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Revised Westleigh Park Draft Master Plan

Reference F2023/00077

The aim of Friends of Berowra Valley is to protect the natural landscape, heritage and biodiversity of Berowra Valley while making the valley more accessible to the community.

In this Master Plan we have three major concerns:

1. Preservation of the Forest including the Critically Endangered Sydney Turpentine-Ironbark Forest and the Endangered Duffys Forest is not guaranteed.
2. The master plan does not respond to the site constraints which include the critical infrastructure of Thornleigh Dam, traffic bottlenecks, site contamination and a forest that supports wildlife. A regional sporting complex is way over the top considering all of these constraints and the currently allocated funding.
3. The very poor consultation process has not included the whole community. This is a regionally significant sporting complex that the local community seem to be unaware of. The focus has been almost completely on MTBing which is only a small aspect of the entire project. The community have concerns around the contamination and remediation, the synthetic turf, the link to Sefton Rd and traffic yet none of these concerns were allowed to be discussed at the latest round of workshops.

Consultation Process

- HSC has failed in the consultation process with the community at every step of the way. The co-design workshop failed to provide an independent ecological consultant in a similar manner to the independent professional track designer. Every time an issue was raised that was not about mountain bike track design the person was shut down, even if it was to mention critically endangered ecological communities.

- The fauna surveys performed since the completion of the workshop are still not available to the community despite requesting this information under GIPA.

Bushland Areas and Mountain Bike Trails

- The trails have not been shut down during this process and signage has not been placed to protect the critically endangered and endangered ecological communities.
- The trails will exclude non-MTBers from enjoying their local bushland as once it becomes a formalised trail it will be one-directional and dangerous for bush walkers as the bikes will be coming at them at speed.
- FOBV does not support additional trails being built and wants the closure of the entire track network out of the bushland.
- There is no need for a link trail between Westleigh and Hornsby Park.

MTB Tracks Damage Bushland

MTBers have convinced themselves and HSC that they are not causing damage to bushland. The science does not support this.

The following has been extracted from the Canobolas Conservation Network's Cycling Strategy Submission.

All tracks through natural areas cause some form of damage to the environment (Havlick et al, 2016; Pickering et al 2010a;b). Track impacts in general include soil erosion, compaction, changed hydrology, track widening/deepening, dislodgement of rocks, and exposure of roots and bedrock. There can be damage to plants including reduction in vegetation height, width and biomass, changes in species composition, and the spread of weeds and plant pathogens (Pickering et al 2010a). All components of habitat within a functioning ecological community are at risk of disturbance from track creation. A permanent trail, whether for walking, riding or vehicular access may become a boundary or barrier for ground-dwelling species, a conduit for water erosion and weeds (Weiss et al, 2016), an access point for predators and noise and light pollution (Steven et al, 2011). Tracks increase the level of ecological fragmentation within natural areas (Ballantyne et al, 2014a,b). There is a long history of informal track creation around permanent tracks, especially in muddy areas or where impediments such as fallen branches exist (Davies & Newsome 2009; Pickering et al 2010b; Ballantyne et al, 2014a,b).

Mountain biking is a high impact sport. It is not a passive form of recreation like walking as it uses equipment and extra power to transmit a person along a track. Speeds can be up to approx. 15-20km/hr on downhill single track, but speeds up to 52km/hr have been quoted in mountain biking literature (Refs available). Extra lateral energy into the soil surface is expended on corners and over terrain features. This and hard braking (skidding) promotes the removal of the track surface by treaded tyres which are optimised to penetrate and grip the soil surface. Mountain bikers describe the sport as "shredding". While a single use of a track may not seem to cause much damage, multiple use over time leads to track degradation via widening (Evju et al 2021) and deepening (Salesa and Cerda, 2020).

Compaction of track surfaces, especially when wet, promotes poor water infiltration and ultimately exacerbates water flow along the tracks. If tracks are not well designed and maintained this leads to erosion (Salesa and Cerda, 2020). All tracks cause erosion and greater damage is caused by mountain biking than hiking (Salesa and Cerda, 2020; Evju et al, 2021). In their comprehensive review of global track erosion literature Salesa and Cerda (2020) state “reported world soil losses from tracks ranged from 6.1 Mg ha⁻¹y⁻¹ to 2090 Mg ha⁻¹y⁻¹, all of which are not sustainable”.

Find an Alternate location for mountain bikes

In our submission on the Economic Development and Tourism Strategy 2020-2025, November 2020 we stated that:

We have no objection to creating BMX or mountain bike trails on degraded lands where there is a requirement for the land to be rehabilitated. Areas around Maroota that have previously been used for sand mining and are no longer used because sand extraction is complete, would be an excellent site for a mountain bike park. The close proximity to Wisemans Ferry would provide a significant economic and tourism increase for businesses in the village.

Excellent examples of bike tracks that use degraded landscapes include, Bare Creek Bike Park at Belrose, Sydney and Quarry Park, Footscray, Melbourne.

Mountain Bike Trails are increasingly being constructed on lands with low biodiversity value. Cringila Hills in the Wollongong area and trails around the ACT are not in biodiverse bushland. Examples from the ACT include Cotter Pines, Majura Pines and Stromlo Forest Park as well as the Centenary Trail.

This is a position we still support.

Protection of Wildlife

The failure to allow access to the fauna surveys completed since the co-design workshops is deeply concerning. To claim that they will only be extracted from the GIS system when preparing for the BDAR as part of the DA process means that we do not have access to very important information.

We know from searches on the Atlas of Living Australia that the local area contains at least 15 mammal species including ringtail possums, brushtail possums, swamp wallaby, short-beaked echidna, feathertail gliders, Goulds Wattled bats, Grey-headed Flying Foxes, sugar gliders, eastern grey kangaroo, large bent-winged bat, brown rat, eastern horse-shoe bat, little forest bat.

There should also be 14 reptile species including the red-bellied black snake, blue-tongue lizards, eastern water dragon, green tree snake, snake-necked turtle, bearded dragon and more.

There should be 8 amphibian species including the common eastern froglet, leaf green tree frog, striped marsh frog, perons tree frog, the vulnerable red-crowned toadlet and the eastern dwarf tree frog.

Over 133 bird species have also been documented including the sulphur-crested cockatoo, noisy miner, kookaburra, grey butcher bird, Australian magpie, king parrot, eastern whip-bird, pied currawong, crested pigeon, Australian raven, crimson rosella, brush turkey, galah, eastern koel, eastern spinebill, grey fantail, eastern wattlebird, red wattlebird, glossy black cockatoo and many many more.

There are also 4 molluscs listed such as the chocolate-streaked pinwheel snail, the endangered dural land snail, hydrobiid snail and leopard slug.

Your observation in the master plan that there were “a few reptile species and indications of mammals” is very vague and concerning. The pounding that the site has endured from mountain bikers for over 10 years has most likely contributed to a reduction in the fauna species that should be found in the area.

In the Master Plan you note that Squaretailed Kites, listed as vulnerable, were observed plus Powerful Owls were heard. This site should be an important hunting ground for the Powerful Owl.

Powerful Owls are listed as a vulnerable species. They have been assigned to the ‘Landscape species management stream’ under the Saving our Species (SoS) program. This SoS strategy aims to ensure that the species is secure in the wild in NSW and that its NSW geographic range is extended or maintained and maintain its conservation status under the Biodiversity Conservation Act.

HSC claims that it wants to avoid, minimise and mitigate impacts on biodiversity at every stage, the removal of MTBing from the bushland is an obvious first step.

Sportsfields

Synthetic turf

HSC states that they want to support environmental sustainability and reduce carbon emissions. Synthetic turf does not align with this stated intention. Synthetic turf is basically a product of the fossil fuel industry and is hence not sustainable, particularly as it cannot be recycled. Cleaning chemicals and micro plastics can be shed into the environment and it deprives fauna of feeding sites.

This site is particularly unsuitable for synthetic turf given its proximity to sensitive bushland. The site is exposed to the full sun and bushfires. Synthetic turf can get extremely hot and be unsafe for players. Synthetic turf can also burn in a bushfire and produce toxic fumes. Synthetic fields cannot sequester carbon.

Lighting

Lighting has a serious impact on native fauna and to minimise the impact on nocturnal animals:

- Playing field lighting must be consistent with the Australian Standards including Control of Obtrusive Lighting Effects.
- The closure of playing fields by 9pm to minimise disruption to resident amenity and wildlife.

Yours sincerely

Karen Benhar

President

Friends of Berowra Valley.