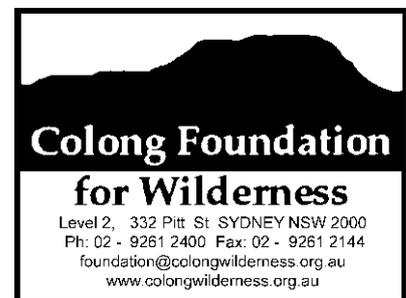


Briefing Note - Horse riding trails in declared wilderness

18 July 2013



The Colong Foundation is greatly concerned about the proposal to trial horse riding in declared wilderness areas without proper environmental impact assessment.

The *Wilderness Act* specifies that management should prevent or restore environmental disturbance. Horse riding on the other hand would cause significant damage to the natural values of protected wilderness. A large number of scientific papers provide very strong evidence that the riding of domestic horses in natural areas spread weeds, damage native vegetation, and cause soil loss and stream bank erosion. It is absolutely unsuitable as an activity in declared wilderness areas.

Policy framework

The current horse riding policy in parks and reserves was initiated by a 2006 memorandum of understanding between the NSW Liberal/Nationals Coalition and a coalition of NSW horse riders. This MoU and policy are one-sided and based on encouraging horse riding activity. They are not based on consideration of the natural resources of wilderness.

This being the case, an environmental impact statement should be prepared and publicly exhibited as a separate measure to address impacts in a thorough and comprehensive way. Protected wilderness is far too important to adopt the 'wait and see what happens' approach as proposed by adaptive management as specified in the MoU and subsequent policy. For example, adaptive management would be unlikely to eradicate any new weed outbreaks that arise as a result of these horse riding trials.

Horse riding use and wilderness

Riding horses in declared wilderness areas will not contribute to increased visitor use (Goal 27, NSW 2021). Only a handful of riders would use these remote areas and there is no identified unmet demand. Riding is permitted on across more than 110 reserves and on 3,000 kilometres of trails in those reserves. Almost half of Kosciuszko National Park is available to horse riders.

The Bi-centennial National Trail already has an easement through the declared Guy Fawkes, Macleay Gorges, Curracabundi, Werrikimbe and Washpool wilderness areas. The Murrain and Tabletop wilderness areas were not declared largely due to this Trail. Yet declared wilderness areas were subject to up to four public exhibition processes but the Trail was subjected to none.

On May 5, 1988 Trail organisers promised the Colong Foundation in writing it would 'ensure that the Trail does not encroach on any existing or future Wilderness Areas' but then broke that promise at the first opportunity. The Bicentennial Trail organisers located their Trail through a number of wilderness areas, and with a few private meetings with NPWS, published it widely.

Too many compromises have been granted in favour of horse riding in declared wilderness and no more should be granted.

Potentially illegal clearing in declared wilderness

There have been two cases of recent clearing and track construction by horse riders, with the assistance of the NPWS. One track has been cut through the Burra-Oulla Wilderness with machetes and chainsaws in Deua National Park where the route is also blazed on granite tors with orange spray paint. In Monga National Park to the north, several large trees have been cleared in the Buckenbowra Wilderness. Before the proposed trial has commenced, horse riders have issued a media release about clearing tracks through wilderness areas.

Environment Minister, the Hon Robyn Parker, has previously advised that 'horse riding proposals that involve physical works to trails, or the provision of new facilities, will be subject to standard environmental assessment processes' (20/6/12 letter to the Environmental Liaison Office).

Recommended actions

Any proposals for horse riding trials under a revised horse riding policy should be subject to an environmental impact statement and public exhibition under Part V of the *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act*.

Revise the strategic directions for horse riding in NSW national parks and reserves policy so that it is in accordance with the provisions of the *Wilderness Act* and adequately addresses the significant environmental impacts of this activity when conducted in protected areas.

The proposed horse riding trial in wilderness should be discontinued immediately as such track works and riding in declared wilderness areas would be contrary to the provisions of the *Wilderness Act*.

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