



Mt Wellington from Chimney Pot Hill

Image credit: Michael Roberts

by Jane Wilson & Nick Sawyer

How Not To Keep kunanyi/Mt Wellington Wild

kunanyi / Mt Wellington (kunanyi) is a natural area of outstanding diversity mostly free of human-made infrastructure. An experience of being close to nature is accessible to many because the mountain is so close to a capital city.

The eastern face of kunanyi where most visitation occurs is the Hobart City Council's (HCC) freehold land, yet it is also part of Wellington Park, which incorporates most of the Wellington Range.

Because of the increase in popularity of Tasmania as a tourist destination, and because of its proximity to Hobart and the easy drive to the summit, the mountain's eastern face is now attracting more visitors than our most popular national parks.

This article is not about the proposed cable car for the mountain, although TNPA is opposed to any such development. It discusses the threats to the eastern face posed by significant flaws in the park management plan which potentially permit other proposed projects (e.g. provision for mountain biking) to go ahead even if these degrade park values.

Mountain values and the visitor experience are in imminent danger of being degraded or lost unless gold standard management practices are put in place.

A Policy of Attracting Even More Visitors

A major threat to the mountain is the HCC's openly stated objective of attracting more visitors when it is already apparent that the mountain has more than it can cope with at peak periods.¹

The HCC has embraced the State government's Tasmanian Visitor Economy Strategy T21, which aims to deliver 1.5 million visitors to Tasmania by 2020. It sees kunanyi as being a site which can help serve up the target numbers and mountain infrastructure as assets to achieve this end. Its current project documents declare this strategy as the driver. The park management authority, the Wellington Park Management Trust (the Trust), has tacitly endorsed this approach by approving in principle the HCC's current major infrastructure projects for the mountain.²

The HCC must reject the government's push to try and attract more tourists and instead turn its focus to how to best manage existing visitors.

The aim of any mountain project must be to provide a better experience for those who visit kunanyi and to encourage them to enjoy being in nature, whilst protecting park values.

Management of kunanyi's Eastern Face

Management should prioritise the protection of natural values ahead of the provision of recreation opportunities, with facilities for mountain biking considered in this context. Unfortunately, the Recreation Strategy has yet to be written (see below) and the Management Plan (paragraph 9.5.1.3) authorises the implementation of the long established *Wellington Park [Mountain] Bike Strategy 2005* (a revision of the first such strategy dating from 2000), which may explain the overemphasis on the provision of tracks for mountain biking (see below).³

The *Wellington Park Management Plan 2013* (amended October 2015) ought to provide a framework for managing the park in order to protect its values as well as guidance for coordination between the HCC and the Trust. However, crucially, at least in some parts of the plan, the key desired outcome of protecting park values is linked to prescriptions and strat-

egies which potentially permit actions which may degrade park values. This is certainly true of part 9.5.1 which outlines policy/actions for management of, and planning for, recreation tracks, a matter pivotal to the future conservation of the eastern face (p 192-193).

The Trust, the overarching managing body, has limited resources.⁴ On ground management of kunanyi's eastern face is largely the responsibility of the HCC but is spread across several internal divisions of Council. The outcome is that management is sometimes not as well coordinated as it could be, particularly in relation to planning, prioritisation and seeking feedback from the public on major proposals.

Transparent broad public consultation needs to be part of the planning process for all major mountain projects, not just for selected ones. In published documents the Trust and the HCC make much of how they engage with the "community", but in recent years this has not always been the case. In some instances consultation has been behind closed doors with select stakeholders.

Missing Visitation and Recreation Strategies

A *Visitation Strategy*, incorporating a *Recreation Strategy*, is fundamental to providing a solid basis for long-term planning for kunanyi. **These strategies are not yet written.**⁵

A future *Recreation Strategy* must be underpinned by the basic premise that protection of kunanyi's natural, cultural and use values is the first priority and must ensure that mountain biking is considered only in the context of the broader *Recreation Strategy*.

In the absence of these strategies projects have gone ahead on kunanyi without adequate consideration of the consequences. One example of this approach is the shortage of parking spaces at middle Springs since the *Lost Freight* temporary café began operations there in February.⁶ This (unsurprisingly) has resulted in more visitors stopping for longer at the site. A similar outcome would be expected if a park Visitor

1 In 2015-2016 approximately 445,000 people visited the mountain one or more times (Poll M & Wild A, March 2017, *kunanyi / Mount Wellington: Visitation to the Mountain*. Report prepared for the City of Hobart by Natural Acumen, Hobart).

2 Works are already in progress on one of these projects: *Rejuvenating the Great Short Walk* (see below).

3 The strategy is referred to in the *Management Plan as the Wellington Park Mountain Bike Strategy 2005*, as amended to include sections of the *Greater Hobart Mountain Bike Master Plan 2011*. On the Trust website the document available is titled the *Wellington Park Bike Strategy 2005* and includes no sections from the aforementioned Master Plan.

4 Note also: *The Walking Track Strategy 2003* is long overdue for an update. Furthermore, it is TNPA's understanding that inventories of park values crucial to plans and strategies haven't been done, including the following: audits of Aboriginal cultural values and of geodiversity and flora and fauna values

5 Preparation of these strategies is recommended in the Management Plan (7.2.2 p 105 & 9.5.1.1 p 192). The TNPA was advised by a Trust representative in April that preparation of a *Visitation Strategy* is a key priority for 2017. Information on the Trust website indicates that lack of funds is holding up progress (June 2017, *Land Manager Update: Implementation of the Greater Hobart Mountain Bike Master Plan*)

6 The *Lost Freight* refurbished shipping container café has a 3 year lease which commenced early this year. The development application for the café was available for public comment. Only one representation was submitted, by Jane, one of the authors (note: it has been partly misrepresented in the HCC's final report). The TNPA acknowledges its failure to get involved in this process and its failure to anticipate the obvious implications for additional car parking. In April this year TNPA executive committee members met with Trust and HCC representatives at middle Springs to discuss overcrowding, pedestrian safety and other mountain issues.



Car parking at Middle Springs

Image credit: Jane Wilson



Café patrons at Middle Springs

Image credit: Jane Wilson

Centre is eventually built at middle Springs (see below). The HCC is belatedly providing additional car parking by upgrading and permanently opening the former overflow carpark. Other factors contributing to this shortage of parking spaces are the rise in popularity of the North South [mountain bike] track which starts from lower Springs, and simply the fact that more tourists are visiting kunanyi.

Mountain Bike Riding

In the 1990s mountain bike riding was restricted to fire trails on kunanyi's lower slopes. However since the early 2000s mountain biking has exploded in popularity, bringing demand from the riding community for access to the long established walking tracks above Fern Tree and higher up on the mountain. On the eastern face some walking tracks are now shared use and the purpose built mountain bike track, the North South track, was opened in 2011.

The *Wellington Park [Mountain] Bike Strategy (2005)* is the guiding document for mountain bike track development on kunanyi and is referred to as such by the Management Plan. The Trust has also endorsed the *Greater Hobart Mountain Bike Master Plan 2011*. This is essentially a wish list for more bike tracks in Wellington Park and elsewhere in Hobart and advocates shared use tracks as a default policy position. Both these documents discuss specific existing tracks, or proposed tracks, and recommend environmental assessments be undertaken on a track by track basis. The TNPA is concerned that the Trust and the HCC have apparently not considered the fundamental question of how permitting mountain biking activities on kunanyi's upper slopes (above Fern Tree) fits in with protecting park values and the experience of other users, particularly walkers who are there to enjoy the natural environment.

kunanyi is an exceptional area of reserved land possessing natural and other values equivalent to those of our national parks, in which mountain bike riding is prohibited.

In contrast, the *Wellington Park Management Plan* lists mountain biking as an activity which is potentially allowable in every management zone of the park, i.e., *Recreation, Natural, Remote and Drinking Water Catchment Zones*.⁷

The TNPA acknowledges its failure to get involved in the debate earlier, but advocates a moratorium on any expansion of mountain biking on kunanyi (not limited to consideration of only the eastern face) until the question of how providing for mountain bike riding fits in to park management aims is examined.

Shared Use Tracks

The approach of encouraging shared/multiple use of tracks has led to several near misses between cyclist and walkers. It must be acknowledged that most of the tracks on the eastern face of kunanyi are too steep and/or narrow for shared use. As a start, the TNPA advocates closing Radfords Track to bikes and closing the North South Track to walkers.

Walker safety is not the only issue of concern for shared use tracks. Walking and mountain biking are fundamentally different recreational activities. Although both walkers and riders enjoy being in nature, riding (especially steep downhill mountain biking) is clearly a sporting/adventure activity. Walking is a peaceful experience, and for many walkers encountering bikes on tracks must be a disruptive event. Neither would most riders welcome encountering walkers on tracks, as they must simply present an obstacle to the flow of the ride.

The Big Bend Downhill/Gravity Track Proposal

A feasibility study is in progress for this proposed dedicated downhill bike track from Big Bend to Junction Cabin with a visitor trail head at Big Bend as well as toilets at both Big Bend and Junction Cabin. Cost estimate is \$2.1 M.

The project is one of three which make up the HCC's major infrastructure program for kunanyi from 2017-2021. These were packaged as a strategic proposal in January 2016 via a 16 page prospectus titled: *One Mountain, One Destination, Three new visitor experiences* (Total Cost estimate \$7.3 M).⁸

The HCC doesn't hesitate to declare that the Gravity track

⁷ Table 2, p 129

⁸ The HCC notes in this prospectus: "...The three projects, consistent with the *Wellington Park Management Plan 2013*,..." (p 4).



Organ Pipes Track – newly resurfaced

Image credit: Nick Sawyer

is the centrepiece of this proposal and is driven by the aim of attracting more visitors to kunanyi. The HCC and the Trust are also developing a proposal for an “Epic” 50 km cross country ride on kunanyi and propose the Gravity track as an integral part of such a route.

The HCC has announced on its website that the Gravity track plans will be open for public comment later this year so the TNPA looks forward to the opportunity to provide input. The TNPA questions the appropriateness of any mountain bike tracks anywhere on the upper part of kunanyi. They are incompatible with both the area’s natural values (sensitive sub-alpine terrain including boulder fields), and with its presentation for visitors who are there primarily to appreciate these natural values.

A Finite Amount of Parking on the Mountain

The amount of car parking on the mountain is already a constraint at peak periods and there is very little scope to increase it, **yet this is not acknowledged in any of the proposals to increase use**, most notably the upgrade to the Organ Pipes track (see below).

The Trust endorsed its own *Sustainable Transport System* strategy in 2009 following public input. It doesn’t include a cable car as an option, instead advocating a shuttle bus service run by licensed private operators. The time for consideration of such a service has now arrived. However, no trials or studies have been done, and a carpark with the capacity for several hundred cars will be required somewhere below the bottom of Pillinger Drive (there is no obvious location).

Publicly Funded Visitor Centre for the Springs

In May this year the HCC released the report of a pre-feasibility study on a publicly funded Visitor Centre for the Springs.⁹

At first glance this proposal appears very welcome after many frustrating years watching the HCC look to private developers to provide visitor services on the mountain. However, the pre-feasibility report centres around providing an asset designed to attract more tourists to the mountain.

A Visitor Centre must instead aim to provide a better experience for those who visit kunanyi to enjoy being in nature. The TNPA supports in principle the location of a publicly funded Visitor Centre at middle Springs, but not as currently conceived.

Rejuvenating the Great Short Walk

This project has been promoted as an opportunity to revitalise a 2-3 hour walk on the mountain. It is another part of the HCC strategic proposal *One Mountain, One Destination, Three new visitor experiences*. It encompasses upgrades to the Pinnacle and Organ Pipes tracks and a proposed toilet at the Chalet, and mentions the possibility of a shuttle bus service. It originated largely because of the lobbying efforts of one bushwalker¹⁰. No opportunity for broad public consultation was provided.

⁹ Hobart City Council. *The Springs Visitor Centre: Pre-Feasibility. Final Report* 27 April 2017. Hirst Projects, Melbourne.

¹⁰ Trust Annual Report 2014-2015 p 16: “In June 2015 enthusiastic bushwalker Michael Hawkins put forward a proposal to upgrade the Organ Pipes and Pinnacle Tracks to allow “family access”. At his invitation the Governor, Lord Mayor, President of the Legislative Assembly and members of the Hobart Walking Club, amongst others, inspected the section of the Organ Pipes Track near the Chalet to discuss the proposal. The Trust Chairperson, Manager and Glenorchy Council member, Alderman Haydyn Nielsen, also attended.”

The proposal seems to have been adopted without any serious consideration of whether a major increase in use of these tracks was desirable (and compatible with overall management strategy) or whether spending \$2.3 M would actually make any difference to use of the track. Almost half of the Organ Pipes track has already been re-surfaced under the banner of this project.

The proposal aims to increase the popularity of the Great Short Walk; a walk from the Springs to the Chalet via the Pinnacle & Organ Pipes tracks, presently promoted as either one way or return. The *One Mountain ...* document makes it clear that the plan is dependent on the provision of a shuttle bus service to provide one way walk options, catering for people with differing motivations and levels of fitness. There is no publicly available evidence to show that this transport concept has yet been subject to any serious planning.

In the absence of a shuttle bus, either a very short walk from the Chalet along part of the Organ Pipes Track, or the full descent from the Chalet to the Springs, will require car access to the Chalet, where parking is extremely constrained and there is no possibility of expansion; i.e., it is premature for this project to proceed in the absence of a strategy for getting walkers to the Chalet. This is further evidence of the need for *Visitation* and *Recreation Strategies* which should also address the more fundamental question of whether a major increase in use of these tracks is desirable.

Conclusion

Hobart's eastern face of kunanyi warrants gold standard management.

The HCC and the Trust must abandon both their adherence to the State government policy of trying to attract more and more visitors to the mountain, and their *ad hoc* approach to development. They need to take a step back and consider the big picture. There are few, if any, cities anywhere in the world close to such a magnificent natural feature. Community consensus is needed on kunanyi's future. Is it a resource to be exploited by opening most of the park to mountain biking and maximising the number of visitors, or should its values be preserved and protected so that visitors who seek an experience of being close to nature will continue to find it?

Jane Wilson is a member of TNPA's executive committee. She is currently a Federal public servant and formerly a liaison librarian and medical scientist. Since early 2015 she has walked on kunanyi's eastern face almost every week, at least once a week and sometimes three times a week, except when working on this article. She thanks co-author Nick for his inspiration, his willingness to include this article amongst his many commitments, and his exemplary writing skills.
