

Journal of Rural and Community Development

The Place of Tourism in Small-Town And Rural District Regeneration Before and During the COVID-19 Era

Authors: Harvey C. Perkins, & Michael Mackay

Citation:

Perkins, H. C., & Mackay, M. (2022). The place of tourism in small-town and rural district regeneration before and during the COVID-19 era. *The Journal of Rural and Community Development*, 17(1), 17–31.

Publisher:

Rural Development Institute, Brandon University.

Editor:

Dr. Doug Ramsey

Open Access Policy:

This journal provides open access to all of its content on the principle that making research freely available to the public supports a greater global exchange of knowledge. Such access is associated with increased readership and increased citation of an author's work.



**BRANDON
UNIVERSITY**
Founded 1899



The Place of Tourism in Small-Town and Rural District Regeneration Before and During the Covid-19 Era

Harvey C. Perkins

The University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand
h.perkins@auckland.ac.nz

Michael Mackay

AgResearch
Lincoln, New Zealand
mike.mackay@agresearch.co.nz

Abstract

This case study reports a two-phase research project into tourism development in a rural district, Timaru, in the South Island of New Zealand. It addresses a lack of research into small town regeneration in New Zealand. The research is set within scholarly debates about small-town tourism-led regeneration, place promotion, and the impact on tourism of the COVID-19 pandemic. Using a qualitative social research methodology, the first phase of the research, pre-COVID-19, illustrates attempts to realise the potential of an underdeveloped visitor economy in Timaru. The challenges faced by tourism advocates are outlined, as are the halting attempts to advance their goals. The second research phase reports the dramatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the way it stimulated a reimagining of tourism and its development in Timaru leading to new and more effective administrative arrangements and place promotion tactics, supported by extra-local funding. The case study concludes with a brief discussion of the research findings as they relate to the scholarly context of our work, emphasising particularly the influence the COVID-19 pandemic might have in the re-imagining of tourism and the practices of tourism development in rural places and communities.

Keywords: Domestic tourism development; COVID-19; rural and small-town regeneration; tourism-led regeneration; place promotion; Timaru, New Zealand

La place du tourisme dans la régénération des petites villes et des districts ruraux avant et pendant l'ère de la Covid-19

Harvey C. Perkins

The University of Auckland
Auckland, New Zealand
h.perkins@auckland.ac.nz

Michael Mackay

AgResearch
Lincoln, New Zealand
mike.mackay@agresearch.co.nz

Résumé

Cette étude de cas rend compte d'un projet de recherche en deux phases sur le développement du tourisme dans un district rural, Timaru, dans l'île du Sud de la Nouvelle-Zélande. Elle répond à un manque de recherche sur la régénération des petites villes en Nouvelle-Zélande. La recherche s'inscrit dans le cadre de débats universitaires sur la régénération axée sur le tourisme dans les petites villes, la promotion des lieux et l'impact de la pandémie de COVID-19 sur le tourisme. En utilisant une méthodologie de recherche sociale qualitative, la première phase de la recherche, pré-COVID-19, illustre les tentatives de réaliser le potentiel d'une économie de visiteurs sous-développée à Timaru. Les défis auxquels sont confrontés les défenseurs du tourisme sont décrits, ainsi que les tentatives hésitantes pour faire avancer leurs objectifs. La deuxième phase de recherche rend compte de l'impact dramatique de la pandémie de COVID-19 et de la manière dont elle a stimulé une réinvention du tourisme et de son développement à Timaru, conduisant à de nouvelles dispositions administratives plus efficaces et à des tactiques de promotion des lieux, soutenues par un financement extra-local. L'étude de cas se termine par une brève discussion des résultats de la recherche en ce qui concerne le contexte académique de notre travail, en soulignant en particulier l'influence que la pandémie de COVID-19 pourrait avoir dans la réinvention du tourisme et des pratiques de développement touristique dans les zones rurales et communautaires.

Mots clés : développement du tourisme national ; COVID-19 ; la régénération rurale et des petites villes ; la régénération axée sur le tourisme ; promotion du lieu ; Timaru, Nouvelle-Zélande

1.0 Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism was New Zealand's largest export industry, contributing 20.1% of foreign exchange earnings in the year ending March 2020 (Tourism New Zealand, 2020a, 2020b). It was seen as an important element in regional, rural, and small-town development, particularly in places known globally for spectacular natural scenery, wild environments, and outdoor adventure experiences (Ateljevic, 2009; Cloke & Perkins, 1998a, 1998b, 2002; Mackay et al., 2014; McClure, 2004; Pearce, 1993; Shone et al., 2016). Furthermore, the links between food, wine, and tourism were developing in

some rural regions prior to the arrival of COVID-19, as evidenced in the rise of agri-tourism ventures, regional wine, beer, and food festivals, and local gastronomy trails (Fountain & Mackay, 2017; Fusté-Forné & Berno, 2016; Mackay et al., 2018a, 2019; Pawson and the Biological Economies Team, 2018; Perkins et al., 2015).

In the current COVID-19 era, with national borders closed, the medium- to long-term future of international tourism is in question (Tourism New Zealand, 2020a). The regions and settlements with a significant focus on international tourism, such as Queenstown in the Southern Alps, are negatively affected (Hollingsworth, 2020). Places more dependent on domestic tourism now have the advantage of being available to local visitors, some of whom are spending the funds they once spent holidaying overseas, across New Zealand, travelling domestically. These funds amount to \$NZ9 billion dollars annually (Tourism New Zealand, 2020b; Thornber, 2020). In light of these new developments, Tourism New Zealand initiated its “Do Something New, New Zealand!” campaign and regional tourism organisations re-focused their promotional activity to encourage New Zealanders to travel domestically, often to rural localities and regional settlements (Tourism New Zealand, 2020b).

As part of a larger study designed to understand recent attempts at rural regeneration in New Zealand (Perkins et al., 2019), this case study examines attempts to harness tourism as part of a rural district’s regeneration strategy before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. The district in question is Timaru, in the South Island of New Zealand, home to approximately 46,000 residents living in rural areas and several small towns (Littlewood, 2018; Statistics NZ, 2018; Venture Timaru, n.d.b) (see Figure 1). Timaru is located in South Canterbury on the southern end of the Canterbury Plains and extends from the east coast into the foothills of the Southern Alps and encompasses 2,737 square kilometres (1,054 square miles). Why Timaru? It was chosen for our research because, despite having once been a very popular seaside holiday destination for South Islanders, since the late 1980s it had gradually declined as a place to visit. Unlike other rural districts in New Zealand, Timaru had not developed as a significant destination for international tourists, even though it is near to the lakes and mountains of the Southern Alps (Dance et al., 2018). As tourism declined in importance, Timaru became better known for primary production and secondary food processing for export.

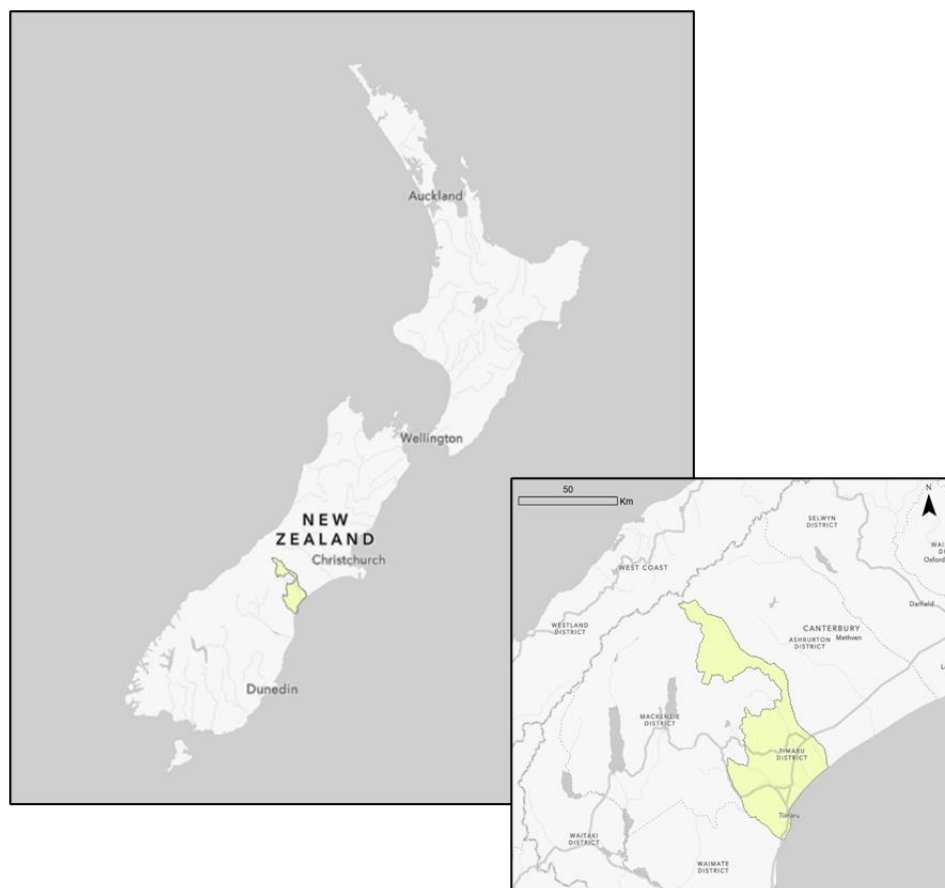
Relying on the literature on rural change, small-town regeneration, and touristic place promotion we report two phases of research in Timaru. The first phase, conducted before the arrival of COVID-19 was guided by the research question: how can local government, and allied tourism development agencies and actors, realize the potential of an underdeveloped visitor economy and in turn provide a greater range of recreational and allied services and experiences to visitors and locals? We began phase one in 2018 by examining the conflicting views within Timaru about the ways international and domestic tourism could be developed and the tactics being employed to do so. This phase of our case study highlighted a series of issues facing the district, including a lack of funding and skilled personnel for tourism development, weak administrative arrangements and less than optimal tourism promotion for the district. This in turn meant that services for tourists were not well developed, which also weakened recreational and allied services to locals.

The COVID-19 pandemic began at the end of our phase one field work. COVID-19’s arrival raised the interesting possibility of interpreting Timaru’s tourism development in a completely new situation. With the permission of some of our phase one key informants we started a new round of fieldwork pursuing the

research question: how has COVID-19 disrupted earlier tourism development efforts in a situation where national borders are closed and domestic tourism is being actively encouraged by national authorities as a regional development strategy?

Turning to the remainder of the paper, we briefly outline the scholarly context for our work (for our full literature review see Hills et al., 2020), discuss our methods, describe our research findings for both phases of our research and conclude with a discussion about the challenges of tourism-led small-town regeneration generally and as affected by COVID-19.

Figure 1: Timaru district in the South Island of New Zealand.



Source: Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, © OpenStreetMap contributors, and the GIS user community.

2.0 Scholarly Context

2.1 Rural Change and Small-Town Regeneration

Our research is underpinned by our longstanding interest in rural change and tourism (Mackay et al., 2009, 2014, 2018b; Mackay & Perkins, 2019; Perkins et al., 2015). This has included work on (a) adventure tourism, (b) place promotion and commodification, (c) cetacean tourism, (d) agri-tourism and rural community development, (e) rural heritage tourism, (f) wine destinations, (g) festivals and events, and (h) the rise and rise of cycle trails across New Zealand. These studies have been informed by theory highlighting the interdependence of space and society in a rapidly changing and globalising world (Perkins & Thorns, 2012). We have also drawn on and contributed to the rich debates that have played out in the rural change literature ranging from rural restructuring to the rise of global multifunctional rural spaces (Argent, 2011; Holmes, 2006;

Roche & Argent, 2015; Smailes, 2002; Woods, 2011). We started thinking about tourism development in Timaru District in this context.

Supported by our knowledge of the rural studies literature, we noted the growing research interest in New Zealand and internationally in small-town regeneration (Powe et al., 2015; Powe, 2018; Spoonley, 2016). This literature focuses on initiatives designed to enhance the profile and economic fortunes of rural settlements and their hinterlands and improve the quality of life of their populations. Regardless of the specific focus of these regeneration activities—whether it be human centred programmes or revitalisation of the natural or built environments—a particular challenge is that regeneration is complex and often local governance and leadership are not up to the task (Carter & Roberts, 2017; Nel et al., 2019; Perkins et al., 2019; Powe & Hart, 2017). Additionally, local tax bases are often limited and financial and human resources are not adequate. Ways, therefore, have to be found to support regeneration based on incremental collaborative effort by many actors partnering over long periods of time, sometimes decades (Powe et al., 2015).

Within the broader regeneration literature, we encountered a small but growing emphasis on tourism-led small-town regeneration. This work discusses how tourism development can be pursued strategically to attract visitors and capital and extend the range of services, facilities and activities available (Perkins et al., 2018; Wise, 2016; Wise & Harris, 2017). Wise (2018) calls for more research into such regeneration activity. Linked to Wise's (2018) work is a recognition that image-revival is a core part of tourism-led regeneration. As we conducted our Timaru fieldwork the need for effort in this area became obvious to us. We therefore reviewed the literature to gain an understanding of place promotion tactics and how places are incrementally changed to ensure there is no or limited dissonance between promotional text and imagery, and tourist experiences (Cloke & Perkins, 1998a, 1998b; Perkins & Rosin, 2018a, 2018b; Perkins & Thorns, 2000; Schellhorn & Perkins, 2004; Schöllmann et al., 2000). The dominant narrative of this literature is about attempts to differentiate place through a variety of promotional tactics and a desire also to provide positive images of towns for local consumption and experience.

2.2 COVID-19

The focus of our phase two research demanded an encounter with the recent and burgeoning literature on tourism and COVID-19. The pandemic has been characterised as a “game changer for travel and tourism” (Higgins-Desbiolles, 2020, p.551). This literature is raising questions about the focus and trajectory of international and domestic tourism and severely questioning its long-held growth model (Fountain, 2021). Cruise tourism, a major source of international visitors to New Zealand, and of potential importance in Timaru, has all but disappeared, and air travel has been greatly attenuated (Gössling et al., 2021). Accommodation platforms, such as Airbnb, and other accommodation providers such as hotels, motels, and campgrounds, are struggling to pay the bills. Governments are under pressure to come up with recovery strategies that balance economic recovery with health concerns. They are also being asked by many citizens to adopt a transformational approach to tourism away from policies of unrestrained growth prior to COVID-19, to a much more sustainable regenerative model, although how this will be achieved in New Zealand's radical free market economy is not clear (Nel & Stevenson, 2014).

Globally, some rural towns, particularly coastal and mountain tourism resorts, almost completely dependent on tourism for their economic development prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, have struggled hugely in the COVID-19 era

(Fountain, 2021). For those rural areas and country towns for which tourism was part of a multi-functional suite of economic activity, COVID-19 has had an effect and created hardship but has not led to the same high level of business failure (Fountain, 2021). Internationally, Vaishar and Štátná (2020) showed that in the COVID-19 era urban areas have often been starved of international tourists, but rural areas and smaller towns have benefitted from surging domestic tourism. Towns and regions for which primary production and secondary food and fibre processing were an economic mainstay, but in which domestic tourism was a side-line activity, have actually done very well financially in the aggregate as the global demand and prices for agri-commodities has boomed, notwithstanding labour immobility and therefore supply issues (Fountain, 2021). This is the situation we found in our Timaru case study where COVID-19 has led to reprioritised investment and a changed promotional emphasis.

3.0 Methods

Our research questions were answered by collecting and analysing data using qualitative social research techniques (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Consistent with this approach we began our research in 2018 by reviewing secondary descriptive statistics, media reports, websites, and policy documents to help us understand Timaru's broader context since the 1980s, but with a particular focus on tourism. We also examined the range and types of businesses operating in the Timaru economy and how these had changed over time drawing on annual reports, websites, and local government documents. A profile of social and educational services in the district was also compiled. This work allowed us to identify key stakeholders for interview, those who could talk in detail about the district's development trajectory, including its tourism aspects. Our interviewees included: (a) personnel from Timaru District Council including the mayor, councillors and senior staff; (b) the chief executive of the South Canterbury Chamber of Commerce; (c) the coordinators of Go Geraldine and the Caroline Bay Festival; (d) a local events coordinator with a national portfolio; (e) curators of the South Canterbury Museum; the Aigantighe Art Gallery and Ngāi Tahu Te Ana Māori Rock Art Centre; (f) managers of a variety of recreational, hospitality, and accommodation facilities; and (g) former managers of tourism administration in Timaru.

As noted in our Introduction, the research was conducted prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-COVID-19, 29 interviews were held face-to-face in Timaru during 2019 and early 2020. Each interview took between 1 and 2 hours to complete and was recorded for later review and thematic analysis. As an extension of these interviews, we also visited a good number of recreational and tourism places recommended by our interviewees in order to get the best possible understanding of what was available to visitors in the district. In a number of cases our interviewees joined us on these visits. This data gathering process concluded when the COVID-19 pandemic began and New Zealand entered a national lockdown early in 2020.

During the lockdown we stopped our interviewing and focused on thematic data analysis, seeking to connect our interviewees' stories with the rural change and small-town regeneration literature. During this time, we kept our eye on the many news media reports emanating from Timaru and other small towns telling stories about radical tourism disruption and local responses. We also kept in touch via Zoom with a small group of key informants in Timaru. This led us to add a new dimension to our work: a focus on the governance and administrative restructuring of tourism development in Timaru with a stronger emphasis on place promotion and branding efforts. This was because, with a complete loss of

tourists, tourism stakeholders in places like Timaru had begun urgently to think about repositioning and promoting themselves to take advantage of domestic tourism after the lifting of the lockdown.

Following the receipt of this new information, we searched the new web-based tourism marketing material created in Timaru in late 2020 and early 2021. We then used techniques followed by Cloke and Perkins (1998a, 1998b, 2002) to describe and interpret the place and activity representations in this web-based material. Once this work was completed in mid-2021, we conducted another round of interviews ($n=9$) using Zoom or Microsoft Teams to avoid face-to-face contact with our research participants as much as possible. These interviews, that lasted approximately an hour, were recorded and in part designed to elicit an understanding of tourism-led regeneration under entirely new circumstances. We spoke to economic and tourism development agency staff, place promotion text and imagery designers, tangata whenua (local Māori with jurisdictional oversight), business owners and managers, and the leaders of community interest groups. Some of the people interviewed for this second part of our study were participants in our earlier research. By taking this approach we were able to document the changes in earlier tourism-led regeneration stimulated by the arrival of COVID-19.

4.0 Findings (Phase One)

4.1 Tourism Development Before COVID-19

The findings from our pre-COVID-19 Timaru research (Perkins et al., 2019) were that, as in the case of other similar jurisdictions, local political support for tourism development initiatives varied considerably among council members and also shifted from election to election. When set alongside a plethora of other economic functions in the primary, secondary processing, and service sectors, local politicians interpreted tourism as being only one of a number of potential development options, and not necessarily a priority (see also Shone & Memon, 2008). One informant, the director of a local non-governmental organisation had this to say:

The agricultural economy, secondary processing and the port keep the regional economy reasonably stable and so there's not a lot of urgency with respect to tourism...food production and process manufacturing is Timaru's main niche...so there are only a few well-resourced and skilled people available to manage and facilitate tourism development in Timaru.

Supporting this view, in the District Council, as one councillor put it:

We have now got a situation where the council hasn't got anyone in-house with any expertise or experience overlooking the whole thing because the total spending on tourism is a bit under half of what it used to be.

Tourism was also seen as a limited source of regional income. The coordinator of the business association in one of Timaru District's small towns told us: "the council has decided not to take tourism development too seriously. They have been swayed by the economic argument that tourism is a low-income earner compared to the primary industries."

Many local residents did not understand the potential of tourism in their town. The owner of significant local hospitality business said that:

Many local people don't really understand the complexity and diversity of tourism and its current or potential connection to Timaru. They also seem reluctant to invest in and or examine future possibilities. For a lot of Timaru councillors, it's not their thing. And the reality is that in Timaru tourism is just a tiny little piece of the pie; it's sort of seen as the cream on the cake or the cherry on top, if you like.

These three factors: (a) lack of urgency and underfunding, (b) a perception of low returns, and (c) poor understanding of tourism's potential, led to limited local political support for tourism development. The flow-on effect of this was increasingly minimal investment of public finances in the recruitment of skilled personnel to facilitate and plan tourism development. As one senior council staff member put it: "It is difficult to provide a Rolls Royce service with a Mini budget."

Key stakeholders in the local bureaucracy and allied agencies also disagreed about the best way of organising tourism development. Overall, this situation, working itself out over a decade or more, resulted in a continual re-arranging of the entities and personnel responsible for local tourism development, and a lack of clear objectives (see also Shone et al., 2016). The chief executive of the local non-governmental organisation mentioned above said:

But there is, right across Timaru, a huge lack of long-term strategic planning, alignment and clear commitment to what the vision and the future of the district should be. That's in areas such as growth management strategy, planning around economic development and tourism. It's chaos. This has happened because there's been a lack of coordination of services and delivery. We've not sourced the right expertise in the area of tourism development to enable that to occur effectively.

Our event management informant told us that "there is no coherent strategy to target particular groups of tourists and attract them to Timaru, and there hasn't really been a cohesive events strategy either."

One of our council informants added:

...good things were being done 15 years ago but much of that impetus has been lost over the intervening years ... the current situation reflects uncertainty about how to proceed with tourism development, and there is a sense of confusion and lack of direction.

As we neared the end of our pre-COVID-19 pandemic research, we noted that attitudes towards tourism were beginning to change in Timaru. The Timaru District Council had, for example, engaged a consultancy firm to create a visitor strategy, released publicly just prior to the completion of this case study (Venture Timaru, n.d.b). Our research informed the consultants' report which echoed our early findings (Perkins et al., 2019) by saying:

Current perceived challenges include a lack of effective sector collaboration and leadership, manifest via insufficient planning and

direction across all areas including marketing. ‘Perceived future challenges’ [included a lack of sector planning and strategic direction across the district and a] ‘continued inability to collaborate, build meaningful partnerships and to provide strong leadership (summarised in Littlewood, 2019).

There was also increasing talk about what Timaru offered as a destination and how to best promote the town to international and domestic tourists. As the town’s mayor put it “Timaru needs to do a better job of telling its story.” One respondent emphasised that a number of new possibilities for tourism and recreation were in their infancy and that “it’s just a matter of taking the initiative and experimenting with possibilities, rethinking the square” as he put it (local tourism entrepreneur).

5.0 Findings (Phase Two)

5.1 The COVID-19 Pandemic and Tourism Development

In Timaru, COVID-19 had the quite dramatic effect of reinforcing the changing views on the value of domestic tourism that we found in the latter part of our phase one research. Local priorities and plans for the visitor economy were quickly recalibrated. The first step by the district’s local authority leaders was to move responsibility for tourism development from in-house district council control, to the district’s economic development agency, Venture Timaru Development, which operates as a council-controlled organisation, beyond the day-to-day influence of the council. This was a significant shift in political control and priorities.

A new tourism development agency was formed within Venture Timaru Development. Called Venture Timaru Tourism (<https://www.vttourism.co.nz/>), its staff are embarking on new promotional efforts and storytelling, including the creation of a website entitled “Time to unwind—Escape to Timaru”. Additionally, the newly elected Timaru District Council mayor, who at the time of our first round of field work was one of our hospitality industry interviewees, established a ‘re-ignition panel’ comprising prominent local residents from a variety of backgrounds aimed at re-igniting the local economy in COVID-19 times. This includes the visitor sector.

The ‘Escape’ website illustrates the ways Timaru tourism is being re-orientated, and the district re-imagined, to encourage domestic touristic consumption. Under the heading ‘Meet me in the middle’ Venture Timaru Tourism points out that:

Timaru is centrally located on the East Coast of Te Waipounamu (Māori for “South Island”). It’s the perfect urban base to meet up with friends and whānau (family) from across the South Island. There are also direct flights from [the capital city] Wellington to Timaru Daily for our North Island mates (Venture Timaru, n.d.a).

COVID-19 has encouraged the new tourism development staff to think about what might attract domestic tourists, as reflected in the new tourism strategy. Food, coastal walks, wellness and relaxation, retail therapy, and events now comprise the well-advertised destination activity-mix, all directed at domestic tourists. Timaru District’s small peripheral towns, such as Geraldine with its

combination of shopping and food offerings, its spectacular foothills and high-country outdoor recreation sites, are also highlighted.

Consistent with the re-ignition theme, Venture Timaru has secured \$400,000 from Central Government's post-COVID Strategic Tourism Assets Protection Programme to support the development of the Geraldine Walkway and Sculpture Trail; the South Canterbury Food Heritage Centre Feasibility Study; SCOFF: South Canterbury Outstanding Food Festival; and heritage trails through the district. Venture Timaru Tourism's operation manager, Di Hay said of these developments:

We're absolutely delighted to have been successful with our bid for funding as it really is a game changer for our district and gives us the ability to push forward with some major legacy projects that will help attract visitors in the future (Venture Timaru, 2020).

Signs of success in this new environment catering for domestic tourists are beginning to appear. One media report of Timaru's COVID-19 economy noted that the district was experiencing a 'domestic tourism surge'. Total tourist spending was up by 16% between June 2019 (pre-Covid) and June 2021 (Tobin, 2021).

6.0 Discussion and Conclusion

Our early fieldwork in Timaru illustrated that there existed some interest in tourism development as an element of wider regeneration activity (Perkins et al., 2019). We noted that agencies such as the Timaru District Council, the South Canterbury Chamber of Commerce, and allied local actors recognised that Timaru's visitor economy was underdeveloped. They saw that it had the potential to provide a greater range of recreational and allied services and experiences to visitors and locals. As our fieldwork progressed in phase one, we also came to understand that these agencies and actors were working in an environment where tourism was seen by the majority of the community as a minor part of the wider local economy and were reluctant to resource it. These tourism advocates were thus attempting to raise tourism's profile in difficult circumstances. Their efforts illustrated what Woods (2011) described as the working out of aspirational micro-politics through which rural places globally are being reconstituted.

Returning to our first research question, our field work showed that to overcome Timaru's tourism development resource limitations, ways had to be found to find and harness funding and skills sourced from afar, noting that central government has a role to play in many circumstances. We also found that a stronger focus on image-revival was required, differentiating Timaru from other tourism destinations and promoting its features that would be attractive to tourists. Determined to find a constructive way forward, key actors in local government asked how a visitor strategy might best be created and sought expert advice. Consistent with the wider small-town regeneration literature (Powe et al., 2015) and our early findings, its advisers identified that tourism development leadership, collaborative strategic partnerships and planning were either weak or missing altogether in Timaru. The advisers then outlined appropriate next steps in the development of a visitor strategy. Having been offered a potentially productive way forward by their advisers, what seemed to be missing was the stimulus to take immediate and concerted action.

With respect to our second research question, the disruptive characteristics of the COVID-19 pandemic provided that stimulus. Our phase two fieldwork recorded how COVID-19 brought a sense of urgency to earlier tourism

development tactics. In a situation where national borders were closed and domestic tourism became strongly encouraged by national authorities, in Timaru tourism futures were re-imagined and action taken to raise the district's profile and enhance its reputation. New institutional arrangements were established and local budgets enhanced, skilled staff were employed, central government funds acquired and new place promotion tactics put in place. In contrast to the pre-COVID-19 situation, Timaru District is showing signs of successfully establishing the plans, administrative and governance arrangements that will create effective tourism-led regeneration. Hosting visitors from within New Zealand is now seen as having the potential to help diversify the South Canterbury and Timaru District economy and add to, and in fact, take advantage of its strengths in food production and process manufacturing. Tourism, therefore, is being harnessed as an element of Timaru District's wider regeneration activities, providing services and experiences for visitors and locals alike. The challenge, consistent with the small-town and tourism-led regeneration literature, will be to maintain the collaborative leadership and governance arrangements, and allied resources, required to sustain the current momentum in the long term.

The changed circumstances faced by Timaru resulting from COVID-19 are likely to be shared by a range of other rural marginal districts and settlements. The pandemic has the potential to stimulate a constructive re-thinking of tourism and its development in a great many places. Our Timaru case study will be therefore important to researchers and policy analysts wishing to understand and contribute to the reconfiguration of tourism in COVID-19 times.

Acknowledgements

We gratefully acknowledge our funders, the Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities: Ko ngā wā kāinga hei whakamāhorahora National Science Challenge (Aotearoa New Zealand): Thriving Regions. We also thank the members of the Council for Australasian Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE) for providing a conference venue for discussing and honing the ideas foundational to this case study.

References

- Argent, N. (2011). Trouble in paradise? Governing Australia's multifunctional rural landscapes. *Australian Geographer*, 42(2), 183–205.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00049182.2011.572824>
- Ateljevic, J. (2009). Tourism entrepreneurship and regional development: Example from New Zealand. *International Journal of Entrepreneurial Behavior & Research*, 15(3), 282–308.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/13552550910957355>
- Carter, A., & Roberts, P. (2017). Strategy and partnership in urban regeneration. In P. Roberts, H. Sykes & R. Granger (Eds.), *Urban regeneration* (pp. 44–68). Sage.
- Cloke, P., & Perkins, H. C. (1998a). “Cracking the canyon with the awesome foursome”: Representations of adventure tourism in New Zealand. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 16(2), 185–218.
<https://doi.org/10.1068/d160185>

- Cloke, P., & Perkins, H. C. (1998b). 'Pushing the limits': Place promotion and adventure tourism in the South Island of New Zealand. In H. C. Perkins and G. Cushman (Eds.), *Time Out? Leisure, Recreation and Tourism in New Zealand and Australia* (pp. 271–287). Longman.
- Cloke, P., & Perkins, H. C. (2002). Commodification and adventure in New Zealand tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 5(6), 521–549. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500208667939>
- Dance, L., Mackay, M., & Perkins, H. C. (2018). Tourism-led settlement regeneration: Reaching Timaru's potential. *Lincoln Planning Review*, 9(1–2), 9–19.
- Fountain, J. (2021). The future of food tourism in a post-COVID-19 world: Insights from New Zealand. *Journal of Tourism Futures*, 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JTF-04-2021-0100>
- Fountain, J., & Mackay, M. (2017). Creating an eventful rural place: Akaroa's French Festival. *International Journal of Event and Festival Management*, 8(1), 84–98. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEFM-06-2016-0043>
- Fusté-Forné, F., & Berno, T. (2016). Food tourism in New Zealand: Canterbury's foodscapes. *Journal of Gastronomy and Tourism*, 2(2), 71–86. <https://doi.org/10.3727/216929716X14720551277763>
- Gössling, S., Scott, D., & Hall, C. M. (2021). Pandemics, tourism and global change: A rapid assessment of COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(1), 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1758708>
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. (2020). The “war over tourism”: Challenges to sustainable tourism in the tourism academy after COVID-19. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 29(4), 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1803334>
- Hills, R., Levy, D., Perkins, H., Mackay, M. H., & Campbell, M. (2020). *Second-tier settlement regeneration and revitalisation: the role of the built environment* (Report for Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities Thriving Regions). University of Auckland/BBHTC.
- Hollingsworth, J. (2020, June 8). New Zealand's star tourism attraction struggles as visitors stay away post-Covid. *CNN Travel*. Retrieved September 24, 2020 from <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/queenstown-tourism-new-zealand-coronavirus-intl-hnk/index.html>
- Holmes, J. (2006). Impulses towards a multifunctional transition in rural Australia: Gaps in the research agenda. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 22(2), 142–160. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2005.08.006>
- Littlewood, M. (2018, May 21). Timaru population growth to stagnate according to study. *Stuff News: Timaru Herald*. Retrieved July 12, 2021 from: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/timaru-herald/news/104071210/timaru-population-growth-to-stagnate-according-to-study>
- Littlewood, M. (2019, July 26). Timaru urged to rethink tourism to change 'stop off' town image. *Stuff News: Timaru Herald*. Retrieved July 7, 2021 from: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/timaru-herald/news/114524302/timaru-urged-to-rethink-tourism-to-change-stop-off-town-image>
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analysing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis*. Wadsworth.

- Mackay, M., Nelson, T., & Perkins, H. C. (2018a). Interpretive walks: Advancing the use of mobile methods in the study of entrepreneurial farm tourism settings. *Geographical Research*, 56(2), 165–175. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12275>
- Mackay, M., Taylor, N., & Perkins, H. C. (2018b). Planning for regeneration in the town of Oamaru. *Lincoln Planning Review*, 9(1–2), 20–32.
- Mackay, M., Nelson, T., & Perkins, H. C. (2019). Agritourism and the adaptive re-use of farm buildings in New Zealand. *Open Agriculture*, 4(1), 465–474. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opag-2019-0047>
- Mackay, M., & Perkins, H. C. (2019). Making space for community in super-productivist rural settings. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 68, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2019.03.012>
- Mackay, M. D., Perkins, H. C., & Espiner, S. R. (2009). *The study of rural change from a social scientific perspective: A literature review and annotated bibliography*. New Zealand: Lincoln University.
- Mackay, M. D., Perkins, H. C., & Taylor, C. N. (2014). Producing and consuming the global multifunctional countryside: Rural tourism in the South Island of New Zealand. In K. Dashper (Ed.), *Rural tourism: An international perspective* (pp.41–58). Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- McClure, M. (2004) *The wonder country: Making New Zealand tourism*. Auckland University Press.
- Nel, E., & Stevenson, T. (2014). The catalysts of small town economic development in a free market economy: A case study of New Zealand. *Local Economy*, 29(4–5), 486–502. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094214535022>
- Nel, E., Connelly, S., & Stevenson, T. (2019). New Zealand's small town transition: The experience of demographic and economic change and place based responses. *New Zealand Geographer*, 75(3), 163–176. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12240>
- Pawson, E., & the Biological Economies Team (2018). *The new biological economy: How new Zealanders are creating value from the land*. Auckland University Press.
- Pearce, D. G. (1993). Domestic tourist travel patterns in New Zealand. *GeoJournal* 29, 225–232. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00807041>
- Perkins, H. C., Mackay, M., & Espiner, S. (2015). Putting pinot alongside merino in Cromwell District, Central Otago, New Zealand: Rural amenity and the making of the global countryside. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 39, 85–98. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrurstud.2015.03.010>
- Perkins, H. C., Mackay, M., Levy, D., Campbell, M., & Hills, R. (2018). Putting peripheral places on the tourism map: A tale of three New Zealand towns. In T. Young, P. Stoke, & G. McGinnis (Eds.), *CAUTHE 2018: Get smart: Paradoxes and possibilities in tourism, hospitality and events education and research* (p.665). Newcastle Business School, The University of Newcastle.
- Perkins, H. C., Mackay, M., Levy, D., Campbell, M., Taylor, N., Hills, R., & Johnston, K. (2019). Revealing regional regeneration projects in three small towns in Aotearoa—New Zealand. *New Zealand Geographer*, 75(3), 140–151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nzg.12239>

- Perkins, H. C., & Rosin, C. (2018a). Central Otago transformed. In E. Pawson, and the Biological Economies Group Team (Contributors), *The new biological economy: How New Zealanders are creating value from the land* (pp. 195–212). Auckland University Press.
- Perkins, H. C., & Rosin, C. (2018b). Tourism, landscapes and biological resources. In E. Pawson, and the Biological Economies Team (Contributors), *The new biological economy: How New Zealanders are creating value from the land* (pp. 137–156). Auckland University Press.
- Perkins, H. C., & Thorns, D. C. (2000). Place promotion and urban and regional planning in New Zealand. In P. A. Memon & H. C. Perkins (Eds.), *Environmental planning and management in New Zealand* (pp. 330–338). Dunmore Press.
- Perkins, H. C., & Thorns, D. C. (2012). *Place, identity and everyday life in a globalizing world*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Powe, N. A. (2018). Non-amenity business growth and small town revival. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 62, 125–133.
- Powe, N., & Hart, T. (2017). *Planning for small town change*. Routledge.
- Powe, N., Pringle, R., & Hart, T. (2015). Matching the process to the challenge within small town regeneration. *Town Planning Review*, 86(2), 177–202.
- Roche, M., & Argent, N. (2015). The fall and rise of agricultural productivism? An Antipodean viewpoint. *Progress in Human Geography*, 39(5), 621–635. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03091325155582058>
- Schellhorn, M., & Perkins, H. C. (2004). The stuff of which dreams are made: Representations of the South Sea in German language tourism brochures. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 7(2), 95–133. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500408667975>
- Schöllmann, A., Perkins H. C., & Moore, K. (2000). Intersecting global and local influences in urban place promotion: The case of Christchurch, New Zealand. *Environment and Planning A*, 32(1), 55–76. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a31185>
- Shone, M. C., & Memon, P. A. (2008). Tourism, public policy and regional development: A turn from neo-liberalism to the new regionalism. *Local Economy*, 23(4), 290–304. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690940802408011>
- Shone, M. C., Simmons, D. G., & Dalziel, P. (2016). Evolving roles for local government in tourism development: A political economy perspective. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 24(12), 1674–1690. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1184672>
- Smailes, P. J. (2002). From rural dilution to multifunctional countryside: some pointers to the future from South Australia. *Australian Geographer*, 33(1), 79–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049180220125024>
- Spoonley, P. (Ed.). (2016). *Rebooting the regions: Why low or zero growth needn't mean the end of prosperity*. New Zealand: Massey University Press.
- Statistics NZ (2018). *Population counts: Timaru*. Retrieved December 9, 2022 from <https://www.stats.govt.nz/tools/2018-census-place-summaries/timaru-district>.

- Thorner, L. (2020, May 18). Coronavirus: Will New Zealand's most expensive attractions be forced to cut prices? *Stuff News*. Retrieved September 24, 2020 from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/travel/back-your-backyard/300015029/coronavirus-will-new-zealands-most-expensive-attractions-be-forced-to-cut-prices>
- Tobin, C. (2021, August 31). Timaru District's 'abnormally strong' economy to help post-lockdown. *Stuff News*. Retrieved December 11, 2021 from <https://www.stuff.co.nz/timaru-herald/news/126205240/timaru-districts-abnormally-strong-economy-to-help-postlockdown>
- Tourism New Zealand (2020a). *About the tourism industry*. Retrieved May 27, 2020 from <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/about/about-the-tourism-industry/>
- Tourism New Zealand (2020b). *Do something new, New Zealand!* Retrieved June 29, 2021 from <https://www.tourismnewzealand.com/news/do-something-new-new-zealand/>
- Vaishar, A., & Šťastná, M. (2020). Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on rural tourism in Czechia: Preliminary considerations. *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1–5. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13683500.2020.1839027>
- Venture Timaru (2020). Venture Timaru secures major funding boost for tourism. Retrieved July 7, 2021 from <https://www.vtdevelopment.co.nz/news/media-releases/venture-timaru-receives-major-funding-boost-for-tourism>
- Venture Timaru (n.d.a). *Time to unwind—Escape to Timaru*. Retrieved 7 July 2021 from: <https://www.vttourism.co.nz/activities/escapes/time-to-unwind-escape-to-timaru>
- Venture Timaru (n.d.b). Timaru District Destination Management Plan, September 2021. Retrieved December 14, 2021 from <https://www.vtdevelopment.co.nz/about-us/destination-management-plan>
- Wise, N. (2016). Outlining triple bottom line contexts in urban tourism regeneration. *Cities*, 53, 30–34. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2016.01.003>
- Wise, N. (2018). Editorial: Tourism and social regeneration. *Social Sciences*, 7(12), 262. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7120262>
- Wise, N., & Harris, J. (Eds.) (2017). *Sport, events, tourism and regeneration*. Routledge.
- Woods, M. (2011). The local politics of the global countryside: Boosterism, aspirational ruralism and the contested reconstitution of Queenstown, New Zealand. *GeoJournal*, 76, 365–381. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-009-9268-7>