



# N.S.W. ENDURANCE RIDERS ASSOCIATION Inc.

## Course Preservation Committee

26 February 2006

Committee Secretary  
Senate Environment, Communications, Information Technology and the Arts Committee  
Department of the Senate  
Parliament House  
Canberra ACT 2600  
Australia

By email to [ecita.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:ecita.sen@aph.gov.au)

**Re: Senate Inquiry into Australia's national parks, conservation reserves and marine protected areas**

Dear Sir/Madam

The following submission is made on behalf of the NSW Endurance Riders Association (NSWERA), which represents approximately 1,000 endurance horse riders throughout New South Wales. The Course Preservation Committee is responsible for liaison with the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service regarding recreational horse riding in national parks and other land managed by NPWS.

Endurance horse riding is an amateur recreational sport involving individuals riding on horseback for distances of between 40 and 160 kilometres per day. A typical event is 80 kilometres in length and riders take between 3 and 9 hours to complete the distance. There are strict veterinary controls and a standardised national set of rules. All horse and rider combinations to successfully complete the course receive awards, and although the fastest times are recognised, there is no prizemoney.

While preparing their horses for these events, riders typically train over distances of 10-40 kilometres.

Most endurance ride courses travel through a combination of national parks, state forests and private property. Because of the distances involved, endurance riding is therefore heavily dependent on access to public land.

As well as being the Secretary of the Course Preservation Committee and former President and Vice President of NSWERA, I am the NSWERA delegate to the Australian Horse Alliance, and a member of the NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service Advisory Committee for the Blue Mountains region.

**a) the values and objectives of Australia's national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas;**

In my long experience of negotiating with NPWS, I believe that at a policy level, NPWS seldom seeks to strike a balance between the many different values and objectives of parks and reserves. Instead, conservation is given absolute priority over all other factors, often without any substantial grounds for doing so. Recreational use is only favoured, and funded, when it relates to high-profile tourism.

Horse riding in parks and reserves, when it is permitted at all, is treated as a grudgingly tolerated intrusion rather than a legitimate activity. Trails with long histories of continuous horse usage are arbitrarily closed to horses; trails which provide connecting links between routes through State Forests are closed, severing the links between riding areas; horses are blamed for erosion and trail impacts actually caused by everything from motorbikes to bulldozers.

The bias against recreational activities is nowhere more apparent than in the land classification known as Nature Reserves. These supposedly have a higher conservation value than national parks. Often created from former State Forests or Crown Land, they are frequently traversed by trails regularly used by horse riders. As soon as the Nature Reserve is declared, horses are banned from setting foot on those trails, on the grounds that their presence is incompatible with the conservation purpose of the land. No-one ever stops to consider the fact that horses had used the area for decades, yet in spite of this, it was considered to be sufficiently pristine or undamaged to be worth of special protection.

The truth is, a horse travelling along a formed trail will not have any discernible impact on the flora or fauna. Manure falling on a compacted surface simply dries and disperses. Horses do not run over and kill wildlife. They do not eat protected species while moving along a track. The impact of their footfalls is more comparable to a walker than to a vehicle.

For an examination of the published literature regarding the impact of horse riding on the environment, please refer to "Horse Riding in Canberra Nature Park," by Dr Sara Beavis of the Australian National University (2000) (available on the Australian Horse Alliance website, [www.australianhorsealliance.com.au](http://www.australianhorsealliance.com.au)).

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

Ten years ago, I regularly met rangers on patrol in my local parks and reserves (Wollemi NP, Blue Mountains NP, Parr SCA). Since then, funding has fallen while land under management has steadily increased. Now with NPWS resources stretched so thin, I can ride for months without seeing a single park ranger.

Trails within reserves deteriorate and often are eventually closed due to damage caused by lack of maintenance. The extremely limited funding is spent on high profile tourist locations and on fire trails in high risk locations. There is nothing left over for recreational trails. Management too often consists of a locked gate, for example at Yellomundee Regional Park where horses are supposedly permitted but in reality cannot gain access.

Much time, energy and money is spent on attempts to eradicate pest species, but value judgments often undermine these attempts. Scheyville National Park in Sydney's north-west is presently

overrun with blackberry and waist-high grass and weeds. NPWS staff struggle in vain to poison the weeds and to keep the grass down to reduce the fire risk in this semi-rural residential area. Yet prior to being declared a National Park, cattle were agisted on the land. There was almost no blackberry, the grass was grazed short, and the wallabies were no less numerous. But “cattle” is a dirty word in NPWS circles, with all non-native animals automatically categorised as pest species. For many, the exclusion of horses from parks and reserves takes on an ideological slant, purely because horses are not a native species. (Nor are white Europeans, but I have never heard a suggestion that bushwalkers be excluded on this basis.....)

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

The “lockout mentality” espoused by the more extreme element of the green movement will eventually see the demise of popular support for the conservation of the Australian bush. Vast tracts of land are labelled “wilderness” and made off-limits to all but the youngest and fittest bushwalkers and cyclists. Every year, new wilderness nominations are put forward, further reducing the limited areas remaining for public enjoyment. Families, groups and individuals wanting to camp in the bush, whether with vehicles or pack horses, are banned from an increasing number of traditionally used locations in national parks. Why would taxpayers want their money to be spent on something which no longer has any relevance to them?

The government must make NPWS accept that parks should be used and enjoyed, and that conservation and recreation can co-exist without detriment to the environment.

**d) the responsibilities of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas, with particular reference to long-term plans;**

The declaration of new reserves appears to be politically driven, with new announcements coinciding with election campaigns or other key dates in the political calendar. Yet land managers receive little or no additional resources to manage these hundreds of thousands of additional hectares.

It is irresponsible for governments to continue to create new national parks without supplying sufficient additional resources to maintain them. Far from continuing to add more land to the reserve system, it is time a moratorium was declared, with no further additions to the reserve system until funding increases to a level where land managers can actually look after the parks and reserves already created. In particular, it is time there was a stop to the continuous wilderness nominations – and consequent declarations – which if they continue at their present rate will eventually swallow most of the remaining areas available to horse riders.

There is no mechanism for consultation in regard to the creation of National Parks and other reserves within NSW. Public consultation only commences *after* the gazettal of the land into a particular category – a category which, in the case of Nature Reserves, may by definition already preclude activities such as horse riding. The public has no input at all into the question of whether an area should in fact come under the control of NPWS, and no input into the classification of the reserve.

Public consultation on reserve management takes the form of submissions on the draft Plan of Management for each individual reserve. Poorly publicised and difficult for the uninitiated to

respond to, in many cases Plans of Management are drafted without any prior public discussions, leading to wildly misleading statements and misinformation.

For example, Maria National Park draft plan of management stated: “There is no established pattern of recreational horse riding in the park”. This came as a considerable surprise to the incorporated Trail Riding Club which applied each year to NPWS for permission to run rides through the park, not to mention all the individual riders who enjoyed the area.

Fortunately, after loud protest, many submissions, meetings and negotiations, the final published Plan of Management made suitable provision for horse riders. However, more care and consultation in the early stages of drafting the document would have avoided this confrontational situation.

It is the responsibility of government to ensure that their agencies do more than just pay lip-service to the concept of community consultation.

**e) the record of governments with regard to the creation and management of national parks, other conservation reserves and marine protected areas.**

The Carr Government has focussed all its attention on the “creation” aspect, largely disregarding the need for on-going management. It sounds so much better to announce that another 100,000 hectares has been declared a National Park, than to announce that another \$100,000 has been allocated for expenditure on staff, or on trail maintenance, or on fire control activities, or on plant and machinery.

As a member of the Blue Mountains Regional Advisory Committee, I see first-hand how staff struggle to stretch budgets and person hours to cover even the bare minimum necessary to keep the parks in the region functioning. The Hawkesbury office is closed on weekends – so when I see someone chainsawing a tree or ripping through the bush on a motorbike in Wollemi National Park, I have to call the Blackheath office, nearly 100km away by road, to report it. Not surprisingly, the response time is hardly impressive.

As stated above, it is time to cease the obsessive focus on “creation”, time to turn instead to the much harder task of maintaining what is already there.

In conclusion, governments need to:

- stop declaring new reserves and start providing more funding to manage existing ones
- enter into public consultation prior to gazetting new reserves
- require their agencies to improve their public consultation on management plans
- ensure that recreational usage and public enjoyment of reserves is given a higher emphasis

Yours sincerely



Fiona Meller

Secretary, Course Preservation Committee, NSW Endurance Riders Association Inc