



The
Aotearoa
Circle

Mā te Kaitiakitanga
ko te Tōnuūtanga
Prosperity Through
Guardianship



NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE PLAN

Part 4B: Our Tourism

The economic dependencies and growth opportunities presented by natural infrastructure for Aotearoa New Zealand's tourism sector.

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Introduction

Why investing in natural infrastructure matters

By recognising natural infrastructure as the productive infrastructure that it actually is, we can strengthen our economy, reduce risk, create jobs, and build a future we can proudly say we helped shape.

Aotearoa New Zealand's economy is intrinsically linked to the environment. With 70% of our exports reliant on natural resources, investing in resilience and natural capital is not a trade-off - it is a win-win.

That's why we believe our Natural Infrastructure Plan presents a $1 + 1 = 3$ investment: it addresses today's challenges while building capacity for tomorrow.

It also points to the need for a shift in conversation beyond hard engineering solutions that may appear cheaper upfront, but often cost more over time in maintenance, repairs and lost co-benefits.

We understand why infrastructure matters. Roads move goods and services. Pipes deliver water and power. Bridges connect communities and enable commerce.

Natural infrastructure is less visible and therefore less valued. It exists in wetlands, native forests, dunes, rivers and floodplains. It quietly provides flood mitigation, water filtration, erosion control, carbon sequestration and temperature regulation without invoices, contracts or maintenance schedules.

Nature may be the most undervalued infrastructure asset we have. And because we undervalue it, we underinvest in it.

For too long, we have framed economic growth and environmental health as competing interests. This Plan demonstrates that we can - and must - achieve both. By doing so we can capitalise on the multiple benefits that investment in natural infrastructure offers - often with lower, long-term operating costs.

And as the New Zealand Infrastructure Commission Te Waihangā has identified, long-term strategy and planning are essential to guiding infrastructure investment and enhancing national resilience. This Plan adds a powerful tool to our infrastructure toolkit to support this.

Practical Actions

The Natural Infrastructure Plan has been developed through a coalition of 200+ contributors with over

10,000 combined hours of research, debate and collaboration. It reflects deep expertise and shared ambition.

What it is not is a list of aspirations. Instead, it provides practical actions from clear policy levers for government to significant opportunities for business, leadership and investment.

The plan also includes six case studies demonstrating the measurable benefits of incorporating nature-based solutions into infrastructure planning.

It encourages decision-makers to widen the lens through which infrastructure investments are assessed.

The Investment Decision Toolkit, for example, provides a structured way to evaluate natural infrastructure alongside traditional engineered solutions.

Public agencies, private companies and iwi can use these tools to compare options, assess long-term value and capture multiple co-benefits.

When making decisions that will shape infrastructure for decades, the greatest risk is not choosing the wrong option. The greatest risk is failing to consider all available options.

Natural infrastructure is not an environmental add-on. It is a credible, investable infrastructure asset.

By investing in natural infrastructure, we can reduce the risk in insurance, improve returns on investment, and know we will have enduring growth.

The question is no longer whether we can afford to invest in natural infrastructure.

It is whether we can afford not to.



Vicki Watson

Chief Executive
The Aotearoa Circle

About The Aotearoa Circle

The Aotearoa Circle, a unique leadership organisation, convenes public and private sector partners to tackle complex climate and nature challenges that threaten economic growth and future prosperity.

We know that our economy is intrinsically linked to our natural capital, yet it has been declining for decades.

That's why we have a mission and a deadline. If nature loss is not halted and reversed by 2035, Aotearoa New Zealand will reach a tipping point with lasting consequences for our economy, communities and global standing.

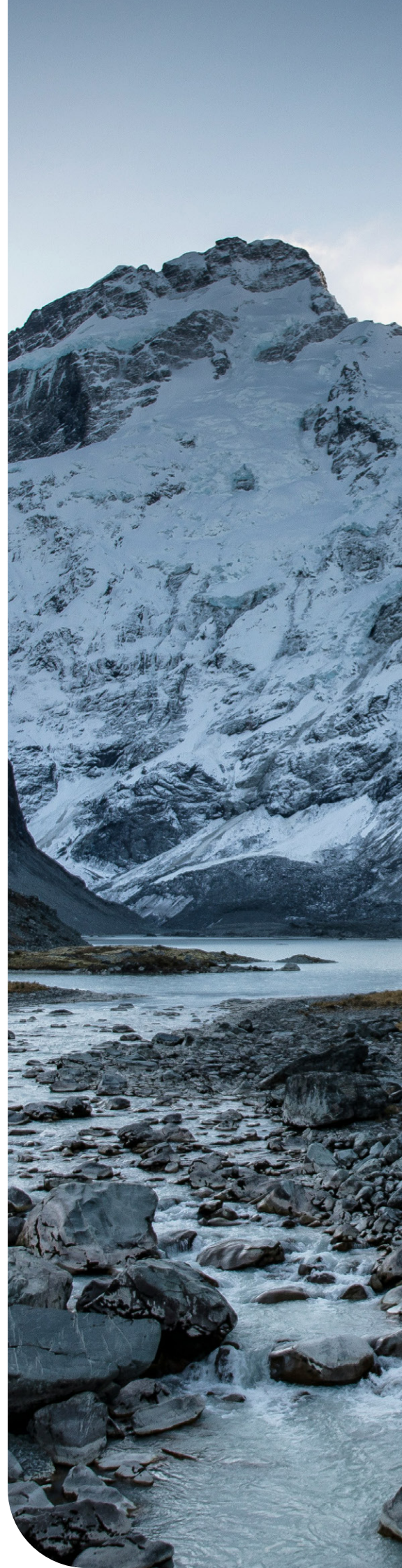
Our work considers pressing climate change and nature challenges facing our key sectors - from agriculture, energy and seafood to transport, finance, and tourism. We do this by delivering practical, cross-sector solutions that reduce risk, strengthen resilience, and ultimately aim to restore natural capital.

The Circle is guided by Guardians (our Board) and strengthened by future voices through our Rangatahi Advisory Panel (RAP) who actively participate in major workstreams, including the development of this plan.

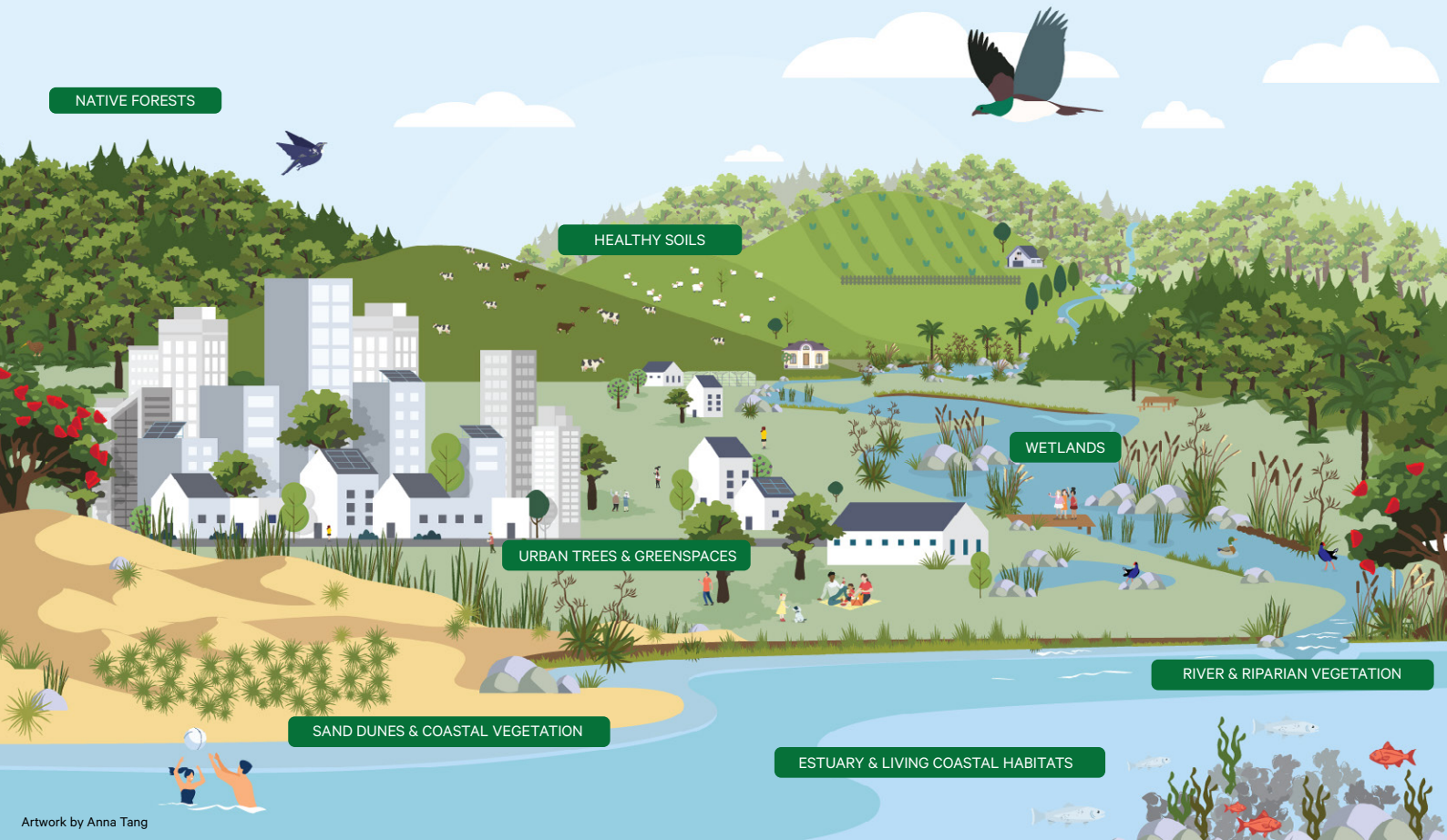
Formed in 2019, our co-founder Sir Rob Fenwick stated at the time that, "Time is running out for the treasures of nature that we love, and it is worth using every last breath, all of our collective energy, to save our land and secure our future."

Sir Rob's vision continues to inspire and guide us each day.






www.theaotearoacircle.nz



What is Natural Infrastructure?



Artwork by Anna Tang

NATURAL INFRASTRUCTURE	SERVICES IT PROVIDES
<p>NATIVE FORESTS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stabilises slopes and reduces erosion and landslides • Regulates water (slows runoff, sustains baseflows, improves quality) • Habitat for native species; supports cultural values and recreation • Stores carbon over long timeframes; provides local cooling and shade
<p>RIVER & RIPARIAN VEGETATION</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Filters sediment, nutrients and some pathogens before they reach waterways • Shades streams, lowering temperatures for aquatic life • Stabilises banks and reduces erosion • Provides habitat corridors for native species and inanga spawning areas
<p>WETLANDS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Temporarily store floodwaters and buffers stormwater • Retain water and supports drought resilience • Filter nutrients and contaminants, improving water quality • Sequester and stores carbon (notably peat systems) • Provide habitat and mahinga kai values
<p>URBAN TREES & GREENSPACES</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce urban heat and provide shade for people and places • Intercept rainfall and reduce stormwater runoff • Improve air quality and support urban biodiversity and wellbeing
<p>SAND DUNES & COASTAL VEGETATION</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trap and stabilise sand, reducing coastal erosion • Buffer storm surge and waves; enable natural shoreline adjustment • Provide habitat for coastal species and protect communities and assets inland
<p>ESTUARY & LIVING COASTAL HABITATS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attenuate waves and help stabilise shorelines • Filter water, cycle nutrients and improve clarity • Store "blue carbon" in sediments and vegetation • Provide nursery habitat that supports fisheries and biodiversity
<p>HEALTHY SOILS</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide the foundation for food production by cycling nutrients, retaining moisture and supporting fertile land • Reduce erosion and sediment loss when healthy, protecting waterways and downstream ecosystems • Help buffer flooding by absorbing, storing and slowly releasing water across the landscape • Filter contaminants and improve water quality before water reaches rivers, estuaries and aquifers • Store carbon and support soil biodiversity that underpins ecosystem resilience

Executive summary

Securing the future of Aotearoa New Zealand's tourism sector through strategic investment in natural infrastructure.

Aotearoa New Zealand's tourism sector stands at a pivotal juncture. Over the next three decades, the industry's resilience, economic prosperity, and competitive advantage will depend on effective stewardship and strategic investment in natural infrastructure.

Far more than picturesque scenery, Aotearoa New Zealand's wetlands, native forests, and resilient coastlines are foundational infrastructure assets; living systems that deliver critical financial, social, cultural and environmental value that underpin the distinctive visitor experiences that set Aotearoa New Zealand apart.

Tourism is a cornerstone of our economic prosperity, contributing \$13.3 billion annually to GDP and accounting for 3.7% of Aotearoa New Zealand's total economic output¹. The sector supports thousands of jobs across regions and is a major export earner, reinforcing its central role in both urban and rural economic development².

Aotearoa New Zealand's strategic growth roadmap for tourism is ambitious. By 2026, the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE) aims to restore international visitor numbers to pre-pandemic levels and to double export earnings from \$9.9 billion to \$19.8 billion by 2034³. Achieving these targets will require investment in workforce development, mixed-use infrastructure, and enhanced visitor experiences. Success will also rely on the condition and resilience of the natural infrastructure that supports access, safety and high-quality visitor experiences.

To support economic growth and prosperity, natural infrastructure must be recognised and treated as core infrastructure.

Nature's integration into planning and investment is essential for supporting delivery of growing visitor expectations, responding to international standards and expectations, and building a high value, future ready industry.

Natural infrastructure provides a foundation for long term commercial performance of our Tourism sector, as well as strengthening the climate change resilience of access routes, protecting iconic natural landscapes, and enhancing the quality of visitor experiences.

Activity is already underway across the country, and emerging projects demonstrate value. Operators, such as RealNZ⁴, are investing in restoring native habitats and wetland regeneration is improving water quality and biodiversity. Coastal restoration strengthens protection for communities and key visitor locations. These examples show that investment in living systems can deliver measurable gains for tourism, resilience, and improved environmental outcomes.

Progress is constrained by fragmented engagement across the sector, insufficient integration of natural infrastructure into investment planning, and limited understanding of the economic benefits it provides. Capability gaps, variable data quality, and misaligned incentives between public and private stakeholders restrict coordinated action and long-term investment.

Integrating natural infrastructure into tourism planning, investment decisions and regulatory frameworks will protect the landscapes visitors come to experience while reducing long-term operating and recovery costs. Coordinated investment and innovation, grounded in Te Taiao, will ensure that Aotearoa New Zealand's tourism industry remains resilient, competitive and able to deliver enduring value for communities, visitors and the environment.

¹ MBIE, Tourism Growth Roadmap. Retrieved from: <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/dmsdocument/30792-tourism-growth-roadmap>

² Stats NZ. Tourism Satellite Account: Year ended March 2023 retrieved from: <https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/tourism-satellite-account-year-ended-march-2023/>

³ MBIE, Tourism Growth Roadmap, <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-tourism/tourism/tourism-growth-roadmap#:~:text=Tourism%20Growth%20Roadmap%20Objectives;in%20tourism%20and%20hospitality%20jobs>.

⁴ <https://www.realnz.com/en/conservation/conservation/key-conservation-projects/>

About this report

Purpose

This report, prepared in February 2026, outlines the key economic dependencies and growth opportunities presented by natural infrastructure as it pertains to one of Aotearoa New Zealand's key economic sectors.

With our natural infrastructure being our most fundamental infrastructure, the purpose of this report is to outline, in a single document, the economic dependencies and growth opportunities presented by natural infrastructure.

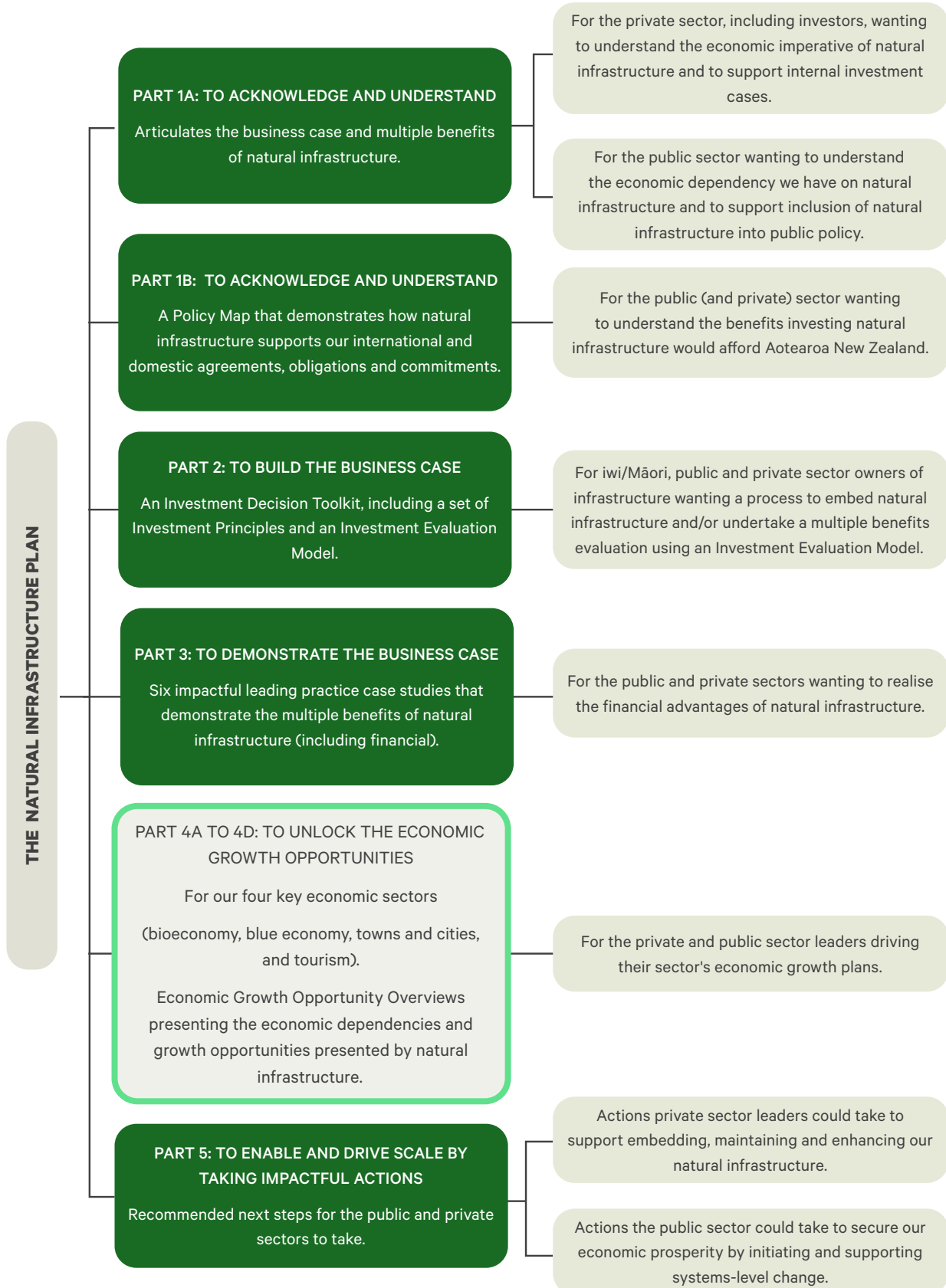
This report has been prepared to support The Aotearoa Circle's Natural Infrastructure Plan (NIP).



Structure of the Natural Infrastructure Plan

The Natural Infrastructure Plan comprises several sections framed against the five objectives. Each has a specific purpose and intended audience.

Note: Parts 1B, 2, 3 and 4A-4D are available as separate PDFs to download.



Next steps

It is envisaged that sector leaders utilise this report when developing national growth strategies.

It is also envisaged that these national growth strategies acknowledge and integrate the economic dependencies the sector has on natural infrastructure, and include plans to embed, maintain, and enhance our natural infrastructure.

To achieve enduring prosperity, and to realise economic growth opportunities, system-level changes are required. These systems-level changes, and other recommendations, are contained within the NIP.



A. Summary of Tourism’s national growth plan

The tourism sector is at the heart of Aotearoa New Zealand’s strategic plans for economic recovery and growth.

The Tourism Growth Roadmap⁵ sets out an ambition to:

- Restore international visitor numbers to pre-pandemic levels by 2026, and
- Double tourism export value from \$9.9billion to \$19.8billion by 2034.

These plans aim to strengthen competitiveness and resilience through investment in workforce development, mixed-use infrastructure, regional partnerships, and enhanced visitor experiences. Aviation and cruise connectivity, system coordination, and data-driven decision-making are also central to achieving these goals.

Central to the strategy is a shared national vision to position tourism as a high-value, future-ready, sector. Delivering on this vision will require coordinated investment and innovation to meet changing visitor expectations and global sustainability standards, ensuring that growth is both inclusive and enduring. Tourism will also rely not only on workforce and infrastructure investment, but also on the health and performance of the natural infrastructure that shapes Aotearoa New Zealand’s identity as a visitor destination.

The Aotearoa New Zealand Government’s strategic direction, as reflected in the Tourism Growth Plan, has a focus on stimulating economic growth. However, there is an opportunity to strengthen natural infrastructure considerations within this growth trajectory to ensure that growth enhances, rather than erodes, the natural assets upon which the sector depends. While the plan notes that “focusing on high-potential visitor markets prioritises sustainable growth”, it does not define “sustainable”.

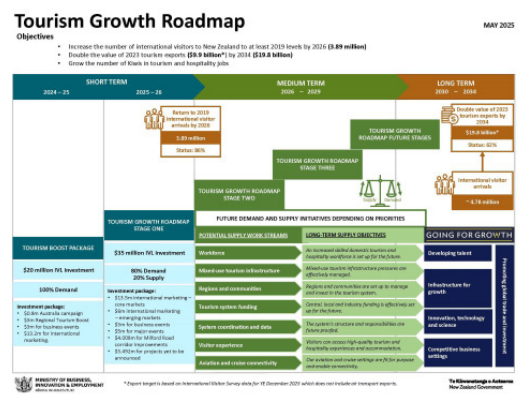
Similarly, the Tourism New Zealand 2024–2028 Strategy⁶ affirms a commitment “to ensuring that we support a sustainable and productive approach to tourism growth” but provides limited detail on how environmental outcomes will be delivered or measured.

This is therefore an opportunity for the strategy to reinforce nature as a core infrastructure asset for resilience, visitor experience quality or long-term sector value. Tourism New Zealand research confirms that nature remains the core motivator for international visitors.

“The top motivation for holiday visitors (76%) to travel to Aotearoa New Zealand continues to be experiencing our landscapes and scenery.”⁷

This highlights the sector’s fundamental reliance on high-quality natural environments.

Further, as is discussed within this section, the infrastructure upon which the sector depends, relies on healthy natural systems for its resilience. These factors reinforce the need for tourism strategies to explicitly recognise natural infrastructure as a critical supply-side enabler of tourism growth.



⁵ MBIE, Tourism Growth Roadmap, <https://www.mbie.govt.nz/immigration-and-tourism/tourism/tourism-growth-roadmap#:~:text=Tourism%20Growth%20Roadmap%20Objectives;in%20tourism%20and%20hospitality%20jobs>.

⁶ Tourism NZ 2024-2028 Strategy and FY25 focus. Retrieved from: <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/assets/about/publications/Strategy-overviews/Tourism-New-Zealand-2024-2028-Strategy-Overview.pdf>

⁷ Tourism New Zealand. (2024). International visitor spend up \$1.3b on previous year. Retrieved from: <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/news-and-activity/international-visitor-spend-up-1-3b-on-previous-year/>

B. Scale of the investment opportunity and expected contribution to GDP

The tourism sector's growth trajectory is compelling. Tourism contributes \$13.3billion to GDP annually, equivalent to 3.7% of New Zealand's GDP, and generates \$9.9billion in export value⁸. The Tourism Growth Roadmap's ambitions would see this figure double to \$19.8billion by 2034⁹.

Visitor spending remains a critical driver of this growth. For example, tourism on Public Conservation Land and Waters (PCLW) generated \$4.3billion pre-pandemic, though this declined to \$3.4billion in recent years underscoring the importance of restoring international visitor flows and strengthening destination resilience¹⁰.

Together, these figures indicate an ambitious and transformative decade ahead bringing significant opportunities for investment, job creation, and regional development, while requiring careful management of risk and resilience to ensure long-term success.

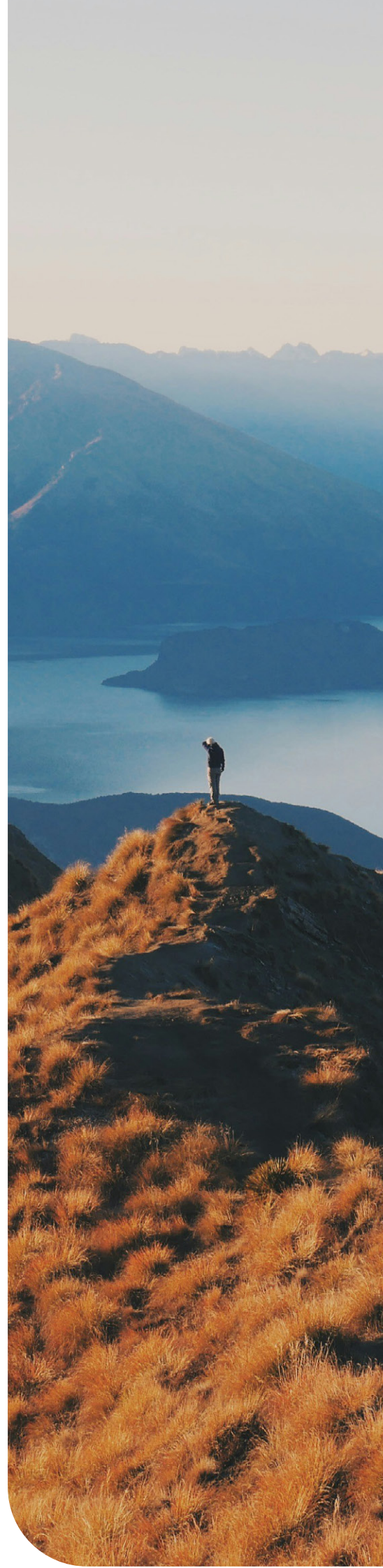
To unlock the full potential of this opportunity, it is recommended that a larger proportion of government-backed tourism funding mechanisms (e.g., International Visitor Conservation and Tourism Levy) be allocated to verifiable natural infrastructure projects that demonstrably enhance the resilience and quality of the visitor experience (e.g., water quality, flood protection, biodiversity).

Alongside increased government investment, there is a clear opportunity to strengthen the private sector's funding to natural infrastructure. Many tourism ventures already invest in environmental programmes, including species recovery initiatives and nature related restoration activities. Building on this existing commitment, operators, asset owners and destination alliances may be able to prioritise strategic investment in natural infrastructure, given the growing risk exposure the sector faces from flooding, erosion, slips and extreme events.

⁸ Statistics New Zealand. Tourism Satellite Account: Year ended March 2023. 29 February 2024.

⁹ Ministry of Business, Innovation & Employment. Tourism Growth Roadmap. June 2025.

¹⁰ DOC, [2019](#)



C. Traditional and natural infrastructure dependencies of the Aotearoa New Zealand’s tourism sector

Aotearoa New Zealand’s visitor economy depends on a diverse network of traditional and natural infrastructure that enables access, experiences, and services across the country.

(i) Economic dependencies on natural infrastructure

Figure 1 highlights that many tourism-related activities in Aotearoa New Zealand exert High or Very High impacts on natural systems, particularly through accommodation, food services, transport, and recreation infrastructure. For details on how this data was determined, please refer to Appendix 2 of the main National Natural Infrastructure Plan.

These high-impact drivers underscore the extent to which tourism relies on healthy landscapes while simultaneously placing pressure on them, especially in destinations where visitor volumes intensify demands on water supply, wastewater treatment, coastal access, and conservation land. The pattern in the chart reinforces that the visitor economy cannot be sustained on built infrastructure alone: without stable catchments, clean waterways, resilient coastal margins, and functioning ecosystems, the natural experiences that attract visitors - and the infrastructure that supports them - become increasingly vulnerable to degradation and disruption. In this way, the graph illustrates a core tourism challenge: the sector’s success is inseparable from the condition of the natural infrastructure it depends upon, making restoration and protection essential to long-term visitor experience and economic resilience.

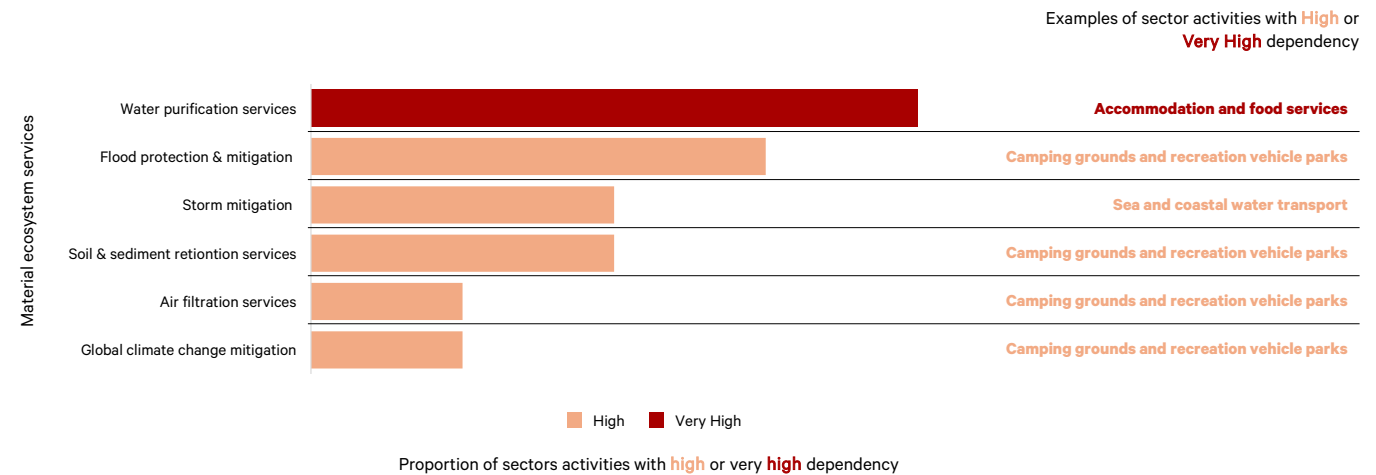


Figure 1: Examples of sector activities with High or Very High dependencies

This includes **roads, bridges, rail, and public transport** that connect travelers to destinations, airports and ports that bring visitors in and move them between regions, water and waste systems that support accommodation and hospitality, electricity and gas networks that power hotels, ski fields, and attractions, and telecommunications that keep visitors connected and enable digital bookings and navigation.

Alongside these **built assets**, natural infrastructure is central to Aotearoa New Zealand's tourism identity, value proposition and economic prosperity. National parks, alpine landscapes, rivers, and coastal ecosystems provide the experiences visitors seek - Great Walks, whale watching, geothermal wonders, and cultural encounters. These natural assets also deliver resilience, buffering against floods, slips, and climate impacts, while forests and wetlands store carbon, and regulate water, sediment and coastal processes.

Land transport and gateways provide the backbone for visitor movement. Tourists travel by road, bus, train, or rideshare to reach attractions, then connect through airports and ports for domestic and international journeys. For example, visitors may drive from Auckland to Rotorua for geothermal experiences, then fly to Queenstown for alpine adventures. These public network assets - roads, rail, runways, wharves - serve all tourism segments, from adventure and eco-tourism to cultural and luxury travel. Alongside these built networks, natural infrastructure plays an essential resilience role. Healthy wetlands, forests, dunes and riparian margins act as protective buffers that reduce slips, flooding and coastal damage, helping keep access routes open and safeguard the reliability of the transport systems the tourism sector depends on.

Across **accommodation and activity sites**, day-to-day operations rely on **essential utilities** delivered through these networks. Water supply from council systems and treatment plants supports hotels, restaurants, and ski resorts; electricity and gas power lifts, heating, and hospitality services; and telecommunications enable real-time bookings, visitor safety alerts, and digital guides. Reliable connectivity is critical as visitors navigating trails or booking last minute experiences depend on cellular and satellite coverage. Natural infrastructure strengthens these systems by stabilising catchments, improving water quality, reducing sediment loads, and lowering the risk of service interruptions during storms and extreme weather. In this way, restored natural systems operate alongside built utilities to maintain consistent service delivery for visitors and operators.

Together, traditional and natural infrastructure operate hand-in-glove, enabling access to healthy iconic experiences, and supporting visitor flow management, while reinforcing Aotearoa New Zealand's position as a leading nature-based destination which tourist demand as demonstrated through their preferences with "...84% of holiday visitors enjoying walking, trekking, or tramping while here, and 75% visited natural attractions such as a lake, river or forest"¹¹ Accordingly, protecting and investing in both built and ecological systems is essential for sustaining the visitor economy and ensuring Aotearoa remains a world-class destination.

¹¹ Tourism New Zealand. (2024). International visitor spend up \$1.3b on previous year. Retrieved from: <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/news-and-activity/international-visitor-spend-up-1-3b-on-previous-year/>

D. Natural infrastructure-related challenges for tourism

Aotearoa New Zealand’s tourism sector is built on the quality, stability and resilience of natural landscapes. Visitors come primarily to experience scenery, outdoor environments and nature-based activities¹², yet many of the natural systems that enable these experiences are under increasing strain.

(i) Impact drivers

Figure 2 shows that tourism activities in Aotearoa New Zealand have High or Very High dependencies on natural infrastructure, particularly across land, air and sea transport systems that enable visitor movement. For details on how this data was determined, please refer to Appendix 2 of the main National Natural Infrastructure Plan.

These impacts highlight that the reliability of tourism experiences is closely tied to the condition of surrounding natural systems, including stable coastlines, functioning waterways and resilient slopes that protect roads, airports, ports and recreational access routes. The strong dependence of accommodation, water-based activities and camping infrastructure on healthy natural environments reinforces a core challenge for the sector: when wetlands, dunes, forests or river margins deteriorate, the built assets that service tourism become more vulnerable to disruption. The graph therefore underscores that the stability of visitor access and the quality of visitor experiences depend fundamentally on maintaining resilient natural infrastructure alongside traditional transport networks.

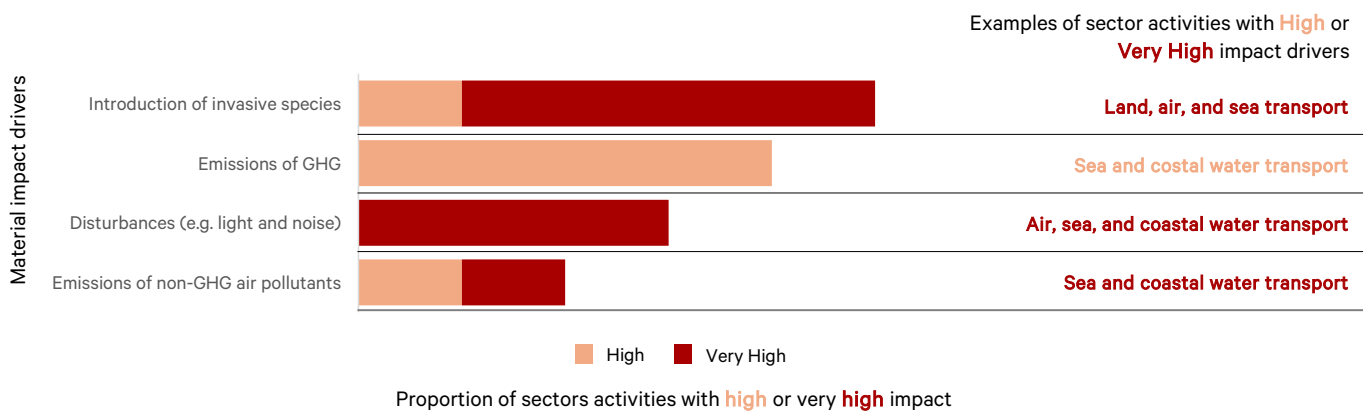


Figure 2: The tourism sector’s greatest impact drivers on natural infrastructure, with examples of sector activities with High or Very High impact drivers

¹² Tourism New Zealand. (2024). International visitor spend up \$1.3b on previous year. Retrieved from: <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/news-and-activity/international-visitor-spend-up-1-3b-on-previous-year/>

Pressure on the natural environments that attract visitors

Most international visitors choose Aotearoa New Zealand for its landscapes and outdoor activities, creating a structural dependency on high quality natural environments. However, these same environments are facing cumulative pressures from erosion, sedimentation, water quality decline and more frequent climate extremes. As natural settings deteriorate, popular attractions become less accessible, less safe and less compelling, eroding the distinctiveness that sets Aotearoa New Zealand apart globally.

Degraded catchments, unstable slopes and declining coastal buffers increasingly pose direct risks to visitor access, operator viability and the built infrastructure that tourism relies on¹³.

Around 40% of Aotearoa New Zealand's coastline is eroding¹⁴, wetlands and dune systems continue to shrink¹⁵, and many native species and ecosystems remain in decline¹⁶. As dunes, wetlands, forests and other natural buffers degrade, the landscapes that once absorbed flood peaks, reduced sediment loads and protected coastal roads, bridges and visitor facilities become less effective. This increase sedimentation, slope instability and coastal retreat, heightening risk for built assets and reducing overall system resilience¹⁷.

As climate driven hazards intensify, weaknesses in natural infrastructure are beginning to determine the reliability and competitiveness of the tourism sector.

Increasing exposure of visitor destinations to climate driven events

Many iconic tourism locations sit in environments that are naturally dynamic, including river valleys, lake shorelines and low-lying coasts. These landscapes are now experiencing more frequent and severe flooding, erosion, storm surge and landslides. When natural buffering systems such as wetlands, dunes and riparian networks are weakened, the impacts of extreme events become more destructive.

Tracks, campsites, viewing platforms, carparks and water-based attractions are increasingly vulnerable to closure or damage, with significant financial

and operational consequences for operators and communities¹⁸.

Growing fragility of natural systems that protect built infrastructure

Tourism relies on roads, bridges, utilities, digital connectivity and gateways that are also dependent on the condition of surrounding natural systems. Forests, floodplains, coastal dunes and headwater vegetation reduce the likelihood of slips, flood surges and erosion that disrupt transport and utility networks¹⁹. As these natural defences decline, the built systems that support tourism become more fragile, leading to more frequent outages, road closures and access constraints. The severe weather events of early 2023 demonstrated how quickly damage to natural landscapes cascades into nationwide disruption across the sector.

Adaptation to climate change

Tourism's ability to adapt to climate change is fundamentally linked to the health and resilience of natural infrastructure. Restored native forests and wetlands regulate water flows, reducing the severity of floods that often close key tourism routes. Healthy mangroves and sand dunes provide cost-effective shock absorption against rising sea levels and storm surges, protecting coastal resorts and marine operations.

Amplified risks for operators, assets and regional economies

Tourism operators manage a mix of built and natural assets that depend on resilient local environments. When slips damage access roads, when floods overtop tracks, when storm surge erodes coastal attractions or when sedimentation affects water quality, entire business models are impacted. The Auckland Anniversary floods and Cyclone Gabrielle revealed the scale of these vulnerabilities, with billions in insured losses and region wide interruptions to tourism²⁰. DOC's report of eighteen thousand impacted assets highlights the extent to which degraded natural systems generate operational uncertainty, sunk repair costs and long recovery timelines²¹.

¹³ Tourism New Zealand (2024). New research shows natural landscapes and unique culture drivers for visitors.

¹⁴ <https://environment.govt.nz/publications/our-marine-environment-2025/our-coasts-and-estuaries-are-affected-by-a-changing-ocean/>

¹⁵ Ryan, Dr (2023). Ecosystem integrity of active sand dunes: A case study for Aotearoa New Zealand.

¹⁶ Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ (2024). Our Land 2024.

¹⁷ MfE, Our Environment, 2025, MfE, Our Marine Environment, 2025

¹⁸ Ministry for the Environment & Stats NZ (2023). Environment Aotearoa 2022 – Climate change and natural hazard pressures.

¹⁹ NIWA (2020). The role of natural infrastructure in natural hazard mitigation.

²⁰ Insurance Council of New Zealand (ICNZ) (2023). Cyclone Gabrielle and Auckland Anniversary Floods – Combined Losses Exceed \$3.5 Billion.

²¹ Department of Conservation (2024). Exploring charging for access to some public conservation land – Discussion Document.

Why addressing these challenges is essential

Weak natural infrastructure increases volatility across the tourism sector, reduces visitor reliability, and heightens long term financial risk. Conversely, investment in wetlands, riparian systems, dune restoration, native vegetation recovery and catchment stabilisation reduces damage from extreme events and protects both natural attractions and the built systems that support them. Strengthening natural infrastructure therefore delivers dual critical outcomes: improved resilience of tourism assets and enhanced visitor experiences rooted in high quality, nature rich landscapes. Addressing these natural infrastructure challenges is fundamental to safeguarding the sector's future performance and the economic wellbeing of the regions that depend on it.



E. Tourism growth opportunities presented by natural infrastructure

The Tourism Growth Plan is currently focused on short-term visitor number growth, with value growth being a medium to long-term focus. The plan should also focus in the on balancing growth with the health of the natural infrastructure that directly underpins visitor access, safety and the quality of the tourism experience.

Recent events have shown that investment in wetlands, riparian systems, dunes and stabilising vegetation can reduce slips, flooding and storm impacts, increase destination reliability and protect regional economies. These nature-based systems act as low cost, high impact resilience infrastructure, reducing repair burdens on councils and operators and keeping key sites open for longer.

Across land transport, **natural infrastructure enhances resilience to disasters and weather events, while creating scenic routes and decentralised access points that encourage shoulder-season activities and domestic tourism.**

Riparian margins, wetlands, stabilising vegetation and restored catchments reduce slips, flooding and sedimentation, directly protecting roads, bridges and walking routes that visitors rely upon.

Protecting and restoring indigenous biodiversity maintains and enhances assets that support premium nature-based experiences and strengthen destination competitiveness.

As climate pressures increase, these investments enable more reliable access, reduce long term maintenance costs and create richer, more resilient visitor experiences that support sustained sector growth. They also provide the ecological foundation for high value wellbeing tourism, a rapidly expanding global segment that relies on clean water, quiet natural spaces and restored ecosystems²². Tourism New Zealand is increasingly exploring this opportunity, highlighting the direct link between natural infrastructure health and visitor demand in wellbeing markets²³.

Targeted natural infrastructure investment in tourism hotspots, particularly where visitor volumes exceed local ratepayer capacity and where natural systems are already under strain can safeguard high demand visitor locations and support emerging regions to build appeal and capacity.

Where natural infrastructure safeguards the quality of visitor experiences, Marketing & Brand should frame tourism positively and clarify impact narratives, particularly in demonstrating how investment in nature provides multiple benefits. **Nature remains the core driver of New Zealand's global brand identity** and the foundation of every major tourism marketing campaign²⁴. Healthy natural infrastructure is therefore essential for maintaining brand credibility and competitive advantage.

Ecotourism opportunities such as volunteer restoration projects, cycling trails, and experiences that connect urban and natural environments, can reinforce the authenticity of Aotearoa New Zealand's "100% Pure" brand. Zealandia²⁵ exemplifies how urban-nature integration can create iconic visitor experiences, demonstrating how restored ecosystems generate both ecological and economic value. International models also show strong potential for responsible tourism²⁶. In Denmark, the new CopenPay scheme demonstrates how responsible tourism can be encouraged through visitor participation in nature-positive activities. During its 2024 pilot, tourists in Copenhagen received rewards such as free ice cream, discounted museum entry and complimentary experiences in exchange for actions like litter collection, volunteering on urban farms, or choosing low-emission transport options²⁷. These sorts of models demonstrate how visitor participation can support environmental outcomes and strengthen sustainability-oriented tourism experiences. Similar approaches in New Zealand could enhance natural infrastructure while appealing to visitors seeking low-impact, conservation-aligned travel.

²² Global Wellness Institute. Wellness Tourism Economy Global Data 2024.

²³ Tourism New Zealand. What We Do; Tourism New Zealand. New research shows natural landscapes and unique culture drivers for visitors. 2024

²⁴ Tourism New Zealand. Tourism Impact. Tourism New Zealand website. Retrieved from: <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/about-us/what-we-do/>

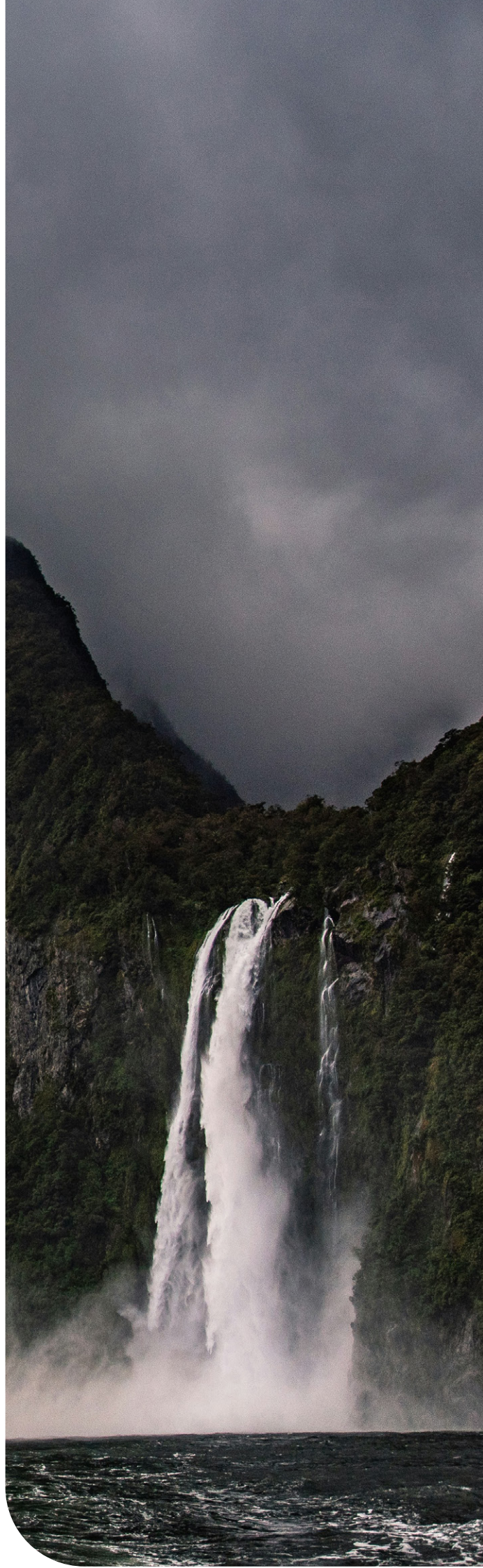
²⁵ https://www.visitzealandia.com/?gad_source=1&gad_campaignid=22814210613&gbraid=0AAAAABchCCEOUcWOXCb5q_NEcPkGmvM1_&gclid=CjwKCAiA2s-vlBhB-EiWARWDPjkFE6y8954S81nSYBNQ7sxnIx0OeCWzzGd_haE1uktMF7fGAIGrtiRoC09cQAvD_BwE

²⁶ Euronews. A lifeline for conservation and community projects: why voluntourism is growing again. 4 October 2025 retrieved from here: <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2025/10/04/a-lifeline-for-conservation-and-community-projects-why-voluntourism-is-growing-again>

²⁷ <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/travel/article/copenpay-program-copenhagen>

Education-based tourism presents a significant opportunity, particularly experiences grounded in Mātauranga Māori and the philosophy of humans being interconnected with nature. Investment in natural infrastructure restores the ecological conditions needed for culturally anchored storytelling, learning journeys and guided experiences that deepen visitor understanding of Te Ao Māori.

Funding to support investment in natural infrastructure could be supported by tax and fee structures for environmental burden redistribution and improved transparency in policy settings like the International Visitor Levy. Greater clarity on how the levy revenue is allocated, and gearing it to support natural infrastructure outcomes, would strengthen public trust, encourage co-investment by the sector and support the growth of the sector through narrative development.



F. Innovative examples of natural infrastructure in tourism

(i) Punakaiki Coastal Restoration Project

Pre project state

Prior to restoration, the Punakaiki site consisted of approximately 114ha of coastal land that had been degraded through pasture farming, vegetation clearance and pilot scale sand mining²⁸. The landscape showed signs of severe disturbance, including compacted soils, altered hydrology, fragmented native vegetation, weed invasion and loss of natural dune and wetland function²⁹.

The area sits adjacent to Paparoa National Park and near the only known breeding colony of the vulnerable Westland Petrel, making ecological degradation of particular concern.

From a tourism perspective, the degraded natural infrastructure contributed to flooding, erosion and reduced resilience along nearby access routes, including State Highway 6, which supports visitor travel to the Pancake Rocks and blowholes.

What was done

The Punakaiki Coastal Restoration Project began in 2009 as a partnership involving DOC, Conservation Volunteers New Zealand, Lincoln University and the landowner. Restoration interventions included:

- **Planting more than 200,000 eco-sourced native plants to restore sand plain forest, coastal margins and wetlands³⁰.**
- **Re-forming dune and wetland systems and restoring natural water flows.**

- **Soil rehabilitation and Pest and predator control**
- **Establishing volunteer programmes, nurseries and monitoring systems to track ecological recovery.**

Outcomes: Ecological and tourism perspectives

Restoration has increased native seedling recruitment, improved soil function and re-established dune and wetland systems that provide stormwater retention, erosion control and habitat connectivity. Species such as fernbird, wētā, wetland birds and the regionally significant Westland Petrel now benefit from expanding habitat and improved ecological linkages.

Strengthened natural systems have reduced flooding and erosion risk along the visitor access corridor, improving travel reliability to iconic attractions. The project also enhances visitor experience through interpretation, guided activities and hands on restoration opportunities, deepening visitor connection and reinforcing the West Coast's nature-based tourism identity.

Why this matters

Punakaiki shows how natural infrastructure investment can turn degraded coastal land into a resilient system that supports tourism reliability, visitor engagement, and biodiversity. It offers a scalable model for regions demonstrating the value of dunes, wetlands, and native forests as core environmental and economic infrastructure.

²⁸ Rhodes, L. (2013). Punakaiki Coastal Restoration Project: A case study for a consultative and multidisciplinary approach in selecting indicators of restoration success for a sand mining closure site, West Coast, New Zealand.

²⁹ Clarkson, B., & Clarkson, T. (2015). Ecological restoration of sand mined coastal ecosystems: Selecting indicators of restoration success. *Catena*.

³⁰ Wildlab Aotearoa. Punakaiki Coastal Restoration Project. Project summary and restoration records. Retrieved from: <https://wildlab.org.nz/projects/punakaiki-coastal-restoration-project>



(ii) Aventura Auckland Surf Park – Eco-Cabins and Integrated Sustainability

Aventura's Auckland Surf Park, now under development in Dairy Flat, is redefining sustainable tourism infrastructure. The masterplan combines a world-class surf lagoon with eco-cabin accommodation, a wellness centre, and farm-to-table dining—all designed to reflect Aotearoa New Zealand's rural character and cultural heritage.

Natural infrastructure principles are embedded throughout:

- **Water-sensitive landscape** design that manages stormwater and reduce runoff
- **Native planting and habitat restoration** that enhances biodiversity
- **Rainwater harvesting and composting** systems that minimises waste
- **A 7ha solar farm** and an innovative system that captures excess heat from an on-site Spark data centre to warm the surf lagoon year-round—a world-first approach to energy efficiency.

These measures reduce environmental impact while creating a tourism destination that prioritizes ecological resilience and visitor wellbeing. By integrating renewable energy, green infrastructure, and nature-based design, Aventura demonstrates a benchmark for tourism developments that deliver both economic and environmental benefits³¹.

³¹ [Aventura](#)



Contact us

This report forms a key part of a wider Natural Infrastructure Plan.

For questions or additional information on the national Natural Infrastructure Plan please reach out to The Aotearoa Circle.

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The Natural Infrastructure Plan, including its associated separate parts, have been prepared by The Aotearoa Circle in collaboration and consultation with Circle Partners and other key stakeholders to stimulate discussion, improve understanding and support consideration of nature as critical national infrastructure. The plan reflects the views at the time of publication and is intended for general information purposes only.

While reasonable care has been taken in the preparation of this document, The Aotearoa Circle makes no representations or warranties, express or implied, as to the accuracy, completeness, or currency of the information. Readers are urged to seek their own independent professional advice on specific matters before acting on any information contained in this Plan.

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The Aotearoa Circle



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