

## ACT EQUESTRIAN ASSOCIATION INC. (ACTEA)

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25 March 2006

The Committee Secretary

Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee

Department of the Senate

Parliament House

Canberra ACT 2600

### **Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

This Association is an ACT-based umbrella group of some twenty affiliated equestrian clubs. ACTEA's mission is to promote horse riding and equestrian activities in conjunction with its affiliated bodies. One of our major goals is the promotion of recreational horse riding. Our experience with ACT parks and reserves, and NSW national parks in this region, provide the basis for comment on the terms of reference of your enquiry.

In summary this Association suggests that

- \* the recreational value of national parks has given way in many more cases than necessary to emphasis being put on the conservation values of national parks and reserves. Without adequate and objective investigation horse riding activities are often not permitted.
- \* the arguments that horse riding contributes to environmental damage are not based on rigorous evidence.
- \* park administration appears to have too many resources going into office procedures, rather than field management and maintenance.
- \* with increased areas designated as conservation areas financing of maintenance in those areas needs investigation.

In the ACT with its pastoral history and despite the growth of the city of Canberra there has been strong interest in horse keeping and horse riding. Public or unleased land has provided much of the space in which recreational horse riding has been possible. Along with horse riders in other parts of Australia, in the last 20-25 years we have found major restrictions placed on horse rider use of much of this land. Namadgi National Park was gazetted in 1984. In that Park horse riding is allowed only on formed roads east of Old Boboyan Road. From the early 1980s close to the suburban edge of Canberra where many of us keep our horses, the reserves of Canberra Nature Park (CNP) have been fenced and in many reserves horse riding is not permitted, or limited only to certain trails.

### **Funding and resources available to meet the objectives of Australia's national parks... with particular reference to (a) values and objectives**

In most cases where we have looked at management plans for national parks and reserves the value of conservation has taken priority over recreational use, e.g. Canberra Nature Park Management Plan 1999 in the chapter on Promotion and Management of Visitor Use phrases such as "promote appropriate recreational use of CNP" and "Balance recreation with

conservation and minimise the impact of recreation on other values and recreational user conflicts” are used. (Ref 1 p.39) These phrases appear to give importance to recreational values but have allowed for the primacy of conservation over recreation, particularly in limiting horse riding in CNP areas. (Ref 1 p.48-50) In several situations horse riding is permitted only on the outside of the CNP reserve perimeter fence.

The alleged environmental impact of horse riding has been given much publicity in recent years but there is also a view that writing on this subject and conclusions drawn from that literature have not been sufficiently rigorous.

The Landsberg report (ref 2) as one of its terms of reference was to identify “significant scientific evidence on the impacts of equestrian use in conservation areas and any gaps in knowledge which are relevant to planning and management of equestrian use in Canberra Nature Park”. Landsberg’s considered opinion (p.41) was “There is insufficient direct evidence of social or environmental impacts to make a definitive determination.” and “There are few studies and no scientific evidence of environmental damage caused specifically by horses when they are ridden along well constructed and maintained trails across gently sloping, well-drained terrain. There are instead rational grounds for suspecting that horses may cause negligible damage under these circumstances.” The tenor of the report is circumspect, pointing to the impact of all recreational activity and the need for research and monitoring. The Landsberg report was commissioned in January 1999, finalised in March 1999, tabled in the ACT Legislative Assembly on 4 July 1999 and applied in the July-August 1999 CNP Management Plan without any time for public discussion of it or its effects on the CNP Management Plan. In Mt Ainslie Reserve the Plan (Ref 1 p.48) closed some 6.5km and in Farrer Ridge about 1.5km of trails to horse riding, with minor changes in other reserves. In Mt Ainslie Reserve this left horse riders with about 12 kms of trail, all of it multi-use. Other recreational use continued in CNP but with dog walking not permitted in some reserves, and cycling restricted to “existing public roads and formed vehicle trails” within reserves.

Another review of scientific literature on the impacts of recreational use, particularly horse riding, in conservation areas, is the article by Sara Beavis entitled *Biophysical impacts of recreational horse riding in multi-use national parks and reserves*. (Ref 3) This focuses on what can be summarised as the alleged erosional impact and weed spread due to horse riding. This article shows there are many factors to be considered in assessing surface impacts of horse riding (p.112-113) In relation to weed dispersal Beavis writes: “There is a general belief amongst state agency staff and the broader community that horses are an important vector in weed dispersal and colonisation. However, weed seeds are dispersed by a number of vectors including: wind; water; ingestion by birds, animals (native, feral and domestic) and humans: attachment to hair, clothing and tyres; and in mud encrustations.” (p.114)

**(b) Whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements.**

Official reports from conservation authorities emphasise that action is being taken on weeds and feral pests e.g. *State of the parks: an overview... 2004* states “Last year the NPWS alone spent almost \$17 million on pest animal and weed management. This constitutes a 1700per cent increase in the level of funding over the past 10 years, within the park system alone.” (Ref 4 p.44) However this comparison needs to take into account the huge expansion in national parks and reserves area in NSW over that period. There is a definite public perception that on many areas of public land there is insufficient weed control. From

personal observation of this writer, in Mt Ainslie Reserve weed control of e.g. blackberries and St Johns Wort in any one season appears to be limited to a section of the reserve leaving an adjacent part of the same administrative area to provide a reservoir of future seed. Though not designated park or reserve in some parts of ACT Forests land, burnt out and now replanted or re-vegetating naturally, there is much blackberry growth.

**(c) Any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks...**

In developing management plans the objective of recreation is often downplayed. Often there are proposals to reduce recreational use, by particular groups of recreational user, or in particular areas. As indicated in earlier remarks horse riders in recent years feel that their interests are one of those recreational uses first targeted in the writing of draft management plans. In our region the draft Plan of Management for Kosciuszko National Park proposed reduction in areas for horse riding and a permit system for horse riding. In the draft it appeared that the permit system was suggested only for horse riders, not those pursuing other recreational interests, though there are impacts noted for other recreational activities. For example the Independent Scientific Committee Interim report (ref 5 p. 51) refers to impacts from horses and walkers at Blue Waterholes and environs. Sometimes proposals for control of recreational activities are not planned for realistic management. A permit system for horse riders in Kosciuszko would require supervision by management over a large area whereas the Draft plan points to the environmental pressures on the most popular camping sites (e.g. ref 6 p.104) Horse riders when using Kosciuszko usually camp and a camping fee for ALL types of recreational user as camper at camps with facilities would be more readily imposed and understood.

Another example was the Draft Plan of Management for Brindabella National Park. (ref 7) This park is used by cyclists, 4WD vehicles and horse riders. It has been used for over 20 years for the ACT Endurance Riders Association annual endurance ride and also by recreational horse riders. The draft stated (ref 7 p.30) that “Due to numerous off-park opportunities for horse riding and potential erosion and conflicts with vehicles, horse riding in the park will be restricted to tracks north of, and including, the Doctors Flat Road and the Folly’s access track” - a very small area of the park. Horse riders think these reasons for restriction are not logically developed and would be equally applicable to other recreational groups using Brindabella National Park.

Proposals such as these which do not appear scientifically based on evidence of the recreational activity damaging conservation values alienate certain sections of the Australian population interested in recreation. Even amongst non-users of parks there is a view that parks are mainly financed by taxpayers generally and should be managed as far as possible for all to visit and appreciate.

**(d) The responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks,...with particular reference to long-term plans.**

We have concerns that management plan development is taking considerable park resources in staff time, and reducing staffing resources in the field. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife website has a very long list of 111 draft plans which have been through a public consultation stage but have not yet been finalised! ([www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au](http://www.nationalparks.nsw.gov.au) clicking to Conservation plans for public comment and Public consultation archive) As well as Plans of Management there are Fire plans and Action plans. Many of these plans have been in the draft stage for years. Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management review process began in March 2002 and is not yet finalised. The public also contributes much time and value in

commenting on these drafts. We agree consultation with the public is useful and desirable, but there is a very complex official process of approval for a plan. While this occurs park management must be in a state of uncertainty. The public can become very disillusioned with the plan process and result when it takes so long, especially when there are radical changes in the final plan compared with the draft, such changes occurring without any further notification or explanation.

Another example of a lengthy gestation period for a management plan is Namadgi National Park Draft Management Plan of September 2005. This was preceded by discussions and workshops over a period of two years but a final plan is not yet decided. This Association is interested in the possibility of re-routing a section of the Bicentennial National Trail (BNT) from Mt Clear to Yaouk via Shannon Flat. The present route along roads is dangerous for BNT users and for motorists as traffic on the roads is increasing. The Draft Plan proposed new fire trails linking the Mt Clear Fire Trail to Boboyan Rd and the proposed realignment of Grassy Creek Trail (ref 8 Map 5) This Association's submission suggested these fire trails could also be used for the BNT. This example, giving greater protection against fire and accident to humans, requires immediate over-riding of the conservation value by safety values.

**(e) The record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks...**

In 1999 (ref 1) CNP consisted of 27 separate reserves covering an area of about 6000 hectares. Since then considerable areas of grassland and Yellow Box - Red Gum Woodland have been added to CNP in Gungahlin and Jerrabomberra areas. There have also been pockets of land within older suburban areas created as reserves e.g. North Watson, Conder. This is a commendable record. However the segments of CNP in which horse riding is permissible have not increased.

What is uncertain also is whether government authorities responsible for national parks and reserves have the financial ability to manage the maintenance of these public lands. Most park management plans are not written within a context of showing specific costs of managing and maintaining the particular park. Large areas of land are being withdrawn from the potential of at least some revenue earning capacity. Some newspaper reports and academic studies suggest local authorities are concerned by the removal of rateable lands from private ownership to national park and reserve status where revenues which would have come to local authorities are no longer received. (ref 9) Members of the public interested in recreation are aware that the actual and potential productive resources of national park and reserve lands are not harnessed into providing revenue for managers. There are, of course, some situations where commercial licences for special activities, or visitor fees, which are usually resource intensive in collection, are applied to park management. But in recent years we are aware of forested areas used for timber production being declared national park or conservation reserve (e.g. in NSW and Queensland) with horse riding automatically excluded by that change of status.

In the ACT we understand the decision has been made that the burnt-out 11000 hectares of ACT Forests will not return to commercial forestry. For the present ACT Forests remains a public trading enterprise and as such pays income tax (though sometimes deferred) GST, FBT and payroll tax. (ref 10) It is understood this status is likely to change soon. The decision, after the 2003 fires, to remove what was ACT forest land from timber production to management by Environment ACT, at present understood to be largely recreational land, at

this stage leaves uncertain how vegetation and track maintenance, formerly carried out as part of the timber production cost process, will now be financed. Many of the tracks are still needed as fire trails and could also be used for recreation - both activities requiring some maintenance.

In the Canberra Spatial Plan an objective is to provide access to open space and recreation areas as this is “highly valued by the community and encourages physical activity.” (ref 11 p.42) Actions planned ( ref 11 p.43) include provision of horse trails, protection of important nature conservation areas from any adverse effects of recreational activities, while another goal is fiscal responsibility (ref 11 p.78) But it is difficult to put an economic value on open space and national parks and reserves as conservation and recreation spaces. As stated by the Canberra Spatial Plan recreational use provides an obvious value seen as a benefit by the many recreational users of open space. If recreation values could be more adequately quantified then monitoring and maintenance activities financed by the public purse might receive more support and adequate finance. In turn this may be of use in reducing and/or restoring any environmental impacts from recreational use and enhancing the conservation values of that space. But policies preventing recreational use without reasonable cause will alienate taxpayers.

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