



Climbers descend "The Lizard" section of the north face of Mt Taranaki. Photo: CAMERON BURNELL/FAIRFAX NZ

Taranaki tourism

- Taranaki received 75,000 international visitors in the year ended March 2013, 3 per cent of the New Zealand total of 2.4 million visitors.
- 50 per cent of international visitors to Taranaki are visiting friends and relatives, followed by 32 per cent for holiday and 13 per cent for business.
- Mt Taranaki attracted 295,000 visitors for the year ended June 2013, the lowest recorded since 2003.
- 33 per cent of visitors to the national park are from outside the region, 3 per cent international and 30 per cent domestic.
- The national park captures 6 per cent of all visits to Taranaki, suggesting the use and management of the country's second national park is way below potential, according to DOC.

Part owner of Kiwi Outdoors Rob Needs is reluctantly on the hunt for a new job because selling outdoor equipment can't pay the bills anymore. Photo: ROBERT CHARLES/FAIRFAX NZ



New Plymouth institution of nearly 80 years, Kiwi Outdoors, is soon to close. Isobel Ewing finds out why, and what will become of the town's best source of outdoor knowledge.

End of an era for Kiwi Outdoors

- 1936** John Pool opens Army Stores in Ariki St with son Max.
- 1955** Ping's Pie Cart starts operating from the vacant lot next door serving pies, steak, eggs and chips and cups of tea and coffee to late-night diners, with the added bonus of providing security to Army Stores in the wee hours.
- 1957** Allen Pool comes on board and works in the store for 47 years. 1963 - Allen's wife Christine starts working at the store. She retires in 1997.
- 1970** Allen's brother Gary begins working in the store, and stays on board for about 35 years.
- 1980s** Army Stores becomes Kiwi Outdoors, specialising in New Zealand-made outdoor equipment.
- 1997** Rob Needs starts working in the store.
- 2003** Needs buys into the business.
- 2004** Allen Pool retires.
- 2015** Kiwi Outdoors shuts up shop.

Mr Outdoors loses battle for survival

Rob Needs' shop is filled with tents, billies, pocket knives and merino outerwear, but the most valuable inventory is inside his head.

Trouble is, he can't sell it.

Needs is part-owner of Kiwi Outdoors, a New Plymouth institution that would turn 80 next year if it weren't shutting its doors forever.

"I'm gutted, I'm angry and I'm scared shitless," Needs admits.

Located in the centre of town, he's the local go-to for any information related to the mountain, whether it's the *Taranaki Daily News* calling for a snow report or visitors directed to him by DOC for advice on huts and trails in the national park.

He jokes if he put "Outdoors Consultant" at the end of his name he'd make a killing.

Needs loves the Taranaki outdoors.

"I've lived vicariously through other people's hikes for the last 17½ years."

He's up at 7am driving people to the North Egmont Visitors' Centre with his shuttle service and often works 11-hour days, frequently spending half an hour with a customer only to have them thank him and head home to buy the item online.

Despite this, he wishes he could keep doing it, but he needs to provide for his family and at the

Where to from here after the store closes?

The year ahead is uncertain for Rob Needs.

His shuttle service will likely stop, unless employment opportunities allow him to do it on the side.

In the immediate future he needs a new job but he's also got plans to monetise that precious outdoors knowledge with a mountain-guiding company.

He's been discussing it with DOC and Venture Taranaki and hopes to have Top Guides up and running next summer season.

With oil and gas and dairying taking a downturn, Taranaki needed to diversify its economy by using its unique assets, Needs says.

"Nobody can steal Mt Taranaki.

moment he's barely scraping by.

"I'm 47, I don't know what I'm going to do," Needs says.

Needs is the sort of guy who won't struggle to find work, but you can understand his anxiety.

His is the same story you hear all too often these days: the local owner-operator retailer struggling to compete with big firms, soaring rent prices in the CBD and the rise of buying online, resulting in a steady decline in business.

"If I had to put any one reason

Nobody can steal our coastline.

"We need to focus on a visitor industry people can't take away from us."

One way he aims to achieve this is by establishing the Pouakai Crossing as a recognised visitor attraction for the region, a project that had its first Venture Taranaki team meeting on Thursday.

New Plymouth MP Jonathan Young is right behind the idea.

If billed as the sister walk to the Tongariro Crossing, which attracts 80,000 visitors annually, three-quarters from overseas, the Pouakai Crossing could attract thousands, Young says.

To this end, he says Needs' local

it's probably corporate outdoors stores. [In New Plymouth] we're up against three biggies."

But those big corporates don't deal in local knowledge – it doesn't serve their purpose and that's why Needs still gets foot traffic.

"We give away a lot of information because we're experts," Needs explains.

He says local and central government information providers often refer people to him and he can't charge for it.

knowledge is critical.

"What we will need is private sector operators like Rob who are experts in their field, who also understand the challenges and ensure it's a world-class experience."

Young says Needs' cultural awareness is important to respect the taonga of the province's iwi. "Taranaki has a very interesting story to tell."

Antony Rhodes, of Venture Taranaki, says Needs' retail knowledge will be a loss, but his expertise in a guiding role will help to maximise Taranaki's assets.

"People coming into the region who don't know the mountain, the trails, the culture, the legend, that local knowledge is vital in giving a



Kiwi Outdoors' predecessor, the army clothing store in 1961.

good visitor experience."

Needs' lasting wish is testament to his devotion to ensuring people's enjoyment of the outdoors.

"If the legacy of Kiwi Outdoors is

that Pouakai Crossing becomes a visitor attraction and the economic impact is the community has a more vibrant visitor industry, I'll be happy," he says.

They're services valued by the community but they don't fill Needs' pockets.

DOC partnership manager Darryn Ratana says Needs' face-to-face interaction with visitors and knack for sending them off with a smile on their face has been a boon for the department, whose office is tucked away in Rimu St, not handy to the CBD.

"Losing that type of knowledge and ability to interact with visitors is a huge loss," Ratana says.

He says DOC could not regulate who went to the summit or what they did there, so having guides like Needs with cultural sensitivity who could educate people on how to conduct themselves in the national park was vital.

Needs' business partner, Allen Pool's grandfather, started the business as an army clothing store in 1936 and Pool began working there at age 16.

The business evolved in the 1970s from army gear to tramping

equipment, all New Zealand-made, Pool recalls.

"Those were the fantastic days of retailing."

People used to travel from Wellington to visit the store, which had a reputation as the best outdoors outlet in New Zealand, he says.

But he says the death of the store now is no fault of Needs', who has worked harder than they ever did, for less.

"He's done everything he could do possible to keep it going.

"It's sad but that's what's happening to the world."

Needs doesn't like to think how many times he's been a showroom for the internet.

"You kind of hope people are genuine."

He'll spend 20 minutes talking to them and they say they'll be back that afternoon, then return with their iPad and ask him to match a price online.

"Sometimes I do it because any sale is better than no sale."

He wonders if the store's closing will make people reflect on the social cost of not spending locally.

Without him in town offering expert advice and safe gear to climbers, will accidents on the mountain increase? Who will provide merchandise for local school prizegiving ceremonies, or charity giveaways?

Only the future can tell.