

Loving our National Parks to death

The sacred ancestral peaks of the Tuwharetoa people were gifted to the nation for its first national park in 1887. Wreathed around in Maori folklore, Tongariro National Park is an area of great contrast: fire and ice, forest and tussock, volcano and glacier. Photographer and writer Craig Potton here reports on contrasts of a different sort: between those who believe that development in a national park is a good thing and those who warn against it.

Next year New Zealanders celebrate 100 years of Tongariro National Park. Much of the pre-publicity of these celebrations must make all conservationists fear for Tongariro and other national parks during the next century. Some government ministers, concessionaires and others in the tourist industry are making a great hullabaloo about increasing tourism as a soft way of boosting an always flagging economy and furthering peoples' enjoyment of the parks. It is not just the numbers of tourists (which will soon reach one million a year at Tongariro) but the impact

of some services that gives real cause for concern.

Today concessionaires are plugging relentlessly at the park's administrators to "open up" the park to larger ski areas, heliskiing, gondolas, better on-site accommodation and generally more development in the name of customer comfort and thrills. It is notable that existing ski-fields have a high impact on park philosophy and activity. Some rangers do not range much in winter. Their main job becomes one of servicing the skifields. At Whakapapa skifield it costs the park,

