



NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION OF NSW
protecting nature through community action

Clarence Valley Branch
PO Box 425, Grafton NSW 2460
clarence@npansw.org.au

National Parks and Wildlife Service Cycling Policy Review and Sustainable Mountain Biking Strategy.

Submission by Clarence Valley Branch of the National Parks Association of NSW.

The Clarence Valley Branch of the NPA is one of the 18 branches of the National Parks Association of NSW, formed in 1980. Since then, it has been involved in working to establish national parks and to contribute to their good management.

Good management means the conservation objectives are met to the best ability of the NPWS, given its resources and the difficulties faced in dealing with introduced species and rehabilitation of landscape and habitat while allowing for appropriate use and recreation.

The National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974 No 80

Section 30E of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974, sets out the purpose of reserving a national park and the principles for its management. It makes clear - subsection (1) - that *sustainable* use and enjoyment are to be consistent with the principles outlined in subsection (2), where (e) is particularly pertinent to this discussion-

Provision of sustainable visitor use and enjoyment that is compatible with the conservation of the national park's natural and cultural values.

Section 72AA, Objectives and content of plans of management, also gives instruction on the management principles that are to be considered in the preparation of a plan of management, which becomes the basis for what can happen in a national park. Together with the sections that refer to conservation, protection, maintenance and rehabilitation, section 1(j) specifically prohibits the execution of any works adversely affecting the natural condition or special features of the park or reserve.

The Branch considers the activity of, and special provision for, mountain biking is inconsistent with the intent of the Act as outlined above, as well as in other sections.

Discussion

The Branch supports appropriate use, which is consistent with the appreciation and enjoyment of nature without adverse impact on ecosystem function, hydrology and soils and other aspects of the natural environment. The use of bikes on existing vehicle tracks and ridden in such a way that no disturbance of the soils occurs, can fit the criteria for appropriate and sustainable use. Appreciation of natural values and compatibility with the national park setting suggests that bikes should be ridden at low speed.

While the Branch is aware that in seeking reservation of lands in the national park system, other views on management and use come into play, any activities and constructions should be consistent with the intent and purpose for reservation of national parks. The Clarence Valley Branch of the NPA remains consistent in promoting those objectives.

Park users are provided with roads and tracks for vehicles to access national parks, but the most appropriate way of getting around on land is on foot, with a high degree of self-dependence (most national parks provide for disabled persons). Walking tracks are provided, but should be well-maintained so that the adverse impacts are minimised or closed if the impacts are not able to be kept within acceptable levels.

Walking tracks should not be used by vehicles, and in this discussion, bikes are vehicles.

Compliance

It has been suggested in a number of places that the Service has had problems with illegal use of tracks and even construction within national parks. It has been further suggested that this is widespread and the solution is to formalise and legitimise the activity. The discussion in 3.6 suggests that the Service is not only unable to enforce compliance, it is prepared to hand the enforcement of compliance over to the mountain biking fraternity. This is a dangerous path to take, with unknown consequences for the future.

The Service has to retain control of national parks and the authority to enforce compliance with appropriate activity. To cede that to user groups would be an abrogation of its responsibility.

Some specific comments follow.

1.6 NPWS role in providing mountain bike experiences

It is acknowledged that the State Plan places some requirement on the Service to consider opportunities for mountain biking (Table 3 and 4), but that should not have led to it presenting the discussion in the way that it has. But, the State Plan refers to “sustainable” mountain biking and that question has not been given sufficient weight in the Discussion Paper.

NPWS appears to have accepted that mountain biking is an appropriate activity in national parks, and the Discussion Paper clearly advocates it.

The Branch considers that the proper role for the NPWS is to raise the question as to **whether** mountain biking is an appropriate activity and leave it to proponents to argue their case. As it is, the Discussion Paper does not give a balanced presentation of the issue and that raises questions about how similar demands for questionable uses of the national park system in the future will be handled by the Service.

Just because an activity promotes health, that does not make it an appropriate national park activity. Opportunities for mountain biking should be sought outside the national park system, and it should be the responsibility of other agencies and/or land managers to move through the processes to provide for the activity.

Note that the Branch is not opposing the use of mountain bikes where cycling is appropriate (see above)– it is how they are ridden. In the same way, the Branch does not object to 4WDs being driven in national parks, but does object to the activities of off-roading or causing damage to wildlife and soils.

1.7 Mountain bike styles.

CVB concurs with the proposed policy intent, provided the “new sustainability criteria” ensure low impact.

The Branch opposes special provision for the two styles of mountain biking in the proposed strategy recommendations.

- Extra single tracks lead to fragmentation of habitat with adverse consequences for wildlife and ecosystems.
- There should be no special construction to provide for a wide range of skill levels – construction of “technical challenges” is more likely to detract from, rather than “foster public appreciation and understanding of nature”, Discussion Paper p.5.
- Extra single tracks also place a burden on the already stretched resources of the Service. There will be a loss in terms of funding being diverted away from core responsibilities, maintenance and restoration, diversion of technical and management staff to develop and manage a non-park activity.

2.1.2 Providing experiences that cross land tenures and 2.2 Future growth.

For many years, the Branch has argued the concept of the Recreational Opportunity Spectrum (Stankey et al) which, in essence, matches experiences to appropriate places. In this scenario, national parks provide for quiet, passive, low-impact recreation consistent with appreciation of natural processes, while other places through to the highly urbanised provide for increasingly developed facilities and activities. Under the ROS concept, mountain biking is best suited for land tenures other than national parks, and where the construction for, and practice of, the activity is appropriate. Where the Service has a role in lands outside national parks that might be appropriate for mountain biking that is where it might enter into partnerships with other land managers.

2.3 Plans of management

The Branch does not believe the word “need” should be used in the context of the proposed strategy recommendation. The most that can be said is that there is a “demand”, or in the distinction that comes from economics, a “want”.

To pursue this line of thinking is to invite other inappropriate uses of national parks to be allowed, simply because the Service interprets “want” as “need”. Examples of things that “need” to be done in national parks are pest control, visitor management that does not conflict with the conservation objectives, erosion control, and rehabilitation. People who want to bush-bash in 4WDs, take timber or wildflowers, hunt, take their dogs, and so on are not given the right to pursue their “want” in national parks.

The Branch urges the Service to clarify the terminology in its processes, and not to place the proposed control on Plans of Management on the basis of a “clear need” being identified.

2.4 Nature reserves and wilderness areas

The Branch is opposed to all forms of cycling on all roads, trails and tracks in wilderness areas, and the policy intent should take the same approach so that PoMs do not allow it. CVB concurs with the first point, that cycling is not permissible on tracks in wilderness areas and nature reserves.

3.2 Developing new mountain bike experiences

NPWS should not develop new mountain bike experiences in national parks.

If it does undertake such consideration, despite the recommendation in this submission, then an EIS, with full public participation, should be an automatic requirement.

3.3 Site suitability

It is clear from this submission that national parks are not suitable for the activity of mountain biking, nor for any special provision by way of use of existing tracks purpose-built tracks or technical features. Suitable sites must be found outside the national park system.

3.4, 3.5, 3.6

CVB does not support any of the proposals in these sections.

The Service should not put itself in a position of using standards developed by other agencies/organisations in national parks unless those standards are developed specifically for the NSW national park system.

3.7 Wet weather

Wet weather mountain biking should not be permitted, as all the environmental impacts are heightened. Where the NPWS determines that roads or tracks should be closed at present, it does so by signage and barriers. The recommendation in this section will go beyond the current practice, and not only take up resources and time, but will give a user group a role in management that impinges on the Service's role as manager.

3.8 Night riding

Many animals become active at night and should not have to deal with extra lights, movement and noise in national parks. Traffic on the existing road system already leads to road-kills and disturbance. The areas remote from that traffic should not be opened up to create further disturbance.

General Comments

The opening remarks in section 4 suggest instituting a lack of flexibility into national park management by arguing that the cost of setting up the infrastructure for mountain biking means it has to last for a long time into the future to justify that cost. This thinking, if put into practice, will have two effects; first, to build harder and more costly infrastructure to gain that longevity; second, to remove the ability to undo the work if it is shown to be needed because of unacceptable impact.

To the greatest extent possible, works done in national parks should be reversible to allow for changing environmental conditions and usage.

The discussion paper spends some time on different user-groups not necessarily understanding the other's viewpoint, and explaining that mountain bikers have many similar interests to walkers, birdwatchers and other passive users. This does not have to be explained, and such ignorance even if it were true does not form the basis of our objection to mountain biking in national parks.

It is a case of caring for and enjoying the natural environment while keeping human impact to a minimum. Mountain biking and the extra impacts it would place on the environment, resources and long-term good management of the national park system is, of itself, unacceptable. And there are other places where the activity should be looking at, many of which could still provide the experience that practitioners seek.

Peter Morgan
President
Clarence Valley Branch of the NPA
25 Oct 2010
By email