

IN THE MATTER

of the Resource Management Act 1991

AND

IN THE MATTER

an application by **MAJAC TRUST** to vary parts of the Buller River Water Conservation Order relating to the Gowan River.

BRIEF OF EVIDENCE OF NEIL KENNETH DOUGHERTY

I, **NEIL KENNETH DOUGHERTY** of Westport state:

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 I am now aged 44 years and have for the last 20 years been involved in White Water Rafting and other tourist operations. In fact for the whole of my working life I have been particularly involved in various aspects of the tourism industry. I currently own and operate Buller Adventure Tours based in Westport and White Water Action Rafting Tours based at Murchison. We acquired those businesses in 1997 and 2003.

1.2 The businesses involve the use of some seven inflatable rafts and other inflatable kayaks as well as the operation of three jet boats on stretches of the Lower Buller. We employ 8 river guides and a total staff of 15 in the summer period. Rafting is seasonal. We tend to be out every day during summer but that drops away to much less than that over the winter period.

1.3 In terms of the rivers utilised, in the course of our operations we have used virtually all raftable rivers in the Buller catchment.

1.4 Inevitably, we have made decisions on which are the preferable and most environmentally interesting stretches of river for tourists and we tend to utilise, nowadays, the Ariki section of the Buller which starts about 1 km above O'Sullivan's Bridge, the Earthquake section which starts at the Brunner Memorial about 25-26kms south of Murchison and goes through to the Iron Bridge and various stretches of the upstream Buller, depending on conditions.

2.0 The majority of our custom tends to come from predominantly from Europe and particularly from British sources. We have considerable email enquiry

but booking tends to be on an on-the-spot basis by tourists calling in. We obtain a lot of references through brochures and the Lonely Planet as well as by road signs, and, of course, word-of-mouth is crucial.

2.1 To maintain and build a high level of interest and reputation, we have found that there is considerable interest, particularly from Europe and the United Kingdom in anything that is unique to New Zealand.

2.2 Accordingly, we make a considerable effort to have stop-offs for breaks during rafting trips, for example to explain flora such as tea-tree, silver ferns and the whole range of other native trees, and to enable short walks or excursions in the surrounding bush. Those sorts of experiences of the New Zealand bush are obviously highly regarded as part of the rafting experience so that the experience is not simply an experience of actual white water rafting thrill.

2.1 We are aiming to show them the uniqueness of the natural New Zealand environment, and that is clearly what the tourists are after. They are obviously able, to experience white water, as such, in any country, but they cannot have the combination of that and the New Zealand bush setting that we can offer them on the various stretches of the Buller that we raft.

3.0 **GOWAN RIVER USAGE**

3.1 When we took over the businesses, the Gowan was an integral part of a run that went down the Gowan and usually encompassed a run down the Buller to the Owen River. In summertime that would occur, probably, a couple of times a week during that first year or so. It was probably, though, in 1998 that we decided that we would no longer bother with the Gowan stretch. There were a number of reasons for that.

3.2 First there is a considerable extra drive to be able to start at the top of the Gowan and that is only worthwhile if it is providing something extra to the rafting client. The reality is that we did not consider then, and still do not, that the Gowan provides anything by way of addition to the unique New Zealand environment experience that we offer.

3.3 Regrettably it has become heavily infested with willows and blackberry on long stretches of the river and that has two effects.

- 3.4 First, the willow is not a New Zealand native obviously, and our overseas clients have frequently rafted stretches of rivers lined with willows. There is nothing unique to New Zealand for them in that.
- 3.5 Secondly, it adds a dangerous aspect to the rafting operation that is just not necessary if we have other stretches that are safer and which actually provide the better New Zealand environment experience.
- 3.6 For all of those combined reasons we decided to desist from operations down the Gowan and we have not operated commercial rafting trips down the Gowan since about the end of 1998.
- 4.0 The safety issue is becoming increasingly important. Safety has always been a prime consideration in our operations and if we have other similar or better stretches of river where we can offer the New Zealand unique environmental experience, then we will always opt for those.
- 4.1 I can certainly say that the danger from willows is such on the Gowan that if we were ever to raft it again it would be a river that would call for a very deliberate selection of the best and most experienced guides to take people down it. That was always our practice when we did raft in 1997-1998 and its danger level is such that one would have to ensure that again.
- 5.0 I am aware of the telemetry proposal to temporarily re-establish natural flows and if we were ever to change our reasons to utilise the river, I would not see that as being any problem for a commercial rafting operator.
- 5.1 It is a very simple matter to make the necessary telephone call as part of planned arrangements and that would not be a difficulty.
- 6.0 The time that would be involved in rafting from the Lake down to the bridge across the Gowan would be approximately something up to 45 minutes. The full length of the Gowan is usually about a 1-1 ½ hour run. A closure of one and a half hours with natural flow re-established would, therefore, allow more than sufficient time for a raft to pass the distance from intake point, which I understand is 2km below the Lake down to the road bridge half way down the Gowan.
- 7.0 I have no problems with the Variation Application sought in the limited terms sought with ability by telemetry to re-establish natural flows if required for rafting.

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NEIL KENNETH DOUGHERTY