



The ACT Equestrian Association Incorporated

ABN 47 674 025 536

All correspondence to:
The Secretary, PO Box 4, Curtin ACT 2605

www.actea.asn.au

President – Christine Lawrence

Vice-President – Cathy Banwell
Treasurer – Jacqui Knobel

Secretary – Catherine Tranter

ACT Parks and Conservation Service

canberramtbexperience@act.gov.au

Draft Canberra Mountain Biking Report

The ACT Equestrian Association Inc (ACTEA) has, since 1970, represented recreational horse riders in the Australian Capital Territory. In 2020 ACTEA affiliates engage in dressage, showjumping, cross country, endurance and pony club as well as recreational trail riding on the many tracks and trails in and around Canberra. There are 1700 reported recreational horses in the ACT, between them contributing \$20 million a year to the ACT economy.

On behalf of these people ACTEA wishes to comment on the Draft Canberra Mountain Biking Report.

ACTEA will be very disturbed if this Report is the basis of decisions about an expansion of mountain bike trails in public space in Canberra. It is an ambit claim for a vast expanse of ACT recreational space already, and for many years, used by Canberrans to engage in a range of recreational activities that are not mountain biking. The Report refers to these groups a couple of times in passing and certainly does not recognise them as stakeholders in any decisions based on its contents.

The maps in the Report are of appalling quality and seem designed to hide the fact that the mountain biking community has laid claim to shared trails in recreational destinations, management tracks currently used for horse riding, running, orienteering and rally driving and even the recreational area set aside next to Uriarra Village. You have to look carefully to see the many thin green lines labelled potential precinct trails. The maps are so bad that they, in these days of superior mapping technology, must be deliberately so.

As the ACT Parks interactive maps of coloured blobs do not reproduce these green potential trails we have to hope they do not endorse these ambit claims but it would have provided some comfort if they had said so.

Stakeholders

The definition of a stakeholder is '*anybody who can affect or is affected by an organisation, strategy or project*'. As far as ACTEA can ascertain the identified stakeholders in this report are an Industry Project Reference Group who represent mountain biking interests, land managers such as Parks &

ACTEA supported by funding from Sport and Recreation Services ACT

Conservation, and those people, primarily cyclists, who attended 3 workshops in July 2019 which discussed where new and improved trails should be. There has been no attempt to engage the members of the other Government reference group – the Recreation Users Group – many of whose members are users of the spaces targeted by this Report. On page 43 the Draft Canberra Mountain Biking Report states that *Trail-based recreation opportunities for other users such as walkers, trail runners and equestrians is also an important consideration in the development of new trails* and thereafter neglects to mention them again or consider any impact new MTB tracks might have on those users.

In July 2018 the Recreation Users Group was told that the concept of the Best of Canberra Trail Design Project was to link cycle & multi use trails (e.g. Stromlo/Arboretum/Cotter) with new trails to create a loop that may highlight great recreational opportunities. The project was branded as a cycle trail but the design could have elements of multi-use trails and loops off the main loop (see RUG Minutes 24 July 2018). Twelve months later RUG was told the Project would link trails from Stromlo to Casuarina Sands, and include shared use trails at the Cotter (see RUG Minutes 14 July 2020). There was some astonishment, then, when it became obvious that the mountain biking community is proposing to establish a 'mountain biking hub' in Blue Range – citing Rotorua as inspiration.

The Report treats the whole expanse of public land from the top of Mount Stromlo, through the Cotter Reserve, around Uriarra Village and up into Blue Range and Sherwood Forest as '*terra nullius*', i.e, belonging to no one, therefore available for appropriation, which is manifestly untrue.

1. Inviting a self selecting group of mountain bikers to develop a mountain bike proposal the government has downplayed to the Recreation Users Group is not community consultation in any meaning of the phrase.

2. Where is the chapter of the Report which discusses the potential impact on current and future users of these spaces and trails who are not mountain bike riders? When will we see a clear assessment of the impact of this mountain bike proposal on other user groups?

Shared Use Trails

The Report uses the term '*shared use*' eleven times without providing a definition of its meaning. The mountain bike community appears to consider that any public trail that is not an MTB trail can be appropriately shared by them. The ACT Equestrian Association is strongly of the view that not all trails are happily shared by mountain bikes and horses. Horses are easily upset by speed and in places where the terrain and elevation is conducive mountain bikes do speed, regardless of the presence of other users. The rash of accidents and near accidents to horse riders on the Bicentennial National Trail (BNT) at Easter this year is proof that a largish section of the MTB community have no regard for the safety of others on 'shared' trails.

Table 3 on page 24 lists a number of existing MTB areas in the ACT.

Majura Pines is listed as having shared trails when it is quite clear from the area map that there are identified equestrian trails that are only crossed by bike tracks in a couple of places. Horses are confined to these management tracks. Isaacs Ridge is a downhill biking destination with the Centenary Trail passing through it. There are identified equestrian trails at Isaacs and horses are not expected to use other trails. When builders started constructing MTB trails in the Zoo Pines they hammered 'No Horses' signs to the pine trees but there are bike tyre tracks on the only designated horse trail in the area. In other words the manifestation of a 'shared trail' is that regardless of who the trail was designed for, mountain bikers consider they can share it but the reverse is not true.

When racing mountain bikes cause anxiety, if not accidents, on the BNT the response is that it is a shared trail – apparently making unsafe behaviour okay. The Report states that the Canberra Centenary Trail and the Bicentennial National Trail are multi use trails suitable for mountain biking (page 30). The Bicentennial National Trail was created as a long distance **horse** trail and it is designed to be ridden on a horse. In Canberra it deliberately links equestrian facilities to each other. Its attractions meant, however, that walkers and cyclists were also keen to experience unassisted touring. It was never designed to be a mountain bike trail.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the BNT Board, the ACT Government and the ACT Equestrian Association states that:

*Both the ACT Government, currently represented by Parks and Conservation Service, City Services and Roads ACT within the Territory and Municipal Services Directorate, and BNT Ltd and ACT Equestrian Association Inc aim to provide **a high quality, enjoyable experience for trekkers using the BNT.***

A 'high quality, enjoyable experience' dictates that the BNT not be a race track but you would not know that on parts of the route in Canberra, especially those with any elevation. The ACT is the only part of the 5,330 kilometre length of the BNT where safety has become an issue because of speeding mountain bikes. The knowledge that this would be a problem is the main reason why the Centenary Trail is separated from the BNT despite the original intention to use the BNT as part of the circuit. The decision, made in 2010, reflected the understanding that the BNT would be much safer for horses if runners and bikers were on a separate Centenary Trail. It was a deliberate decision strongly supported by ACTEA and the BNT Board.

Local horse riders are already complaining that their safety is daily put at risk by inconsiderate mountain bikers who shrug at the chaos they cause. Linking the BNT into the mountain biking land grab will drive horses and probably many other low impact users off the BNT altogether.

3. We are not aware that anyone has consulted either the local BNT Coordinator or the ACT Equestrian Association about the safety of incorporating a horse trail into an MTB network and we object strongly.

4. There needs to be detailed discussion about every one of the proposed MTB trails that impact on other stakeholders.

Stromlo Forest Park

The Report sees Stromlo as a significant hub for expanding westward. It identifies expanding the trail network in Stromlo as a priority. The link trail connecting the eastern side of Mount Stromlo to the Cotter Reserve will go straight through West Stromlo cutting through the management tracks presently used by equestrians driven off the designated equestrian trails on the eastern face of the mountain by bike riders who refuse to recognise the existence of designated equestrian trails. Car parks off Uriarra Road are also flagged. This suggests that the mountain biking community is proposing to take over the entire western face of the mountain.

It is imperative that Parks understands that West Stromlo is now the only nearby riding area available to people who keep their horses at the three equestrian centres on the Cotter Road. If the government continues to do next to nothing to support its contention that Stromlo is a multi-use facility horse will be driven from West Stromlo as they have from the eastern side of the mountain.

5. As ACTEA has always been told that western Stromlo will be a safe resort for equestrians this is disturbing news and we request clarification on how West Stromlo will be protected as an equestrian destination.

6. There are no assigned management tracks in West Stromlo. Before any mountain bike links trail is constructed there should be a clear definition of areas where horses can be safely ridden from the agistment centres on the Cotter Road before any MTB tracks are created.

Uriarra Village

The Report proposes a connection from the existing MTB tracks in Hyles Block across the road from Uriarra Village, through the pine forest recreation area to the east of the Village and around the edge of the horse paddocks. There also appear to be a lot of green lines inside the pine forest which is used for horse riding and other recreational pursuits by the residents, including children, of the Village. ACTEA has not been able to find any residents of Uriarra Village who have been consulted about this land grab.

MTB access to Blue Range from here appears to be by using the link road from the Village down to Brindabella Road. This is the only direct route from Uriarra Village to the cavaletti into the fenced Sherwood Forest (and thence to Uriarra Forest and Blue Range) and its use by mountain bikers is a threat to equestrian safety.

Uriarra Village already experiences a multitude of problems with cyclists who use the roads around Uriarra Village for parking and their private property to access trails elsewhere. Their horse agistment paddocks are often accessed by members of the public and gates are left open. Inappropriate parking along roadsides impacts the rural setting and disturbs the landscape outside the village. A big increase in the number of cyclists using Hyles Block will exacerbate this problem unless consideration is given to keeping the users of those trails to Hyles Block itself.

7. Uriarra Village's limited access to local riding places on the edge of the Lower Cotter Catchment should not be co-opted for the use of mountain bikers.

8. Any plans for enlarging the trail complex in Hyles Block should include a clear recognition that the amenity of Uriarra Village should not be impacted by inconsiderate and inappropriate parking on roads around the Village

Blue Range/Sherwood

Equestrians have used Blue Range for many decades for trekking and for running and training for endurance rides and by day riders who regularly float their horses to the area. Access to Blue Range only became an issue when the Cotter Dam was raised and most activities, particularly horse riding, in the Cotter catchment were banned.

The ACT Endurance Riders Association has been holding the Brookvale Ride in the Blue Range area for 38 years. While the ride has always started at 'Brookvale', just across the border in NSW the trails and elevation of Blue Range in the ACT have been integral to the character of the ride. The flatter terrain of Sherwood and Uriarra Forest is also essential for the shorter rides held in conjunction with the main "Brookvale" ride as well as providing the necessary length of course. The MTB Report has laid claim to several significant management tracks used for these rides, by either routing the pro-

posed link trail along them, or routing proposed downhill tracks across them, without any consultation with ACTERA.

In its 2014 Memorandum of Understanding with the ACT Equestrian Association the ACT Government agreed to equestrian access to Blue Range outside the Lower Cotter Catchment. To make this happen Parks and Conservation installed a cavaletti entrance into the fenced "Sherwood Forest" area, on a purpose made trail off Brindabella Road which the MTB community now proposes to use as a connection from Uriarra Village. With an additional cavaletti access off Mountain Creek Road this is a safe and expansive recreational asset for Canberra riders. In 2017, Parks opened access to equestrians into the larger Uriarra Forest/Blue Range area by modifying gate arrangements at the end of Sherwood nearest to Blue Range Hut, thus enabling riders to access that area via Sherwood, bypassing the Lower Cotter Catchment. A large proportion of this area is now covered with green potential MTB trails and the pink potential link trail extends well into Sherwood, as does the boundary of the proposed 'recreational trails precinct' which can probably be interpreted as mountain bike trails area.

9. As mountain bikers take over management tracks in Nature Reserves and large lengths of the Bicentennial National Trail, Sherwood has become a safe and attractive destination for many recreational riders with access to a horse float. It is imperative that equestrian use of these trails is recognised with a commitment to their continued and safe use.

10. While it is unacceptable that a mountain bike facility take over existing trails used by the Brookvale Ride, it is equally appalling that their appropriation of trails will limit locals' ability to even train for this and other such events

Management Model

The Report concludes on page 73 with a recommended management model for the new Best Of Canberra Bike Trails.

The recommended model for governance of the ACT Trail network is one which recognises the existing stakeholder groups and their significant knowledge and expertise on trail development.

It is recommended that a skills-based group be brought together as a Trust or other incorporated body. This group would ensure collaborative leadership in the development of the new trail experiences and assist with the ongoing management and development of the leading and supporting hubs. It will also be instrumental in seeking commercial investment, resources from grant opportunities and through ACT Government budget allocations.

This model would see a greater role for user groups in a partnership with ACT Government. It provides for the land manager to focus on core business (parks and reserves and forestry operations) and remain a partner in the development of the trail network.

In other words, the mountain biking community want to police themselves. Given that they want to take over shared use trails they will potentially be interacting with the other users of ACT public open space and impacting on their capacity to undertake their own chosen activities in safety and enjoyment. Since the mountain bike community does not recognise stakeholders other than themselves, this is the equivalent of putting the mouse in charge of the cheese!

11. ACTEA's preference is that, if this proposal is going to attract the touted income the money should be put into management by Parks & Conservation. If there is going to be any stake-

holder group in charge of these public trails it should be just that, representative of all the users of all the trails the MTB community is co-opting for their mountain biking network.

ACTEA is happy to expand on any of the above or answer questions.

Christine Lawrence
President
ACT Equestrian Association

cflawrence@homemail.com.au
62885799

19.10.2020