

Meeting cost of freeloader camping

There's something deeply paradoxical about the freeloader camping crisis.

I'm calling it "freeloader" after the American expression for people who expect something for nothing. Just "free" would do.

The irony is overwhelming for this baby-boomer, who spent six months in a Combie touring Europe in 1972 - and being obliged to pay to stay in camp-grounds in every country. Those who camped free on the Continent risked waking up with their vehicle on blocks. Or worse.

The trouble with Kiwis is we're too damned nice to the offspring of the same rude and unobliging Europeans who that year "hosted" 43 million US, Canadian, Australian, New Zealand and South African tourists jamming Europe.

We're afraid if we say anything that offends the thousands of freeloaders flocking here it might get us a bad rap in tourism bibles.

Mayor Neil Holdom says he wants tourists to fly here and stay in our hotels, rather than drive down to shit on our beaches. I'm with him all the way.

Especially if he and his regional colleagues and their bureaucrats take a strong message to central government that it's all very well constructing a wildly successful campaign to attract people to New Zealand, but quite another to abandon the regions to the consequences.

That the latter is happening is becoming more apparent each day, not just from the complaints coming from Taranaki's surfboard community - who rightly object to having their treasured places defiled - but in reports from other regions.

Take what's happened to a Takaka farmer, whose land became a campground for up to 400 freeloaders a night.

When someone complained to the council, it declared that it couldn't risk sending its enforcement officer (suggesting it has only one) to boot the freeloaders out. It said the farmer should issue trespass notices. He has since tried locking his gate, which seems sort of obvious.

A Stuff.co story about this conveyed the information that central government is indeed contributing funds to bolster regional infrastructure. But the numbers look paltry - a few hundred thousand here, a few hundred there. Looks much like Paula Bennett's \$5000 "inducement" to Aucklanders to move to the provinces if they can't afford a house.

Earlier this summer, I got an unusual opportunity to experience the mindset of those who travel our backroads looking for dirt-cheap tourism adventures.

It arose at Kawarua Park one early evening when we were approached by a couple of young women asking if we were locals. If so, was it okay to camp there? Only if you've got a self-contained campervan, we advised (possibly wrongly).

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They said there were five of them travelling in a car and they had a couple of two-person tents. One slept in the car. Why not go to a campground? Can't afford it, they said. They'd had to pay the rental company \$600 to repair their car after they stood on its roof to view the night sky. So they said.

They wanted to camp somewhere close to Pukekura Park, because they were keen to see the lights. A phone call established that friends would let them camp on their back lawn. They did, and the friends cooked them a meal, let them shower, gave them rare access to Kiwi life. They were even generous enough to barbecue that week's entire meat purchase, since the youngsters had been living on white bread and tuna sandwiches for a week. They said.

We called in to make sure our friends weren't tied up and the family jewels vanished, and found a wonderful multi-cultural exchange going on. The campers were all professionals, two from Japan, one from France, one Spain and the fifth from Colombia. They'd met at an Auckland language school and were branching out to see the country.

It was a successful outcome. They saw the lights (just a block away), we all felt like good Kiwis, and they were grateful for a look into our lives. I've since heard from another friend that she's had a similar bunch camp on her lawn, too.

A good thing? So far, yes. But given the tendency for social media to spread news of such experiences to the next wave of tourists, the potential for cultural exchange to morph into something less desirable looms large.

It might help the government, though. Infrastructure for that kind of camping is already in place - so long as you don't mind sharing your lawn, your food, your shower, and your loo.