



In the second semester of 2011 the third year Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning students taking the Professional Practice course (SOCI 314) were set an assignment to write a short, topical article of local interest. This related directly to the content of the course SOCI 314, which provides a critical study of issues in the provision of professional services in environmental planning, design, social sciences, tourism, sport and recreation. As part of the assessment the articles were subject to the LPR review processes.

Porters Ski Field development: A balancing of interests

by Holly Gardiner

Holly Gardiner is studying towards the Bachelor of Environmental Management Honours degree. She is particularly interested in the balance between environmental, economic and social interests, and the challenges which this brings. This article was written as an assignment for the SOCI 314 Professional Practice paper in the third year of the Bachelor of Environmental Management and Planning.

Porters Ski Field is one of the closest ski fields to Christchurch, located 89 kilometres away in the Craigieburn mountain range in the South Island of New Zealand. It began operating in 1968 and has since become recognised as an excellent ski field for those learning to ski and snowboard as well as providing more advanced runs, which has made it popular with families (Markby, 2008). In 2006, the ski field (formally known as Porter Heights Ski Field) was sold to an investment company called Blackfish Limited, and the name changed to Porters Ski Area Limited to reflect the new management (Williams, 2011).



Figure 1: Street view of the Alpine Village, source: http://www.skiporters.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/porters_pe_document.pdf

In 2010, Blackfish Limited put forward an application for a private plan change to the Selwyn District Plan to allow their proposal for redeveloping the ski field to go ahead (Boffa Miskell Limited, 2010). Their vision was to enable better access to the neighbouring Crystal Valley, situated beside the Porters Basin. The project would greatly increase the size of the ski field and see the construction of the first on-mountain European style alpine village in New Zealand. This expansion came out of the recognition of a growing demand for better beginner and intermediate facilities in New Zealand. Blackfish Limited noted in their proposal that the number of international visitors to New Zealand on skiing holidays has increased notably since 1990 from just under 200,000 skier days to 600,000 skier days in 2009 (Blackfish Limited, n.d). They also suggested that when compared to major international ski fields New Zealand had a limited amount of on mountain accommodation, and

access roads to the ski fields are difficult to navigate. This made New Zealand fields unappealing to the wider international market. After surveying the available terrain in the Southern Alps, Blackfish suggested there was room to expand because only 0.08% of the area was currently being used whereas in the European Alps, which is of a similar area to the Southern Alps, uses 3% of the available terrain for ski fields. With these factors in mind, Blackfish Limited proposed that the cost (\$250 million) of the expansions of both the ski area and alpine village would be money well spent.

The proposed alpine village (see figure 1) would operate all year round, offering accommodation for 3,400 guests and cater to a wide variety of clientele to be housed in 'boutique chalets', apartments suitable for families, and 'backpacker' style accommodation (Blackfish Limited, .n.d). There would also be accommodation for 214 staff. Hot pools, a day spa, a cinema, restaurants and cafes would be available in the village to guests, with access to the Porters and Crystal Valley ski areas provided using high speed, eight-seater gondolas. Summer activities such as walking, mountain biking and fishing would enable all round use of the village.

In total the expansion would result in 960 full time jobs in Canterbury, thus it was argued that the project would be a good addition to the local economy and generate international tourism interest post-earthquake, helping Canterbury's recovery.

In order for Blackfish Limited to proceed with the project, several steps had to be taken. They needed to apply to the Selwyn District Council for a private plan change to the zoning of the Porters Ski Field, from rural high country land to a ski area sub zone.



Figure 2: Street view of the Alpine Village, source: http://www.skiporters.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/porters_pe_document.pdf

The plan change deals with 616 hectares of land in total, and involves removing the designation of the area as an Outstanding Natural Feature to allow the expansion to go ahead (Boffa Miskell Limited, 2010). Blackfish Limited also needed to apply to Environment Canterbury for resource consent to carry out the expansion. On the 21st of August 2010, the plan change was publicly notified and submissions were accepted until the 17th of September 2010 (Selwyn District Council, 2010a). In total 2308 submissions were received, with 44 of these opposing or partially supporting the development (Rhodes, 2010). After the submissions were analysed, a notice was released on 30th of October 2010 asking for further submissions and these closed on the 15th of November 2010. Submissions were received from Castle Hill Station, Forest and Bird, Christchurch and Canterbury Tourism, the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand, Environment Canterbury and a number of individuals (Selwyn District Council, 2010b).

In the face of these submissions, Blackfish Limited Director, Simon Harvey, has said without the expansion Porters Ski Field would be too costly to continue to operate (Wright, 2011). The expansion is needed to make mountain access easier and encourage greater use the facility, bring new employment opportunities to the region, and attract greater numbers of visitors to the area. Opposition to the development centred on concern over conservation aspects of the area and how these might be managed, particularly given the unique ecology and landscape of the South Island high country. Concerns were raised over the ways in which a large increase in visitors to the area

would impact the Department of Conservation facilities at the Kura Tawhiti Castle Hill Reserve, and traffic management needed to be addressed (Selwyn District Council, 2010c). Further, the lack of information regarding how the use of water, and waste water treatment would be dealt with was raised as a potential problem.

A further hurdle to the development revolved around Blackfish's proposal to secure the land in Crystal Valley they needed for the development. Their proposal involved swapping 70 hectares of land covering rare coastal areas on Banks Peninsula that Blackfish Limited owned for the 198 hectares of Department of Conservation (DOC) land in Crystal Valley. Though this was initially rejected, in March 2011 Blackfish Limited announced the proposal has been accepted; however, a condition of acceptance was for Blackfish Limited to also give 320 hectares of land in Porters Valley to DOC, in addition to the land on Banks Peninsula ("Ski field expansion", 2011).

As of 14th March 2012, the Hearing Commissioners' recommendation to the Selwyn District Council regarding Plan Change 25 has been released and accepted by the council (Selwyn District Council, 2012). The Commissioners recommended that the Plan Change be adopted with several amendments, subject to a 30 working day period, where those who have made submissions have the opportunity to appeal the decision. The resource consent decisions were released on the 24th of February 2012, and the consents were granted subject to a 15 day period of appeal (Environment Canterbury, 2012).

Conclusion

The Porters Ski Field development highlights the issues that can arise for planners and stakeholders with regard to the conflicts between land uses, the values land can hold for people, and ways in which concerns might be addressed. Though the supporters of the development highlighted the economic benefits of the project to the post-quake Canterbury region, the landscape and ecological values of the area were clearly an issue. These conflicts have been, to some extent, addressed through a process of negotiation based on an acknowledgement of both these values.

References

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