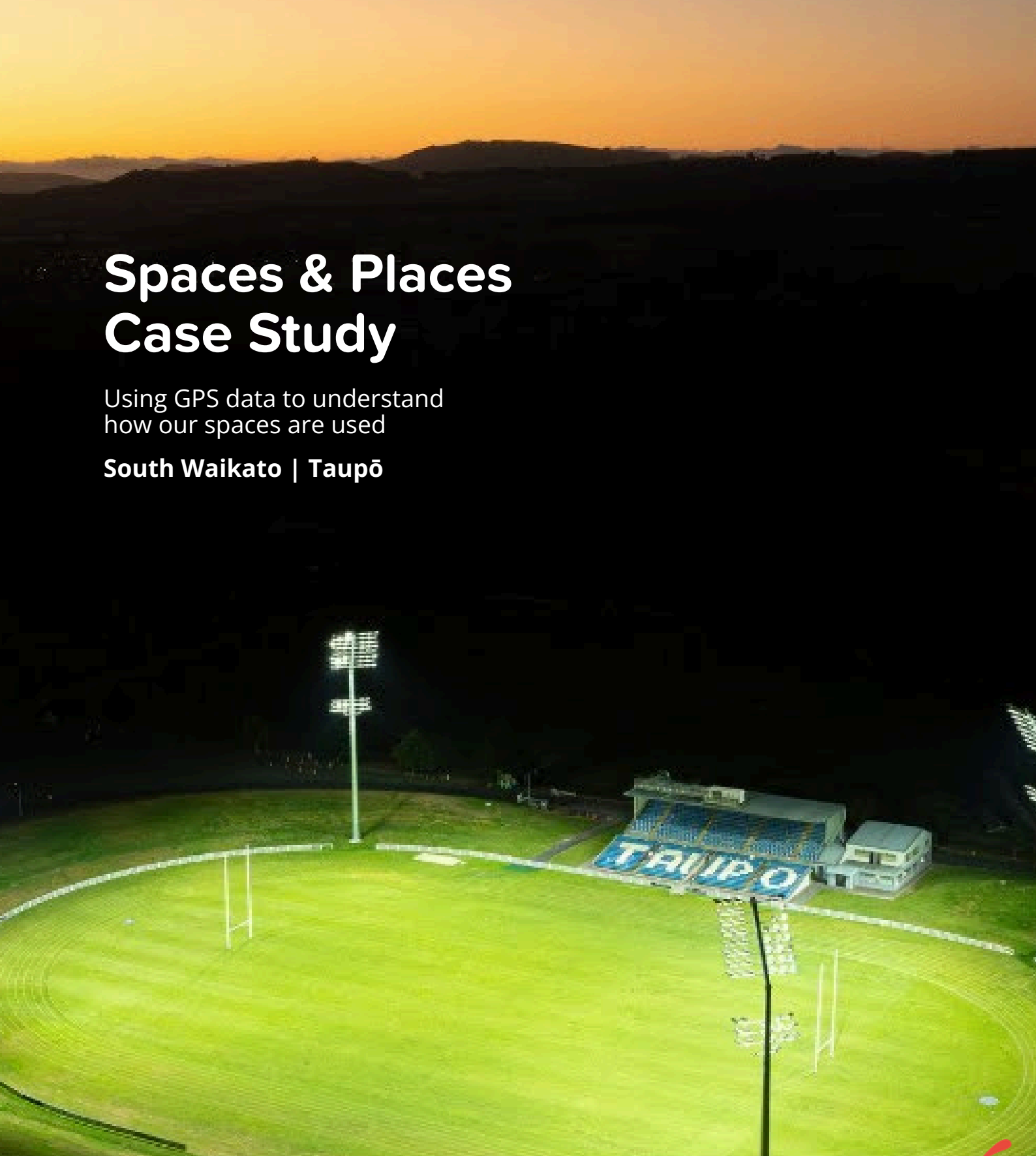
Spaces & Places Case Study

Using GPS data to understand how our spaces are used

South Waikato | Taupō



Owen Delany Park, Taupō

Active Xchange

SPORT WAIKATO
Hei painga moo te iwi

Understanding how our spaces and places are used

Good decisions about parks, reserves, trails, playgrounds, sports facilities and other community spaces start with understanding how people actually use them.

Traditionally, that picture has not always been easy to build. Councils may know where facilities are located, their condition and when bookable spaces are reserved. Sports organisations may understand membership and participation. Population data tells us who lives in an area, but many of our everyday recreation spaces – from local parks and playgrounds to trails and reserves – do not have turnstiles, booking systems or other reliable ways of showing how they are being used.

Through our spaces and places guide, the Waikato Regional Active Spaces Plan (WRASP), we work with ActiveXchange to bring these different sources of information together. ActiveXchange combines facility and infrastructure information, participation data, community profiles and aggregated movement data to provide a clearer picture of where, when and how people are active.

This gives us, our councils and other partners a shared evidence base for asking practical questions such as:

- Who is using a space, and who may be missing out?
- Where are visitors coming from?
- When are spaces busiest – and when is there capacity for more use?
- Are people travelling across district boundaries to use particular spaces or facilities?
- Where are there gaps in access or provision?
- Where could future investment, improvements or activation have the greatest impact?

Why look beyond individual sites?

People do not organise their lives around council boundaries. They travel between communities for work, education, sport and recreation based on factors such as location, accessibility, quality, cost and personal preference.

Looking at data across a wider network helps reveal these patterns. A facility that appears to serve a local community may actually attract people from across a district or neighbouring districts. Two facilities may have overlapping catchments, while another community may have limited access to suitable opportunities.

A well-used space may need additional investment, while another may have capacity that could be unlocked through better programming, accessibility or activation.

Understanding these patterns helps shift planning from assumptions towards evidence.



Jones Landing, South Waikato

Understanding how spaces are classified

Before looking at the data, it is useful to understand how active spaces and places are described. Two different concepts are important: the role a place plays and what the place is used for.

The active-space hierarchy: who does the place serve?

The **Waikato Regional Active Spaces Plan (WRASP)** classifies spaces and facilities according to their reach, role and level of use or competition – not simply their physical size.

A small specialist facility could have national or regional significance, while a large park may be considered local if it primarily serves its surrounding community.

As a guide, the WRASP uses drive-time catchments of approximately 20 minutes for local, 30 minutes for sub-regional and up to 90 minutes for regional facilities. These are indicative rather than fixed boundaries.

The hierarchy describes the widest role a place plays – not its importance to the community. A local playground can be just as valuable to community wellbeing as a regional sports facility; they simply serve different purposes.

Park types: what does the place do?

While the hierarchy tells us who a place serves, its park type describes what it primarily provides. Parks may support neighbourhood recreation, organised sport, nature, heritage, civic activity, outdoor adventure or connections such as walking and cycling corridors. Many places perform more than one of these functions.

A multi-use park is a good example. It may combine sports fields, playgrounds, walking paths, community facilities, event areas and natural spaces within one location. A multi-use park can be local, sub-regional or regional depending on who it attracts and the role it plays within the wider network.

And what is a reserve?

A reserve can simply be another term used for public open space, but it can also refer to the land's legal classification under the Reserves Act.

This means the terms can overlap without conflicting. For example, a place could be a regional sports and recreation park, while the land itself is legally classified as a recreation reserve.

A simple way to remember it:

Hierarchy = who the place serves
Park type = what the place does
Reserve classification = how the land is legally protected or managed

Turning information into better decisions

The purpose of tracking data is not simply to count visits. It is to help councils and partners better understand the problem they are trying to solve and choose an appropriate response.

Sometimes the evidence may support investment in a new space or facility. In other cases, the better response could be improving an existing space, addressing accessibility, changing programming or opening hours, strengthening walking and cycling connections, or activating a place differently.

This evidence can support priorities within Parks and Recreation Strategies and Action Plans (PARS), Long Term Plans, Reserve Management Plans and wider recreation and facility planning. It can also strengthen business cases and funding decisions, help identify underserved communities, and provide a baseline for understanding whether an investment or activation has made a difference over time.

Importantly, the data is one part of the picture. Movement information provides aggregated, de-identified estimates of visitation and use rather than exact visitor counts. It is most valuable when considered alongside community feedback, local knowledge, surveys, bookings, physical counters and other sources of evidence.

Used together, these insights help us move beyond ***"How many people used this place?"*** towards more useful questions: ***"Who is this place serving, what role does it play within the wider network, and what could we do differently to help more people be active?"***

The following examples from South Waikato and Taupō districts show what this looks like in practice – using data to build a clearer picture of how local spaces and places are being used.

A practical example

Imagine a council is considering a new indoor sports facility.

The data may show that residents are already travelling to a facility in a neighbouring district, but that venue is approaching capacity. Population growth and participation trends may support developing additional space. In that case, a new or expanded facility could be justified.

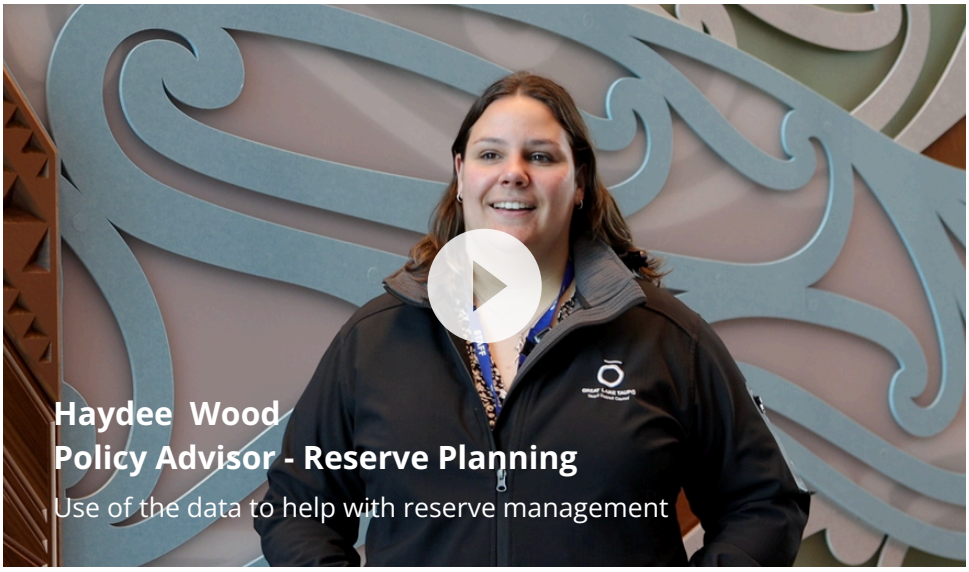
Alternatively, the data may show that the neighbouring facility has spare capacity during the relevant hours. The stronger investment might then be a partnership with the neighbouring council, improved transport, coordinated bookings or an extension to the existing venue - rather than building a duplicate facility.

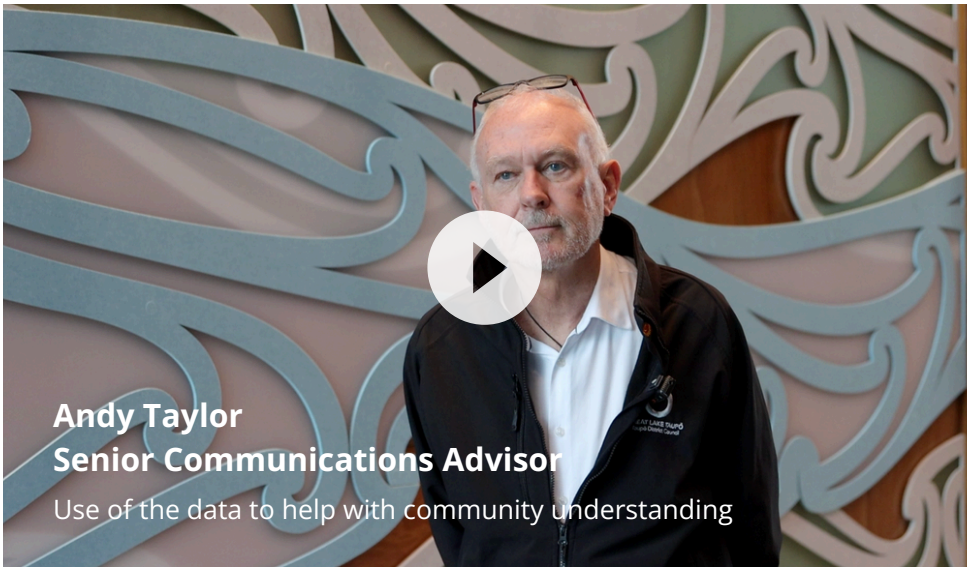
In another community, a park may have low estimated use despite being surrounded by families and young people. That does not automatically mean the park is unnecessary. It may indicate that the space is poorly connected, feels unsafe, lacks shade or play opportunities, or does not offer activities that appeal to the local community. The next step would be to combine the data with engagement and on-the-ground investigation.

The purpose of the information is not to produce an automatic answer. It is to make the decision - and the reasons behind it - better informed.

Examples of data use by Taupō District Council

Taupō District Council is using this data in different ways to support its planning and decision-making. The following examples show how these insights are helping inform reserve management, improve community understanding and identify suitable locations for future facilities.







SOUTH WAIKATO KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1 Jan - 31 Dec 2025

Regional sites attracted over

70% of total unique visitors

from outside of the South Waikato District area, indicating **significant pull of site(s) e.g. destination venues**

Visitors to **regional sites** stayed,

on average 17.2% longer (mins)

compared to local sites

Visitors to **sports fields** typically stayed

on average 25% longer

than visitors to Reserves (Parks only)

Notably, **more than**

20% of those visitors

come from people residing in **Auckland Territorial Authority**

Circa 50% of visitors across multifaceted, local sites

came from the

top 25% most deprived areas

across New Zealand, evidencing the vital importance these sites have for **engaging the local community** across lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

WAR MEMORIAL PARK (TOKOROA)

36.4%
of visits come from **under 10km**

26.6%
of visits come from **between 50-100km**

53%
of visits lasted **longer than 1 hour**

28.5%
of visits lasted **more than 2 hours**

74,800 VISITS

71%
of visitors come from outside of the South Waikato District

Average stay: 66 minutes

Busiest days: Saturday & Sunday

Peak times: 11.30am-5.30pm

3.7km
Distance local visitors travel to the park

65.3km
Distance Waikato region residents (outside of South Waikato) travel to the park

44%
of visitors
are coming from the most deprived area (8 and above on a 1-10 scale)

Weekday vs Weekend use

37.4%
Saturday-Sunday

62.6%
Monday-Friday

TAUPŌ KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1 Jan - 31 Dec 2025

Regional sites attracted more than

60% of total unique visitors

from outside of the Taupō District

visitors residing in the Taupō District travel

on average 27.3% less

distance to reach regional sites compared to local sites.

This may be due to the location of regional sites and their proximity to densely populated areas/ other mitigating factors.

Visitors to regional sites stayed,

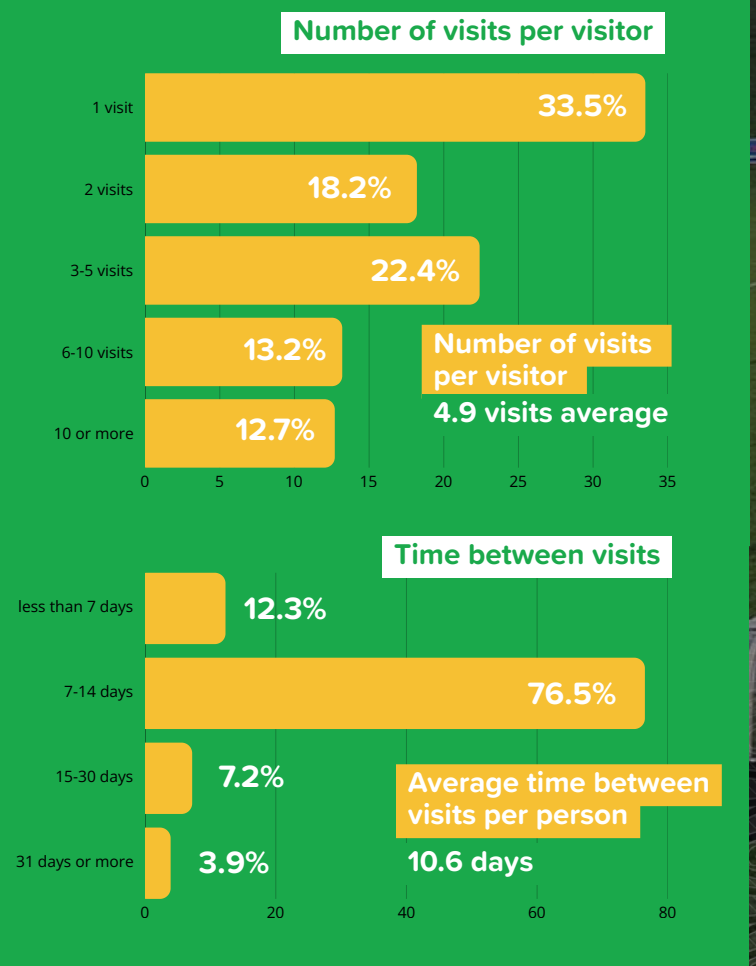
on average 14.9% longer (mins)

compared to local sites

Visitors to **Sports Fields** typically stayed

on average 27.5% longer

than visitors to Reserves (Parks only)



OWEN DELANY PARK (TAUPŌ)

448,500 VISITS

52.3% of visits come from **under 10km**

31.1% of visits come from **over 100km**

50.4% of visits lasted **up to 1 hour**

26.2% of visits lasted **more than 2 hours**

59.5% of visitors come from outside of the Taupō District

Average stay: 65 minutes

Busiest days: Saturday & Sunday

Peak times: 2.00pm-5.00pm

Weekday vs Weekend use

37.9% Saturday-Sunday

62.1% Monday-Friday

30% of visitors are coming from the most deprived area (8 and above on a 1-10 scale)

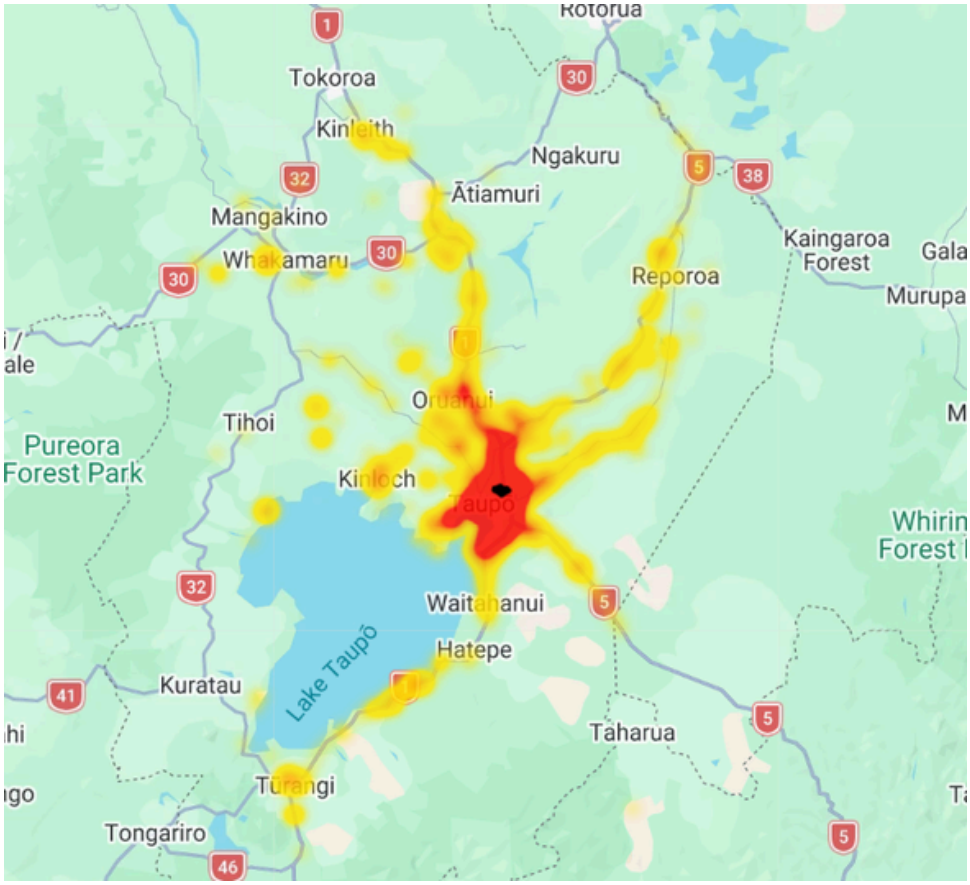
Local vs Out of Town visitors

61% Local

39% Out of Town

6.9km median distance

66.7km average distance



Regional Reserve (Parks only)
attract significant visitation

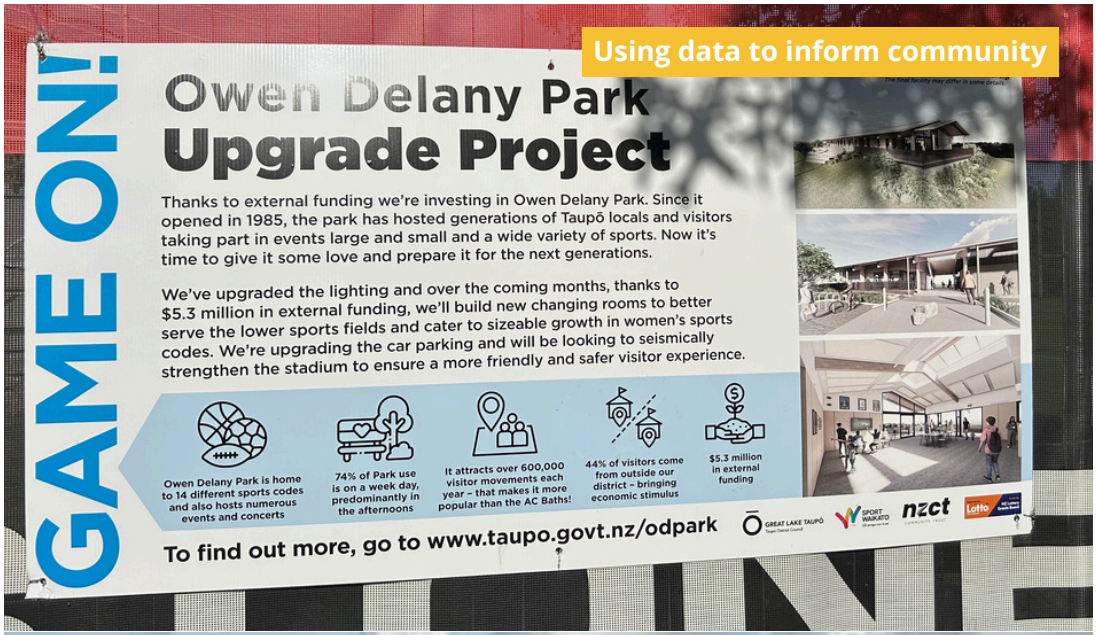
Circa, 70% of visitors come from outside of Taupō district

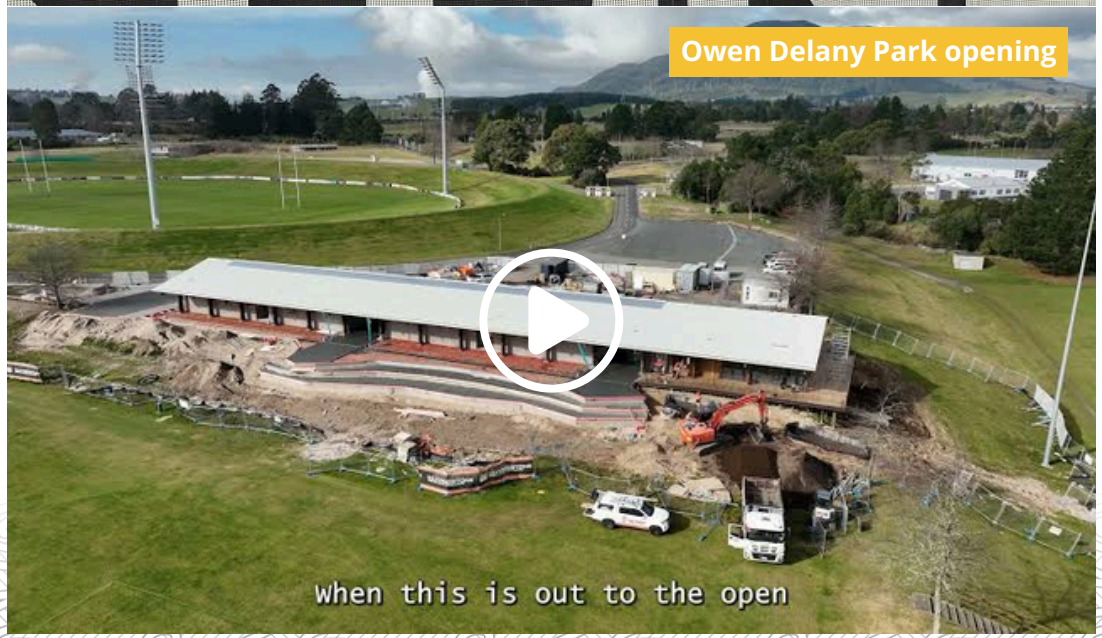
5.2km

Distance local visitors travel to the park

96.9km

Distance Waikato region residents (outside of Taupō) travel to the park







Shane Brodie | Spaces & Places Manager
shaneb@sportwaikato.org.nz | 021 131 3416

Ben Danieli | Recreation Infrastructure Advisor
bend@sportwaikato.org.nz | 027 446 7040