

Title of Project: Interpretation of science for tourists visiting the Mt John Observatory site

Project Number: 280

University Project Leaders/Departments: Dr Karen Pollard; Physics and Astronomy

Brief outline of project

A summer scholarship would enable a student to design science outreach material appropriate for tourists, drawing on the science of interpretation, and undertake a small review of the reception of the material with a sample of visitors to the area. The Mount John observatory site is now being visited by 1000s of people every year as a result of the building of the Astro Café on its summit. The astronomical heritage of the basin is being interpreted for smaller numbers of tourists by Earth and Sky, which runs night sky tours from the Astro café. This represents an opportunity for UC to publicise its scientific work, and to attract young people to science as a vocation. An analysis of the multi-layered attributes of Mt John and the surrounding Mackenzie basin has highlighted that interpretation of such areas is not a simple exercise. Mt John itself has an interesting history stretching back into the area's significance to Maori who were in the basin while food gathering, collecting rock or travelling to the West Coast. It provides an impressive view of a geomorphically significant area which contains some rare or endangered indigenous species. Material prepared for tourists is dominated by the spectacular aesthetics of the landscape, whether by night or day. The challenge is to find an appropriate balance between such aesthetics and attention to UC's scientific research, principally in astronomy, but also in other disciplines, drawing on sources such as the Journal of Interpretation Research. The researcher would identify appropriate formats for interpretive material in this site, gather this material from a variety of sources around the university and prepare a mock up of the material. They would then interview a small number of visitors to the site in relation to the material's ability to attract attention, to be understood by someone given the relatively limited time available to most visitors and the amount of competition for their attention at such a site, and to the overall messages about the university and its scientific research that they might take from the material. At least two extended visits to Mt John would be required. The findings of a previous scholarship project *Summer Student Review of WHC Operation Guidelines* would be available to the successful applicant, who would require both a science background and an interest in adult education.

Specific student requirements:

Please indicate below any specific academic requirements you have for the summer scholarship student (e.g., specific level; specific courses, or equivalents, completed)

An honours or above level student, capable of working independently off campus, with excellent communication skills and an enthusiasm for interdisciplinarity.

Special condition:

The student would stay at the observatory at Lake Tekapo itself to gain convenient access to visitors to the site at various times of the day and in a variety of weather conditions. This would also enable them to discuss the project with the UC managerial team at the observatory.

Yes. It will be appropriate to observe and interview evening visitors to the Astro café.