

## Otago Central Rail Trail

This is the story of the Otago Central Rail Trail which wends its way from Clyde, in Central Otago, to Middlemarch in the Dunedin City District.

It has been one of dedication and perseverance by those who originally thought of the concept.

The final train went over the branch line to Central Otago in 1990. The line was closed due to a more efficient roading network. A group of four people had a passion for developing a tourism product to enhance the local community and economy. They saw the possibilities that the rail corridor could provide and raised the concept of a trail which would cover 160km. Those four people formed the Otago Central Rail Trail Trust.

The Department of Conservation saw the potential for outdoor recreation and acquired the rail land in 1993. Six years and over \$850,000 were spent preparing and upgrading the closed railway by DOC and The Trust. This involved re-decking the trails 68 bridges, several of these over 100m in length, and ensuring that these structures were safe for walkers and cyclist such as the addition of hand rails. All the original sleepers, rails and crushed rock ballast were removed. Users now find the track similar to a good gravel road. The difference is there are no motor vehicles or steep hills. To complete the trail varies depending on your fitness, however, you should allow 3-5 days if you plan to cycle and 5-7 days if you wish to walk. Alternately you can visit sections of the trail as part of day trips as there are many points to access and exit the trail.

Since its opening in 2000, the trail has developed from a basic track with minimal interpretation and support services to the provision of "ganger sheds" for shelter, interpretation, toilets and water sources to meet user's needs. It has gone from several thousand people users when it opened, to now over 14,000 doing the whole trail and over 50,000 doing parts of it each year.

So what have been some of the benefits of the trail? A number of businesses have sprung up to meet the visitors' needs for food, accommodation and other activities to participate in. Specific businesses have developed, such as Trail Journeys and Altitude Adventures, which provide support services to trail users. Side trips such as curling, farm visits, high country tours and horse riding now provide trail users with a variety of other activities to discover the Central experience.

When the trail was originally proposed, there was considerable opposition in the local communities. As many (or some) of you will remember, the 1990's was a time when rural economies were in bad shape and this was equally true for the local communities in Central Otago. Many of the 70 local farmers and landholders who border the trail could not see what the attraction would be of travelling along a disused railway that goes through one of the driest and harshest landscapes in New Zealand.

Now many of those same farmers and landowners provide services such as farm stays, families running cafes, farm visits or commercial accommodation. All these services make a strong destinational product. For some farmers, the income from tourism is now greater than the traditional wool cheque.

A key change has been in the local communities. The trail now provides a focus for communities. It has reinvigorated small communities like Waipiata, Oturehua and Omakau. It has helped save many of the local pubs that were suffering from their reliance on a shrinking local population. It has ensured the long term viability of community services.

The chief change can be exemplified in the discussions now held in local pubs. Locals could not see that the trail would be so popular. In the old days discussions were about how bad farming was or what was the latest silly proposal from one government service or another to now discussing what they like about the area. One farmer is quoted as saying that for 70 years he never appreciated the Hawkdun Mountains (which he lives at the base of) until he discussed it with visitors. Visitors in their midst have made them look at themselves and why they live in Central Otago.

It is discussions like these and combined with other conversations which have culminated in the development of our regional identity "Central Otago - A World of Difference" which has attempted to identify what people value about the area and would like to see retained. This has resulted in a vision that the local community are passionate about and wish to share with visitors. Hearing a clear message also helps new residents and businesses to align their thinking as to what the community wants.

Local communities now think about their current lifestyle, what they like, what they want to further develop and how this may occur so as to retain the integrity of this place. At a local community level, these discussions have occurred through the process of developing community plans.

A destination management approach is being taken in how organisations such as the Central Otago District Council and Tourism Central Otago operate and promote the area. The values and expectations of local communities are apparent and it becomes clear where there are differing expectations.

The way in which Tourism Central Otago markets the region is determined by the way in which communities want to be promoted. All the players in the community, whether it's Council, Tourism Central Otago, businesses or educational institutions, all deliver the same message on the regions values. This then provides a consistent message to both new residents, visitors and businesses of local community expectations and how to undertake new activities that are in keeping with its values. This all contributes to retaining the integrity of what is important to our community.

For the rail trail and the communities of Central Otago there are challenges. However, these challenges can be overcome when we have a clear idea of what we value and want to retain. Through a destination management approach, the community and all agencies work together. When we look back to where the community was in the mid 1990s to where it is now, these are positive challenges and help further strengthen our communities.

The Otago Central Rail Trail is a positive example of how the tourism industry can be strengthened through having strong relationships with all sectors of the community. A

destination management approach will help preserve the uniqueness of the Otago Central Rail Trail experience; however, without the communities buy in, we will not have a strong tourism industry.