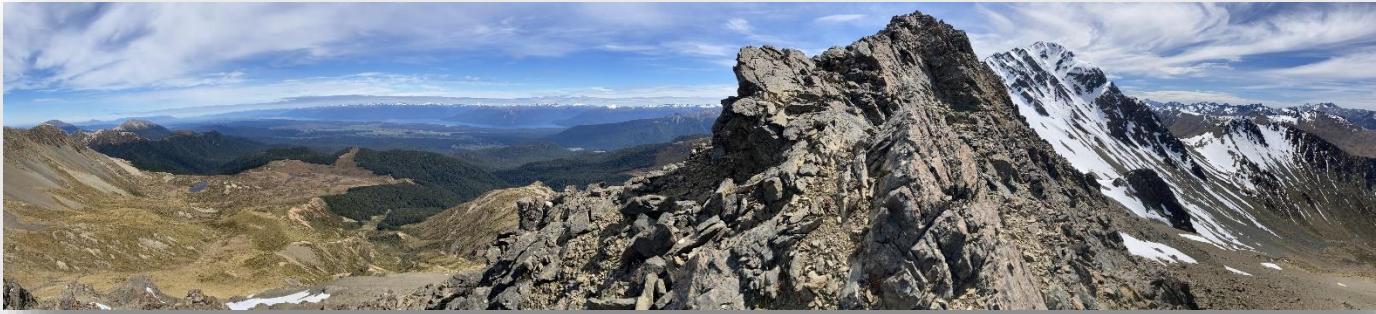


Proposal to Establish an Overnight Tramping Experience from The Milford Road onto the Countess Range



Prepared by: Southland Section of the New Zealand Alpine Club
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1st September 2023



Southland Section NZAC

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Southland Section NZAC

Proposal to establish an overnight tramping experience from the Milford Road onto the Countess Range

Prepared by: Southland Section of the New Zealand Alpine Club¹
1st September 2023

Proposal

It is proposed that the Milford Opportunities Project (MOP) establish a medium sized tramping hut on the western flanks of the Countess Range, just above the bushline, accessed by a tramping loop track from the Milford Road starting from a proposed new carpark near Walker Flat. The track and hut would provide a tramping experience unique in Southland and Fiordland with spectacular 270° panoramic views from the hut, and in so doing would meet one of MOP's objectives to establish an overnight visitor experience from the Milford Road.

The proposed hut and tracks would be suitable for moderately fit day-visitor picnickers, and somewhat experienced overnight trampers, with an estimated tramping time of 3–5 hours each way and a height gain of 980 metres.

After comparing the experience offered by similar huts in the South Island, we anticipate that the hut and track would be very attractive to local, national and international visitors, and could be well used throughout the year.

This proposal identifies sound, practicable routes for the tracks that would be interesting to walk and should be straightforward to maintain. The proposed track would take trampers through bush in which DOC undertakes extensive biodiversity protection work, resulting in relatively rich birdlife and birdsong that would make the experience memorable, and encourage biodiversity advocacy, and briefly out onto open tops with magnificent vistas to the proposed hut.

The proposed hut and track would open access to introductory mountaineering experiences on the Countess Range and facilitate tramping opportunities for experienced trampers wishing to continue over the range to the Upukuroa and Mavora Valleys to access the Te Araroa Trail, and to traverse to Key Summit.

A loop track provides a full immersive experience with different scenery for both the ascent and descent. At the bushline two day-use shelters are also proposed to facilitate trampers putting on extra warm clothes before entering the alpine zone or taking off extra layers on the way back down the mountain. The shelters also provide a rest stop and picnic area.

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Three candidate hut sites are identified: further analysis is required to choose the best site for the hut for views and climatic exposure, and geotechnical surveys will need to be undertaken to confirm the best hut site. All the candidate hut sites offer vistas superior to those offered by other bushline huts in New Zealand (see Figures 1 and 2, and Appendix 3).

Informal discussions with Southland recreationalists and others indicate support for the proposed hut and tracks, but support is strongly qualified that the experience must cater for locals in terms of using the hut, the size and style of hut, and the adoption of appropriate “tramping track” track standards.

We have informally outlined the draft proposal with Federated Mountain Club’s Administration Committee and they much prefer the proposed Countess Range Hut site to MOP’s proposed hut site in Mistake Creek, for which they hold very strong reservations.

Noting DOC’s reluctance to own more infrastructure, and the need for public ownership, it is proposed that the hut would be ultimately owned and operated by the Backcountry Trust, which is supportive in principle of this proposal, or the New Zealand Alpine Club.

Costs are not included in this proposal.

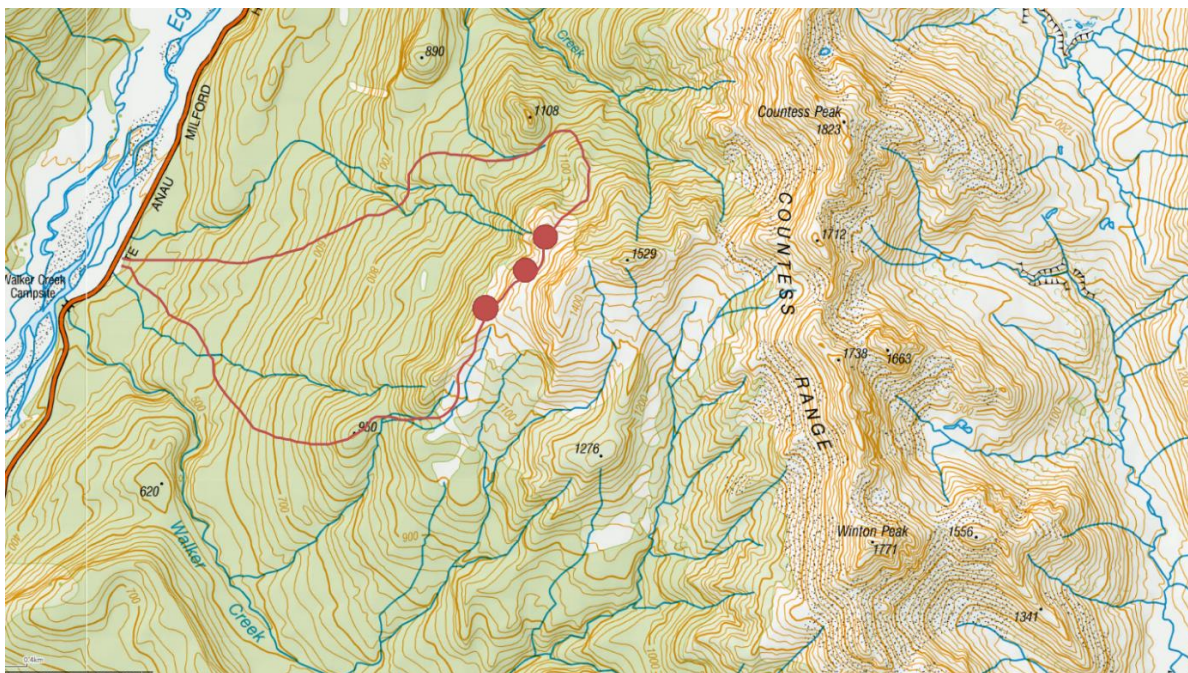


Figure 1. Proposed track and three candidate hut sites for consideration. The proximity of the candidate hut sites to Countess and Winton Peaks is shown.

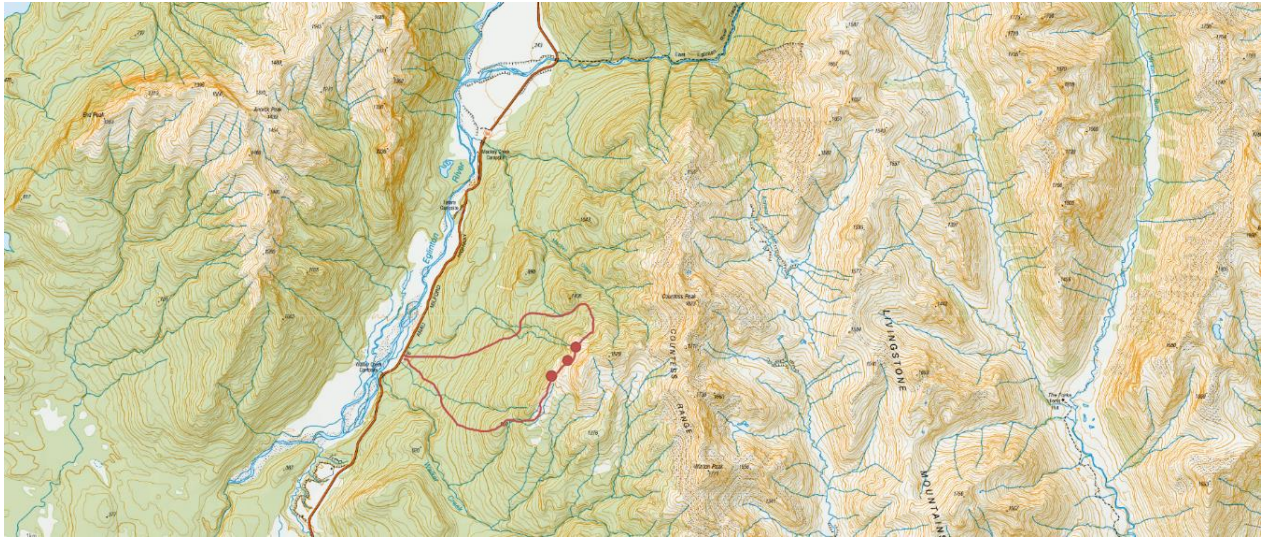


Figure 2. Proposed track and potential hut sites, showing relationship with the Upukeroa and Mavora Rivers, which would be accessible from the track by suitably skilled parties.



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1. Background

The July 2021 MOP Masterplan proposed establishing an eighty person hut in Mistake Creek. The hut was marked as being suitable for low to medium fitness individuals wanting an overnight experience without the commitment of one of the three Great Walks in the region. A further dotted line over U-Pass indicated that those more fit and willing may consider turning the overnight trip up Mistake Creek into a loop, returning to the road via Hut Creek.

Recognising the inherent difficulties and dangers that would arise from establishing a hut in Mistake Creek, and aware of the paucity of accessible, straightforward, interesting tramping and climbing opportunities in the Fiordland and Southland region, the Southland Section of the New Zealand Alpine Club began exploring an alternative hut site that would meet MOP's requirements, and at the same time find favour with Southland recreationalists.

Southland Section of New Zealand Alpine Club has developed this proposal because:

- We believe our members would benefit from having an alpine hut that is relatively accessible that would offer mountaineering experiences that cannot otherwise easily be had in the Southland region, and provide a gateway to straightforward transalpine-style tramping.
- We know that there is unmet demand in Southland for tramping experiences that a hut in the Countess Range would provide
- We want to share the truly spectacular scenery that the proposed hut would provide with other New Zealanders and overseas visitors
- We want visitors to the region to enjoy authentic 'Kiwi' tramping and mountaineering experiences, something from our own experiences overseas tells us is highly valued, which cannot be got from the commoditised Great Walks.
- By being involved with the design and development of a hut and track, we can ensure that our members, and other local outdoors enthusiasts can benefit from the very rare opportunity of building a hut from scratch, and that we can help ensure that the result is satisfying for our members, locals and visitors to the region, and to ensure that we don't get displaced, as we have with other areas in Fiordland, by tourism developments.

Members of the Southland Section have considerable experience and success in understanding hut design, construction and maintenance of tramping and alpine huts: we designed and built Homer Hut, Moraine Creek Hut and Esquilant Bivvy, and members independently have lead renovations of Avoca Hut in Canterbury and Bull Paddock Creek Hut in Nelson Lakes. Members have intimate and deep knowledge of Fiordland and the Southland mountains.

2. Proposed Countess Range Hut location

Tramping huts are often regarded as destinations in their own right. In this proposal, the location of the hut is integral with the proposal—identifying the hut location determines the track, not the other way around, though the ability to construct a suitable track is a precondition.

We identified three candidate sites for the proposed Countess Range hut site on the western flanks of the Countess Range, just above the bushline, accessed by a tramping loop track from the Milford Road starting from a new carpark near Walker Flat, taking 3–5 hours each way. This would provide a

tramping experience unique in Southland and Fiordland with spectacular 270° panoramic views from the hut.

Further analysis is required to choose the best site for the hut for views and climatic exposure, and geotechnical surveys need to be undertaken to confirm the choice of site. (see Figure 3).

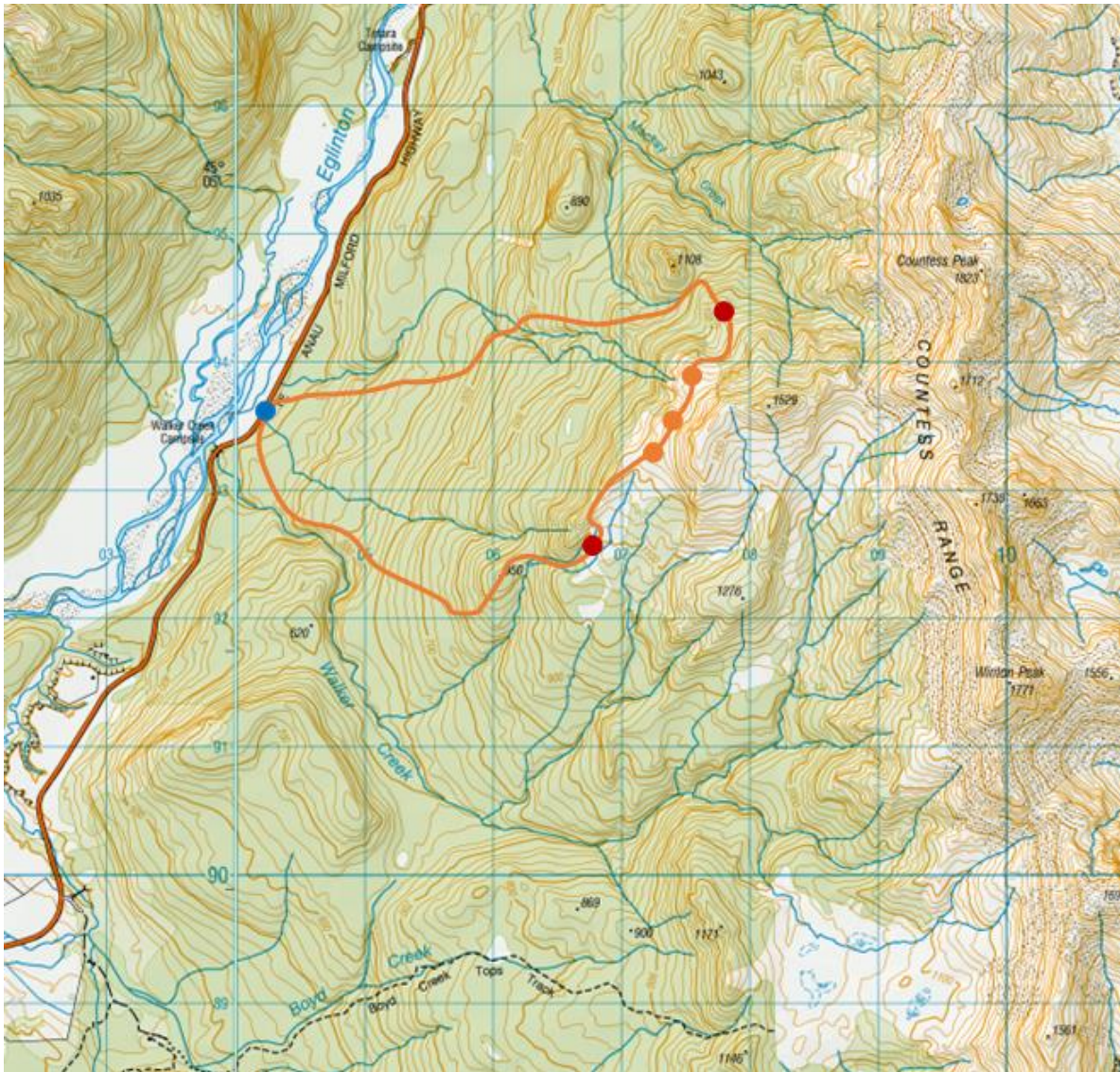


Figure 3. Proposed track (orange), three candidate hut sites (orange), day shelters (red) and carpark (blue) for consideration. The proximity of the candidate hut sites to Countess Peak, Winton Peaks and Boyd tops is shown.

It is not hyperbole to claim that the views from any of the three candidate hut sites are not only stunning, but are perhaps the best mountainside vistas to be had in New Zealand.



Figure 4. Panorama from middle candidate hut site. The upper Eglington Valley is to the right, with Mt Eglington visible. Lakes Te Anau and Manapouri are to the centre and mid-left. The Takitimu Mountains are visible in the distance towards the left.



Figure 5. Panorama from east to south-west from the northernmost candidate hut site. Countess Peak is to the left and Lake Te Anau to the west.



Figure 6 & 7: Traversing through sub alpine scrub at the northern end of the proposed track.

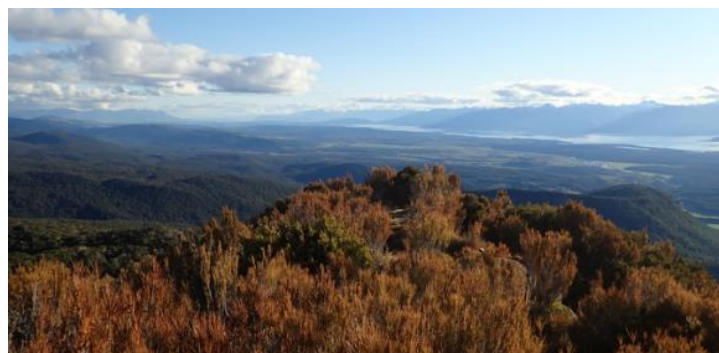


Figure 8: Senic views across the Te Anau basin (including Mt Luxmore) at bushline on the southern loop



3. Opportunities enabled by this proposal

a. Target market

Southland Section of New Zealand Alpine Club believes that there are several potential market segments for the hut:

1. Te Anau locals who wish to escape winter fog, or want to 'stretch their legs', for one day trips
2. Southland trampers who want a weekend tramping destination
3. Southland trampers who want a Friday night head-start for a hard tramping trip into the hinterland to the east of the Countess Range
4. Southland mountaineers, especially in winter, looking for Grade 1 and Grade 2 climbs
5. Southern South Island trampers who want a weekend tramping trip
6. Overseas visitors wanting a day trip for a picnic and scenery
7. Overseas visitors who want a moderately challenging overnight tramping trip, returning to their starting point.

Anecdotally, $\frac{3}{4}$ of visitors to Mt Brown Hut, offering a similar experience to the proposed Countess Range Hut, are from overseas. The overseas visitor likely to visit the proposed Countess Range Hut would be seeking a short tramp with relatively little preparation, as opposed to those looking for longer trips in the Greenstone and Caples Valleys.

It is unlikely that there would be much (though some interest could be expected) desire for people to want to complete a Great Walk as well as visit the Countess Range as the experience required for the latter would not immediately attract Great Walk walkers.

While overseas and local visitors would be competing to use the hut in summer, during winter the hut would mostly be used by locals and those as far away as Dunedin.

b. Tramping

The proposed loop track would provide a straightforward, rewarding and interesting tramp through native bush and crossing a few small streams before a short climb up through sub-alpine scrub before reaching open tussock slopes and the proposed hut shortly after.

We assess the climb up to the hut from the carpark to take between three and five hours for most parties wearing packs. The descent time would be slightly less.

The lower bush is open red beech forest and then mountain beech.

The scenery from the scrubline onwards is panoramic, with wide vistas in most directions, making the tramping very appealing.

c. Picnicking and day trips

In Europe, it is not uncommon for casual picnickers to climb upwards of 1500 metres to a hut to enjoy the view and amenities a hut offers. Picnickers already make use of Lake Howden and the first huts on the Kepler and Milford Tracks in such a manner. The same interest could be expected for the Countess Range.



Without carrying heavy packs, parties could expect to get to the hut in under three hours, making for a good picnic trip. The Te Anua basin experiences long periods of fog in winter and locals especially appreciate day trips that get them out of the fog, explaining in part the popularity of the Boyd Creek track.

It is not expected that the presence of picnickers would detract from the overnight tramping experience.

d. Mountaineering experiences

Southland mountaineers seeking introductory climbs are largely limited to the Takitimu Mountains, or Double Cone: the only other peaks are in Darran Mountains, which are among the most highly regarded mountains in New Zealand, but they are difficult and unforgiving; and the Takitimu Mountains which have long foot access and make for snow-plods and shingle scrambles than interesting mountaineering. The Countess Range promises a variety of Grade 1 and possibly Grade 2 climbs that would fill this gap, especially in winter. The hitherto lack of good access has dissuaded climbing in the Countess Range.



Figure 9. View from just below the summit of Winton Peak in the foreground. The Boyd Creek string-bog can be seen to the left. Countess Peak is beyond Winton Peak (Photo: Robin McNeill).

The rock in the area comprises tuff, a type of sedimentary rock that forms from the consolidation of volcanic ash and other volcanic debris. It's loose nature does not make for good rock climbing, but it is suitable for rock scrambling and scree running.

e. Access to additional tramping experiences

The proposed Countess Range Hut opens potential to access tramping areas that otherwise require long access routes. Medium fit trampers could utilise the track to get to the hut on a Friday night after work, potentially in the dark, well positioned for a fast getaway on the Saturday morning to the infrequently visited valleys to the east.

We would not want to encourage tramping on the broad flats at the head of the Boyd Creek Track, to the south-west of Winton Peak, as they comprise important, delicate string bogs that could not withstand much traffic without being seriously degraded. A formed track around the west and south edges of this flat would prevent people walking on the flats, which are at any rate make for somewhat unpleasant tramping, and access to the Upukuroa Valley via an 1100 meter saddle more or less opposite the Acheron Lakes.



The Upper Upukuroa Valley is seldom visited by trampers as the access from the main valley is through long stretches of private land, including Takaro Lodge. This is a long way and access is not guaranteed. Instead, we propose that a marked route be established from the hut, crossing the Countess Range and through to the Upukuroa River. A 1580 metre col with scree approaches to the south of Countess Peak looks the most promising route that stays well clear of the delicate string bogs at the head of the Boyd Creek track and leads efficiently down to the Annear Creek Saddle and on to the East Eglington.

The upper reaches of the Upukuroa River makes for very pleasant tramping through river flats and reasonably dry beech forest with, on average, much better weather than that experienced to the west. The valley can be followed to north and over to the East Eglington River, making for a satisfying weekend trip back to the Milford Road. There are several routes continuing up the East Eglington River through to Key Summit, offering different grades of difficulty for those with more time. It is not proposed that a track be formed for any of these routes, other than to maintain the upkeep of the East Eglington River track.

A marked route down from the 1100 metre saddle to opposite Acheron Lakes could be continued up to the lakes themselves and a poled route over to the head of North Mavora Lake and the Te Araroa Trail. Whether the route should be upgraded to a track is something that could be considered at a later date.

4. Considerations

MOP envisages the overnight experience as a starting point the level of service will be 'Backcountry Comfort Seekers' Easy Tramping Track and the hut will be a Serviced Hut [RFx ID: 27598029 Notice to Tenderers # 3 of 12 July 2023, Subject: Milford Opportunities Project - Transport & Infrastructure Stream – Walking & Cycling Experiences Feasibility, Item 3].

Southland tramping clubs contacted during the preparation of this proposal were unanimous that the hut shouldn't be too large and the track should be a tramping track and not a Great Walk. They were particularly concerned that they should be able to use the hut and not find themselves unable to use it due to oversubscription.

a. Safety

The travel at all times is benign and safe. Because most of the route would be in the bush, risks to inexperienced trampers from underestimating bad weather and conditions would be minimised, with ample opportunity to turn around and safely retreat if prudent. There are no bluffs or exposed traverses to fall off, or river crossings. The avalanche risk is assessed as low to very low. The weather is better on the eastern side of the Eglington Valley than on the west, being in the rain shadow of the Eglington Range, and would be much better than experienced on any of the Great Walks in the region.

b. Size and nature of hut

We anticipate that the hut will be a popular destination and that in summer, demand would always outstrip supply of bunks. Local opinion is very much that the Great Walks huts are impersonal and are very cold in winter, and this is solely because of their large scale. This suggests a hut size of in the vicinity of 20 bunks. The bunks could be individual bunks or a sleeping platform.



It is not clear that it would be necessary to have a hut warden. There are few objective dangers in the route and, if there is one, the warden's job would be to keep the hut clean and tidy, attend to track work and collect hut fees. The latter could be automated because of Internet availability and the very likely need for a computerised booking system.

c. Statutory land management

Most of the proposed track is in Fiordland National Park. The remaining track and the hut site are all in the Mavora Park Conservation Area. There are stringent requirements to be met to obtain a permit to establish a hut in a national park, which are avoided in this proposal. Appendix 6 discusses this in detail.

d. Track design considerations

A loop track is proposed to (1) minimise interactions with other parties and so keep feelings of crowding to a minimum, which would otherwise be problematic and (2) to make for a much more interesting experience. The proposed uphill track route from the north is steady and the scenery opens up to best advantage as height is gained. This would not be so apparent on descending this track. The downhill route to the south has its own interests for most of the way, which would not be so enjoyable if it were the uphill track. The gentler gradient of the southern track would be easier on trampers' knees to descend than the northern track, which increases its attractiveness.

We propose that the track should be built as a "Tramping Track" as set out in s2.7 in HB 8630:2004 New Zealand Handbook *Tracks and Outdoor Visitor Structures* (Standards New Zealand, 2004). This has the merits of:

- Providing an "authentic" Kiwi tramping experience
- A track that is in harmony with the landscape rather than a bulldozed, hardened track that forces its way through the landscape
- Providing a walking experience that is interesting in its own right
- Slowing party speed, so that the environment is better appreciated
- Being kind to feet, noting that hardened Great Walks tracks are very tiring due to the monotony of travel
- Dissuading ill-prepared or too inexperienced parties from attempting an excursion into the alpine zone and exposing them to risks that they may not be prepared for
- Being affordable to build
- Being affordable to maintain

Against this are that a "Tramping Track" will:

- Need occasional re-routing to avoid new windthrow
- Be muddy in places

Anecdotally, it would seem that while overseas trampers do not much like muddy tracks, they will persevere with them. Tourists are also usually eager to find "authentic" experiences, and those wanting sanitised walks will properly choose a Great Walk instead. The routes we have identified have endeavoured to minimise flat ground which could easily become boggy, but there will be need for gravelling and perhaps short sections of boardwalk in places.



e. Track construction

It would be inappropriate for the track to be built with a digger as the intention is for a tramping track rather than another Great Walk. Hardened, formed tracks such as are found on the Great Walks detract considerably from the experience, and the monotonous grade and surface of those tracks are very wearing and hard on feet. A hand-built track can take an easier route that fits the locality rather than forcing the track on the environment. There will need to be hardening of the track in some areas, but the proposed routes are substantially dry and unlikely to get as muddy as Fiordland tracks.

Three small bridges and one medium sized bridges are required on the norther-track to the hut and there are three small streams to cross on the southern loop. Because the watersheds are small, there are no rivers and the moss in the streams indicates that floods are rare. An all-weather route like the emergency route north of Mackinnon pass on the Milford has also been identified which could allow two these bridges to be removed or removed during winter.

The height gain and loss of the track is 960 metres. The nature of the track means that there is almost no up and down.

The gradient of the northern loop is on average 11°, steepening on the final ridge climb to 15° on average. The average gradient on the southern loop is 12°, a little steeper at the top. The track could be zig-zagged to reduce the gradient, but this is unnecessary and would detract from the experience. Nowhere would handrails be needed.

f. Water

The only stream with copious running water near the proposed track is on the northern loop, running down from the saddle. The hut would need to have rainwater collection system.

g. Toilets

A fly-out sewerage system would be required. Septic tanks and long-drops have not been successful above the bushline in New Zealand.

h. Telecommunications

Much of the track route and all the candidate hut sites enjoy good 4G cellular coverage from the Milford Highway.

i. Carparking

There is already a carpark at Walker Creek. This could be used, but it is proposed that a safer carpark could be relatively easily established on the eastern side of the Milford Road at the proposed track entrance. There is enough room to match the hut occupancy should the MOP park and ride scheme not progress, and for local users, which we would not see as wishing to use a park and ride system. This carpark would also be useful as a staging area during the track and hut construction.

j. Aircraft

Helicopters would be necessary to establish the hut and track, taking perhaps a year in the process. As the area is seldom visited now other than by DOC biodiversity rangers, this would not be a serious problem.



Once the hut was established, use of helicopters should be kept to the bare minimum necessary to deal with the fly-out sewage. The climb to the hut should not act as any sort of deterrent to personnel undertaking hut maintenance. Resupplying the hut, or bringing in maintenance materials should be coordinated with the sewage fly-outs as backflights to minimise the carbon footprint and keep noise pollution to an absolute minimum.

Helicopter flights for visitors would not be condoned or welcomed. If nothing else, the helicopter noise would drown out the birdsong that is likely to become an attraction in its own right. At worst, helicopters detract from wilderness experience that this track offers.

k. Day use shelters

It is often desirable to have a break, eat food and change layers when transitioning between the forest and the sub alpine zone, to make this more pleasant and safe it is proposed small shelters should be considered at the bush line of the track. The northern end of the proposed track passes through a prolonged scenic alpine scrub zone which would make an inviting picnic area. Other examples of shelters are Forest Burn Shelter, Hanging Valley Shelter, Lake Howden Shelter and Harris Saddle Shelter. The recently constructed Lake Howden shelter has a bench with scenic views across the lake and a water tank.

5. Biodiversity implications

This part of the Eglington Valley is heavily monitored and trapped by DOC. There are many DOC trapping lines below 800 metres through all of the bush.

As a result, the birdlife is prolific for Fiordland. This provides a wonderful opportunity for DOC to showcase its biodiversity recovery work, as well as very much enhancing trampers' enjoyment. Kaka, bellbirds, robin's, tits, parakeets, moreporks have been observed and the dawn chorus is vocal. DOC will be able to provide more information.

There is a possibility that bats are roosting in the vicinity. Specialist advice is needed for trampers to safely (for the bats) observe them and protect their habitat.

It may be possible to get trampers to be actively involved with trapping.

The Boyd Creek alpine string bog is scientifically important and delicate. Considerable care would need to be taken to ensure that trampers stay well clear of the bogs and that any tracks around the bogs to protect them do not impair their wellbeing. This is not likely to be difficult, but its importance cannot be overstated. It is understood that the bogs' sensitivity was one reason that a hut at the head of Boyd Creek was not promoted as an option for MOP.

6. Geology

We are not qualified to comment on the geology of the area. However, we understand that the Countess Range is geologically important, especially with respect to the Alpine Fault and wider Southland formations.



7. Alternatives

There are few locations off the Milford Road where a new hut could be established and none on the bushline that can be ascertained.

It would be possible to establish a hut at the head of the Boyd Creek track, but this would jeopardise the delicate string bogs and the scenery is not as good. Further, the track would have to deal with sections of boggy ground that would require considerable effort to mitigate. The Boyd Creek track is assessed by DOC as being a “difficult tramping track”, though this would seem to rather overstate its nature. Certainly, the Boyd Creek Track would be inferior for overnight and one-day tramping experiences to the proposed track.

8. Social licence

This proposal has been outlined in general terms with the Southland Tramping Club who is in agreement in principle and the Federated Mountain Clubs Administration Committee, who felt that it was a significant improvement on MOP’s original intention to build a hut in Mistake Creek.

This proposal in general terms was outlined at the MOP “Track and Hut Engagement Session” on 2 March 2023 at the Milford Opportunities Hub, Te Anau with attendees representing: Trips and Tramps, Fiordland Tramping and Outdoor Recreation Club (FTORC), Fiordland Trails Trust (FTT), Bike Fiordland, New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) - Southland Section, New Zealand Deer Assn, Southland (NZDA), Milford Sound Lodge, Fiordland Outdoors, and Department of Conservation (DOC). The proposal was largely supportive in principle, except for DOC who did not want to be burdened with ownership of a new hut and tracks.

9. Ownership

Six models for owning and operating the proposed hut and tracks have been identified. They are:

- a) Department of Conservation
- b) Milford Opportunities
- c) Commercial operator
- d) New, standalone trust
- e) An existing trust
- f) New Zealand Alpine Club

The merits of each are now discussed in turn.

a. Department of Conservation

DOC has made it clear at local MOP meetings that they do not wish to own a new hut or track, as to do so would impact on their budget through increased capital charge and increased depreciation charges, and they do not have the staff resources to manage the hut.

b. Milford Opportunities

It is unlikely that MOP or its successor would have either the social licence or background to manage a hut and track.



c. Commercial operator

Having a commercial operator own and manage the hut and track would lose all social licence with local trampers and recreationalists., and so is not favoured. Commercial operators would probably find difficulty in finding it economic to construct and manage a hut and track themselves. It seems unlikely that government would fund a hut and track for private enterprise to commercialise.

d. New, single-purpose trust

A single purpose trust would likely work best during the hut and track construction stages. Historically, single-purpose volunteer trusts do not work so well in operational phase: volunteers like projects and they mostly do not operations. Retaining volunteers whose roles would be more focused on getting the toilets cleaned and sewage removed would be difficult. Setting up a new trust will require time and effort and may not result in the best outcome.

e. An existing trust

An existing trust that operates over a wide, but related ambit can work very well. A good example is the Backcountry Trust, who has a budget in the order of \$500,000 per year maintaining huts and tracks using, mainly, volunteer effort. Very preliminary discussions with the Backcountry Trust indicate that in principle they would look favourably at owning and operating the proposed hut and track. To do so would cement social licence with the Southland outdoors community, and would provide a channel for volunteers to become involved in the upkeep. Backcountry Trust currently own two huts on this basis, that have been gifted to them because of the difficulty in otherwise managing the huts.

f. New Zealand Alpine Club

New Zealand Alpine Club owns and operates 18 huts and base huts, including Homer Hut off the Milford Road. The Southland Section of New Zealand Alpine Club built and maintains Homer Hut and built Esquilant Bivvy in Mt Aspiring National Park. The huts in the Matukituki Valley and Forbes Range are managed under a joint management agreement with DOC. The club has experience in owning and operating huts and in principle Southland Section would be interested in owning and operating the proposed hut and track. New Zealand Alpine Club huts in national parks are required to be open to the public and social licence is likely.

Recognising the need for social licence, which demands public or not-for-profit ownership, it would seem that either Backcountry Trust or New Zealand Alpine Club would be best positioned to own and operate the huts. This is something that requires further investigation.

10. Cost

We see that MOP would provide the capital cost to establish the hut. On-going costs to maintain the hut and track, and to operate the fly-out sewerage would need to come from MOP revenue at Milford Sound.



11. Next steps

The next steps involved with seeing this proposal develop into something more concrete are:

1. MOP refine this proposal, especially in regard to:
 - a. Identifying the best hut site
 - b. Preparing an estimate of costs
 - c. Confirming the ownership model
2. Socialise the refined proposal amongst Te Anau Basin recreationalists and Southland recreationalists, and seek feedback to improve the proposal
3. Prepare a detailed scope of works and fully costed budget.



Appendix 1. Tramping track standard

It is proposed to establish the track to meet the standards of a “Tramping Track” as set out in s2.7 in SNZ HB 8630:2004 New Zealand Handbook *Tracks and Outdoor Visitor Structures* (Standards New Zealand, 2004)². The recommendations in the handbook are paraphrased below.

‘Tramping Tracks’ cater for Backcountry Adventurers, including trampers, hunters, anglers and mountaineers. A few may be suitable for mountain-bikers and are commonly not formed. They are marked and may traverse a wide range of terrain and cater for backcountry visitors with generally moderate to high backcountry skills and experience. Trips on these tracks vary in length from half-day to multi-day. The footwear recommended for these tracks is tramping boots.

There is no minimum track width and where surface material such as gravel is used, the maximum surface width shall be 300mm. Vegetation shall be cleared to ensure there is a clear passage and a clear view of the track markers, poles or cairns. Cut woody vegetation shall be cleared from the track surface.

Benching is limited to where:

- (a) Environmental or visitor impacts need to be mitigated
- (b) No practicable alternative option for redesigning or rerouting the track exists
- (c) There is high enough use to warrant benching.

There is no maximum grade and steps should not be used except where their use will prevent erosion or significant visitor impacts.

The track surface shall generally be the natural surface and may include mud, water, roots and embedded rocks. Major obstacles such as windfalls are to be removed or the track diverted around them. Generally minor obstacles such as rocks, tree roots and earth are not to be removed.

Boardwalks are not generally provided except where they are necessary to mitigate significant environmental effects.

Watercourses shall be bridged where they cannot be safely crossed without the help of others during times of normal water flow. Bridges may be 3-wire crossings. Watercourses shall also be bridged where:

- (a) No reasonable alternative wet weather track exists
- (b) They cannot be safely crossed unassisted when in flood
- (c) Floods occur with a frequency that means the watercourse is a barrier to progress or becomes a significant hazard to over 25% other predominant user group
- (d) There is no shelter within 2 hours walking distance where visitors can wait until the stream conditions improve.

Guardrails, barriers, chains or hand-wires may be used at locations where a significant hazard to visitors exists, but only where no other reasonable options such as re-routing the track exists.

² Sourced from <https://www.backcountrytrust.org.nz/uploads/1/1/8/6/118692908/snz-tracks-and-outdoor-visitor-structures-handbook.pdf> on 15/7/2023.



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Shelters may be provided where:

- (a) The total walking time of the start of the track to a hut exceeds four to five hours
- (b) There are significant numbers of relatively inexperienced visitors
- (c) There is exposure to adverse weather conditions on the most distant parts of the track.

Where shelters are provided, toilets should also be provided at those locations that are or may become popular stops, provided the visitor numbers warrant it.



Appendix 2. Hut size and character

a. Hut character case study

Backcountry huts are much more than shelter—they are places where new friends are made, food is shared and often they are a destination in their own right. This is very difficult to achieve at large scale, which is why large New Zealand hut designs seldom get the atmosphere right to encourage social discourse.

We posit that many useful lessons can be learnt from architect Jacques Faure’s talk, *Refuges: Joyful Frugality and Simplicity to Generate Social Interaction*³, at the 4th Sustainable Summits Conference in Chamonix, 2018. Faure’s talk discusses how his initial design for a replacement for the French Alpine Club’s Aigle Refuge caused 10 years of acrimonious controversy until the Petzl Foundation provided funding for a new architectural study, which resulted in a solution receiving broad consensus.

Faure provides insight as to what is necessary to successfully design a hut that works on a social scale as he addresses how to combine tourist influx and preservation of heritage in the creation of a new high mountain ‘refuge’ (hut) in Ecrins National Park, France. We strongly recommend his talk to those considering hut character and size for the Countess Range, and his research into social implications and drivers was considerable. In essence, Faure argues that, “... refuges are unique locations that facilitate mountain exploration. They are an expression of joyful frugality, generating social interaction through simplicity”. Our own experience confirms Faure’s view.

The renovation of Aigle Refuge increased its capacity from 18 beds to 30, and created a larger living space for the refuge keeper. Faure’s research indicated that between 20 and 30 beds was the natural limit of a hut that had “character” as opposed to feeling [like a barn] (JJ Faure, pers. comms, June 2018).

³ See <https://sustainablesummits.org/jacques-felix-faure-refuges-joyful-frugality-and-simplicity-to-generate-social-interaction/> and the talk itself at <https://youtu.be/5dlNhq5vBZQ> at 37:23 minutes.

See also the documentary, *La nouvelle cabane de l'Aigle* (52 minutes), at <https://www.capuseen.com/films/3769-la-nouvelle-cabane-de-l-aigle>.

Appendix 3. Similar visitor experiences

Criteria for highly sought-after overnight tramps would appear to be:

- Spectacular views from just above the bushline
- A sense of achievement on reaching the destination (the hut)
- All-weather access (no major unbridged river crossings, and no long exposure to the weather above the bushline)
- Good road access to the track start and good parking
- Accessible to moderately fit, less experienced trampers
- An “authentic” experience, without overcrowding
- An ascent of around 1000m
- No hut warden.

Highly successful huts that meet most of these criteria are discussed below.

b. Mt Brown Hut

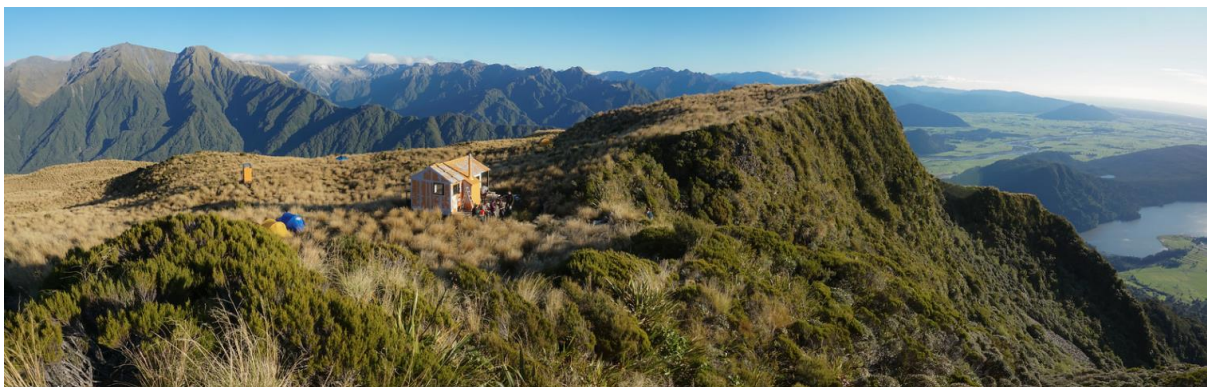


Figure 10. Panorama showing Mt Brown Hut (Photo: Hugh van Noorden).

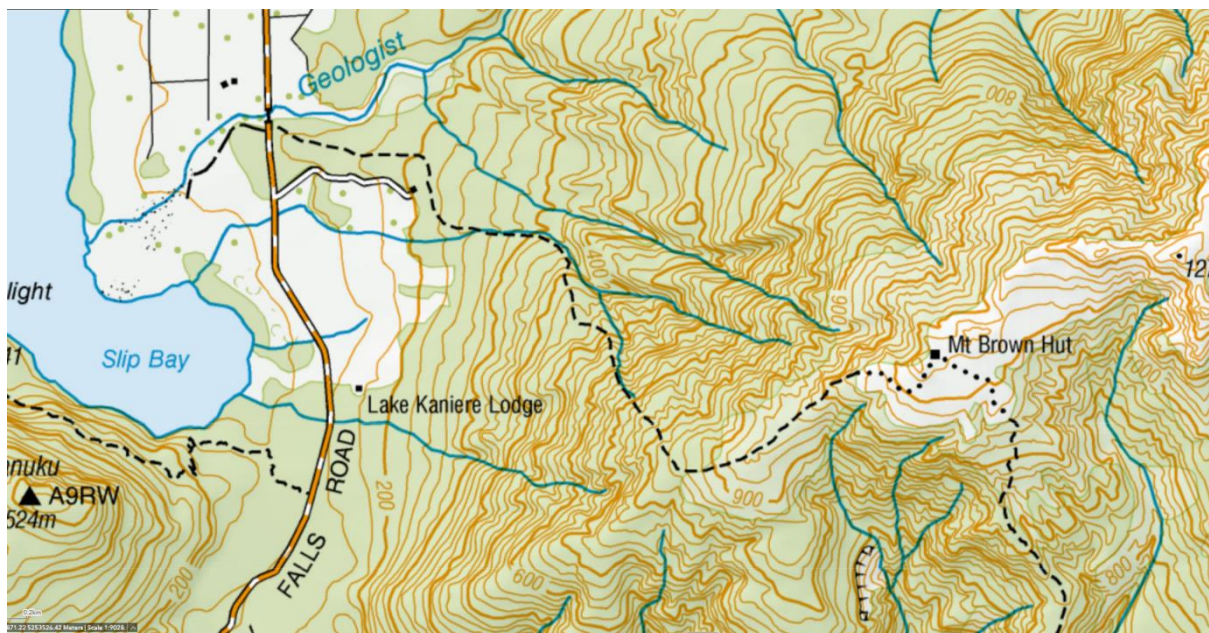
- Four-bunk hut in a beautiful basin, sheltered by a ridge, just above the bushline. The vegetation within 150 metres of the hut in all directions shows sign of visitors.
- It usually takes between 3 and 6 hours to get to the hut from the carpark and there is a 920 metre height gain.
- There are no hut fees, but koha is appreciated. Donations are collected by the Permolat group. The income exceeds the cost of maintaining the hut, though the income reduced after coal was no longer supplied. Most income is from New Zealand users because, it is suspected, the difficulty of overseas visitors making a payment.
- The volunteers that worked on this hut wanted to encourage first time trampers and families to use this hut.
- This hut was relocated from Lower Arahura Hut site, much of it had to be replaced and strengthened due to high winds that can be experienced on Mt Brown, this was carried out by many hours of volunteer work from the Mt Brown Community Project Team. The hut was nominally built by the Kokatahi Tramping Club.



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- The track is managed by volunteers and is signposted just south of Geologist Creek on the east side of Lake Kaniere on the Dorothy Falls Road.
- Relocated four-bunk hut from Aharurah Valley by volunteers. Considerable support from local businesses and suppliers assisted.
- Established initially for local family use, but soon became heavily used by overseas visitors. It is estimated that 80% of users are from overseas. Anecdotally, the hut has full occupancy all year on average.
- Is operated by volunteers, but is not officially owned by anyone
- The track is muddy in places and is well-worn through Westland bush, where anywhere flat ponds and becomes a mudhole.
- The track from Geologist Creek was purpose-built to access the hut
- Visitors do complain about the mud, but that doesn't stop people using the track
- There are no hut fees and advertised as such, pointing out that it is not a DOC hut.
- The hut is not advertised, deliberately.
- There is no carpark as the proposed site flooded.

<https://www.remotehuts.co.nz/mt-brown-hut.html>

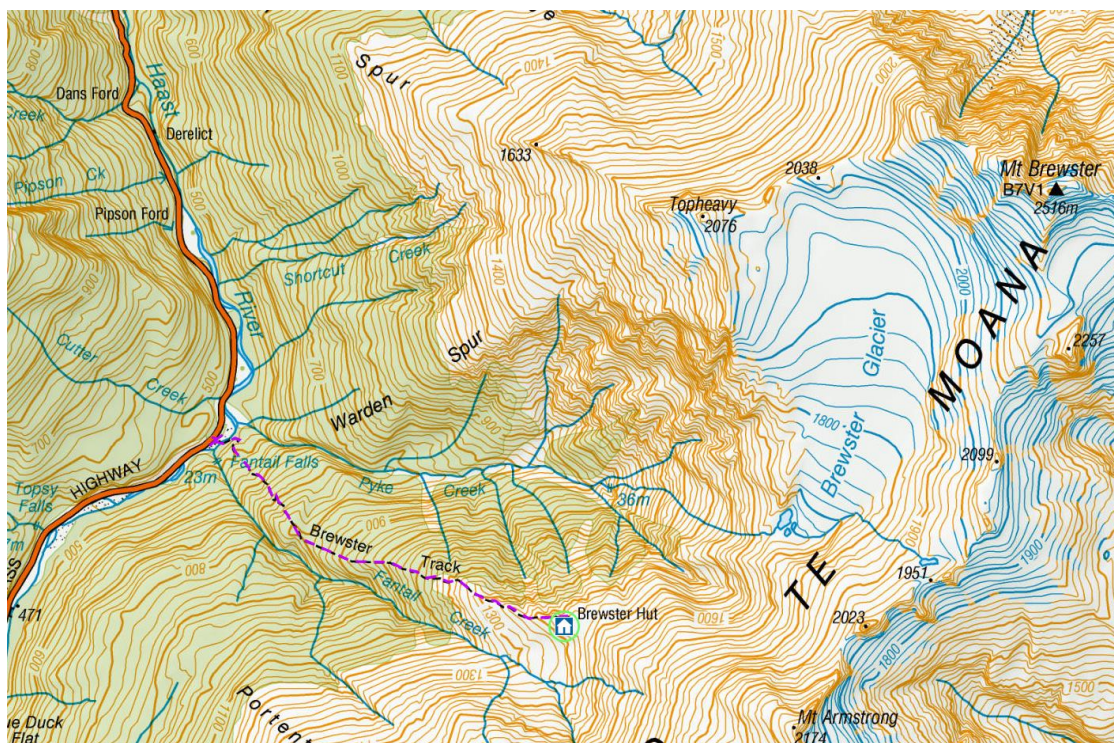


c. Brewster Hut



Figure 11. Mt Brewster Hut and environs (Photo: The Wanaka Official Webpage).

- There is a 940 metre ascent to the hut from the carpark, which takes most people 3 to 4 hours.
- Heavily used 12-bunk hut
- Bookings are required Labour Weekend – 30 April.
- The river at the carpark is problematic as it is unbridged and impossible to safely cross when in flood or running a fresh.

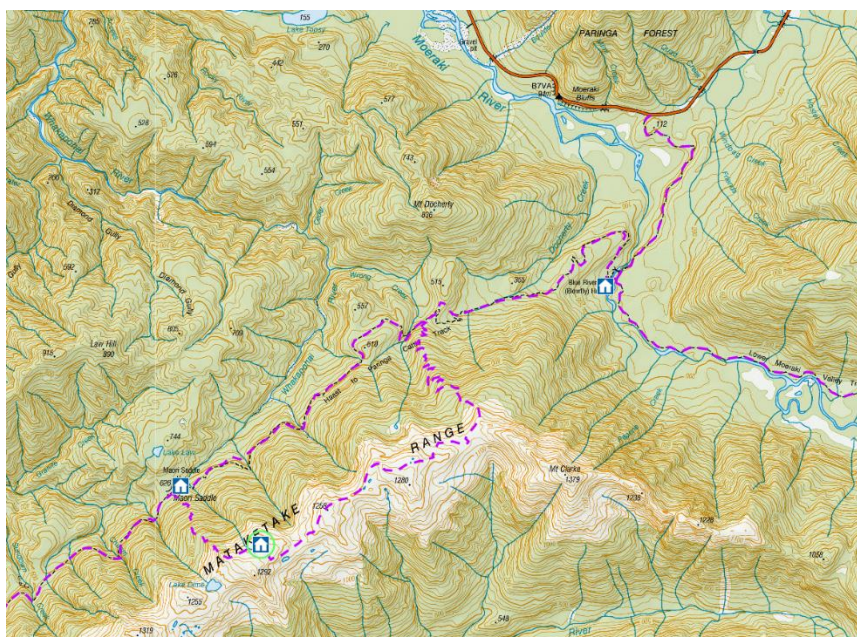


d. Mataketake Hut



Figure 12. Helicopter view of Mataketake Hut, showing the vista. (Photo: Backcountry Trust).

- Mataketake Hut is an 8-bunk hut located on Mataketake Tops Route. On a weekend trip to the hut visitors can experience the backcountry from the mountains to the sea.
- There is a 1,110 meter ascent, which DOC claims takes 9 hours from the road.
- The hut was funded largely by a legacy from the late Dr Andy Dennis and the Backcountry Trust
- The hut is owned by the Backcountry Trust
- Accessed from the Haast Highway, south of Lake Moeraki. In winter, snow may affect access to, and along, the tops to the hut. The hut is located in a popular Haast Roar hunting area, so may be particularly busy throughout the Roar period, mid-March to mid-April.
- Hut fees are \$25 per night/ \$12.50 per night for people 11 – 17 years old. Bookings are required all year.





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e. Other bushline huts

Other bushline huts which serve a similar purpose that are a single day return walk, and/or an accessible overnight tramp from the road end:

- Carol Hut, Arthurs Pass National Park
- Bealy Spur Hut, Arthurs Pass National Park
- Liverpool Hut, Mt Aspiring National Park
- Mueller Hut, Mt Cook National Park
- Luxmore Hut, Fiordland National Park
- Powell Hut, Tararua Conservation Park
- Mt Fyfe, Ka Whata Tu o Rakihouia Clarence Conservation Park
- Mt Robert, Nelson Lakes National Park



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Appendix 4. The Backcountry Trust

The Backcountry Trust funds and supports volunteers to maintain huts and build tracks for outdoor enthusiasts including trampers, deerstalkers and mountain bikers.

The Trust was established in 2017. Prior to that the Outdoor Recreation Consortium - a partnership between the NZ Deerstalkers Association, Trail Fund NZ and Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand - operated successfully from 2014-17. The three organisations set up and provide ongoing support to the independent Backcountry Trust. Two trustees from each of the three organisations comprise the Board.

The Trust is in partnership with, and primarily funded by, the Department of Conservation (DOC). With the support of DOC through the Community Conservation Partnerships Fund and the huge effort of hundreds of volunteers around the country, the Backcountry Trust and Outdoor Recreation Consortium have so far funded the restoration of 80 huts and 700 km of walking and mountain bike tracks.

The Backcountry Trust aims to provide a secure funding source that will allow volunteers to continue this work into the future.

<https://www.backcountrytrust.org.nz/>

Appendix 5. Alternative track routes

The authors have explored potential alternative track routes for the countess range location.

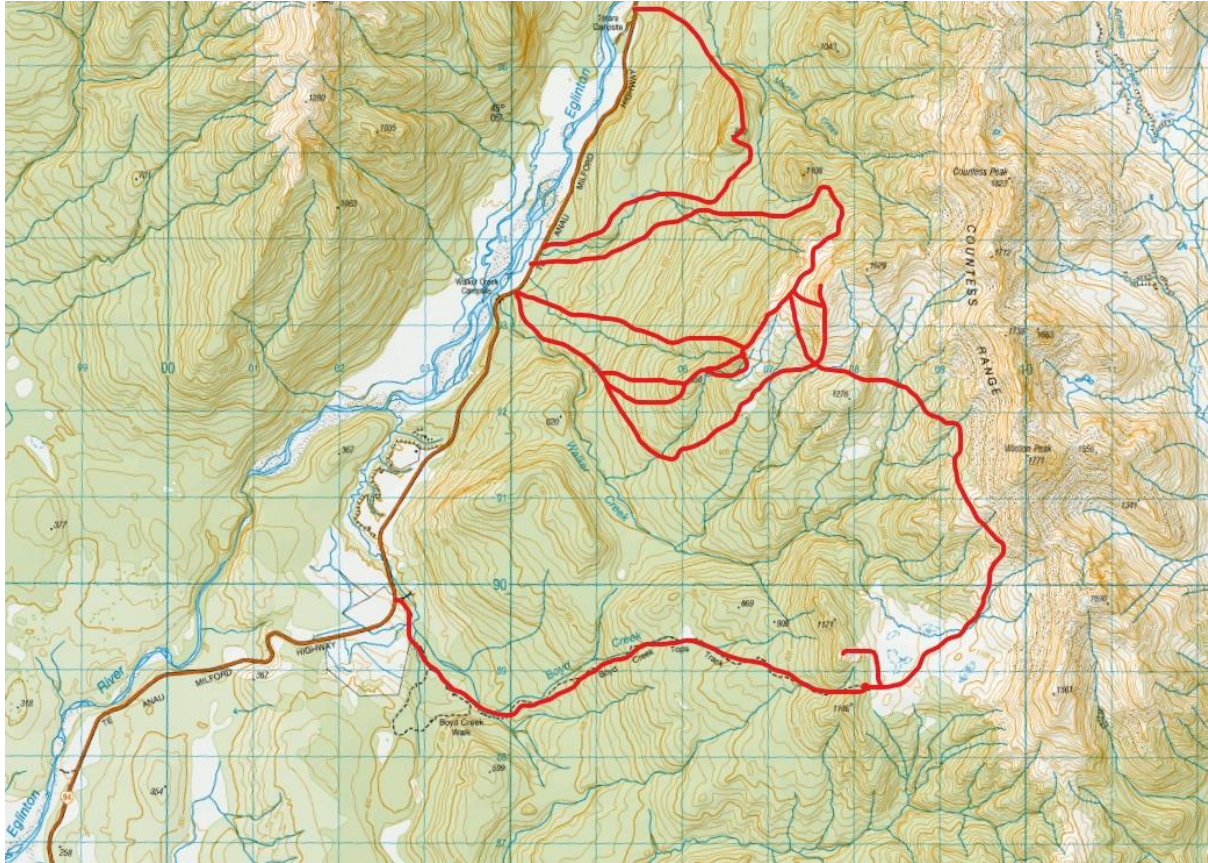


Figure 13. Track routes explored for suitability.

Appendix 6. Relevant DOC statutory planning documents

The proposed hut lies in the Mavora Park Conservation Area, and much of the proposed tracks (and all of the tracks below bushline) are in Fiordland National Park. The proposed tracks and hut system are thus subject to two statutory planning documents: the *Southland Murihiku Conservation Management Strategy* (2016), which establishes the allowable scope of operations for the land in the Mavora Park Conservation Area, being within the “Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place” and provides a policy framework for the *Fiordland National Park Management Plan* (2007), which establishes the scope of operations for the proposed tracks below the bushline. The relationship of these statutory plans are shown below.

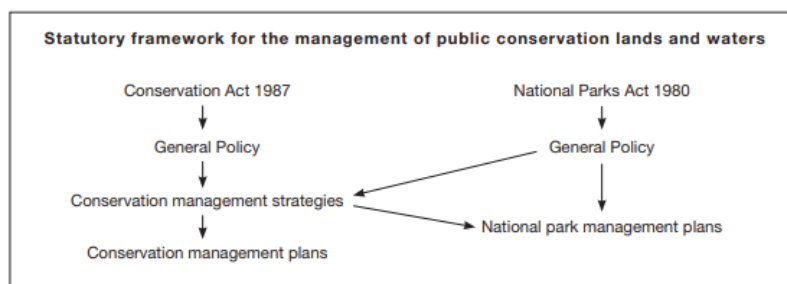


Figure 14. DOC Statutory management documents.

A requirement articulated in the *National Parks Act 1987* is that no commercial activity should take place in a national park when it can be undertaken outside of a national park.

a. Fiordland National Park Management Plan

The pertinent management objectives and implementations for the area in which the activities are proposed to take place are in section **5.3.9.2 Milford Road**.

Objectives

1. The Fiordland National Park that adjoins the Milford Road will be managed to provide for and protect the following attributes:

- a) The spectacular views of forested catchments, open grasslands, lake systems and outstanding mountainscapes;
- b) Its significant indigenous flora and fauna;
- c) A place which is a destination in its own right;
- d) The Eglinton Valley’s open and uninterrupted views of the surrounding mountains and valleys and its overall sense of naturalness;
- e) The steep, winding and narrow character that forms large parts of the adjoining road;
- f) The easily accessible and safe visitor opportunities at designated sites;
- g) The valuable access for many who are accessing remote parts of Fiordland National Park;



2. To provide for the integrated management of the Milford Road and Fiordland National Park adjacent to the road in a way that ensures visitor safety, protection of park values and a high-quality visitor experience.
3. To provide sufficient opportunities for a wide variety of recreational activities compatible with national park purposes.
4. To consider opportunities for facility development which will enhance public enjoyment of Fiordland National Park, and appreciation of the natural values without impairing or diminishing its natural values.
5. To promote future growth in visitor use of the Milford Road outside of existing daily peaks

Implementation

13. Activities associated with commercial recreation or tourism proposals, including new facilities, should only be authorised where:
- a) They are consistent with the attributes identified in Objective 1 of this section;
 - b) They can be sited to minimise adverse effects on the natural and landscape values;
 - c) The design is sympathetic to the national park setting;
 - d) The visitor experience is not compromised through overcrowding and where other adverse effects can be managed.
 - e) New proposals for travellers' accommodation should be considered in accordance with Chapter 9 of the General Policy for National Parks 2005; however, in general it is considered that there is adequate travellers' accommodation provided within Fiordland National Park or at nearby locations; and
 - f) Preference should be given to any facility development that utilises previously modified sites and provides new opportunities for Fiordland National Park visitors, but is still in keeping with the national park setting.

b. Southland Murihiku Conservation Management Strategy

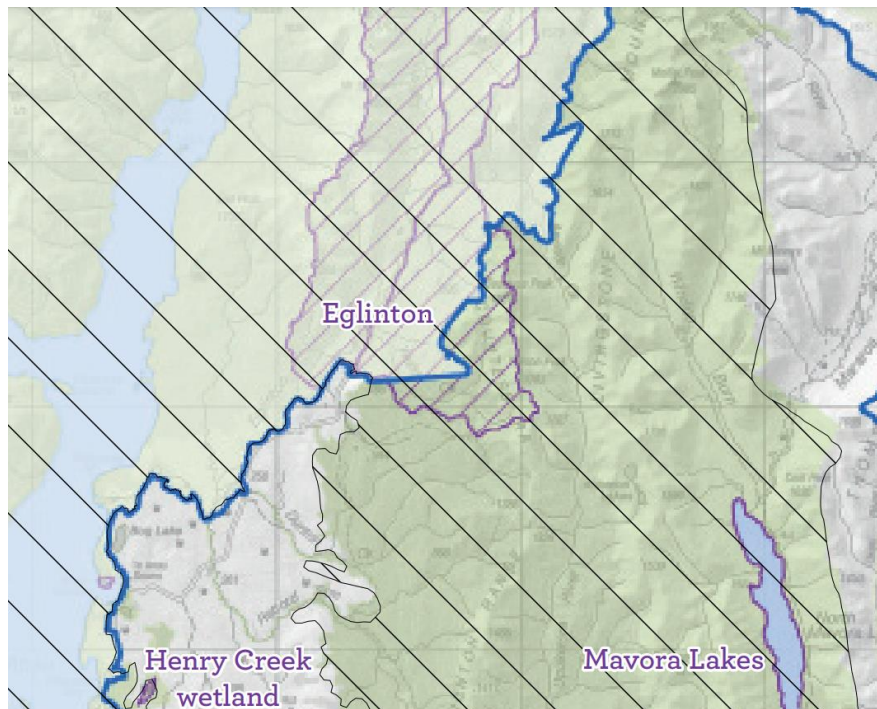


Figure 15. Part of Map 5.3 Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place. Purple narrow hatching indicates priority biodiversity areas; black wide hatching indicates inclusion in the World Heritage Park.

Key points from the current, 2016, *Southland Murihiku Conservation Management Strategy (CMS)* are:

2.2 Fiordland Te Rua-o-te-moko Place

- Numerous short walks along the Icon destination of the Milford Road Journey enable visitors to be awed by the grandeur of this area. Visitors learn about the special indigenous flora and fauna, the factors that threaten them, and the opportunities to contribute to their conservation. (pp60-61).

The CMS is silent on other matters pertaining to this proposal in Fiordland National Park.

2.3 Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place

- The Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place comprises all of the high-country land in north-western Southland (see Maps 5.3 and 5.3.1). The main blocks of public conservation lands and waters within this Place are the Eyre Mountains/Taka Ra Haka Conservation Park, Mavora Park Conservation Area and Snowdon Forest Conservation Area.

While the Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place is highly valued for its ecological, cultural and historic values, the community particularly values the natural character within this Place, including the landscapes, natural quiet, and backcountry and remote recreation opportunities.

The Mavora Park and Snowdon Forest conservation areas are two of several areas of public conservation lands and waters within this Place that have been internationally recognised as part of the Te Wāhipounamu—South West New Zealand World Heritage Area (see Appendix



14). In addition, the northern portions of these conservation areas (parts of the Livingstone Mountains and the Countess and Dunton ranges) have been identified as being suitable for inclusion in Fiordland National Park.

- **This Place is primarily managed for backcountry recreational experiences**, with some opportunities for more remote experiences away from road ends, particularly at higher altitudes. **Although recreational use of this Place has been low in the past, there is scope to increase use without affecting the backcountry and remote recreational experiences.**
- Commercial activity enhances the conservation and recreational values. Minimal development occurs on public conservation lands and waters, and is sympathetic to the natural and cultural landscape, biodiversity and recreational values.

POLICIES

- 2.3.1 Manage (including when considering concession applications) those parts of the Western High Country Mata-puke Koikoi Place that are within the Te Wāhipounamu—South West New Zealand World Heritage Area in accordance with the criteria for which the World Heritage Area was nominated and the statement of outstanding universal value (see Appendix 14).
- 2.3.2 Investigate the addition of parts of the Livingstone Mountains and the Countess and Dunton ranges (within the Mavora Park and Snowdon Forest conservation areas), as identified in Map 4 of the Fiordland National Park Management Plan 2007, to Fiordland National Park, through a public process in accordance with section 8 of the National Parks Act 1980. Otherwise, continue to manage the conservation areas under the Conservation Act 1987, while having regard to the adjacent National Park.

Appendix 7. Considerations for hut site and track location selection

A large number of valleys, and alpine areas were explored on foot and reviewed during the creation of this report as shown in Figure 16. In addition to the social licence of our members, we identified the following additional considerations of desirable attributes which helped us reach a consensus:

- Sunshine hours
- Aspect
- Accessibility to services
- Safety of the surrounding area
- Views
- Weather

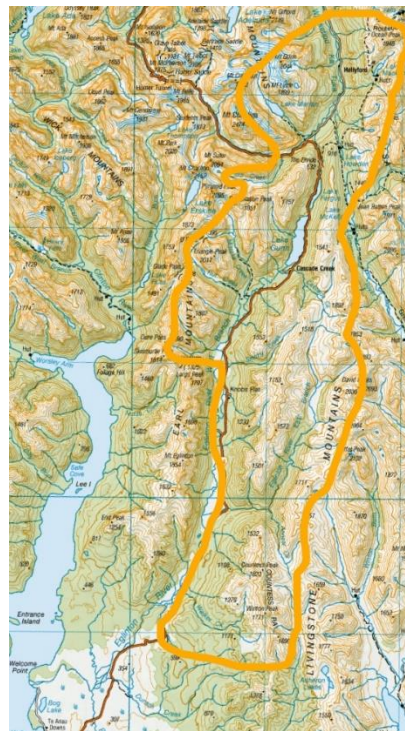


Figure 16. Region examined and explored for potential hut sites.

a. Sunshine hours

It is highly desirable to have a hut in a high area with prolonged sunshine hours. Generally higher elevations sites have longer hours, than those based in valleys. A comparison of Mistake Creek and Countess Range hut sites sunshine hours is shown in Table 1. During winter the Countess Range sites have 7.5 sunshine hours and the Mistake Creek site has 1 hr. During summer the Countess Range site have approximately 13 hrs and Mistake Creek has approximately 10 hrs of sunshine.



Table 1: Sunshine hours at the proposed hut sites

Site	Location	Winter Sunrise	Winter Sunset	Winter Sunshine Hours	Summer Sunrise	Summer Sunset	Summer Sunshine Hours
Countess Range	-45.10517, 168.00709	9:30	17:00	7:30	8:30	21:30	13:00
Mistake Creek	-44.86783, 168.02954	13:00	14:15	1:00	9:45	19:15	9:30

b. Aspect

For an alpine hut it would be desirable to build the hut on an aspect which loses snow early in the season. Northern and western aspects typically lose snow for earlier in the spring, which is desirable as it would provide for a longer peak season. Western aspects also feature stunning sunsets, which would form part of the attraction to the hut.

c. Accessibility to services

The following services would be desirable via helicopter:

- a. Toilet waste removal
- b. Gas replacement
- c. Wood / heating supplies
- d. Warden supplies
- e. General maintenance, rubbish removal, track repairs
- f. Warden supplies
- g. Medical / Emergency assistance

Sites closer to Te Anau and Manapouri airport minimise air travel and were ranked favourably.

Cellphone coverage is desirable and already provided at the high sites and along the road corridor.

d. Safety of the surrounding area

A motivator of the site selection was avoiding areas which were close to natural hazards. Examples of areas of concern were:

- Hut Creek & Mistake creek – proximity to U-Pass: Steep waterfall, steep gut on southern side with significant rock fall + avalanche risk
- Mistake Creek – proximity to steep slopes in the upper valley with potential avalanche paths and rock fall
- Tops above Cascade Creek – Long exposed ridge traverse to the north to Key Summit which takes a day with no shelter on route. The norther tip of the Livingstone mountains is close to the West Coast, so it is prone to poor weather. Despite a direct valley route existing many people may attempt a tops traverse in poor conditions, as frequently occurs along the Robert Ridge between Lake Angelus and Mt Robert.



e. Views

Sub alpine and alpine areas have fantastic views and many members in our club seek access to these areas. Our members noted that the majority of huts in Aotearoa are below the bushline. Those that are above the bushline and are readily accessible are in high demand and extremely popular.

f. Weather

The Milford Road provides access to the Darren and Humbolt Mountains on the West coast and the Earl Mountains and Livingstone Range which drain South/East. The 50 km stretch of mountains ranges from an average annual rainfall of greater than 6m in the Darren and Humbolt Mountains to around 2m on the Lower Livingston Range⁴. Therefore, the Lower Livingston Range offers on average more favourable weather compared to potential sites further north.

⁴ <https://niwa.co.nz/climate/national-and-regional-climate-maps/southland>

Appendix 8. Additional photos of the proposed experience



Figure 17. Proposed Walker creek carpark on the eastern side of SH94, 210m north of the existing Walker Creek campground turnoff

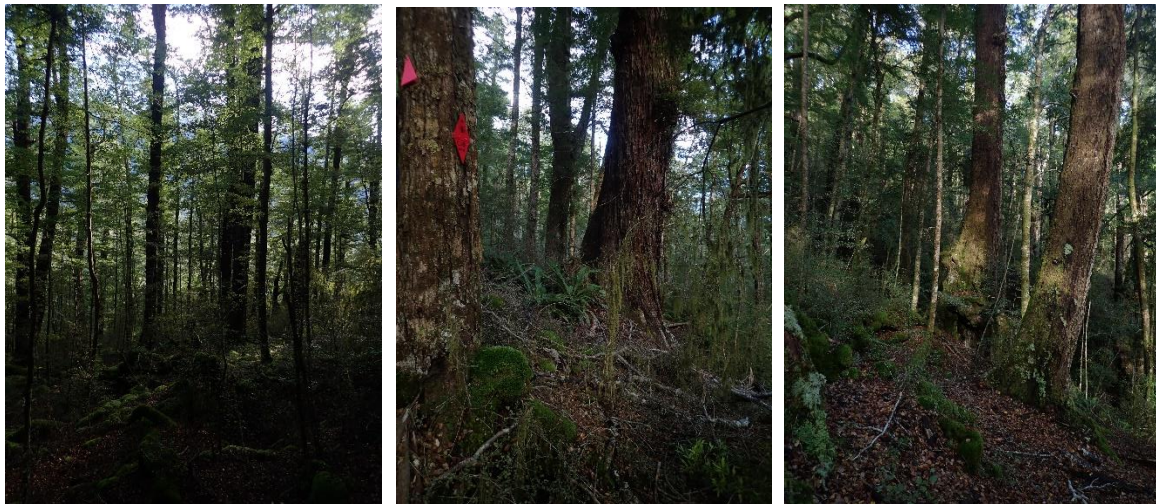


Figure 18. The proposed track for the most part follows a gentle but continuous gradient up through mature beach forest.



Figure 19. At higher elevations views of the Eglington valley begin to emerge.



Figure 20. At the bush line the track would continue to wind up through clear patches in the open alpine scrub.



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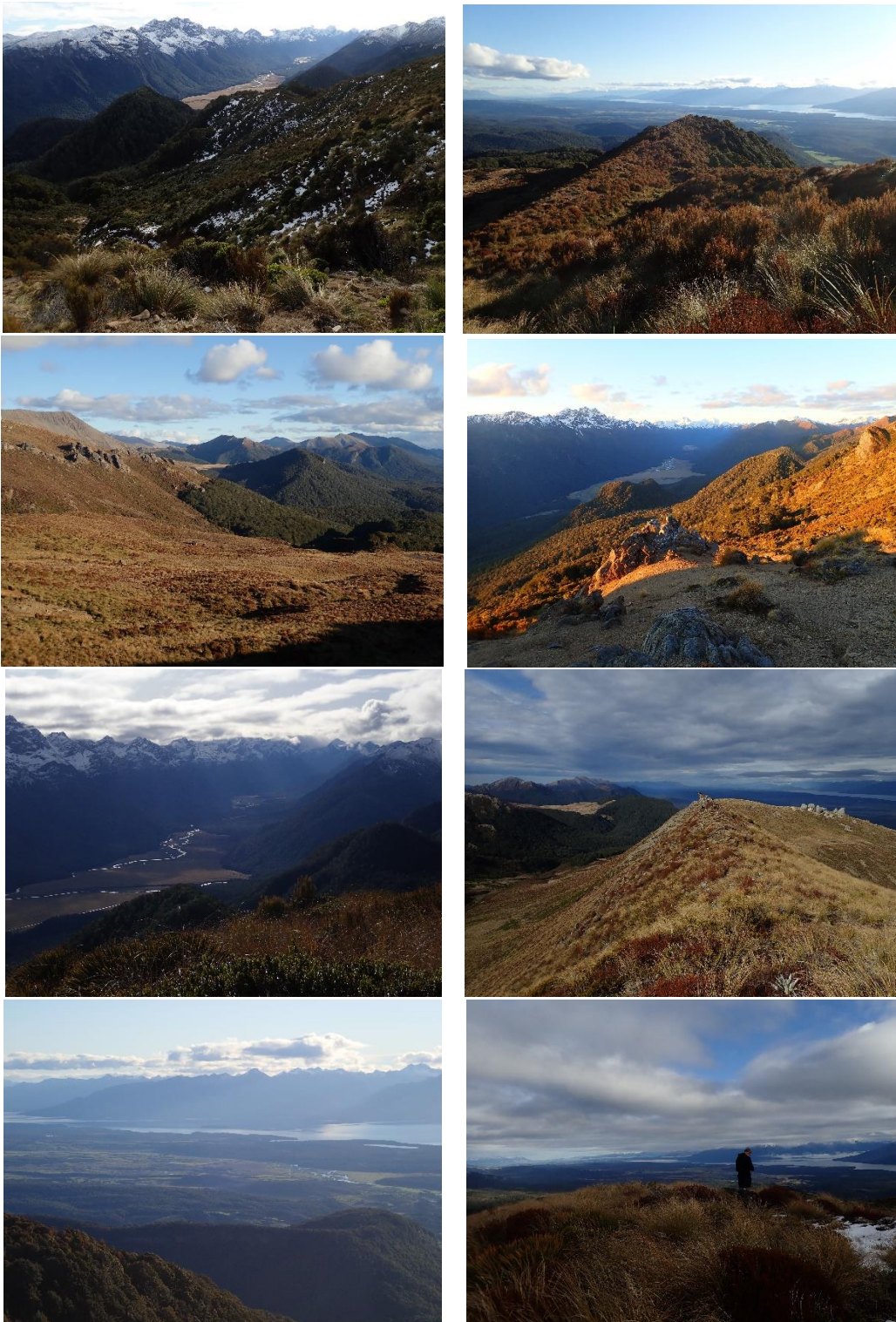


Figure 21. Above the bush line the track continues through alpine tussock lands with stunning vistas overlooking the Eglinton and Te Anau basin



Appendix 9. Proposed Hut site coordinates

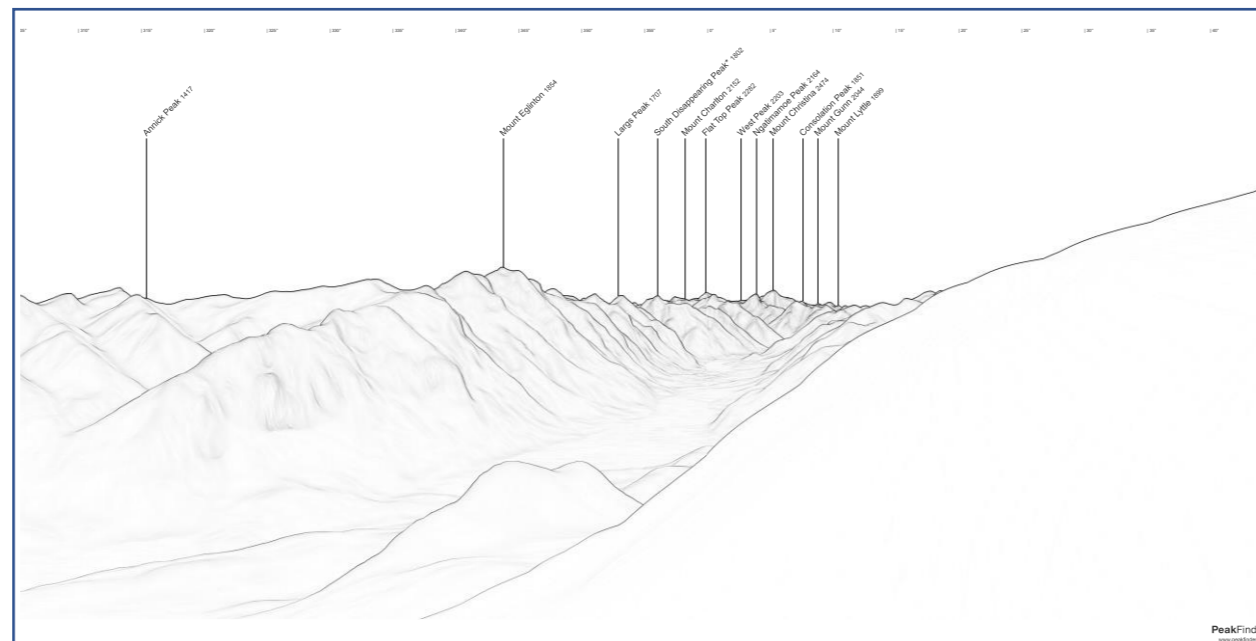
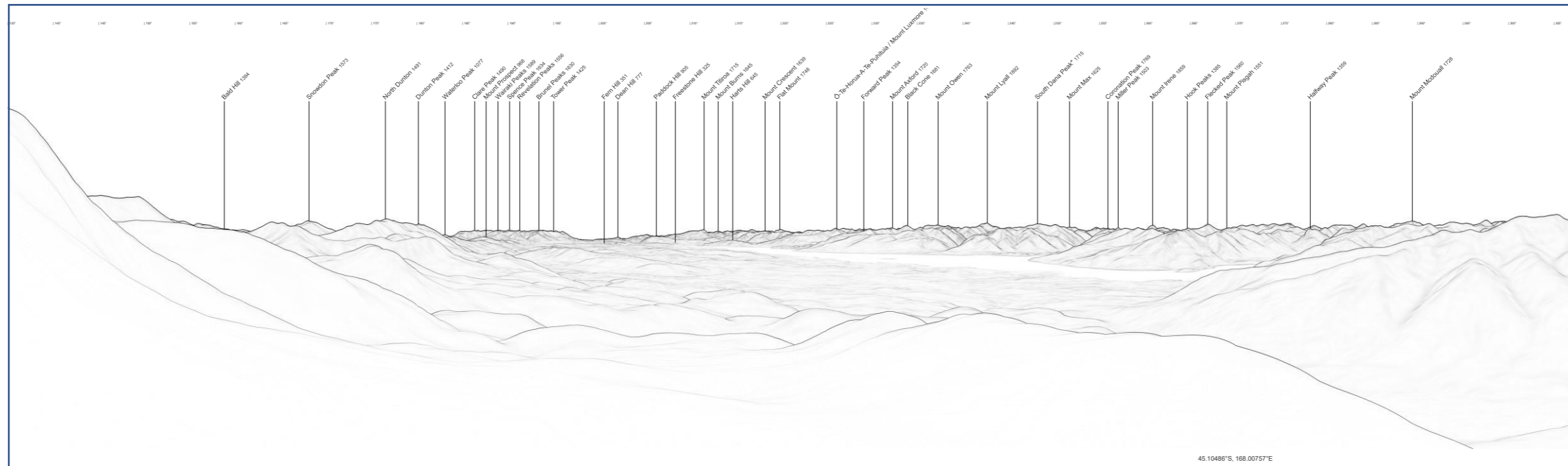
Our proposed hut sites are approximate to $\pm 50\text{m}$ only, we recommend a further work, including Geotec to establish the most suitable location. We are open minded to other sites along the spur.

Site	Latitude (WGS 84)	Longitude (WGS 84)	Latitude (NZTM)	Longitude (NZTM)
A	-45.104870°	168.007361°	4993260	1207224
B	-45.103131°	168.008839°	4993461	1207328
C	-45.099279°	168.011323°	4993901	1207497



Figure 22. Graphic showing the potential hut site locations along the alpine portion of the track.

Appendix 10. Visible peaks from the proposed Countess Range hut site



Appendix 10. Visible peaks from the proposed Countess Range hut site

Figure 23. Many popular mountaineering peaks are visible from the proposed hut site many peaks including Spence Peak in the Takitimu Mountains, Mount Titaroa in the Hunter Mountains, Mt Luxmore in the Kepler Mountains and Mount Eglington and Flat Top Peak in the Earl Mountains⁵.

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⁵ Image sourced from Peak Finder [<https://www.peakfinder.com/>] under CC BY 4.0 Licence