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Record numbers mean whitebait exhibition will stay open

The success of Hokitika Museum's Whitebait Exhibition has mirrored South Westland's bumper whitebait season with record visitor numbers resulting in the exhibition being extended until January 2012.

'WHITEBAIT! The story of New Zealand's favourite fish' has cemented the West Coast's reputation as the Whitebait capital of New Zealand with 7,800 visiting since the exhibition opened nine weeks ago. That represents a 400 per cent increase in visitors compared to the year before.

"I'm thrilled, it is wonderful to have the opportunity to showcase such an important aspect of West Coast culture. Even long-time whitebaiters have said they have learnt things about baiting they never knew," says Museum Director Julia Bradshaw.

The exhibition looks at the diminutive fish and its effect on the West Coast people and their culture from the Awarua River in the South to the Heaphy in the north. The historic film footage and Tangata Whenua audio-visual display where local iwi reminisce about the heydays of West Coast whitebaiting have been especially popular.

Visitors have come from all over the West Coast, New Zealand and the world including the USA, Columbia, China, Germany, Ireland, England, Australia and Malaysia. One visitor said the whitebait exhibition was a "national treasure", another said it was "better than Te Papa", and a third that it was one of the "best exhibitions" they had experienced.

"It is so flattering to hear comments like that and the word of mouth recommendations mean visitors are still pouring into the museum. Along with radio and press coverage the exhibition has also appeared on One News and been filmed by a French TV crew who are doing a story about whitebaiting on the West Coast," says Ms Bradshaw.

As a result of requests to keep the exhibition open or to put it on permanent display the Council has agreed to extend its season until January 8 with a gold coin entry fee. If there is enough interest and support it may be extended until April 2012.

The long-term plan is to put the whitebait exhibition on permanent display, however, the Museum needs the time and the resources to make room for it. It is hoped that this will happen during the revamp of the Museum's galleries which is expected to begin in 2013.

The exhibition is open at Hokitika Museum from 9.30am – 5pm.

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