

*Submission to the Senate Environment, Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts Reference Committee.*

The Enquiry Secretary
Dr Jacqui Dewar
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts
Reference Committee
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Sir /Madam,

I am writing this submission on behalf of the Esperance Pleasure Riders Club inc., a group based in Esperance, on the South Coast of Western Australia approximately 700km south-east of Perth. The context of this discussion will therefore be slanted towards the needs and aspirations of our members.

We are a group of people who range in age from 8 years old to 60+, who enjoy riding horses in natural surroundings around Esperance, in a non competitive manner. Our primary aims are

- • To enjoy our natural surroundings and see them with the greater depth and appreciation possible from the perspective of horseback, than obtained from vehicles or walking (e.g. the acute senses of our horses often pick up wildlife that we would miss)
- • relaxed social interaction both during and after rides
- • improve fitness in an outdoor setting for a range of age groups
- • for children the development of responsibility in looking after a horse as well as appreciation of the natural environment and interaction with other children and a variety of different aged adults of both sexes.
- • The knowledge gained about our historical past by following the tracks and trails of early settlers.(e.g. we are involved in organizing a 360km Israelite Bay Heritage Ride with a similar group ,The WA Horse Trekkers, which follows the trails of early settlers in an area east of Esperance)

When taking part in these rides and when training for longer treks, riders will often travel distances from 10 to 50 kilometres. Many of our rides are based on the edge of parks and reserves or private property. Many more potential trails are not available to us because the Department of Environment and Conservation in WA, has a “no horse riding in the areas under their jurisdiction’ policy, unless by special permission for specific requests. This has the drawback that permission can be totally dependent on the outlook and attitudes of those in charge at the time.

There is a general lack of understanding of the level of interest and use of tracks and trails by horse riders in our area and throughout the state, as evidenced in the lack of consultation with rider representatives in the “State Trails Master Plan’ developed by

Maier Brampton Associates – Recreation Trails Consultants in 2000 for the Ministry of Sport and Recreation, Ministry for Planning and the WA Planning Commission. The Esperance Shire also developed a “Trails Master Plan “ in 1998/99 but did not consult horse riders. In our view this is a major neglect of a significant part of the population and their recreational needs.

a) the values and objectives of Australia’s national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas:

The values and objectives of our national Parks and conservation reserves are rather unclear to the general public. The idea of conservation often seems to reflect a particular ideology that assumes that it is possible to faithfully recreate the biology and ecosystems that were here before Europeans came to Australia. Of course this is not possible since the original land users and managers (Aboriginal people) are no longer in place to manage it in their particular ways, and no-one can be really sure about what was here before.. The ideologists forget that Australia has not been a pristine, untouched by human hand, wilderness for at least 50,000 years.

In our experience, the implementation of this ideology results in horse riding in Parks and Reserves, being deemed to be a non- legitimate activity. Even though areas may have had a long historical use by horse riders the attitude is towards removal rather than co-operation. Yet these same areas are often freely available to unrestricted use by motor vehicles, trail bikes and quad bikes, which from sheer weight of numbers will have a far greater affect than the small amount of usage by horse riders.

Decisions such as the blanket lockout of horse riders from enjoying low impact nature based visitation to these areas, appear to be based on the ideological principle that all non native animals just by their presence are detrimental, rather than sound environmental management decisions. The trend in Australian conservation areas appears to be towards extremist restriction rather than educated inclusion. It also reflects the development of a culture within the bureaucracies that manage parks and reserves to ensure that only like minded employees or those who are willing to be inculcated in this ideology, are sourced. The values and objectives that have been developed for our National parks and Reserves seem to be reflection of an extremist section of the community who believe that only their interpretation of conservation is the correct one.

As members of the tax paying public, who are also horse riders, we feel that the values of our method of appreciating natural areas are not being given fair representation. Reasons given for not allowing controlled horse riding in Parks and Reserves, are generally based on subjective and anecdotal assessments that have limited scientific basis for their implementation e.g the carrying of weeds into parks by Horse manure is seen as an innately insurmountable problem within the DEC. the fundamental agricultural fact, that in most Southern WA bush, introduced pasture plants won’t grow unless given large doses of Superphosphate and trace elements, is ignored e.g. every day thousands of kangaroos around the South-west of WA are moving into paddocks adjacent to Parks and Reserves, to graze, then return to them and deposit their droppings full of pasture seeds –

- Conclusion - We do not advocate a “free for all approach” and would welcome input into developing trails and use systems in parks and reserves, for horse riders, that would allow them access to areas of scenic beauty and historical significance with minimal impacts on the environment.

b) whether governments are providing sufficient resources to meet those objectives and their management requirements:

At present the imbalance between on the ground people and office bureaucracy seems to have resulted in fewer and fewer Park rangers and more and more desk top management. Large areas are being acquired for Reserves and National Parks and the people and resources are not in place to adequately manage them. The results can be disastrous in areas that are not of high public profile e.g the Cape Arid National Park has an area of 279,415 ha and has only 1 on the ground ranger to look after it. In 2003 a huge area of 217,000 ha, almost the whole park, was burnt in wildfires that went on for weeks. Any rare and endangered species that were there (a Bilby like animal was seen by one of the Conservation and Land Management firefighters running in front of the flames!) if not killed by flames or smoke, had their habitat totally destroyed. Some species such as the Dibbler will not live in an area unless it has **not** been burnt for a minimum of ten years.

Much time energy and money is spent on “feel good “ objectives such as poisoning cats, (cats have been in Australia since the early 1800’s at least- letter to John Gould from John Gilbert ; their presence in Tasmania has not appeared to have led to widespread extinctions ;) and research by CSIRO has indicated that they are not a key species in extinctions, unlike foxes. Objectives in cases such as this appear to be based on ideology rather than objective assessments.

One of the results of lack of funding is that it may be deemed easier to lock up an area and restrict access, than develop an inclusive management plan for it that will inevitably require money and human resources to run.

- • Conclusion – insufficient resources are being provided to meet the observed objectives of acquiring more areas to close up as reserves, parks etc. Insufficient resources spent on developing inclusive policies that allow the sustainable enjoyment of these areas by people such as horse riders who wish to experience the environment in ways other than by vehicle or on foot.

c) any threats to the objectives and management of our national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.

A subtle threat, which is rarely acknowledged, is the tendency to believe that Australia was a wilderness with no human influences pre European habitation. This is reflected in the belief that wilderness conservation can be achieved by shutting up huge areas of land, which because of limited resources is then left to fend for itself. In fact Australia, when Europeans came, was a highly humanized and managed environment – the result of at least 50,000 years of human intervention, both positive and negative, to develop the habitats and their suites of animals and plants, that were here.

This pristine wilderness attitude has resulted in a large amount of confusion and resentment from sectors of the community such as horse riders. What is actually trying to be achieved is unclear, since the habitats that were here cannot be recreated unless they are managed as the Aboriginals did.

In effect the Australian Conservation bureaucracies and public conservationists are often trying to create artificial environments that fit their concepts of what “natural ecosystems” are. Any non- native animal is not to be tolerated – at what point does a non-native become native e.g. are dingoes and some of the more recent bat arrivals, native? Usually this means that post aboriginal land uses, such as grazing cattle intermittently along the south coastal areas in parts of WA are deemed “unnatural” and stopped. Such practices are what created the habitats that were there when taken over by Department of Environment. They had persisted for nearly 200 years and replaced Aboriginal burning practices with an arguably even more sustainable management regime since large grazing animals are mimicking the effects of the extinct megafauna.. These areas are now economically expensive to manage and at greater risk of wildfires due to the build up of ungrazed scrub and grasses.

The lack of resources given to manage huge areas of land, may ultimately lead to its degradation as habitat for many species. Creative thinking could include leasing particular land types for well managed grazing practices e.g. if all pastoral stations in WA had their leases revoked in 2015, where are the resources going to come from to manage them?

- • Conclusion – to the general public including horse riders the objectives and management policies for many parks and reserves are unclear and often seem to be unrealistically based on ideology rather than objective scientific evidence e.g the blanket restriction of horse activities from Parks and reserves does not appear to be based on objective scientific principles. The restrictive policies may in many cases be doing more harm than good to the long term sustainability of habitats and environments as well as alienating support by the public.

d) the record of government in the creation of reserves

The record of government in the actual creation of reserves has been positive, however they rarely follow up with enough on the ground funding to manage them properly. Government to date has usually supported Conservation Departments in excluding any activities that enable horse riders to take part in enjoying our natural landscapes. This is reflected in the precept of ignoring past land usages that did not have a detrimental impact on an area, simply because they do not match the particular philosophical viewpoint that **all** horse activities are an unnatural part of the environment. For example horses were ridden through the Israelite Bay area east of Esperance, on the south coast of WA, for close to 100 years with no observable degradation taking place. Yet since the National park was created, this activity was automatically excluded – why? The recent Heritage Ride through this area that followed the trails of the original settlers, was only allowed as a one off activity that required permission to proceed and was heavily dependent on the prevailing attitude of the local district manager – a non-sympathetic manager could have stopped the ride from proceeding.

- • Conclusion - It is recommended that adequate funding should be available to manage all parks and reserves properly. It is recommended that the blanket policy of automatic exclusion of non degradation activities, such as managed horse riding in parks and reserves should be disallowed. Funding should include development consultative processes to allow properly managed usage of conservation areas by recreational horse riders , especially where there has been a long background of historical usage.

Nicole Chalmer
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