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Heli-hunting in Mt Cook National Park

This submission is made to DOC Canterbury and the Canterbury Conservation Board by the Council of Outdoor Recreation Associations (CORANZ), on behalf of its members, apart from the New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association, which are making their own submission.

CORANZ is the national association of seven major national outdoor recreation associations – New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association, New Zealand Federation of Freshwater Anglers, New Zealand Four Wheel Drive Association, Option4 – Recreational Sea Fishers' Trust, Public Access New Zealand, New Zealand Bowhunters Society, New Zealand Salmon Anglers Association; Jet Boating New Zealand, and the regional Marlborough Recreational Fishers Association.

CORANZ member associations have approximately 20,000 members in total, and represent one of the larger membership alliances of outdoor recreation associations in New Zealand. Many of our members use public lands in the South Island, that are proposed for heli-hunting.

Summary: CORANZ is utterly opposed to any heli-hunting in New Zealand for the following reasons:

1 Heli-hunting is NOT a recreational activity. The DOC discussion paper claims heli-hunting is a recreational activity. This is not the case.

All outdoor recreational activities require development of outdoor skills eg bushcraft or ground-hunting skills and fitness, just as for sport eg rugby, cricket, soccer etc. Recreational hunting requires a significant level of fitness, ability to travel over rough ground, bushcraft skills to find one's way, and to stop getting lost etc. There are also firearm skills including the ability to make a clean kill of the animal. No such skills are required for heli-hunting, as the helicopter either overflies the animal and the trophy seeker shoots it, or the helicopter drives the trophy towards the trophy seeker.

As with other recreations and sports the franchiser or national association of the recreational activity is the arbiter and authority of the rules under which the activity is legitimate and safe. The arbiter of whether heli-hunting is a recreational activity is the national big game hunting association, New Zealand Deerstalkers' Association (NZDA). It is not DOC, which in any case usually knows very little about the rules and ethics of recreational activities.

NZDA opposes heli-hunting for a number of reasons including - it is usually extremely cruel to the animals, does not obey "fair chase" rules, an important hunting ethical consideration (one required in most recreational hunting countries worldwide), and because of the uncontrollable interference it causes to ground-based recreational hunters and other recreational users on public lands administered by DOC.

Ethics and rules are important in recreation and sport. It is not rugby if forward passes and tackling the man without the ball are allowed. In mountaineering, helicoptering to the top of a mountain is not considered an ascent. Similarly, not allowing fair chase for a trophy animal removes its trophy value. CORANZ understands some heli-hunting clients have been surprised and disappointed by the lack of hunting ethics in New Zealand heli-hunting.

It is clear that heli hunting is NOT recreational hunting. Can one imagine lions or leopards being allowed to be shot in Africa from a helicopter?. Only in New Zealand, by the sound of DOC.

2 Heli-hunting is not a WARO (commercial wild animal recovery) activity: The discussion paper claims heli-hunting is a WARO activity. This is not the case. WARO activity involves wild animal recovery for meat processing or live capture. Heli-hunting is not driven by wild animal recovery, but by the high fees able to be recovered from guaranteeing tahr or chamois trophy seekers a trophy.

DOC has gone out of its way to separate heli-hunting from WARO activity in its new "framework", so it can charge fees for trophy animals taken, highlighting this major difference from WARO, where no animal harvest fee is charged.

Heli-hunting is illegal with a WARO concession. The WARO concessions issued prior to December 2009 clearly state that WARO activities "*EXCLUDE the carriage of recreational hunters or fare-paying passengers.*" The December 2009 WARO concessions likewise exclude heli-hunting. DOC has created heli-hunting as a separate concession category, so that it can charge significant fees per animal taken.

3 Heli-hunting is irrelevant for wild animal control: Wild animal population growth-rates are determined by the number of females in the herd. Heli-hunting, which is targeted solely at "mature trophy males" has no impact on the birth-rate of the herd. Consequently heli-hunting is irrelevant to wild animal population control. However taking the best trophy males can gut the trophy genetics.

4 DOC cannot enforce heli-hunting concessions: DOC's inability to enforce WARO concessions is apparent from the lack of enforcement of WARO activities in areas forbidden for WARO eg recreational hunting areas (RHAs), times and places where WARO is forbidden eg Nelson Lakes National Park from 1 November to 31 May annually, etc. One prosecution of Mt Hutt Helicopters, an open-and-shut case where three infringements of WARO conditions occurred, failed, mainly because of DOC's incompetence in bringing the case.

Recent good footage of Bill Hales helicopter (Alpine Springs Helicopters) HSD, is available on Utube at

http://s283.photobucket.com/albums/kk311/hamish247/?action=view¤t=ChopperIntheRHA_0001.flv

It was taken by recreational trapper and hunter, and communicated to DOC Waimakariri Area Manager Kingsley Timpson on 17 November 2009. In his email the hunter said:

"My name is Hamish Sutton and I am writing to inform you of the illegal poaching activities of Bill Hales and associates at Alpine Springs Helicopters.

I live in Christchurch and I am a keen hunter and trapper. I do a lot of my hunting and tramping in the Lake Sumner Forest Park primarily because of the 45,000ha RHA (recreational hunting area). This area like all RHA's is set aside as a no commercial WARO (wild animal recovery operation) zone and is one of 8 RHA's in New Zealand.

On the 12th of November, 2009 at approximately 9:00am, 26 km walk in from the road and a 2 hours walk from the valley floor on to the tops my cousin and I witnessed the illegal poaching and recovery of deer by a blue Hughes 369D (rego HSD) with black red tipped rotors flown by Bill Hales at Alpine Springs Helicopters based in Hamner Springs. The area the deer were shot and recovered is Hot Springs Stream in the Hope River catchment in the Lewis Pass and is well inside the known RHA boundary available on the Department of Conservation GIS website. The occupants of the machine were clearly breaking the law by poaching from the RHA

Investigation of the hut visitor's book at the Top Hope Hut confirms that other hunting parties had also witnessed poaching by this helicopter and crew and the offending has been taking place over a considerable period of time from this area.

I would like to see the offending pilot and shooter charged and all current WARO permits suspended. I will happily testify and provide as much evidence as possible to help with the investigation."

DOC Canterbury have done nothing about suspending or cancelling Hales WARO licence. This is symptomatic of DOC's desire not to constrain WARO operators as required by their concession. The people who miss out are recreational hunters, who no longer go to the Lake Sumner RHA because it has been shot out by Hales. DOC has good conditions on paper, but refuse to enforce them.

Hales should have been reporting the location of the animals shot by a GPS system to the NZ Food Safety Authority. There is no sign that he was doing that accurately, or that DOC has asked for that information. This supports CORANZ's contention that the GPS system for identifying where animals are taken is easily falsified.

If DOC Canterbury is unable or unwilling to enforce WARO conditions, it is clear it will also have no intention of enforcing heli-hunting conditions. Heli-hunting activities are far more difficult to enforce than WARO. In any case, verifying that heli-hunting clients shoot the animal from the ground (as required by the heli-hunting concession) is impossible to enforce, and is simply put in there for DOC "public relations" reasons.

Besides being issued with a new WARO concession in December 2009, Hales is also an applicant for a heli-hunting concession, yet to be issued, and proposes taking 20 tahr and 70 chamois annually.

CORANZ concludes: DOC Canterbury has no intention of enforcing the terms of either WARO or heli-hunting concessions, and probably cannot do it even if it wanted to. Hence allowing heli-hunting in Aoraki Mt Cook National Park is allowing a totally uncontrolled activity.

This is not in the interests of recreational hunters in the Park, or of other recreational users, who will suffer from intrusion and noise from helicopters searching for and chasing tahr and chamois in the Park. Recreational hunters on the ground will find themselves competing with a spotting and driving helicopter and helicopter disturbance and interference, in their hunting. It will give the Board

a bad name, as well as the Park and the South Island. The South Island of New Zealand will become the recreational hunting hellhole of the Pacific. Not 100% Pure at all.

5 Recreational Hunters being excluded by uncontrolled WARO and heli-hunting: Hales has illegally removed so many deer from the Lake Sumner Recreational Hunting Area, and “no-go” WARO areas in the Forest Park, as to stop most recreational hunters going there. He and his ilk should have no problems forcing recreational hunters out of the areas DOC currently allows recreational tahr hunting in AMCNP. This may be one of their goals – get rid of potential witnesses.

6 DOC avoiding its duty to foster and encourage recreational hunting: DOC has a duty to foster recreation (S 6 (e) Conservation Act), and a General Policy to encourage recreational hunting [GPNP S 4.3 (i)]. Allowing heli-hunting does neither of these things. Nor is it covered by [GPNP s 4.3 (i)], as heli-hunting is not commercial hunting.

7 Animal cruelty issues: Chasing a male tahr or chamois around with a helicopter usually means its hoofs get badly damaged, as well as being badly stressed by being chased. The animal usually collapses as a result. CORANZ understands overseas trophy seekers have been concerned by this damage, because of the animal cruelty. And because the damaged hoofs do not look good when the animal is stuffed by a taxidermist.

8 Illegal heli-hunting activity: Heli-hunting companies claim they have been carrying out heli-hunting for several years. Such heli-hunting is clearly illegal under a WARO concession, as discussed above. So the helicopter pilots have been acting illegally. DOC has presumably not had enough evidence from the helicopter operators to verify these illegal activities. If it had then DOC would have presumably taken the cases to court. Consequently the cases are likely to be hearsay, unless the operators can substantiate them.

If the operators can substantiate them, then the Department, at least in Canterbury, has been colluding with the operators. The Board, as the Citizen and user watchdog, should be very concerned about such behaviour, and express its concern that an illegal activity should be condoned, by DOC, and presumably secretly encouraged by the Department.

This behaviour is continuing, as DOC intends to allow the heli-hunting applicants to carry out heli-hunting without a concession eg up to April or May or more likely later, until the concessions are either approved or declined. This is outrageous behaviour.

Recently DOC prosecuted a foreign tour guide for operating in Kahurangi National park without a concession. It seems heli-hunting operators are not subject to the Conservation Act.

9 Major interference with other recreational users: DOC claims to have actively recruited 16 helicopter company applicants and 33 helicopters for heli-hunting. The Regional Conservator is going to the SCI Conference in the United States to promote New Zealand’s heli-hunting. At present the total trophy chamois, tahr, goats and deer proposed by the applicants is 1474 chamois, 1254 tahr, 300 goats and 205 deer. This totals 3200 animals. This translates to over 6,000 hours of extra helicopter time on lands in the South Island administered by DOC. To the extent that Mt Cook National Park is also opened up, there will be significant increased air activity in the Park.

Conclusion: Given the adverse impacts of heli-hunting on other recreational activities, especially recreational hunting, but also climbing and tramping, and the fact that heli-hunting is not a recreational nor commercial WARO activity, CORANZ urges the Board and Department not to allow heli-hunting in AMC National Park. CORANZ is also concerned that DOC is too close to helicopter applicants.

Yours sincerely

Dr Hugh Barr, Secretary Copy to: Peter Dunne MP