

Asking for permission to access the outdoors

Asking permission: no need for nerves

Do you feel apprehensive about approaching landholders for access across their property? If so, you're not alone. According to the Walking Access Survey 2015, six out of ten New Zealanders (64 per cent) are nervous about asking landholders for access to their land.

The New Zealand Walking Access Commission has put together some useful advice and tips to make asking for permission easier.

"The most important thing people need to know is that landowners are usually happy to allow people to enter their property as long as they follow a few simple rules" says Fiona Gower, from Rural Women New Zealand.

"Asking permission starts with making contact. A phone call to the farmer explaining why and where you want to go, and asking if that's ok, shows courtesy and respect," says Fiona.

With an increasingly urban population, there is often a lack of understanding of what trampers and outdoor enthusiasts need to be careful of when entering farms. Taking the time to seek permission gives the farmer an opportunity to explain any safety issues.

For example:

- Leave gates as they are found – open or closed;
- Don't climb unsupported fence wires – in the absence of a gate or stile, go through the fence wires or climb over at posts;
- Climb over gates at the hinge end – not at the latch end where it could bend or break;
- Don't block or obstruct gateways, tracks or entrances (for example, with vehicles);
- Keep away from specific areas and animals at the landholder's request;
- Respect electric fences;
- Walk in single file around farm animals, without driving them;
- Do not feed farm animals;

- Walk around, rather than through, crops;
- Report damage, stock in difficulties or anything suspicious to the land manager; and
- Leave no rubbish or nasty surprises for someone else to find.

“When the farmer explains where you can go, it’s important to stick to that,” says Fiona.

“If the farmer says don’t go into a paddock because there is a bull there that might chase you or ground holes that you could fall into, it is because they are potential hazards.”

Anders Crofoot, a landowner and access spokesman for Federated Farmers believes reconnecting urban New Zealanders with the land is important.

“Many landowners have put up signs with a number to phone for permission to enter the property. Signs really help the public when they can’t work out who owns what, or what to do when they come across a locked gate they weren’t expecting.”

People requesting access must respect that the farmer can say no and they will have good reasons why they don’t want people on their land at that time. For example, at lambing time or when there is a stand of hay ready to cut or crops ready to harvest.

Phoning ahead and explaining your visit and intention is the best first move.

Farmers are also naturally anxious about people carrying firearms and asking for access.

So it is a good idea to leave your rifle in the car, ensuring the car is still in your view at all times, if you are going to visit the farmer.

“While safety and damage to livestock and crops are the main concerns,” says Fiona, “99% of the time these are not issues. Most farmers are really happy to provide easy access but safeguards have to be in place. No matter where, you cannot expect to have the right to walk over private land without permission.”

Anders believes landholders decisions about whether to grant access are generally dictated by the personalities of the individuals involved, rather than the generation they come from.

“There are always times when places change hands, or the person who used to own it dies, and the new owners won’t allow access. But it also goes the other way – new owners grant access when the old ones weren’t comfortable with it.

Many Kiwi families have farmed the land for generations and are as passionate about the surrounding area as the recreationalists who come long distances to see it,” he says.

“We like to think land owners in New Zealand would provide easy access... especially if they are beside public conservation land or a mountain range. But it comes down to a matter of mutual respect. In fact, how people ask, makes a difference. If you show courtesy and understanding about the concerns and safety requirements farmers are dealing with, it engenders a sense of goodwill on both sides of the fence. Both parties need to respect certain rights and responsibilities to make public access positive and enduring for future generations. A phone call is a good way to start.”

