

# 'Rubbernecking' disaster tourism may produce backlash

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Recent research by the University of Otago on how best to operate tours focusing on the Christchurch earthquake, and similar disasters, has produced new findings for the tourism industry on avoiding negative reactions from residents.

Department of Marketing researcher, Dr Shelagh Ferguson, and postgraduate student Alex Coats carried out in-depth interviews with around 50 Christchurch [residents](#) in six focus groups from across the city, examining the reaction to Red Zone earthquake tours through the CBD in 2012.

The aim of the research was not only to find out residents' reaction to 'earthquake tourism' generally, but also to determine the right balance between the many tensions that exist in any area after a destructive event of significant magnitude.

Ferguson says this will allow tourism operators in similar situations internationally to provide an appropriate and valued tourism experience for visitors, without offending local residents and being accused of insensitive 'rubbernecking' in a [disaster zone](#).

She says this is probably the first time research into 'earthquake tourism' has been carried out with residents of a severely damaged city.

"We found that most residents were accommodating with regard to earthquake tours focused on the CBD," she says. "However, they were

far less happy with the possibility of tours coming into residential areas to view destroyed homes in the eastern suburbs."

"At the time of the study in 2012 this possibility was seen as being totally insensitive and exploiting the suffering of Christchurch people."

Dr Ferguson's research suggests that disaster tourism could be used to raise money for recovery efforts, with a certain percentage of the tour price going towards reconstruction or assistance to the CBD or redevelopment of public facilities.

This study also clearly indicated that focusing on the 185 people who died in the earthquake was unacceptable to residents. Revealing personal details of those who lost their lives in the CTV building was seen as inappropriate and intruding on personal loss. Taking videos and photographs of sites of mass fatalities was also viewed as inappropriate by many respondents.

"However that said, there was an acceptance that sites involving high fatalities, like the CTV building, are of significant interest and that visiting these places is valid so long as any tour information is conveyed in a general sense and does not get into personal details."

"Overall I think our study offers useful guidelines for [tourism](#) operators who want to include the consequences of the 2011 earthquake, or a similar disaster, into their business."

"Fundamentally it warns against sensationalising the impact of the disaster, particularly on peoples' personal lives, and making sure staff present information as objectively and authentically as possible."

The research found that informants were also concerned that visitors get a fully rounded picture of the impact of the earthquake and suggests

there is a place for videos and multi-media presentations portraying the full impact of the [earthquake](#) across the city.

This study has been published in the *Journal of Research for Consumers*.

Provided by University of Otago

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