



Australian Native Plants Society (Australia) Inc.

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POSITION STATEMENT

Mountain Bike Trails

Position

The Australian Native Plant Society Australia (ANPSA) is opposed to the development of trails for mountain bike riding within the conservation estate, unless the areas proposed for development are completely degraded.

Background

Area of Application

The Conservation Estate is a collective term which includes national parks, conservation parks and nature reserves. These reserves contain some of the Australia's most significant natural and cultural heritage assets and include areas of high conservation or high community value that are afforded the greatest degree of protection under the federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act or state conservation acts. This includes areas that contain Threatened or Priority Ecological Communities and Regional Parks.

For the purposes of this position paper, all of these areas are considered part of the broader conservation estate.

Definition of the Activity

Mountain biking is a sport of riding bicycles, often over rough terrain, usually using specially designed mountain bikes. Mountain bikes share similarities with other bikes but incorporate features designed to enhance durability and performance in rough terrain, such as air or coil-sprung shocks used as suspension, larger and wider wheels and tires, stronger frame materials, and mechanically or hydraulically actuated disc brakes.

Mountain biking can generally be broken down into five distinct categories: cross country, trail riding, all mountain (also referred to as "Enduro"), downhill, and freeride. Advanced riders pursue both steep technical descents and high incline climbs. In the case of freeride, downhill and dirt jumping, aerial manoeuvres are performed off both natural features and specially constructed jumps and ramps.

Current Situation

Mountain bike riding is currently very popular and many mountain bike trails are being proposed, promoted, designed, developed and constructed throughout Australia. This includes in metropolitan as well as regional and country areas. Mountain biking is actively promoted by many state organisations, including state parks and wildlife services, as well as local governments as a key activity to boost local tourism.

Mountain bike riding is promoted as having numerous perceived benefits such as the following:

- increasing connection with, and concern for, the natural environment;
- improving health through physical activity;



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- bonding between families and family members; and
- economic benefits for areas where they are located, particularly in rural and country areas, through spending on food, accommodation and facilities.

Mountain biking is also a highly competitive sport with major events of national interest being conducted on an annual basis. Some popular mountain biking routes attract an informal competition between riders to establish records for completion of sectional, one-way and return journey tours. Anecdotal evidence suggests such competitions make trails unsuitable for casual riders and they often involve night riding, which brings with it a number of additional issues.

Impacts of Mountain Biking

Mountain bike riding is an active, rather than a passive, recreational pursuit. Mountain bike trails cater for many different levels of interest, expertise and skills. Mountain bike trails may be located on flat land or in hilly terrain, but all usually involve the construction of a suitable trail which caters for the level of challenge desired.

As a consequence, mountain bike trails in native vegetation cause a number of unacceptable environmental, social and cultural impacts. These include the following:

- destruction and removal of native plants, including Threatened species
- disturbance and loss of native animals, especially birds and mammals, at considerable distances from the physical trails themselves
- interference with the breeding of native animals
- erosion
- reduction of safety of walkers
- introduction of weeds and disease such as *Phytophthora dieback* and *Myrtle Rust* simply via disturbance, as well as through bikes, equipment and clothing
- destruction of and interference with sacred sites, especially on mountain peaks
- disturbance of peaceful surroundings
- damage to views and landscapes.

The impacts of mountain bike trails on plants and animals does not stop at the edge of the trail, but extends as a halo and as an advancing front for weeds either side of the physically cleared area. Further, mountain bike riders are typically not content with the officially constructed mountain bike trails, and many unacceptable additional or interconnecting trails are created by enthusiasts without authorisation using unacceptable techniques or with inappropriate features.

Construction of multiple trails in a single area results in fragmentation of the natural area with the additional consequence of creating an increased edge/area ratio within all the patches of the natural area that remain. This results in increased potential for weed and disease introduction, impairing key ecosystem functions and isolating flora and fauna species, including the disruption of animal movement pathways within the original area.

Considerations associated with the construction and use of Mountain Bike Trails

The Australian Native Plant Society Australia holds the view that bike trails should not be sited or constructed in the conservation estate, nor in areas containing Threatened or Priority species or Ecological Communities. Mountain bike trails are not compatible with National Parks or Nature Reserves which are



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meant to be for the conservation of nature and pedestrian recreation only, not higher impact recreational pursuits such as mountain biking, trail bike riding or horse riding. Mountain bike trails should only be constructed in cleared areas or in non-native vegetation.

Native vegetation should not be cleared specifically to accommodate mountain bike trails. Rather, mountain bike trails could and should be built on already cleared and/or degraded land, such as the following:

- land that has already been utilised for other active recreational pursuits such as skiing, horse riding or motorised sport
- non-native forests and plantations
- cleared paddocks
- old road/rail alignments
- abandoned mine and quarry sites
- areas adjacent to areas of the Conservation Estate that are set aside as buffer zones.

The focus for location of trails should be on degraded and buffer zones, to give bike riders what they are after whilst protecting natural areas and areas of passive recreation. Siting mountain bike trails in revegetated areas, or areas that could be revegetated, would deliver multiple benefits, including utilising currently degraded, under-utilised areas, restoring native vegetation, carbon capture and storage, delivering tourist attractions and creating custom-designed trails.

Any proposal to develop or construct mountain bike trails must include the development of a Mountain Bike Master Plan. Such Plans must be carefully developed after surveys and consultation with stakeholders. Environmental and cultural surveys must be a prerequisite for all Mountain Bike Master Plans. The appropriate Traditional Owners and their views must be consulted extensively and respected before any decision is made on the development of a Master Plan. To avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest, these surveys must be undertaken by competent, independent consultants.

Any proposed mountain bike trails must not be in areas prone to land degradation. The number of mountain bike trails permitted in any one area must be minimised. Future expansion of established trails should not be permitted where the expansion may impact environmental and cultural values of the area.

E-mountain bikes should be considered a motor vehicle and be restricted to road access in any area. They should not be used on mountain bike trails, in much the same way as off-road motorcycles are not permitted to use those areas. Existing road accesses within the conservation estate, on which the public is currently permitted to use a motorised vehicle, should be accessible for mountain biking.

The Mountain Bike Master Plan must include active enforcement measures and trail maintenance programs. There must be regular reviews of performance and environmental impact of any mountain bike facility. There must also be a rehabilitation plan for disused or unauthorised tracks or in the event that the facility fails in some way. Further, the Master Plan must include the active enforcement of any limits and the rapid removal and repair of any un-authorised trails by the manager of the facility.

The proponent for mountain bike trails in an area, or mountain biking generally, whether it is a government agency or a private organisation, must not be part of the evaluation team for Master Plans. The role of State government national parks and wildlife agencies should be to actively discourage establishment of



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mountain bike trails within areas of the conservation estate, rather than be the proponent for such facilities.

Any proposal to construct mountain bike trails that involves the clearing of native vegetation must undergo environmental impact assessment open to public submissions and receive approval at the appropriate national and/or state level.

ANPSA

The Australian Native Plants Society (Australia) (ANPSA) consists of eight member Societies in regions throughout Australia, representing more than 5000 individuals. The aims of the Society can be summed up as growing, conserving and appreciating the Australian flora, and include the following:

- Protect, conserve and enhance Australian indigenous plants in their natural habitats.
- Promote and support the study and cultivation of Australian indigenous plants for their intrinsic value and their ecosystem services.
- Communicate knowledge about Australian indigenous plants.
- Encourage the cultivation of endangered Australian indigenous plants in botanical gardens and other reserves.
- Encourage the growing and use of Australian indigenous plants in home gardens, public places and for revegetation projects and rural plantings.

Adopted at Full Council 11 September 2022