DRAFT SUBMISSION

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To whom it may concern,

Submission on the draft REF for the Gardens of Stone mountain bike network (MBN)

Executive Summary

Wilderness Australia urges the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) to refuse approval for the proposed 33 km Gardens of Stone Mountain Bike Network (MBN). While the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* requires NPWS to foster public appreciation, understanding, and conservation of nature and cultural heritage, approving the proposed MBN will degrade internationally significant pagoda landscapes, threaten endangered wildlife, and is likely to help entrench ongoing unauthorised track construction.

Wilderness Australia's objection based on six findings:

Serious Methodological Defects: The Multi-Criteria Assessment (MCA) averages eight ecological attributes rather than treating severe ecological harm as a strict "red-light" barrier over which a proposed MBN track must pass. For example, this allows the Dingo Creek Loop to achieve a 4/5 overall score despite scoring a low 1/5 due to impacts on Threatened Flora and Ecological Communities. The MCA value averaging process facilitates an inappropriate trade-off of core park values for thrilling bike tracks and can be used to legitimise damaging visitor facility development.

Similarly, applying Sustainability Assessment Criteria at a broad regional scale falsely treats 17km of proposed tracks in less disturbed pagoda bushland outside the former pine plantation as equality modified as areas with proposed tracks inside the plantation. The regional scale treatment renders these criteria useless as a tool to inform decision a bike track route selection.

A well-documented long term pattern of unauthorised track construction and Park clearing: Decades of evidence from Royal and Heathcote National Parks, Garawarra SCA, Hassans Walls Reserve, Blackheath, and Hazelbrook demonstrate that providing formal trails does not stop illegal track building—it normalises it, with platforms such as Flow Mountain Bike actively promoting unapproved singletracks via third-party GPS data. Crucially, Section 9.1 of the draft REF itself acknowledges that operational impacts will include trail widening, creation of informal "A lines and B lines," and unauthorised construction of jumps and berms using natural materials and yet proposes no enforceable deterrents, such as on-the-spot fines or Bike Park closures.

Flawed Assessment and Underestimated Offsets for the State Mine Gully Bike Park: The August 2026 approval of the 24.54 km State Mine Gully Bike Park (DA170/25 / PPSWES-324) pre-empts

the southern (Lost City) section of the proposed MBN based on a Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) that assumed an unrealistic 1 m clearing width (2.36 ha total) and omitted hazardous tree removals, as well as spectator and marshalling areas for competition events. By contrast, the draft REF applies an average clearing width of 2.3 m (1.8–3.2 m) to the MBN, and Section 9.8 of the REF admits the off-park network will actually clear 4–5 ha of Plant Community Types and potentially impact the threatened Purple Copper Butterfly (*Paralucia spinifera*)—confirming that DA170/25 underestimated clearing and biodiversity offset payments by roughly half.

Direct Threats to Endangered Fauna and Neighbour and Conservation Licence Issues: The Biodiversity Assessment Report (BAR) confirms the highest trail impacts occur with the State Mine Bike Park and documents active an Spotted-tailed Quoll (*Dasyurus maculatus*) denning site in State Mine Gully near the lower end of Trail 02. This Trail must be removed, as was Trail 56 or relocated to protect wildlife. Furthermore, the neighbouring Secret Creek Sanctuary (Mr Trevor Evans) to this Bike Park had their conservation lease/licence for the Australian Ecosystems Foundation Incorporated (AEFI) cancelled over bushland lots within the Bike Park apparently without direct notification during the Bike Park DA process.

Failure to Protect Internationally Significant Pagoda Landscapes: The draft REF recognised the Gardens of Stone pagoda landforms as internationally significant but did not adequately protect these values consistent with a 2014 NSW Planning Assessment Commission (PAC) inquiry ruling that they deserve the "highest level of protection", NPWS has not designated them as an Asset of Intergenerational Significance (AIS). Restricting AIS mapping to small patches of Leura Skink habitat leaves pagoda landscapes legally undervalued and vulnerable to rock-plate scarring and clearing, compounding broader visitor management failures in the SCA.

Visitor Conflict, Safety Risks, and Regional Over-Supply: Routing mountain bikes near walking tracks, such as the proposed Alcatraz Walking Track from Forest Camp and trails above Carne Creek, potentially threatens walker safety, compromises quiet nature appreciation, and risks riders dominating Forest Camp, despite extensive mountain bike facilities already operating at Hassans Walls, Blackheath, Hazelbrook, Knapsack Gully (Lapstone), and Orange.

Introduction

The evidence in this submission suggests that mountain bike riders are little interested in the protection of unique local landforms and biodiversity of the area (contrary to the claim on page 15, REF) and far more interested in the provision of new thrilling trails.

The belief that riders are engaged with the natural world is contradicted by any review of mountain bike social media posts and websites. Development of bike tracks in the unique local landforms and biodiversity of the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area degrades those values as this REF attests. Development of bike tracks and bike parks on high conservation value lands also denies access to those areas by other visitors who are interested in those values and wish to enjoy them.

The provision of bike tracks in environmentally sensitive areas provides no additional benefits to most bike riders who would be just as happy with thrilling rides located on less environmentally sensitive land.

Wilderness Australia believes that the development of trails for mountain bike riders does not broaden the appeal for nature conservation. On the contrary, providing such trails increases the expectation that bushland in protected areas are suitable sites to be cleared for the development of mountain bike sports. This has resulted in the on-going degradation of our first national park, Royal, as well as Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area (see **Attachment A1**). The degradation caused by large numbers of unauthorised tracks in these parks is apparently being promoted by the Flow Mountain Bike lobby group on their website. This park abuse and its promotion are reasons enough to refuse to approve this proposed activity.

Unauthorised trails are also a feature of mountain bike use in the Blue Mountains and Hassans Walls Reserve (see **Attachment A2**). This pattern of use has been going on for decades.

Development of the bike tracks proposed in the Gardens of Stone SCA by the REF will facilitate unauthorised bike track construction in this state conservation area.

The *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NPW Act) requires '*fostering public appreciation, understanding and enjoyment of nature and cultural heritage and their conservation*' (page 15 of the REF). It does not permit the facilitation of park degradation by enabling further unauthorised bike tracks to be constructed, as demonstrated on multiple occasions, in multiple localities as referenced in Attachments A1 and A2.

Proposal pre-determined by approval of the State Mine Gully Bike Park

The decision by the Western Regional Planning Panel to approve the State Mine Gully Bike Park pre-empts the southern, Lost City, component of the proposed activity described in the REF. Approval of this section of the Bike Park may be considered a foregone conclusion. An overwhelming case for refusal of the Lost City component of the REF is, however, provided in this submission due to significant environmental impacts caused by proposed unauthorised tracks. The proposed activity should not proceed future as unauthorised activities should not be facilitated.

The evidence in the REF reveals that the previous environmental assessment of clearing and biodiversity offsets for the State Mine Gully Bike Park (DA170/25) were wrongly determined and underestimated. The DA170/25 biodiversity offsets amount is too small by half. These allegations are explained in the next section.

Tree Risk Policy and Clearing - comparisons with DA170/25 State Mine Gully Bike Park

Wilderness Australia is pleased that a tree risk assessment has been incorporated into the REF, something that was absent from the REFs for Lost City walking track construction. The Central Tablelands Mountain Bike Club, in its DA170/25, did not identify trees for removal. Failure to identify risky trees will not prevent subsequent removal of hazardous trees for public safety that the bike riders might fly into during their rides. The omission of trees to be cleared may have

reduced the BDAR offset calculation, in addition to the unlikely assumption that clearance would be limited to a one metre track width and not a wider clearing corridor.

The Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) associated with **DA170/25** concludes 'no significant impact' is based on a **cleared-area figure of 2.36ha** that may be roughly derived by applying a track width of one metre to the total track length of 24.54km (see page 1, BDAR, Aug 2025). This width is inconsistent with the bike track clearance width in the REF of 1.8-3.2m (Section 6.2.2, page 33 of the REF).

In other words, a clearing width on average in the REF that would be more than double that of the track width in DA170/25. The average clearing width for REF is calculated as 69,860m^2/30,000m which equals 2.3m (BAR page 15 gives track length cleared as 30km; BAR page 17 gives area cleared as 69,860 m^2). The State Mine Gully Bike Park claims approximately one metre of clearing by using manual clearing methods, but no cross section or construction standard contained in DA170/25 supports the one metre track width claim.

If the clearing-corridor calculations in DA170/25 had used the typical cross-sections for World Trail classes - adventure, flow, gravity, shared-use, and for benched sections on >25% grades, and applied these to the relevant sections of the 24.54 km track, then a clearing figure much greater than 3ha would be derived. Such a calculation would then require a full Biodiversity Assessment Method (BAM) assessment and a significantly greater offset compensation payment.

Further, the Statement of Environmental Effects (SEE) for this DA claimed the proposed bike park will become a "*world-class*" network and lists "*competitions and hosting of regional/national/state events year-round*." The alleged narrow ribbon of hand built single track with clearing 1m wide is not a competition track design width. Higher-specification trails require wider track widths and clearing corridors and more earthworks. The current Lost City track extensions contained in the REF do not make a reference to competition standard track design and clearance requirements. The REF clearance estimate is not based on the requirements for an international standard track development that are stated by the intended users in DA170/25.

The BDAR for DA170/25 also did not determine the clearing required for spectator and marshalling areas, through these features are specified in the consent, and apparently will require further bushland clearance.

Further, the REF appears to confirm that the BDAR clearance estimate for DA170/25 is inaccurate. The REF states "*The **off park MBT network would result in PCT clearing of 4-5ha** and may impact threatened species not requiring further assessment on-park, such as the Purple Copper Butterfly Paralucia spinifera, that occurs around the foothills*" (Section 9.8, Cumulative Impacts, page 110). The REF indicates that the proponent for DA170/25 provided inaccurate track clearing estimates to the determining authority.

The bike stakeholder for which the NPWS is providing tracks in the SCA at Lost City has apparently short-changed the environment on offset payments due to the clearing estimates for DA170/25. This dodging of environmental responsibilities is consistent with apparent past behaviour of this stakeholder towards the environment, as alleged in this submission in

Attachments A1 and A2 regarding on-going unauthorised track development at Hassans Walls and at Lost City some decades ago.

This is strong evidence that the mountain bike stakeholders who would benefit from the proposed Mountain Bike Network (MBN) should not be granted these tracks. Doing so would reward their recent poor conduct in relation to DA170/25, as well as their past unauthorised track clearing.

Relevant licencing and leasing provisions and associated Neighbour Relations

The NPWS should consult with Mr Trevor Evans of Secret Creek Sanctuary. The Sanctuary is an important neighbour to the south-west of the proposed MBN activity.

I understand that Mr Evans alleges to be a licensee or lessee of property within and/or adjoining State Mine Gully Bike Park approval area (c.f. page 16, section 3.1.1, leasing, licencing easement provisions; and page 24, section 3.6.1 existing approvals of the REF). Mr Evans also alleges he was not consulted or contacted regarding the State Mine Gully Bike Park DA170/25 prior to the issue of development consent. Further, Mr Evans alleges that he was instrumental in having previous mountain bike tracks in State Mine Gully closed following environmental damage to the area, as well as rubbish dumping by riders.

The freehold sanctuary is 35 Crane Road, Cobar Park, Lithgow of 27 hectares and is surrounded by a feral animal proof fence.

The Australian Ecosystems Foundation Incorporated (AEFI) also manages (or recently managed) the adjoining unfenced bushland that connects directly into the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area. This area is understood to include Lot 1 DP 965231; Lots 1, 2 & 3 DP 1110346; and Lot 2 DP 787403 & Lot 11 DP 1240259 in the Cobar Park / State Mine Gully area. It is perhaps the conservation management by AEFI that may partly explain the finding that "*Impacts are highest in trails associated with the Lithgow Mountain Bike Park"* (page 15 of the BAR).

The proposed tracks should not pass anywhere near the Spotted-tail Quoll den in State Mine Gully (page 123, BAR) and the removal of track 56 is welcomed (Page 84, RAR). Further, the "**Spotted-tailed Quoll *Dasyurus maculatus* was observed in 2025 denning near lower end Trail 02**" (page 173 of BAR). The lower end of track 2 should also be removed or relocated, regardless of its effect of the bike park.

As the NPWS would be aware, in August 2026 the Western Regional Planning Panel approved a major 24.54 km recreational trail network across these adjoining lots (DA170/25 / PPSWES-324).

The NPWS should consult with Mr Evans as a neighbour to gain insight as to what are the likely adverse impacts of approval of the proposed mountain bike track activity at Lost City/State Mine Gully. The NPWS should also consult to ensure that no part of the proposed activity falls within a AEFI lease/licence area.

Apparently, the licence/lease for the above lands was cancelled following the issue of consent for the State Mine Bike Park, allegedly without due process or consultation. These alleged

actions perhaps indicate the lengths the local bike lobby may take regarding valid criticism and conflicting conservation management by interests on Crown land.

The NPWS should verify these allegations. If valid, they become another raft of reasons to refuse approval for this proposed mountain bike activity. It is unlikely that Lithgow City Council would not know of the AEFI lease/licence over its lands. The alleged failure to notify AEFI seems to invalidate the credibility of the consent issued for DA170/25; PPSWES-324.

Interaction with walking tracks

Whether this proposed Alcatraz Walking Track from Forest Camp as indicated in the Master Plan would be used by mountain riders is a moot point.

Separation of walkers and riders on narrow tracks is an important consideration for visitor safety and enjoyment. The bike trails on the pagoda landforms above Carne Creek, will interact with walking tracks, such as the proposed Alcatraz Walking Track from Forest Camp, a potential attraction near Forest Camp that would attract heavy use.

Other walking tracks may also be taken advantage of by bike riders who are used to riding on unauthorised trails in Royal, Heathcote and Garawarra parks, and in Blackheath.

Regulation of riders could become unenforceable, given the planned for scale of bike use by this Mountain Bike Network (MBN) proposal. Effectively bike riders may come to believe they “own” Forest Camp, just as the former motorised trail bike riders believed they “owned” Newnes Plateau and essentially forced other visitors to the edges of the Plateau.

The NPWS should think through all potential consequences of making Forest Camp a key bike riding destination.

MBN Interaction with AIS

Asset of Intergenerational Significance (AIS) is a level of superior protection that eases the way for other important park values to be developed in State Conservation Areas (SCAs). This is not how SCAs should be managed. SCAs should protect all heritage values, and particularly national and internationally significant values, including threatened plants and communities.

Values of national and international significance have not been automatically designated and mapped as AIS in protected areas, nor have they been deemed equivalent values so that these values are protected from development and clearing. When undertaking a REF assessment, AIS should not be a subset of important heritage values granted protection, if doing so allows other important values in protected areas to be cleared.

An AIS designation is warranted for pagoda landscapes by the 2014 determination of a NSW Planning Assessment Commission that pagoda landforms are of "**special significance**" and deserve the “**highest level of protection” (**Reference: see Appendix B).

It is unfortunate that the NPWS fails to protect pagoda landscapes that the REF has recognised as internationally significant (page 76).

The Gardens of Stone SCA contains many values equal to those contained in the small areas of AIS mapped as Leura Skink habitat. Effectively the AIS has operated in this instance to reduce

protection that should be afforded equivalent outstanding values, such as pagoda landscapes and matters of national environmental significance, for example. The mapped AIS subset of values may facilitate the loss of other important heritage values in protected areas when a proposed activity is assessed in this manner.

Assessment pathway

It's unfortunate that development activities like mountain bike track construction for rider thrills are approved internally by the NPWS. The Minister decided that the bike tracks are to be provided in the SCA under the NPW Act.

Protection of heritage values can be overruled, if impacts are found to be not significant. Pagoda Landscapes are not explicitly valued highly under the *Biodiversity Conservation Act* (although they could be), and so development of these landscapes can have no significant impact, as the legally attributed value given to pagoda landscapes by the NPWS is low.

Efforts by third parties to provide evidence of significant impacts are generally unsuccessful, as the NPWS are reluctant to go against the Minister's intentions regarding a proposed activity. Third parties require evidence of large impacts on legally recognised significant values to challenge the Minister's intent for a proposed activity.

Contested matters in an internal NPWS assessment, such as the degree of environmental degradation, will lean towards not being a significant impact.

The evidence in the REF that appears to point to significant impact (see REF section 9.2 page 92 regarding impacts on threatened fauna habitat and page 110 on high-negative cumulative impact). The BAR does not make a finding of no significant impact and prefers to state efforts have been taken to avoid impacts on threatened species and states that residual impacts remain (Executive Summary). The REF has no such qualms, listing in Section 11 that the impact of the proposed MBN for each environmental factor is not significant.

The proof of the degree of impact will revealed during construction and use, as the damage caused by delivery of the MBN and the State Mine Bike Park becomes known.

Other than going to the extreme of litigation, third parties have limited means to prevent unnecessary environmental damages from proposed activities in protected areas.

Assessment pathway continued
– objection to use of multi-criteria assessment to justify track development choices

This approach of considering three selection criteria across various value attributes is useful for the initial purpose as "*A first pass of this assessment removed or modified several trails due to swamp crossings, interactions with threatened species and proximity to cultural heritage sites*" (page 1 of method report).

The methodology is not useful when used to justify tracks that do have environmental problems because these proposed tracks may be enjoyable or economic to build. When heritage value/ecological parameters are summed to obtain a total criterion score, then unacceptable and perverse outcomes can be derived.

Criterion 1, regarding impact of a proposed route on heritage/ecological values, should be a redlight criterion. The redlight approach is apparently how the methodology was initially used in the first pass.

Regarding Criterion 1; Wilderness Australia objects to the summation of track impacts across eight heritage/ecological attributes to derive an impact score against that criterion. Consider an example where damage occurs to a threatened fauna habitat that results, say, in a score of one for that attribute value. This track, for the sake of this hypothetical example, scores well on the seven other value attributes, so the track can be built across a threatened fauna habitat. The track would have to also hit low scores on threatened fauna habitats, threatened flora/communities, breach habitat connectivity and impact significant landscapes or swamps to score a low mark against Criterion 1.

In the actual case of the Dingo Creek Loop, it scored a 1 on threatened flora and ecological communities. This is a red flag requiring variation of the track. It is not a trivial matter that generated an average score of 4 out of 5, when summed across the other value attributes assessed. This is a perverse outcome. The issue is relocation of the track to avoid the 1 score, perhaps by avoiding a small section of Newnes Plateau Shrub Swamp, occurrences of *Persoonia hindii* and the Little Eagle nesting site, not "all good" a 4 out 5 score was reached (see figure 124, page 134 and 135 and page 252 of BAR)!

Summing the heritage/ecological attributes can dilute a significant impact with the lower impact scores in relation to the other heritage/ecological value attributes. Setting a prerequisite minimum attribute score of say 3 for each heritage/ecological value attribute would be more helpful as a redlight.

The second flaw with this multi-criteria approach is that it fails to recognise that bike tracks are linear features that can be shifted in the landscape and still meet the other criteria. If the above eight heritage/ecological attributes of Criterion 1 are overlain on the landscape, a route of less impact can be identified. If these data are not available in digital form, then the assessment can be undertaken as an expert process where a route of least heritage impact is identified that can meets the other criteria.

Third, the suggestion that the NPWS should "trade off" bike user enjoyment against protection of heritage/ecological attributes is unacceptable for a protected area under the NPW Act and an administrative action hostile to the objects of the Act where visitor use must be compatible with heritage values.

Where a new bike track route is being cleared, then it should be so located to have the least impact. The current approach does not seek to do that, but rather dilutes the value of the protection purpose of the protected area with consideration of providing thrilling tracks for bike riders and economics matters. Protection to park values should be a given in a protected area, and only in unusual circumstances should protection be traded off against visitor use. It is certainly wrong to "trade off" protection of threatened flora and fauna, wetlands or significant landscapes in this process for a thrilling bike ride. A new bike track should instead avoid important heritage values.

This multi-criterial assessment method should not vindicate proposed tracks that pass through threatened species habitat, as in the Dingo Creek Loop. The methodology needs to be thrown out because it can generate unacceptable protection outcomes.

It is abundantly clear to everyone that the route of all the bike tracks were selected by World Trail in about 2022 and this methodology is just a retrospective justification process for the originally selected trails. The methodology can only have credibility as a redlight/no go process, not one that determines the relative acceptability of MBN tracks. It is only the mountain bike lobby who believes that new thrilling rides should be traded off against the protection of park values!

Other policy considerations

Environment groups do not support the Master Plan approach to protected area visitor management, as such subsidiary plans lack legal force and so weaken regulation of visitor use. Regulation was further weakened by the provisions in the plan of management for this SCA that allow for one-on-one consultation with stakeholders. These consultations have distorted planning processes and lead to sub-optimal visitor management outcomes for the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area (see **Attachment B**).

The NPWS cycling policy should require good behaviour of riders. The behaviour of the mountain bike lobby and bike riders should be factors when determining whether to issue of an approval for a new bike track proposal. As the evidence in this submission has established, bike riders have constructed allegedly unauthorised bike tracks in a systematic fashion for decades in national parks and Crown reserves.

Mountain bike riding can not be considered a sustainable, nature-based recreation opportunity due to this large body of evidence of damaging unauthorised track construction in national parks and Crown reserves.

The proposed activity outlined in the REF should not be approved as it rewards systematic and organised bad behaviour by these stakeholders, who are, on the evidence provided by **Attachment A1 and A2**, behaving little better than motorised trail bike riders in their disrespect for nature and the NPWS reserve management framework. To claim that trails are to be provided to such stakeholders so that they may appreciate nature, is contrary to abundant evidence of environmental damage caused by unauthorised track construction.

Consideration and Justification of Preferred Alternatives

Despite the shortcomings listed above, consideration of environmental values enabled some rationalisation of the MBN to reduce environmental impacts to a degree. It remains disappointing that pagoda landscapes, perhaps the key reasons for creating the state conservation area, were not a part of the values that were used as constraints to select alternatives.

The *Sustainability Assessment Criteria for visitor use and tourism* was again inappropriately applied at the regional scale, as in the case of the glamping resort sites. The approach taken has deemed the "*MBN is located in an area that is **largely unmodified** in terms of site character and landscape context*" (REF section 7.4, page 50). Such an approach is worse than useless, as

such a broad regional scale application does not permit site selection based on disturbance. The approach makes the suitability assessment self-defeating, as all sites appear to be suitable. This may be the case for the 13km of track proposed within the former pine forest plantation (except for the intact nationally endangered swamps in the pine forest), but not for the 17km of proposed track requiring clearing area outside the plantation. Outside the pine forest the MBN activity is proposed on much less disturbed pagoda landscapes, such as those above Carne and Dingo Creeks, and parts of the patchily burnt Lost City area.

As the NPWS well knows, the suitability assessment is a tool to identify sites that are more disturbed and to prefer these for development. If the methodology is used at a broad scale identifies all sites around Forest Camp both in and outside the pine plantation as equally disturbed, then the process becomes a pointless and veers from the truth (see Table 2, page 5, site suitability matrix in the Sustainability report).

Impact Assessment identified additional unauthorised tracks

The MBN impact assessment for "soil quality" notes that further impacts "*would occur during operation including compaction and/or erosion of soils, exacerbated by trail widening to allow passing and creation of alternative A lines and B lines. Informal feature building by trail users, such as jumps and berms, where materials are won from adjoining natural areas would increase erosion potential and add to sediment mobilised*" (Section 9.1, page 79). There are no mitigation measures proposed to prevent unauthorised track widening and creation of additional tracks (called "B lines" and "informal feature building" in the quote above). It is of deep concern that potentially unauthorised track construction is a matter of fact matter mentioned in the draft REF. These new unauthorised tracks flagged in the REF may impact on denning Quolls, Purple Copper Butterfly habitat and Pilot Birds, and goes against the recommendation "*Restricting site access to the designated trail to reduce impacts on fragile vegetation and threatened flora species and communities*" in the BAR for State Mine Gully (page 173). Essentially bike users can't be trusted to act responsibly in environmentally sensitive environments. They have inveigled themselves so far into the REF process that it recognises further unauthorised track construction.

Following track construction, a "walkover" should be done to identify further potential hazards, such as scaling rock features (REF, page 81). Prior to construction an arborist assessment for the whole network is to identify additional hazardous trees (page 89). Identification of addition hazards will result in yet more track clearing, widening and tree removal. Hazard identification is certain to lead to more clearing in State Mine Gully where approved clearing under DA170/25 is half as wide as proposed in the MBN in the REF and no hazardous trees were identified. The additional rounds of clearing in State Mine Gully will then report back to impacts on threatened species of flora and fauna and on the unprotected but internationally valuable pagoda landscapes.

An obvious measure to prevent unauthorised track development for the NPWS to issue on the spot fines. Another appropriate measure appropriate for track construction without approval would be closure of the Bike Park until environmental damage is repaired.

The NPWS proposal to undertake a REF project addendum for tree removal is appropriate but does not apply the Crown or Council lands regulated by the consent under DA170/25, where tree removal is likely.

Cumulative Impact Assessment

This section identifies safeguard measures to prevent environmental damage.

A very necessary additional safeguard is to prevent the construction on further unauthorised mountain bike tracks on Crown Reserves and on the State Conservation Area and adjoining national parks. New bike tracks, such as shortcuts and alternative routes, as the REF has identified in Section 9.1 should not be allowed in the State Conservation Area because of likely further impacts on threatened species and internationally significant Pagoda Landscapes. The cumulative impacts on social (amenity, recreation, education) values will not be minimised when unauthorised tracks are built.

Mountain bike tracks are being duplicated into a series of networks for a user group that is a minor park user and one that degrades natural values to enjoy their sport. There are facilities at Hassans Walls and Blackheath, Hazelbrook, as well as extensive facilities at Orange and Lapstone/Knapsack Gully.

Parks are not a bucket into which various environmentally damaging uses should be placed.

The proposed activity would have a significant impact

Given that the proposed activity will result in new unauthorised tracks there will be significant and regularly increased impacts associated with this proposed activity. There will be visual, recreational, scientific and other impacts associated with unauthorised track construction. Development of unauthorised tracks should automatically be deemed significant impacts and grounds for refusal of an activity.

Conclusions and recommendation

Mountain bike riders have taken insufficient regard of the damage caused by bike tracks. The stakeholder is a bad actor against the environment demonstrated by decades of unauthorised track clearance in protected areas and apparent recent action that seeks to avoid the compensation payments required for the development of the State Mine Bike Park.

The unauthorised track building activity is also recognised in the draft REF as continuing if the MBN activity is approved.

To facilitate the Bike Park that connects and is part of this proposed MBN activity, a wildlife sanctuary licence has apparently been cancelled and wildlife management removed from Crown and Council land in State Mine Gully, apparently without consultation.

The Sustainability Assessment Criteria for visitor use and tourism have apparently been inappropriately applied avoid identification and appropriate protection of less disturbed sites outside the former pine plantation. The draft REF downplayed consideration of pagoda landscapes, as these values are not protected at the highest level.

The multi-criteria assessment has been used to vindicate proposed MBN tracks that could harm important heritage values by diluting these impacts with irrelevant considerations, such as how much of a thrill a proposed bike ride may be. The multi-criteria assessment allows an inappropriate trade-off of core park values, like protection of threatened species, for a more thrilling bike track. The assessment can be used to legitimise damaging visitor facility developments.

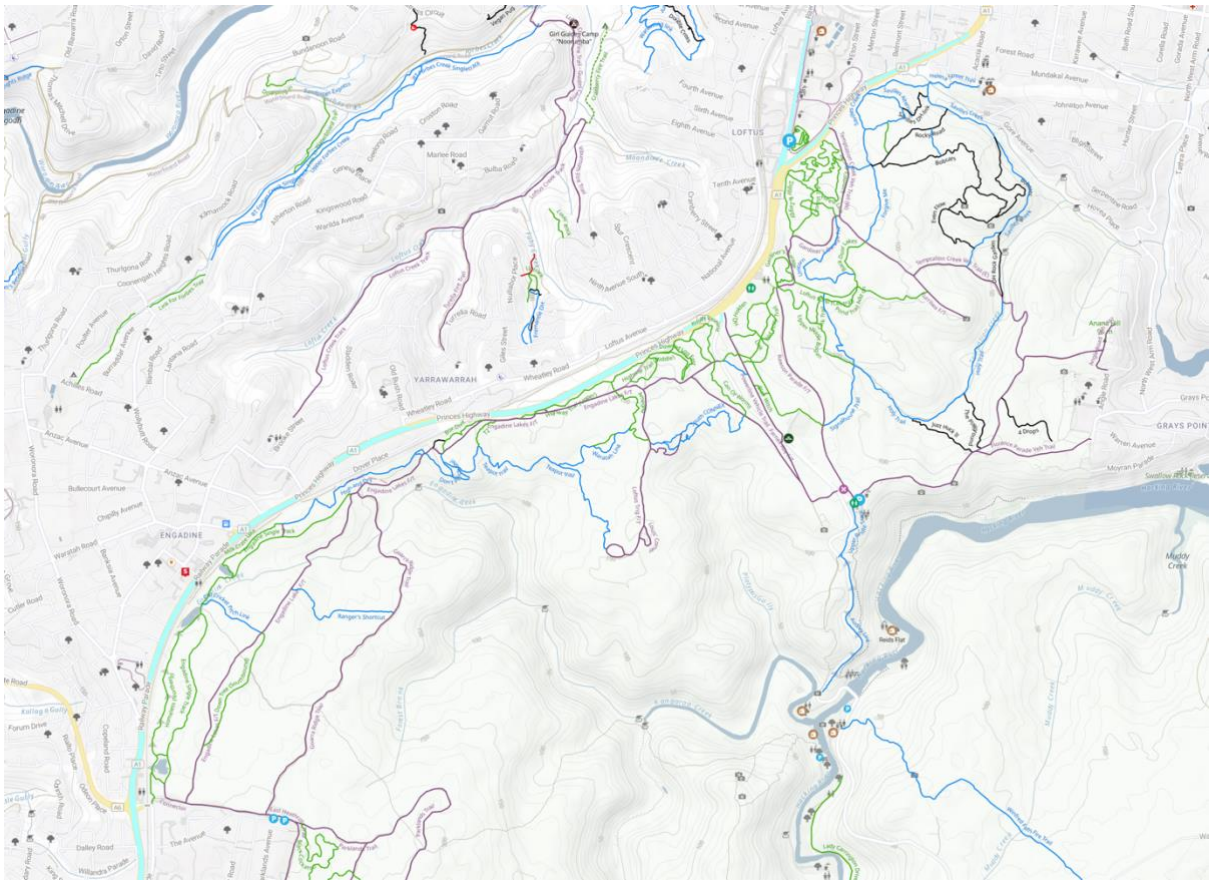
Wilderness Australia recommends that the proposed activity not proceed to approval to prevent a bad actor being rewarded and allowed to continue to establish unauthorised tracks that have the potential to cause significant impacts.

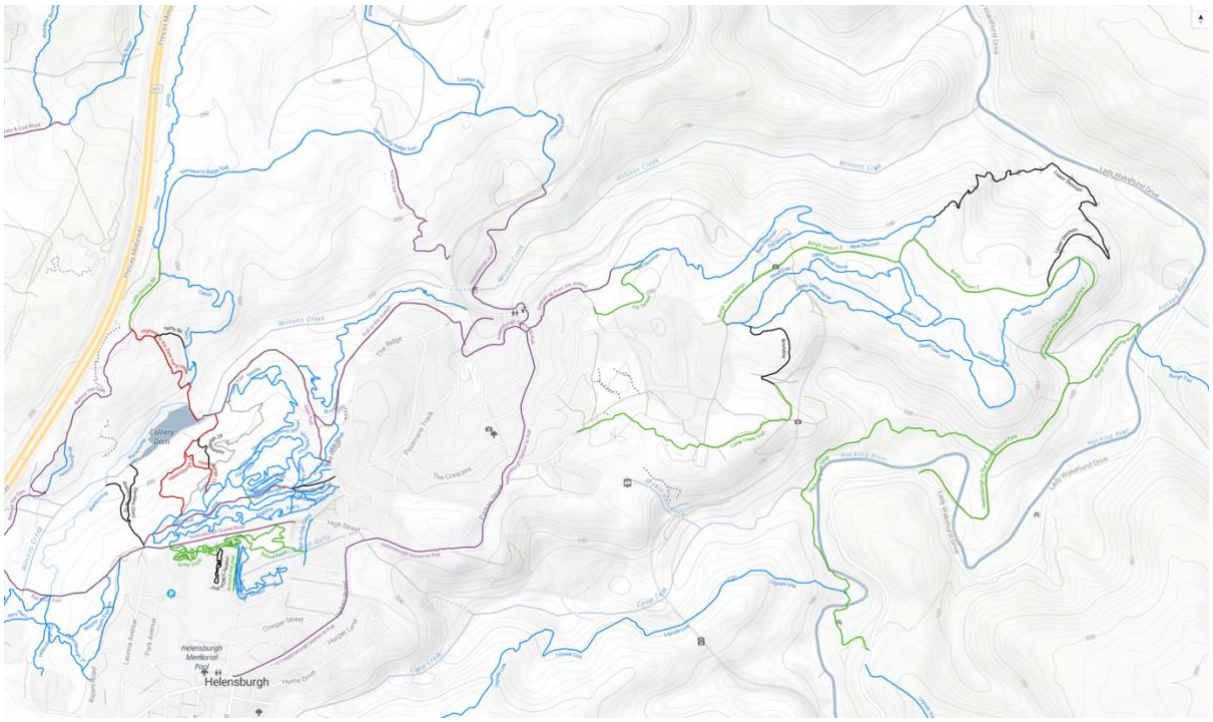
Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission.

Yours sincerely,

Keith Muir
Hon. Projects Officer
Wilderness Australia

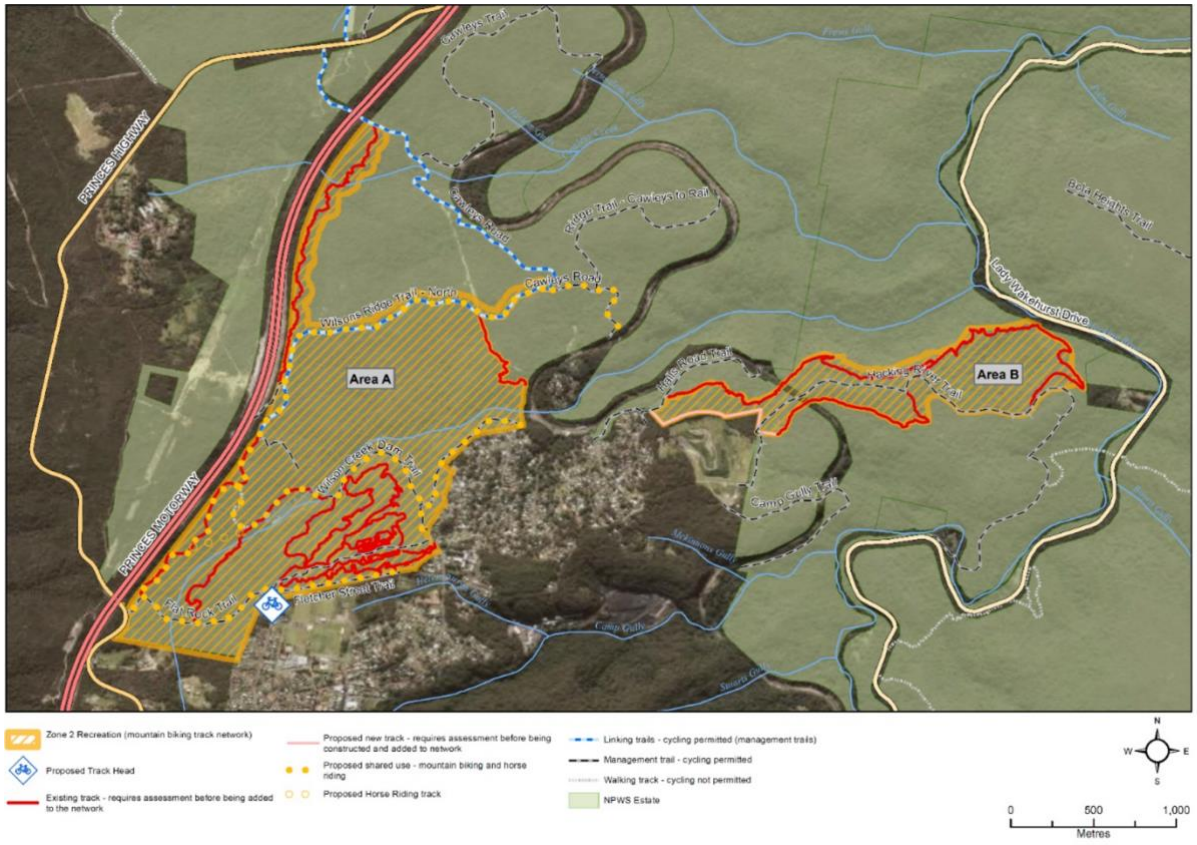
Attachment A1 – Unauthorised Bike Trails in Royal and Heathcote NPs and Garawarra SCA





The images above were taken from the website https://flowmountainbike.com/destination/royal-national-park-mountain-biking/ accessed September 2026. The Flow Mountain Bike website is promoting trails in addition to those

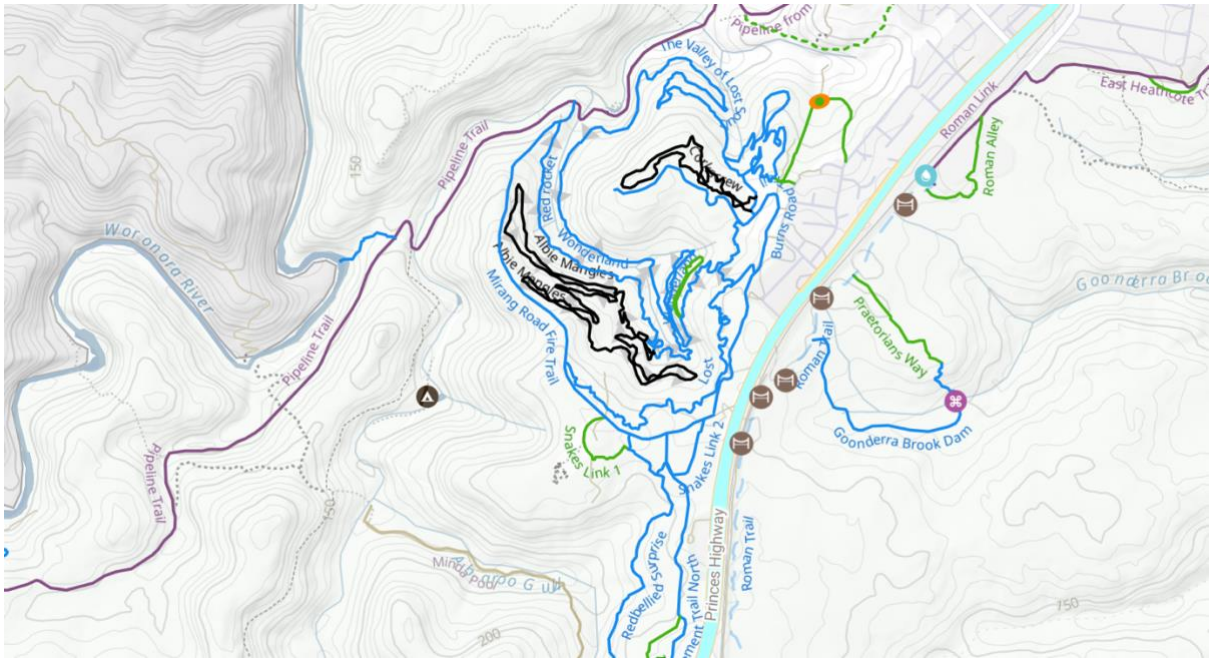
approved for use. Below is an example of the generous access for mountain bikes in these parks. Image below is taken from the Mountain Biking Plan 2023, page 15, yet this is not enough to stop unauthorised use. The claim that approved trails stop unauthorised use is contradicted by the many additional bike tracks shown in the image on the previous page when compared to the image below.



'Flow Mountain Bike is an independent cycling media outlet based in Australia with a global reach focused on where to ride and what to ride. For 15 years, we've been testing bikes, exploring trails, and telling the stories that matter to riders.'

Flow Mountain Bike apparently accesses third party sourced GPS data, such as Trailforks, which routinely includes informal and illegal singletracks alongside legal fire trails. These park stakeholders should not be granted extra bike trails in new areas when they promote unauthorised bike trails after all the due process, compromised of park values and accommodation of their damands under the *Mountain Biking Plan 2023*.

Below is an image showing bike trails in Heathcote National Park, accessed from the Flow Mountain Bike website on 12 November 2026. Flow Mountain Bike through its website apparently encouraging further use and construction of unauthorised trails in this national park.



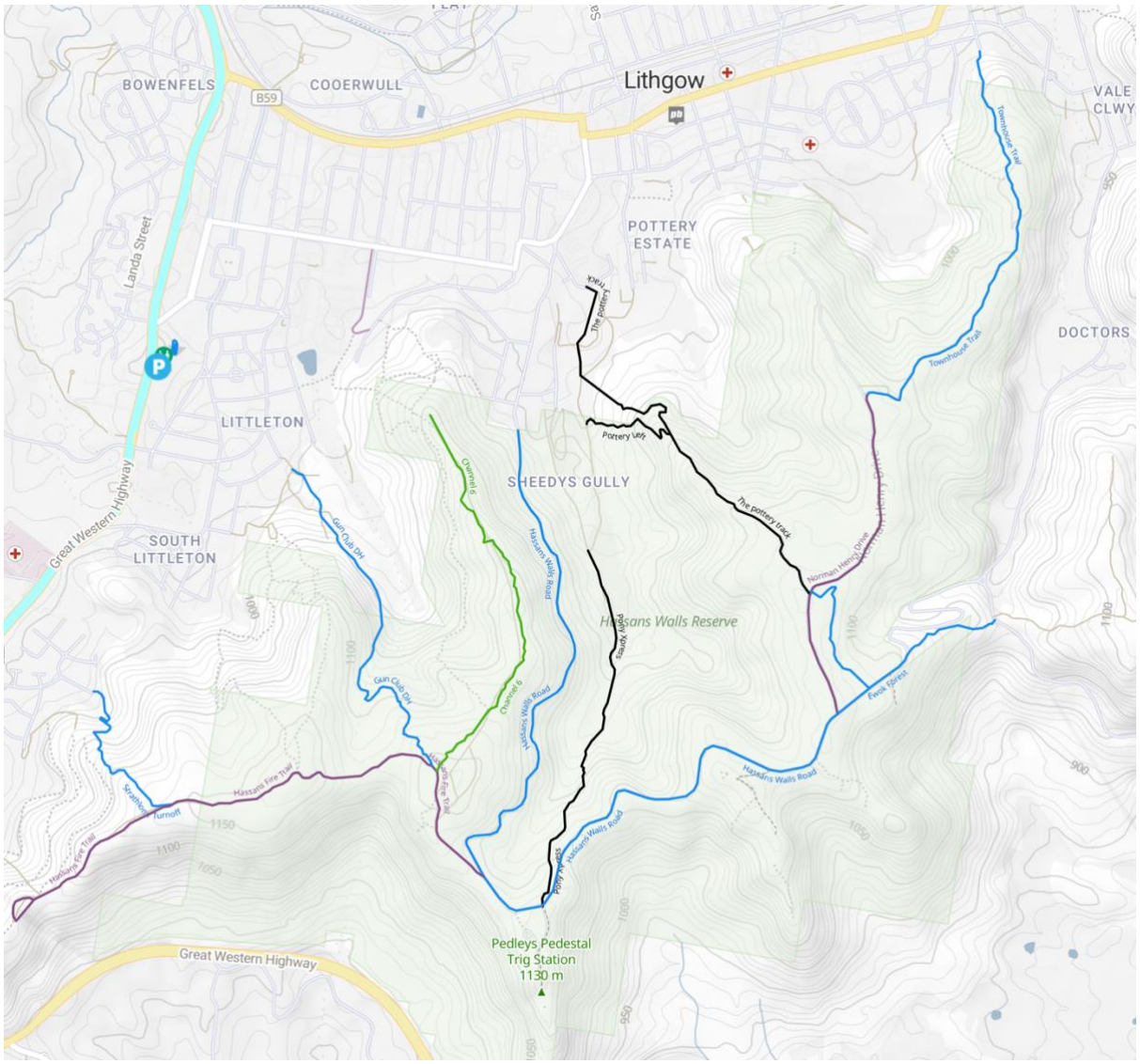
Under the Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area Plan of Management (adopted 2022, amended June 2026) and the Mountain Biking Plan (adopted May 2023), the NPWS states: "Mountain biking is permitted on management trails in Heathcote National Park. There are no tracks authorised for cycling in the park." Such a written direction apparently does not prevent bike trails from being built, used and promoted in national parks.

The claim that legitimate trails replace unauthorised use is rubbish.

The NPWS must be more vigulant in imposing on the spot fines for riding and building unauthorised singletrack in Garawarra SCA, and Heathcote and Royal National Parks. The NPWS must co-operate with local councils to actively close and rehabilitate unauthorised mountain bike tracks across the protected area estate and on Crown reserves.

Attachment A2 – Unathorised Mountains Bike Trails in the Hassans Walls Reserve, Lithgow and in the Blue Mountains region

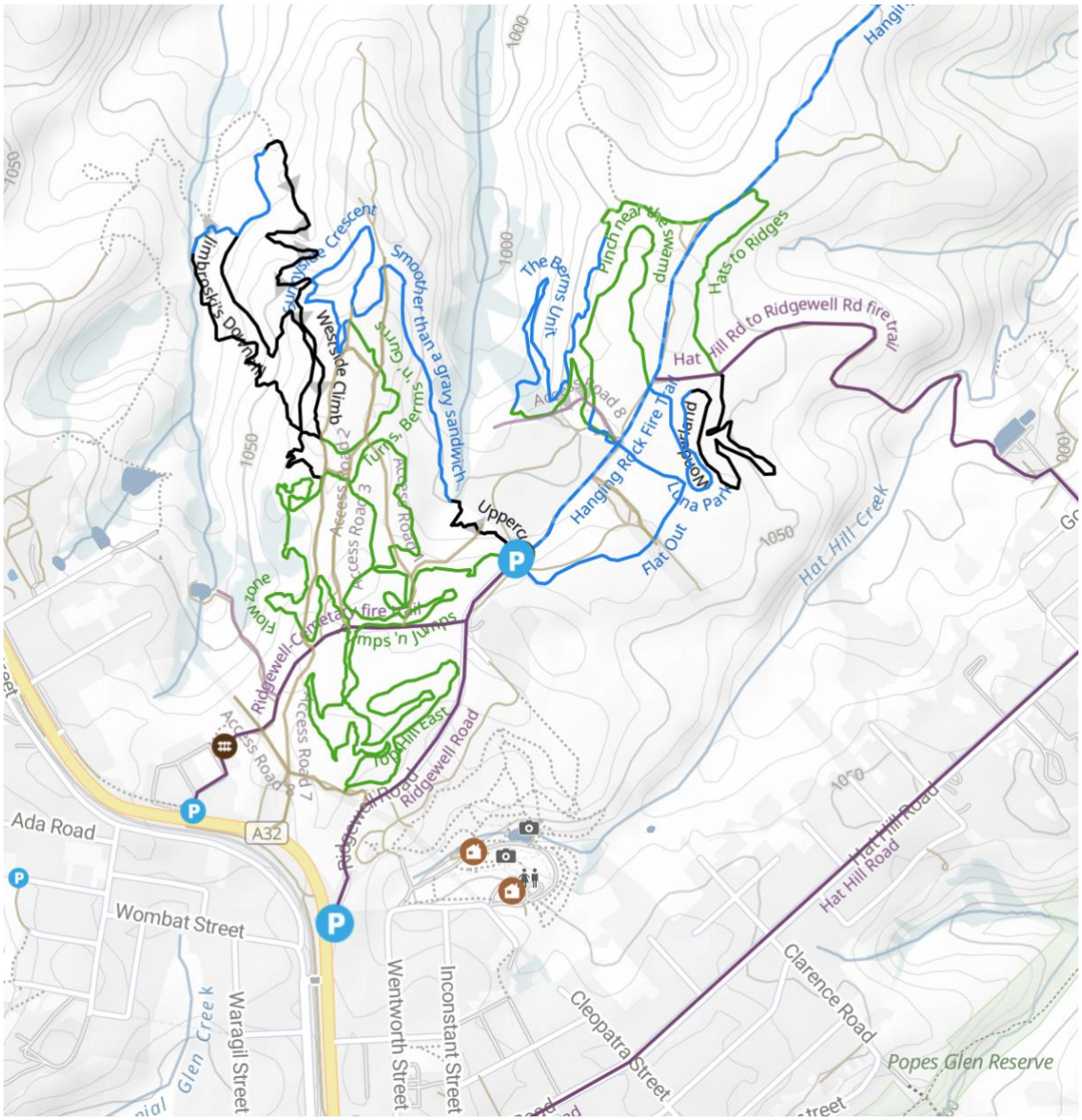
Bike riders really do build tracks where they like and get them approved retrospectively. These riders are well serviced with trails and there is no need to reward them with more.

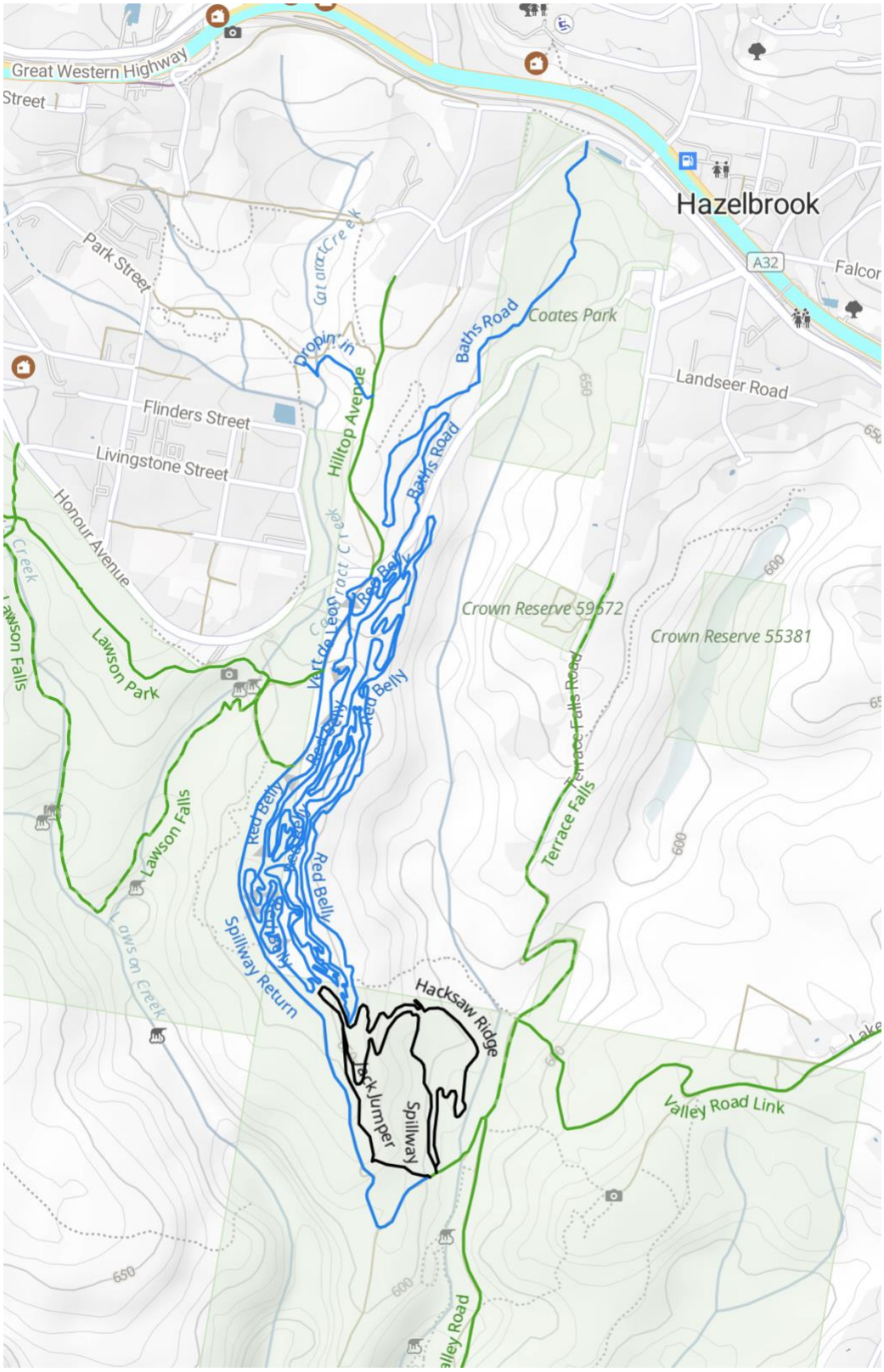


These mountain bike trails at Hassans Walls Reserve were established more than three decades, before Lithgow City Council created a formal Plan of Management for the reserve. The first reserve plan of management was developed in 2016. In the late 1990s the local biker riders hosted the NSW State Downhill Championships in 2000, the Oceania Downhill Championships in 2002 and the State downhill races in 2011.

The mountain bike lobby also has definite plans to develop more bike tracks in the region. In March 2021, Lithgow City Council exhibited the *Draft Hassans Walls Mountain Bike Trails Strategy* to formally plan, upgrade, and sustainably manage purpose-built trails across the reserve. Formal process has only retrospectively approved existing mountain bike trail development arould Lithgow. This retrospective approval of bike trails has to stop.

Below is a maze of bike tracks on Crown reserves just to the north of Blackheath. These mountain bike trails around Ridgewell Road and the former Blackheath Tip are not approved under a plan of management. The hand-built berms, jumps, and wooden features were constructed unofficially by local riders mostly after Blue Mountains City Council's 2015 reserve plans of management were put in place.





This bike trail maze near Hazelbrook around Terrace Falls Reserve and the adjacent bushland are not approved by any plan of management. The Crown Reserve Plan of Management adopted in 2015, alongside council's Hazelbrook Area Recreation Master Plan 2023–2033, do not permit this use. BMCC's *Dirt Jump Strategy* (2002) ordered the closure of unauthorised dirt jumps off Lake Road in Terrace Falls Reserve. Council recognises the interim dirt-jump facility on

Oaklands Road, north of the highway in Horseshoe Falls Reserve, as an authorised bike site in Hazelbrook. These trails are also in addition to the extensive approved mountain bike tracks at Knapsack Gully, near Lapstone.

These facilities for mountain bikes have not prevent continued use of unauthoried trails described above.

Attachment B – a dot point statement of concern regarding sub-optimal visitor management in the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area generally

Aspects of the following visitor facilities in Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area are short-sighted:

• *State Mine Gully*: Straddling the Conservation Area boundary, kilometres of bike track will unnecessarily scar large areas of bare sandstone rock-plate, degrading the pagoda views from Dobbs Drift Lookout at the gateway to the park from Lithgow. The bike park's design and the recent development consent specifies using the abundant rock for jumps, armouring and trail walls. With the publication of the draft REF, the extent of impacts of this Bike Park on Quolls and other threatened speices is only now becoming better known.



Mountain bike tracks caved into bare rock will be visible from the Lookout Dobbs Drift (the 4WD trail on the pagoda spur at the top right of the image. Wilderness Australia proposed that the most visually damaging of the trails be removed but the proposal was approved unamended.

• *Lost City*: Two roads (one for 4WDs) and a carpark spoil iconic views from the southern lookout, the one closest to Lithgow. Visitors look across the valley at cars and glinting windshields that detract from the scenic splendour of Lithgow's prime pagoda attraction. Also, duplication lookouts and carparks at Lost City is a needless redundant expense delivering two almost identical experiences. Another facility, say upgrading the road to Birds Rock Lookout to a 2WD standard or an all-access walking track for the 50-site Forest Campground, may have to be foregone.

• *In pristine pagoda landscapes*: Three private glamping resorts are planned. Approving them signals to future developers that the best locations in NSW parks can be developed. This graphical slideshow on these resort proposals includes images of the resorts from pages 29, 62 and 63 of the NPWS resort proposals report.
• *Shattering the silence*: The Emirates is seeking fly-in/fly-out operations for its Wolgan Valley Resort up to 210 helicopter flights per week over campgrounds, dropping to 100 flights per week over the proposed glamping resorts, Forest Camp and other attractions in the Gardens of Stone once the Wolgan Road is re-opened. This helicopter noise blights the peaceful enjoyment of the park's tranquillity. The lower Blue Mountains villages also would suffer additional helicopter noise.

Compromising unique natural features with several poorly located facilities is a risky tourism strategy because tourists might believe the park is degraded and go elsewhere, or visit once and not return.

In 2014, a Planning Assessment Commission determined after extensive inquiry that pagoda landforms are of "**special significance**" and deserve the "**highest level of protection**". The NPWS planning processes for visitor use have not applied this finding to the design of visitor management.

The nature-focussed management of *Destination Pagoda* would boost tourism and prevent roads, resorts and bike parks from being built in pagoda landscapes.

Pagodas landscapes are a key marketing point of difference for Lithgow. The essential management tactic of protecting pagoda landscapes has been ignored. Management actions are needlessly degrading this key attraction of the park with visitor facilities.