

Professional coach drivers

20 June 2023

Attendees

Te Anau-based professional coach drivers

Introductions

- Welcome / health and safety
- Introductions
- Recording session for website
- Purpose for the meeting: to test the feasibility of the masterplan recommendations

Background and Context

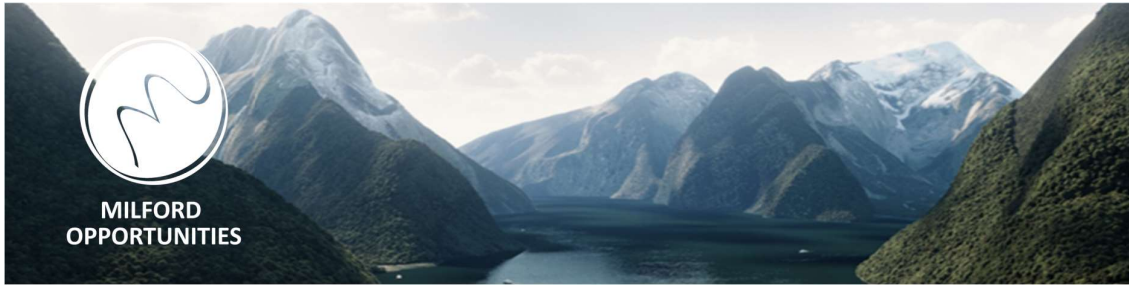
- Attendee presented a collection of photos taken within the corridor with a personal story about change. Provided background leading to the visual impact of change and current state.
- Waka Kotahi / NZTA responsible for road management, their responsibility is independent of DOC – two separate entities.
- We have two separate entities doing things in the same place, do the agencies talk to each other? The effects / outcomes of their work would suggest that they act independently of each other.
- Change has happened for good reasons in terms of infrastructure resilience, response to a natural hazard, but the issue is how was it done? What agencies are involved? What was their brief and how have we arrived at this outcome?
- Design needs to fit the environment.

Questions / Feedback

- It is common sense getting experienced bus drivers in the room to provide their knowledge and experience.

Design

- Someone's designed current infrastructure, what were their design parameters and what communication was had? There's an example of a bridge and barriers constructed for improved safety, but the design detracts from the natural landscape that was present before - the area has been visually degraded. Design for safety and preservation of natural values are



not mutually exclusive.

- There was no consultation with the placement of road barriers, they're useless because they're in the wrong place. They put them where cars don't run off the road.
- They didn't come and ask the locals; it was done without consultation by someone in Wellington.

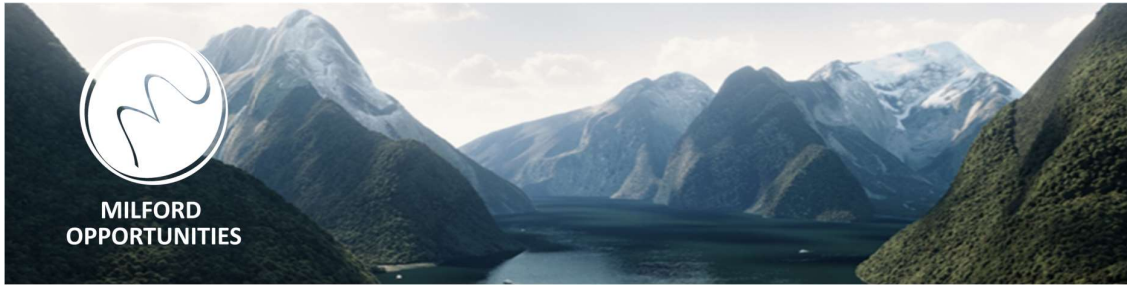
Governance

- There needs to be a governance group that sits independently over the Milford corridor. What that would mean is having all the right people sitting at the table that would contribute to the proper management of that corridor.
- We have this repeating issue of poor communication / prioritising. What the place deserves and needs versus what we've got.
- Consistency and coordination is required by agencies.
- Milford Road suffers from pressure of use, agencies are not working together to get the right outcome, what is right for the place.
- There are examples of agencies working against each other with different objectives. Different agencies making decisions, not all of which are coordinated or conducive to having a really nice experience.
- The outcomes may make it safer, but there are visual and environmental costs.
- It is frustrating when things happen which don't have public consultation. i.e the speed limit change on the western side of the tunnel from 100 down to 80. That was open to the public for submissions. All other activities which affect the visitor experience, or the professional experience of the highway do not have any public consultation and lots of other things just happen.

Milford Opportunities - we have fundamental pillars that will influence recommendations. A shared vision between agencies and that they work together is a principle of the project.

Access along the corridor

- The bureaucrats have got a lot to answer for. Road access has been closed because somebody thought a rock might fall on the road. They've closed a lot of the stuff where you could stop and have a walk etc. That's part of the reason why we are going faster because there are no places to stop.
- It is good to have access because it slows people down, that's a good thing.
- You can't fight Mother Nature. When your number is up, no matter what you're doing, it's going to happen.
- It used to take 3.5 hours to drive to Milford from Te Anau.
- When I first started, we put people on bikes. Good old push bikes. Not electric bikes. People could bike from the tunnel to Milford, or from Milford back to Lake Marian. Sometimes it was from the Divide and then bike to Cascade Creek. It annoys me so much seeing all those things closed.
- I understand Waka Kotahi values someone's life at 25 million. So that's what safety decisions



are made on. The liability of \$25 million or someone getting their vehicle damaged.

Experience

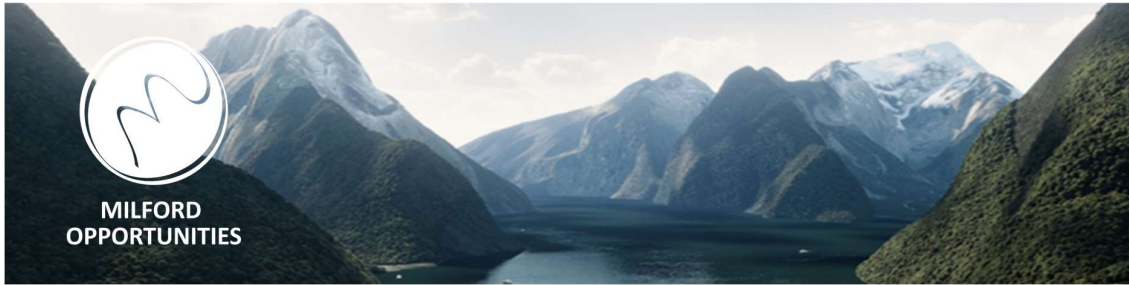
- The experience has changed, the numbers of people have grown enormously.
- Managing visitor numbers, visitor management is key.
- Different visitors have different experiences, it changed once they put in cell phone reception. People are on their phones and distracted, missing the beauty out the window.
- Phones contribute to driver distractions, running late for boats.
- People panic and take an undue risk. A park and ride would eliminate a lot of those issues.
- If we didn't have cell phones, we will soon have satellites, the horse has bolted.
- We are a very small country; we cannot do quantity tourism; we have to do quality tourism. I know that sounds elitist, but we need to shut the masses. We want to save the very thing that people come here for. We need to protect the environment and look after it.
- We are generally considered world leading. Backpackers can go over to South America, once they start making enough money and have saved enough, then can come to Milford. It is the quality of the experience.
- We will never be able to shuffle masses around New Zealand, let alone on the Milford Rd. It just can't be done and shouldn't be done anyway. You see the effects of it.
- Some form of proof of residency to camp in Milford Sound is required.
- Maybe the access would be at a certain time.

Infrastructure

- Fiordland is a big, empty, beautiful place and it was a place to escape. The whole principle of national parks and human interaction. We've just forgotten all about it.
- It is a very special place.
- More structures may have an adverse effect on the experience we are offering.
- Design needs to fit environment.
- We can't fight mother nature.
- Hard Infrastructure needs to be fit for purpose, it has to fit and be right for the place – no support for a gondola.

Q. *Do you think it would enhance experience putting more infrastructure into the landscape or not?*

- No. The general feedback from clients is that this is the reason why they come to New Zealand. If you want to see tunnels through mountains and gondolas going up mountains etc, go to Europe, go to America? It is our point of difference. Our untouched environment.
- I do have some concerns with some of the proposed development along the way.
- I've always advocated for circuit tracks or point to point where we can drop people at one point and pick them up at another point.
- DOC have missed the point with the Chasm, they need to get this and change their mindset. It is about visitor management and the quality of the visitor experience. It is a much better experience if people are walking in one direction.
- Some better use of textures, colours, spaces to match the landscape.



- It's fundamental differences of conservation values and why we've got national parks. We really need to hold on to these values and protect it from commercial pressures.
- This is what our forefathers saw? National parks and conservation philosophy is going to enrich your life, and it just becomes more and more precious.

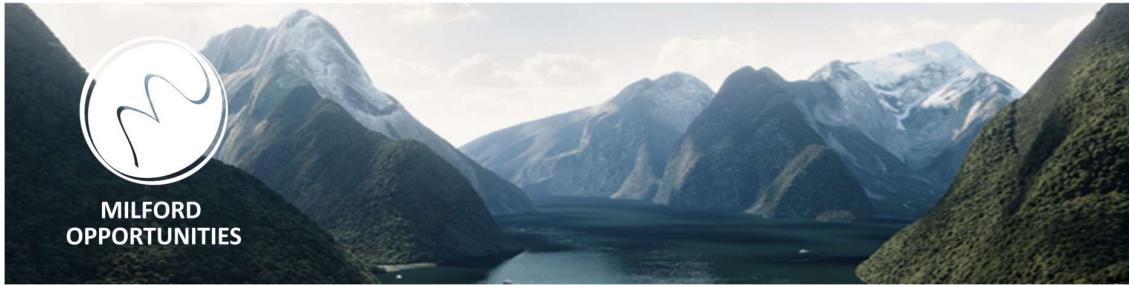
MOP – We would encourage people to see past the graphic representation or some of the terminology in the masterplan and think about the intended function of each proposal.

Slowing the Journey

- Things have developed overtime on the road, it is now a very busy place. Milford Road was once a slow journey, it took time to get from A to B and it was enjoyable, far more enjoyable than now.
- Milford is a destination, but you separate Milford Road from Milford, they go together.
- When it was a gravel road, we used to stop at Cascade Creek for morning tea.
- We were able to put people on push bikes when we didn't have the traffic.
- Now it is so pedantic with an increasing focus on safety.
- Closing access and activities has created more congestion, having the stops slows people down.
- Ministry of Works / engineers from Invercargill. Overtime they worked through a whole process on the road, shaping cornering to make it faster. With the best intention, they created what we have got by improvements made over time. We turned something from what was a lengthy journey to get to Milford into a fast one because of the design of the highway.
- When you start the journey from Queenstown – people are just focused on getting to Milford by a given time to make a cruise. That's where a lot of things start going wrong for people.

Nodes

- I think that there's an answer in the nodes, slowing down, and experiencing the journey. That will present the journey to Milford as part of the whole package. Milford is the destination of course, but the nodes will play a vital part.
- The nodes that are proposed, they need to be thought about carefully and for what reason they're being provided.
- What experienced are people going to get, how does it fit to the landscape? We know landscape architecture, whole lot of issues come into play.
- You could question some of the things proposed, some of the others make good sense.
- A lot of the proposals for nodes and elements feel someone has sat in a room, put things on a wall to see what sticks, and let's just see what happens.
- There's a lot of good ideas, but basically everything has an effect of some kind, whether it's crowding or hard infrastructure.
- Goes back to why are people coming here. Fairly minimal human intervention in it. All of these things add stuff soon as you add stuff, you're creating an effect in terms of maintenance, capital expenditure.
- A human physical artefact in the landscape, all these things affect the visitor experience. Why



people go in there and how they are experiencing it.

- The project needs to consider how these new facilities fit into the landscape or rationalising the number of them or both. Everything has to fit, so whatever we do, whatever is done has to be thought through really carefully. It is the whole journey, how it fits together, and a lot of sensitivity required for planning.
- The nodes with hard structures Eglinton Reveal / Kiosk Creek / Gertrude Valley / Cleddau walk have shelters, bridges, all these car parking areas, all that kind of stuff. These things have an impact. As soon as you build something, you'll change in the natural environment. Hard infrastructure will be required. All of these things add maintenance, expenditure and a human footprint. Hate to see a structure at Eglinton. Great place to let people get out and stretch their legs, with no infrastructure in place.
- With any development, there is the landscape values. What we know right now is that there has been mission creep and the outcomes are not good. We need to learn from that, be sensitive in planning and all be heading in the same direction.
- Nodes are a good answer. Present the journey to Milford, other than tearing up the tar seal. Sell part of the journey as actually getting there. Focus on giving people a time to be somewhere, trying to slow that down.
- You can't consider it as a series of individual nodes, it's a complete integrated experience.

Queenstown v Te Anau coach experience

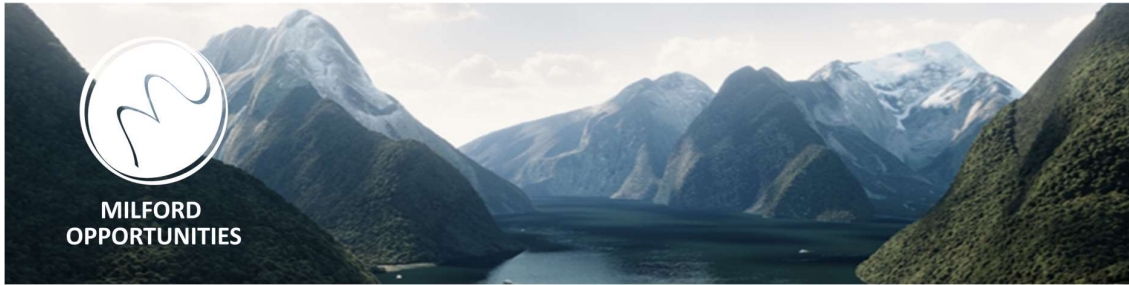
- It has been voted by Lonely Planet as one of the top 10 most scenic roads in the world.
- It's about changing that mindset of the people making the trip from Queenstown. Tourists have had it drummed into them that this is the best way to see it by operators in Queenstown with big budgets and promotions, because Queenstown want them back there. We can't compete with Queenstown. We haven't got the promotions.
- That is not the best experience. It's a long trip that turns back around 3:30pm, people sleep all the way back to Queenstown. It is brutal and it doesn't do it justice and it doesn't do the road justice.
- Highlight of the journey - commentary, don't take your eye off the journey.

Q. What I heard you say was that the experience they get by getting on one of the smaller buses here is much more personal? A premiere experience? What is good about what you are doing now, how would you amplify what you do?

- The people that travel with us just love the fact that we take our time, we do some of these short walks we stop and poke around and they connect with nature and see a bit of bird life and get educated along the way. It is personal, educational. That is our job to enrich the journey, explain all the geology and geography and the photo opportunities.
- Hordes of people go to US and Japan; our point of difference is our untouched aspect.

Rental cars

- Rental car companies need to canvas people, if you're taking the car to Milford Sound it's going to cost you another \$200 or \$300 and that will buy you a ticket on a bus from Te Anau to Milford. You must leave your car in Te Anau.



- Ban rental cars on Milford Road completely.
- Rental cars - pre COVID people were parked illegally on yellow lines.
- That created major safety issues because were getting out of their vehicle, no footpaths and walking down the road.
- They don't understand that they've got to pay for a park and make their way to the boat that they're already running late for because they've been stuck behind a 'time rich – money poor' tourist on the road.
- Limited passing lanes and options doesn't help.
- One of the toughest roads in NZ

Visitor Management

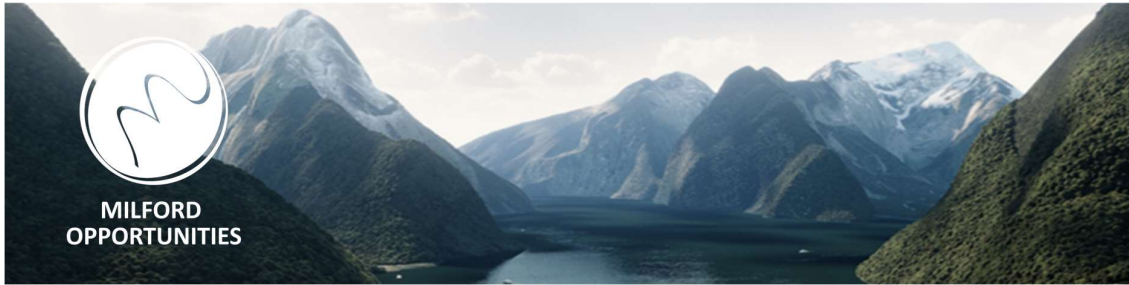
- The increasing number of people is one of the things that has changed dramatically in my time. From when I started 10 years ago, until COVID, it's obviously had an impact.
- It's about managing visitor numbers and distributing them along the corridor.
- Numbers of people doing short walks on tracks, I have seen that increase enormously. During that period, it was like walking down Queen St.
- The cruise boats are not public transport, they have large crew's thing with fixed departure times.

MOP - The project has heard surveys, both international and domestic, that people are coming here because they come to experience nature. While they want more activities, they want to do it in a way which is about the experience with nature. It's not about adding more structures.

- It is a tricky balance.
- I recall a postgraduate study about Milford in about 2000ish, asking if they thought that Milford was crowded. No one thought it was busy. But if you come from Hong Kong or somewhere like that. It's not a busy place, is it? It's all relative. But I live here, and I say it is busy. It is perception.
- In 2019 - pre covid, it was busy. It was busier this year than pre covid. It has its challenges.
- Visitor experience and quality of experience. I think there is a tipping point, and we are extremely close to it.
- You still need to seriously consider when you see it at those peak levels, what impacts do you see? It is having an impact on the place.
- The safety limits, the closing down of stopping places, it pushes people into the little spaces.
- Limiting numbers is high on everyone's agenda and low impact.

Transport model

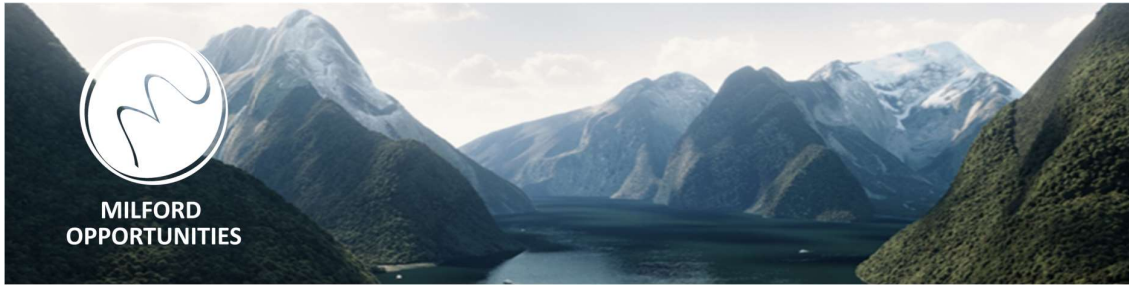
- The masterplan talks about providing nodes and all these other opportunities to do things along the corridor. This is good for those people who are going to stay for a time, have more opportunities. I'm sceptical that it's going to have a substantial effect on distributing people at Milford Sound throughout the day. I think there's always going to get a peak in the middle of the day for a number of reasons.
- Someone really needs to put their head into Operations Research about movements of people and vehicles from different places and their impact on different places along the corridor,



especially at Milford.

- Where people are departing from, what time and what size do you cycle people through? If you've got a hop on hop off model, what does that mean? It's easy to say, but is it a high frequency bus service?
- The existing tour boats are not hop on/off public transport, they have large passenger loadings with fixed departure times. Does the existing boat fleet configuration and schedule wag the tail of the dog, creating congestions of hop on and hop off buses on the highway?
- The project needs to do work on making sure that the flow of people during the day is managed.
- I think a figure that I hear about the average amount of people going through the Homer Tunnel is 1.8 people per vehicle. A bus could eliminate up to 25 cars.
- Cascade Creek or Lake Gunn camping ground was set up for 20 vehicles by Department of Conservation. I think it was 2017 they were getting up to 200 vehicles dropping in each day. It is a self-registration honesty system; people were not paying.
- A park and ride would be great because we could control it.
- There are too many people at the same places at the same time, and everyone's got a bit of a different view of it, but it's something which probably needs to be talked about. It is overwhelming and unpleasant.
- Other places around the world operate quotas on people visiting and that creates issues as well.
- That's the conversation which needs to be had, as part of this whole process.
- Denali National Park example – hosts about 7,000,000 visitors a year. One road in and it is 90 miles long. Equal to Milford Road, their park and ride system works well. You get interpretation on the bus, and a bus comes along every 15 or 20 minutes. It doesn't have cruise boats but Mount Denali itself is quite a feature. It is a good system.
- Their system works well, that park is under a lot of pressure.
- You drive along that road and there's no cars. The only vehicle you will see will be the bright Park Authority vehicles.
- Good to look at it, cherry pick what might work for us and bring it to the table as well.
- Scalable cruise prices – 91% of people are doing cruise around midday. This comes down to the individual operators in Milford, but you create rationing system with a price point. Midday cruise will cost more. If you want to do a morning or late day cruise or a mid-afternoon cruise it would be less. Maybe that is a one of many mechanisms that might flatten things out and take the big peaks away.
- We've got lots of flexibility at an individual level to curate a day. From when I pick people up in the morning, you could do this trip with me 3 days in a row and have a different trip every day because we've got flexibility to curate a day on our own terms. If there is a big crowd of people at a certain stop, I just go somewhere else, and I'll do it later in the day.
- Hop on, hop off fast. Does anyone else feel like me that it's a terrible idea?
- If anything, unnecessary.
- I need to understand it more, what it looks like.

[Further feedback received from participant after engagement session.]



- My biggest concern about park and ride are, how many extra buses will be needed and what happens if they pick up no passengers along the way?
- Where will we get the extra drivers from? They will need to be trained and that is not a five-minute job.
- Most of all - where are they going to live? Perhaps MOP should look at building a large accommodation block to give drivers some security because it is a pretty cruel world out there at the moment.]

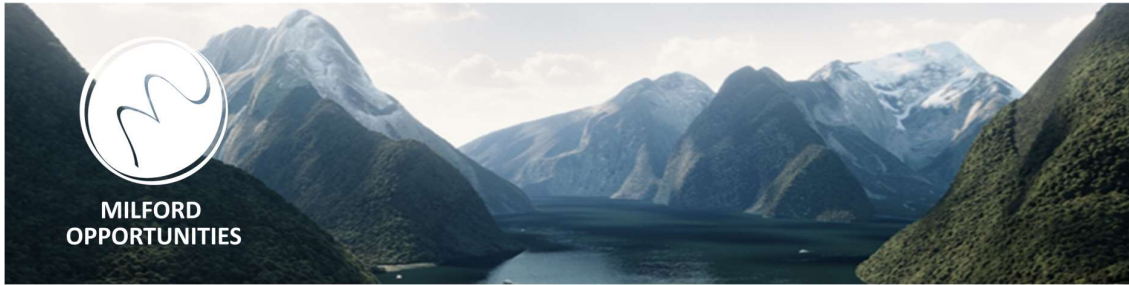
Transport model - MOP – Courtney Hart

- *Part of my job will be to do a lot of transport modelling, which will look at different size buses and how we can flatten the peak.*
- *The more information you can give us, the better. The best information will come from you guys. We'd love to hear about it.*
- *The movement modelling, it's not just movement around Milford Sound itself if that helps put your mind at rest.*
- *Are there nodes / areas that you don't like stopping? Where do you feel unsafe on the road?*
- *Transport workshop proposed, then there will be further engagement as we go – when we need to check in with this group, especially on the nodes.*
- *Decision will be made about what's appropriate, and every group has said a low impact option is the most appropriate. Huge consideration is the energy, the visual impact and safety.*

Balancing slowing the journey versus infrastructure – Milford Opportunities - Tom Hopkins

The Te Anau basin development plan is happening in parallel. There are lots of moving parts. I have been listening carefully, checking to see if I heard it right. There is broadly general support for the idea of slowing things down, by offering a wider range of opportunities. But I am hearing that you are uncomfortable about building infrastructure – there is tension about that. I am keen to hear what solutions could look like. Infrastructure seems to be a key challenge for us to try and address, often a design challenge. If we're talking about something physical, it's not about doing it, it's how it's done.

- It is not about 'not' doing it, it is how it is done. Critically - who is involved, the skill required. What is given precedent. Sensitive in design.
- How each design project is structured in terms of who was involved, their skill level and what level of authority they have.
- If a landscape architect wants to do something which they know is sensitive to environment, but they're barred from doing that by someone in Wellington who's got an overriding blanket approach to road barrier design or something? What's given precedence.
- An example of it was described in the plan as an iconic visitor shelter for the view of the valley or something. What's iconic? Is it the view or is it the structure?
- If you want to see an iconic structure, go to Paris and look at the Eiffel Tower.
- This place is special because it's empty. Doesn't take much explaining.



MOP - We heard at the Tracks and Huts session views around a viewing structure at Bowen Falls. It would have to be designed in a way that it wasn't visible and there are challenges wrapped around that.

- It's about putting up the right stuff. The right stuff and a world class experience might be mutually exclusive.

Themes

- Listen to experience and consult with the experienced drivers.
- Design - we're not opposed to infrastructure, but the infrastructure needs to fit and be right. It's not about not wanting infrastructure, it is how you do it.
- Governance - agencies must work together in coordinated consistent way. Can't have different agencies making independent decisions.
- Access needs to be limited and visitor management needs to be considered better.
- Slowing the journey - sell the journey getting to Milford. Focus on giving people a time to be somewhere. Slow the journey down to experience the sequence, visual, emotional, environmental.
- Transport modelling - ban rental cars.
- Nodes – an integrated continuous experience on the way that fits with the place.