

SNOWY MOUNTAINS
HORSE RIDERS
ASSOCIATION INCORPORATED

Keeping Our Heritage Alive...

ABN 39 594 933 682

P O Box 15

JINDABYNE NSW 2627



The Secretary,
Senate Environment, Communications Information Technology and the Arts
References Committee
Parliament House,
CANBERRA ACT 2600

SENATE INQUIRY INTO NATIONAL PARKS

Our objective of this letter is to draw the attention of the Senate Inquiry to a range of key issues we have experienced in regards to Kosciuszko National Park and the Governments of that time over the past 20 plus years. Unfortunately, our organization was not able to make formal submission in the correct time frame and consequently hope that this letter may still be noted.

About us:

The Snowy Mountains Horse Riders Association (SMHRA) was established in 1985 as a community lobby group as a result of major traditional horse riding areas of the Snowy Mountains being declared “Wilderness” and the subsequent prohibition of horse riding without any public consultation.

Our vision statement:

*In the tradition of the Man from Snowy River,
our vision is to hold on to the values of our heritage...
our mountain horsemanship, our bush skills and bush lore ,
our history and our Memories.*

*A unique Australian way of life, our aim is to be sincerely recognized
by governments and society as responsible and legitimate land users
in our traditional areas.*

We are mostly the descendants of the original pioneers and settlers of the Snowy Mountains districts. We are ordinary local landowners and residents. We are not affiliated with any political group or organisation. We are members of the community genuinely concerned about the restrictions being placed on what should be community owned land. Land that we cherish and respect and would never want to see degraded or destroyed. Land that should not be controlled by city based minority interest groups, but should be properly managed for the use and enjoyment of the entire community, and most importantly to ensure this use is sustainable for future generations.

We are familiar with the arguments put forward by the main opponents of horse riding in the National Parks. We regard their arguments as unscientific, based on ideology rather than any proven scientific base, and coming from a political agenda rather than from a sensible approach to park management.

The SMHRA has organised the very successful **Man from Snowy River Mountain Muster** from 1987 until 2001. Winners of the “**Canberra Regional Awards for Culture**” in 1995, the muster is a very popular event which demonstrates the commitment and dedication of the association.

Members of the SMHRA are proud to have played a major role in the development of the Wild Horse Management Plan with the Kosciuszko National Park (KNP). Our members have been represented on the KNP Wild Horse Management steering committee and we have also been involved in the very successful “Roping and Trapping” trial with National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 2002-2003.

For many years SMHRA have had a close liaison with NPWS in regards to horse riding activities throughout the KNP for search and rescue purposes. This has included State Emergency Services membership, training and exercises.

Over the years we have continually offered National Parks our expertise and knowledge in the hope that this resource be acknowledged by the powers that be.

Regardless that over 80% of the submissions received by NPWS for comment on the most recent KNP Draft Plan of Management 2004 in which we, and other riding groups, were advocating horseriding policies to be repealed in wilderness areas, the NPWS and government continue to refuse this request and deny the local people their voice on this issue alone.

HOW WE GOT TO THE CURRENT SITUATION

In 1982 the KNP Draft Plan of Management stated : *“It is proposed that horse riding be permitted throughout the park (including wilderness areas) except for that part of the Kosciusko management unit where the fragility of the alpine and sub-alpine environments is such that the uncontrolled use of horses would compromise other important values.”* Following the public exhibition phase in 1982, submissions were reviewed and the NPWS proposed that these provisions remained. Horse riders had no problem.

However, in the final plan that was adopted by the Minister, horse riding in wilderness areas had been excluded and horse riding was abolished without any public consultation! It was another two years before local horse riders were even aware of this.

In 1986, a further draft of amendments on horse riding in wilderness areas was **proposed by the NPWS officers** that stated:

“The Service recognizes the significant link horses have had with the cultural heritage of the Park and the cultural link with the local community, as well as the desire of the community to experience parts of our national park by horse”.

*“The (1986) amendments arise from a further 4 years of experience in evaluating the problems associated with this aspect of the plan. Also there is no doubt that those in support of horse riding failed to express their opinions **(did not have opportunity)** during the exhibition phase....”*

“...Two of the wilderness areas, Byadbo and Pilot adjoin the Victorian Cobberas-Tingaringy National Park. The Victorian authorities permit horse riding in the park and from discussions with them, it is unlikely that this situation will change.”

“The proposed (1986) amendments will bring greater consistency to the management of horse riding on both sides of the NSW and Victorian borders.”

“Such complementary management practices are the objective of growing cooperation between the Victorian, NSW and ACT authorities who manage sections of the Australian Alps. This cooperative endeavor has been formalized into a Memorandum of Understanding signed by respective Ministers and will form the basis of an Alpine National Parks agreement.”

*“The amendments are also based on the concern that exclusion of horse riding from all wilderness areas is **not** based on a consideration of the natural and cultural resources of these areas, the provision of recreational opportunities nor the assessment of impact of riding. The amendments...are based on the concept that horse riding can serve the legitimate purposes of encouraging the use, understanding and enjoyment of substantial sections of the Park.”*

These amendments were to reintroduce horse riding back into the Byadbo Wilderness and to the Pilot wilderness south of the Tin Mine Trail and the Bogong Peaks in the North. (An area larger than the entire ACT)

The Plan of 1982 represented a dramatic change in the way of life for the local Snowy River Community, however, it was recognised that, since it was adopted without consultation, amendments were needed. Despite this, the amendments were not even tabled not to mention implemented, and we continue to be excluded from our own heritage and birthright.

Our Association and the local community is still at a loss to understand how such major changes could be made that would affect the community at large, unopposed and without public consultation.

**THE LOCAL COMMUNITY WAS NOT NOTIFIED NOR CONSULTED –
OUR HERITAGE HAS BEEN HIJACKED !!**

THE RIGHT TO MAINTAIN OUR CULTURAL HERITAGE

As stated in the KNP 2004 draft POM in Section 7, People and the Landscape:

“At a national level, the legend of the Man from Snowy River has contributed to a particular Australian sense of identity, as has the construction of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. For specific groups or communities, experience associated with the park can explain deeply held collective positions and feelings some of which may be passed on from one generation to the next. The experiences of displaced people, be they Aboriginal or non-aboriginal, may be reflected in feelings of loss and lament, nostalgia and pride, resentment and anger, or a need for recognition of legitimacy.”

*“Cultural significance is embodied in the fabric, setting and contents of a place, the documents associated with it, its use and intangible values such as cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories, memories, feelings and associations.... According to the **National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2002**, any heritage deposit, object or material more than 25 years old is deemed to have potential cultural significance.”*

Yet this section fails to recognise that many of the people who played such an important role in the history of the Park, did it on horseback!

Accessing park areas on horseback, with their “tangible and intangible cultural heritage” is a means of reflecting on our history and culture, and keeping the Snowy Mountains culture alive - preserving **our cultural heritage**, landscape memory, bush skills bush lore and horsemanship.

Much of our cultural heritage is intangible. It is the way in which we teach our children and the way in which we pass on our memories, our methods and ways of carrying out our lives in the tradition of “the Man from Snowy River”.

An example of this culture is in the Lower Snowy River Corridor and Pinch River area: Being such a harsh, hardy and rugged terrain it has for generations often been the starting ground for horsemen with new and young horses. “...*where the hills are twice as steep and twice as rough...*” It is felt to be the perfect arena for teaching riders and their horses advanced skills and instincts as well as building foundations for the perfect relationship and gaining the ultimate harmony. This is indeed the breeding ground for great horsemen and great horses.

The Snowy Mountain horsemen and women are renowned and celebrated by all Australians. This was seen recently in the Olympic opening Ceremony in Sydney as well as the many other various events and features.

Our great grandfathers were the original “Men from Snowy River” or “Snowy River Riders”, grazing their cattle and sheep in the mountains since the early 1800’s and becoming the legendary horsemen.

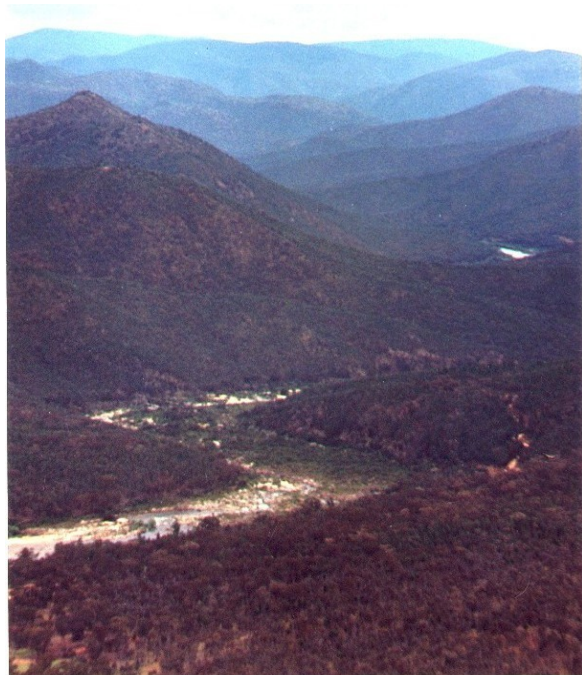
The tangible and intangible cultural heritage items have been discussed at length both in the Independent Scientific Committee Interim Report and the draft POM expressing the unique way of life of the pastoral era and admitting that it is of “historic and social significance at a national level”.

While acknowledged at least in the draft POM, **our** feelings and associations for “*cultural practices, knowledge, songs, stories, memories...*” have been made totally irrelevant as we have been left out of the discussion on horse riding and wilderness management decisions. We have also literally been left off the map of horse riding opportunities in the southern parts of the park, being coincidentally also “Snowy River Country”.

*“And the Snowy River riders on the mountains make their home,
Where the river runs those giant hills between;
I have seen full many horsemen since I first commenced to roam,
But nowhere yet such horsemen have I seen”*

WE HAVE RECOMMENDED THAT THE PLAN OF MANAGEMENT AND NSW NATIONAL PARKS ADVISORY GROUPS:

Give more than lip service and just tokenistic consideration to preserving our cultural heritage but actively support this through clear objectives and strategies for achieving it in the POM and throughout the “whole” of the KNP. Other than acknowledging that our cultural heritage exists, the POM has still done nothing to ensure its preservation.



The Lower Snowy River – Looking south – Byadbo Wilderness on the left and Pilot wilderness on right

COMMUNITY ACCESS AND EQUITY ISSUES HAVE BEEN IGNORED

First, let us be clear - this Association has never, and will never, seek to ride in Alpine or sensitive areas! What we are seeking is access to the southern end of Kosciuszko National Park particularly, which is our traditional area.

We cherish and respect our Park, we would never want to see it degraded, and we have worked hard to preserve it along with our cultural heritage.

This debate appears to have been hijacked by a narrowly focused group that favours only bushwalkers. There are other aspects to consider, in relation to access and equity for the community at large, which appear to have been ignored in the all of the recent Plans of Management.

The prohibition of horse riding in the KNP is a blatant contradiction of the original Kosciuszko State Park Act, 1944-1952. Varied recreational use of the area has been undertaken by a wide range of users, and was identified in the Kosciuszko State Park Act 1944, Section 13 as follows:

Ref. Page 1106 Section 13. Area to be available for recreation etc.

“Subject to the regulations, land within the Kosciuszko State Park shall be available to the public for the purpose of riding, hiking, camping, snow sports, and any other form of recreation, and the public shall have free access to and over all roads and track, and to all fishing streams within the park”.

NPWS promote the principles of Equity and Fairness in the workplace and yet the NPWS does not demonstrate these principles in its dealings with the local community and we feel very betrayed.

As noted by the Southern CRA Wilderness Assessment (2002):

“If National Park management is to be successful and maximize stakeholder support it must acknowledge and respond to the reasonable aspirations and traditions of locals as well as other interests.”

A magnified look into NPWS wilderness policies is needed, as they conveniently overlook the needs of the local people in relation to local issues.

In the report “Horse Riding in KNP” (November 2002), Dr Sara Beavis from the Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies at the Australian National University stated:

“It is a concernthat as access is reduced across Kosciuszko NP, these (currently available) camps will become more pressured with associated higher levels of impact. This is not an issue relating to horse riding per se, but the consequence of management. This issue is also raised in the Southern CRA Wilderness Assessment 2002 and a significant number of submissions were made in relation to the relocation of recreational activities from declared wilderness areas would cause congestion and damage in the remaining places where these activities could be undertaken.” ...

“...Isolated rural populations have limited access to a wide range of opportunities and facilities that urban dwellers can take for granted. The linkages between reduced physical activity and both physical and mental health is an emerging issue for isolated rural communities, particularly since it has been acknowledged that there is a relative neglect of aspects of human wellbeing, other than economic considerations, in regional development (Townsend et al., 1999). In the southern part of Kosciuszko NP, some isolated communities view horse riding as one of only a limited number of options for recreational exercise, and identify the removal of access as a significant impediment to achieving a healthy lifestyle. In the Southern CRA Wilderness Assessment (2002), social issues that have emerged out of the impacts of wilderness on lifestyle include:

- *lack of opportunities for recreation in rural communities;*
- *the negative effects of boredom on young people; and*
- *limited opportunities for recreation and access specifically in children, the elderly and the handicapped.”*

Studies such as these are never acknowledged by the bureaucracy.

These sentiments are supported further by Rick Farley, Chair of the Kosciuszko Community Forum, who states:

“When we talk about the issue of access we are talking about a very diverse range of activities from disabled access to vehicle access. We are talking about four wheel drives, horse riders, skiers, fishers, canoeists, anyone who wants to access the park.”

"After considerable discussion the Forum agreed that a range of recreational opportunities needed to be provided for so that visitors could enjoy the park's natural and cultural attractions."

*"One important issue that was raised during the round of regional workshops earlier in the year was the need for **special access to areas which have important cultural and historical connections for certain groups and individuals.**"*

"It was agreed that such special access arrangements should be considered in the new Plan of Management".

Incidentally, our association (SMHRA) was not invited to attend the Community Forum....it seems our invitation was 'lost' in the mail!

LACK OF SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE TO PROHIBIT HORSE RIDING

Horse Riding and many other recreational uses are prohibited from National Parks based on the Precautionary Principal. The adoption of the Precautionary Principal is rarely if ever substantiated (as required).

In most cases quoted by Green Groups in reference to horse riding, the basis of the contention is not based in proven science, rather on literature reviews and non-scientific assertions without substance.

We are yet to be satisfied of the references citing specific scientific studies or research to support the prohibition of horse riding in wilderness areas as is often claimed? We are always only given lists of mere government staff and unqualified but well meaning green groups opinions. We are yet to see "hands and knees science" and no longer believe that it exists. The postulation that extrapolates into firm facts from other studies is difficult to substantiate yet it continues to produce negative and adverse evidence that is unfair and unjust.

It is clear from the evidence that there are great knowledge gaps being filled with biased and discriminative rhetoric misquoted from dubious research and compromised sources, predominantly that of cattle grazing in the high alpine areas of 50 years ago. **There is no scientific relationship between grazing issues and traditional periodic horse riding.**

There is no substantiated scientific evidence to allow for management decisions to even be debated, not to mention implemented. We can all understand decision-making based on "precautionary principles" when scientific data indicates this is warranted. However, there are no scientific studies that suggest that we should be suspending judgment as there is not the rigorous data to support a "no horse riding" management policy in wilderness areas.



Pilot Wilderness – Following in his grandfathers footsteps.

We contend that horse riding areas should be increased and widened to disperse and reduce any perceived impacts instead of crowding into smaller and smaller areas. As a result of this concentration of activity, the impacts naturally will be intensified and again used as a means of convenient adverse impact for the anti horse riding lobby.



HORSE RIDERS CONTRIBUTION TO PARK AND COMMUNITY

The skills of the Snowy Mountain's horsemen and women have been recognised several times over the past 20 years by State Emergency Services and Police.

Most recently horse riders were praised by the NSW Police, when, for example over 100 square kilometres was covered by 7 horse riders in 2 days whilst searching for a missing bush walker recently south of Thredbo. SMHRA was recognized as a valuable resource and will be called on in future exercises.

In a letter of thanks and appreciation from NSW Police, Monaro Local Area Command Search Co-ordinator Senior Constable Anthony Hill, the horse riders were highly praised for their contribution, not only by police on this occasion, but also by the helicopter support personnel who saw first hand (a birds eye view) their speed and professional expertise in covering the search area.

Over the 2 days of the search and rescue in which our riders were involved, they met other foot searchers out in the wilderness who were battling to find their direction using GPS, compass and maps. The horse riders helped the other searchers to find their way, but they did this without carrying any of the technology of the walkers and were totally self reliant and sufficient with their own skills and knowledge, their experience, landscape memory and instincts. These instincts and experience are also built into their horses. An experienced horse in this field is just as unique as is the rider.

In defence of retaining this historical knowledge we note that whilst much of a foot searcher's energies are used in watching where they are stepping and focusing on not

getting lost or injured themselves, a horse rider has the benefit of being able to actually scan the landscape around him and leave the groundwork and terrain to his horse. Consequently the rider has a greater capacity to seek out people in dense bush and can endure much longer search hours without rest.

With continued restrictions on horse riding, these vitally important skills will be lost forever, **we are the last generation with this experience and expertise** to pass on. We view the destruction of these traditional skills and expertise as a national disgrace and generates a greater risk to all Australians enjoying the outdoors.

This skill set has other benefits as riders cover vast areas relatively easily. the potential exists for horse riders to also map areas for the service of noxious weeds and feral or endangered animals. This type of voluntary contribution could be a service to the community and achieve common goals for all concerned.

The above expertise and experience should be acknowledged by NPWS as a management resource and could be at times a vital contribution to the community.

From our experience there has been no attempt to find an appropriate balance between the needs of all stakeholder groups here in the Snowy. The people of the southern Snowy Mountains have been totally circumvent, ignored and neglected for more than 20 years.

SMHRA along with a growing number of other likeminded Australians will continue to lobby for our rights and more so “justice” on this issue.

SMHRA supports the following amendments as originally proposed and instigated by NPWS 1986:

The Byadbo Wilderness area: (80,986 hectares)

“Based on an assessment of weeds, soil erosion, the large size of the area, vegetation and cultural resources it is considered that horse riding is an appropriate activity and impacts will be minimal. Due to the harsh dry conditions the numbers of other park users is very small and the potential for conflict with other park users is small.”

The Pilot Wilderness area: (92,400 hectares)

“Based on an assessment of weeds, soil erosion, the large size of the area, cultural resources, past land use practices and the presence of some identified fragile communities it is considered that horse riding is an appropriate activity in part of the Pilot Wilderness.

The area proposed where horse riding be permitted, is in the southern half of the Pilot. It is an area bounded in the north by the Tin Mine Trail and a line due west of its junction with the Cascade Trail. This excludes virtually all of the sub-alpine areas and major groundwater communities, ie. Bogs, ferns and wet heaths.

Restricting horse riding to the southern half of the Wilderness area would reduce the possibility of conflict between walkers and riders. The great majority of walkers, walk in an area in which horse riding would not be permitted.”

Note: Nowhere in the above NPWS amendments, is the concern raised of adverse impacts or degradation on the environment mentioned. All concerns were purely that of social impacts with other users.



Pilot wilderness. A 7th generation Snowy River family –



Pilot Wilderness riding – Mt Pilot in background

Our only conclusion about why we are continually vilified by National Parks and green groups is their resentment and jealousy of our lives here in the mountains. We see and are very much a part of the life cycle of the bush and have an intimate knowledge and bond which ties us to the land similar to our indigenous friends. The only difference between these green groups and us, the local community, is that we are prepared to share our beloved mountains with all.

“Our governments have taken our cattle from the mountains, they have dammed our towns and our history and emptied our river systems. Finally now they finish off our heritage by denying our celebrated horsemen the right to ride in their own traditional lands and thus branding the “Man from Snowy River” a criminal!”

Please take our views into serious consideration during the enquiry.

Yours Sincerely

Leisa Caldwell

for

Snowy Mountains Horse Riders Association Incorporated