

# Bushwalking NSW

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## DRAFT MASTER PLAN – GARDENS OF STONE (STAGE 2)

### Introduction

Bushwalking NSW Incorporated is the peak body for bushwalkers in NSW and the ACT. It represents the interests of over 11,000 bushwalkers from 70 bushwalking clubs throughout NSW and the ACT, and provides a united voice to local, state and federal government agencies and other bodies on issues affecting bushwalkers.

The Gardens of Stone has been a premier bushwalking destination for many years and individual bushwalkers have been instrumental in raising awareness of the importance of the Gardens of Stone as an important conservation precinct and in lobbying government for its protection.

### The Relationship of the draft Master Plan to the draft Plan of Management

There appear to be two separate planning processes underway for the Gardens of Stone Stage 2. It is noted that the draft Plan of Management states that:

*“the specific type and location of new infrastructure and the location of areas to be designated for vehicle access, cycling and horse riding will be determined during the development of a detailed master plan and in consultation with Wiradjuri representatives and relevant recreational user groups.”* (see page 5 of draft Plan of Management).

This implies that the Master Plan will follow the Plan of Management. However, the draft Master Plan states that:

*“The draft master plan provides a long-term framework to deliver an exciting new ecotourism destination for Lithgow and future visitor experience opportunities in the Gardens of Stone SCA.”* (see page 8 of draft Master Plan).

Further, the draft Master Plan states that:

*“As such, the master plan should be viewed as a dynamic strategic planning tool that sets a long-term framework for the Gardens of Stone SCA which can be adapted to accommodate unforeseen changes as they arise.”* (see page 8 of draft Master Plan).

The Plan of Management is a statutory document, the Master Plan is not. Bushwalking NSW considers that the Plan of Management should drive the strategic direction of Gardens of Stone Stage 2, not the Master Plan which should be a subsidiary document.

Bushwalking NSW also considers that financial commitments to rehabilitate and restore degraded sections of the Gardens of Stone should sit within the Plan of Management and not reliant on a non-statutory Master Plan that a future government could walk away from.

### Park Planning Principles

Visitation is an obvious important planning principle for the Gardens of Stone Stage 2, yet it would appear that the development of this location as a nature-based tourism destination has

been the primary driver for the establishment of this State Conservation Area. There appears to have been no formal assessment of other locations for the development of some of the adventure-based tourism experiences. It begs the question 'why Gardens of Stone?' and whether other locations in the Lithgow area were formally considered.

While we would consider the roll out of a range of activities such as walking, mountain biking and horse riding (the latter as part of the National Trail) and accompanying low-key camping options to be appropriate, the inclusion of activities such as zip lines and 'via ferrata' type climbing experiences such as foreshadowed at the Lost City Visitor Node seems premature without a formal assessment of other locations for these types of activities.

These proposed activities should be withdrawn from the Master Plan pending further assessment of the suitability of the Gardens of Stone for these activities.

Further, it is considered that this supports our view that the draft Master Plan should be withdrawn pending formal adoption of the Plan of Management.

### Development of a Multi-Day Walk

This is proposed for Gardens of Stone Stage 2 though the draft Master Plan also suggests that this will be extended into Wollemi National Park, part of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

The draft Master Plan (and the accompanying draft Plan of Management) indicate that the walk will be serviced by low-impact accommodation which could be operated by and leased to a private sector partner. It is noted that seven locations for "accommodation nodes" are identified and it is assumed that this would be built accommodation of some kind.

Bushwalking NSW would be extremely concerned with the leasing of this accommodation on national park estate to a private partner. If this accommodation is to proceed then it should be operated by NPWS.

The draft Master Plan suggests that the proposed multi-day walk will extend beyond Stage 2 and into Wollemi National Park as a combined walking and mountain biking route. Again, there is a suggestion of "guided walker accommodation". No further information is provided on this.

Bushwalking NSW would be opposed to new accommodation buildings being constructed within a World Heritage Area. While we consider that a multi-day walking route within Wollemi National Park has, in principle, some merit and should be investigated further, we consider that the proposed route should make use of existing trails or walking tracks as much as possible. The need to construct new tracks or trails should therefore be kept to a minimum.

### Commercial Development in the State Mine Gully and Lost City Precinct

Lost City is proposed as a major visitor destination. This will include adventure tourism attractions such as zip lines and 'via ferrata' type climbing experiences. It is assumed that commercial operators will be sourced to provide these experiences. Comments on the desirability of these experiences for a location such as Gardens of Stone have been provided above.

As a further comment, Bushwalking NSW considers that any commercial arrangements for such experiences (assuming they do proceed) should be transparent and not hidden away from public scrutiny as part of 'commercial in confidence' arrangements. Gardens of Stone is public land and the public should be able to scrutinise any proposed agreements between the State Government and private operators.