

Bushwalking NSW

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Bushwalking NSW Inc
Level 1, 79 Myrtle Street
Chippendale NSW 2008

14 April 2020

NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry
GPO Box 5341
Sydney NSW 2001

Dear Sir/Madam

Submission – NSW Independent Bushfire Inquiry

Bushwalking NSW Incorporated is the peak body for bushwalkers in NSW and the ACT. It represents the interests of over 11,000 bushwalkers from 69 bushwalking clubs throughout the NSW and the ACT, and provides a united voice to local, state and federal government agencies and other bodies on issues affecting bushwalkers.

Our mission is to support safe, active and inclusive bushwalking and related outdoor activities in wisely managed natural areas. In particular, we see bushwalking as a recreation that should be available to as many people as possible.

Our affiliated clubs and their members have been undertaking walks and other activities in NSW national parks and other natural areas for over a century. Many of these areas were significantly affected by the 2019 and 2020 bushfires.

Our affiliated clubs were impacted by the fires because numerous club activities had to be cancelled while national parks and other natural areas were closed due to threat of bushfire, while bushfires were underway, and for months after bushfires due to damage. Bushfire makes the ground and trees unstable, and burns bridges, signs and huts, making tracks and activities dangerous and inaccessible. Let alone the undesirability of walking through nature devastated.

Additional club activities had to be cancelled due to hazardous air quality which made it unsafe to exercise outdoors even in areas not directly threatened by bushfire.

Some of our clubs were becoming concerned about the viability of their club because the activities they could offer their members were so severely curtailed by the bushfires.

For some members of our clubs, the fires impacted them more personally as some reside in areas that were directly affected by fire.

Our submission below responds to the terms of reference of the Inquiry.

1. Causes and contributing factors

The drought conditions were a significant cause of the fires. Bushwalkers witnessed the extreme dryness of the forests and places they walked through. Locations that had traditionally provided water for walkers had dried up forcing walks to be cancelled or the need for extra water to be carried.

Bushwalkers have also noted extreme heat, particularly in the most recent two summers. We have had to cancel activities due to the risk of heat exhaustion and this has had a marked impact on club activity programs.

It was therefore not surprising to many bushwalkers that we experienced a terrible bushfire season.

While there were undoubtedly other factors leading to the fires, the lack of rain in the years leading up to the 2019/2020 bushfire season was a major factor. Declining rainfall in much of south-eastern Australia is consistent with the environmental changes foreseen by climate scientists. Unfortunately, too few in government have taken this advice seriously and it is hoped that the events of 2019/20 will force governments to accept the connection between climate change and events such as bushfires and floods. We also need to plan for these impacts. We also need governments at all levels to act to lessen and reverse the impacts of climate change so that we are spared further devastation from extreme bushfires.

2. Preparation and planning

Bushwalking NSW appreciates the need for hazard reduction burning to be a key component of the management of national parks and other natural areas. However, this needs to be science-based and not based on emotive reasoning to simply 'burn the bush'. We are also mindful of the need for agencies such as NPWS to temporarily close national parks and other natural areas while hazard reduction burns are undertaken.

However, we consider that hazard reduction should concentrate on reducing the fire risk around communities and properties. We are not convinced that hazard reduction in wilderness and remote areas should be undertaken unless there are sound ecological reasons to support such activities.

We do request that adequate notice of such burns is publicised so that club activities programs can be amended without undue inconvenience to participants.

3. Response to Bushfires

Members of our affiliated clubs would have participated in volunteer efforts to fight the fires either as members of the Rural Fire Service or another emergency services. Bushwalking NSW supports the efforts of all of these organisations.

We also consider that adequate resourcing of these organisations should be a priority for all levels of government.

4. Other Matters: Recovery needs and opportunities

Bushwalking NSW supports efforts by governments, private organisations and local communities to rebuilding and recovery after the fires. We also recognise that this will require considerable investment by the public and private sectors over many years.

This rebuilding and recovery must include the ecological recovery of the national parks and other natural areas.

In particular, we consider that the fires have presented an excellent opportunity for land managers to undertake systematic culling of feral animal populations such as horses, pigs, deer, goats, foxes and cats. We also advocate for programs to target weeds, particularly where post-fire conditions will encourage the spread of weeds in national parks and adjacent lands. This will require government to increase resources to land management agencies such as NPWS in order to undertake feral animal and weed control.

Bushwalking NSW also urges land managers to expedite the rebuilding and recovery of the bushwalking infrastructure that was destroyed or damaged in the fires such as walking tracks, bridges, signs, campsites and huts. This should also include reopening more remote areas of national parks that have been closed for many months and are only accessible on foot. While we accept that there are safety issues to consider in reopening these areas, we would advocate that their reopening should not be unduly delayed.

Restoration of the walking track network will enable people to reconnect with places they have long known as well as introduce others to the splendours of NSW national parks and other natural areas.

Restoration of this network and the planned and gradual augmentation of the network, where appropriate, will also aid regional economies such as through demand for local services such as trades, hospitality and tourism.

We recommend the inquiry consider the following among its recommendations arising from the Inquiry:

5. Preparation and planning for future bushfire threats and risks.

As mentioned, we consider that hazard reduction should concentrate on reducing the fire risk around communities and properties. We are not convinced that hazard reduction in wilderness and remote areas should be undertaken unless there are sound ecological reasons to support such activities.

7. Appropriate action to adapt to future bushfire risks to communities and ecosystems

Restore our opportunities to be in nature:

Consider where locals and tourists can expect to be able to exercise, bushwalk, adventure, and benefit from time in nature throughout any future extensive bushfire seasons when numerous parks and natural areas are closed due to bushfire, threat of bushfire, or damage from bushfire. Inform the community of these options, and work towards restoring these options to pre-climate change levels by addressing and reversing adverse human impacts on the climate.

Restore our air quality so we can exercise outdoors:

Consider where people can safely exercise outdoors when smoke from bushfire is resulting in dangerously poor air quality. Work towards restoring air quality to pre-climate change levels by addressing and reversing adverse human impacts on the climate.

Restore nature:

Address the impacts of extreme heat, dryness, bushfire smoke, and bushfire on our native ecosystems, plants and wildlife populations so that our biodiversity may be retained and restored for their own sake, and also for their enjoyment by humans. Work towards restoring our natural areas and ecosystems to pre-climate change conditions by addressing and reversing adverse human impacts on the climate.

Restore our holiday period:

Consider whether holidaying should be encouraged outside of each region's peak bushfire period to allow tourist's nature enjoyment/exercise/bushwalking/adventure plans to proceed instead of having to be cancelled due to bushfire, threat of bushfire, or national park closures due to bushfire damage. (eg. To avoid the NSW South Coast mass-evacuation required during 2019-20 New Year holiday period.) Work towards restoring our opportunities to enjoy safe and healthy summer holidays by addressing and reversing adverse human impacts on the climate.

9. Coordination and collaboration by the NSW Government with the Australian Government, other state and territory governments and local governments

All governments within Australia need to act together to lessen and reverse the impacts of climate change so that extreme weather, heat, and lack of rain do not cause further extreme bushfire seasons and the consequent:

- loss of life, biodiversity, and assets. Assets including nature: our native ecosystems, vegetation and wildlife; as well as walking tracks, bridges, signs, campsites, huts, and our national park estate in general;
- worsening of the quality of Australian lifestyles such as we have seen this bushfire season where not only are lives and assets lost, but we are unable to exercise in nature and our national parks because of ongoing bushfires, threat of bushfire, or damage caused by bushfire; and
- toxic air resulting in Australians being unable to safely exercise outdoors.

Ensure all Australians and tourists can continue to enjoy time in, exercise in, and adventure in nature that is protected from extreme and out-of-control bushfires.

We also encourage all our governments to collaborate and take the opportunity presented by these unprecedented fires to undertake systematic culling of feral animal populations such as horses, pigs, deer, goats, foxes and cats; and to initiate programs to control weeds in national parks and adjacent lands. Many of our club members are willing to volunteer to assist in weeding.

Bushwalking NSW congratulates the NSW Government in expediting this Inquiry and we look forward to the release of the Inquiry's findings.

Yours Sincerely,

Kirsten Mayer
Executive Officer

Bushwalking NSW Inc. - The peak body for bushwalkers in NSW & ACT
Keep exploring, be amazed!

<https://www.bushwalkingnsw.org.au/>