

CERTIFICATE OF FINDINGS
Section 94, Coroners Act 2006

IN THE MATTER of **Darren John MYERS**

The Secretary, Ministry of Justice, Wellington

As the Coroner conducting the inquiry into the death of the deceased, after considering all the evidence admitted to date for its purposes, and in the light of the purposes stated in section 57 of the Coroners Act 2006, I make the following findings:

Full Name of deceased:	Darren John MYERS
Late of:	18 Canterbury Street Karori Wellington
Occupation:	Building Surveyor
Sex:	Male
Date of Birth:	21 May 1970
Place of Death:	Arete Stream Tararua Ranges New Zealand
Date of Death:	On or about 30 May 2019
Cause(s) of Death	
(a). Direct cause:	Blunt force injuries of the head
(b). Antecedent cause (if known):	
(c). Underlying condition (if known):	
(d). Other significant conditions contributing to death, but not related to disease or condition causing it (if known):	

Circumstances of death:

I find that Darren John Myers, late of 18 Canterbury, Karori, Wellington, died at Tararua Ranges on or about 30 May 2019. The cause of death was blunt force injuries of the head due to a fall.

Those findings, and my reasons for making them, are also set out in my written findings dated 16th November 2021.

Recommendations:

The MSC has a clear focus on preventing further outdoor recreation fatalities. It will often make recommendations aimed at preventing accidents like this from occurring again. In its report MSC notes that all outdoor recreation comes with an element of risk, as do many everyday activities. Is impossible to remove all the risks from outdoor recreation activities, nor should they need to be totally risk-free. In reviewing all the evidence available and using it as a learning point for others the MSC encourages all those involved in tramping to consider the following points¹:

1. Carefully consider the consequences of tramping alone. Those who choose solo should do so on trips that are well within their level of skill and experience. Solo trips are not recommended for inexperienced trampers, above the bush line or in winter conditions.
2. Source the latest weather forecast for the area, consider the impact that forecast weather will have on the trip and be prepared to alter plans according to the conditions.
3. During trip planning, consideration of alternate routes is essential. Always have a backup plan and always be prepared to stay longer at safe points such as huts.
4. Consider appropriate footwear which is suitable for the terrain. Boots are essential on expert routes and when tramping off-track. Boots are also preferable on any multi-day tramps where packs are generally heavier.
5. In steep terrain, constantly evaluate the likelihood and severity of a fall. In principle, when descending off-track, plan to follow ridgelines and spurs as opposed to gullies and streams, as these are more dangerous due to being steeper and wetter.
6. Generally speaking, tremors should be well versed in the evidence-based Land Safety Code.

These recommendations are consistent with current proactive prevention focused messaging delivered by MSC and its partners.

In light of this, I make no formal recommendations.

Restrictions on publication:

Pursuant to section 74 of the Coroners Act 2006, I am satisfied it is in the interests of decency or personal privacy to prohibit the making public of photographs of Darren Myers taken by police. I am satisfied that such interests outweigh the public interest (if any) in the publication of those images.

Signed at Hastings on 16th day of November 2021.



Coroner T Fitzgibbon

**THIS FINDING IS SUBJECT TO PROHIBITIONS AND RESTRICTIONS
ON PUBLICATION UNDER S 74 OF THE CORONERS ACT 2006**

**IN THE CORONERS COURT
AT HASTINGS
(IN-CHAMBERS)**

CSU-2019-WGN-000229

**I TE KŌTI KAITIROTIRO MATEWHAWHATI
KI HERETAUNGA
(I TE TARI)**

UNDER

THE CORONERS ACT 2006

AND

IN THE MATTER OF

**An inquiry into the death of
Darren John Myers**

Date of Findings: 16 November 2021

FINDINGS OF CORONER T FITZGIBBON

Introduction

[1] On the 12 June 2019 Darren Myers was found deceased in the creek bed of the Arete Stream in the Tararua Ranges. He was below a waterfall and was seen by staff on a helicopter conducting search activity. The discovery of his body followed an extensive search by Police, Land Search and Rescue and the Air force.

Issues

[2] The issues are the cause and circumstances of death and whether any recommendations or comments are made for the purposes of reducing the chances of further deaths occurring in circumstances similar to those in which the death has occurred.

[3] Having given due consideration as to whether an inquest is necessary or desirable in this case and having complied with the requirements of section 77 of the Coroners Act

2006, I have decided to conclude this inquiry by holding a hearing on the papers and make chambers findings pursuant to that section.

Cause of death

[4] A post mortem was conducted by pathologist Doctor Michael Handler. In Doctor Handler's opinion the cause of Mr Myers death is blunt force injuries to the head. Additional fractures were in the right hyoid bone and left wrist. Over the head and extremities were scattered contusions and lacerations. Toxicology testing did not identify any alcohol or commonly screened for drugs in his system.

[5] I accept the medical evidence of Doctor Handler as to the cause of Mr Myers death.

Circumstances of death

[6] Darren Myers lived with his wife Kimberley Shaw in Wellington. She says on about the 26 May¹ 2019 Darren mentioned to her that he might go for a tramp in the Tararua's. Kimberley was not sure if he was doing any research about where he would go but she saw him on the computer. Darren asked her if she would pick him up from the end of his tramp which was at Holdsworth campsite. Darren gave her written instructions on how to get there.

[7] His anticipated date of arrival was 31 May or 1 June. He told her that if he arrived early he would sleep in his tent. Kimberley was due to arrive at Holdsworth Campsite about midday on 1 June (Saturday). Kimberley dropped Darren at the start of the track on Tuesday 28 May 2019 at about mid-day. This was the intersection of Poads Road and Gladstone Road near Levin. He told her he was doing the North Crossing of Mount Tararua. Darren said he would be staying in huts and plotting his route from hut to hut. He also had his tent if required.

[8] Kimberly sent a text message to him that evening about the heavy rain in Wellington and hoping Mr Myers had arrived at the hut. Mr Myers responded the next

¹ In the formal written statement of Kimberley Ann Shaw it has 26 June – however I accept this is an error and should be 26 May.

day at 3:16 pm saying he was alright but the weather had turned to “custard” that afternoon. Mr Myers told her he had stopped at Arete Hut for the night as it wasn’t prudent to continue to Tarn Ridge Hut. Kimberly received another text from him the next day at 8:05 am saying he had the hut to himself. That was the last message she received from him.

[9] She arrived at the pre-arranged pick up point about 12:20 pm on Sunday 1 June 2019. This was the Holdsworth Campground carpark. It was raining heavily. Mr Myers was not there. She spoke with the ranger at the park who alerted police.

Experience

[10] Kimberly says Mr Myers first began tramping with his mother as a teenager. While living in the United Kingdom, he would do a couple of weekend trips and a week-long tramp each year. He has done this also in Wales and the Scottish Highlands. Mr Myers has completed a 6-7-week hike along the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain. In 2018 Mr Myers tramped overnight to the Pinnacles in Coromandel.

[11] His brother in law, Duncan Styles has known Darren for about 10 years. He describes Darren as an active hiker and mountain biker. He has known him to complete numerous hiking trips. Mr Styles says he has always been impressed with Darren’s preparation for hiking trips. He always seemed to put a lot of thought into his gear and in his view, did not take unnecessary risks.

New Zealand Mountain Safety Council

[12] The New Zealand Mountain Safety Council (MSC) prepared a report to assist with my inquiry into Mr Myers death. The MSC had access to statements, photographs and the weather forecast for the area. They reviewed this in conjunction with their own expertise. MSC have been able to determine the sequence of events prior to Mr Myers death based on this information. The purpose of the report is to identify contributing factors and suggest recommendations which may be used in order to prevent similar deaths of this nature occurring in the future.

28 May – 12 June 2019

[13] The Northern Crossing of the Tararua Ranges is one of four classical tramps and is considered an *Expert Route* by the Department of Conservation (DOC) for much of it. This is due to the steep ridge lines, low levels of track maintenance, minimal active hazard management by DOC and long sections of off-track travel requiring complete self-sufficiency. It is also exposed to frequently extreme weather conditions. MSC states that this track requires thorough preparation as well as solid navigation skills, fitness and the correct equipment.

[14] MSC consider Mr Myers was an experienced tramp, though most of that experience was in Europe and particularly the United Kingdom. In their view this track would have been towards the upper end of Mr Myers experience and may have been the most challenging tramp he had ever attempted. Furthermore, he was solo and at the beginning of winter, meaning he would be unlikely to meet other trampers and would need to be totally self-sufficient. Mr Myers choice of beginning at the Gladstone Road end indicates the most popular direction was chosen, although the drop-off time seems late for the projected four or more hours to make the Waiopehu Hut. As no formal intentions were left, this is the assumption made as to Mr Myers intended destination for the first day.

[15] The Waiopehu Track is a steep, bush covered ridge line that heads generally south from the Gladstone Road end and is a section of the Te Araroa Trail. The other possible route, up Ohau Gorge and then to Mayo Nob, is steeper, has no huts close by and would be considered less likely in this instance. There are no entries noted in the hut book to confirm this. It was from Arete Hut that Mr Myers had the final communications with his wife indicating that he was at the hut and hadn't pushed on to Tarn Hut.

[16] MSC says this indicates that Mr Myers was finding it tough and was behind his expected pace. Much of the Tararua Range's exposed tracks are heavily rutted and require careful foot placement. Off-track routes can be quite slippery between the tussock clumps. The next day the weather would have been quite bad with severe gales and heavy rain. Generally, in the Tararua Ranges, strong winds and cloud results in poor visibility on the tops, making navigation very difficult. It can be difficult to keep dry and warm. At 8:05 am on Saturday 30th May 2019, Mr Myers sent a message to his wife mentioning he was alone at Arete Hut. At 10:46 am his phone contacted a nearby cell tower but couldn't

establish a connection. This may have been when he turned his phone on to try and confirm his position. He had a mapping application (app) on his phone which would have plotted his current location on a topographic map.

[17] From the evidence presented to MSC they summarise that Mr Myers tried to push on to Tarn Hut down the ridge line to the south. His intended route would have been via Tarn Ridge to Tarn Ridge Hut. This is an off-track route which is about 5.3 kilometres with 500 metres ascent and 520 metres descent. The DOC website estimates time to Tarn Ridge Hut from Arete Hut to be four hours. Footprints found by the search and rescue team were located at a height of 1389, approximately 1 kilometre south of Arete Hut. This was either to try and get back to Arete Hut or perhaps to try and get out through a different route down one of the steep valleys. MSC presume that he chose to descend to Arete Stream, as it leads to Arete Forks Hut and would provide a more sheltered option to complete his trip.

[18] MSC state the decision to continue down Arete Stream and the conditions on the day was a dangerous decision. Whether intentional or not Mr Myers found himself following Arete Stream, which the Tararua Tramping Club route guide recommends be sidled to the true right of the stream. The stream descends very steeply and involves several waterfalls. While attempting to navigate a waterfall, Mr Myers fell several metres, sustaining severe injuries including a fatal blow to his head. He was carried a short distance down the steep stream, by storm flows, to where he was found, nearly two weeks later, on the 12 June 2019.

[19] MSC identified a number of contributing factors in relation to Mr Myers death. They are summarised as:

Competence: lack of recent/ relevant experience; overambitious choice of route, solo

[20] MSC state that while Mr Myers was an experienced trumper the evidence suggests he had not tramped recently, and they are not aware of him tramping in the Tararua Ranges previously. The evidence suggests that his preparation was rushed and missed some important details on the route that may have helped his decisions later. Mr Myers lack of complete route intentions underlines this factor as well. The choice of footwear shows he

had improperly considered the route conditions, in particular the large sections of off-track travel.

[21] His family spoke of Mr Myers experiences in Europe including crossing Scotland and trips to the Pyrenees. MSC say that these trips can be described as mountaineering in some sections and most people use the many roads and tracks available. Poor weather is common in Scotland and the Pyrenees however the Tararua Range with its frequent gales pose a higher level of danger. The best option for Mr Myers when the weather conditions deteriorated, was to remain in Arete Hut and wait for conditions to improve.

[22] Tramping solo is popular in New Zealand. However, MSC state it is important to understand that there will be no support on the trip. Without a tramping partner you are more likely to make a mistake in judgement. A tramping partner experienced in the Tararua Ranges may have suggested or prompted the option of staying at Arete Hut.

Equipment: lack of appropriate footwear

[23] The Salmon Trail shoes that Mr Myers was wearing were lightweight shoes intended for shorter, easier trips, usually with lighter packs and for better formed tracks. The lack of rigid shank and soft tread make it hard to grab hold on steep surfaces. Trail running shoes were not suitable footwear for this trip.

Weather: change in conditions

[24] Over the duration of the tramp the weather worsened. This was predicted by the MetService forecast. Prior to departing, the forecast for 29 May was “*Gale northwesterly, rising to severe gale at night*” followed by “*Showers turning to rain in the morning, possibly heavy. Severe Gale north-westerlies*” for the 30th May. On 31 May snow was forecast down to 1000 metres. Due to these conditions, staying at Arete Hut, even for several days would have been a safer option. MSC state that being aware of the weather forecast and knowing how severe the wind can be in the Tararua’s, the safest option would have been to delay setting off on this route until more suitable weather was forecast or choose a shorter trip with easier bailout options.

Social and psychological factors: searching for an alternative path

Terrain: difficult conditions

[26] Below Arete Hut the bushes are very dense and can be very difficult to travel through. Once making the decision to descend, it would have been difficult for Mr Myers to turn around and head uphill again, meaning that the streambed may have been his only remaining option. Steep conditions make the consequences of a fall much worse. The steepness of the terrain may have contributed to a general level of tiredness, increasing the likelihood and certainly contributed to the severity of a fall. By climbing down a stream, with quite a bit of water flow was a dangerous route choice and is particularly difficult when descending.

[27] The MSC conclude in their report that while Mr Myers was considered an experienced trumper by family members, MSC states that based on his experience he was not sufficiently prepared for a trip of this nature. An *Expert Route* like the Northern Crossing of the Tararua Ranges requires careful study to know the type of terrain that will be encountered. It requires a good understanding of the weather forecast as well as how that might affect the terrain or tramping conditions. An expert trumper would have studied a good alternative route and have planned several possible bailout options.

[28] MSC state that lack of preparation contributed to Mr Myers becoming significantly affected by the weather conditions, which had been accurately forecast. The wind and driving rain made travel extremely difficult and resulted in him being unable to continue on his planned route. Even in dry conditions, gullies and streams are more dangerous due to being steeper and wetter. In the wet conditions Mr Myers was traversing exposed rocks that would have been very wet and slippery, and at some point, during his descent he slipped and fell over a waterfall, sustaining fatal injuries.

Findings

[29] I find that Darren John Myers, late of 18 Canterbury, Karori, Wellington, died at Tararua Ranges on or about 30 May 2019. The cause of death was blunt force injuries of the head due to a fall.

Recommendations

[30] The MSC has a clear focus on preventing further outdoor recreation fatalities. It will often make recommendations aimed at preventing accidents like this from occurring again. In its report MSC notes that all outdoor recreation comes with an element of risk, as do many everyday activities. It is impossible to remove all the risks from outdoor recreation activities, nor should they need to be totally risk-free. In reviewing all the evidence available and using it as a learning point for others the MSC encourages all those involved in tramping to consider the following points²:

1. Carefully consider the consequences of tramping alone. Those who choose solo should do so on trips that are well within their level of skill and experience. Solo trips are not recommended for inexperienced trampers, above the bush line or in winter conditions.
2. Source the latest weather forecast for the area, consider the impact that forecast weather will have on the trip and be prepared to alter plans according to the conditions.
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5. In steep terrain, constantly evaluate the likelihood and severity of a fall. In principle, when descending off-track, plan to follow ridgelines and spurs as opposed to gullies and streams, as these are more dangerous due to being steeper and wetter.
6. Generally speaking, trampers should be well versed in the evidence-based Land Safety Code.

[31] These recommendations are consistent with current proactive prevention focused messaging delivered by MSC and its partners. In light of this, I make no formal recommendations.

² NZ Mountain Safety Council – Report on the tramping accident which resulted in the death of Darren James Myers – May 30 2019, Arete Stream, Tararua Ranges – Authors: Dave Mangell and Adam Smith.

Restrictions on publication

[32] Pursuant to section 74 of the Coroners Act 2006, I am satisfied it is in the interests of decency or personal privacy to prohibit the making public of photographs of Darren Myers taken by police. I am satisfied that such interests outweigh the public interest (if any) in the publication of those images.

Condolences

[33] I would like to take this opportunity to extend my condolences to the family and friends of Darren Myers for their loss.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'T Fitzgibbon', is written over a light blue rectangular background. The signature is stylized and cursive.

Coroner T Fitzgibbon