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SUBMISSION

On a proposal to allow horse-riding activities in National Parks

The Clarence Environment Centre has maintained a shop-front in Grafton for over 22 years, and has a proud history of environmental advocacy. The conservation of the Australia's natural environment has always been a priority, and we believe it should be managed primarily to protect that environment and its unique biodiversity, and secondly to allow people to enjoy those values.

To that end, many of our members have spent years assisting with the management of those parks, both in a paid and voluntary capacity, activities that are currently being undertaken with two of them volunteering their expertise to help assess flora an heritage qualities next week.

As a result, we are fundamentally opposed to any activity taking place within national parks that are not in line with their conservation aims.

In recent times, we have had National Parks opened up to recreational hunting, using guns, bows and arrows, and packs of dogs. We have also had requests by mountain bike enthusiasts, 4 wheel drive clubs, and now horse riders to likewise be allowed access to conservation areas to undertake their sporting activities.

The Shooters Party and some within the National Party, for no reason other than they appear to be pathologically opposed to anything that is linked with the "Green" movement, are also advocating the introduction of logging and mining into national parks, and as a consequence our wonderful national parks estate are under threat as never before.

According to the Primary Industries Minister, there are some 600 state forests scattered across the countryside where these activities are already allowed, which begs the question, why do they require access to national parks at all.

However, in all the state forests where our members have also been been active, undertaking audits of logging activity etc, we seldom see any of the more passive recreational activities, bushwalkers, bird watchers, family picnics etc. being undertaken. We believe this is because, not only is shooting allowed, but these areas are regularly used by proponents of motorised recreational activities such as trail bike riders, 4 wheel drive enthusiasts, and the occasional car rally. These are highly incompatible with other, more passive recreational activities.

Apart from the car rallies these other non-passive sports are completely unregulated and uncontrolled once they enter the forests, and are therefore highly dangerous, with multiple deaths recorded annually. It is no mystery therefore, why bush-walkers, bird watchers, family picnics, and also horse riders, avoid state forests like the plague.

Quite clearly that is the reason horse riders now want to use national parks, but we point out that the horse riding fraternity applied to be allowed to use national parks **before** the recent political announcement was made permitting sporting hunters to run riot with high powered rifles in national parks. We all know the likely consequences of a horse being startled by an unexpected gunshot, or the consequences of the horse being mistaken for a feral brumby.

Any state forest worker will confirm that the uncontrolled use of state forests for motor sports is undesirable and highly destructive to native vegetation, and causes massive erosion and creek pollution, with the forest often left looking like a garbage tip.

However, the state forest estate is vast, and there could be room for everyone if they were properly managed. In this day and age, nobody expects to be able to pursue a recreation and use public facilities for nothing, we even need to pay for a licence to fish. So why should the use of state forests be any different. We strongly believe that areas of state forests should be designated for specific sporting activities, and fees charged to pay for proper management of facilities which would benefit both users and the environment.

The only sporting activity that we believe is not compatible with the concept of multiple recreational use of state forests is hunting. Projectiles from guns have the potential to kill people up to 3 kilometres away, and packs of dogs should be excluded from all public land because of the threat they pose to native animals, particularly slow-moving species such as Koalas. Despite this, a lunatic has now allowed this activity to occur in national parks as well as in state forests, where the toll on native animals over the past decade is unknown and incalculable.

Horses are a declared invasive species, and are controlled across the national park estate as a feral pest. In the wild they cause damage to native vegetation, which in turn reduces habitat for native fauna which is already suffering from habitat loss. If they are introduced to parks for recreational purposes, they will need to be separated from the narrow walking tracks used by pedestrian users, and either use normally 'closed' park management trails, or require special trails to be constructed which will further reduce native vegetation.

Those horses will also require holding pens or fenced paddocks to be provided so riders can rest, eat, etc. They will introduce a range of weeds carried in manure which they will drop all along every trail they use, and have the potential to introduce and spread plant diseases such as the *Phytophthora cinnamomi* pathogen, which can decimate native vegetation and can wipe out certain species altogether.

The Australian Horse Alliance argues that the Bicentennial Trail already bisects a number of national parks and wilderness areas including the World Heritage Washpool National Park, the Guy Fawkes, Macleay Gorges, Werrikimbe, Curracabundi, Murruin and Tabletop wilderness areas, and that the impact is "light".

However, we believe "light" is not acceptable, especially when the Alliance is calling for broad-acre access to all wilderness areas. We are not advocating for the closure of historic bridal trails, but impacts from human activity in any conservation area, while never totally unavoidable, should nevertheless be kept to an absolute minimum.

In conclusion, we believe that horse riding is incompatible with the conservation aims of national parks and therefore should be excluded. At the same time we urge the State Government to review the use of state forests for recreational purposes, and act responsibly to control its use by non passive users, which would allow all members of the public, and foreign tourists, to safely enjoy the natural environment they offer, to the greatest extent possible.

We thank the Minister for this opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely
John Edwards
Honorary Secretary
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