

Brand Value

The work of ecolabelling
and place-branding
in New Zealand tourism



Justin Westgate

School of Environment, The University of Auckland

Ministry of Tourism Research Scholarship 2009

Summary of key findings

- An integral part of New Zealand's place-branding has been the employment of 'clean-green' associations. Within tourism ecolabelling is used as a support but its efficacy is put into question.
- Politically driven projects of marketing and branding have wide-ranging impacts – not just economic but also socio-cultural.
- New Zealand place and destination brands are both culturally and politically sensitive, and inherently tied to environmental perception and performance.
- Visitors have preformed expectations of their tourism experience, informed by marketing employing clean-green associations. There is expectation of active environmental management, and that this should be locally led – given that visitors lack in-depth knowledge of local environmental issues.
- Amongst mainstream tourism visitors there appears to be very low active (front-of-mind) engagement with sustainable practices, however, there is strong back-of-mind awareness.
- Ecolabels themselves appear to be underperformed in the marketplace, and show room for increased promotion and awareness.
- Tourism operators equate ecolabels with increased competitive advantage and see ethical and sustainable tourism of increasing future importance.
- Within the industry there are negative responses to rigid procedures of environmental certification, felt especially by smaller businesses. There is also a danger of ecolabelling and the term 'sustainability' being associated with greenwashing.
- The 100% Pure brand has strong aspirational potential that could be further employed as a banner to direct unified action towards increased sustainability.
- New Zealand tourism's strategic emphasis on increased visitor numbers and reliance on air travel presents a challenge to its sustainability commitment – which will require creative strategies to address.
- Voluntary eco-certification and its dependence on markets is problematic. While intended to provide consumer choice, the volatile nature of markets is antithetical to supporting long-term sustainability. 'Choice editing' (Lang 2007) presents useful framing. For New Zealand tourism this would call for increased intervention and regulation of sustainability standards. Sustainability certification and labelling would then become the default license to operate, supporting the industry's drive towards increased sustainable performance.
- New Zealand tourism and its place-branding are inherently interdependent, and both reliant on the deployment of clean-green images and associations. Sustainability is important for the tourism industry, however support is not fully extended to other sectors. The current Government's interruption of sustainability initiatives has implications to the perception of the wider place-brand, and indeed may work to undermine the favourable associations developed by the tourism sector.
- Crucially, New Zealand's environmental credentials are being more readily scrutinised, posing a threat to its clean-green image. Internal disapproval undermines support of local actors who have the capacity to support environmental performance and claims. International criticism works to destabilise the strength of the country-brand associations. Support for environmental claims needs to be tangible and widely supported.

Introduction

This research investigates the intersection between branding, environment, and tourism. New Zealand relies on the employment of unique place-based qualities to market itself internationally, which are critical to international trade and tourism. Over the past few decades government-initiated projects have developed branding and marketing campaigns to promote the country and specific trade sectors. Tourism is one such industry, which is important economically, and an example of world-leading practise in destination branding.

Tourism in New Zealand has seen a marked growth over the last few decades. While it offers a unique environment and tourist experiences, the recent growth of the industry can be linked to Tourism New Zealand's international marketing campaign '100% Pure New Zealand'. This has worked to position and promote the country as a unique tourism destination, employing a range of place and cultural associations. At the heart of the two campaigns is employment of 'clean and green' – environmentally sustainable – associations, which underline not just tourism marketing but wider place marketing.

Over the last few decades environmental sustainability has become of increasing international concern within the tourism industry. The concerns of a once niche eco-tourism market have increasingly become mainstream. For the New Zealand tourism industry sustainability is a key concern, and is deeply embedded within its business strategy. It is also well supported within the industry by various initiatives. Tourism ecolabels are one such example developed to support sustainable practice. While the international Green Globe award has been available since 1999, it is only recently – 2008 – that the official tourism quality agency, Qualmark, has launched a national award: Qualmark Green.

This research shows that tourist visitors and operators support ideas of sustainability, but despite widespread commitment to green ideals, ideas remain stubbornly underdeveloped and deployed within tourism, especially amongst consumers. Current ecolabel deployment relies on voluntary market uptake, and in the case of sustainability initiatives may not be capable of pricing the full social and environmental costs. This suggests the need for more direct market intervention. While the tourism industry has actively mobilised strategies to enhance sustainable operations, there is need for firm and consistent government support via policy and implementation on all levels to address challenges of the country's clean-green image. Given that the product here is New Zealand, and that projects are largely government-driven, intervention is both appropriate and entirely feasible

Literature

This research takes a critical cultural geographic approach. Recent geographic interest in tourism investigates the implications of travel and tourism as an industry, as well as a social and cultural activity. Of particular interest are the movements and activities that occur in and between places – especially in relation to globalised flows – but also how characteristics of place, as well as personal identities, are formed through relationships to place, landscape, and people. Place and identity are seen as dynamic in nature, and tourism is a key contemporary experience which acts to make place (Coleman and Crang 2002). In the New Zealand context, for example, Cloke and Perkins (2002) have investigated the increased commodification of tourism and the implications for the production and consumption of place.

Other literatures are also drawn upon. The developing geographies of brands and branding works to highlight the importance of ‘geographically entangled’ (Pike 2009) and reflexive market objects (Lury 2004) that operate at global scales.

Nation and place-branding literature discusses ways in which countries are competitively marketed as brands (Dinnie 2008, Anholt 2007). New Zealand is often employed as a successful case-study. Analyses, however, focus largely on application and lack a well-grounded theoretical and critical approach, which this research applies.

Ecolabelling within tourism has seen wide investigation as to differing frameworks and outcomes (Font and Buckley 2001, Honey 2002). New Zealand research has focused largely on international tourist impact, as well as on ecotourism, rather than mainstream tourism.

Methodology

A critical cultural-theoretical framework was employed, with an empirically-grounded case-study using a qualitative mixed-method approach. Of particular interest was how market objects (labels and brands), practices (policies and procedures) and subjects (visitors and industry operators) perform tourism spaces into being through their relationality. Taking a broad perspective – rather than a simple market-share analysis – encompasses the range of objects, actors, and processes involved, and helps reveal the complex set of relations and their significance. My political interest was in examining how the work of ‘greened’ and ‘greening’ market objects promote environmentally-sensitive practices and encourage environmentally-conscious subjects.

Analysis was applied to tourism projects engaging with sustainability and branding, providing a critical understanding of political motivation as well as symbolic engagement. Two

key mainstream tourism sites were used as case-studies: Rotorua and Queenstown. These provided indicative samples of both visitors and tourism operators. Via semi-structured interviews, visitors to mainstream activity sites were surveyed on their perceptions of the country, their tourism experience, and awareness of ecolabelling. Tourism operators were similarly interviewed to gauge perceptions from an industry standpoint. As well, market deployment of ecolabels was surveyed, and typical tourism marketing collateral analysed. This wider mix allowed the research to comment on how projects and market objects are more subtly entangled with place and how it is made – and in this instance with interests of sustainability.

Research questions

The particular questions this research set out to answer were:

- What are ecolabels, and what work do they do in wider New Zealand destination branding?
- What cultural and geographical images and associations are mobilised via place and environmental branding?
- How are tourism subjectivities framed within environmental branding, and how do accepted tourism subject groups (international, domestic, industry) understand and respond to destination branding and ecolabelling in New Zealand?
- How does ecolabelling within tourism work to support New Zealand's sustainability commitment?

Findings

Political and strategic dimensions

Analysis of key politically driven strategies and projects showed the following:

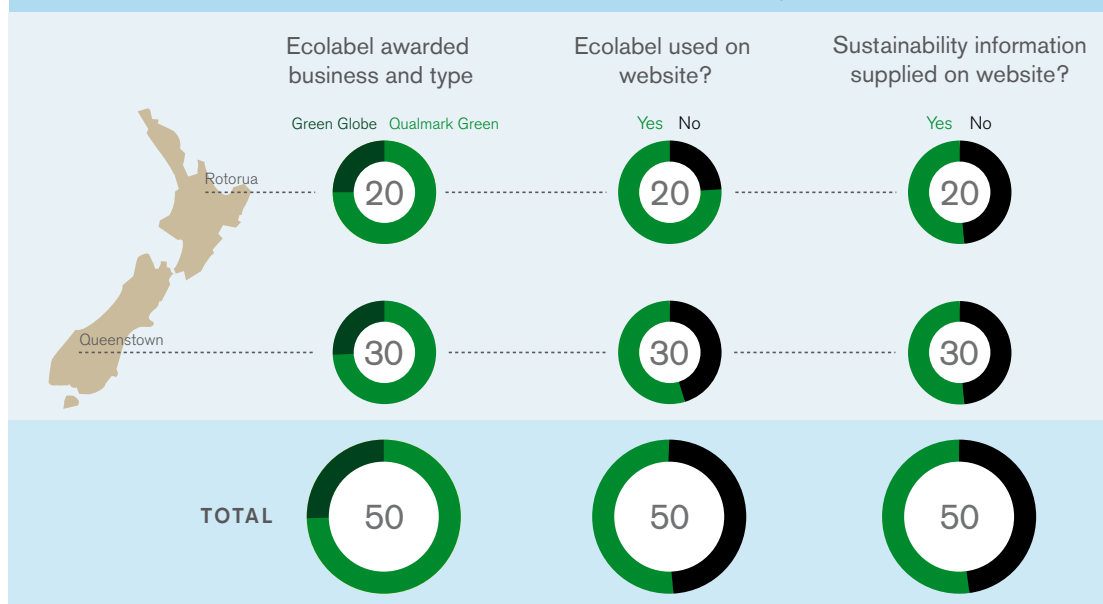
- New Zealand's 'clean-green' image and its associations are a critical element in the country's international marketing. It is a key component for competitive advantage for export industries and tourism.
- Government strategy has supported implementation of sustainability policy via a range of initiatives, with key direction given via *Sustainable Development of New Zealand: Programme of Action* produced by the Labour government in 2003.
- The New Zealand tourism industry has implemented initiatives to support sustainable practice. Environmental sustainability is a key component of the *New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2015*. The strategy is developed through a combined effort between the private sector and government, and informed by consultation with industry groups, local government, central government, and interest groups.
- The Strategy highlights entanglements of image and branding. Sustainability is tied with the country's clean-green image, which is relied upon for overseas marketing. The 100% Pure tourism marketing campaign relies upon clean-green associations and images. Quality labels are employed via the Qualmark standard, which includes environmental considerations.
- 100% Pure is seen as responsible for the increase in international tourist numbers to New Zealand, as well as increased earnings. The campaign is frequently cited as a successful tourism marketing case-study.
- 100% Pure has entangled itself with New Zealand culture, sport, fashion, and arts in a bid to promote the country as a travel destination
- There have been critical responses to the 100% Pure campaign both locally and overseas. New Zealand's environmental performance has increasingly been put under scrutiny as global environmental concerns have become a focus.
- There has been a convergence of New Zealand branding projects – New Zealand New Thinking and 100% Pure – over the last decade. The success of 100% Pure presents an opportunity to extend its application from tourism to wider nation-branding.

Industry ecolabel deployment:

In New Zealand tourism environmental certification is available through two assessment and labelling schemes: Green Globe and Qualmark Green. Green Globe is an internationally developed and recognised award, available since 1999. Qualmark Green is a New Zealand-based award, developed and operated by the industry's official tourism quality agency Qualmark New Zealand, supported by Tourism New Zealand and other government agencies.

A survey of eco-certified tourism operators' employment of labels showed that only half used them on websites. A similar proportion provided information on the organisation's sustainability strategy.

Figure 1: summary of ecolabel employment, as well as provision of sustainability information, observed on eco-certified tourism operator websites in the case-study regions.



On-site label deployment:

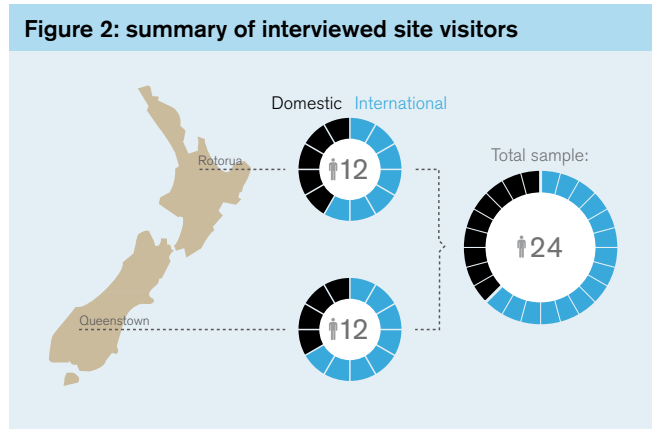
- Site surveys at tourism operations showed potential issues with on-site label use. There was competition for label space as well as visitor attention. Ecolabels were positioned peripherally, even within operations with a clear environmental interest.
- Guidelines for labelling best-practice were not immediately evident or clear with regards to on-site deployment and therefore left to individual operator discretion.

Case-study interviews

Interviews were undertaken with visitors to mainstream tourism venues, as well as with tourism operators. These provided indicative samples of key tourism groups, giving insight into key perceptions of place, environmental awareness, labels, and tourism industry.

Tourism visitors

Independent travellers were targeted, rather than those on organised tours, as these had engaged in a conscious decision-making process of which sites to visit. Visitors were interviewed at key tourism venues in each case-study region.



Clean-green awareness:

- There was a low awareness amongst international visitors of New Zealand's 'clean-green' reputation.
- Domestic visitors were all aware of the country's clean-green reputation and voiced strong opinions as to the constitution of this.
- Clean-green reputation was not by itself a strong factor in reason for visiting, but acted as a support in decision making.

Because New Zealand is... it's selling point is 'clean and green', so then the environment-friendly tourist attraction is very important.

NZ (Taiwanese) visitor, female, ~25yrs

Kiwis are just pigs. The country is just a disgrace as far as tourism... you know – the cleanness of it. The only reason why we're clean and green is 'cos we've got open spaces and a small population... and so we win by default... but as far as 'clean-green' – I think the country needs a good kick in the arse.

NZ European visitor, male, ~40yrs

Environmental awareness:

- Visitors used surface readings to gauge the environmental status of a destination – specifically: scenic beauty, lack of rubbish, and pollution.
- A large proportion of visitors – two-thirds – felt it was important that their tourism activity be environmentally-friendly.
- Very few – only 2 of 24 – had actively sought or had used eco-certified tourism activities or services.

- There was extremely low recognition of eco-labels: no recognition of Green Globe, and only domestic visitor recognition (two) of Qualmark Green.
- There was a high recognition of the Fern Mark and Qualmark label, but confusion of what this indicated, as well as confusion of the Qualmark with the Qualmark Green label.
- Visitors were mostly unsure of how well the New Zealand tourism industry managed itself sustainably. A small proportion thought it did a relatively good job, although room for improvement existed.

I kind of assume that I'm not going to have to check for the environmental safety precautions – the tour directors, the government, the locale (operators) [will manage the environmental impact]... 'cos if they stress it too much then the tourism goes away 'cos it will go away – your beauty will go away...

American visitor, female aged 50.

Tourism operators

In-depth interviews were undertaken with tourism operators. These were selected as mainstream, family-oriented, and activity-based. Two were located in Rotorua, three in Queenstown, and another which, while Auckland-based, operated regionally. Operations had a range of environmental certification, from Green Globe, Qualmark Green Silver and Gold, sustainable charter affiliation, as well as 'none currently but working towards certification.'

Clean-green awareness:

- New Zealand's 'clean-green' associations were linked to the natural environment and the protection of this.
- The natural environment was understood to be of key importance to the tourism industry.
- Protection of the environment was seen as an imperative – not just from a business standpoint – but also ethically motivated.
- There was awareness of problems of mixing environment and market, specifically via insincere employment or greenwashing; and a desire to avoid this in business practice –both at the industry and country level.

Ecolabels:

- Ecolabels were seen as a support to competitive market advantage.
- The bureaucratic procedures of certification compliance were criticised as complicated and rigid, presenting barriers especially for smaller businesses with fewer resources.
- Concern was voiced over the lack of market awareness of ecolabels.

Conclusions and implications

Geographies of tourism and brand entanglements

Each of the three connecting areas of investigation – tourism, environment, and branding – can be seen as both manifestations as well as agents of globalising processes. Taking a cultural geography approach, this research highlights the dynamic relationships that exist amongst political projects, markets, brand objects, cultural symbols, people, and the physical environment. This dynamic mix of relations, configured via tourism, highlights how particular ideas are developed, employed, circulated, and performed not just to represent place but to actively make it.

- An integral part of New Zealand’s place-branding has been the employment of ‘clean-green’ association. Within tourism, ecolabelling is used as a support, but its efficacy is put into question.
- Politically-driven projects of marketing and branding have a wide range of impacts – not just economic but also socio-cultural. Market projects and objects are not merely representative but rather work to perform and make both place and identity. For example, tourism’s 100% Pure branding not only employs images of the country in a particular light but encourages particular performances congruent with these.
- Brands are responsive to their markets. For New Zealand these are international and external. Local responses to 100% Pure highlights the sensitivity of the brand to environmental performance, and the politically contentious nature of claims implicit in the brand. They also point to domestic cultural sensitivities to how the brand performs the country, and hints at the politics of making claims about nationhood.
- While brands representing place are instigated by governments, they are largely developed and strategically managed by corporate agencies. In effect, the imaging and making of place is passed over to corporate agents.
- Ethics will continue to develop as an important factor in brand marketing strategy. When the brand is *place*, and is led by government, consideration of impacts at all scales is required. Ultimately, New Zealand needs to be able to support its brand promises.
- There is potential to ‘open up’ branding practice to public involvement and scrutiny. Where brand is place, it is important to consider the value of local ‘buy-in’.

Environmental performance in New Zealand tourism

- Visitors appear to develop an expectation of their experience: they want to see what has been ‘promised’ in the marketing material. This is an important finding because, given the employment of clean-green images as a key component of tourism market and the correlation between pristine scenic landscapes and environmental sustainability, there is also an expectation of active environmental management.
- Visitors feel it is unrealistic to expect non-locals to have in-depth knowledge of environmental issues. This supports the need for an industry-led implementation of environmental sustainability, as well as to effectively promote programmes and present issues in a straight-forward manner.
- While previous research suggests that New Zealand attracts a greener type of visitor (see Towner 2006), amongst mainstream tourism visitors there appears a very low active engagement with sustainable practices.
- Importantly, while issues of sustainability appear absent front-of-mind, there is strong back-of-mind awareness. Even when, as is the case in the New Zealand tourism industry, business actors and industry organisations take it upon themselves to implement more sustainable practice, gaps in visitor awareness and behaviour needs ongoing attention. This may be through further education, but could employ more nuanced approaches such as suggested by behavioural economics (see Diamond and Vartiainen 2007)
- Ecolabels themselves appear to be underperformed in terms of visitor recognition and market promotion. Awareness of ecolabels was extremely low amongst both domestic and international visitors, and appear to be unevenly deployed by operators. While it may be up to the awarding body to also promote their label, a real opportunity for label promotion works through tourism operator marketing collateral, as well as on-site. Potential exists to enhance label performance by more effectively engaging with available promotion channels.
- Ecolabelling is perceived by operators as a vehicle for increased competitive advantage. Potentially this might arise from cost saving, a price premium, or as a positive factor in attracting customers. For an advocate, ecolabelling has the potential to create a wider awareness of the relationships of place (environment) and resource use, among producers and consumers. In its promotion, as well as potential profit, it causes operators to consider the future and future impacts – of the environment – but also of business. It can enhance awareness and support for

environmental issues and considerations – and a general commitment to supporting the development of a more sustainable tourism industry.

- The evidenced operator support shows that ecolabels present an opportunity for improved environmental support from below – that is, market-driven. The sample of mainstream tourism operations are successful commercial ventures but see in their tourism products and business practices opportunities to pursue their diverse and particular environmental commitments. Tourism, in this framing, may be seen as a platform for each to pursue their mix of desires and commitments, rather than environmentalism being introduced as a constraint or opportunity in an otherwise economically rational business operation, or a response to a policy initiative.
- Assumptions made about the functioning of ecolabels are highlighted. They are understood, and indeed are assumed to operate as objects that communicate between the demand and supply of environmentally-conscious tourism. Though inadvertently labels have become a self-generating educative project.
- There are negative responses to the rigid procedures of certification. These frustrations have the potential to induce a good-versus-bad attitude towards ecolabelling. It presents questions as to whether a potential unfairness of scale works against smaller operators.
- Greenwashing remains highly contentious and has the potential to create mistrust within the industry, as well as potential loss of consumer trust. However, while these fears exist, at work is a more subtle set of processes than is considered in critiques of greenwashing. First, green claims are expected and second, they can do positive work.
- 100% Pure’s aspirational brand value presents an opportunity to be employed as a banner to direct unified action towards increased sustainability.
- The challenge is for Government to see this potential and engage an integrated strategy that is supported in action. Tourism is a key constituent of place-branding, but the support of wider branding that relies on clean-green associations requires deployment of sustainability commitments at all levels.

Tourism and sustainability policy in New Zealand

Tourism is an important sector for New Zealand economically but, as well, draws strongly on cultural threads that tie it to imaginaries of place and identity. The particular projects employed via branding projects demonstrate the entanglements of tourism with place and environment.

- The New Zealand tourism industry has responded to environmental concerns through a range of sustainability initiatives, and is supported by the *New Zealand Tourism Strategy 2015*. Projects have been developed by both government and industry, and via collaborations between actors. There is evidence of real support for increased sustainable management within the industry. It is understood as a critical issue currently, and more so for the future.
- A problem for New Zealand is that international tourism is built on air travel, and the strategic emphasis is for increasing visitor numbers. Sustainability initiatives operate only on onshore activities and voluntarily. Carbon emissions are but one factor in the sustainability equation, but they are a key constituent for long-haul destinations. It is argued that there should be an emphasis on reducing air travel (Kollmuss et al 2006). Such an issue will require further creative responses to address.
- Qualmark Green works on the recognition and success of the Qualmark quality label. It presents a viable option for more mainstream tourism operations to engage in sustainable practices, rather than appealing largely to eco-tourism ventures. The value of this is with mainstream tourism being inherently entangled with clean-green imaginaries, and ecolabelling is one way to enhance sustainable performance.
- Voluntary eco-certification and its reliance on market drive is problematic. While intended to provide consumer choice, the volatile nature of markets is antithetical to supporting long-term sustainability. ‘Choice editing’ (Lang 2007) presents a useful framework. For New Zealand tourism this would suggest increased intervention and regulation of sustainability standards. Sustainability certification and labelling would then become the default license to operate. Such a move would positively reinforce the environmental perception of the country, supporting authentication of New Zealand’s ‘clean-green’ placebrand.

- New Zealand tourism and its place-branding are inherently interdependent, and both reliant on the deployment of clean-green images and associations. Sustainability is an important focus for the tourism industry, however support is not fully extended to other sectors. The current government's reduced focus on sustainability has implications to the perception of the wider place-brand, and indeed may work to undermine the favourable associations developed by the tourism sector.
- Crucially, New Zealand's environmental credentials are being more readily scrutinised, posing a threat to its clean-green image. Internal disapproval undermines support of local actors who have the capacity to support environmental performance and claims. International criticism works to destabilise the strength of the country-brand associations.
- For the tourism industry the challenge is to mobilise a more positive framing of the country's image, and to catalyse promotion and education of sustainability initiatives as well as improved practices.

References

- Anholt, S. 2007. *Competitive Identity: The New Brand Management for Nations, Cities and Regions*. Palgrave Macmillan, UK.
- Cloke, P. and Perkins, H. 2002. Commodification and Adventure in New Zealand Tourism. *Current Issues in Tourism* 5(6): 521-549.
- Coleman, S. and Crang, M. 2002. Grounded Tourists, Travelling Theory, in Coleman, S. and Crang, M. (eds.) *Tourism: Between Place and Performance*. Berghahn Books, New York, NY.
- Diamond, P. and Vartiainen, H. 2007. *Behavioral Economics and Its Applications*. Princeton University Press, NJ.
- Dinnie, K. 2008. *Nation Branding: Concepts, Issues, Practice*. Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford.
- Font, X. and Buckley, R. (eds) 2001. *Tourism Ecolabelling: Certification and Promotion of Sustainable Management*. CABI Publishing, Wallingford.
- Honey, M. (ed.) 2002. *Ecotourism and certification: setting standards in practice*. Island Press, Washington, DC.
- Kollmuss, A. and Bowell, B. 2006. *Voluntary Offsets For Air-Travel Carbon Emissions: Evaluations and Recommendations of Voluntary Offset Companies*. Tufts Climate Initiative. Accessed 5 January, 2010: http://www.yale.edu/sustainability/necsc/Climate%20Change%20science/TCI_Carbon_Offsets_Paper_April-2-07.pdf
- Lang, T. 2007. *Food security or food democracy? Pesticides News* 78: 12-16.
- Lury, C. 2004. *Brands: The Logos of the Global Economy*. Routledge, London.
- Pike, A. 2009. Geography of brands and branding. *Progress in Human Geography* 33(5): 619-645.
- Towner, N. 2006. *Ecotourism and ecolabelling: a New Zealand case study*. Thesis (MSc, Environmental Management), University of Auckland, Auckland.

This report summarises research undertaken for a MA in Geography at The University of Auckland. It was funded by a postgraduate scholarship provided by the Ministry of Economic Development.

Note: this document is an edited version of the submitted report. [16/04/2019]

The author may be contacted at: justinwestgate@gmail.com