

## **Serviced accommodation proposed for the Gardens of Stone SCA - Briefing for concerned Citizens**

In November 2021, the 28,000ha Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area (GoSSCA) beside Lithgow in the western Blue Mountains was announced with a \$50 million reserve establishment package to transform the area into an eco-tourism destination. The reserve was proclaimed in May 2022. Now the reserve's unique beauty, heritage and significance is at risk from a serviced cabins proposal that would provide fake "wilderness immersion" experiences for a few high-end tourists. The proposed lease risks setting a precedent for NSW National Parks and reserves by developing sites within internationally rare and significant pagoda landscapes that should be protected.

### **Recommendations:**

- **Discontinue lease negotiations for the proposed three groups of luxury serviced cabins that Wild Bush Luxury Experience (WBLE) seeks to develop among iconic pagoda landscapes in the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area.**

### **A better approach to visitor management for this reserve**

- Use of reserve establishment funds to provide quality, basic and low-impact visitor facilities to create more opportunities for the vast majority of visitors who are from the Greater Sydney region and wish to engage with nature but have limited means.
- A low-key, low-impact approach to tourism shall deliver greater benefits to Lithgow, the reserve's gateway township, because visitors with limited means will spend time in Lithgow.
- Present the reserve's internationally significant pagoda landscapes<sup>1</sup> to visitors in a low impact, environmentally sustainable manner. Pagoda landscapes can be Lithgow's unique tourism cache, equal to the Three Sisters in Katoomba, but not when these landscapes are spoilt by the presence of high-end serviced accommodation.
- Following public consultation review, construct a Gardens of Stone Walk which avoids impacts on heritage, further interference from WBLE or inconvenience to walkers.
- Only fund construction of mountain bike single tracks on highly disturbed parts of the conservation reserve, such as the former pine forest or off reserve at lands owned by the State Mine Museum.

### **Concerns**

- The proposed program for commercial lease development in the Gardens of Stone has no social licence. In January 2023 the community made over 1,000 submissions strongly objecting the proposed commercial leases for up to 20 years over this conservation reserve.
- The Planning Assessment Commission<sup>2</sup> and the Department of Planning<sup>3</sup> have previously found that

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<sup>1</sup> [The geoheritage and geomorphology of the sandstone pagodas of the north-western blue mountains region \(NSW\) | Haydn Washington - Academia.edu](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Planning Assessment Commission, December 2012, Review Coalpac Consolidation Project, p76.](#)

<sup>3</sup> Department of Planning and Infrastructure's Coalpac Consolidation Project Director-General's Environmental Assessment Report, June 2013, p36.

internationally rare and globally unique pagoda landscapes should be protected at the highest possible level. If the commercial lease for 18 cabins is approved, three pagoda landscape sites would be degraded.

- The proposed cabin accommodation sites are contrary to NPWS sustainability assessment criteria because the lease proposal is effectively permanent and located in substantially unmodified pagoda landscapes, on ridgelines where the guidelines recommend that lease development be avoided.
- In conjunction with the NPWS, WBLE determined the proposed route of the Gardens of Stone Walk<sup>4</sup> which was not subject to public comment and review through plan of management process for GoSSCA.
- WBLE lease sites have influenced the route of the walk, requiring walkers to journey an additional six kilometres on a loop track to reach the proposed pass into Carne Creek gorge.
- The NPWS will fund tens of kilometres of road and walking track to support the proposed cabin developments, an effective subsidy of millions of dollars to support a development proposal that harms the reserve's iconic pagoda landscapes and other heritage values.
- The cabins will compromise Lithgow's pagoda landscape cache, this is Lithgow's iconic brand as a tourism destination. Lithgow will be criticised for moving from coal mining to tourism mining that damages its outstanding heritage assets.
- The NPWS has botched the leasing process by not providing clear information.
- High-end visitors will go directly to the resort sites, bypassing Lithgow.

## Background

- The NSW Sustainability Assessment Guidelines for Visitor Use and Tourism were incorrectly applied to the proposed cabin developments among the iconic pagoda landscapes of the Gardens of Stone SCA and so these guidelines did not resolve the conflict between tourism and conservation objectives in the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974.
- Three cabin zones are proposed, each with six cabins, a common kitchen-dining area, a 20,000l water tank, raised walking tracks, solar panels for electric power, lighting, and bathrooms. In addition, 4WD road access, linked walking tracks and grey water disposal are required, probably outside the lease notice area. Each resort site is a pristine pagoda landscape that should be protected at the highest possible level.
- The serviced accommodation in environmentally sensitive parts of the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area is contrary to past nature conservation management of Blue Mountains reserves. NPWS management banned climbing on the Three Sisters, a sacred site, abseiling down Mt Banks, due to impacts on scenic amenity, and rejected cabins at Govetts Leap Lookout, due to community concerns.
- Lost City adventure theme park was rejected on 3 November 2023 due to impacts to pagodas that would have caused a loss of world-class views for anyone who went there hoping to enjoy them. An adventure theme park or cabins on State Mine Museum land in Lithgow would support the struggling museum, a site which can provide water, sewage and power services.

Authorised by Keith Muir, O.A.M, 8 June, 2024

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<sup>4</sup> The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area Plan of Management 2022 specifies that "*The multi-day walking experience may be developed in conjunction with an experienced nature-based tourism business selected through an expression of interest process*" [i.e. developed in conjunction with WBLE] (section 6, Scheme of Operations, page 18).