



BABES IN THE WILD

New Zealand Inc takes a hit when foreign tourists die in our national parks. And they do die – by drowning, hypothermia, falls and avalanches. Peta Carey asks what more can we do to protect visitors to our great outdoors – and when does personal responsibility kick in?

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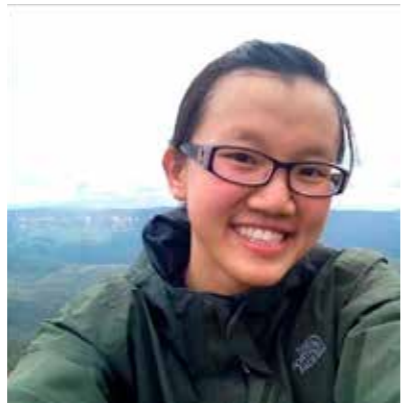
Fjordland rain. It's become almost a meteorological term in itself. On the East Cape, they talk of millimetres of rain, elsewhere a few centimetres. In Fjordland, rainfall is still referred to in inches. A dumping of up to 12 inches (30cm) over 24 hours is not unheard of. It's anticipated. Ask any tramping guide, track maintenance team, roading contractor.

So when on May 19, 2014, a "weather watch" turned to a "weather warning" – a low-pressure system intensifying over Fjordland – you could stand beside any creek on the west of the main divide and watch the water rise markedly within an hour. Streams would go from fordable – wet boots perhaps, water around the knees – to a torrent, too strong for some. Too strong for Yessica Asmin, a young Indonesian national, Australian university student and first-time visitor to New Zealand. It was in these conditions that this vibrant 22-year-old drowned in the Pampolona Creek on the Milford Track.

Fatalities or injuries within our national parks are not unheard of; they inevitably result in a story across most local media outlets. But this was different. The story went global. This was a fatality on the Milford Track, New Zealand's premier Great Walk, arguably one of the greatest alpine walks in the world. An avalanche of blame and accusations was hurled at the Department of Conservation. Where were the bridges? Where was the information?

Allan Munn is conservation services director for the Southern Regions. No office bureaucrat, Munn has a face that's been gently worn by years of work in the biodiversity arena – cutting tracks, eradicating pests, and creating safe havens for kakapo, Chatham Island robins, kokako. After 24 years he took a 10-year break, but when former colleague and now DoC director general Lou Sanson encouraged him to apply for a high-level role with responsibility over the Southern Regions – including his beloved Fjordland – Munn couldn't say no. He'd been in the job for only nine months when Yessica Asmin died.

Munn flew to the Indonesian Embassy in Wellington immediately afterwards to offer his condolences, extending an invitation to Asmin's parents to visit the area. He nods sadly, acknowledging the tragedy. "At times we tend to make



Top: Yessica Asmin, and rescuers removing her body from a helicopter in Te Anau. Above left: Asmin's Australian boyfriend and fellow trumper Sean McNabb. Above right: Mintaro Hut, a further hour's walk from their fateful river crossing.

decisions on large numbers of people, or large numbers of dollars, but when a young woman drowns and it's someone's daughter, someone's loved one, it makes your decision-making very real. Perhaps there are things we could change. Perhaps there are things we could have done better." He is constructive, sympathetic, certainly in no way defensive.

Yet when you look at the facts, and not at the media-fuelled barrage of blame, it looks strongly as if the department had done all it could. The DoC website was loaded with warnings and directions, the staff at the Te Anau visitor centre had given the correct information, emphatically.

But this tragedy on the Milford Track went to the heart of an issue DoC faces all over the country, from day walkers at Mt Cook and West Coast glaciers to remote back-country trampers and alpinists. Where do you draw the line between what DoC has to provide in terms of information and facilities, and an individual's personal responsibility to look after themselves? How far must

the department go in order to prevent people injuring or killing themselves on public conservation lands?

The facts then: when Yessica Asmin and her Australian boyfriend, Sean McNabb, decided to walk the Milford Track, the summer season had ended. By April 30, the winter season had begun. Guided walks had finished and their plush lodges closed up. Freedom trampers could, indeed, still walk the track, but they would be clearly told facilities were much reduced. The standard of the track was no longer rated "Great Walks/Easy Tramping", it was now "Back-country Adventure Seeker". Hut wardens had gone home. The DoC tramping huts would have no cooking facilities, no radio contact and hut fees would be reduced. Most important of all, as has occurred every year at the end of the summer season since the 1960s, several bridges had been removed.

Avalanches. With the mountains either side of Mackinnon Pass rising to well above 2000m – the precipitous U-shaped



The route from Lake Te Anau to Milford Sound – now famous as the Milford Track – was blazed by Quintin Mackinnon and his companion Ernest Mitchell in 1888. The cairn (above) marks the track's highest point.

glacial valleys famous in photographs shown around the world – the trigger point for avalanches from late autumn, through winter and spring is sudden, swift and deadly. They destroy bridges, bring massive slips down over tracks and, not least, can kill.

Grant Tremain, conservation services manager for recreation in Fjordland, answers directly to Allan Munn, overseeing the park's 400,000 annual visitors.

"After a certain time of year, I don't want any of my staff on the ground in there," he says, referring to the valley floor. "When you see an avalanche coming off those sheer-sided mountains, the deluge of snow can become airborne at 800m to 1000m. The force is devastating."

The cost of replacing bridges each season? More than \$8000 per bridge. He cites the big snow year of 2013: "If the bridges had been left in there, we would have had to replace every one, and many more than once," putting anyone working on the ground in immediate danger. Few old-timers have forgotten the loss

of ranger Steve Taylor 30 years ago, killed by an avalanche near Dumpling Hut.

Contrary to media reports, Asmin and her partner McNabb were told the bridges had been removed. They'd received that information at the Te Anau DoC visitor centre. It was and still is clearly stated on the website, and the couple had been reminded by the bus driver who took them to the boat to cross Lake Te Anau to the start of the Milford Track.

They'd been advised at least twice to take a personal locator beacon, and eventually hired one. And, yes, they did know bad weather was on the way, but had already left before the "weather watch" was upgraded to a "weather warning".

Another fact: there was shelter along the track. Says Tremain: "When they [McNabb and a fellow trumper] said, 'We didn't have any other option except to cross,' I don't agree with that." They had passed two separate day shelters, and the private Pampolona Lodge, so if they had made the decision not to cross the swollen creek they could have backtracked 300m to shelter.

But of course they were on a mission to Mintaro Hut, only another hour's walk. "It's so often that group drive, the urge to get to the destination," he says.

Carefully written into DoC's Milford Track website is the reminder: "Ensure all in your party are suitably fit and experienced in winter tramping, including navigation skills, river crossings, alpine conditions, safety judgment."

Whether or not the young couple on the Milford Track chose to read or think seriously about that warning is unknown. According to Te Anau police constable Chris Boulton, who handled the aftermath, the answer to whether both Asmin and McNabb and friend Sebastian Keilholz, who had joined them, had the necessary skills and experience is – yes and no.

"They did the right thing, the young men taking the packs across first, then going back to help each other." But when Asmin fell into the current, she was swept away. Had the group known about and used recommended river-crossing techniques – crossing as a trio, linking

arms – Asmin might have survived.

Why the confusion in the media? Did these young people fully understand that the bridges had been taken out?

Constable Boulton: “After a tragedy like this, everyone’s looking for someone to blame. It’s easier to point the finger, forget what you may have read or been told, than take any responsibility.” He’s realistic. “They were naive, babes in the wood, really. Considering the winter track conditions, they had possibly overestimated their ability.”

So when Allan Munn, apologetic, suggests the Department of Conservation could do more, what is it exactly they can do? “Social media and general website input,” he says warily. The nub, he suggests, is getting stronger, clearer information out before people plan their trip, before they even get here.

“These days young people aren’t necessarily getting their information from our website or our visitor centres.” He cites the many social media websites – Facebook, Tripadvisor, tramper.co.nz, travel blogs, *Lonely Planet* or the ad hoc conversations at backpacker hostels or the iSites dotted around the region.

Such was the shock from Asmin’s death that DoC head office set about reviewing their entire information conduits, safety regulations and systems across the Great Walks, in particular the reach of social media. The subsequent “Southern Great Walks Visitor Safety Review” throws up some striking insights and changes, some immediately instigated.

Key is visitor expectation and source of information. Although the DoC website clearly has “Winter Season” in view (and even the clarity of that DoC webpage can be improved, according to the report), the overwhelming bulk of information from all other sources of information – including concessionaire websites and Tourism NZ – refers predominantly to the summer season. All information and photographs point to a stunning, must-do, achievable adventure for those of moderate fitness and experience. Even the potential rainfall is downplayed on some of those sites. This emphasis, according to the report, “may contribute to a disconnect between people’s perception of the track and the reality that DoC and associates try to convey”, particularly when the summer season changes



The Waiho River is fed by the melt-water of the Franz Josef Glacier. In 2011, two young women – one from Singapore and the other from Taiwan – died crossing this river.

THE STRING OF TRAGEDIES AROUND FRANZ AND FOX GLACIERS MEANT THAT RADICAL INTERVENTION WAS REQUIRED.

overnight to winter.

The report hints at the difficulty between marketing and safety. There are 80,000 booked visitors per year across the Great Walks in New Zealand. The revenue to DoC is not insignificant. The revenue to concessionaires – guided walks – more than significant. But the overwhelming positive brand message – glossy photographs of cloud-free mountaintops – has to be tempered with clear distinctions, especially between seasons. As a result of the report, DoC’s Commercial Partnerships Unit is working “with all brand partners to improve the quality of information” to convey realistic expectations.

The report also raises the question of whether the track should be closed permanently over the winter season, or

temporarily depending on avalanche or flood danger.

Many critics have echoed that question: if you’re going to take out the bridges, why not close the track? The answer’s simple. “Firmly enshrined in legislation is free access to national parks,” says Munn. “But it’s also human nature. Say no, and they’ll go anyway.”

North of Milford, in Westland Tai Poutini National Park, conservation services manager Wayne Costello has tried to close off access. Or, in his words, “make it as difficult as possible”. In particular he’s referring to the Welcome Flat Track, north of Haast.

“It’s all about expectations. People book the hut, arrange their travel and are committed to heading up, regardless,” he says. But if there’s more than 100mm of rain within a few hours, Costello puts barriers in place, such as the dangers around river crossings and slips in the Copland Valley. “Sure, there are people who know their rights and have simply walked around the barrier. But I’d far rather err on the side of caution and have someone complain to us about their rights than the search and rescue team picking up their bodies.”

For Costello, it’s also about bypassing that social media and website source of information, trying to ensure there’s

a point of human contact. He’s trying to make it obligatory for visitors to collect hut tickets from the Haast visitor centre. “Our approach is for the staff to talk directly to the visitors, provide them with all the information and let them make a decision. But if my team is really worried – about the conditions or the experience of the group – then they provide them with the strong advice, ‘Don’t go.’ I’d rather be accused of meddling than have another fatality,” he says.

He’s seen some of those fatalities. And not necessarily on any Great Walk or tramping track, but on day walks, on a 10-minute stroll from the carpark.

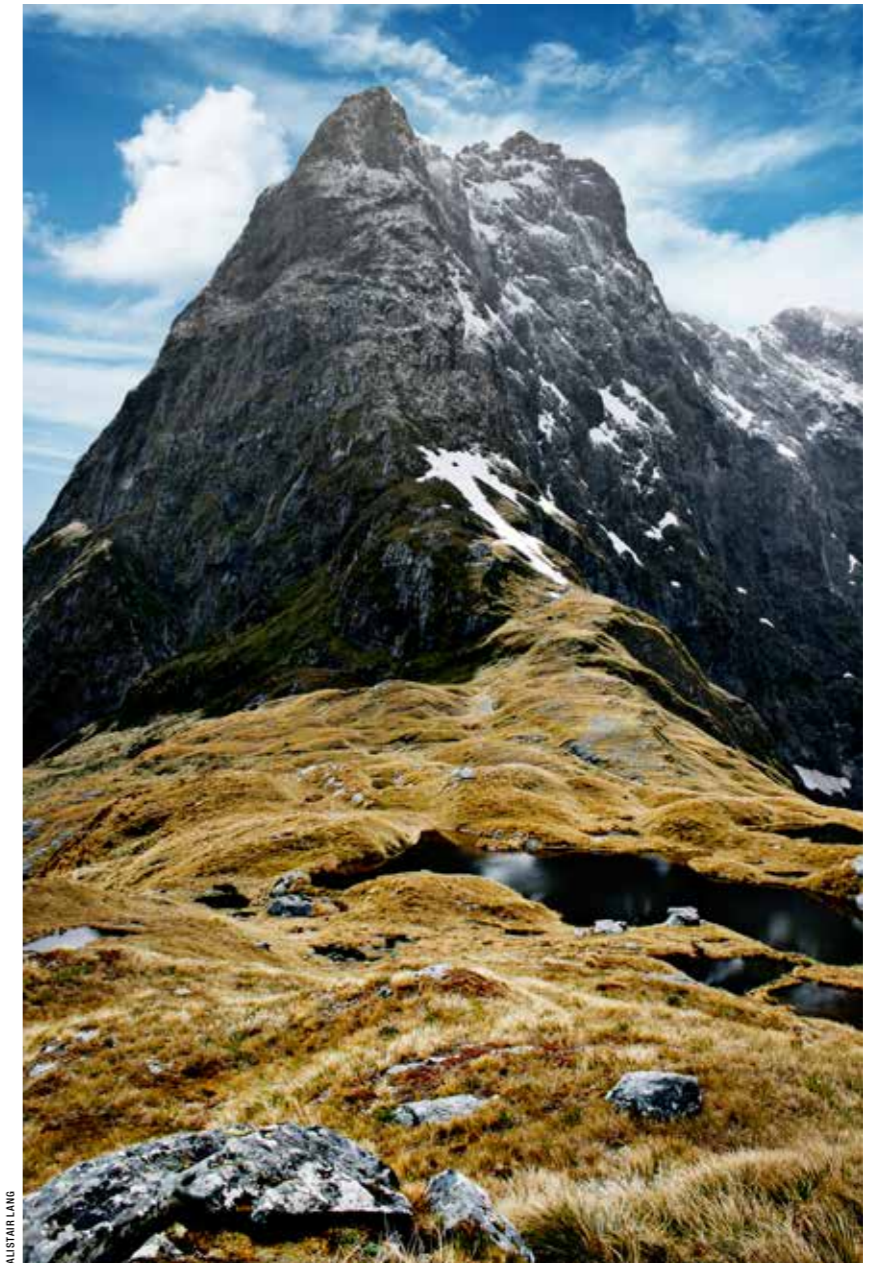
In 2009, two Melbourne brothers, Ashish Miranda, 24, and Akshay Miranda, 22, crossed the safety barrier at Fox Glacier to touch the ice and photograph each other alongside the towering blue ice wall. Their parents were watching as the ice fell, crushed and killed them.

In 2011, two young women – one from Singapore and the other from Taiwan – died crossing the Waiho River in Franz Josef Glacier Valley. Part of a larger group, they’d set out at 2pm for an eight-hour day walk and on dusk decided to take a short cut across the river – deep, swift and murky from glacial moraine silt. Most of them made it across. The two women drowned.

“Many of these people, they’ve come straight from downtown New York or Tokyo or Shanghai,” Costello explains. “They show up at the glacier, it’s a nice day and looks benign. Rock falls, ice falls, swift rivers – these are all completely foreign to people who have come from these locations. There is absolutely no perception of the hazards.”

The string of tragedies around Franz and Fox Glaciers has meant radical intervention was required. Experts in human psychology and risk assessment were brought in, reports written and recommendations taken up.

First was the signage. Bulletin boards were simplified. The standard green and gold DoC signs, discreet and in keeping with the native surroundings, were taken out. Instead, large “in your face” red signs, including strong, simple messaging, “People have died here,” and internationally universal symbols, were installed. They included copied inserts of the newspaper clippings of the fatalities mentioned above.



The Milford Track’s Mackinnon Pass at 1154m. To reach it, trampers negotiate a series of 11 zigzags on a sometimes rocky track, traversing beech forests and an alpine herb field. They then face a steep descent.

Second, according to Costello, was matching visitor expectations to the outcome. “If people are hoping to touch ice and it doesn’t happen, they’re more likely to put themselves at risk. What we’re really trying to do through communication with all the tourism operators is to ensure those expectations are at the right level.”

Costello is careful not to isolate the issue as one exclusive to foreign tourists. He cites the case of watching a New Zealand father and his five-year-

old son walking beyond the barrier to the icefall. “New Zealanders loathe being told what to do, or not to do.”

Allan Munn: “We’re now a society where we have ‘Danger, this could kill you’ warning messages on plastic bags,” he says. “It’s about the plausibility of a lot of those warning signs. For many people, risk is one of the reasons they go into the outdoors.”

Risk is a key consideration across all standards and policies that DoC has employed in its recreation management.



DAVID COOPER



GRANT TREMAIN

Top: Allan Munn, conservation services director for the Southern Regions. He had been in the job nine months when Yessica Asmin drowned crossing the Pompolona Creek (above). The hut the young trampers passed is above and to the left of the creek. This aerial shot also shows the avalanche danger to bridges and winter trampers.

“THE ONLY WAY TO STOP ANYONE BEING KILLED IN FIORDLAND IS TO STOP PEOPLE GOING INTO FIORDLAND.”

GRANT TREMAIN, CONSERVATION SERVICES MANAGER FOR RECREATION IN FIORDLAND

Painstakingly made clear in the “Visitor Risk Management Policy” are six separate categories of recreation in a continuum from those with few outdoor skills (using the easy short walks of an hour or less), through to highly skilled “back-country remoteness seekers”. Each category is accompanied by clear guidelines as to what DoC must provide in terms of facilities and information, but also indicates the associated acceptable level of risk for each standard.

DoC acknowledges that although most visitors prefer a low level of risk, there is a significant set of back-country users who prefer remoteness, lack of facilities (such as no huts or bridges) to experience the wilderness as it is. As the Visitor Strategy explains, referring to “back-country remoteness seekers”: “Because of their high skill level and experience, this group accepts the higher level of risk associated with travelling through remote wilderness areas.”

“Try and over-manage that and you devalue their experience,” says Munn.

Yet the back country is increasingly under scrutiny as the fatalities mount. Cascade Saddle, easily accessed from Wanaka, is one such route – hailed in *Lonely Planet* as a “must do” with glorious photographs. In the past decade, five people have died, having ignored the warning signs and with insufficient equipment or experience to tackle the steep and often treacherous terrain en route to the saddle and beyond.

Cascade Saddle has provoked almost as much soul searching as the Milford Track. Although the track up to the bush-line is categorised as “easy tramping”, its designation beyond is very much a “remoteness seeker” route. Similar to Franz Josef, the green and gold sign has been removed, replaced by a stark red one that’s difficult to ignore.

There have been suggestions of installing handrails and steps up the most hazardous section of the climb to the spur above the saddle. The dilemma for DoC is it then creates an expectation that facilities exist thereafter. If someone hasn’t the experience and skills to get to that point, then woe betide them beyond.

The Yessica Asmin case brought up another incident in 2005 when a young German woman, Johanna Kuchelmeister, drowned crossing Mistake Creek in Fiordland at the end of a back-country excursion with her Canadian

boyfriend. In memory of their daughter, the family donated \$15,000 towards the construction of a bridge. When Asmin died on the Milford Track there were questions raised, yet again, as to why that bridge had never been built. Munn insisted on visiting the German Embassy, shortly after the Indonesian Embassy, to clarify DoC’s position.

“Mistake Creek,” Munn says, “is clearly a back-country track. There are thousands of rivers and streams like that in the back country. We cannot bridge them all.”

The area beyond the river crossing – a reasonably straightforward crossing in normal flow – has no facilities and demands a high level of experience. Similar to the Cascade Saddle dilemma, some suggest if a bridge were to be built, even a three-wire crossing, it would invite those with insufficient experience into reasonably demanding wilderness.

Overall, suggests Munn, the level of ability and judgment in the outdoors – even for New Zealanders – is markedly less than in decades past. “We’ve shifted from being a largely rural-based community to an urban one. Tramping was a bigger part of what we did 30 years ago. We talked among ourselves as to where we went that weekend, about river crossings, about routes. Now we live in cities, go out once a year, and are far less fit. The level of people’s ability is going down, while the public expectation of being looked after is going up.”

Sadly, the most at-risk age group in the wilderness is also the same as on the roads: young men, between 18 and 30. In the hills, however, the victims are sometimes the women following tentatively behind the stronger men, who may have swayed the decision-making with a greater acceptance of risk. All involved in the Milford Track incident are wary to apportion any blame, but the statistics over many years and tragic events are revealing.

All the people interviewed for this story cite the same weaknesses of human nature and risk-taking: the pressure to meet a bus or plane; because “we’ve come all this way and we’ve only got a few days”; the pressure to reach the warmth of a hut, or to go just that little bit further – beyond the safety sign and barrier – to take a better photograph.

Are foreign tourists the main problem or, rather, the most common victims?



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A wood engraving showing prospectors crossing the Taramakau River using the Maori pole method, 1865.

Grant Tremain: “In places, yes. There are a number of Kiwis being hurt in the back country, but it’s foreign tourists who are our focus right now.”

Both Munn and Tremain concede there’s also often arrogance, particularly among Europeans, overestimating their ability. “They’re coming to a South Pacific country and when they get here their response is often: ‘We’ve got mountains in Europe. We’ve been walking around in those mountains for thousands of years... what do you guys know?’” says Tremain. “Continental weather in Europe is stable, easy to forecast. In New Zealand, it can change so quickly. It’s very hard to get that message across; hard to explain how a river can rise within minutes. People can’t grasp that concept until they’ve seen it.”

There are more than 100,000 bed

nights in Fiordland every year – be they in huts or camping across the thousands of kilometres of tracks from day walks to back-country routes – in one of the most extreme environments, with the highest rainfall, in the country. Tremain is often amazed there’s not an incident or fatality a week. Ultimately, he’s realistic: “The only way to stop anyone being killed in Fiordland is to stop people going into Fiordland.”

Allan Munn refers positively to the recommended changes in the latest report. “There will always be tension between the expectation that someone is looking after them, and the responsibility to look after themselves,” he says. “All we can do is our utmost to inform, to remind people of where the responsibility most properly lies – with the individual.”

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