

Before the Independent Hearing Panel
Appointed by the Dunedin City Council

Under the Resource Management Act 1991 (**RMA**)

In the matter of an application by **Dunedin City Council** and the **Department of Conservation** for consent to construct and operate a carpark at Tunnel Beach, Dunedin

Dunedin City Council and **Department of Conservation**

Applicants

Statement of evidence of Elizabeth Anne (Annie) Wallace

20th April 2022

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Qualifications and experience

- 1 My name is Elizabeth Anne Wallace.
- 2 I am the Operations Manager for the Department of Conservation (DOC) Coastal Otago District.
- 3 I have worked in a range of operational roles for DOC since 2005 and have been in my current role since 2015. I am part of DOC's Regional Leadership Team for the Southern South Island and as such have a strategic view of DOC's wider network of visitor experiences and how these are managed throughout Fiordland and Central Otago as well as locally across Coastal Otago.

Scope of evidence

- 4 I have been asked to prepare evidence in relation to the strategic importance of the DOC track project at Tunnel Beach. This includes:
 - (a) The strategic importance of Tunnel Beach to DOC;
 - (b) DOC's obligations in regard to visitor safety;
 - (c) DOC's obligation to protect natural, cultural and historic heritage at Tunnel Beach and across Dunedin; and
 - (d) The opportunity to connect people to the natural, cultural and historic heritage at Tunnel Beach.

Executive summary

- 5 Tunnel Beach is a significant tourism experience for Dunedin City as well as a popular local recreation site. Tunnel Beach receives 120,000 visitors a year, which has continued even post covid. Alongside other high demand iconic sites nationally Tunnel Beach is an important site for DOC to perform its functions under the Conservation Act 1987. The delivery of these functions is guided by DOC's Heritage and Visitor Strategy and is focussed on sustainably managing visitors to protect and enhance the values of New Zealand's natural, cultural and historic heritage. The number of people visiting Tunnel Beach alongside the natural, cultural and historic heritage present at the site make it an important place to focus DOC's efforts.
- 6 DOC understands that the area around Tunnel beach has significance to Ōtākou, as treaty partner DOC is working with Aukaha to ensure Ōtākou's values are realised at Tunnel Beach.

- 7 Because of the importance of Tunnel Beach to Dunedin City DOC has partnered with the Dunedin City Council (DCC) to address the risks and realise the opportunities at Tunnel Beach as a tangible symbol of the wider collaboration between the two agencies.
- 8 DOC has invested significantly at Tunnel Beach by acquiring the land for the public's enjoyment and gazetted it as a Recreation Reserve. DCC has invested significantly in road safety improvements on Blackhead Road. The project we are discussing today represents a continued high level of investment by DOC and DCC as well as the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment.
- 9 DOC has obligations in regard to visitor safety. The most common visitor group identified at Tunnel Beach has a low level of ability to manage their safety in the outdoors. A high cliff hazard at the Tunnel Beach headland has been identified as a risk to the people in this visitor group. DOC has provided a low barrier before the headland, as a decision point encouraging visitors to stay away from the high cliffs. This has not proven effective, and it is now important for DOC to further intervene by providing a better visitor experience further from the high cliff hazard therefore encouraging visitors to spend less time near this hazard.
- 10 The congested carpark at Tunnel Beach has been identified by DOC as a hazard for visitors, it provides a poor-quality experience and has a negative impact on people living on Tunnel Beach Road. I support DCC's proposal to shift the carpark and improve its design to mitigate these issues.
- 11 Dunedin and coastal Otago are popular with visitors as a destination to view sensitive coastal wildlife such as Hoiho / yellow eyed penguin and Pakake / New Zealand sea lion. High visitor numbers at places that are home to these species can have a significant negative impact on them. By contrast Tunnel Beach is an easily accessible experience within 15 minutes of the city centre where high visitor numbers have no impacts on coastal wildlife.
- 12 The popularity of Tunnel Beach is relatively recent, and its current configuration has proven unsuitable to manage the impacts on biodiversity and the increased visitor risk resulting from this popularity. The Tunnel Beach track upgrade will reconfigure the site and provide the means to influence visitor behaviour necessary to mitigate these impacts and risks and allow DOC to perform its functions under the Conservation Act 1987.

The strategic importance of Tunnel Beach to DOC

- 13 Tunnel Beach is a significant tourism experience for Dunedin City as well as a popular local recreation site, receiving 120,000 visits a year even with

the border closed. This puts the site amongst the busiest visitor sites that DOC manages in the Southern South Island Region, comparable to Roys Peak in Central Otago and Nugget Point in the Catlins.

- 14 Site observations, survey data and conversations with people walking the track all show that there is a good mix of locals, students, and visitors to Dunedin. Tunnel Beach has a strong social media presence. On Queens Birthday 2017 (5th June) the Tunnel Beach location tag was used on Instagram 72 times. Social media data from the Meltwater tool shows a 117% increase in public mentions of Tunnel Beach between June 2019 and June 2020.
- 15 Alongside other places DOC manages nationally where there are a high number of visits, Tunnel Beach is an important site for DOC to perform its functions under the Conservation Act 1987. The delivery of these functions is guided by DOC's Heritage and Visitor Strategy and is focussed on protecting natural, cultural and historic heritage, and connecting people to this, so that both values and people can thrive. The high number of people visiting Tunnel Beach makes it a priority place for DOC to focus its efforts and investment in connecting visitors with nature, culture and heritage.

DOC's obligations in regard to visitor safety

- 16 As DOC's Coastal Otago Operations Manager, I am accountable for DOC's visitor safety responsibilities at Tunnel Beach. DOC has obligations to identify hazards at visitor sites and provide appropriate management depending on the level of risk these hazards present to visitors. DOC's *Visitor Risk Management Policy* recognises that different kinds of visitors have different levels of ability to manage their own safety. The visitor groups identified at Tunnel Beach have a low level of ability to manage their own safety in the outdoors. Combined with the high cliffs hazard at the Tunnel Beach headland the result is a high level of risk for visitors, 2 people have been rescued after falling onto a rock platform below the cliffs in the last 6 years. DOC has managed this risk by installing signage and a low barrier to act as a decision point. Further managing the risk is important for DOC because most visitors cross the barrier and walk onto the headland regardless, so the risk remains high.
- 17 DOC's track upgrade at Tunnel Beach aims to reduce the number of visitors who venture as far as the high cliffs hazard and reduce the time they spend there by creating a better visitor experience further from the hazard. The new viewpoints further up the track are intended to give visitors a similar experience to the headland (with excellent views of the coastal landform and environment) so more visitors can leave satisfied without approaching

the cliffs. As Shay explains in his evidence DOC experience at Orau/Sandfly Bay shows that this approach can work.

- 18 Another hazard visitors encounter at Tunnel Beach is the congested carpark. The carpark's location with no separation from the active roadway and its small size relative to the number of visitors create a congested space with a mix of speeds that are a hazard and impacts the quality of the experience for visitors. Congestion also has a negative impact on the residents of Tunnel Beach Road. DOC wholeheartedly supports DCC's proposal to shift the carpark into the Recreation Reserve and improve its size and design. This is crucial to mitigating these issues.

DOC's obligations to protect natural, cultural and historic heritage at Tunnel Beach and across Dunedin.

- 19 DOC's Heritage and Visitor Strategy prioritises the protection of Natural, Cultural and Historic Heritage.
- 20 A critically endangered coastal turf ecosystem is located on the Tunnel Beach headland.
- 21 The current configuration of the track means that the coastal turf ecosystem is being damaged by the number of people choosing to walk on the headland. DOC's interventions to date include installing both signage discouraging this and a decision point barrier designed to physically discourage this.
- 22 These interventions have had little effect, with the majority of visitors still choosing to cross the barrier and walk on the headland and damage the coastal turf ecosystem.
- 23 The reconfiguration of the site described above for visitor safety is also designed to mitigate damage to the coastal turf ecosystem by reducing the number of people walking on the headland and the time people spend there.
- 24 Dunedin and coastal Otago are popular with visitors as a destination to view sensitive coastal wildlife such as Hoiho / yellow eyed penguin and Pakake / New Zealand sea lion. In particular Hoiho at places like Orau/Sandfly Bay, Katiki Point, Roaring Bay/The Nuggets are under pressure because of high visitor numbers at these sites. The only DOC managed site in coastal Otago with a higher number of visits is Tunnel Beach.
- 25 A partnership between Te Rūnanga o Ngāi Tahu, DOC/Te Papa Atawhai, Yellow-eyed Penguin Trust/Te Tautiaki Hoiho and Fisheries New

Zealand/Tini a Tangaroa signed Te Kaweka Takohaka mō te Hoiho (A strategy to support the ecological and cultural health of hoiho.) The strategy identifies that 'visitors are often unaware of appropriate tikaka and behaviour around hoiho. Close encounters cause stress and reduce breeding success.' The strategy seeks a future state where 'Tourism and recreation are managed effectively through a coordinated precautionary approach to ensure activities do not threaten hoiho.' Strategic priority 9 of the strategy is 'Reduce the impact of tourism and recreation activities to ensure they do not threaten hoiho.'

- 26 To achieve this future state and deliver on Te Mahere Rima Tau (the five-year action plan for Hoiho) it is important for DOC to pro-actively manage visitor sites where Hoiho breed. This includes mechanisms to manage visitors such as: Rangers, fences, signage and tracks. These mechanisms have been successful and remain important, but the broader network of visitor sites including Tunnel Beach also plays a key role.
- 27 Unlike the Hoiho breeding sites Tunnel Beach is an easily accessible experience within 15 minutes of the Dunedin city centre. Tunnel Beach also appears to be more popular; receiving more visits than these sites. Hoiho / yellow eyed penguin and Pakake / New Zealand sea lion do not breed at Tunnel Beach and it would be incredibly rare to see them on the beach there. As a result, in the network of visitor sites in coastal Otago, Tunnel Beach currently relieves visitor pressure from Hoiho breeding sites. It is therefore important for DOC to carry out the proposed work at Tunnel Beach, to ensure it remains an appealing site to visit and is a safe, low impact, high quality visitor site.

The opportunities to connect people to natural, cultural and historic heritage at Tunnel Beach

- 28 The location of Tunnel Beach with spectacular views to a large section of coast and the special heritage fabric of the tunnel itself attracts large numbers of local, domestic and international visitors to this site. This high visitation provides an opportunity for DOC to deliver on its strategy to connect visitors with natural, cultural and historic heritage. Reflecting the importance of the values at site and the opportunity to connect with large numbers of visitors, Tunnel Beach has been identified nationally as a priority place for DOC to invest in an improved visitor experience.
- 29 We know that the environs of Tunnel Beach are significant to mana whenua and the wider site provides opportunities to tell mana whenua stories through interpretation. DOC is working closely with Ōtākou Rūnaka via

Aukaha to weave their cultural narrative throughout the track as part of the DOC track project.

- 30 There is also an intriguing heritage story, represented by the tunnel at Tunnel Beach, connecting visitors to early European settlement and the social structure of Dunedin at that time.
- 31 The project will establish viewpoints with storytelling to engage visitors in these stories. The location of these viewpoints have been chosen to accentuate natural, cultural and historic heritage while providing a high-quality experience.

Conclusion

- 32 With the high number of people visiting Tunnel Beach, DOC is obligated to deliver management actions to protect the biodiversity present at Tunnel Beach, manage the risks to visitors, and capitalise on the opportunities this high visitation provides to connect visitors to conservation, heritage and recreation. To perform its functions under the Conservation Act 1987, DOC proposes a track upgrade project that will bring Tunnel Beach into line with the visitor management and visitor experience approaches seen at comparable sites managed by the Department elsewhere in the Southern South Island.



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