

## Reference sites

The Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) manages 19 national parks and over 800 reserves within Tasmania. The PWS does not continually count visitors to every national park or reserve but takes regular counts at 14 selected sites in Tasmania – called “reference sites”.

### Visitors to reference sites (rounded to thousands)<sup>1</sup>

Financial year	2016 - 2017	2017 - 2018	2018 - 2019	2019 - 2020	% change 18-19 to 2019-20	Unit of measure	Notes
Freycinet	292	310	317	264	-17%	Visit	2
Cradle Mountain (Dove Lake)	252	280	284	217	-23%	Visit	
Tasman Arch (Tasman NP)	191	203	204	170	-17%	Visit	
Mount Field	194	196	204	167	-18%	Visit	
Lake St Clair (Cynthia Bay)	90	95	92	77	-17%	Visit	
Gordon River (cruises)	85	81	78	69	-12%	Visit	5, 6
Mole Creek Karst (caves)	46	63	58	43	-26%	Visit	
Narawntapu (western entrance)	48	49	54	48	-11%	Entry	
Hastings Caves and Thermal Pool	46	46	40	36	-10%	Visit	
Tamar Island Wetlands	35	40	49	34	-32%	Entry	
Maria Island	23	31	38	38	-1%	Visit	3, 4
Three Capes Track	12	12	11	9	-23%	Visit	
Highfield House (Stanley)	11	12	12	11	-13%	Visit	
Overland Track	9	9	9	7	-23%	Visit	
<b>Total number of visits/entries to all reference sites</b>	<b>1,335</b>	<b>1,428</b>	<b>1,452</b>	<b>1,193</b>	<b>-18%</b>		

## Notes

1. Visitor numbers are **rounded to thousands** to make them easier to read in a table. The percentage changes are calculated on unrounded numbers.
2. **Freycinet.** Data for Freycinet (and for many other reference sites) is derived from counts of vehicles exiting the site. From January to May 2020, there were several substantial periods where the vehicle counter was faulty at Freycinet. Replacement estimates have been imputed based on other available data. The estimate of 264,000 visitors for 2019-20 should be used with caution.
3. **Maria Island.** Maria Island has experienced the smallest decline of any of the 14 reference sites – a decline of only one per cent for the whole financial year. The reason for the small decline in the whole 12-month period was due to strong growth in the **first eight months** of 2019-20. The visitor growth before COVID-19 almost (but not quite) offset the decline after the pandemic hit. Tourism numbers were very high from October 2019 to mid-February 2020. Visitor numbers did decline rapidly in the last four months of the financial year, from March 2020 to June.
4. **Maria Island.** As of June 2020, some data from the usual sources was not yet available for all of 2019-20. The estimate for 2019-20 was made based on other available data. The estimate of 38,000 may be subject to revision in future.
5. **Gordon River (cruises):** Source of data is the Tasmanian Visitor Survey (Tourism Tasmania). Only includes visitors to Tasmania from interstate and overseas (excludes Tasmanians). The *Tasmanian Visitor Survey* was suspended in March 2020 because face-to-

face interviews posed a health and safety risk, and because travel into Tasmania became heavily restricted. Data for April, May and June 2020 is assumed to be zero because tourists were not allowed into Tasmania.

6. **Gordon River (cruises):** In some reports, an estimate of 80,000 visitors may have been reported for 2018-19. The estimate of 80,000 visitors was for the **12 months ending March 2019**, which was the most recent available data at the time of reporting. The estimate of 78,000 visitors is later data for the **12 months ending June 2019**.

### **Special note about the effect of COVID-19 on visitor estimates for 2020-21.**

- COVID-19 has affected some normal data gathering routines and affected estimation processes.
- Visitor estimates are provisional and may be subject to revision.

### **Sources**

- PWS; and
- Tourism Tasmania (for Gordon River [cruises], via the *Tasmanian Visitor Survey*).

### **Units of measure**

- **Visit** = the act of going to a site; includes the entire time at the site from first entry to final exit. Visitors who enter and re-enter multiple times are only counted once.
- **Entry** = the act of entering a site; may include re-entering a site on multiple occasions during the same trip. Visitors may be counted once or several times.
- A “**visitor**” = the general term used in everyday conversation and is roughly equivalent to a visit or an entry.

### **Visitor numbers – year commentary**

The PWS does not count visitors to every national park or reserve, but takes regular counts at 14 selected sites in Tasmania – called “**reference sites**”:

1. Freycinet National Park
2. Cradle Mountain (Dove Lake entrance)
3. Tasman Arch (Tasman Peninsula)
4. Mount Field
5. Lake St Clair (Cynthia Bay entrance)
6. Gordon River (cruise). Data courtesy of the *Tasmanian Visitor Survey* (Tourism Tasmania)
7. Mole Creek Karst National Park (caves)
8. Narawntapu National Park (western entrance – Bakers Beach)
9. Tamar Island Wetlands
10. Maria Island
11. Hastings Caves and Thermal Springs
12. Highfield House (Stanley)
13. Three Capes Track
14. Overland Track (full traverse of the whole track between Cradle Mountain and Lake St Clair, in either direction)

### ***Summary of trends in the Reference Sites leading into COVID-19 and the shutdown of parks and reserves***

- In the 2019-20 financial year, visitor numbers dropped substantially because of restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Parks and reserves were closed in late March and re-opened in mid-June 2020.
- No visitors were allowed into parks and reserves during the normally busy Easter and ANZAC Day public holidays. Visitor numbers to all reference sites declined in 2019-20; many as much as 10 to 32 per cent.
- Since re-opening after 15 June, there are still restrictions at some sites, which will create limits on visitor numbers. At the Mole Creek and Hastings Caves, visitor number on tours must be limited because of social distancing requirements in confined spaces. On the Overland Track and Three Capes Track, daily walker numbers are capped at a lower level than usual to address social distancing requirements at huts.
- Recent history (late 2018 and 2019) presents some evidence visitor numbers were easing back from the all-time highs in 2017 and 2018. As of January, and February 2020, visitor numbers at some reference sites were up, some were steady, and others had declined – there was not a consistent trend across all reference sites. However, the Coronavirus pandemic has since disrupted any trends that might have been developing.

### ***Re-opening of parks and reserves June 2020 – preliminary insights about visitor behaviour to parks and reserves within COVID-19 restrictions***

The following information is based largely on personal observations from PWS officers. These broad comments are consistent with partial data that is starting to be assembled in July and August 2020.

1. **Pent-up demand was released when parks re-opened.** For example, visitor numbers at the Tasman Arch on the Tasman Peninsula was at just over 320 visitors in the week ending Monday 18 May (in the week after limited access to parks was allowed within 30 kilometres from a place of residence), then increased past 800 visitors in the week ending Monday 8 June, and exceeded 1 500 visitors in the week ending Monday 20 July. (Source: estimates derived from vehicle counts)
2. **Weekends and school holidays are the busiest times.** For example, since the shuttle buses at Cradle Mountain re-commenced in mid-June, passengers regularly exceed 600 or 700 passengers on Saturdays and Sundays and during the school holidays. This is well above the 200 to 500 passengers on weekdays. (Source: shuttle bus operator)
3. **Tasmanians who have not ventured to a park or reserve for years are coming again.** For example, at Cradle Mountain there has been a surge in Tasmanians who may not have held a parks pass for some years, or not at all, buying Annual and Two Year park passes. (Source: Cradle Mountain Visitor Centre manager)
4. **There was localised evidence of camping and caravanning immediately after COVID-19 restrictions were eased in mid-June.** For example, the camping site at Narawntapu was solidly booked because locals “wanted to get out of the four walls at home”. (Source: Narawntapu Visitor Centre manager)
5. **Commercial tour operators are running few or no tours in parks and reserves.** In January and February, many tourists started to voluntarily cancel bookings as news

about COVID-19 became progressively grimmer. Operators, in turn, cancelled trips. For example, at Freycinet, visitor arrivals in tour groups went down 35 per cent in February, compared to February 2019; and down 69 per cent in March, compared to March 2019. Most tour operators depend on visitors from mainland Australia and overseas. Since re-opening in mid-June, PWS Visitor Centres at Cradle Mountain, Lake St Clair, Mt Field and Freycinet have reported zero or very few bus or other tour groups.

6. **Tasmanians are taking up some of the slack – but cannot completely replace tourists from mainland Australia and overseas.** In a few localised cases, some visitor numbers in June and July have matched or exceeded the numbers in 2019. Highfield House in Stanley has had its busiest July on record (472 visitors, which is traditionally low because of winter). At the Tamar Wetlands in Launceston, visitor numbers were up 22 per cent in the month of June, compared to June 2019; and up 7 per cent in the month of August, compared to August 2019. (Source: ticket sales data at Highfield House, and walker counter data at Tamar Wetlands)
7. **Accommodation providers near some parks and reserves are doing well, and there are some strong forward bookings into August and beyond – especially on weekends.** For example, there are strong forward bookings for the Government Huts at Mt Field on weekends, and there is second-hand information of strong bookings for commercial accommodation in the Cradle Valley precinct. It is Tasmanians making these bookings.

### ***General tourism insights about COVID-19 (4 June 2020)***

The following is a summary of [research insights by Tourism Tasmania](#):

1. Tasmanians will be travelling. Whilst we do not know exactly when, we do know that Tasmanians intend to travel within the next year.
2. The East Coast is at the top of the list of places Tasmanian want to travel overnight ... but it is not just about Freycinet (National Park); and the list of places where Tasmanians want to travel within Tasmania is long and diverse.
3. Safety and familiarity is important, but there are other barriers to travel. Research is showing that people are more inclined to return to places they've been before, or to travel to places that are familiar to them. Tasmanians who indicated they did not plan to travel in the near future were mostly constrained by money and/or time. A small number had no desire to travel within Tasmania, and an even smaller number indicated that they were concerned about safety and/or health reasons.
4. People still want to come to Tasmania. This is important as Tasmania's tourism economy moves through stages of Tasmanians being the first to travel within Tasmania, then opening the borders to interstate visitors, and finally to international visitors when safe to do so.

## General visitor trends in Tasmania

Tourism Tasmania produces reports on visitor trends in their *Tasmanian Visitor Survey*. The *Tasmanian Visitor Survey* provides information about visitors to Tasmania.

Information from the *Tasmanian Visitor Survey* is available for the **12 months ending March 2020**.

Note. Tourism Tasmania has suspended the *Tasmanian Visitor Survey* until further notice. Information was collected by face-to-face interviews. Tourism Tasmania will review the situation when it becomes safe for interviewers and the public to participate in face-to-face interviews again. Visitors to Tasmania who said they went to one or more national parks declined in 2018-19, and again in the 12 months ending March 2020.

Visitor numbers to Tasmania have declined in the 12 months ending March 2020. Visitors who said they went to a national park have also declined.

The decline in the 12 months ending March 2020 will be associated with the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, firstly as tourists started to cancel travel plans voluntarily, as airlines and tour operators started pulling services, and then as government-imposed travel restrictions came into effect.

However, even before COVID-19, there was a decline in the visitors to Tasmania who said they went to a national park. Visitor numbers to parks grew rapidly from 2012, reached an all-time peak in 2018, but then started to decline throughout 2019. The proportion of all visitors to Tasmania who said they went to a national park was also declining – from 43 per cent of all visitors in 2017-18 to 37 per cent in the 12 months ending March 2020.

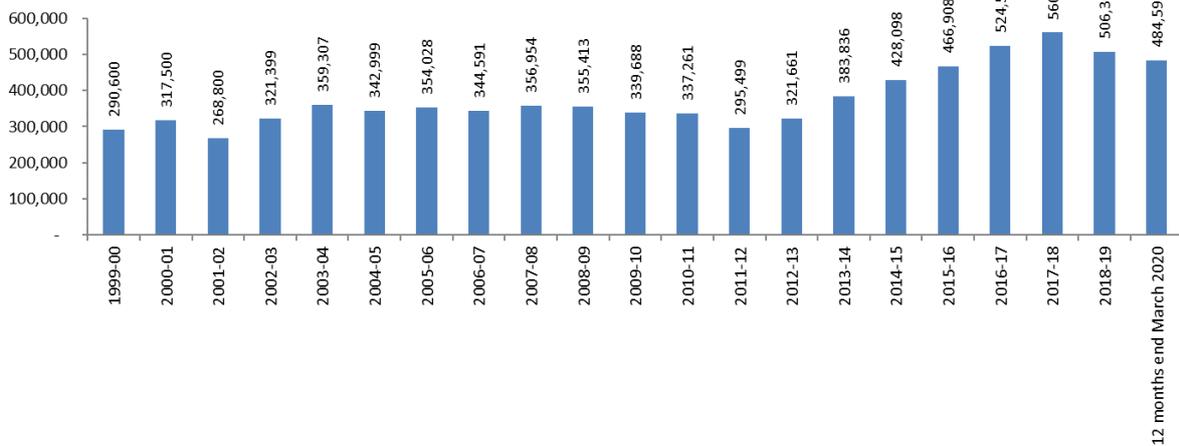
However, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted any trend that might have been developing.

<b>12 months ending</b>	<b>Visitors to Tasmania</b>	<b>Visitors to Tasmania who went to a National Park</b>	<b>% of visitors to Tasmania who went to a National Park (“market share”)</b>
Dec-15	1 158 067	439 406	38%
Jun-16	1 173 802	466 908	40%
Dec-16	1 241 228	500 299	40%
Jun-17	1 273 936	524 547	41%
Dec-17	1 269 743	537 489	42%
Jun-18	1 300 047	560 622	43%
Dec-18	1 318 458	546 011	41%
Jun-19	1 315 618	506 366	38%
Dec-19	1 351 548	502 653	37%
March 2020	1 309 000	484 596	37%

Source: *Tasmanian Visitor Survey*, Tourism Tasmania

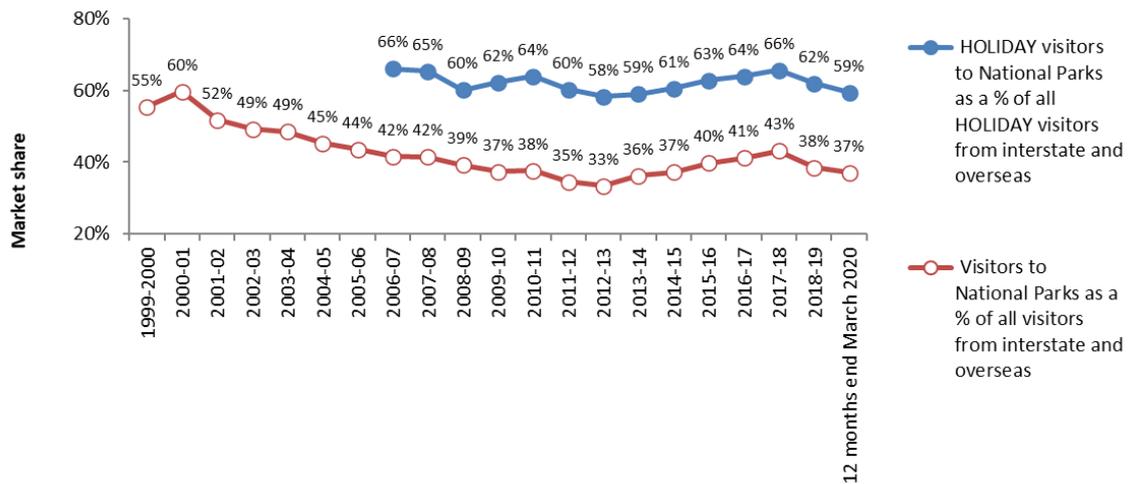
## Visitors to Tasmania who went to one or more national parks

(Source: Tasmanian Visitor Survey)



Source: Tourism Tasmania. Created by Visitor Research Officer, PWS.

## Visitors to National Parks (from interstate and overseas) - as a proportion of all visitors ("market share"). Source: Tourism Tasmania



Source: Tourism Tasmania. Created by Visitor Research Officer, PWS.