

Safer route to Blue Lake Hut proposed

Less danger on new route

Sasha Borissenko

In the wake of the tragedy involving the death of a trampler over Christmas, a mapping specialist is advocating a safer, but equally spectacular, alternative route.

Andrew Wyatt, 41, of Cornwall, was last seen on December 15 and his body was found on December 27 below Lake Constance Bluff after an unsurvivable 100-metre fall.

It was presumed he fell from an area just one hour from the Blue Lake Hut where he was last seen.

Ralph Kingston, 88, of Stoke, said he was particularly struck by the tragedy as he had tramped there more than 10 times in 30 years.

"I really regard the Blue Lake Hut as a second home."

As a former aerial mapping surveyor of 37 years where he worked as a photogrammetrist at H.O. Lands & Survey, he felt he could offer his expertise to improve the quality of the area.

He first came up with the alternative route in 1970, after narrowly avoiding an accident when he was climbing a steep slope to pass a rocky bluff at the western side of Lake Constance.

When the area was wet it could be dangerous, slippery and in the case of Mr Wyatt – lethal, he said.

His alternative route "completely outflanked the moraine wall and the rock bluff".

The traverse was more direct, equally spectacular, and much less exposed to danger under most summer tramping conditions, he said.

He recommended that experienced rangers should take his idea and compare both routes for safety.

Poles and safety signage should also be added to provide extra support for trampers.

"I want people to enjoy it as safely as possible. Certainly, if you are going by yourself into the wild you are going at your own risk."

"But I think everyone who has done tramping in the area would agree the current track is awfully risky."

What saved Sir Edmund Hillary on so many occasions was that he knew when to turn back, he said.



Calling for change: Ralph Kingston with a map of the area from Blue Lake to Waiiau Pass where he wants to see a safer route on the Te Araroa Trail.
Photo: MARION VAN DIJK/FAIRFAX NZ

"If you are on your own, lost or the weather has gotten beyond your control, the mountain will always be there, the path will always be there."

As a trampler of 30 years he had lost many friends and relations to tramping accidents.

"It makes you have much more of an appreciation of how fortunate my wife and I are to have survived after all these years of tramping voyages."

"I'm not saying I was the first to think of this alternative route but I'm going to be 88 next month and I feel I have an element of responsibility to do something."

"I am the first to admit life is a matter of survival of the fittest,

"I think everyone who has done tramping in the area would agree the current track is awfully risky."

Ralph Kingston

Mapping specialist

but the Department of Conservation [DOC] has to take on a certain amount of responsibility to minimise harm."

Mr Kingston feared that the Government was neglecting to incorporate the trampers within the distribution of funding.

"We all know DOC resources



The top of the gully where British trampler Andrew Wyatt was suspected to have fallen to his death in December.

are limited, but dare I say the political world is more interested in cyclists rather than trampers."

Araroa Trust chief executive Rob Wakelin said while they were responsible for areas in the vicinity, DOC was responsible for the area in question.

The trust was aware and had reviewed the proposal and passed a motion that it would engage with DOC to help establish whether the alternative route was feasible.

"We are pretty comfortable with Ralph's proposal but DOC are the

ones with the people directly on the ground."

Conservation minister Nick Smith said while he was unfamiliar with the proposal, he would be happy to have a look at it and pass it on to his department.

Changes to routes would be subject to a lengthy and protocol-heavy process that was possibly outside his role as minister.

DOC was responsible for almost 14,000km of tracks around the country, through often rugged terrain, and it would be unrealistic to

suggest they could ever completely eliminate any risk.

However, he said safety improvements would continue, citing the Government's increased funding for more detailed mountain and weather forecasts last year.

Dr Smith rejected the suggestion that trampers were neglected.

The Government spent \$140 million on recreational facilities and a substantial portion of that was reserved for tramping tracks and huts, he said.

"If anything, as mountainbiking is a new activity I think funding towards it would tend to be less."

DOC spokesman Rory Newsam agreed with Dr Smith's assertions that DOC would not be rushing to make changes to the route without there being significant evidence to indicate it was unsafe.

"DOC has to manage its recreational budget carefully and it already spends more than \$64m maintaining a network of over 14,000 kilometres of track and more than 900 huts nationwide."

More firefighters crossing the Tasman

Helen Murdoch

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Five nervous yet excited Nelson men left for Australia yesterday to help fight the Victorian bushfires.

Led by Action Forest Management silviculture crew boss Graham Staples, the crew includes two of his AFM co-workers, Dean Hewitt and Steve Packer, and Lee Beloe and Nathan Palmer, of the Brightwater Volunteer Rural Fire Force.

"It's a new experience," said Mr Staples. "Australian firefighting is totally different. There's no water and it's more about containment than fighting fires."

The group expect to be armed with picks and shovels rather than fire hoses as they help build containment lines designed to steer the blazing fires around rural settlements.

The crew was among 18 experienced rural Kiwi firefighters who left for Melbourne yesterday, where they will be briefed before being deployed to bolster numbers in priority fire areas.

The tour is no walk in the park,



New experience: Rural firefighters Lee Beloe, left, Dean Hewitt, Nathan Palmer, Graham Staples and Steve Packer at Nelson Airport before flying to Victoria in Australia to help fight forest fires.
Photo: MARTIN DE RUYTER/FAIRFAX NZ

with volunteers expected to work two shifts of seven 12-hour days with a short break in between.

"It'll be like going over there and joining an army," Mr Staples said.

The crew is the second from Nelson and the third from New Zealand to fly to Victoria this summer.

The first crew, led by Motueka Rural Fire Force incident

controller Colin Eggers, left Nelson on January 27 and is due home on Saturday.

They were among 22 New Zealand rural firefighters called on to help their Australian

counterparts contain raging bush fires in the remote Gippsland region in Victoria.

A second deployment of 22 New Zealand firefighters left for Australia in early February.

National Rural Fire Officer Murray Duffield, who flew over the region recently, said the first Nelson crew has been fighting uncontrolled wildfires in Goongerah region of east Gippsland which started from lightning strikes and have been burning across remote bushlands.

Waimea Rural Fire Authority principal fire officer Ian Reade said the authority had weighed up if it could risk sending a second crew to Australia.

"But we expect some rain in the next week and it's pretty good season for us to do this sort of thing."

In addition, the deployed firefighters returned with invaluable experience and skills.

AFM manager Robin Thompson said Mr Staples was experienced in rural firefighting and had worked in forestry for much of his life.

Losing experienced staff would put the company slightly behind in its work programme "but we will be able to handle it".

Water running short

Water restrictions are looming again.

Nelson City Council is asking residents who take their water from streams or wells to use it responsibly and conserve it whenever possible.

The Tasman District Council's Dry Weather Task Force is to meet this afternoon and will decide whether to impose restrictions.

The council's call follows flows in local rivers and streams gradually receding and approaching the low flow trigger level.

The council says it will continue monitoring the situation regularly until there is significant

rain. Should water restrictions become necessary, affected households will be notified in writing.

The restrictions do not apply to those on the council reticulated supply, and water levels in the Maitai Dam, Maitai and Roding rivers are currently adequate.

It is the second time this summer that residents have been urged to conserve water. The first was during the dry spell at the end of last year, but rain last month averted restrictions.

The next two days are forecast to have sunny spells and light winds, with drizzle and northerlies developing on Friday.

PM at Grey Power talk

Prime Minister John Key is expected to speak to several hundred Nelson Grey Power members on Thursday.

The initiative for the meeting came from the Prime Minister's Office, Nelson Grey Power president Neville Male said.

There were several issues its older membership was concerned about including health, adequacy of housing, cost of living and superannuation, Mr Male said.

The meeting will be at the Annesbrook Church centre.

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