Tourists ignore NZ hazards at their peril

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New Zealand is marketed as the adventure capital of the world, blessed with huge areas of untouched land, pristine lakes and thousands of kilometres of walking tracks.

Tourists from throughout the world come to ski, tramp and kayak their way around the country.

But sometimes things go badly wrong: In the past month two tourists have met their maker alone in the bush.

New Zealand Mountain Safety Council Risk management programme manager Paul Chaplow said tourists often underestimated the ferociousness of the environment.

"Because New Zealand is advertised overseas as an outdoors destination, people come here maybe thinking that we're a bit of Disneyland and just go wandering out.

"We don't have anything that bites or poisons or wild animals that are going to create problems like overseas, so perhaps there's the perception that our environment's relatively benign.

"We're doing what we can to try to educate people coming into New Zealand that it's not," Mr Chaplow said.

Department of Conservation (DoC) recreation manager Mike Edginton said tourists were responsible for their own safety.

"The department will always try to put in place information and other facilities and services that will ensure that the sorts of people that we expect to be on the tracks are safe, but once you go half an hour or so beyond a road you're pretty much on your own," he said.

DoC is responsible for the maintenance of more than 1200km of track and 900 huts.

Although they do ask people to fill in an intention form, stating their name, contact details, intended route and travel schedule, it is not compulsory and they have no way of knowing exactly how many people are on the tracks at any one time.

"We just cannot be managing, providing and checking information for somewhere in the vicinity of a million visitors a year," Mr Edginton said. "The safety of people is their responsibility, for themselves and for those who are in their party."

There were concerns that tourists used to the gentle, rolling hills of landscapes such as the Cotswolds in Britain were not prepared for New Zealand's rugged terrain and changeable weather.

Tourists could not walk into the bush unprepared and expect to walk out as a matter of course.

"You do have to have a level of fitness and skill that is perhaps a bit higher than somebody who is just stopping on the side of the road and looking out at the nice views or having a picnic," Mr Edginton said.

Both men said there was plenty of safety information available on both organisations' websites and in guide books, but it was not known whether tourists were even aware of these resources and looking at them before they came to New Zealand.

"Someone who comes to New Zealand needs to come with prior knowledge of what they need and/or buy it when they get here," Mr Chaplow said.

In most cases, basic equipment such as walking packs, rain jackets and tents are not available for hire but specialist safety equipment like personal locator beacons are.
Mr Chaplow was cautious about sending everyone into the bush with locator beacons. He acknowledged their life-saving potential but said they could be a problem when inexperienced people believed it was all the safety equipment they needed.

"The danger [of beacons] is that, potentially, tourists and other people will just assume that 'I'm sweet now; if I get in trouble I can just call for help' kind of attitude.

"It's a dangerous thing to think that technology alone will save you if you get in trouble. They need to have the right equipment."

Many tourists also ran the risk of getting in trouble and no one knowing where they were. Many were not missed until they failed to arrive at pre-booked accommodations or their families overseas became concerned about the lack of contact and police were alerted.

British tramper Mark Thomas was one such tourist. He set out on a solo tramp through the South Island for some "serious meditation" in May 2004.

His decomposing body was found in April last year, 11 months after he was last seen alive.

It was determined Mr Thomas died after he slipped down a waterfall and landed on rocks.

"If he had some form of radio beacon, he could have set off [and] he probably would have lived. He couldn't walk or move," Mr Chaplow said.

"He basically lay there until he died.

"He wanted to do it on his own. It didn't work out for him."

New Zealand's extreme weather systems were also a danger many tourists did not consider, Mr Chaplow said.

"Just last weekend we had a southerly come through and there's snow all over our peaks again and it's only the beginning of March.

"Our climate is such that you can get those southerly changes at any time of year. They need to make sure they pick an appropriate type of trail.

"You're playing Russian roulette with our weather."

Both the Mountain Safety Council and DoC encouraged all track users to stop in at each hut they passed and record their name, intended route and travel schedule so if something went wrong, rescuers would at least have a record of their passing to narrow the search field.

"Anyone that goes out into our wilderness without letting people know where they're going and without the right equipment is putting themselves at risk."

**Fatal attraction**

* English tourist Mark Thomas, 27, disappeared from Wanaka in May 2004 after telling people he was heading for a remote hut for a few days. His decomposed body was found near Makarora, Central Otago, almost a year later.

* Elizabeth Thomson failed to return to the Arthur's Pass Youth Hostel after a day tramp in February this year. The body of the 55-year-old from Kent, England, was found beneath a bluff. It appeared she had fallen 20-30m down a bluff, then a further 40-50m down a very, very steep gully before coming to rest under some trees.

* The body of Japanese tourist Katsusbaro Nagashima was found near the Inland Pack Track, near Punakaiki, in February. Police believe the 65-year-old tried to cross the Dilemma Creek at a time the river was up after heavy rain and that he was washed down the river.

- NZPA