

ON THE TRACK

Conservation down the track

Keith Muir*

The Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Organisation (NOREDO) have proposed a Great Eastern Centenary Walking Track to link Melbourne to Brisbane by a 3,000 km track via Sydney. It would encourage regional, nature-focused tourism, catering for walkers that are considered a "niche" tourist market. NOREDO hopes the proposal would become the NSW equivalent of the Appalachian Trail in North America or the Bibbulmun Track of Western Australia.

The promotional brochure heralds: "The Centenary Track will be a natural, national icon, symbolising unity across state boundaries and across time, and celebrating 100 years of nationhood. It will be this generation's vote of thanks to the past, and its gift to the future." The Trail is intended to be an environmentally benign \$10 million development, with support garnered from the corporate sector, all levels of government and volunteers.

The proposal, however, has been a movable feast since its inception in 1997. The original proposal was to traverse the Eastern Escarpment through most of the protected wilderness of NSW. Its WA equivalent, the Bibbulmun Track, provides 46 huts between 10 and 20 km apart. NOREDO fortunately recognised that constructing such a track, with similar huts, in so remote a location would be very difficult and be in direct conflict with current management of these areas.

Another concept was developed following a coastal route, but support for this or any track seems to be lacking as recent submissions to park plans are silent on the proposal. In order to win funding the proposal was further amended to provide interpretation centres and so-called icon walking tracks, such as along the Caldera Rim in the Border Ranges NP, were added. The proposal now seems to be focused on expanding tourism activity in north coast parks.

The project's stated aim of linking major scenic features and ecosystem types could result in a cliff-top walking track that cuts across remnant habitats. There is

a risk that such scenic icons could be exploited without adequate regard for conservation. A genuine process of route selection must consider environmental impacts or the original vision will be negated.

While such tracks do encourage people to go bush, track development should not be at the cost of park management. Picnic tables, car parks, concrete barbecues and shelter sheds should be located on the edges of parks to protect core areas. They are likely to become the focus of high-impact tourism operations. Such a commercial element may be required, however, to ensure the essential funding for track maintenance, as voluntary labour and government funds would not be adequate.

Key issues for major 'tourist icon' walking tracks are:

- Wilderness values should not be compromised;
- Route selection must be subject to adequate environmental assessment and design (to prevent soil erosion, and avoid wet areas, steep slopes, threatened species habitats and other sensitive areas);
- Track easements across private property should be provided to improve access to public land;
- Tracks should not overrule current park management processes and practices;
- Commercial use should not be subsidised by voluntary labour;
- Track maintenance should not divert limited voluntary labour resources from essential ecosystem maintenance activities;
- Development creep, as experienced with huts on the Overland Track in Tasmania, should be

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avoided;

- Popular tracks and camp sites should be avoided to ensure these do not become over-used;
- Construction should be by manual methods since the use of 4WD tractors, mini-excavators and D4 bulldozers within protected areas is abhorrent to most park users and is, moreover, environmentally damaging.

Some of these concerns regarding development can be addressed by linking existing tracks but many of the above issues would remain problematic. For example, the experience with the Bicentennial National Trail is that these projects overrule existing park management. This trail bisects the gazetted Washpool, Guy Fawkes and Macleay Gorges wilderness areas and trims the Barrington wilderness area, thus compromising their integrity.

There is already one tri-State trail (the BNT) open to all users. The extra appeal of a "walkers only" tri-State track, linking the existing Hume and Hovell, Great

North and Twin Rivers tracks, would be minimal. As walkers already have a number of formed walks available, the project appears to lack adequate demand unless it is located close to coastal population centres.

There is a risk that this extended track proposal will lead to commercial development and require walker fees to prop up its maintenance. Introduction of fees and alteration of the current management of parks simply may not be much of a celebration for the Centenary of Federation. The vast majority of walkers enjoy short walks and so the main benefit of a tri-State walking trail is its value as a tourist drawcard, rather than meeting an existing demand.

A more practical alternative would be to apply the initiative to the maintenance of existing track infrastructure, which in many areas is in decline.

* **Keith Muir** is Director of the Colong Foundation for Wilderness.

Case study - the Pinnacle Track

Dailan Pugh (of the North East Forest Alliance) reports that in 1997 the NPWS constructed a walking track and lookout on The Pinnacle in the Border Rangers NP. The track passed through the territory of the rufous scrub bird, over the top of one of only three localities of the vulnerable plant *Euphrasia bella*, and into the habitat of the endangered eastern bristlebird. The environmental assessment for this project failed to ensure these species were protected. Dailan also has recorded walking tracks that pass through threatened species habitat, and camp sites in the middle of koala colonies.

The Pinnacle example illustrates that NPWS is not immune from overlooking its legal responsibilities when locating tourist developments. To excuse the environmental damages caused by track construction as a method of controlling usage ignores the damage these facilities cause. Track-construction activities need to be even more carefully assessed in a national park than elsewhere if nature is to survive the eco-tourism boom.

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The first white bushwalkers

Who were the first white bushwalkers in NSW? Historical records show that there were 'bushwalkers' from the earliest days of white settlement. Walkers of the present century are recreational walkers - those of earlier times walked as a matter of necessity; they were explorers in a new and unknown land.

The first recorded 'bushwalk' took place from 15-18 April 1788, just three months after the founding of Sydney. Governor Phillip and a party of eight were landed at Manly Cove. The party walked up the coast to a lagoon [Dee Why?], then they marched westwards via the head of Middle Cove to about the Old Northern Road. They returned to Middle Head and were picked up by two

boats, after being away for four days.

Four days later, 22 April, Governor Phillip again set off on an exploratory trip. They were taken by boat to somewhere near the junction of the Parramatta River and Duck Creek. They reached Prospect Hill by a circuitous route before returning to the boats after six days walking.

Phillip's third land exploration was in April 1791. Reading these records leads one to admire Governor Phillip. He was fifty years old in 1788, and all these walks were into unknown country, which at that time was covered by thickets, forests and intersected by creeks and unknown rivers.

The other explorers of this time were William Dawes and Watkin

Tench. Between December 1789 and May 1791 they undertook a number of expeditions (from 2 to 6 days long) around Sydney.

Knowing the distance and duration of these trips it is of interest to read about the equipment the members carried - especially in the present age of hi-tech lightweight gear. A description by Tench:

"Every man ... carried his own knapsack, which contained provisions for ten days. If to this be added a gun, a blanket and a canteen, the weight will fall nothing short of forty pounds. Slung to the knapsack are the cooking kettle and the hatchet ..."

It is appropriate to call the men who undertook these land expeditions in the time of Governor Phillip the first white 'bushwalkers' in Australia.

Peter Mylrea
Bushwalker, amateur historian

NPA BRANCH MEETINGS

ARMIDALE BRANCH: Second Thursday of month at 7.30pm, Uniting Church, Rusden Street, Armidale.

BERRIMA (SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS) BRANCH: Third Fri alternate months. Contact Sec 02 4872 1116.

BLUE MOUNTAINS BRANCH: Third Wednesday of the month at 8pm, Springwood Neighbourhood Centre.

CENTRAL COAST BRANCH: 3rd Thursday March, May, July, September, November 7.30pm, Bateau Bay Progress Hall.

CENTRAL WEST BRANCH: 2nd Friday of month, 6-8pm, Bathurst Information & Neighbourhood Centre. Ph 02 6331 5284.

CLARENCE VALLEY BRANCH: First Monday of month at 7.30pm, Grafton High School Common Room.

FAR NORTH COAST: Contact Hazel Bridgett 02 6629 5 010.

FAR SOUTH COAST: Meetings every 2nd month, field trip alternate months. Contact Kim Tayson, PO Box 797, Bega 2550.

HUNTER BRANCH: Contact Secretary, David Cater, on 02 4921 6376; e-mail: ccdic@cc.newcastle.edu.au

HAWKESBURY-CUMBERLAND BRANCH: First Wednesday of alternate months (starting February), 7.30 pm, Tebbutt Room, Windsor Library, 02 4573 6169.

ILLAWARRA BRANCH: Contact President, Pam Robinson, on 02 4284 1662.

LACHLAN VALLEY BRANCH: Third Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm, Parkes Neighbourhood Centre.

MACARTHUR BRANCH: Second Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm, Campbelltown North Public School, cnr Thomas St & Rudd Rd, Campbelltown.

MID NORTH COAST BRANCH: Third Monday of the month, 6pm. Ring Gwen O'Dea 02 6583 2272, Mollie Rowell 02 6583 1427.

MILTON BRANCH: First Wednesday of the month at 7.30pm, Room 10, Ulladulla Primary School.

SOUTHERN SYDNEY BRANCH: 3rd Wednesday of the month (not school hols) 8pm, Multi-purpose Centre, 123 Flora St, Sutherland. Ph Peter Vaughan 9556 3485 for details.

SYDNEY BRANCH: See Members' Diary in *Sydney Branch Newsletter* and this Activities Program for details.

TAMWORTH-NAMOI BRANCH: Third Friday of the month at 8pm, No 1 Oval Pavilion Kable Avenue, Tamworth. Phone Ron Webster for details: 02 6766 4296.

THREE VALLEYS BRANCH: Last Tuesday of the month, 7.30pm, Parkhouse Residence, Grassy Head Road, Grassy Head.