

Three Capes Track

Marketing or pragmatism – which will prevail?

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The eastern half of the Three Capes Track (a.k.a. The Two Capes Track) is now a *fait accompli*. It has been open to the public since just before Christmas. Initial media response has been generally very positive and it appears to have been fully booked for most of this time.

Superficially Three Capes appears a great success but let's examine aspects of the track more closely.

Photo (right): Aerial photo of Surveyors Cove hut complex on the Three Capes Track taken a few weeks before completion. It comprises two 24 bed bunkhouses, a large kitchen/dining room, staff accommodation, toilets, a helipad and lots of water tanks (the smaller white building towards the rear is assumed to be temporary construction worker accommodation). A firebreak extends around three sides of the complex – this will need to be re-burned at regular intervals. All three hut complexes are of similar size and layout. They are the largest infrastructure complexes ever constructed in a remote part of a Tasmanian national park and, as such, set a worrying precedent for future development in other national parks.



Clarification

The Three Capes Track, as originally proposed (see map below), comprised a western half and an eastern half, linked by a ferry crossing of Port Arthur. Each of the overnight nodes was intended to comprise both PWS huts and upmarket commercial accommodation.

Only the eastern half has been constructed. It is promoted as the Three Capes Track even though it only reaches two of the capes. It starts with ferry trip from Port Arthur to Denmans Cove and walkers are required to stay one night in each of the three PWS hut complexes at Surveyors Cove, Munro and Retakuna. The proposed parallel system of upmarket commercial huts is yet to be constructed.

Some Basic Geography



The Three Capes are Capes Raoul, Pillar and Hauy. All three have been accessible for many years via established walking tracks. Capes Raoul and Hauy could both be reached in about two hours on tracks which were of adequate standard for most people who were prepared to walk this distance. Cape Pillar is a longer walk – slightly too long for the average walker to do a daytrip so usually visited as a two or three day trip using one of several informal campsites. In all three cases, the main attraction was the spectacular coastal scenery near the cape itself.

In recent years the tracks to Capes Raoul and Hauy have been upgraded to make them more appealing to tourists with minimal bushwalking experience (the Cape Hauy Track is also the final section of the Three Capes walk).

The northern half of the old Cape Pillar Track (Fortescue to Tornado Ridge) remains open and unchanged but the southern half (Tornado Ridge to Cape Pillar) has become part of the Three Capes Track. This has involved substantial rerouting and reconstruction of the track to a much higher standard. The original route (Fortescue – Tornado Ridge – Cape Pillar) remains the most direct route to Cape Pillar and the upgrading has shortened the walking time by about an hour.

So the Two Capes Track incorporates a completely new section of track from Denmans Cove to Tornado Ridge, then follows existing (but substantially rerouted and upgraded) tracks to Cape Pillar and back over Mount Fortescue to Cape Hauy and Fortescue.

The spectacular coastal views which feature in most of the Three Capes publicity material are largely confined to the short section from Munro to Cape Pillar which can be reached most directly by the old track from Fortescue Bay.

The Three Capes Concept

The traditional access to the three capes has been to visit Capes Raoul and Hauy as daywalks and Cape Pillar as an easy two or three day walk using the pre-existing direct track from Fortescue and camping somewhere in the Munro – Retakuna area.

The crucial question which will make or break Threes Capes is whether the marketing and the huts on the new track are sufficient to attract walkers away from the traditional approach, which has been made quicker and easier by the track upgrades, does not cost \$495, and takes two or three days, not four!

When shown the original Three Capes proposal the reaction of most experienced local walkers has been something to the effect of “how on earth did anyone come up with this!”

Conceptually it was to be a wilderness walk with walkers staying in remote cabins each night, yet there was to be extensive contact with civilisation (Port Arthur and the ferry) at its midpoint – hardly conducive to a wilderness experience! It would have taken walkers within a very short distance of the road access to the Cape Raoul Track and entered civilisation at Port Arthur. Most walkers would want to use these as start or finish points for a walk, and if walkers were expected to pass through Port Arthur after a couple of nights on the track most would want to break the walk for a meal with fresh food, a beer, a shower and to sleep in private in a bed with sheets. This route is not compatible with the concept of a long distance walk in natural surroundings.

The official line is that the government remains committed to the completion of the Three Capes Track (i.e. construction of the western half) but it is to be hoped that they wait a while and review the strengths and weaknesses of the current track before extending it. Any remaining funding is likely to be required to construct campsites for independent walkers (see “independent walkers” below).

A far cheaper option for those walkers who want a longer trip is to continue north along the coast from Fortescue using the scenic coastal track constructed by the Hobart Walking Club decades ago.

Alternatives

The Tasman Peninsula has a major limitation as a location for a “long distance wilderness walk” – the undeveloped area is simply not big enough! See the comments above on the original proposal. The Two Capes Track that is now open is the longest wilderness walk that can possibly be squeezed into Tasman Peninsula. It would have been far more sensible to build on the area’s strengths by promoting a series of shorter walks (e.g. the TNPA’s proposed *Great Tasman Coastal Experience*) – see map below.



This might not have achieved the “iconic” status to which Three Capes aspires but it would have been far cheaper to construct and would not have been a gamble with \$25 million of public money. This more sensitive, low key approach would have had far lower impacts on the wilderness and natural values of Tasman National Park.

It would also have had the major benefit that visitors doing multiple shorter walks would use existing nearby accommodation, contributing to the local economy. In contrast, the Three Capes Walk with its easy four days, three nights schedule locks walkers into using accommodation within the national park and gives them little incentive to spend additional time on Tasman Peninsula.

Track impacts the wilderness and natural qualities of Tasman National Park

This area of the Tasman National Park previously had only a basic, but quite adequate, walking track and no huts. It was popular with local walkers who appreciated it as it was. Wilderness is, by definition, an absence of development so the new facilities obviously have a massive impact on the wild character of the area despite media claims to the contrary.

Track is a not yet proven success

The track has only just opened. The majority of the bookings are a response to the pre-opening publicity, including the extraordinary endorsement by Lonely Planet long before the track opened. In the longer term it will be judged on feedback from actual users whose concerns may include:

- There has been very little publicity of the independent walker option (see “independent walkers” below) so most walkers would have been unaware of this alternative when they made their booking;

- Only one standard of accommodation is currently available which is quite expensive and not particularly luxurious (see “Luxury Accommodation” below);
- The fixed schedule is likely to irritate fit walkers who may prefer to complete the walk in two long days rather than the mandated three and a half easy ones (experience from the Overland Track is that many walkers are overseas backpackers who are young, fit and time-poor – they prefer to complete the track in the minimum possible time).

Independent Walkers

The Overland Track provides the options of using the commercial Cradle Huts operation, a commercial camping trip, or walking independently using the PWS huts or camping (the fee for a permit to do so is \$200 – one quarter of the cost per night of Three Capes). In contrast, all the publicity relating to Three Capes has focussed on the commercial walking operation run by the PWS – pay a \$495 fee and use the provided huts (see “Luxury Accommodation” below). N.B. At Three Capes the PWS is running a commercial tourism operation – the Three Capes huts are not directly comparable to the PWS Overland Track huts. The PWS has already been criticised by commercial operators for unfairly excluding competition from Three Capes.

Despite a long standing commitment that local walkers could continue to access Cape Pillar by the old track and camping, little attention has been given to providing for such walkers – in particular, the very limited camping opportunities in the area and the possibility that many walkers may prefer this option. The pre-existing track from Fortescue with optional return over Mount Fortescue (no car shuffle required) provides the most direct access to the spectacular coastal views between Munro and Cape Pillar, and Capes Raoul and Hauy remain easy daywalks. i.e. all the “best” sections of the track can be visited without walking the entire track (and paying the associated fee).

There is currently some confusion over whether independent walkers may walk the entire track but there is no doubt that they may walk the eastern section without paying the \$495 fee as long as they have a current parks pass, they walk the track from west to east (to reduce the risk of spreading pathogens) and they do not stay in the huts. Once this becomes widely known (unsurprisingly PWS and the government appear reluctant to publicise this option) it is likely to result in overcrowding and overuse issues at the existing campsites. It also has the potential to undermine the financial viability of the track if many walkers who would otherwise have paid the fee for the Three Capes experience choose to use their own tent.

Standard of construction

Given the target market for the track it was not unreasonable to aim for “dry boot” standard but this has been interpreted rather too literally. Construction is mostly of a high standard but there is a remarkable amount of stonework and long sections of boardwalk over ground which would rarely be wet. Both are expensive to construct and most walkers prefer a natural surface where possible. The Cape Hauy section (constructed a couple of years earlier) was similarly criticised (especially for the

number of stone steps which were particularly unpopular with anyone with knee problems) but unfortunately this criticism did not lead to changes for the rest of the track. A slightly lower standard of construction would have been quite adequate and would have substantially reduced the overall cost.

“Luxury” Accommodation

Irrespective of the quality of the detail design, the hut complexes provide only basic communal accommodation. Each hut complex includes two 24 bed bunkhouses and a separate kitchen/dining hut. This is not comparable with an upmarket commercial operation which would provide private bedrooms and prepared meals, albeit at considerably greater cost. The Three Capes huts are slightly upmarket of the PWS Overland Track huts but they are also four times the price per night! Showers are not provided apart from a single outside shower at Munro. The area is generally short of water (a major reason for the large roof area of the huts is to maximise rainwater catchment) so provision of additional showers is unlikely and a swim is not an option because the only points where the sea can be accessed are at the start (Denmans Cove) and the end (Fortescue Bay).

Viability

The Three Capes Track is a very expensive gamble (\$25 million of public money), based on very limited market research and ignoring much professional advice. Even if the chosen concept proves popular it is hard to see it ever providing sufficient benefits to the Tasmanian economy to justify the initial expenditure. The key question is not “is the track a success?” but “could the \$25 million have provided a greater benefit to Tasmania if it had been spent on something else?”

The \$495 fee is unlikely to cover the running costs of the operation. Each of the three hut complexes is to be staffed throughout the year i.e. a minimum of three full time equivalent staff. All servicing (e.g. removal of sewage) requires the use of a helicopter and the hut complexes are likely to need additional water during summer, especially during the first summer of operation. i.e. running expenses will be substantial.

The target of 10,000 walkers per year has been mentioned (and is probably the minimum necessary if the fee is to cover routine expenses) but no justification is provided. The capacity of the walk is 48 departures per day. This equates to a capacity of around 17,500 walkers per year. i.e. the target requires 57% capacity averaged over the whole year. This seems very optimistic. Tasman Peninsula may be less exposed to the extremes of winter weather than the Overland Track but it not as sheltered as Freycinet either. It is a very bleak place when a cold south-westerly is blowing. There is a reason for place names like Hurricane Heath and Tornado Flat! It may not be a very popular walk outside the summer months.

A hidden cost is the PWS resources (e.g. staff time) that appear to have gone into the construction and promotion of the track. This will never show on any balance sheet but represents substantial resources that could have been better used elsewhere.

Environmental Sensitivity

It has been claimed that “beyond issues of scale, the accommodation is sensitive to the environment”. The sheer scale of the villages makes them insensitive to the environment and inappropriate in a remote area of a national park irrespective of the quality of the design and construction. It has also been claimed that the villages will “settle in the landscape once construction is complete”. This can never be permitted because fire safety dictates that an area immediately surrounding the huts must be permanently kept completely clear of vegetation.

The Future

It is possible that the marketing will win out and the Three Capes Track will become a popular iconic walking experience but this is a more probable future:

- The majority of walkers will access Cape Pillar by the old direct track from Fortescue and camping. Campsites will need to be constructed/upgraded (i.e. to provide tent platforms, water supply and toilets) in the Retakuna – Munro area to cater for the increased numbers, and the old track will need maintenance, if not upgrading;
- PWS will eventually withdraw from subsidising its unprofitable commercial walking operation and the hut complexes will be leased to a *bona fide* commercial operator for a peppercorn rent. Each 24 bed bunkhouse will be converted into two or three luxury double bedrooms for the new clients (this would actually be a good environmental outcome because it would avoid the construction of a second set of huts for a commercial operator);
- Visitors seeking a longer walk will continue north from Fortescue to Waterfall Bay using the scenic coastal track constructed by the Hobart Walking Club decades ago;
- Cape Raoul will remain a short, easy day walk separate from the walks east of Port Arthur. If the link between Cape Raoul and Port Arthur is constructed it may become a popular daywalk but few will use it to directly connect with the tracks east of Port Arthur; and
- Last, but not least, a government committee will inquire into how so much money came to be spent on such a poorly researched project with no proper business plan.

Postscript

Anecdotal evidence from the Three Capes Track, after a few weeks of operation, is that many walkers are bored and frustrated by the amount of time spent hanging around the huts.