

Ever tried pitching a tent on asphalt?

Our freedom camping debate may be the first local evidence of what *Sunday Star-Times* writer Shamubeel Eaquab calls “overtourism”, the downside of having too many visitors.

While Sir John Key shrewdly identified tourism as our best growth option, claimed the ministry for himself, and steered it towards becoming our biggest earner, he left a mess for regional communities like Taranaki. Spectacles of loo paper hanging from bush near roadside lay-bys, tatty vehicles bedecked with drying smalls crowding beach carparks, and board-to-board surf breaks have become all too familiar.

The invasion of underspending overseas free-loaders may be filling the coffers of the government, vehicle renting outfits and airlines, but they threaten to “perish” the very thing they’ve come to enjoy – pristine emptiness.

I remember “overtourism”. It’s been around a long time in countries like Italy, which had 40 million tourists surging through its cathedrals and art galleries by the 1970s. On a trip there early this millennium, we were woken at dawn in Florence by groups of night-shift workers wandering down the alleyway under our hotel window, singing at the tops of their voices. They may have been celebrating the finish of work, but we suspect they were reminding us who owned the country.

Something similar is happening here now. One of the camping apps began with dozens of complimentary messages about our freedom camping mecca, the Waiwhakaiho river mouth carpark, but the latest tone has changed. “Lovely, etc” has become something reflecting the behaviour of local vigilantes.

“I did not feel safe,” said one, describing a night of terror inflicted by carloads of people roaring around the area, loud music blaring from sound systems, and threats about “f...ing tourists” shouted from car windows.

That kind of resentful behaviour is common in European tourist traps now, with police patrolling the Trevi Fountain and “tourists go home” graffiti appearing in Barcelona. Already, New Plymouth needs security people to check freedom camping haunts, although South Taranaki boasts that its small army of friendly volunteers handles any problems.

Lonely Planet’s acclamation of Taranaki was greeted with joyous pride and photo opportunities for elected reps, but it probably contributed to the problem. New Plymouth Mayor Neil Holdom was happy to pose for a photo that celebrated such unexpected publicity, but while early in his term he made it plain he only wants tourists in planes, spending money (not crapping on the beach), a more complicated reality has emerged.

His council still can’t decide what to do about preventing this summer becoming another freedom camping free-for-all. Its latest strategy, if you can call it that, is to consult the public about what to do. The answer’s simple, if a *Stuff* poll run with my previous column on this topic is anything to go by – ban the buggers. More than half the 2300 respondents said they don’t want non-self contained freedom campers here at all.

To be fair to New Plymouth District Council, it’s not alone in its hand-wringing. The same issue has arisen throughout New Zealand. Apart from throwing a few measly millions at councils so they can build more loos, the government is as clueless as the country’s 60-plus territorial local bodies about what to do. It continues to research and strategise; one official now thinks nothing useful will happen for two more years.

15.09.2018 JT column – freedom camping

A bit of reading around the subject shows this is a complex problem, not least because more than half the councils (including New Plymouth's until last year) have no specific freedom camping bylaw or wrote their own version, meaning tourists driving the length of the country encounter dozens of different sets of rules. Not that they're likely to know what the rules are – until someone with a torch raps on their windscreen at night.

One of NPDC's strokes of genius is to propose herding freedom campers into carparks beside existing public toilets, some of them in the middle of town. As someone noted drily in a national report – such places rarely have a view of the sea, and have you ever tried banging tent pegs into asphalt?

One location suggested by the council may turn out to be an unwise choice – the parking area behind Fitzroy shops. Given that suburb's success fighting off the proposal to sell half its golf course for housing, councillors should have learned a lesson about taking on such a well-organised community. In fact, every community is likely to be well-organised on this issue.