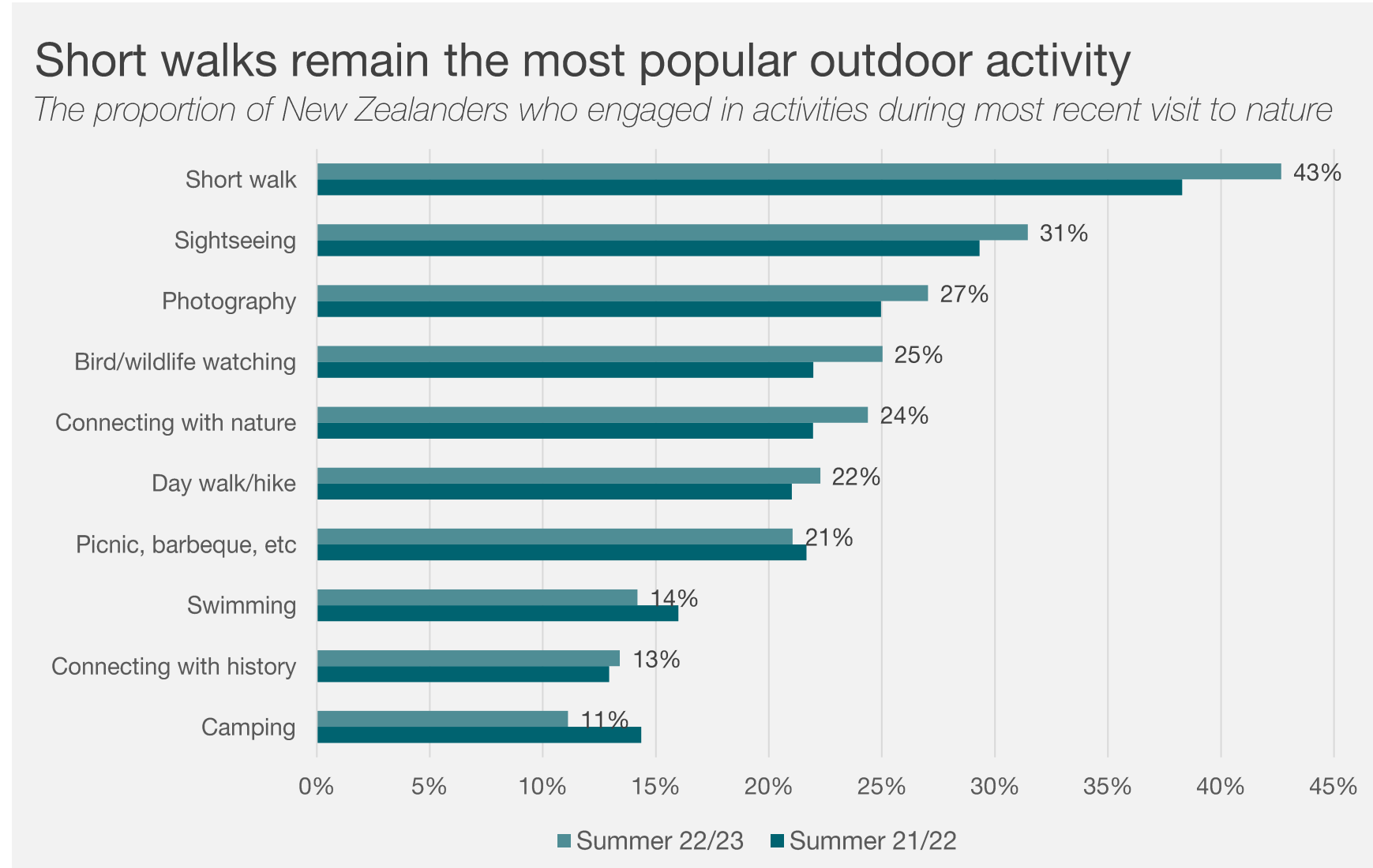


Figure 7: the top 10 activities Public Pulse of Conservation respondents engaged in during their last visit to a Protected Natural Area. These proportions are weighted averages.

Short walks were the most popular activity for NZers to heritage places

The top 10 activities at both protected natural areas and protected heritage places were similar. Key differences include a higher ranking for connecting with history and connecting with culture.

Short walks (under 3 hours) were the most popular activity for NZers who visited protected heritage places.

Sightseeing, connecting with history (learning about Aotearoa's/NZ's history) and photography were also popular at protected heritage places.

Short walks were most popular activity at heritage places

The proportion of New Zealanders who engaged in activities during most recent visit to heritage

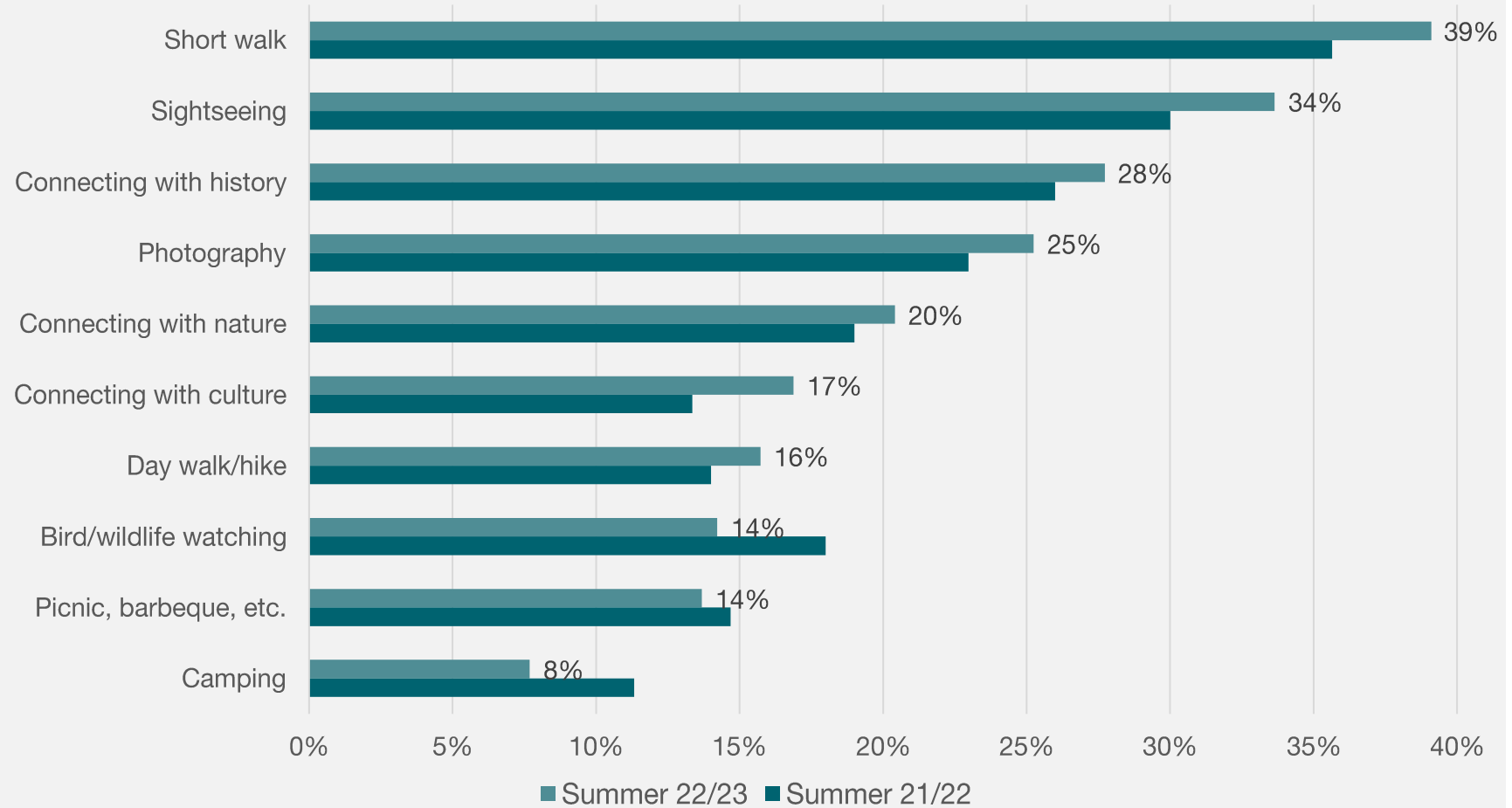


Figure 8: Top 10 activities Public Pulse of Conservation respondents engaged in during their last visit to a Protected Heritage Place.

Around four out of five visitors had a good or exceptionally good experience

Visitors generally had positive responses to their experiences at protected natural areas and protected heritage places. However, satisfaction with the overall experience at protected areas was lower when compared to 2021/22 summer.

Visitors' experiences of protected natural areas were slightly better than those of protected heritage places.

Protected natural areas evoked greater proportions of both types of positive responses ('good' and 'exceptionally good').

Most NZers who went to protected areas had a good time

The proportion of New Zealand visitors who rated their most recent visit outdoors

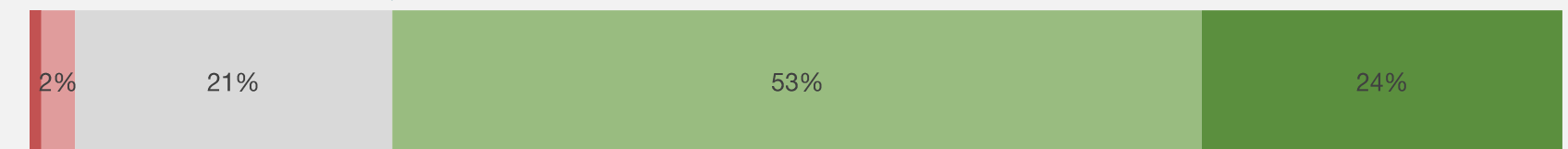
Protected Natural Areas

85% - good or exceptionally good visit



Protected Heritage Places

77% - good or exceptionally good visit



■ Extremely poor ■ Poor ■ Acceptable / OK ■ Good ■ Exceptionally good

Figure 9: The proportion of respondents who rated their most recent visit to Protected Natural Areas and Protected Heritage Places.

Around a third of visitors reported damage from other visitors

During the 2022/23 summer, near a third (32%) of visitors reported that they had noticed damage from other visitors.

At both protected natural areas and protected heritage places, damage to natural landscapes was observed most (15% and 13%, respectively).

Damage to visitor facilities and infrastructure, crowding, and poor/inappropriate behaviour were observed in similar proportions at both site types.

Damage to cultural or historic features was most prevalent at protected heritage places.

Damage to natural landscapes was noticed most by NZ visitors

The proportion of New Zealanders who noticed types of damage by other visitors

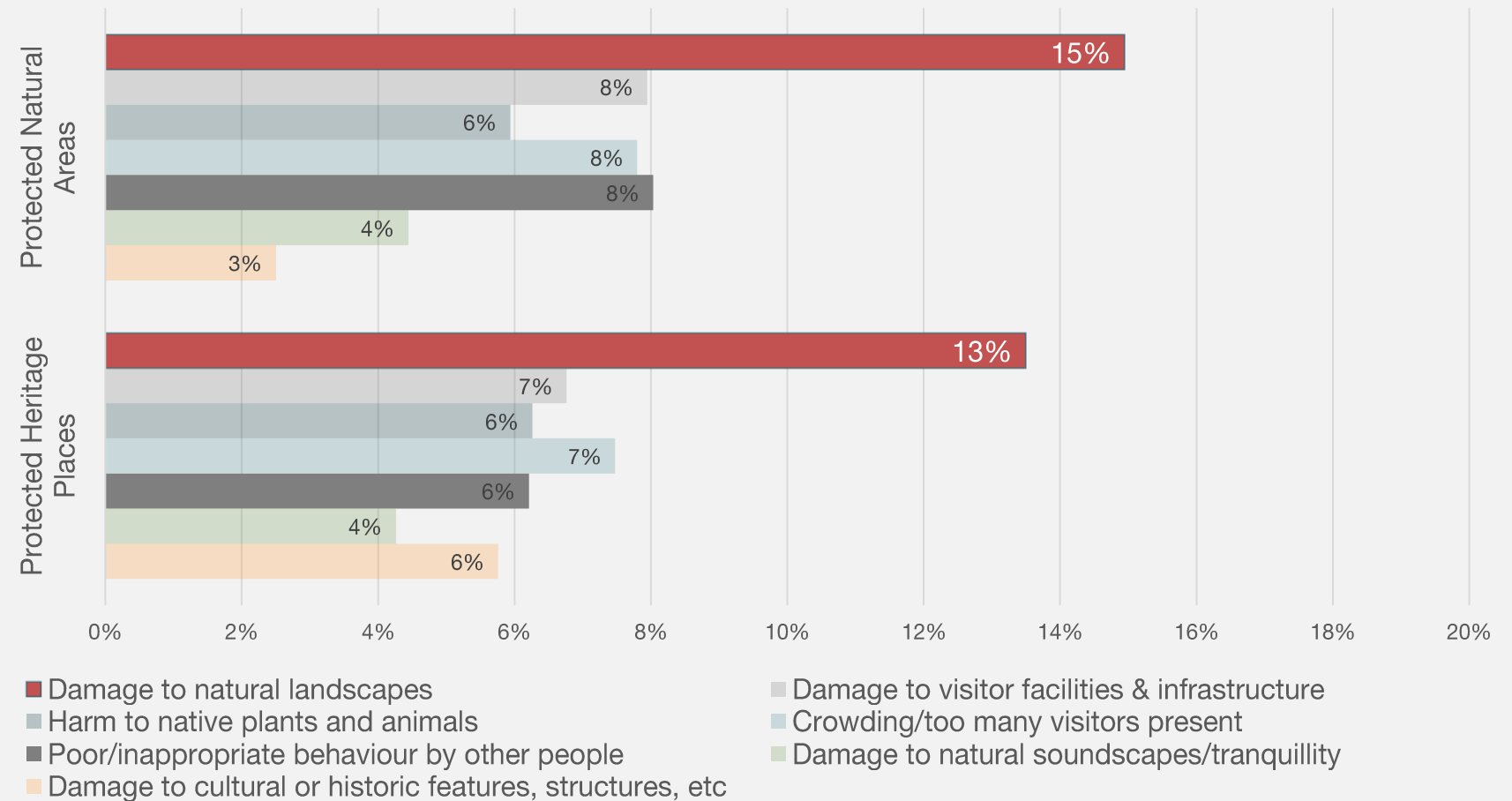


Figure 10: The proportion of respondents who have noticed certain types of damage from other visitors, on their most recent visit to Protected Natural Areas and Protected Heritage Places.

Understanding International visitors in the outdoors.

A key difference this summer was the return of international visitors. This sub-section contains the most recent [International Visitor Survey](#) (IVS) information available. It covers Quarter 4 of 2022 (ending December).

For context, [overseas visitor arrivals](#) were 359,900 in December 2022, up 56% from November 2022 (231,300). Australia continues to be New Zealand's largest market, making up 46% of international arrivals to New Zealand for December 2022.



International visitors engage with a range of natural attractions

National parks (50%), and beaches (49%) were the top-visited specified natural attractions; followed by glaciers (26%) and geothermal parks (25%). Six out of ten (61%) international visitors had also visited (or done) another type of unspecified natural attraction.

Australians were less likely than visitors from the rest of the world to visit (or do) any type of natural attraction; this includes national parks (41% and 58% visited respectively).

Other popular attractions were hot pools (26%), breweries/vineyards, etc. (25%) and top-end restaurants (23%).

National parks and beaches were popular with internationals

Proportion of international visitors who went to natural attractions (Oct – Dec 2022)

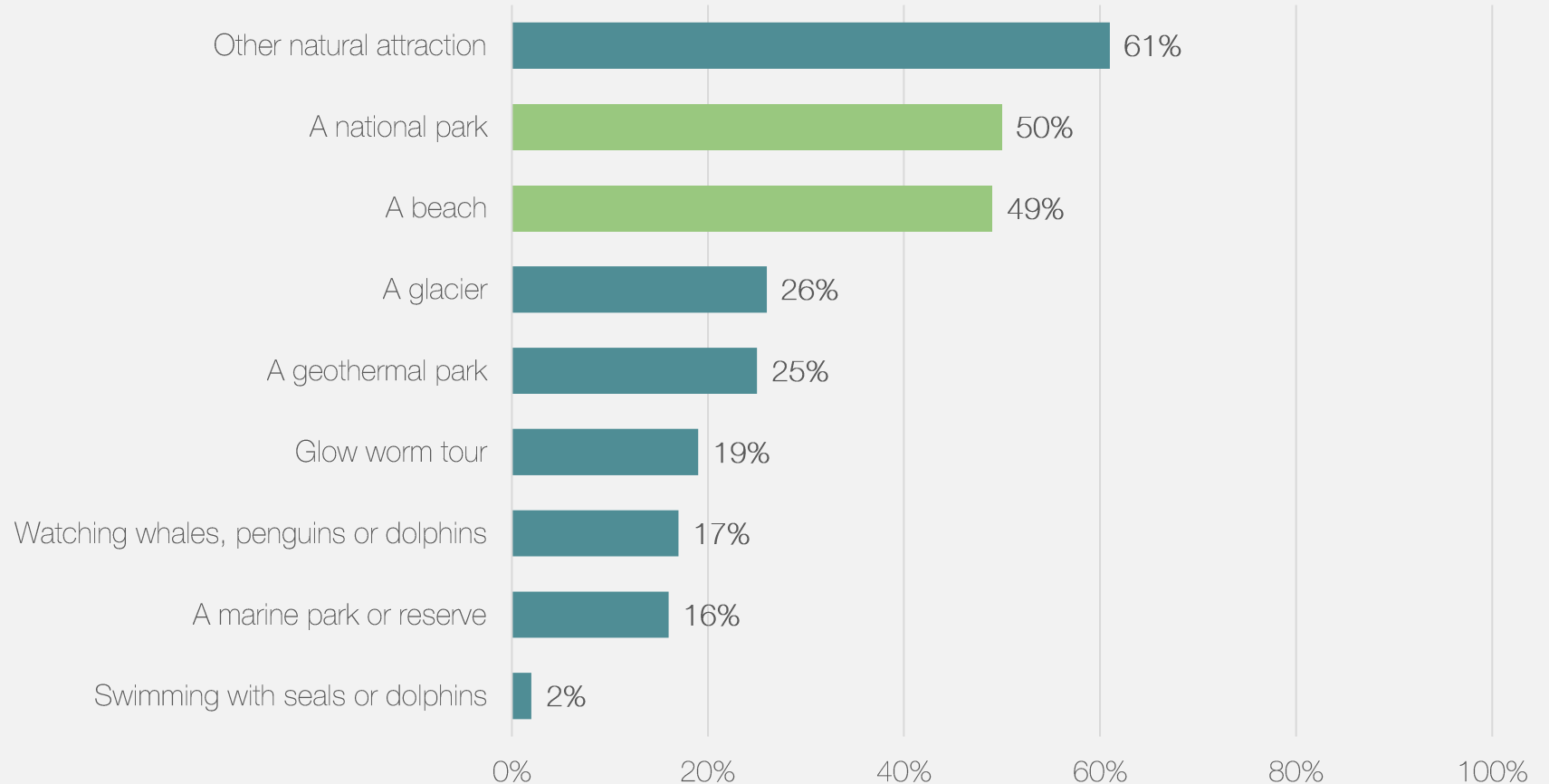


Figure 11: IVS: While you were in New Zealand, which of these things did you go to? [Top natural attractions]

The most popular national parks were in the South Island

Half (50%) of international visitors visited one or more National Parks.

Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook National Parks had the highest levels of self-reported visitor activity. Other popular South Island National Parks were:

- Westland Tai Poutini: 13%
- Arthur's Pass: 12%
- Mount Aspiring: 12%
- Abel Tasman 11%.

Of the three North Island national parks, Tongariro National Park attracted the most (11%) international visitors.

Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook national parks were popular

Proportion of international visitors who visited national parks (Oct – Dec 2022)

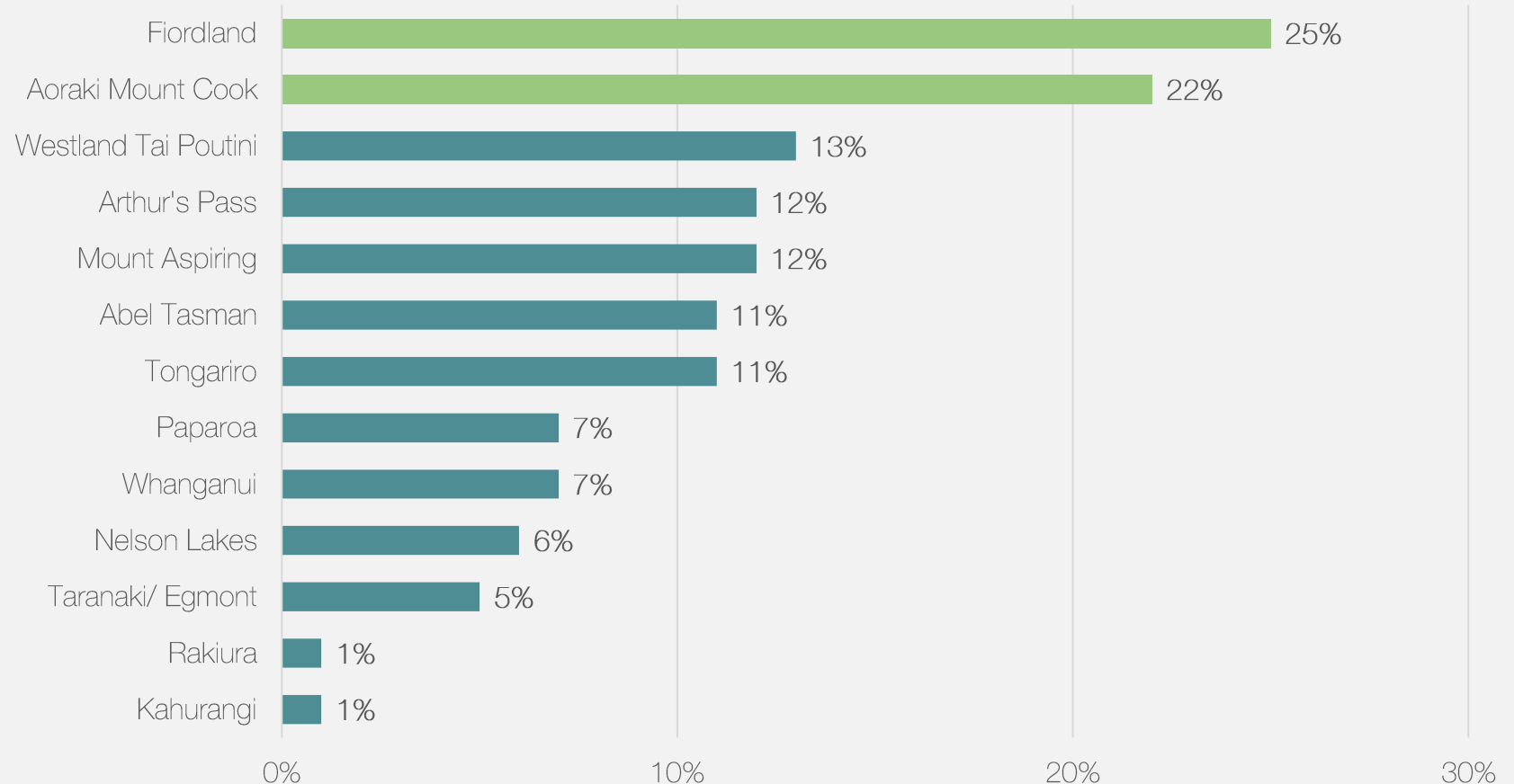


Figure 12: IVS: While you were in New Zealand, which of these National Parks did you go to? Note: The survey tool typically included prominent places (e.g. Milford Sounds) in addition to national park names.

Walking (of any kind) was by far the most popular outdoor activity

To the right are the top outdoor activities undertaken by international visitors from October to December 2022.

Around two-thirds (68%) of international visitors did a walk/tramp.

A range of water- and equipment-based activities were undertaken by 5-14% of international visitors. Small numbers also reported fishing (4%), bungy-jumping and canyon-swing/canyoning (both 3%).

Many internationals undertook walks, hikes and/or tramps

Proportion of international visitors who undertook outdoor activities (Oct – Dec 2022)

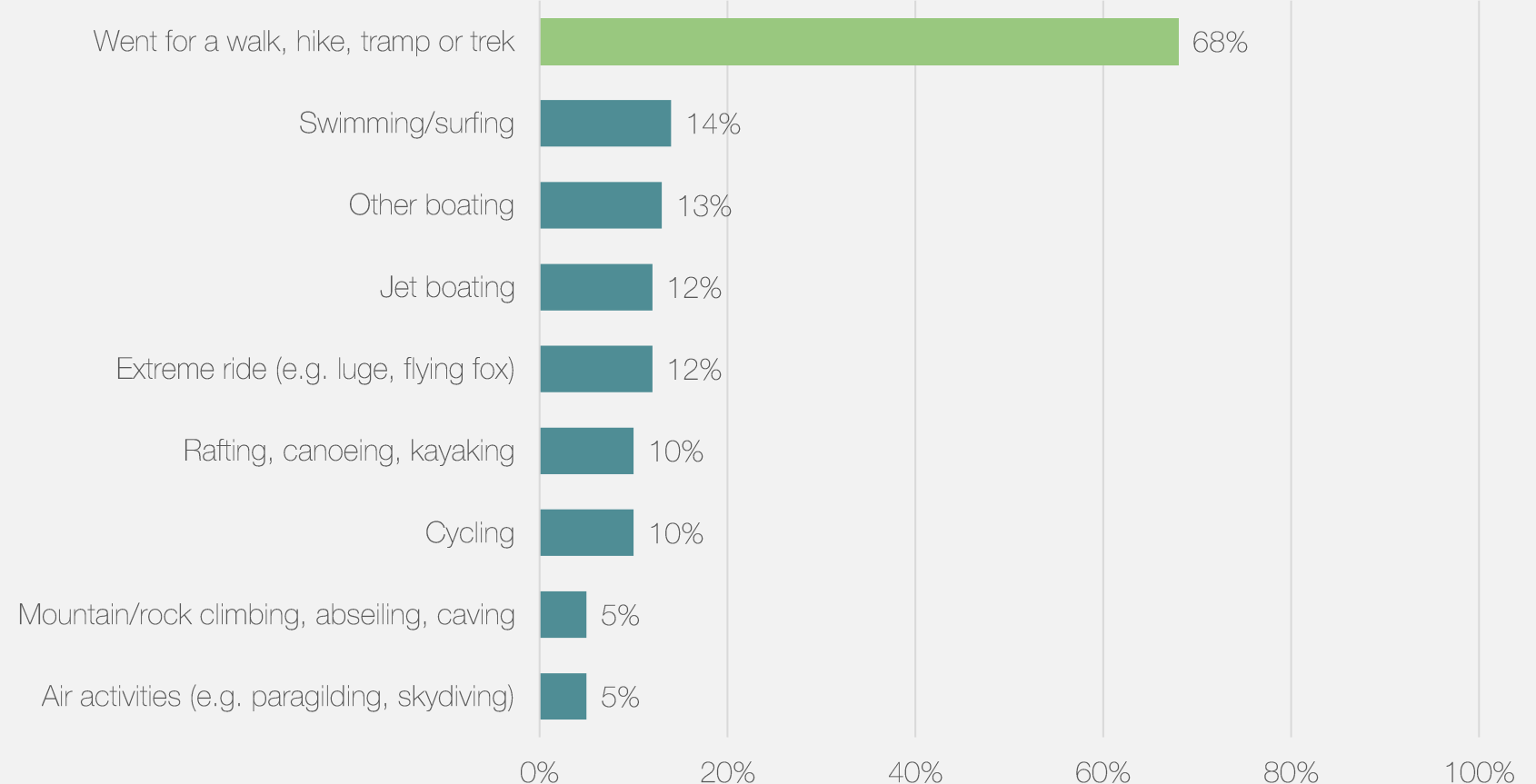


Figure 13: IVS: While you were in New Zealand, which of these things did you go to? [Top outdoor activities]

Understanding walking activity

What proportion of international visitors participated in certain kinds of walks?

50%

Participated in a walk that took between ½ and 3 hours

22%

Participated in a walk that took under ½ hour

22%

Participated in a walk/hike that took over 3 hours but not overnight

3%

Participated in a New Zealand Great Walk

1%

Participated in another trek/tramp that included an overnight stay

0.4%

Participated in the Te Araroa Trail

International visitors engage in a range of cultural attractions

Over one-third (38%) of international visitors had visited a public museum or gallery. Less than half of that (15%) reported visiting another important building or site [including heritage].

A quarter (25%) of international visitors went to a place significant to Māori.

Australians were less likely than visitors from the rest of the world to visit or see any type of cultural attraction; this includes a place of significance to Māori (16% and 34% visited respectively).

Some internationals visited public museums or galleries

Proportion of international visitors who undertook top cultural attractions (Oct – Dec 2022)

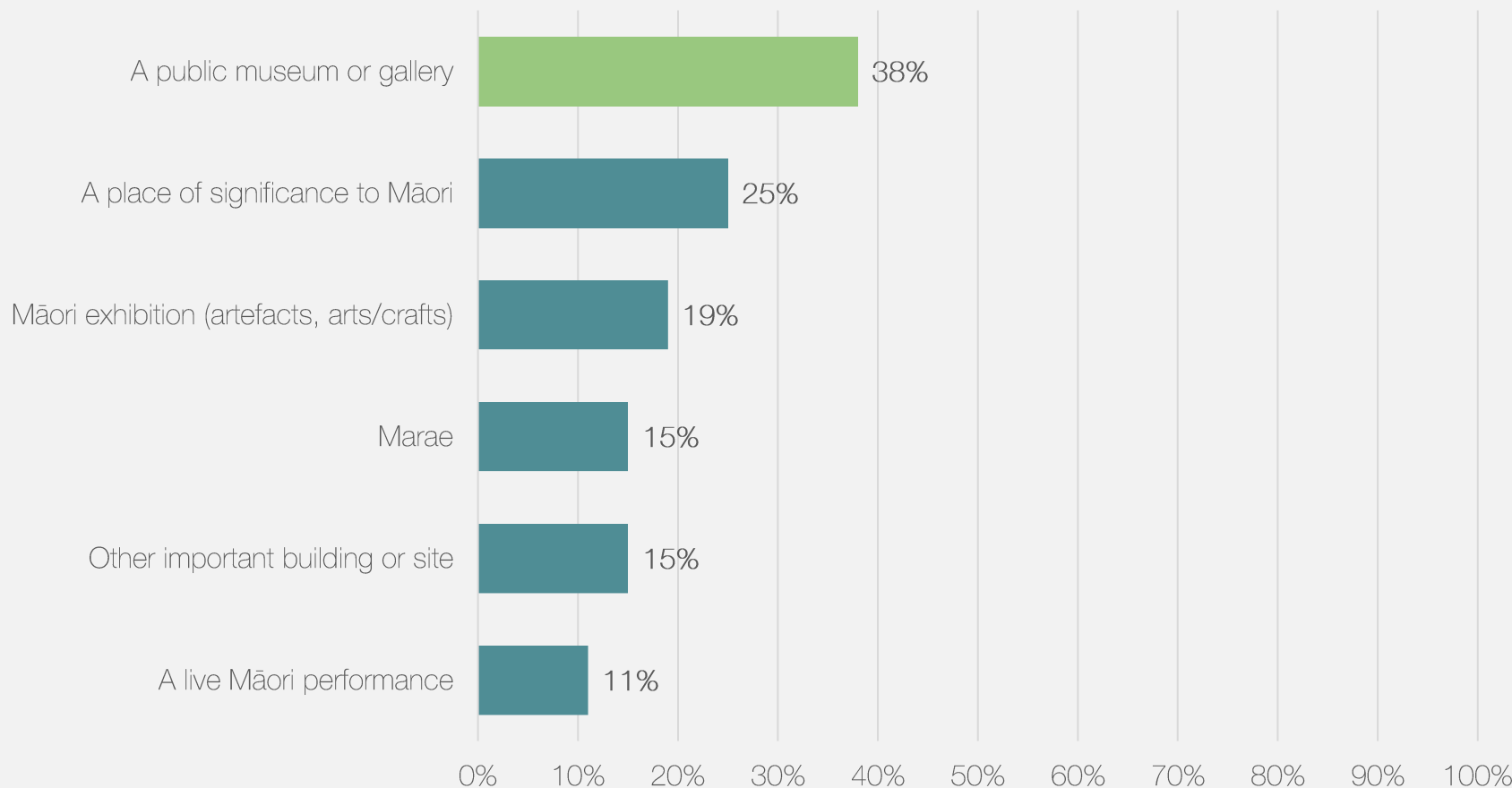


Figure 14: IVS: While you were in New Zealand, which of these things did you go to? [Top cultural attractions]

The large majority of visitors were satisfied with their New Zealand visit

Nine out of ten (90%) international visitors were either satisfied or very satisfied with their New Zealand visit.

While satisfaction was similar between Australians and visitors from the rest of the world (91% and 88% respectively), visitors from the rest of the world were around twice as likely as Australians to report being very dissatisfied (5.8% and 2.4% respectively).

93%
Agreed they enjoyed their experience of Māori culture¹

¹Experiences were not limited to public conservation land and waters.

Nine out of ten internationals were satisfied with New Zealand

The proportion of internationals who were satisfied with their most recent visit to New Zealand

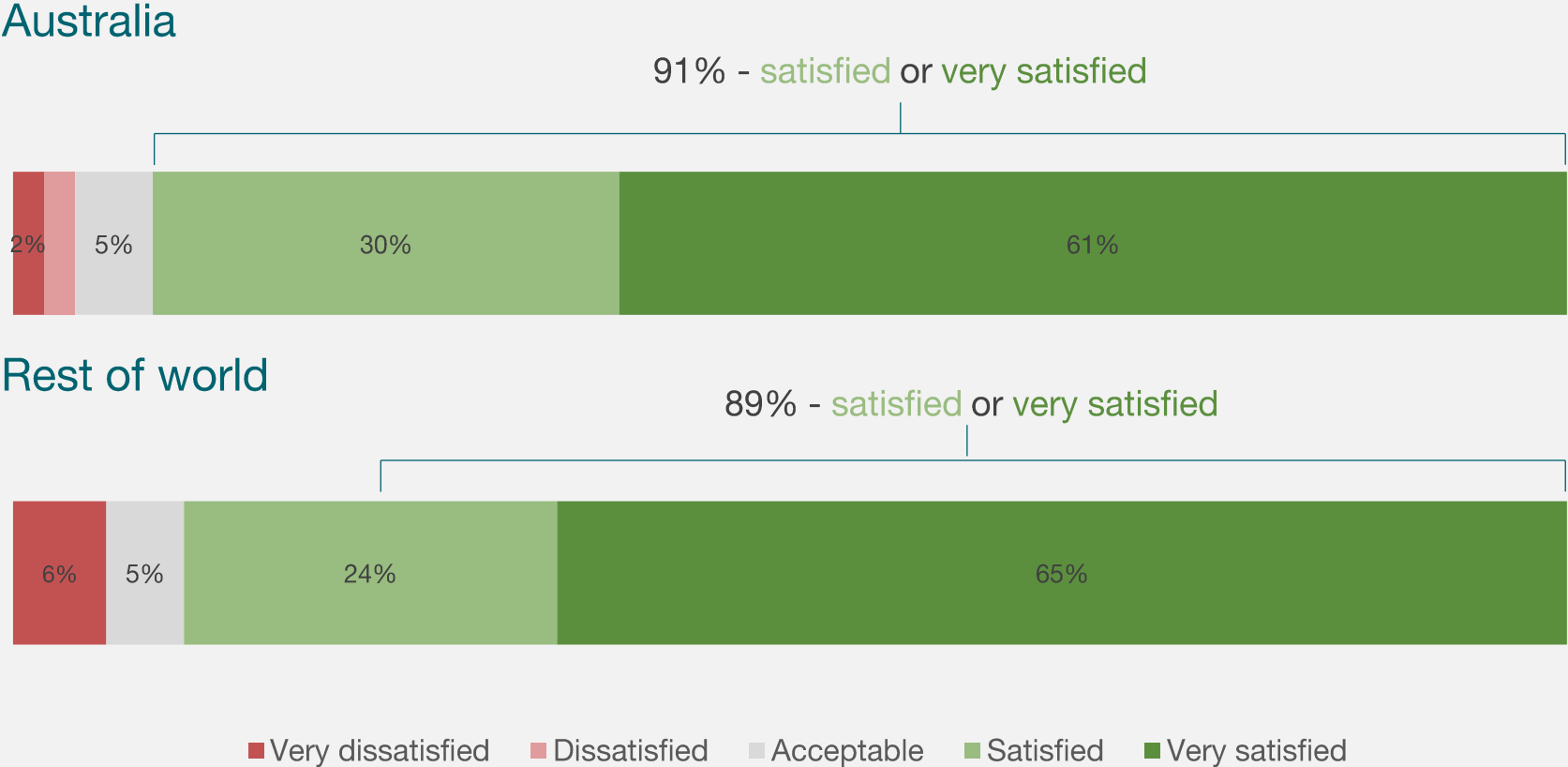


Figure 15: IVS: And thinking about all the aspects of your trip, how satisfied were you with your New Zealand visit overall?

Visitor perceptions of the environment were very favourable

Almost nine out of 10 (86%) international visitors rated the natural scenery and wilderness as very good. This was the highest rated attribute, with almost all visitors (99%) rating it as good to some degree.

While not as highly rated, other environmental attributes were also perceived well – around nine out of 10 rated each attribute as good to some degree, with the availability of public facilities as worst.

On the whole visitors felt welcome and safe (94% and 93% respectively rated these attributes as good).

Natural scenery/wilderness were rated high by internationals

Proportion of international visitors who rated attributes of visit (Oct – Dec 2022)

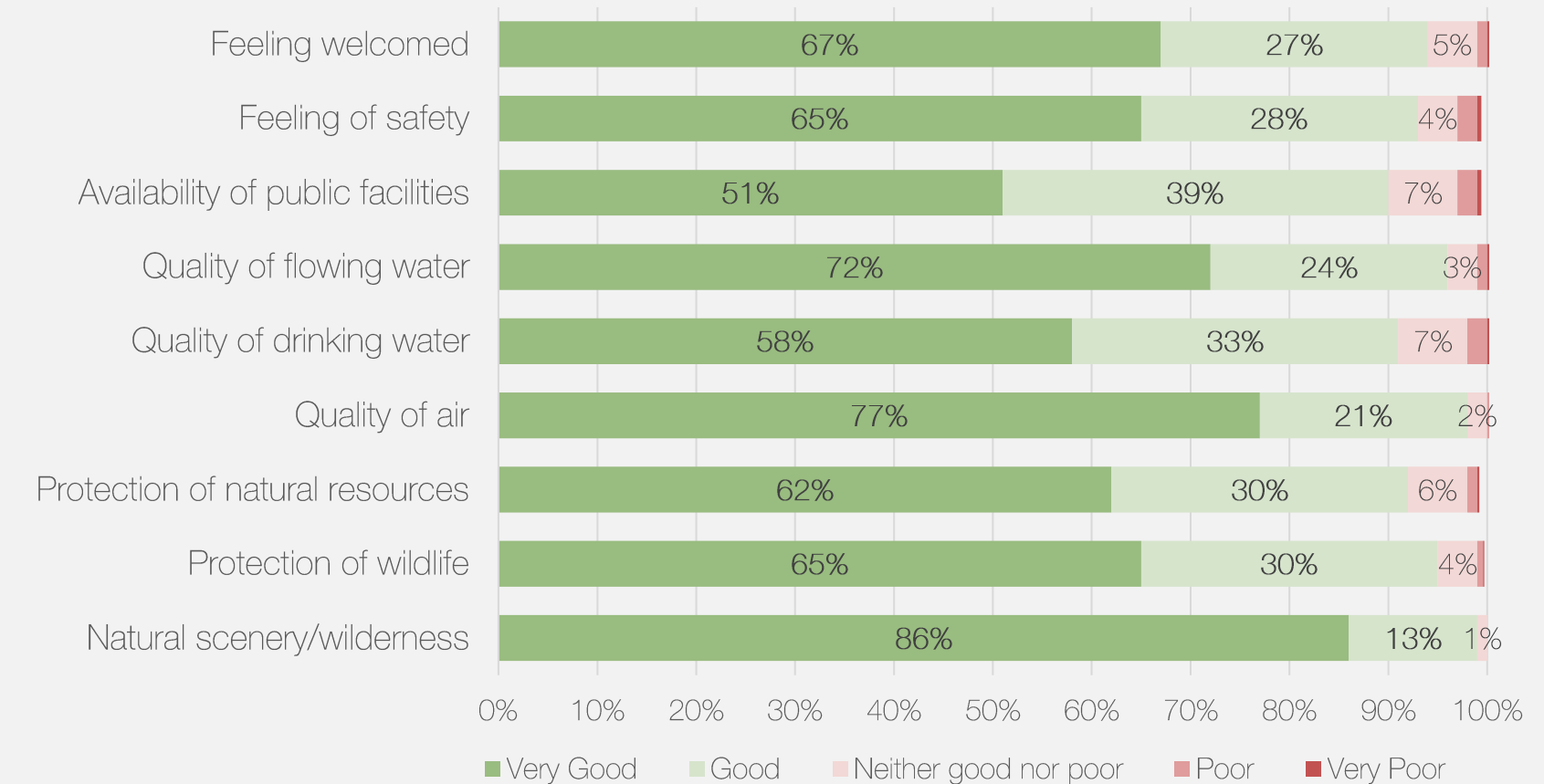


Figure 16: IVS: Based on your experiences during your trip to New Zealand, how would you rate the following? Note: this survey covers all experiences wider than those on public conservation lands and waters

Understanding where people stayed in the outdoors.

Some of DOC's best visitor data is through an online booking system. Overnight accommodation is important to understanding where people stayed outdoors.

This sub-section contains data and information for the summer period (1 December 2022 to 28 February 2023) from DOC's booking system. Note, this sub-section includes people staying on public conservation land only, not all accommodation in New Zealand.



South Island Great Walks were very busy over summer

There are ten Great Walks across the country. DOC manages nine of these, excluding Lake Waikaremoana.

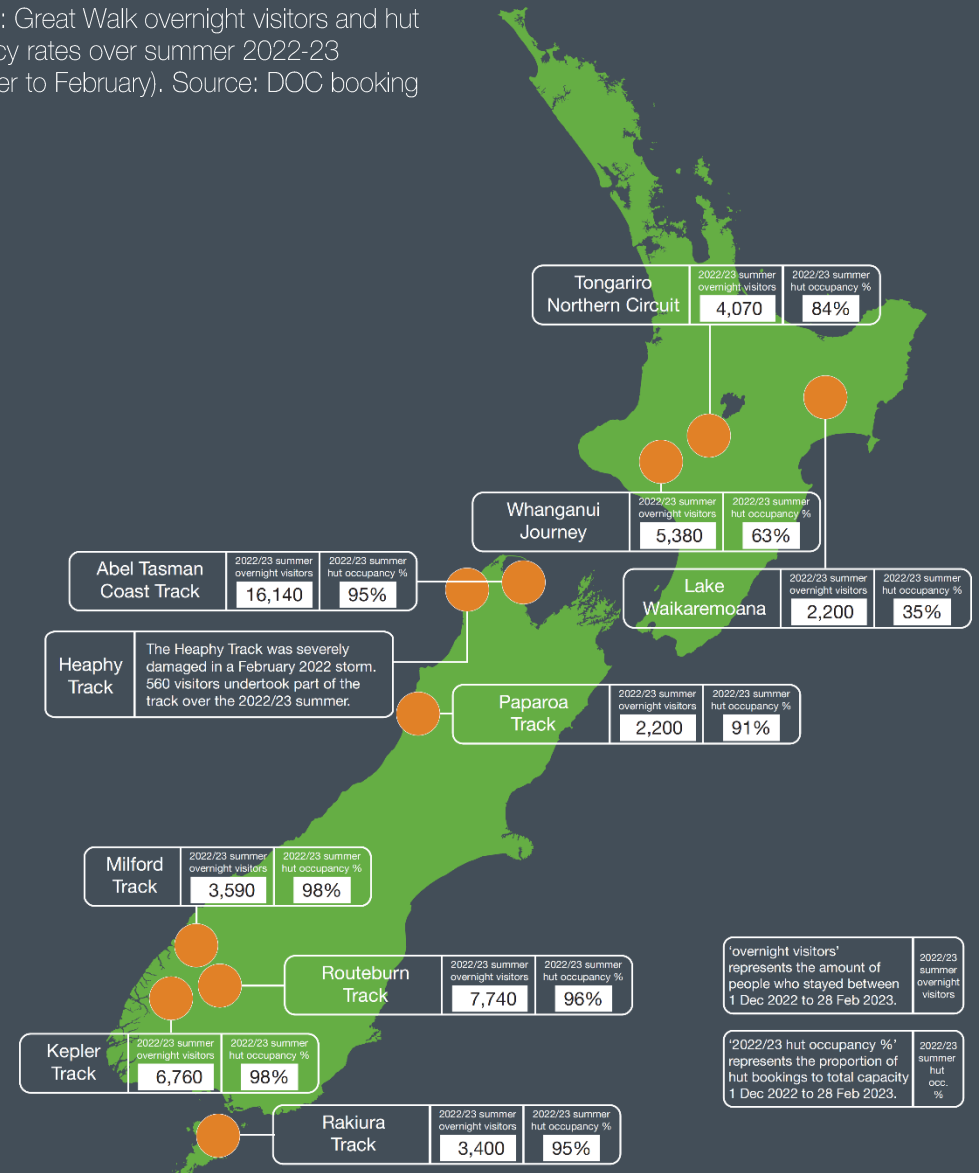
Around 47,380 people stayed at Great Walk huts and campsites, up 18% compared to this time last year, but similar to previous summers. This occurred despite severe damage to the Heaphy Track.

There were fewer New Zealanders and more international visitors on Great Walks this summer compared to 2021/22 summer. This reflects the opening of international borders in 2022.

Great Walk huts had an average summer occupancy of 74%. Aside from the Heaphy Track, all South Island Great Walks were at or near capacity over the summer months.

The Abel Tasman Coast Track continues to be the busiest Great Walk over summer, with more than double the visitors of any other Great Walk.

Figure 17: Great Walk overnight visitors and hut occupancy rates over summer 2022-23 (December to February). Source: DOC booking data.



Understanding Great Walks

Great Walk numbers compared to 2021/22 summer.



47,380

New Zealanders and international visitors went on a Great Walk, up 18% from 2021/22 summer.

2:1

For every international visitor, there were two New Zealanders on Great Walks.

31,880

New Zealanders went on a Great Walk over summer, down 17% from 2021/22 summer.

+35%

More people did a Great Walk in the North Island, including the reopened Lake Waikaremoana.

15,500

International visitors undertook a Great Walk over summer, up from 1,480 visitors from 2021/22 summer.

+15%

More people undertaking South Island Great Walks, an additional 4,970 people.

South Island campsite visitors doubled compared to 2021/22 summer

DOC manages close to 300 campsites across the country. 115 of these campsites are non-Great Walk campsites and bookable. Around 136,260 people camped at DOC-managed bookable campsites over the summer, up 34% compared to this time last year.

Tōtaranui Campground (Tasman) surpassed Uretiti Beach Campsite (Northland)¹ as the most visited DOC campsite in New Zealand over the summer. White Horse Hill Campsite (Aoraki Mount Cook) was the second most popular campsite.

Camping at bookable North Island campsites was down (-23%) compared to 2021/22 summer. This reflects severe weather events in the North Island.

South Island camping more than doubled, up 115% in visitor numbers compared to 2021/22 summer. This reflects the return of international visitors to the country (see next slide), including the South Island.

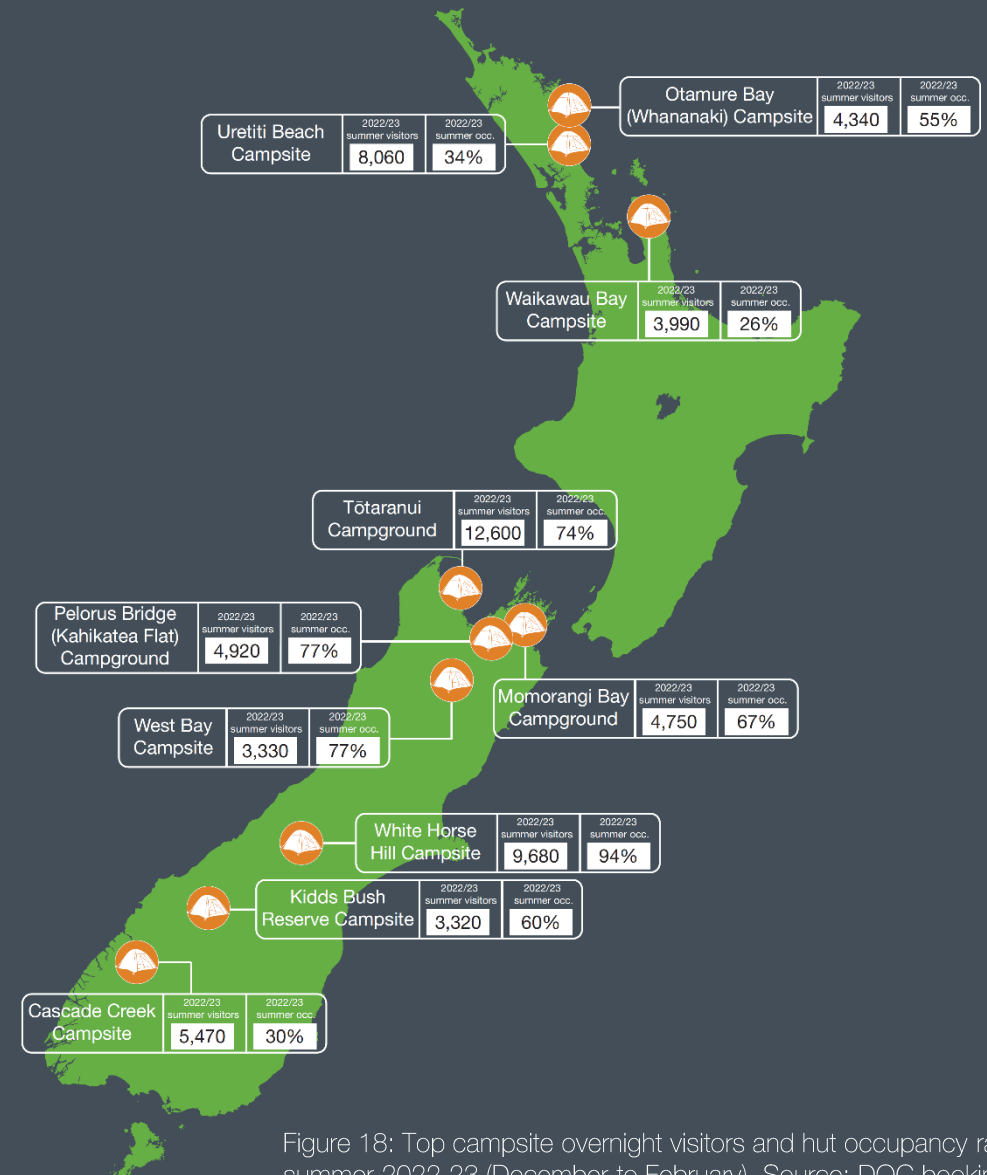


Figure 18: Top campsite overnight visitors and hut occupancy rates over summer 2022-23 (December to February). Source: DOC booking data.

¹ Uretiti Campsite was hit by flooding due to rain before the summer season.

Understanding bookable campsites

Numbers of people staying at bookable campsites across New Zealand compared to 2021/22 summer.

136,260

New Zealanders and international visitors camped over the summer, up 34%.

92,230

Fewer New Zealanders camped over the summer, down 9%.

44,030

Significantly more international visitors camped over the summer, up from 330 visitors.

2:1

For every international visitor camping, there were two New Zealanders camping.

-23%

Fewer people camped in the North Island, most likely due to severe weather events.

2.14x

More than double the number of people camped in the South Island compared to 2021/22 summer.

Iconic huts across the country were popular with visitors

DOC manages over 950 huts across the country. Aside from Great Walk huts, 70 huts are bookable and many of these huts experienced high visitor demand.

Around 30,700 people stayed overnight at other bookable huts over the summer. The Pinnacles Hut (Coromandel) was the most visited non-GW hut in New Zealand this summer, with around 2,900 people staying overnight and an occupancy rate of 51%.

Following Pinnacles Hut, iconic alpine huts located in National Parks – including Mueller Hut (Aoraki), Angelus Hut (Nelson Lakes) and Welcome Flat (Westland Tai Poutini) – were busy.

Holly and Pouakai huts were popular in Taranaki; while Woolshed Creek Hut attracted locals in Canterbury, including families.

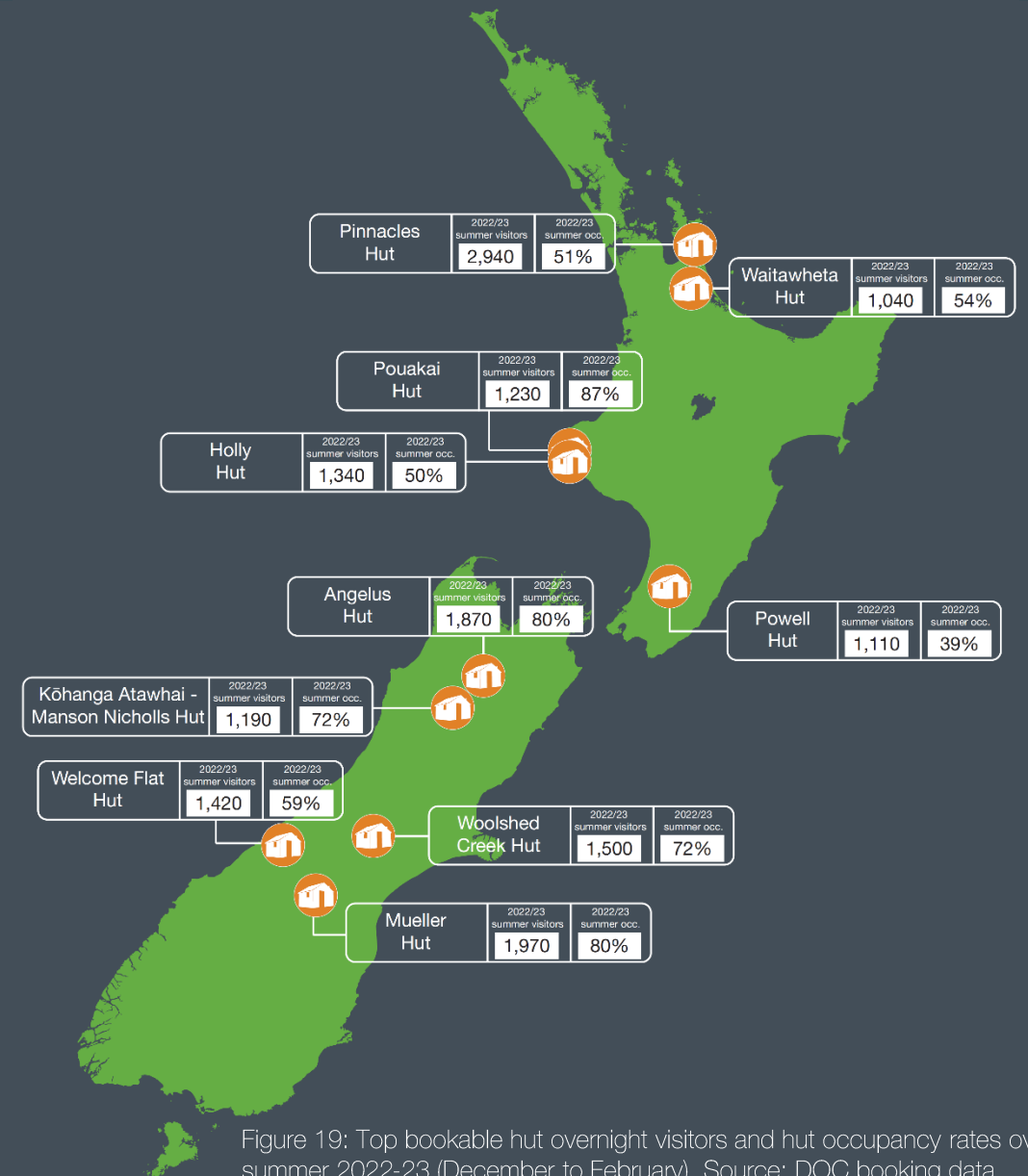


Figure 19: Top bookable hut overnight visitors and hut occupancy rates over summer 2022-23 (December to February). Source: DOC booking data.

Understanding bookable huts

Numbers of people staying at bookable huts across New Zealand compared to 2021/22 summer.

30,700

New Zealanders and international visitors stayed at huts over summer, up 10%.

25,520

New Zealanders stayed at bookable huts over summer, down 8%.

5,190

International visitors stayed at bookable huts over summer, up from 200 visitors.

5:1

For every international visitor, there were five New Zealanders staying at huts.

+16%

More people stayed at bookable huts in the North Island.

+5%

Slightly more people stayed at bookable huts in the South Island.

Understanding how severe weather impacted facilities and communities.

Lastly, while there has been a lot of visitor activity across the country, severe weather has caused extensive damage to communities and to infrastructure, including DOC's visitor network.

The final sub-section looks at some examples of how consecutive extreme weather events have damaged tracks, campsites and huts.



Cyclone Gabrielle has damaged tracks and huts across the North Island

Over the 2022/23 summer Cyclone Gabrielle has had an extensive impact on public conservation land across the North Island.

The map to the right shows some examples of how severe weather has caused track closures. A full list of all [closures and alerts](#) is available via DOC's website.

Many of DOC walks, facilities and sites are still closed from storm damage and flooding. Tracks may be unsafe due to the risk caused by slips, flooding and fallen trees. It will take time for DOC to assess and repair damage across affected areas.

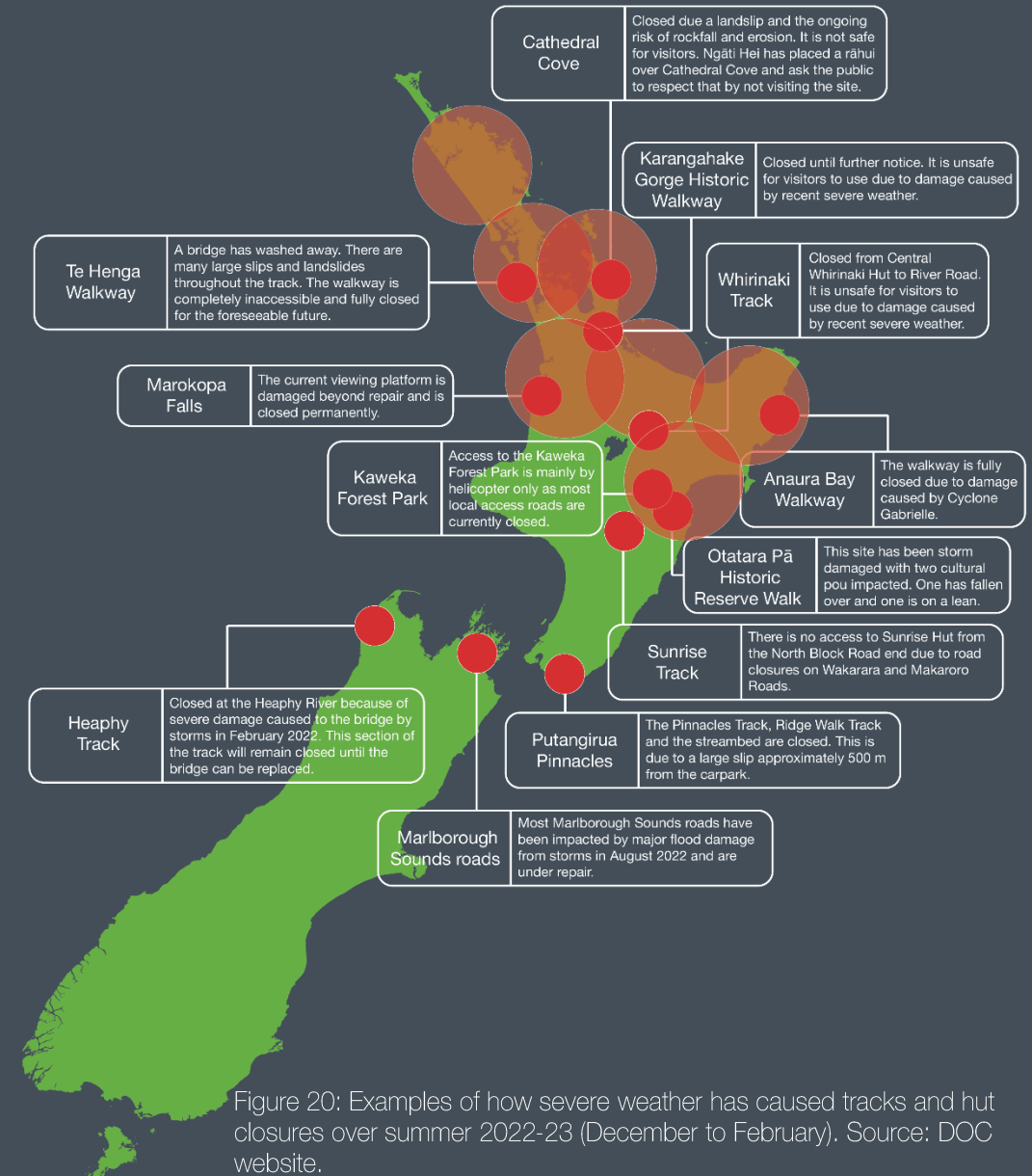


Figure 20: Examples of how severe weather has caused tracks and hut closures over summer 2022-23 (December to February). Source: DOC website.

Some of the weather impacts over summer at DOC places

The bridge at the Bethells Beach end of Te Henga Walkway (Auckland) was washed away and there are many slips and landslides on the track. The track is closed for the foreseeable future.

A large slip has washed away a section of Cathedral Cove Track and there is ongoing rockfall onto the track and beach. The track is closed and Ngāti Hei has placed a rāhui over Cathedral Cove.

Medlands Campground on Aotea/Great Barrier is closed due to slips, flooding and fallen trees.

Leon Kinvig Hut in Ruahine Forest Park is closed due to severe flood damage and is not safe to use. It is on the edge of a large bank with no foundations at one end.



Te Henga Walkway, Auckland. Source: S Sebregts.



Cathedral Cove Track, Coromandel. Source: DOC.



Medlands Campground, Auckland. Source: DOC.



Leon Kinvig Hut, Manawatū-Whanganui. Source: DOC.

DOC is helping local communities following storm events

From conducting welfare checks, assisting in clean-up efforts, and repurposing equipment, DOC people have lent their support to communities in affected regions.

Kaimahi in Hawke's Bay have been helping their community with the clean-up.

DOC staff distributed food parcels to kaumātua and whānau on Aotea/Great Barrier island who were having trouble getting food.

DOC sent 5 Starlink dishes to Search and Rescue Services in Gisborne who were struggling to operate with no internet connectivity and limited mobile reception.



Te Mātau a Māui team shoveling silt out of homes in their community. Source: DOC



DOC helping Ngāti Manuhiri and Waikato Tainui distribute kai packages. Source: DOC



Improving internet connectivity by donating Starlink dishes. Source: Richard Kay

Summary

Weather events caused damage to tracks, particularly across the North Island. This summer New Zealand saw two consecutive extreme weather events. Many of DOC walks and facilities are still closed from storm damage and flooding.

Easy-access coastal areas near urban centres were popular with New Zealanders. Accessible sites and coastal areas were popular over the summer, including places near main population centres. This reflects where New Zealanders live and travel in the summer months.

Internationals returned at near 65% of pre-COVID summer arrivals. The most popular national parks were Fiordland and Aoraki Mount Cook. Expect international visitors to gradually return and re-connect with the country over the coming years.

Data and information sources

For further information please contact the Insights and System Performance Team.

- ▶ **DOC District Staff Survey (n=53)** – DOC created a short online survey for Operational staff to complete. From 7 to 17 February 2023 n=53 rangers participated. The results cover 36 of DOC's 45 regions.
- ▶ **DOC Public Pulse of Conservation (n=1,000)** – From 9-17 January, 7-15 February, and 6-16 March 2023, n=1,000 adults (18+) each month participated in an online survey. No weighting has been applied to the data in obtaining a representative sample. Instead, quotas were relied upon.
- ▶ **MBIE International Visitor Survey (IVS, full sample size n=2,235)** – This document contains results for Quarter 4 2022 (ending December). Sub-samples vary and are unavailable, but are robust. Due to different qualifying rates data is not comparable between pre- and post-COVID-19.
- ▶ **DOC Bookable Accommodation** – DOC's booking system currently collects accommodation booking data for huts, campsites and lodges across New Zealand. Estimated visitor numbers and occupancy rates are from 1 December 2022 to 28 February 2023.