



# Sustainable Mountain Biking in NSW Management Strategies for Discussion

Proposed by  
Northern Beaches Mountain Biking Group

12 August 2009



# Table of Contents

1.0	Introduction	1
1.1	Background	1
1.2	Purpose of this Report	1
1.3	Northern Beaches Mountain Biking Group	2
1.3.1	Community represented	2
1.4	Mountain Biking in NPWS Administered Parks	2
2.0	Sustainable Management	4
2.1	Sustainability, Environment and Conservation	4
2.2	Formal Definition	4
2.3	Application	5
2.3.1	Cumulative Impact and Level of Use	5
2.4	Management Controls	7
2.4.1	Concentration or Dispersion of Usage	7
2.4.2	Design Controls to Accommodate Usage Level	9
2.4.3	Restriction and Control of Usage	10
3.0	Existing Policy Framework	12
3.1	Strategic Objectives	12
3.1.1	National Parks Objectives	12
3.1.2	State Plan Objectives	12
3.1.3	Recreational Taskforce Report	14
3.2	Policy Impediments to Wider Mountain Bike Access	14
3.2.1	Existing Policies	14
3.2.2	Plan of Management Structure	16
3.2.3	Opportunities to Address Impediments	16
3.3	Policy Evaluation	16
3.3.1	Equitable	17
3.3.2	Affordable	17
3.3.3	Beneficial	17
3.3.4	Needed	17
3.3.5	Timely	17
3.3.6	Aligned with DECCW/NPWS Objectives	18
4.0	Proposed Steps Forward	19

## Why this Document?

This document was originally prepared for a meeting with the Hon. Carmel Tebbutt in her capacity as Minister for Climate Change and Environment, Minister for Commerce and NSW Deputy Premier on 12 August 2009 to discuss the issues and opportunities regarding the sustainable use of mountain biking in NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service administered parks.

It is hoped that as well as supporting those recommendations it may also be of help to aid cycle infrastructure and trail access discussions with other land managers in Sydney and beyond.

This meeting was organised in response to issues raised with Mike Baird, MP for Manly, by members of the mountain biking community, local environmental and bush rehabilitation groups and National Parks in Sydney's Northern Beaches.

NoBMoB notes that a vast amount of information regarding the Environmental and Economic impacts of Mountain Biking is available through the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) website: <http://www.imba.com/resources/science/index.html>. This includes case studies from North America, Tasmania and New Zealand outlining how a well developed mountain biking strategy can deliver sustainable social, environmental and economic benefits.

Readers can visit the NoBMoB website at the following address: <http://nobmob.com/>

The site administrators can be contacted at this email address: [admin@nobmob.com](mailto:admin@nobmob.com)

## About the Authors

The authors of this document have volunteered our time and effort to draw on our professional experience working in major environmental, engineering and management consultancies.

Our combined experience in the environmental arena covers the environmental and sustainability assessment of major road and rail infrastructure projects, the sustainable design of some of Sydney's most energy efficient buildings, the development of low carbon emission tri-generation and renewable energy projects and a healthy dose of environmental compliance monitoring.

In addition we have worked with government stakeholders in establishing appropriate impact limits, improving internal management processes and assessing the efficiency of capital investment in public infrastructure.

On the weekends we ride mountain bikes. This report has been prepared in our spare time because we believe that mountain biking on single track is inherently sustainable and socially desirable. However NSW, and especially Sydney, needs a far more co-ordinated approach to avoid the proliferation of poorly designed unofficial trails in bushland environments.

Unique to Sydney are our wonderful urban National Parks which, as the largest contiguous bushland reserves containing extensive existing trail networks need to play a significant part in meeting the social need for sustainable mountain biking access to single track in the Sydney Basin. We have proposed a sensitive management approach for DECCW/NPWS consideration that we believe can be applied to better meeting the social needs of Sydney in an environmentally and economically sustainable manner.

# A note on sustainability and other environmental terms

This report uses a number of common environmental management terms that vary in their meaning from state to state and author to author. For clarity, we have defined how we have interpreted these terms and the role that they can play in our suggested management framework.

In particular, the concept of 'Sustainability' has been increasingly used in public discourse. In many cases the term 'sustainability' is used loosely to mean 'all environmental concerns'. However, sustainability in its true sense aims to meet the social needs of current and future generations in an economically efficient manner that does not result in significant or irreversible environmental impact.

Other key terms used in this report are:

## *Sustainable Management*

The application of sustainable development principles in accordance with the precautionary principle to manage environmental impacts arising from legitimate social uses of the natural environment in a manner that is economically viable and does not lead to significant or irreversible environmental damage.

## *Environmental Impact Assessment*

The application of sustainability principles to policy decisions clearly requires an assessment of the level of impact that can be accommodated without irreversible environmental damage. The purpose of Environmental Impact Assessment is to set the level of acceptable impact and to assess whether the level of proposed activity would exceed the level of acceptable impact.

## *Naturally Sustainable Level of Impact*

In most cases the acceptable limit should be in the area where the level of impact is below the level of natural regeneration, that is that the natural environment can regenerate faster than the rate of impact. This represents the naturally sustainable (or unmanaged) level of impact.

## *Sustainably Managed Level of Impact (Environmental Management)*

With additional management effort in the form of labour, maintenance or improved design, the naturally sustainable level of impact can be extended. For example, the use of erosion controls on a heavily used walking trail will increase the level of activity that can be sustainably accommodated. The role of Environmental Management is to apply additional effort to extend the naturally sustainable level of impact to accommodate the proposed level of activity.

## *Economic Benefit Assessment*

The application of additional management effort usually carries a cost in terms of labour, time and materials to consider the extent of action required. The role of economic assessment is to determine whether the benefits provided by the costs required to manage the level of impact outweigh the economic benefits provided to society.

## *Social Benefit Assessment*

The third area of sustainability assessment is that the social impact must be positive. That is, the proposed activity should provide a healthier, happier, more engaged society. This can be achieved through the improvement in health and wellbeing or the displacement of socially destructive behaviour (e.g. excessive drinking) with socially positive behaviour (e.g. bush walking).

### *National Parks*

Whilst we understand the different intention and uses of the categories of land under NPWS management (National Parks, Nature Reserves, Regional Parks, etc.), we have used the term 'national parks' broadly to denote the full range of park types under DECCW control. It is not our intention to propose a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to allow all mountain biking activities in all areas of all national parks, rather that mountain biking on single track be appropriately accommodated within the portfolio of NPWS managed parks.

# Executive Summary

## Current Issues

Current policies generally prohibit mountain biking on single track in national parks, however riding has been occurring in NSW National Parks for over 20 years in both official and unofficial capacities. Recently significant efforts have been made outside Sydney by both riders and staff to improve mountain bike access in NPWS administered parks. This is also occurring in other States.

However, our experience in the Sydney national parks and in particular Garrigal National Park indicate that the opposite approach is being adopted within the Sydney Metropolitan Area. This has resulted in the ongoing restriction of access in the geographical area where the demand for mountain biking trails is the highest. This has led to confrontation and frustration between rangers and mountain bikers and requires costly compliance monitoring and enforcement costs that could more productively be directed to engaging with volunteers to improve the trail standard.

The recreational riders represented by the northern beaches mountain bike community are concerned that recent trail closures, residential development approvals for currently used undeveloped land and changing NPWS land management attitudes and land boundaries are limiting access to existing trails and encouraging the proliferation of unofficial trail building in the area. Closures have also put huge pressure on the only official mountain bike track at Manly Dam. This has led to recent major works which has reduced the value of the track to both mountain bikers and walkers.

The community view of national parks in many circles is that they could become more relevant through increased accessibility. Accessibility has reduced largely due to individuals becoming time poor in larger growing metropolitan areas and increased urban travel times.

## Vision

By increasing visitation and community engagement through improved and dedicated mountain biking facilities the community accrues benefits of increased levels of fitness, access to natural environment and tourism. The increased patronage results in a small financial benefit to the DECCW through increased park access fee revenue and the increased value of the NPWS brand

The social benefits of engaging a predominately younger, fitter user group in community bush regeneration and trail maintenance projects will clearly reduce costs to NPWS and increase the value of maintaining the natural environment in the view of younger generations.

## Steps Forward

Given that the revision of the relevant policies are well overdue and the PoM's for the Sydney National parks are also overdue or under revision, we recommend that a policy review is undertaken in light of the sustainable management approach outlined in this document.

The resulting policies should seek to increase and create positive engagement of mountain bikers with the natural environment, NPWS and the community.

We encourage open discussion and evaluation of existing trails and potential new trails between NPWS, mountain bikers and other stakeholders using the proposed sustainable management approach. We are here to help and can draw on professional expertise in areas such as environment, social, economics, planning, landscape architecture and trail design from within the mountain bike community.

# 1.0 Introduction

## 1.1 Background

Following from a submission prepared by members within the NoBMoB community regarding potential official mountain bike access to the existing trail network in the Oxford Falls region the issue of mountain bike access to NPWS managed land was raised in state parliament on 4 June 2009, by Mike Baird, NSW Shadow Treasurer and Member for Manly. The outcome of this was the meeting with Carmel Tebbutt, Minister for Climate Change and Environment/ Minister for Commerce and NSW Deputy Premier, on 12 August 2009 for which this report has been prepared.

Mountain biking is a relatively young sport that has been widely undertaken in National Parks for the past 20 years without significant management controls enforced. In recent years the increasing popularity of the sport has led to prohibition controls in accordance with individual park Plans of Management (PoM) being enforced at many popular riding locations which, in turn, has concentrated use further at an increasingly smaller number of official locations.

We note that more bikes have been sold annually in Australia than cars for a number of years now and approximately 70% of these bicycles are mountain bikes. Mountain biking is popular leisure activity as it is accessible to a wide range of socioeconomic groups, promotes a healthy lifestyle and exercise away from the pollution and dangers of city streets and produces no green house gas emissions.

The combination of the increasing popularity of mountain biking and reducing availability of suitable riding locations is clearly unsustainable in light of the recent concerns by land managers and mountain bikers alike, relating to the level of use and the corresponding level of environmental impact of mountain biking.

In addition to the extremely wide recreational user base, Australia currently has a number of recent mountain biking world champions and as a nation ranks near the top in almost all disciplines of the sport. Clearly a more workable solution needs to be found to ensure that a more environmentally, socially and economically beneficial management arrangements can be put in place to accommodate all aspects of this nationally important recreational activity. This should include a review of the sustainable access to single track within NSW national parks.

For further details regarding a summary of contemporary mountain biking as a recreational activity, an assessment of the demographics, economic benefits social benefits and the principal issues affecting trail access in NSW, please refer to our Oxford Falls submission which can be found at <http://nobmob.com/system/files/Oxford+Falls+Plan+of+Management+-+NoBMoB.pdf>

## 1.2 Purpose of this Report

This report presents the views of members of the mountain biking community that use the northern beaches mountain bike trails. In particular, it outlines our view of how NPWS could adopt a more inclusive policy toward mountain bike access in NPWS managed land in a sustainable manner.

Consideration has been given firstly to establishing a sustainable management approach in accordance with the principles of environmentally sustainable development as the overarching driver.

In the context of the sustainable management approach outlined in section 2.0, we have considered the current NPWS policies, their status and whether they are suitable to meet the needs of society into the future. Where current NPWS policies have been identified as needing a review, opportunities for consolidation and improvement have also been identified.

We have also considered the strong potential for mountain bike tourism to contribute to the achievement of the NPWS visitation goals outlines in the NSW State Plan 2006 and the NPWS Recreation Taskforce Report 2008.

### **1.3 Northern Beaches Mountain Biking Group**

NoBMoB is a network of approximately 1600 recreational mountain bike riders located around the northern beaches of Sydney. Numerous members of the group regularly participate in rides arranged through the NoBMoB website and a majority of users who access the website to discuss equipment and issues, obtain trail information or participate in online discussion forums.

In addition the users who have registered to participate in forums, a much larger number of people access the website for information only. As an indication of the scale of the total user base, the NoBMoB website is accessed by over 20,000 unique visitors each month<sup>1</sup>.

#### **1.3.1 Community represented**

In previous consultations, NoBMoB has been identified as being representative of a significant user group of recreational mountain bikers who have been riding in the Northern Beaches for approximately 20 years. We note that emphasis has been placed on presenting the opinion of recreational mountain bikers who are typically not members of an organised club as these riders are typical of the bulk of trail users represented within the NoBMoB community.

NoBMoB provides a forum to arrange informal recreational mountain bike rides for anyone interested in mountain biking in the area. In our experience, most riders do not wish to join a club because the focus of most mountain biking clubs is on racing and organised events<sup>2</sup>. Many recreational riders do not wish to ride competitively and do not have the time to be involved in organising or participating in club events and the associated club obligations.

Involvement in NoBMoB rides is open to all and are frequently attended by people who are new to Sydney and/or mountain biking and wish to meet other mountain bikers in the area.

The NoBMoB group is comprised predominately of riders between the ages of 20-40. Most riders are employed full time in a professional capacity (e.g. accountants, teachers, IT managers, lawyers, environmental, engineering, management consultants, small business owners) as well as tradespeople, students and travellers. Given the age distribution there are also a number of families with both parents and children involved in the local mountain biking community.

### **1.4 Mountain Biking in NPWS Administered Parks**

Although current policies generally prohibit mountain biking on single track in national parks, this has been occurring in NSW National Parks for over 20 years in both official and unofficial capacities. Recently significant efforts have been made outside Sydney to improve mountain bike access in NPWS administered parks.

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<sup>1</sup> NoBMoB web logs, May 2009

<sup>2</sup> NoBMoB site survey: <http://nobmob.com/node/4751>



However, our experience in the Sydney national parks and in particular Garrigal National Park indicate that the opposite approach is being adopted within the Sydney Metropolitan Area. This has resulted in the ongoing restriction of access in the geographical area where the demand for mountain biking trails is the highest.

The recreational riders represented by the NoBMoB community are concerned that recent trail closures, residential development approvals for currently used undeveloped land and changing NPWS land management attitudes are limiting access to existing trails and encouraging the proliferation of unofficial trail building in the area.

The NoBMoB community appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the DECCW's consideration of mountain bike access to NPWS managed land. To meet the clear social need for trail access, the NoBMoB community would like to work with the DECCW and NPWS to develop a truly sustainable trail network and management strategy to provide sustainable recreational access to NPWS managed land that respects the natural and Aboriginal heritage value of NSW national parks.

## 2.0 Sustainable Management

This section outlines the widely accepted definitions of 'sustainability' and outlines the distinction between 'sustainability', sustainable management and environmental management and how we believe that these approaches can be applied in the context of national parks.

### 2.1 Sustainability, Environment and Conservation

In recent years the concept of 'Sustainability' has been increasingly used in public discourse. In many cases the term 'sustainability' is used loosely to mean 'all environmental concerns'. However, sustainability in its true sense aims to meet the social needs of current and future generations in an economically efficient manner that does not result in significant or irreversible environmental impact.

In this sense, sustainability assessment is a combination of environmental impact assessment, economic benefits assessment and social needs assessment. Similarly, sustainable management involves the management of environmental impacts arising from legitimate social uses in a manner that is economically viable.

Whilst environmental impact assessment and prudent environmental management are critical components in a sustainable management strategy, we note that restricting the definition of sustainability to environmental concerns often leads to access restrictions under the banner of conservation based environmental policy. The risk associated with protection based environmental conservation policy where access is restricted limits the allowable level of engagement of individuals with nature.

The unintended result of this policy approach in the long term is the reduction of the societal and economic value of the natural environment by making it increasingly irrelevant or inaccessible to current and future generations alike. In this case, the natural environment is conserved in the medium term, however the value of the natural environment to society diminishes as stronger restricting protection based conservation policies further limit the allowable level of engagement with nature.

In contrast, broader sustainability based conservation policy seeks to provide maximum environmental, economic and societal benefits that can continue indefinitely with no irreversible environmental effect. In essence this means using the natural environment in way that best serves the needs of current generations without degrading its value to future generations.

### 2.2 Formal Definition

The concept and formal definition of sustainable development is usually cited as the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Report as:

*"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"*<sup>3</sup>

This definition highlights the concept of intergenerational equity as a basis for sustainable development policy decisions. These decisions may relate to economic, environmental or social measures and in a true assessment of the sustainability of policy decisions all three aspects must be considered. Achieving sustainability in one area does not necessarily result in a sustainable result overall.

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<sup>3</sup> *Our common future*, World Commission on Environment and Development, <http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#>

The obvious uncertainty relating to the measurement of the future environmental impact of a planned activity or development is usually addressed by reference to the precautionary principle, formally defined in the 1992 Rio Declaration:

*“Where there are threats of serious or irreversible environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as a reason for postponing measures to prevent environmental degradation.”<sup>4</sup>*

We note that the emphasis of the precautionary principle is on ‘significant’ and ‘irreversible’ environmental impacts. This is applied to the residual impact remaining after all economically feasible mitigating and remedial measures have been applied.

In most cases relating to bushwalking or cycling trail impacts the environmental damage is not irreversible and can be regenerated naturally within a generation (nominally 20 years) if use is altered to assist natural regeneration.

Therefore whilst the environmental impacts posed may be locally significant to the current generation, they are rarely irreversible or outside the realm of remedial assisted regeneration. A good example of this is the successful erosion control work undertaken on popular walking trails in NSW National Parks over the past 20 years to remediate the effects of poorly aligned trails.

## **2.3 Application**

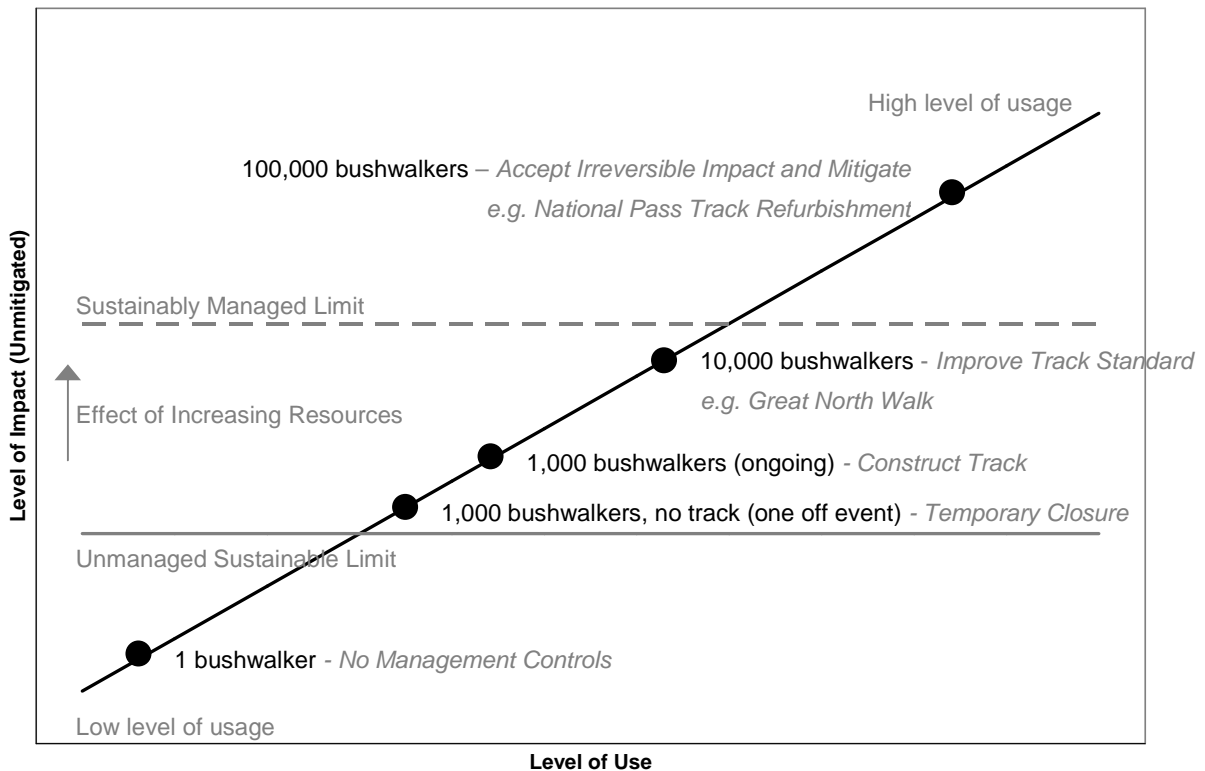
This section outlines our application of a sustainable management approach to national park environments.

### **2.3.1 Cumulative Impact and Level of Use**

The overall impact of any activity is dependent of the level of use at that location. As illustrated in Figure 1, when the level of use results in an impact beyond the level of the natural environment to regenerate, some level of manageable environmental impact is accepted. This impact is preferable to more widespread degradation and is managed to avoid impacts that would irreversibly degrade the natural environment.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, Rio, 1992 (the “Rio Declaration”).



**Figure 1 - Relation between the level of use and the cumulative environmental impact (Note numbers are illustrative and will vary with site)**

Using the approach generally taken to the provision of bushwalking trails as an example:

- One or two bushwalkers infrequently walking off trail is unlikely to cause an impact that is beyond the ability of the natural environment to regenerate without assistance. This use is below the unmanaged sustainable limit and requires no specific management effort.
- One thousand bushwalkers walking off trail over a single weekend is likely to cause a significant impact that would take some time to regenerate with or without assistance but is not irreversible. This is above the naturally sustainable limit but is sustainably managed with minor effort to control further usage (e.g. temporary regeneration closures).
- One thousand bushwalkers walking off trail every weekend is likely to cause a significant impact that is beyond the level of the natural environment to regenerate. In this case, a well designed trail is the most environmentally sensitive means of providing social access to the natural environment. This is above the unmanaged sustainable limit but is within the sustainably managed limit though the provision of an appropriately designed trail.

Should the level of use continue to increase on an existing trail, the cumulative impact on that trail may reach a point where further management effort of the trail itself is required. Consideration would be given to an increased maintenance regime, more robust trail construction or management of access to the trail. These measures can increase the sustainably managed limit and are largely dependent on the extent of resources (time, labour, maintenance, capital) devoted to managing the impact.

Where it is possible to sustainably manage the environmental impact arising from legitimate societal use of the natural environment, the reasonableness of allocating the required resources can and should be assessed on the basis of conventional economic and social benefits assessments.

## 2.4 Management Controls

The interrelation between usage and impact results in the need for a decision to be made about the controls that need to be put in place to ensure that the usage remains sustainable. Principally this requires consideration of:

- The extent to which usage is concentrated to consolidate management effort.
- The extent to which trails are designed to accommodate higher rates of usage.
- The extent to which it is socially acceptable to restrict or control access.

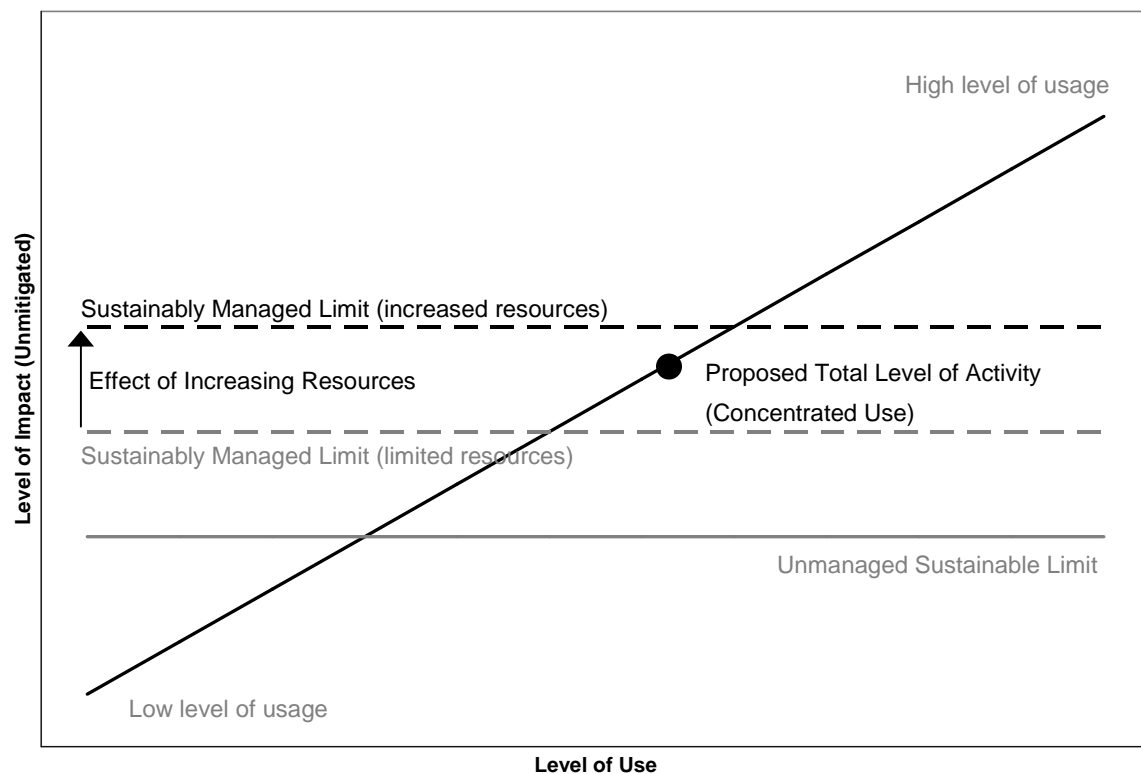
This section considers how these management approaches can be most appropriately applied in the context of mountain biking in national parks.

### 2.4.1 Concentration or Dispersion of Usage

#### *Concentration*

The concentration of usage provides benefits in accommodating an activity in an area where significant management effort can be targeted and applied. The principal issue with regard to concentration approaches is that these encourage a greater level of use at a single location.

With appropriate management effort, the level of usage that is within the capacity of the increased management resources can be sustainably accommodated. Within the context of national parks, any policy designed to concentrate impacts should ensure that the proposed areas are capable of sustaining the proposed level of local use that is encouraged by the adoption of a concentration policy.

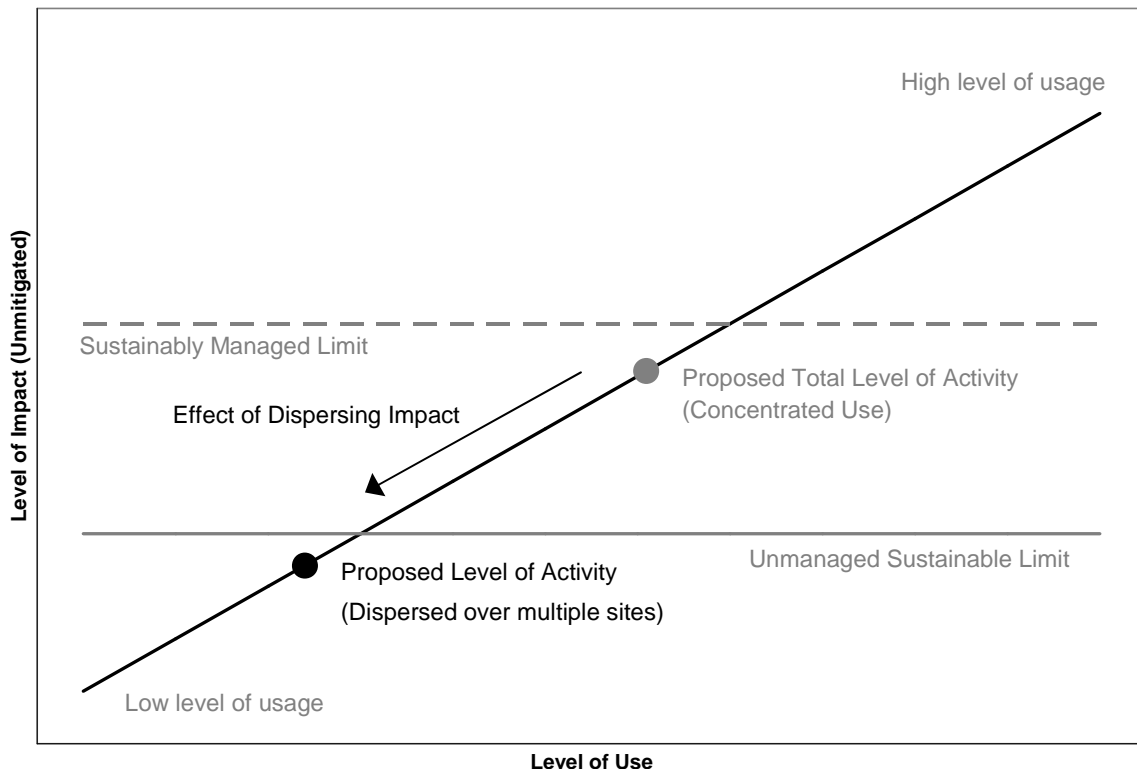


**Figure 2 - Effect of concentrating usage**

### Dispersion

In contrast, the dispersion of usage spreads the impact across a wider area and reduces the management effort required at any single point. Policy designed to disperse impacts by dispersing usage aims ultimately to keep the level of impact below the unmanaged sustainable limit to minimise the management resources required. This is not always possible as demand will vary from one location to another based on the local population. However, a dispersion approach will naturally identify the areas where additional management effort and evaluation is required.

Provided that the appropriate additional resources are allocated to deal with these issues when they arise a dispersion policy, coupled with a mitigation assessment should support the most efficient allocation of management effort.



**Figure 3 - Effect of dispersing usage**

### Practical Considerations

Demand is already concentrated in larger population centres where focused management efforts can be targeted therefore a very significant degree of concentration is naturally applied due to the concentration of the bulk of NSW population in Sydney.

Therefore in large population centres such as Sydney, further attempts to concentrate all use at a single location is likely to be ineffective as the total demand exceeds the level that can be sustainably managed at any one site. Given the growing popularity of the sport, evidenced by the continual growth in annual bike sales (exceeding car sales, with 70% mountain bikes), a long total length of trail needs to be provided across the Sydney basin to cater for the demand and thus avoid the proliferation of poorly designed unofficial trails in national parks and other bushland reserves.

Therefore the most effective policy would be reflective of the scale of the current social need and seek to provide dispersed access for this level of recreational demand in an environmentally sustainable manner. This is likely to require contributions from various land managers including

councils, crown land and principally NPWS (as the manager of the largest network of existing trails) to be successful.

The scale of management effort required to continue to enforce the current prohibition approach or to concentrate a very high level of demand at a very small number of sites is likely to be significantly more than is available with current NPWS resources.

The large and diverse mountain biking community, would appreciate the opportunity to work with NPWS to designate, design and maintain an appropriate official trail network that would relieve the enforcement and maintenance burden from the department.

We would propose that a similar scheme to the NPWS-community partnered bush care groups be investigated to care for the trails and their immediate environment. We note that specific mountain bike trail maintenance organisations such as Terracare were formed to help co-ordinate mountain biking volunteer efforts with various park rangers. However, due to limited interest from land managers, Terracare has had limited success to date

In contrast, in regional areas where usage is low, the dispersal of impacts over the existing trail networks would likely result in the cumulative impact being well within the unmanaged limits.

### 2.4.2 Design Controls to Accommodate Usage Level

Apart from management controls applied to the usage level of an individual trail, trail design can be improved to accommodate a greater number of riders. This is essentially the same process that is undertaken in the track standard upgrades undertaken for walking trails as their popularity increases. The influence of improved track design is illustrated in Figure 4, below.

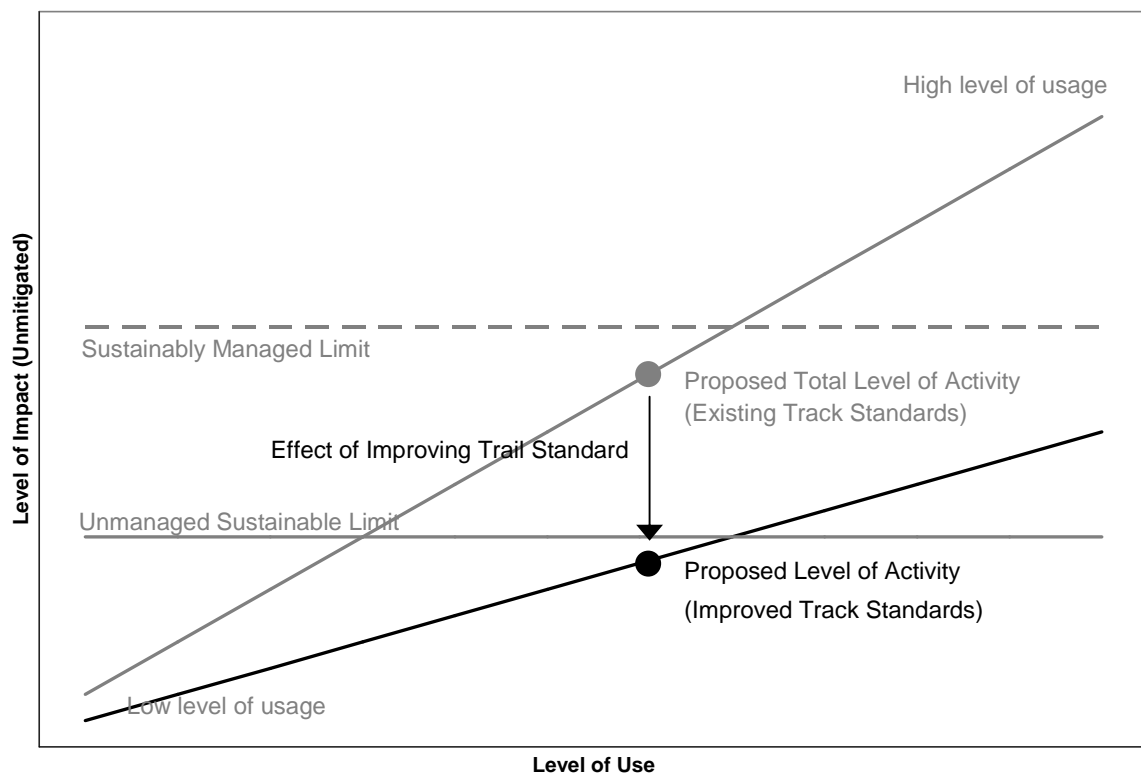


Figure 4 - Effect of design controls

We note that the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) has produced guidelines for appropriate track construction for mountain biking and that these are applied internationally and within Australia to improve the design of mountain biking and walking tracks in national park environments.

Furthermore, we understand that the South Australian Department of Environment and Heritage (DEH) has generally adopted the IMBA guidelines for the development new and upgrade of existing walking trails in the SA park system<sup>5</sup>. This is due to the reduced maintenance requirements for a better designed trail and the more appropriate treatment of steep grades through the general avoidance of steps (where erosion control is a major problem) than under the existing Australian walking track standard that was previously used.

Therefore we would recommend that in areas of high usage consideration be given to designing and constructing trails in accordance with the IMBA guidelines. The adoption of this guideline in South Australia indicates the local acceptance and potential for reduced lifecycle costs associated with a higher standard of trail construction.

Again, where usage is low, existing walking tracks may be of an appropriate standard for mountain biking as well and strict adherence to IMBA standards for low use trails would not be necessary.

### **2.4.3 Restriction and Control of Usage**

Apart from accepting an irreversible impact (such as the cutting of stairs into natural cliff face that has occurred in the historical construction of the recently refurbished National Pass walking track in the world heritage area of the Blue Mountains), the final management strategy for managing natural areas where the usage and cumulative impact is the restriction or control of usage.

This can be done through permits, outright restriction or redirecting part of the usage to other similar areas.

#### *Permits*

In cases such as the Overland Track in Tasmania, permits are used to limit the level of usage and fund the maintenance work required. Whilst a permit system for riding in National Parks could conceptually be established for mountain biking the administration and enforcement costs are likely to be high. The issue of double charging mountain bikers for national parks access (as most would already purchase a vehicle annual pass) and the cross subsidy of walking facilities would also need to be addressed

#### *Redirection*

In some areas redirection to other land such as State Forest, may be a viable strategy particularly for racing and spectator events. This approach has successfully been adopted in the ACT and much of New Zealand. Similarly the construction of privately run bike parks has proven to be a viable alternative in cities where undeveloped land is readily availability within a short drive from the CBD and land prices are low enough to allow commercial viability.

However as there is very little State Forest or other appropriate contiguous natural bushland that lies outside the control of NPWS within the Sydney Metropolitan Area, access to alternative areas is

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<sup>5</sup> SA Department of Environment and Heritage, *Linking with Nature – A trails strategy for South Australia's Protected Areas 2008-2012*, p.10. <http://www.southaustraliantrails.com/pdf/LinkingWithNatureTrailsStrategy.pdf>



unlikely to be made available. Therefore a significant level of official recreational access to NPWS managed reserves is critical in avoiding the proliferation of unofficial trails in protected areas.

#### *Prohibition*

The prohibition of an activity should only be considered if it is demonstrably incompatible with the conservation of the natural environment, is inherently anti-social or shown not to be economically viable.

Given that NPWS current policies confirm mountain biking as a legitimate activity in NPWS managed land and NPWS surveys indicate that cycling is currently one of the most popular activities conducted in NSW National Parks, it is likely that society generally considers mountain biking on single track in natural areas to be a beneficial activity that should be accommodated.

Similarly in any decision to more strongly enforce the current prohibition approach should consider the negative economic impact of the reduction in cycling participation, lost cycle tourism opportunities in regional areas and a reduction in National Parks visitation revenue.

We note that the prohibition approach has proven to be relatively ineffective to date, resulting in the increased enforcement costs associated with the addressing the proliferation of unofficial trails in protected areas. Providing appropriate access would enable DECCW resources better directed to engaging with the community.

#### *Track Closure*

Track closure, particularly in adverse weather conditions is an effective control of the impact of cyclists and walkers alike. By establishing an official communication channel whereby track closure and track conditions can be broadcast, the management of weather related damage to trails can be effectively managed.

The recent implementation of a user reported 'traffic light' system for trail condition monitoring on the NoBMoB website has been successful in identifying 'no-go' or 'marginal' trail conditions and using trail condition as a basis for selecting where to ride. NoBMoB would be pleased to assist NPWS in implementing an official system to facilitate the broadcast of trail conditions in a similar manner to snow/surf reports or road traffic issues.

## 3.0 Existing Policy Framework

This section discusses the existing policy framework that is applied to mountain biking in NSW National Parks. The strategic drivers, specific policies and structure of national parks management control is considered to identify how improved mountain biking access can help the specific strategic objectives to be met.

We also discuss the key policy impediments to wider mountain bike access and identify opportunities that could address these.

### 3.1 Strategic Objectives

With regard to the strategic objectives currently applicable to mountain biking in NSW National Parks, we have identified three key documents.

#### 3.1.1 National Parks Objectives

The National Parks and Wildlife Service administers National Parks, Regional Parks and a range of other reserves in NSW under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974.

The objectives of the NPWS under the act are:

- The conservation of nature;
- The conservation of objects, places or features (including biological diversity) of cultural value within the landscape;
- Fostering public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage and their conservation;
- Providing for the management of land reserved under the act in accordance with the management principles applicable for each type of reservation.

As an activity, mountain biking is not incompatible with the conservation objectives of National Parks managed land. Furthermore, we note that that where sustainably managed, mountain biking on narrow trails helps to foster public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature by particularly engaging youth and young adults who may not otherwise choose to walk or picnic in the park.

#### 3.1.2 State Plan Objectives

The 2006 NSW State Plan<sup>6</sup> is a strategic document produced to set out a vision and provide direction for NSW as a state. The State Plan is referenced in the DECCW recreational taskforce report<sup>7</sup> where a number of goals, priorities and targets are identified that are applicable to the increased access of mountain biking in national parks.

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<sup>6</sup> New South Wales State Plan, November 2006 [http://www.nsw.gov.au/stateplan/pdf/State\\_Plan\\_complete.pdf](http://www.nsw.gov.au/stateplan/pdf/State_Plan_complete.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> New South Wales Taskforce on Tourism and National Parks Final Report, November 2008  
<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/resources/commercial/20080617Text.pdf>

State Plan Objectives		
Goal	Priority	Target
Practical environmental solutions	E4: Better environmental outcomes for native vegetation, biodiversity, land, rivers and coastal waterways	Meet NSW Government targets for protection of our natural environment Improved urban environments
Improved urban environments	E8: More people using parks, sporting and recreational facilities and participating in the arts and cultural activity	Increase visits to State Government parks and reserves by 20% by 2016
NSW open for business	P1: Increase business investment	Increase business investment in NSW Increase tourist visitation to NSW by 10 million visitor nights by 2016
Stronger rural and regional economies	P6: Increase business investment in rural and regional NSW	Set and achieve regional business growth targets
Rights, Respect and Responsibility	P6: increased participation and integration in community activities	Increase the proportion of the total community involved in volunteering, group sporting and recreational activity, or group cultural and artistic activity by 10 per cent by 2016

We note that the high levels of bike ownership, high and growing existing participation rates, wide demographics and established domestic cycling industry (in excess of \$1b p.a.) mean that increased mountain bike access to National Parks would aid in achieving each of the State Plan Objectives outlined above.

The adoption of a sustainable mountain bike management strategy in NSW national parks would bring with it increased domestic tourism to regional areas and in addition to hospitality benefits would promote the establishment of new cycling tour, maintenance and equipment hire/sales businesses in the area. In many cases local cyclists would be willing to maintain the trails on a volunteer basis.

The award winning You Yangs mountain biking trails in Victoria provide a good example of the increased visitation (60,000 visitors p.a., or 45% of all visits) and local economic benefits that can be realised through officially facilitating mountain biking in natural bushland.

In addition, increased mountain biking participation is clearly aligned with the goals of increasing sporting activity and the intent of the *Premiers Sporting Challenge* for students.

Further details of the market size, participation rates, social and economic benefits of sustainably managed mountain bike access in Sydney's Northern Beaches are detailed in the report that we prepared for the Oxford Falls area<sup>8</sup>. Similarly, a comparative assessment of trail availability in Australian and New Zealand cities is included, which clearly demonstrates the lack of suitable recreational trails in Sydney.

<sup>8</sup> Oxford Falls Plan of Management User Group Consultation - Northern Beaches Mountain Biking Group Response, May 2009, <http://nobmob.com/system/files/Oxford+Falls+Plan+of+Management+++NoBMoB.pdf>

### 3.1.3 Recreational Taskforce Report

The Taskforce was engaged to provide advice on practical methods to expedite the realisation of NSW State Plan objectives, and report on opportunities for an enhanced level of sustainable nature tourism on New South Wales public lands, particularly national parks, marine parks and reserves. The Government emphasised that proposals must be compatible with the conservation of the natural and cultural heritage values of those areas.

The Taskforce was asked to:

- Identify ways to promote and protect the State's biodiversity and cultural heritage values through appropriate use of its national parks and reserves
- Create a platform whereby visitor numbers and tourism expenditure can be increased
- Identify ways to increase management resources and conservation benefits from tourism in National parks and reserves.

We note that the issue of mountain bike access was raised in a number of submissions to the associated consultation, however no specific undertaking was made to investigate the easing of mountain bike access restrictions or consideration of how mountain bike tourism and recreation could contribute to meeting the targets.

In contrast to NSW, Tourism Tasmania has commissioned a specific report to outline the tourism potential for mountain biking in Tasmania<sup>9</sup>. In the absence of a specific NSW report, we note that whilst the specific details differ, much of the market analysis and information contained in the Tasmanian report remains relevant to NSW.

The key difference between Tasmania and NSW is that far fewer official trails exist in NSW. Therefore much mountain bike tourism from NSW is directed interstate or to international riding hubs such as Rotorua, NZ or Whistler, Canada. In these locations official trails support significant local tourism industries centred around mountain biking. We believe that a large scale sustainable tourism benefit could be realised by NSW through the provision of access to local single track in natural bushland environment.

## 3.2 Policy Impediments to Wider Mountain Bike Access

This section discusses the policy impediments that currently exist to discourage or prohibit mountain biking access to both fire trail and single track in NPWS managed reserves.

### 3.2.1 Existing Policies

#### *Cycling Policy*

The existing NPWS Cycling Policy was last updated 2003, was due for revision in 2006. The policy does not give any further access to mountain bikers than was otherwise available. Under this policy cycling is recognised as a legitimate recreational activity in National Parks and usage is restricted to roads and management tracks.

Furthermore, the policy considers 'cycling' as a whole (including road biking) without the separate treatment of mountain biking. We believe that there is significant scope to clarify and improve the

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<sup>9</sup> Mountain Bike Tourism, Market Profile for Tasmania, December 2008  
[http://www.tourism.tas.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0008/38555/mountain\\_bike\\_profile.pdf](http://www.tourism.tas.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0008/38555/mountain_bike_profile.pdf)

specific management of mountain bikes in National Parks when the now overdue policy review is undertaken.

Notwithstanding the above, some individual parks have made provision for mountain bike access such as the Livingstone National Park and State Conservation Area near Wagga Wagga in rural NSW:

*“The extensive network of single lane trails has attracted mountain bike riders to the park in recent years. Organised group as well as individual recreational riding on single lane trails has increased in the park since gazettal leading to an increased risk of damage/injury where motorised and non-motorised bikes are sharing the track....*

*Issues such as erosion and conflict with other park users exist. Mountain bike riding is a legitimate recreational pursuit when managed appropriately, and within the scope of objectives for national parks and SCAs, and will be permitted on designated trails in the future.”<sup>10</sup>*

We note that this PoM also states that:

*“All mountain bike riding will be in accordance with DECCW/NPWS policy.”*

This indicates the need for appropriate policy direction to be provided at a higher level to assist in the local application of the NPWS cycling policy. Therefore a clear, revised cycling policy would enable consistent management and state wide provision of access for mountain bikers in national parks.

#### *Walking Trails Policy*

The walking trails policy is similarly due for review and significant opportunity exists to consolidate the walking trails policy into a generic trails policy that covers mountain biking as well.

We note that the Department of Environment and Heritage in South Australia has recently taken the opportunity to use mountain biking trail design guidelines in planning and maintaining walking trails due to the improved treatment of steep grades and avoidance of steps.

#### *Definition of Bicycle as a Vehicle*

Bicycles are considered to be vehicles under the NPW Act and we understand that this definition has led to the exclusion of mountain bikes from most trails in National Parks. However this definition of a bicycle as a 'vehicle' was written in 1974, well before the emergence of modern mountain bikes.

We believe that the independent, self powered and lightweight nature of mountain bikes are far more comparable to hikers than the cars, horses and motorbikes also covered by the definition of 'vehicle'. Furthermore, we note that horses and motor vehicles have both been provided with separate definitions and policies for management purposes leaving bicycles as effectively the only type of vehicle without its own separate management provisions.

In our view, a separate definition of mountain bikes would be more appropriate. This has been provided for other recreational users to provide access that would be otherwise be restricted if they were considered to be a 'vehicle' or other classification. In particular, Horses are excluded from the

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<sup>10</sup> DECC/NPWS Livingstone National Park and State Conservation Area PoM, November 2008, p.26

definition of 'pet' for management purposes and are separately treated outside the definition of 'vehicle' despite being a 'vehicle' under the NSW road rules.

### **3.2.2 Plan of Management Structure**

The current Plan of Management (PoM) structure of regulating National Parks has proven to be a frustrating impediment to gaining access. The PoM's are intended to provide local control over allowable activities appropriate for the specific reserve.

In practice, the effort involved in establishing and updating the PoM for a park means that reviews are less frequent than the five year cycle originally envisioned. Furthermore, previous attempts to be considered in and contribute to the consultation process by the mountain biking community have resulted in restrictions on access being placed on trails that have been ridden for over 20 years.

The discretionary and regionalised nature of NPWS management under PoM's with regard to mountain biking is clearly demonstrated by the different approaches taken to allowing mountain bike access in different parks. For instance the popular Oaks single track in the Blue Mountains is considered to be appropriate, however no suitable locations have been found in the greater Sydney area.

The predominant policy approach adopted in the Sydney Metropolitan Area has been to prohibit usage, even on trails that have been ridden for over 20 years, or have been incorporated into national parks through boundary revisions. This has led to confrontation and frustration between rangers and mountain bikers and required costly compliance monitoring and enforcement costs that could more productively be directed to engaging with volunteers to improve the trail standard.

### **3.2.3 Opportunities to Address Impediments**

Given that the revision of the relevant policies are well overdue and the PoM's for the Sydney National parks are currently over due or under revision, we recommend that a policy review is undertaken in light of the sustainable management approach outlined in this document.

The resulting policies should seek to increase the engagement of mountain bikers with the natural environment. The social benefits of engaging a predominately younger, fitter user group in community bush regeneration and trail maintenance projects will clearly reduce costs to NPWS and increase the value of maintaining the natural environment in the view of younger generations.

## **3.3 Policy Evaluation**

Any revised policies should be measured against clear success areas to ensure that they meet the needs of mountain bikers as well as NPWS and other user groups. The Northern Beaches mountain biking community would be pleased to assist in developing appropriate mountain biking policies for National Parks.

Our initial assessment of the potential for improved mountain bike access is outlined below.

### **3.3.1 Equitable**

Improved mountain biking access would mean that mountain bikers would be treated on equal footing to walking, horse riding and watersports where specific infrastructure is provided within National Parks to facilitate recreational access.

### **3.3.2 Affordable**

The wide demographic and existing ownership of mountain bikes mean that there are few barriers to anyone of any socioeconomic status participating. This ensures that access to any mountain biking infrastructure provided by NPWS is available to a wider cross section of the community (rather than being limited to boat or horse owners).

Given the widespread use, relatively low cost of construction associated with mountain biking trails and potential for greater patronage, the additional cost of accommodating mountain biking on single trail in national parks is expected to be small.

### **3.3.3 Beneficial**

The community view of national parks in many circles is that they could become more relevant through increased accessibility. Accessibility has reduced largely due to individuals becoming time poor in larger growing metropolitan areas and increased urban travel times. By increasing visitation and community engagement through improved and dedicated mountain biking facilities the community accrues benefits of increased levels of fitness, access to natural environment and tourism. The increased patronage results in a small financial benefit to the DECCW through increased park access fee revenue and the increased value of the NPWS brand.

### **3.3.4 Needed**

The recent prohibition in Garrigal and ongoing threats from rangers in Sydney regarding fines for riding on trails that have been ridden for 20+ years is indicative of the need for official trail access arrangements to be put in place.

Failure to make adequate provision will lead to unsustainable concentrations of usage at other local trail locations, such as Manly Dam, and the uncontrolled proliferation of new poorly designed trails within national parks boundaries.

The increasing sales of mountain bikes, driven in part by the NSW Government's goal to encourage participation in outdoor activities such as cycling, means that unless appropriate access is provided, the problem will continue to get worse into the future. Long term continued growth can be expected as people who have grown up riding, while the sport was developing over the last 20 years (aged 25 to 35 years), will move into older age groups that are currently underrepresented in rider age distribution statistics. Age is little barrier to mountain biking as is evidenced by a number of older riders taking up the sport and still riding after their retirement.

### **3.3.5 Timely**

The large recent growth in mountain biking participation has also been due to public interest in sustainable recreation. Particularly for novice riders there are significant safety issues associated with riding on the road and most people have an innate preference for recreation in natural surroundings.

The current or upcoming revisions to the key Sydney National Parks PoMs and the overdue review of the NPWS cycling and walking tracks policies that should be undertaken provides a unique opportunity to ensure that mountain biking is appropriately accommodated and its place in NPWS managed parks is sustainable in the long term.

### **3.3.6 Aligned with DECCW/NPWS Objectives**

As discussed earlier in this section, the provision of mountain bike access to singletrack in National Parks, particularly urban National Parks will assist in meeting the NPWS objectives of conservation, education and engagement with nature and the broader NSW State Plan objectives for tourism, community involvement and increased participation in recreational activities such as cycling.



## 4.0 Proposed Steps Forward

This section summarises the proposed steps that could be taken to enable greater mountain biking access to National Parks. We acknowledge that some of these may be impractical for DECCW or NPWS to undertake, or may involve additional resources that are outside the Department's capacity.

A large number of members of the Mountain Biking community have expressed that they are pleased to help the DECCW as far as practical in ensuring that an appropriate sustainable management framework can be established. These include specialists in all aspects of sustainable design, environmental management and assessment, landscape architecture, ecology and project management.

### 1. Review Policies

- Walking track
- Cycling
- Vehicle

### 2. Update PoM's to Make Provision for Access

- As far as practical, enable policies to be referenced in PoM reviews to allow more dynamic management across NPWS's portfolio of parks (i.e. when the policy is updated it feeds through the PoM review without the need for a specific revision to every PoM to save DECCW resources in effecting minor changes to the individual PoM's)
- This also gives an appropriate policy lever to withdraw or restrict access in areas where it is found to be inappropriate
- Making provision for access in the current and upcoming PoM reviews for the Sydney National Parks enables access to be provided once the higher level policy review is completed

### 3. Identify Key Parks

- Start in areas with higher historic mountain biking demand
- Sydney (Lane Cove / Ku-Ring-Gai Chase / Garrigal / Berowra Valley RP / Royal)
- Regional Areas such as Glenrock, Livingstone where demand exists
- Specific management effort is probably not required in parks where patronage is low.

### 4. Identify Suitable Existing and New Potential Trails

- Review current trails and assess current design and improve if necessary.
- Review recent trail closures and assess if they can be upgraded to a sustainable standard such as those produced by IMBA.
- Evaluate if there are suitable areas in parks that have the potential to accommodate new single track following the sustainable management approach in this document. Consideration should be given to possible trail linkages to other sites outside of NPWS boundaries.

### 5. Identify Unsuitable Trails

- Classify and sign (totem) unsuitable trails as 'Walking Only'
- Poor existing trail design
- Very high walker use

- Susceptibility to pooling following wet weather
- In a wilderness area
- Protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage
- 'Unrideable' classifications should generally be left to the rider to decide – bikes can easily be carried or pushed along sections of trail which are beyond the rider's ability. We note that bikes can be pushed or carried on any walking track under existing policies.

#### **6. Identify Minor Works to Improve the Trail for all Users**

- Facilitate training of community, NPWS and DECCW staff in the design and maintenance of walking trails and riding trails to IMBA standards.
- Improve drainage/reduce trail erosion by 'armouring' the trail in areas where water pools
- Consider whether an alternative trail for walkers or riders is appropriate in sections of high potential interaction (e.g narrow stairs/technical sections/fast wide firetrail)
- Consider adopting IMBA trail design guidelines for walking tracks and multi use trails.

#### **7. Agree and Publicise a Trail Access Code**

- For Walkers/Bicycle Riders/Horse Riders
- Highlight everyone has equal right of access
- Provide and highlight walking only trails to reduce potential conflict
- Consider a mix of walker priority and bike priority trails as appropriate to manage interaction and ensure that no one group feels that they have a greater right of access.

#### **8. Monitor Compliance in a Reasonable Manner**

- Recognise that 100% compliance is unachievable and select a strategy that doesn't require total compliance with restrictions. e.g. spreading the impact across a number of sites means that a small percentage of non-complying riders using different trails in wet weather won't have as big an impact as all of them using the same trail.
- Set similar enforcement expectations as campsites/walkers with regard to compliance with minimal impact bushwalking/camping codes
- Engage with the local mountain bike community in a proactive way when problems arise
- We'd also love to see some rangers out on bikes instead of hanging out of 4WD windows. In some cases rangers heading out on a mountain bike has enabled a much greater level of engagement with the local mountain biking community.