

Extract from *A Bunk for the Night – A guide to New Zealand's best backcountry huts* by Shaun Barnett, Rob Brown and Geoff Spearpoint

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PRESERVING THE HUTS: A BACKCOUNTRY PARTNERSHIP

Many outdoor New Zealanders have a strong cultural attachment to huts in the hills, and value them immensely. However, looking after that network is a big task, one that has challenged DOC for many years. Now, after a long period of proposed removals and minimal maintenance for many huts, the director-general of DOC wants to collaborate with outdoor people all around the country to help maintain those huts the department is struggling with. DOC has almost a thousand huts on their books. They are officially maintaining about 700 of these, which is a very fair effort, but that leaves about 300 huts requiring someone to love and look after them.

Perhaps you have a favourite little backcountry hut that needs attention and you can help? Looking after New Zealand's backcountry hut network is, to some extent, passing on an outdoor inheritance to the kids of tomorrow. If there is one thing Shaun, Rob and I have learned over the last few years, it is that there are many people who have a deep affection for our huts. This is not surprising, considering that they have been such a key part of the nation's rich collective memories of the outdoors.

The idea of those who enjoy getting out into our backcountry working with government agencies to provide public huts is not a new one. Recreation clubs played an important role in getting New Zealand's hut network up and running, and their continued commitment to hut maintenance is often an inherent part of their identity. From large, well-resourced organisations like the New Zealand Alpine Club (NZAC) and the New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association (NZDA), through to smaller tramping groups like the Heretaunga Tramping Club, recreation clubs were building their own huts long before state agencies got involved in the wider hut network.

In recent years, however, with DOC either unable or unwilling to maintain many public huts, individuals and informal groups have been taking up the challenge. While groups like the Federated Mountain Clubs of New Zealand (FMC) have kept up a dialogue with DOC's head office, advocating for continued government maintenance of huts, others simply took ownership of the issue and got on with doing them up.

Recent Activity

One of the first informal volunteer groups that was set up to save backcountry huts was Permolat on the West Coast. In the early stages of DOC's 2002 Recreational Opportunity Review it became evident that there were going to be a significant number of huts removed or put onto 'minimal maintenance'. As a result, Andrew Buglass started Permolat in 2003, a loose collection of backcountry track-cutters who linked up via the Internet. A website (remotehuts.co.nz) soon followed, with an attached online discussion forum that has become a focal point for the 250-plus people in the group. The name Permolat comes from the aluminium venetian blind material that was used for many years to mark tracks in the hills. Normally, red or white Permolat markers about 10 centimetres long were cut off a roll and nailed up to mark tracks. It was a simple, light, efficient and cheap system that worked well, and is a good metaphor for the group's philosophy.

To DOC Hokitika's credit, they embraced this energy and helped facilitate the track work, setting in place an operating code of using hand tools only, and only maintaining tracks that already exist. Many positive things have happened as a result of this arrangement, and even in the face of budget cuts, the huts on the West Coast are looking better than they have for a long time. In the last 10 years, at least 24 huts on the West Coast have had maintenance work carried out on them by Permolat members. Some

Permolat members have individual management agreements with DOC, while others have simply gone in and done the work, mostly with the blessing of DOC Hokitika. There has been no strategic plan to any of this, but, just as the bush grows in a random way to produce magnificent forest, so lots of random track-cutting and hut maintenance over time is restoring the network. People self-select by choosing the places that most need attention.

Another active maintenance group, exNZFS, started by former deer-culler Derrick Field, has taken on the restoration of several remote huts in the Tararua–Wellington region. They now have management agreements with DOC for Carkeek Hut, Arete Forks Hut, Mid Waiohine Hut, Mid King Bivouac, McGregor Bivouac and Dundas Hut. As well as providing shelter for recreational users of the region, many of these huts have been identified as part of the Forest Service heritage to be protected for historic reasons. Some of the people involved in the restoration of these huts helped build them 40-plus years ago.

Finance for these volunteer group renovations began with donations and the generosity of those carrying out the work, but as the benefits became recognised, DOC looked for ways to contribute through their Community Fund. Discussions between DOC, NZDA, FMC and Trail Fund three years ago led to the establishment of a joint partnership called the Outdoor Recreation Consortium. DOC formalised some funding for the consortium, to be split between the three organisations and specifically aimed at paying for materials and transport to facilitate volunteer work. This has enabled ongoing maintenance to be carried out on huts and tracks all over the country. See: hutsandtracks.org.nz and look up 'Project Blog'. It's inspiring stuff!

A Tradition of Hut Work

Club volunteers also continue to maintain huts open to the public in the backcountry, as they have done for more than 80 years. The various branches of the NZDA carry out great work around New Zealand. We have the Southland section to thank for the network of hunters' huts on Stewart Island/Rakiura, for instance, and the Canterbury branches to applaud for looking after Mathias Hut, Red Stag Hut and Doubtful Hut. The Canterbury Mountaineering Club has a long tradition of maintaining many open club huts, and the NZAC also maintains huts open to the public in the high country.

As the volunteer work on DOC-owned huts has opened up, more individuals have offered to help. Craig Benbow and others have put in a huge effort to renovate the long-neglected huts in the northern part of Arthur's Pass National Park, and more recently, Roger Woods led a team in the long-overdue rebuild of Minchin Bivouac.

There are exciting things happening in the North Island, too, and in many ways we are just starting to see the unlocking of volunteer power near places with bigger populations. Local clubs have received funding to recut and develop tracks and maintain huts in the Kaimai Ranges, and in the eastern Bay of Plenty, Nga Tapuwae O Taneatua Tramping Club has restored Kotepato Hut.

Similarly, we shouldn't forget the efforts of the farming community over the past 10 years. There was a time when the high-country hut network was falling into decline as changing patterns of farming meant the huts were becoming less useful. In recent years, however, this has been reversed, as many stations have started to diversify into tourism activities and have come to realise that their huts could be an asset to the farm rather than another maintenance liability. A number of heritage huts have been sensitively restored through this approach.

Ways Forward

DOC will continue to be the main player looking after our more popular huts, but gone are the days of expecting the department to do everything because it is 'their job'. This is true of conservation as well as recreation. Although the less frequently used backcountry huts are

seen as belonging to DOC, ultimately we as New Zealanders own them, and if we want to keep them we need to do something about it. The sad truth is that DOC's recreation focus has increasingly turned to the front-country, often driven by tourism. Less-used, remote huts are sometimes seen as a liability, and they consequently feature at the bottom of the priority list, despite many individual DOC staff around the country feeling passionate about them.

Even if the money were there for DOC to do it all, we don't think that would be a good idea anyway. There are real benefits to looking after our backcountry heritage together. One thing that has become clear in the last few years is that many of the volunteers who have come forward to look after huts are anything but amateurs, and in many cases include well-qualified tradespeople. What is also clear is that the growth of a managerial culture within DOC has taken its toll on the practical skills of rangers in some areas. Successive restructures haven't helped either.

One of the benefits of DOC and local communities working together to maintain our backcountry facilities is a better understanding on both sides of what each can offer, and with that comes increased respect, collaboration and friendships. It offers locals an opportunity to be involved in maintaining facilities in places they feel very connected to, and it helps DOC be more outwardly focused and involved with the communities that surround conservation lands. While Outdoor Recreation Consortium spending needs to be carefully managed to enable the best result, there also remains a role for the community to keep an eye on departmental spending priorities and efficiencies as well.

Finance will always be a challenge for volunteer projects and in the long term a secure funding source separate from government is perhaps the best way to sustain volunteer efforts. One way people can contribute is to leave a bequest dedicated to maintaining a backcountry hut they particularly like. A Permolat trust has been set up specifically for financing hut and track maintenance on the West Coast, and the FMC's Mountain and Forest Trust can be used for a similar purpose nationally.

In 2014, DOC received a bequest from hunter and climber Barry Smith specifically for a remote hut in south Westland, and in 2016 his wishes were carried out when the old hut at Creswicke Flat in the Landsborough Valley was replaced with a new four-bunker. In the Orongorongo Valley, Papatahi Hut was partly built in 2010 with money bequested by Gilbert McCaul to FMC, who channelled it to this DOC project. After a life well spent enjoying our backcountry, that's a fine legacy to leave behind.

The future of our backcountry heritage will only be as good as we collectively make it. If you feel as strongly about these havens in the hills as we do, and if you think they are worth passing on to the next generation to enjoy, then consider getting involved. Take it from us, it will be one of the most satisfying things you've done. It is a different way of experiencing the hills, and is particularly suited to those who have developed good practical skills over many years and are now happy pottering around in a fantastic setting, putting something back in a place of shelter.

Where to Begin?

If you are keen to help in a practical way, first have a close look at that favourite hut. Measure and photograph everything, especially any parts that need attention. Fill a notebook with the details. Then contact staff at your local DOC branch or the Outdoor Recreation Consortium and tell them of your interest. Begin a conversation. This may lead to either a one-off memorandum of understanding, or more usually a management agreement between you and DOC. Standard management agreements last for five years, renewable for a further five if both parties are happy.

DOC will talk through the safety and legal responsibilities – these are mostly common sense and not too onerous – if you have concerns about them talk to other volunteers who have signed. A few friends interested in helping will be needed; it only needs to be a few,

but ideally seek out a builder friend for more major work. Most clubs and many outdoor people know someone in the construction industry, and many are only too happy to lend a few days for specific parts of a project. Seek funding assistance, including through the Outdoor Recreation Consortium (application forms are available at: hutsandtracks.org.nz/resources).

On your first maintenance trip, plan to go in for a week and have fun. Maintain the hut competently, enjoy working with friends, photograph what has been achieved and come back out with the satisfaction of having done something that will benefit others as well. The experience may lead to a whole new relationship with a place you already know. It is a wonderful way to return something to a hut you treasure, and to make sure it is passed on to the next generation in good nick.

– Geoff Spearpoint and Rob Brown

Photo captions

Peter Fullerton and Hugh van Noorden painting the chimney during the Tunnel Creek Hut restoration, Paringa Valley, West Coast PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

Kerry Clapham removing rotten boards at Top Trent Hut in the Ahaura catchment, West Coast PHOTO: GEOFF SPEARPOINT

Hans Kolinko and Paul Gush (exNZFS) painting Arete Forks Hut, Tararua Forest Park PHOTO: DERRICK FIELD [PERMISSION REQUIRED BEFORE USING]

Brett Johnson and Ross Bloodworth (exNZFS) working on McGregor Biv, Tararua Forest Park PHOTO: TREVOR JOHNSON [PERMISSION REQUIRED BEFORE USING]