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# Stakeholder perspectives of the future of accessible tourism in New Zealand

Brielle Gillovic and Alison McIntosh

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – *The purpose of this paper is to put forward the argument that New Zealand's tourism industry generally fails to acknowledge the importance of the access market. Despite anecdotal evidence of the market's value and strong legislation, New Zealand's access market arguably remains underserved and misunderstood. The current research sought to explore social and business rationales to support a future for accessible tourism in New Zealand, from the perspectives of its key stakeholders. It sought to uncover contemporary issues in the tourism industry, to examine the capacity and context for which issues can be addressed and overcome, to achieve a future for accessible tourism in New Zealand.*

**Design/methodology/approach** – *Under the interpretive paradigm, original, exploratory research was conducted. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with ten key New Zealand tourism industry stakeholders who agreed to participate in the research. Qualitative data were thematically analysed. The following five key themes inductively emerged from the data: "Accessibility as a human right: Developing a culture of accessibility"; "Accessible tourism: Good for business?"; "Bottom-up, market-led approach"; "Leadership from the top: Moving from apathy to action"; and "Meeting somewhere in the middle". The five themes correspond to themes evidenced in the wider literature and present propositions for the future development of accessible tourism in New Zealand.*

**Findings** – *Findings revealed stakeholder opinions of an industry exemplifying minimal awareness and consideration for accessibility. Accessibility was perceived to be an issue of social change, requiring the achievement of a cultural shift where accessibility is envisioned as a cultural norm necessary for the future. Whilst top-down leadership and support were deemed pertinent, ownership and accountability were seen to be crucial at the lower, operational levels of the industry. A "meeting in the middle" was reported necessary to see the leveraging of a greater push towards accessibility and emphasising more prominently, what has been and can be done, moving forward into the future.*

**Originality/value** – *This paper provides original insights into the current and future scope of accessible tourism in New Zealand from the perspectives of its stakeholders. The key themes derived from the research assist knowledge for aligning the industry on a pathway towards achieving the necessary awareness and collaboration required in order to offer accessible tourism experiences to all.*

**Keywords** *New Zealand, Stakeholders, Tourism industry, Qualitative research, Future studies, Accessible tourism, Access market*

**Paper type** *Research paper*

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## Introduction

A key argument put forward for the future of tourism is that it is absolutely "crucial to map the current provision of accessible tourism", to enable the participation of people with access needs in tourism activity, and determine the very potential of the access-requiring market (Buhalis *et al.*, 2005, p. 72). Otherwise, tourism's "full potential is squandered and its promise of many powerful benefits for humanity remains unfulfilled" (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2006, p. 1193). This paper provides original insights into the current and future scope of accessible tourism in New Zealand from the perspectives of its stakeholders.

The contribution of the tourism industry to New Zealand's economy is undeniable. International and domestic tourism expenditure accounts for \$9.8 billion dollars and \$14.2 billion dollars, respectively, contributing \$7.3 billion dollars directly to New Zealand's total gross domestic product, and a further \$9.8 billion dollars indirectly. Tourism supports over 5 per cent of New Zealand's total labour market. For the year ended 2013, international tourism arrivals experienced a 7 per cent growth rate, reaching 2,769,436 international arrivals (Tourism New Zealand, 2013). However, arguably, the country is somewhat disadvantaged due to its isolated geographical location and distance from major inbound tourist markets – Australia, China, Germany and the UK – outwardly permeating a sense of inaccessibility (Rhodda, 2012). Both Government and industry alike have been complacent that “in New Zealand, the economic benefits that would accrue from developing access tourism have not been researched. Nothing is known about the number of visitors with disabilities in and to New Zealand; and little is known about their wants and needs. This is in spite of the fact that the access tourism market is already a potentially large one, and is set to grow” (Rhodda, 2014, para 2).

This paper puts forward the argument that New Zealand's tourism industry currently fails to acknowledge the importance of the access market. Despite anecdotal evidence of the value of the access market and strong legislation, the access market for New Zealand remains neglected, underserved and misunderstood. This current research sought to address the following objectives: first, to ascertain the current scope of accessible tourism in New Zealand, second, to explore social and business rationales to support a future of accessible tourism in New Zealand, and third, to examine the perceived reality and possibilities of “on the ground” accessible tourism in New Zealand.

## Disability and accessibility: a review of the literature

### *The discourse of disability*

Disability is a multidimensional construct that comprises a multitude of impairments, activity limitations and participatory restrictions (Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen, 2010). With the global ageing of the population, rising chronic health problems, lower child mortality rates and increased life expectancies, disability figures are expected to inflate considerably over the ensuing years (Robinson *et al.*, 2007; World Health Organization, 2011; Yau *et al.*, 2004). Any person at any point in their lives may acquire an impairment – albeit in a temporary or permanent capacity – posing disabling impositions upon the level and extent of their participation in a myriad of activities, and in contexts and settings fabricated entirely with the mobile and functional in mind (Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Murphy *et al.*, 1998). A review of previous literature revealed two models of disability – the medical model followed by the social model – that have dominated disability discourse (Aitchison, 2009). The medical model, defined phenomenologically, views “disability with respect to functional ability, and handicap as the resulting disadvantage that an individual faces in competing with others” (Shelton and Tucker, 2005, p. 212). Oliver (1996) argues the medical model possesses inherently strong medical undertones, determining an emphasis on disability as a devastating deviance from normality (as cited in Darcy and Buhalis, 2011b), an imposition of personal, bodily “tragedy” stricken upon an individual (Howson, 2004). Barnes and Mercer (2005) argue that such a stance stems from a long entrenched history of pronouncing the disabled as “ill” or “abnormal”, “in need of medical attention and welfare, people who are unable to fully participate in the world and therefore needed to be excluded from it [...] People were depersonalised, institutionalised and hidden away from a society which saw no real imperative for change” (as cited in Richards *et al.*, 2010, p. 1101).

A revival in thinking and defiance towards the medical model surfaced during the late 1970s (Oliver, 2004). This period saw a rise in political construction (Shelton and Tucker, 2005) and movements – namely, the “disability movement” – critiquing and challenging the medical model, relentlessly pursuing the reconceptualization of disability as a social tyranny of subjugation (Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a; Winance, 2007). Such reconceptualization determined disability to be “understood as an unequal relationship within a society in which the needs of people with impairments are often given little or no consideration” (Pagan, 2012, p. 1520). Social barriers included structure, interaction and representation; heightened hostility; and, restrictions on the

participation and independence of disabled people in mainstream activities (Oliver and Barnes, 2010; Titchkosky, 2003). Dependency and exclusion were evidenced in the abundance of ways in which disabled people were mistreated and denied of their basic citizenship rights to education, employment, benefit systems, the built environment, leisure and travel, sport and recreation and the media (Jaeger and Bowman, 2005). Whilst Oliver (2004) argued there has been minimal implementation of the social model in real life settings, he believes it is a change catalyst, and similarly, many academics believe if disability is in fact socially constructed, then a social resolution is possible. Hence, it is society's responsibility to remedy such barriers and engender positive action for change (Shakespeare, 2006; Susman, 1994; Winance, 2007). Disability and access therefore are issues of political, social and economic injustice and an important consideration for the future of global tourism and humanity (Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen, 2010; Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a; Darcy *et al.*, 2012; Foggin, 1999; Sedgley *et al.*, 2011; Singleton and Darcy, 2013; Small *et al.*, 2008; Visit England, 2013; Yau *et al.*, 2004).

### *Disability, accessibility and the tourism industry*

Disabled people<sup>[1]</sup> are representative of one market largely mistaken and unwarranted by the global tourism industry (Daniels *et al.*, 2005; Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a; Huh and Singh, 2007; Richards *et al.*, 2010; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005). The right to travel, however, is a fundamental human and citizenship right, transcended internationally in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities (Ateljevic *et al.*, 2012; Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a; Darcy *et al.*, 2010; Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Jaeger and Bowman, 2005; Singleton and Darcy, 2013). Further, assertion of one's quality of life – particularly in commanding independence and self-confidence – is obtained through the activity of travel (Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen, 2010; Reisinger, 2013; Yau *et al.*, 2004). Although ideals of equality, respect, equity and access underpin these rights, they are largely non-existent across the global industry, denying participative opportunities for all those people requiring of access. Meaningful inclusion is imperative, and participation in the activity of tourism should not be compromised as a result of inaccessibility (Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Oliver and Barnes, 2010). Arguably, true inclusivity will be achieved only when disabled people have sought their desired community integration; when abilities are recognised and valued; when independence and diversity is celebrated; and, when human rights and citizenship rights are protected and valued (Office for Disability Issues, 2001).

Unfortunately, tourism is generally designed with the contention of travellers being able, mobile and seeing, and subsequently, the industry at large, delivers embodied, multisensory experiences directed at the non-disabled majority (Aitchison, 2009; Small *et al.*, 2008). "Inaccessible buildings and public transport, demeaning stereotypes, prejudice and ignorance, and negative social ascriptions, undermine and deny the many capacities of disabled people" (McFarlane and Hansen, 2007, p. 89). Aitchison (2009) believes the existing, exclusionary practice emulates the omitting nature of society itself, and demands tourism is channelled to break down this negativity, in order to motivate the generation of a just, inclusive and accessible industry. It is no surprise therefore that a review of the tourism literature reveals that "disability remains on the margins of tourism scholarship" (Richards *et al.*, 2010, p. 1099).

### *Barriers to accessibility*

As disability within the context of tourism is a relatively new area of research, a review of relevant literature revealed, issues of accessibility (e.g. Blichfeldt and Nicolaisen, 2010), barriers and constraints (e.g. Singleton and Darcy, 2013; Small *et al.*, 2012; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005), and physical, social, economic and political implications (e.g. Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a) have chiefly governed its enquiry. In the existing research, a predominant focus is centred upon barriers to accessibility, including physical access, negative attitudes and lack of adequate information (Eichhorn and Buhalis, 2011).

Of all accessibility barriers, the physical environment has arguably been addressed most significantly, namely, through the implementation of statutory initiatives, building codes, convention and legislation (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). In terms of tourism development, the incorporation and application of universal design principles are an effective tool – if not a

solution – to meet physical access requirements of disabled people, seniors and others with access needs, in addition to benefitting business operation and profitability (Darcy *et al.*, 2010). The Center for Universal Design (2003) defines universal design as “the products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (as cited in Darcy and Dickson, 2009, p. 34).

Informational and communicable access are also essential, with the provision of insufficient, inaccurate and inappropriate information implicating both demand and supply (Darcy and Daruwalla, 1999; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Largely, tourism marketing is poorly representative of disabled people and seniors; there is an evident lack of media, advertising or promotional material targeting this group and large type print and visuals are lacking for visually impaired travellers (Foggin, 1999). Additionally, accommodation providers often make “unrealistic claims as to the suitability of their facilities”, which can have incredibly compromising implications (Shaw *et al.*, 2005, p. 168). Similarly, Ross (1994) attests “green washing” to be problematic, with some businesses exaggerating or self-assessing their accessibility, when for the large part, their actions and dispositions remain unchanged (as cited in Bizjak *et al.*, 2011). The power of knowledge cannot be denied, particularly when “the logistics of planning, booking, preparing to set out and experience destinations and attractions all require great patience, dedication, and cost, usually more so than those without disabilities” (Robinson *et al.*, 2007, p. 41).

Although both physical and informational access are undeniably crucial, arguably, the greatest barrier inhibiting accessibility is negative attitudes and interaction – be it pronounced or hidden – between disabled and non-disabled people (Gladwell and Bedini, 2004; Jaeger and Bowman, 2005; Office for Disability Issues, 2001). Barriers are said to be hierarchical, for even if disabled people were able to surpass their physical access requirements, they would still encounter antagonising societal barriers (Gladwell and Bedini, 2004). Engaging in the tourism industry is no easy feat and marginalisation is commonplace for disabled people, as they encounter emphatically negative social, political, cultural and economic barriers, which oppress, disenfranchise and exclude (Grue, 2011; Milner and Mirfin-Veitch, 2012; Titchkosky, 2003). Such social reactions to disability are generally powerful and varied, inclusive of ignorance, stereotyping, discomfort, prejudice, discrimination and misidentification (Barnes, 1992; Correll *et al.*, 2010; Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Dovidio *et al.*, 2010; Jaeger and Bowman, 2005; Murphy *et al.*, 1998; Peters, 1999; Rodin *et al.*, 1989). “Prejudice lies at the heart of segregation” (Morris, 1991, p. 3), and whilst “hostility is not a common experience for most disabled people, it is yet the iron fist in the velvet glove of the patronising and seemingly benevolent attitudes” they experience (Morris, 1991, p. 6).

From the supply side, negativity is rife amongst an industry ill-equipped to consider disabled people, where “negative attitudes focus on negative behaviours, such as avoidance of people with disabilities, obsolete and derogatory labelling, paternalistic behaviour toward people with disabilities and apathetic behaviour in which people behave as if individuals with disabilities do not exist” (Robinson *et al.*, 2007, p. 165). Assumptions are widespread, with beliefs including: disabled people do not travel, they travel infrequently, they travel for different purposes than those of non-disabled (Robinson *et al.*, 2007); “they travel in packs, the market is small, they should do things organised by government and institutions familiar with their needs, accessible facilities are too expensive to provide, accessible facilities are never used and they cannot afford it anyway” (Darcy and Daruwalla, 1999, p. 43). The tourism industry is often inept to serve this consumer group, and implications are acknowledged by an array of academics who largely maintain the industry gives little respect to training, education, legislation, provision of access or quality service to their access-requiring patrons.

### *Towards a future accessible tourism industry*

Accessibility ought to be “an essential facet of ethical tourism practice, and should rightly be seen not as a theoretical choice or a niche topic, but rather as a universal value system to which all tourism development and management needs to be held accountable” (Wantanee, 2014, p. 102). Legislation needs to extend from merely demanding physical access and rectifying discriminatory practice once it has already occurred. There must be a political mandate for accessible tourism; “policies must strengthen, on the one hand, the rights of disabled citizens to

travel and enjoy tourism on an equal basis and, on the other hand, the ability of tourism providers to deliver accessible services and facilities in an effective, profitable and sustainable way” (Ambrose, 2012, p. 22). To ensure a future “disability-friendly” industry (Lovelock and Lovelock, 2013), the rationale behind accessibility cannot be undermined, and it is imperative the social, economic, moral and legal vindications supporting accessible tourism are brought to fruition (Foggin, 1999).

With accessibility ascribed to facilitation of tourism participation, the concept of “accessible tourism” is fast rising in significance. Partially attributable to altruistic interests (Lovelock and Lovelock, 2013), “partially in response to antidiscrimination legislation and partially motivated by identifying a new niche market, tourism industry sectors have, though, begun to engage with disabled travellers” (Shelton and Tucker, 2005, p. 214), and the academic world has seen a heightened presence of international conferences and publications (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Defined by Darcy and Dickson (2009), the concept of “accessible tourism” “enables people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments [...] Inclusive of all people including those travelling with children in prams, people with disabilities and seniors” (p. 34). An accessible environment of the future will therefore exemplify an offering of “an accessible physical environment, as well as assistive technologies and social policy” (Darcy *et al.*, 2010, p. 517). It will allow “people with access requirements to function independently and with equity and dignity through the delivery of universally designed tourism products, services and environments” (Tourism Victoria, 2010, p. 2).

Australia, Europe, the UK and the USA are proactively leading the accessible tourism revolution, recognising and understanding what the nexus of ageing, disability and tourism means for both their country and its visitors (Bizjak *et al.*, 2011; Darcy *et al.*, 2010; Darcy and Dickson, 2009). The transportation, accommodation and visitor attraction sectors have also become more accessible (Yau *et al.*, 2004). As the global impetus for tourism industry access rises in importance, processes are now being replicated in other localities (Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Successful outcomes have been attributable, first, to the generation of effective and influential agendas to corroborate the creation of accessible tourism industries, and second, such agendas have been discernibly featured throughout disability discrimination law, building codes and standards for access (Darcy and Dickson, 2009). Fundamentally, legislative bodies must serve as “educators” and “enablers”, promoting business propositions supporting accessibility and inclusivity (Shaw *et al.*, 2005). Accessibility can be both authorised and promoted through “developing and distributing information on access requirements to tourism enterprises; planning, setting priorities; provision of financial incentives; coordinating the implementation of accessibility measures, actions and projects; establishing financial support programmes for enterprises targeting removal of access barriers; applying regulations which govern minimum access requirements and framework standards in public and private sector tourism enterprises; promoting staff training programmes; developing employment-support measures addressing accessibility; benchmarking progress” (Ambrose, 2012, p. 23).

Accessible tourism case studies are somewhat scarce – particularly throughout the Asia-Pacific region (Darcy *et al.*, 2010). It is believed industry operators want tangible proof of the benefits accessible tourism can bring before they will commit to creating and providing access (Bizjak *et al.*, 2011; Card *et al.*, 2006). Correspondingly, a seemingly negative perception of accessibility pervades the industry, with businesses neglecting this group as a weak source of profitability and an unworthy investment of time and effort (Robinson *et al.*, 2007). In fact, it is commonly thought “the comparable dynamics of balancing the compliance costs of exclusion of the currently disabled traveller generates a similar set of tensions that are, due to ever changing market conditions, impossible to ever be amenable to resolution based purely on economic principles” (Shelton and Tucker, 2005, p. 215). A definitive example is the accommodation sector perceiving the supply of rooms for disabled people to be a costly, burdensome liability (Darcy *et al.*, 2010). This being said, lack of access can simply be accidental, as “many tourism-driven agencies often unknowingly create organisational and institutional barriers to engagement through their narrow and outdated policies, practices, facilities and programs, as well as rules and regulations that tend to exclude, restrict or discriminate” (Stumbo and Pegg, 2005, p. 195). The industry’s

disengagement with this market is largely psychological (Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005), and those businesses who adapt their current mind sets and open themselves to new possibilities will be the ones who not only relish in the benefits of this lucrative market, but make a genuine difference to those with access requirements (Darcy and Dickson, 2009).

Notably, of case studies documented throughout relevant literature, accessibility provision has chiefly reaped positive benefits – namely financial – including: enhanced profitability (McCoy, 2013); enhanced flexibility, productivity and operational management (Ambrose *et al.*, 2012); higher occupancy rates (Darcy *et al.*, 2010); increased market share; greater customer base and loyalty (Ambrose *et al.*, 2012; McCoy, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005); and, exploitation of sustainable competitive advantage (McCoy, 2013; Robinson *et al.*, 2007). Ray and Ryder (2003) believe disabled people possess higher spending power than often perceived (as cited in Bizjak *et al.*, 2011), and similarly, Yau *et al.* (2004) confirm, “travellers with disabilities generate billions of dollars” (as cited in Card *et al.*, 2006, p. 164). What’s more, Stafford *et al.* (2001) affirm this spending to be greatly multiplied when you consider the travel accompaniments of disabled travellers (as cited in Robinson *et al.*, 2007). In fact, a Global Economics of Disability (2013) study contended the global access market to extend to 2.2 billion people when travel accompaniments were accounted for, controlling around \$8 trillion dollars in annual disposable income (as cited in McCoy, 2013). The accessible tourism niche is worthy of much greater acknowledgement, engagement and research (Robinson *et al.*, 2007), and the business rationale must be reiterated should the industry see a real commitment to this market (Ambrose *et al.*, 2012).

## Methodology

This research sought to ascertain the current situation and future propensity for an accessible tourism industry in New Zealand from the perspectives of key industry stakeholders. It explored both the economic and social rationales supporting accessibility, and the perceived reality and future possibilities of “on the ground” accessible tourism in New Zealand. Given the importance and relevance of the multiple subjective realities existing, the interpretive paradigm was chosen (Ayikoru, 2009; Guest *et al.*, 2012; Jennings, 2010; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Savin-Baden and Wimpenny, 2007; Tribe, 2001). Semi-structured interviews, lasting anywhere between 30 and 70 minutes, were undertaken as an appropriate method of data collection for a stakeholder analysis (Johnson, 2002; Legard *et al.*, 2003; Patton, 2002). The interview guide allowed for some structural guidance to cover the study parameters and key literature themes, whilst ensuring the flexibility to further explore ideas (Johnson, 2002). Key themes included exploration relating to: the specific organisation and their accessibility story; wider industry awareness, and the consideration for and facilitation of accessibility; and, effecting change for an accessible tourism future.

Ten representatives of stakeholder organisations voluntarily agreed to participate in the research, signifying a 50 per cent response rate from all those approached. Given the rich responses achieved, this sample size was not considered to be a limitation as a point of data saturation was attained (Patton, 2002). It was initially hoped participants would be representative of a cross-section of New Zealand tourism industry stakeholders, including organisations from the top, upper levels, through to the grass-root, operational levels. The profile of participants approached included: four councils and government bodies; six visitor attractions, activities and tour operators; two accessible tourism organisations; three destination marketing organisations; three airports and transportation providers; one travel broker; and, one social change group. The following agreed to participate: one city council; two accessible tourism organisations; three visitor attractions; one destination marketing organisation; one transportation provider; one travel broker; and, one social change group. Participants were both directly and indirectly involved in the industry, with the majority catering exclusively to the access market; a couple of mixed providers catering to the industry in its entirety; and, one mainstream stakeholder not yet considering accessibility. For the purposes of confidentiality, the names of organisations and other identifying variables of participants are not reported. Ethical approval was granted prior to the research being undertaken. Given that most of the participants were non-disabled and in a professional role, the research proved minimal risk to them.

Thematic analysis of the interview data formed the basis upon which pattern recognition occurred, and five major themes were inductively derived (Patton, 2002). These themes are presented below. Although not empirically generalisable to New Zealand's population at large, nor necessarily applicable to other countries and contexts around the world, findings allowed original insight into the current existence and future of accessible tourism in New Zealand.

## Findings

Five key themes were revealed from data analysis. These were: "Accessibility as a human right: Developing a culture of accessibility"; "Accessible tourism: Good for business?"; "Bottom-up, market-led approach"; "Leadership from the top: Moving from apathy to action"; and, "Meeting somewhere in the middle". The five themes generally provided support for the key findings of previous literature, as to the key lessons for the future of accessible tourism. These findings are elaborated below.

### Accessibility as a human right: developing a culture of accessibility

Stakeholders determined the provision of access to be "the right thing to do". Driven by a compelling sense of social justice, they expressed the necessity of a nationwide cultural shift, where accessibility could become accepted as a cultural "norm". Stakeholders alluded to other countries accepting and embracing the diversity of disability through their access provision, questioning why it was not the case in New Zealand. This finding also relates to perspectives of wider scholarly literature that advocates every human being possesses the fundamental human and citizenship rights to partake and revel in the activity that is tourism (e.g. Darcy and Buhalis, 2011a; Darcy *et al.*, 2010; Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Jaeger and Bowman, 2005; Singleton and Darcy, 2013). One comment alluded to the general feeling expressed by all participants, stating, "I've started to actually see, this is better for me too, and this is the kind of world I want to live in" – Social Change Organisation.

Participants also reported that the provision of access should go hand-in-hand with customer service, in offering the best experience to all. This was thought to stem from having a mindful awareness about what you are doing, consistently factoring the access market in to your audience, and ensuring you are not creating or perpetuating barriers. Stakeholders believed the lack of awareness is unintentional, and that New Zealanders by their very nature, possess an inherent "can do" attitude, demonstrated in them "bending over backwards" to extend compassion to, and accommodate their clientele, even if the accessible facilities are not there. Participants commented unprompted that, in the future, it will simply be unacceptable to continue to say "we will make do", "we'll cross that bridge if and when we have to", or "we can wing it". Irrespective of a certain presence of the "right" mentality, it was felt the industry is complacent and responsive, oblivious to the need in being pre-empting and proactive, a mind-set critical for the future. As one participant explained:

It's all about people bringing more awareness and people looking out for or being more conscious about things. It's not about thinking about accessibility and being reactive, realising, "oh my buildings not accessible". It is starting to develop the culture. If I build a building now, I need to think about the accessibility straight away. Because there are 1 out of 4 people who may be using my facility. So its common sense. It's not 1 out of 10 or 100. Its 1 out of 4, 25%. It's massive! Who would say no to this? (Accommodation Provider).

The participants emphasised that the need for accessibility and universal design extends to most – if not all – people during their lifespan, and hence, the provision of access is valuable and vital to enhancing the livelihoods of both our current and future populations. The following quote by a stakeholder participant summed this up:

I mean, if I don't even talk about the value to the city, it's a human right. It's like saying, "what is the value in helping vulnerable people?" The value is in helping, in ensuring everyone can live here – whether you are a tourist or you are here – ensuring the cityscape, in every form, is suitable for everyone. Not just one-eye and conservative, towards a perfectly abled, majority person. If you have sculpted the city for tourists to have an easy time, then people living here as well are going to have the same benefits. And having tourists and residents with access issues here – and they are here because of the wonderful facilities – means you've got a more diverse city. When you've got a more diverse city, society's better" (City Council).



## Accessible tourism: good for business?

All participants agreed that New Zealand's future was to be a future of access provision, achieved through the connectivity of organisations, and the communication of strong business propositions supporting access. It was commonly reported that, whilst the social case is undeniably convincing, the business case further substantiates it, propelling altruistic intentions into action. In the end, it comes down to benefit and feasibility; the need to show operators the value proposition in accessible tourism, as the following quotes illustrate:

I think we struggle in New Zealand, where we think that accessible tourism is a good, civic thing to do. But it's not. It's totally about exploiting tourism just like any other market. You look at the market, see what their needs are, then you market that you are catering to this target market. It is very much a "chicken and the egg" issue. How do you get local tourism operators to invest in their business, when they don't see big market value in people needing accessible facilities? How do you build value, without the service offering there? (Accessible Tourism Organisation).

"Whether organisations realise it or not, it's inevitable with the baby boomers coming through. By 2030, I think it is, we are going to have one quarter of the population over 65, of which we know at least 50% will have at least one impairment. It's inevitable that if you're not positioning yourself, or are not thinking about accessibility, then somebody else is going to. There is actually a real opportunity to be competitive and differentiate yourself. Right now, we are starting to get the leaders in this space, the ones that are realising its important and good for business. Then there are other people maybe ignoring it. I think it is something that eventually, everybody, organisation and business will have to do. It's just the reality of the way the worlds going, the way the population is going" (Social Change Organisation).

Whilst perceptual barriers exist – namely time, effort and money – particularly in the inability to charge for access, nor measure its return, participants advocated the power in making seemingly small and insignificant changes. These included: learning basic New Zealand sign language; providing captions and subtitles; printing in larger font or Braille; speaking louder and slower; updating webpages; contemplating room set-up, changing the height or propping a door open; installing a wheel-in shower; or, stocking a wheelchair. Further, the significance of creativity was emphasised, diminishing a perceptual barrier of accessibility not being aesthetically pleasing nor appealing. Participants discussed the need to consciously consider and incorporate whatever changes that could be done at the minute, then factoring other possibilities into future considerations, for when timing and feasibility prove propitious. Such opportunities could arise in "new planning cycles", or "rebuild", "redevelopment" and "renovation" projects. "I think there is something to be said for people putting their money where their mouth is, and really investing in it. Not just financially, but also their time. You know, making it worthwhile. But initially, that is a constraint. Budgets obviously, and the time it takes to get them over the line. So they might be really keen, but they might just have to wait until the following financial year to secure a budget for it first" – Social Change Organisation. Several stakeholders referred to the conducting of a cost-benefit analysis to determine the priority placement and the subsequent feasibility, worth and relevance of its provision. For example:

For us to enable something to happen from an accessibility perspective, means one, two, three of four revenue generating opportunities are sacrificed for it. So it is that, "where does it sit in the order of priority?" As does everything. I could have five different revenue generating opportunities, and one of them is higher priority than another. So it is just an added piece to that priority (Transportation Provider).

It was felt by participants that accessibility should simply be another factor of general business operation and planning. They relayed how core operations need not change too significantly, particularly given access customers typically travel with non-access-requiring companions who also utilise and derive satisfaction from accessible, universally designed facilities. It was expressed that accessibility is simply another medium through which organisations can deliver what they already deliver well, to an extended customer base, as the following quote illustrates:

We realised that there were some doors in front of people who wanted to book their accommodation and travel needs in New Zealand. Some doors that we could easily open. So from there, we did some different projects and implemented some change into the way we work on a regular basis. We put some procedures in place for accessibility and developed a culture to work towards accessibility. What that means, is being conscious to, or aware of the difficulties people are meeting. Trying as much as possible, to assist our guests, which is the core of our business anyway. So instead of doing 100%, we do 200% or 250% for the customer concerned (Accommodation Provider).

Benefits were communicated to include: a differentiated, diversified product or service offering; attainment of competitive advantage; added value; enhanced brand and reputation; self-marketing; increased revenue potential; empowered staff and customers; business longevity; and, long-term sustainability. “This is money, this is a source of income, this is a source of repeat clients, this is a source of referral clients, and we need to look after them” – Travel Broker. Not surprisingly, the importance of the business case is also a finding of previous studies (e.g. Bizjak *et al.*, 2011; Card *et al.*, 2006; Darcy *et al.*, 2010; Shaw *et al.*, 2005), and evidently, accessibility makes “good business” sense; a commercial venture that will positively benefit organisations’ bottom line (Auckland Disability Research Group, 2009, p. 14).

### A bottom-up, market-led approach?

According to the participants, dialogue amongst the lower, operational levels of the industry is opening up, as awareness rises and organisations are increasingly exposed to a population requiring of access. They argued that the power of the accessible voice cannot be underestimated, for there is great potential for mutually beneficial relationships between the access market and tourism industry to exist. Indeed, the importance of the authentic voice of the disabled and (dis) embodiment are key findings of previous findings elsewhere (Aitchison, 2009; Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Daruwalla and Darcy, 2005; Small *et al.*, 2008, 2012; Stumbo and Pegg, 2005). Participants expressed that in engaging with the access customer, the organisation can receive invaluable feedback – whether it be positive or negative – facilitating robust, constructive discussion and offering opportunities for tourism organisations to explore, listen to, and act upon any concerns. The following quotes illustrate this:

So just listening to your visitor, and if you can, your non-visitors as well. That voice is really important. You have to make time for that and value that. Making sure when you do see feedback that you’ve got a way of using it, building it in to what you are planning or operating (Visitor Attraction).

Further, stakeholders confirmed such relationships to be validated in customer loyalty, repeat visits and referrals. “I see value in building relationships and making strong relationships for my clients, because they become friends. I want people to have the best possible experience, because let’s face it, if they have a great experience, they’re going to come back. They’re going to tell other people about me, and it’s going to grow my business” (Travel Broker).

Aside from direct interaction between the access customer and the tourism organisation, it was suggested organisations seek engagement, education and affiliation, at a wider level, with pockets of the access community, to further initiate, forge and enhance prospective relationships and the subsequent levels of influence they can have. One participant expressed how: “I’m not going to learn sign language. If I am dealing with someone who is deaf, I just have to think, ‘speak up and a lot slower, because you know, I’m a typical Kiwi, I speak quickly. Most deaf people, they’re using e-mail. I use text messages to communicate with them. That’s certainly the one thing I have found to be enormously different. A lot of people use Facebook Messenger, they use text message, and they use Viber. I have all those. I will communicate with them that way, whatever way is easiest for them” – Travel Broker. Encounters are valued, because then this customer group becomes “well and truly” apparent in the organisation’s mind, and therefore, is able to then be factored into both daily decision making and long-term strategic management and planning.

Overall, participants felt that some traction is beginning to manifest, as there are some individuals and organisations who are valuing and embracing the provision of access. They were described as the “change makers” or the “enlightened” ones. They envision and are acutely aware of the “kind of world” they want themselves and others to live in; they demonstrate aspirational leadership in their endeavours to transform access hopes and dreams of the future, into today’s reality. “At the end of the day, it’s their own choice. I would say as an industry, or as a group of people who are emotionally concerned, I guess it’s important that we try and help out at the maximum. Again, it could be us tomorrow. So, do you want to react when you are having difficulties, or do you want to help the future generation which could be yourself, tomorrow?” – Accommodation Provider. Their energy is endowed in

attempts to better themselves and embolden others, pushing the boundaries through: challenging of policy, processes and entrenched ideas; having the difficult but necessary conversations; shifting organisational culture and mind-set; empowering staff; and championing change.

Participants commented on implementing a number of mechanisms that can easily be replicated by others. These included: the creation of access statements and accessibility policies; engagement in continuous improvement programmes, surpassing minimum standards and expectations; enforcing compulsory staff training; and, seeking advice and accreditation from reputable, expert third parties. It was similarly reported that the future is about taking “ownership”, impressing accessibility in people’s minds, then generating the excitement about being part of a wider social change movement, “not because you have to, but because you want to”. “Change happens when people take ownership of it themselves, and are passionate about seeing the change themselves. Its human nature. You’re not really going to want to be told to make that change, you actually have to believe it first. See what little changes I can make, make that benefit to me, then, if my next door neighbour can see it, and his next door neighbour can see it, next thing you know, the entire town has seen it and your entire town has actually got tangible benefit” – Travel Broker. The more we see individuals and organisations becoming enlightened to “aspire” and “inspire”, buy-in will be garnered, and the future access market will grow “naturally” and “organically”.

### Leadership from the top: moving from apathy to action

Participants similarly commented that the upper levels of the industry have proven an “ineptness” in recognising and capitalising upon the opportunity that is accessible tourism, instead exhibiting apathy and complacency. Yet, participants noted the importance in utilising their influence, in harnessing their role as a facilitator of meaningful and inclusive accessible tourism practices, through leadership, support, positive reinforcement, legislation and destination marketing. It was stated that local, regional and central government, together with dominant private sector leaders, must collectively purport “toeholds” to permeate a sense of cohesion and togetherness across the industry, inducing a chase towards realising the commercial and social propositions of accessibility. As one participant commented, “It comes from the top. Those top, key organizations could actually help with starting to break down some of those organizations and starting to push the reality of what, as an industry, they need to start looking at. Because then you feel like you are a part of something wider” – Social Change Organisation. Similar findings pertaining to the major theme of “top-down leadership” can be found in a number of other publications (e.g. Ambrose, 2012; Darcy and Daruwalla, 1999; Darcy and Dickson, 2009; Robinson *et al.*, 2007; Shaw *et al.*, 2005).

Unfortunately, the participants commonly alluded to an existing and pervasive mind-set of “dark-age” thinking infiltrating the industry, raising issues in first identifying the market, and second, in the way New Zealand is marketed at a destination level, and who is targeted, respectively. As one participant described:

I don’t think it’s [awareness] huge. I don’t think it’s anywhere where it should be at all. At all concerned for the type of person that’s visiting, what their needs are. It’s still too sort of singular, perfect, and able-bodied. That person doesn’t really exist. They’re missing out on a huge amount. Huge! Obviously it’s going to increase. It’s the elderly, those with intellectual and mental health concerns, all types of physical disability. It’s huge what you’re missing out on, and it’s huge how your sculpting your tourism. It’s too singular, again, not just because it’s important as a human right, but for New Zealand to be seen as a welcoming place for all people is really important, not discriminatory, and that moves over into the reality of it all (City Council).

Amplifying this, participants commented on the perception access customers have of New Zealand’s (in) accessibility, given its geographical location and distance from major inbound markets. A couple of participants questioned whether customers would differentiate from one organisation to another, and the way in which one’s perception and judgment of accessibility could change. “You could argue that if people are looking at coming to New Zealand, they may look to Air New Zealand as the carrier to gauge the level of accessibility of the country. Because if

your national carrier's accessibility is visible, perhaps that is indicative of the country, rightly or wrongly, this may be something they draw" – Transportation Provider. What's more, New Zealand's destination marketing at an international level further impinges upon these discernments, as the following participant emphasised:

The image that we promote around the world is one of mountains, outdoors, and bungee jumping. You know, depending on the market [...] Sheep and all sorts of other things. If you were not aware of what New Zealand is really like, and were solely dependent on images you see from Tourism New Zealand or anybody else, I would imagine it's fair to guess that people would have an image that New Zealand is inaccessible, versus, I don't know, New York or London, where you would expect them to have very good public infrastructure and transport. We are a long way from all of our markets except Australia, and that's a barrier to everyone, not just disabled people (Destination Marketing Organization).

Several participants argued that New Zealand's principal destination marketing organisation has significant responsibility, at a destination level, in attracting tourists to New Zealand. As the preceding quote insinuates, both historic and current marketing efforts are reported and perceived to be "out of kilter" and incredibly "broad brush", as the national tourism organisation has failed to conduct any analysis by age, nor address the apparent access market as a "sector" in its own right. One participant expressed this directly:

This is representative of Tourism New Zealand's sort of apathy towards working out what's the market with the biggest disposable income, how do we convey that, how do we cater for their needs, how do we market to that market centre? They just haven't done that, they've shown poor leadership. Take Queenstown for example, Tourism New Zealand has invested heavily in marketing their region and they are targeting adventure tourists and backpackers. Look at their disposable income, they would have the smallest. I've got a strong sense it could come down to individual egos of senior managers within Tourism New Zealand. They don't want to be seen to be chasing a non-glamorous market, but it doesn't make sense. It just doesn't make sense! It's weird, but it comes down to some very antiquated ideas about branding, which flies in the place of the economics of supply and demand (Accessible Tourism Organisation).

One issue of dissent for participants was legislation. Convincing arguments supported the requirement and further necessity of robust, "common sense" legislation, specifically in channelling it as a driver of enforced action for change, and "legislating with consequence" for non-compliance. "We'll fine you \$200,000. \$50,000 of it is a penalty; a financial penalty as in, pay now. \$150,000 is, reinvest in fixing this issue. It's great! You have to change. You have to prove, (a) what you have spent, and (b) what you have done and how you have changed it. They will be on your case. If you are not willing to invest in yourself, we will make you invest" – Transportation Provider. However, several participants articulated legislation to be too "reactive", "cumbersome" and "lacking of substance", and therefore, an ineffective driver of accessible tourism. Just because something is mandated, doesn't mean it is necessarily right or effective, and many simply enact the bare minimum, scraping through. Participants felt that future legislative amendments would need to ensure the current "reactivity" is replaced with "proactivity". Amendments to employment law specifically, could see disability become an everyday business and social consideration, enhancing interaction between persons with accessibility needs and those not-requiring of access, emphasising personal relevance and assisting the integration of disability as a cultural norm:

That's where I was thinking of social change through legislation. I reckon, if we had something where you had to employ someone with an access need, I reckon that's so powerful. Everyone working with that person now gives a shit. They'll be walking around and they'll care, because they work with someone. That's the most powerful. Because 90% of people I've found in this field, who don't have an obvious need themselves, are here because their family or friend does (City Council).

In terms of support, organisational support from the public sector was applauded by most participants, with Arts Access Aotearoa and Be. Accessible frequently alluded to. Arguably, Be. Accessible's previous work with the Rugby World Cup in 2011, has solely cultivated the profile of accessibility, placing it upon the industry's agenda, leaving a legacy which to this day, both current and future accessibility provision is grounded upon. "It was very refreshing to see Be.'s work come into force during the Rugby World Cup. Arguably, one of the biggest, loudest,

international events we've ever hosted, and the biggest influx of international tourists coming to our shores for a concentrated period of time. The fact that the accessibility audience was seen as an important part of that – making credible information about our hotel and attractions welcoming people with different access needs – was really refreshing. I think that does have a legacy” – Visitor Attraction.

Education was also reported as important, and moving forward, there was seen to be a necessity in replacing the current “bits and pieces” of “mismatched information”, with accurate, credible and timely information collateral. Participants commented that there is an onus upon each and every organisation to propagate seemingly simplistic information – such as getting from point A to point B, and the availability of services, facilities, transport and infrastructure – not only locally, but regionally and nationally too. It was felt that positive reinforcement will see other tourism organisations embrace access ideals in the future, if they can tangibly witness their efforts being commended, and their features and services mapped and promoted.

### Meeting somewhere in the middle

Ultimately, the success of a future of accessible tourism in New Zealand, participants felt, lies with a “meeting in the middle” of the industry. Whilst there are “two sides the coin” and each side undoubtedly has their own pertinent roles to respectively play, participants felt it is about the industry recognising and valuing the interconnectedness and interdependence of one another. It is incumbent upon each and every individual organisation to play their part, but to be conscious that concurrently, one is limited in control over their own environmental spheres, as well as their influence at a larger scale. Without an accessible industry, an accessible organisation is simply that, one individual. With this being said, regardless of individuals, there will not be a fundamental change or an industry shift, until a seamless, industry-wide supply chain is created, as the following quote reiterates:

You can make a good analogy with frozen foods. When you're distributing frozen foods, you need consistent linkages throughout the supply chain, and if you break the supply chain, you ruin the product. It's the same with accessible tourism. If you break the chain, then you ruin the experience of the holiday (Accessible Tourism Organisation).

Evidently, the future of accessible tourism, is reliant upon an industry exemplifying connectivity, communication and collaboration.

### Conclusion

This paper argues that minimal awareness and consideration has been granted to the needs of disabled people in the New Zealand tourism industry. The findings of this research – informed by key tourism industry stakeholders – explicitly allude to the implications of a country permeating an image of inaccessibility, impacting upon the impression of the destination communicated, and excluding the needs of a growing access market. The findings reported here are of value to countries working through the layers of understanding and decision making within this future area of tourism provision and development.

The five themes emerging from the research findings provided important information about what current stakeholders perceive to be the most relevant issues, and have provided perspectives to scope and support the future development of accessibility within the New Zealand tourism industry. Although the findings reported here require further substantiation, the research findings reconfirmed the access market to be largely untouched, but one with scope for opportunity should critical issues be addressed and priorities reconsidered going forward. Specifically, it was revealed that accessible tourism in New Zealand will only be realised through the: connecting of organisations; effective communication of the business case; and, ensuring always, that the “accessible voice” is genuinely heard. Whilst top-down leadership will be fundamental, a “meeting in the middle” from the bottom-up, will see collaboratively, how accessibility success stories can be showcased, emphasising what has been done, and more importantly, what can be done moving forward into the future.

As such, future research needs to: establish the business case for New Zealand and abroad; ensure the conveyance of the authentic “access voice”, especially in tourism marketing; further examine stakeholder perceptions; showcase studies of best practice and benchmarking; include the voice of the travel accompaniments of disabled people; and, consider employment, and perceptions of the employment, of disabled people in the tourism industry. In short, accessible tourism is an important research and industry consideration for the future of tourism provision both in New Zealand and elsewhere.

## Note

1. Given the legislative terminology, context and geographic location of the researchers, being New Zealand, the term “disabled people” was employed despite the researchers supporting the social model of disability; a model which generally prescribes the use of the term “people with disabilities” (Harpur, 2012).

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