

ILLAWARRA BIRDERS

Submission-Draft Illawarra Escarpment mountain Bike Strategy





**ILLAWARRA
BIRDERS**

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Illawarra Birders Inc. Submission- Draft Illawarra Escarpment Mountain Bike Strategy.

Dear Sir/Madam,

Illawarra Birders Inc. strongly object to the draft bike strategy.

Our organization has over 100 local members, we are affiliated with Birdlife Australia and Birdlife International. Illawarra Birders welcome the opportunity to comment on the Draft Illawarra Escarpment Mountain Bike Strategy.

We object to the development of extensive mountain bike networks and associated infrastructure within the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation area. We also recommend that any references to such investigations and development be removed from the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation area plan of management.

The definition of a **State conservation area**, are lands reserved to protect and conserve significant or representative ecosystems, landforms, natural phenomena or places of cultural significance. They provide opportunities for sustainable visitation, public enjoyment, and research.

Our organization believes that the mountain bike strategy proposal is an unsustainable development which will only cause irreparable damage to this fragile environment.

Illawarra Birders objections are outlined on the following pages.

Yours sincerely,

Michelle Rower
Conservation Officer

The conservation significance of Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area.

Biological values • The park has high biodiversity, with: – 22 vegetation communities, which represents 40% of the terrestrial vegetation communities identified in the Illawarra – four endangered ecological communities, and several communities that are rare or poorly conserved, or restricted to the Illawarra – nine threatened plant species, of which six are listed under the EPBC Act and four are restricted to the Illawarra – 21 threatened native animals. • The Illawarra escarpment contains the most extensive area of rainforest in the Sydney Basin Bioregion (NPWS 2002a) and is one of only six concentrations of rainforest in New South Wales (Floyd 1990). The park conserves a third of the escarpment's rainforest within the Wollongong Local Government Area and most of the region's rainforest types. • The park spans an ecological transition zone near Mount Keira and Mount Kembla. The zone contains the northern or southern distributional limits of many coastal plant communities and wildlife species (NPWS 2002a). •

Reference: Plan of Management Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area 2018. Fauna of the Illawarra Escarpment Coastal plain and Plateau. NPWS 2002

Illawarra Birders – Two Federal and one State critically endangered species, Regent Honeyeater (*Anthochaera Phrygia*) - Swift Parrot (*Lathamus discolor*) Endangered NSW. Recorded within the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area which are not listed in the Plan of Management: One hundred and twenty one species of birds have been recorded within the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area.

Two studies on the effect of people and mountain bikes on Birdlife.

Study one: It's not Trails that disturb forest birds but the people on them.

The first study to disentangle the effect of forest trails from the presence of human's shows the number of birds, as well as bird species, is lower when trails are used on a more regular basis. This is also the case when trails have been used for many years, suggesting that forest birds do not get used to this recreational activity. Published in *Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution*, the finding suggests the physical presence of trails has less of an impact on forest birds than how frequently these recreational paths are used by people. To minimize the impact on these forest creatures, people should avoid roaming from designated pathways.

"We show that forest birds are quite distinctly affected by people and that this avoidance behavior did not disappear even after years of use by humans. This suggests not all birds habituate to humans and that a long-lasting effect remains," says Dr Yves Bötsch, lead author of this study, based at the Swiss Ornithological Institute, Sempach, Switzerland and affiliated with Institute of Evolutionary Biology and Environmental Studies, University Zurich, Switzerland. "This is important to show because pressure on natural habitats and nature protection areas is getting stronger and access bans are often ignored." The researchers visited four forests with a similar habitat, such as the types of trees, but which differed in the levels of recreation. They recorded all birds heard and seen at points near to the trails, as well as within the forest itself, and found that a lower number of birds were recorded in the forests used more frequently by humans. In addition, they noticed certain species were more affected than others. He continues, "Generally it is assumed that hiking in nature does not harm wildlife. But our study shows even in forests that have been used recreationally for decades, birds have not habituated to people enough to outweigh the negative impact of human disturbance."

Bötsch concludes with some advice, which may help to minimize the adverse effects on forest birds by people who use forests recreationally.

"We believe protected areas with forbidden access are necessary and important, and that new trails into remote forest areas should not be promoted. Visitors to existing forest trails should be encouraged to adhere to a "stay on trail" rule and refrain from roaming from designated pathways."

Reference: Frontiers in Ecology and Evolution - highlights in the disturbance to local bird-life.

Study two: Australian Study on the Effects of Mountain Biking within National Parks.

In a study of 1976 members of Bicycle Queensland, Heesch et al. (2010) examined the correlates of cycling injury (demographic characteristics, reasons for cycling, years of cycling as an adult, cycling frequency) for the previous year. Approximately 10% were caused by a 'crash with an object on the road or path'. Since this included 'pothole, kerb, animal', and 'wet or gravel surface', we assumed that few accidents are reported to be caused by animals (including domestic animals). Despite these few recordings, moribund lizards and associated bicycle skid marks have been observed on an urban Brisbane bicycle track. It is likely that the most dangerous time for the local blue tongue lizard *Tiliqua scincoides* is soon after sunrise when local biking traffic is substantial and lizards take their first bask for the day. Snakes are also vulnerable: Australian red-bellied black snakes *Pseudechis porphyriacus* often lying across a track in the Blue Mountains National Park and are prone to being accidentally ridden over and killed. We predict that the risk of injury to animals is positively correlated with increasing numbers of bike riders in the same way that animal road kill is associated with high vehicle traffic levels. Apart from direct injury by bikers, mountain biking trails (or any other pathway through natural areas) may indirectly impact on native species. Many small species are influenced by changes in the vegetation structure that occurs with disturbance at the edge of bushland. For example, the abundance of brown antechinus *Antechinus stuartii*, a small carnivorous marsupial, was found to respond to structural components of its habitat including understorey height and complexity, litter depth and the absence of logs (Knight and Fox 2000) all of which may be modified in the presence of a mountain biking track or built infrastructure (e.g. jumps, boardways, teeter-totters) in a national park. Predation may also be greater at the interface of the tracks and natural areas. For example, Anderson and Burgin (2002) found that abundance of the small common *Lampropholis* skinks (*L. delicata*, *L. guichenoti*) at the edge of remnant bushland plots, separated only by the width of power line corridors, was only half that of sites located at the core of such small remnants of natural bushland, showing the detrimental 'edge effect' of the dividing corridors. In a later study, Anderson and Burgin (2008) provided evidence that these differences were sustained, and that bird predation was the major factor for the differences in abundance between the edge and core. Mountain biking trails through natural bushland offer an equivalent interface that has the potential to attract animals, particularly reptiles that thermoregulate and expose them to predation and collision with bikers' wheels. For example, over a seven year period, Wotherspoon and Burgin (2011) collected 19 reptile species (33% of the local recorded reptile fauna) as road kill on early morning excursions in Faulconbridge on a suburban road in a 50 km zone that abutted national park. These species are also likely to access trails within the local national park and therefore expose themselves to possible collision if it were a mountain biking trail. Use of the trail would also potentially expose native animals to predators, including feral species such as the red fox *Vulpes vulpes* that penetrate natural areas by moving along such paths (Catling and Burt 1995). Since mountain bike trails tend to be narrow they would be less of a challenge than roads for most vertebrates. Reptiles may be the exception since they seek open areas and/or warm substrates as basking sites. For example, Wotherspoon and Burgin (2011) found that species considered locally rare were found in disproportionately higher numbers as road kills. Individuals of two species, eastern small-eyed *Cryptophis nigrescens* and blind snake *Ramphotyphlops nigrescens* that had been seldom observed locally, were among the most common encountered road kills. While the low speed, suburban street that Wotherspoon and Burgin (2011) reported on has remained effectively unchanged for more than 20 years, species may become locally extinct as a result of new road development (Lunney et al. 2002) while the long-term viability of some vertebrate populations may be compromised (e.g., Jones 2000; Ramp and Ben-Ami 2006). In addition to the age of the road, soils and/or habitat may also influence the impact on local species. For example, although mountain biking was not specifically mentioned, Ross et al. (2009) reported that bicycles contributed to the degradation of saltmarsh communities, habitats often present in coastal national parks. The impact of human trampling of benthic invertebrate habitat (pneumatophores and associated algae) and associated changes in gastropod communities at the landward – midregion of a temperate mangrove forest (the area of highest gastropod diversity) were observed to be substantial, even at the equivalent of 25 people walking through a 30 cm wide undisturbed area (Ross, 2006). Hardiman and Burgin (2011b) undertook a similar study to Ross (2006) in a very different environment. In a pristine canyon environment of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area with very sandy substrate and low nutrient waters, they found that even at much higher levels of trampling than Ross (2006) had used, abundance and diversity of aquatic invertebrates returned to pre-trampling levels within one week. The impact of mountain biking may therefore differ greatly, even between aquatic ecosystems. Natural area managers are increasingly confronted with threats of appeals and litigation against their efforts to restrict what they perceive to be inappropriate recreational activities within protected areas. Such conflict with recreationists can be supported by the associated tourism and retailing industries who have commercial interests in the use of areas for their sport (Sarre 1989).

The trail ahead therefore requires serious consideration of how best to deal with mountain biking and the associated degradation of natural areas, and potential loss of plant and animal species. Lessons for balancing the rising demand for mountain biking in national parks against nature conservation, could be gleaned from the long-term conflict over horse riding. In 1996, a national park's survey in New South Wales revealed that 60% of park visitors objected to recreational horse riding in parks (Ramsay 1996) despite it being viewed as an integral part of the Australian image (Beeton 1999). The conflict continues (Newsome et al. 2002). We suggest that this may well be the outcome for mountain biking if the issues are not addressed adequately. To minimise the potential for such protracted conflict over mountain biking (or indeed any other emerging sport), decisions must be based on: 1. Sound ecological and social research; 2. Park management should genuinely engage with stakeholders (e.g., mountain bikers, other recreation users, relevant commercial interests, local residents, researchers) to develop options (these may include alternative venues to national parks); 3. Decisions, and clearly enunciated reasons that underpin these decisions should be widely disseminated; and 4. Monitoring activities, including studies to determine long term chronic impacts and on-going community attitudes on an on-going basis to ensure that changes in management decisions are underpinned by defensible research. Without a strong strategic approach to mountain biking that includes community engagement, underpinned by quality ecological and social science, the outcome will be further degradation of natural areas and, at the least, loss of many animals if not major threats to populations. We also predict that there will be on-going conflict between mountain bikers and other recreationists and residents.

Reference: An extract from a report titled: Is the evolving sport of mountain biking compatible with fauna conservation in national parks? Shelley Burgin and Nigel Hardiman, Printed in the Australian Zoologist volume 36.

The environmental impacts of the proposal:

Illawarra Birders - response to Bike Strategy:

Even though the first study was conducted overseas the effects should be taken into consideration when planning any disturbance within the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area. Many Australian Rainforest bird species are cryptic by nature and will not tolerate any disturbance within their territory. A relatively fast moving, quite mountain biker may approach an animal without being detected until well within the normal flight response zone. The result may be a severe startle response by the species with significant consequences to the animal. It may result in the displacement of the species which could be short term or permanent.

The increase number of bikes to the region will have a negative impact on the surrounding habitat which will result in a decrease in the biological value of this park. Increasing the numbers of visitors to this area will result in the increase of litter, weed infestations, disturbance to the soils leading to increase erosion and an increase in the noise disturbance to the local fauna. There was no mention of the effects of fragmentation and the loss of vegetation in the construction of the tracks and the effect on the local wildlife in the Bike Strategy. The bike strategy also does not mention the effect on endangered wildlife, on bushland regeneration, weed removal mitigation or management of endangered fauna and flora apart from the statement that there is a need for the protection of native plants and animals. There is no mention in the Draft Bike Strategy on how the number of bikes that will use the region will be controlled. No mention in the bike strategy on which type of Mountain bike riding would allowed within the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area. The illegal use of the park by mountain bikes now demonstrates that they have an inability to understand and to care for the environment and by increasing the number of riders will only increase the effects on these plant communities. If there is a problem now with the illegal use of mountain bikes in the area, how will increasing the number of riders within the park be policed. The illegal use of motor bikes on the tracks will also increase resulting in further disturbance and erosion within the region. Motor bikes are known to illegally use tracks now with little or no policing.

Bike riders that are now illegally using the National Park should be dealt with under the current legislation. If there are adverse safety, environmental and cultural impacts within the National Park this is no reason to allow more riders within this environment. Even if the mountain bikes are managed, an increasing demand cannot be sustainable within this environment into the future.

Six types of Mountain bike riders as listed in the NPWS Sustainable Mountain Biking Strategy: They are,

Cross country- Riding involves riding point-to-point or on a circuit and includes both uphill and downhill sections. It includes a broad spectrum of terrain from management trails to single-track, and may include technical challenges suiting a wide range of skill levels. Rides can be anywhere from an hour to several days.

All mountain- Riding is a more technical form of cross-country riding that can include more advanced technical challenges and steeper hill sections.

Downhill riding- involves a point-to-point ride that is predominantly downhill. Tracks are usually single-track with technical challenges. Downhill mountain bikes are generally too heavy for serious climbing, so riders usually travel to the start of the descent by car or ski lift, requiring supporting infrastructure. Downhill tracks generally require greater armoring and more frequent maintenance to protect the environment than cross-country tracks as they descend more steeply. They also present a greater risk to participants than cross-country tracks.

Free riding- Free riding involves riding tracks or doing stunts that require more skill and involve more technical features than cross-country. Some free riders prefer riding in stand-alone challenge parks or skills areas, while others prefer technical challenges in cross-country rides. Free riding encompasses a number of other styles such as downhill, north shore (riding on elevated tracks made of interconnecting bridges and logs) and slopestyle (combining stunts and tricks).

Dirt jumping- Dirt jumping involves riding bikes over shaped mounds of dirt or soil to become airborne. Dirt jumpers prefer dedicated jumping areas.

Trials riding involves hopping and jumping bikes over obstacles, without a foot touching the ground. It can be performed either off-road or in an urban environment.

This draft strategy does not comply with the objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974-No 80