

Bushwalking NSW

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Dorrigo National Park, Bindarri National Park and Bindarri State Conservation Area draft Plan of Management and Dorrigo Escarpment Great Walk draft Master Plan

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.

Our submission focuses on the Dorrigo Escarpment Great Walk draft Master Plan and follows the Headings in the draft Master Plan and, where required, the individual page numbers. At the end of our submission, we have added some general comment.

2.4 Drivers for the Project

Bushwalking NSW's Strategic Plan includes a goal of 500 kilometres of new walking tracks in 5 years in NSW and we see the planned Escarpment Great Walk as a major element of this goal. We also agree that the development of more extended walking tracks and routes will contribute to better physical and mental health and improve people's connectivity to the natural world. We are also pleased to see that exposure to Gumbaynggir cultural insights and perspectives will be an integral part of the walking experience.

We also support the intention to have the planned camping areas and accommodation maintained and operated by the NPWS, not commercial companies, and that the facilities will be accessible to both independent walkers as well as those participating in commercially guided walks.

4.1 Route Overview

We support the intention to apply minimal impact design principles and to site the planned camping areas on areas previously used for logging. We also support the intention to use existing tracks and trails for the proposed route and camping area access. This will ensure that the need to cut new tracks is minimised and we also support this.

We consider that the track design including distances between camping areas is realistic and should be within the capability of people with reasonable levels of fitness.

The mandatory check-in process and track briefing (page 22) is an excellent idea. It will be particularly important to emphasise the need for correct gear and clothing hygiene to prevent the entry of pest organisms including weeds and fungi. Although there will be boot/shoe cleaning facilities, there should also be opportunities to clean walking poles as dirty pole tips can be vectors for pest organisms.

We also agree that navigation competence should be emphasised and that access to paper-based and digital maps and track notes should be available both pre-walk and at the visitor centre on arrival.

An essential item of equipment that needs to be emphasised in information about the Escarpment Walk (preferably before people turn up at the start) is an adequate first aid kit.

The intention to provide a 2-day walking experience as well as the full 4-day experience is a good idea as this will broaden the appeal of the walk to more people.

5.1 Walk Key Design Principles

The proposed daily capacity for each track stage is 24. Presumably this means that up to 100 people can be walking the full route option at any one time as well as up to 48 taking the shorter 2-day option. The draft Master Plan canvasses two options for managing walkers taking either option (page 35).

Rather than having up to 48 walkers at the Stage 1 camping area, Bushwalking NSW prefers the option of using the proposed camping platforms at the upgraded picnic area (proposed to be renamed Baliiga) as this would result in a more even distribution of walkers staying for the night.

7.1 Remote camp (Waygarrgala)

This is supported as it provides walkers with the option of enjoying a camping experience with fewer facilities.

7.2 Management trail access

The intention to use existing management trails to access the camping areas for maintenance purposes is a sound one, especially as the use of helicopters for this purpose has caused controversy in other parts of Australia. The potential use of these trails by commercial companies to provide logistical support for commercial parties is not specifically mentioned in the draft Master Plan. This needs to be clarified as this could result in higher usage of the trails by vehicles.

8.2 Key threats

Again, we see the introduction of pest organisms as a key threat and will require high levels of equipment and clothing hygiene beyond simply footwear brushing. One option is to install disinfectant baths at each camping area for footwear and walking poles.

9.3 Track ranger model

The opportunity to employ dedicated rangers to walk the track or to have volunteer campground hosts during peak periods is an excellent one. We consider that positive interactions between NPWS staff and walkers will achieve much in developing a better experience for users of the Great Walk.

9.4 Partnership opportunities

While we support partnership opportunities with credentialled and experienced tour operators, we wish to highlight one potential problem with a booking system shared between commercial companies and independent walkers. Experience elsewhere in Australia with shared booking systems can result in commercial companies 'block booking' slots for the relevant walk meaning that independent walkers find it extremely difficult to book a place.

NPWS needs to be mindful that opportunities to book camping areas are equitable and that independent walkers are not disadvantaged.

We also support the aim to provide an affordable experience with returns that cover ongoing servicing and maintenance work, ensuring the walk is sustainable in the long term. Affordable should mean that people on limited incomes are not prevented from enjoying what will become a great Great Walk.

Finally, Bushwalking NSW hopes that the Dorrigo Escarpment Great Walk will become an integral part of our long-term vision of a Great Escarpment Trail linking Barrington Tops with Boonah in Southeastern Queensland, the longest walking route in Australia and one that would eventually attract people from all over Australia and beyond.

Bushwalking NSW Inc.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the draft Master Plan. Bushwalking NSW Inc looks forward to being kept informed on the final adoption of the Master Plan.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "David Bell". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

David Bell
President
Bushwalking NSW Inc.
10 January 2024