

Tourists increasing biosecurity risk

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NEW Zealand biosecurity faces several new threats with ever-growing numbers of tourists looking for a cheap holiday here, the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) director of border clearance services, Steve Gilbert believes.

He told the Potatoes New Zealand Conference in Pukekohe in late July that there was a whole range of new travellers visiting this country.

Very cheap flights from Asia now meant people who had not been able to afford to travel previously now could.

“And they pose a different biosecurity risk,” he said.

Self-catering tourists were bringing large quantities of their own fruit, vegetables and other food to this country to reduce costs while they were here.

“From 3-5pm every day you will see four or five examples of this at Auckland International Airport,” he said.

One international student, for example, brought in 60 packets of chili sauce with her in her

luggage, one every week she was here. The reason she gave for doing this was because the sauce was one tenth of the price in her homeland. Other backpacking tourists were gifted fruit when they left a country and chose to bring it to New Zealand with them, Gilbert said.

“We confiscate it and put them on the first flight home. It’s a challenge for the future.”

Another issue was rising luggage allowances, with some airlines letting each passenger bring 45 kilograms with them. If they were travelling in a group of three or four that amount of baggage took MPI staff a lot of time and effort to search.

There had been a nine percent increase in tourist numbers this summer compared with last year with an average of 18,000 passengers a day coming through Auckland International Airport in January. From December 2016 to February 28 this year there were 2963 undeclared items seized.

Gilbert said this might mean around 15,000 items were picked up annually.

There was an average of 300 people a week who were fined

\$400 for not declaring food in their luggage, with most saying they “simply forgot about it”, such as a piece of fruit not cleaned out of a backpack.

Gilbert said while 95% of travellers wanted to comply with NZ’s biosecurity regulations, some still “just didn’t get it”.

“They think one apple can’t do any harm,” he said.

And some did not believe there was any need to clean a tent used in the United States before bringing it here, despite the risk from soil and vegetative matter still being on it.

In the last four years quarantine staff numbers had grown from 330 to 550 with detector dogs increasing from 20 to 60, which required 100 of the animals to keep that number in the field. A huge amount of money had also been spent on technology, such as more x-ray machines.

“We have been through a fair amount of change and there will be more wherever we go,” he said. A lot more brown marmorated stink bugs, which posed a significant threat to NZ agriculture, had been found this year compared with last.

MPI was working closely with machinery importers to make sure agricultural equipment was heat treated in its home country before being sent here.

“If not we will send it to Australia and they will probably send it to Singapore,” he said. Transitional facilities were being reduced so there was less risk of containers being opened in agricultural areas, such as Pukekohe, from where pests could rapidly spread. And it would be hard for any new of these facilities to now be established.

Gilbert said seed imports had been incredibly challenging, with certification from some countries not able to be taken at face value. There were 7.1 million items of mail inspected each year with the balance having changed in recent years. There had been a 49% drop in mail items coming from Australia and from within NZ, but a 117% lift in the volume from China.

“And people will put anything in an envelope such as seeds and plant material, and that’s significantly increasing.”



NEW THREATS: Ministry for Primary Industries director of border clearance services Steve Gilbert says the growing number of tourists pose new biosecurity risks.

Tourism is all take and no give, research finds

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THE tourism industry, which has bagged farming for spoiling its pristine image, is bludging off the rest of the community, Victoria University research has found.

Last year the Tourism Export Council, which described itself as the Fonterra of tourism, attacked farmers for marring the environment and adversely affecting water quality.

Fonterra has committed to leading the move the clean up the country’s 50 water catchments.

The council called for a five-year moratorium on irrigation and backed the anti-farming group

Choose Fresh Water with money for its campaign against farmers.

It has also lamented the money the Conservation Department has to spend.

But now Victoria’s school of government senior lecturer Dr Valentina Dinica has found tourism contributed less than 3.5% of DOC’s budget while DOC spent 10 times that much – 34% of its budgetary allocations – on recreational expenses including tourist facilities and services and managing tourism concessions.

“DOC is subsidising tourism while facing a huge financial gap to save precious native species, and sustain ecosystem services,” Dinica said.

And not only were tourism firms, which made \$35 billion a year from tourists, not paying their way they expected special



NOT RIGHT: The Department of Conservation is subsidising tourism while facing a huge financial gap to save precious native species and sustain ecosystem services, Dr Valentina Dinica says.

treatment if they did contribute. “At the same time, our country struggles with the highest numbers in the world of endemic species threatened with extinction or deemed at-risk.

Reversing the continuous biodiversity decline is not an easy task.

“The financial challenges are enormous for three main reasons: the large size of protected areas, the small taxpayer base on which state budgets may draw and the magnitude of the conservation challenge.

“Over-reliance on state funding

is not a financially sustainable strategy,” Dinica said.

Many countries where tourism was a major user of protected areas funded conservation largely through proven conservation funding of tourism taxes, entry fees and user charges—all of which may exempt nationals, to reflect their contributions as taxpayers.

Some park authorities earned as much as 80% of their revenue from such sources.

“In New Zealand, however, there has never been political appetite for such tools.

“Nor has there been political willingness to use regulatory instruments for conservation gains despite the 1987 Conservation Act allowing the state to do so.

“Under Part III on concessions in the Act, the Conservation Minister and DOC staff have the authority to insert not only environmental management but also conservation responsibilities in concession contracts.

Extensive contract analysis and interviews with numerous tourism operators revealed the legal powers were seldom used to halt biodiversity decline.

“Most concession requirements are formulated in terms of what-not-to-do in order to avoid harming nature or rectifying damage, rather than determining what businesses need to do for biodiversity conservation.

“It is an opportunity missed that these legal provisions

arent used as a basis for formal partnerships between DOC and concessionaires.

“This is concerning from an ecological viewpoint.

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Instead, recent governments have been implementing a yet unwritten governance reform strategy for protected areas, which over-relied on voluntary approaches for conservation gains.

Since 2009, several restructurings of DOC, significant policy changes and some legal amendments had been implemented based on a policy hypothesis for which no evidence was yet available worldwide. The hypothesis was that if

DOC contributed to national prosperity through tourism in public conservation lands, any ecosystem pressures from increased economic activities would be more than compensated for by the willingness of others to do conservation work.

Partnerships with businesses and communities were expected to take the form of contributions through volunteering staff labour and access to relevant equipment or vehicles from operators, philanthropic donations from tourists and businesses and commercial sponsorships.

“My research on the concessionaires’ views on the recent strategy indicates there is very limited interest to volunteer.

“A key reason is biodiversity conservation is viewed as a state responsibility and a matter of state leadership.

“Operators are not keen to learn conservation skills and allocate the human and material resources DOC hopes for, unless there are private benefits.

“Some concessionaires would only volunteer if DOC agrees to change the zoning of national parks to allow for more tourism facilities and activities.

“Others expect monopoly rights for the use of major tourism facilities currently open to the public.

“We need to re-examine our policies, make full use of existing legislation and reverse the subsidy relationship between DOC and the tourism sector,” Dinica said.