

The Gardens of Stone

Stage Two Reserve Proposal



...towards National Heritage

Report summary

The diverse pagoda landscape of the Gardens of Stone Stage Two reserve proposal covers some 39,000 hectares of largely natural public land in the western Blue Mountains, on the Newnes Plateau and western escarpment. The proposal adjoins the existing national parks of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.

Much of the landscape is characterised by spectacular pagoda rock formations and diverse vegetation – hence its name. The proposal is to reserve this area in a combination of National Park additions and new State Conservation Areas. The latter designation allows for underground coal mining.

This report is the first comprehensive review of all available information on the natural and cultural values of the area.

Conservation background

Proposals to reserve the Gardens of Stone Stage Two area date back to the 1930s and environmental groups have been actively campaigning for the area since 1985. These proposals are based not only on the area's capacity to extend the area and values already protected in adjoining national parks which are now World Heritage listed, but also to protect the special values uniquely embodied by Gardens of Stone Stage Two - particularly geodiversity, biodiversity and landscape, but also cultural heritage.

Important values

Analysis reveals that the Gardens of Stone Stage Two landscape contains a number of very significant values, many of which are unique or best expressed by the area. Some of these values are of national significance, and certain aspects are potentially of global significance.

Natural values

Under natural values, the area has the best representation of rare landforms including pagodas, montane sand dunes and highland peat swamps, as well as cliffs, natural arches, waterfalls, slot canyons, gorges and large caverns. The landscape is both complex and spectacular. It supports a very high number of 42 threatened plants species and 42 threatened animal species and 16 rare vegetation communities, including two critically endangered animals that are restricted to the swamps. Most importantly, the area offers a remarkable opportunity to protect all these values together, in a largely intact, unique and very beautiful landscape.

The plant diversity in Gardens of Stone Stage Two reserve proposal probably exceeds 1,000 native species, with 814 species on Newnes Plateau alone. The minimum proven diversity for Gardens of Stone Stage Two would be represented by Newnes State Forest with 281 vertebrate species. The actual total would be slightly higher, perhaps around 300.

Two parts of the area have been identified as a possible extension to the declared Wollemi Wilderness. Further, reservation of the entire Gardens of Stone proposal would significantly extend the existing protected areas of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. This is a nationally rare opportunity to complete the protection of an environmental gradient right across the mountains, from the coastal lowlands, over the crest of the Great Dividing Range and onto drier the Central Tablelands.

The high altitude Newnes Plateau is a large area of the highest elevation sandstone terrain available in the Blue Mountains and the Sydney Basin bioregion (c. 9,000 ha above 1100m). It is a potentially vital refugium for the future, which will help species cope with a changing climate.

Cultural values

The Gardens of Stone Stage Two area also encompasses significant Aboriginal historic, recreational and aesthetic values. The area is becoming increasingly well known as an especially beautiful and inspiring landscape which is also very accessible. The most well known Aboriginal place of Maiyingu Marragu is just one of many rock art and other sites dating back thousands of years.

The most significant historic feature is 'Blue Mountains crossing' precinct of Mount York, where the 1813 colonial explorers discovered they had crossed the 'sandstone barrier' and where a number of early roads survive.

Recreationally, the area is already well used for sight-seeing, bushwalking, rock climbing and car touring. The very accessible western escarpment features numerous historic and popular lookouts and walking tracks while the rest of the area offers more remote and informal opportunities. With stronger protection and management the recreational values can be greatly enhanced.

Aesthetically, the terrain is both dramatic and intricate, often changing rapidly and surprisingly over quite short distances, especially in the pagoda and escarpment areas where the vegetation can be of low stature but of remarkable variety in colour, form and texture. One walks and weaves between the outcrops as new scenes come into view, more strange ironstone sculptures emerge and another wildflower display or gnarled gum is discovered. Narrow defiles lead round corners into overhangs, caves, ferny glades, groves of huge trees and trickling streams.