



Mr Tony Walker
President
Bushwalking Victoria
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9 June 2014

Grampians Peaks Trail Project Manager
Parks Victoria
Level 10, 535 Bourke Street
Melbourne Vic 3000

Dear Sir/Madam,

GRAMPIANS PEAKS TRAIL (GPT) DRAFT MASTER PLAN APRIL 2014

Bushwalking Victoria (BWV) is grateful for the opportunity to comment on this document.

BWV represents the common interests of over 70 Victorian bushwalking clubs, with over 8,000 members. BWV also aims to proactively represent the interests of all recreational walkers in Victoria as well as walkers visiting from interstate and overseas. One of the common interests of BWV clubs and their members is the conservation of the ecosystems and natural landscapes through which they walk, so that they can enjoy the maximum variety of native flora and fauna and unspoilt scenery and ensure their preservation for future generations.

BWV welcomes the GPT initiative, which if judiciously implemented, will see the creation of an iconic, world class walking track that will draw a wide range of visitors from intrastate, interstate and overseas into the Grampians region to experience some of the best scenery in Australia, enjoy varying, including challenging, grades of walking and attractive accommodation options, and contribute valuable revenue to the local economy.

BWV is comfortable with much of what appears in the Draft Master Plan, particularly as it has had the benefit of input through its representative on the GPT Task Force. However, the Task Force has brought together a number of competing interests, so that the development of the Draft Plan has necessarily brought in its train the dilution or dissolution of some of the views that the different members have brought to the discussion table. As the document is broad-scale in its vision, there are still areas of the Plan about which we have some reservations, and these are set out below.

BWV in general supports the proposition that users contribute to the cost of providing and maintaining camping facilities, trails and other infrastructure in parks. We understand that the proposed pricing structure is based on the concept of cost recovery (construction costs excepted), although experience with similar iconic walks would indicate that that will most likely boil down to partial cost recovery. Nonetheless, the average spend per night (Table 6.2, page 68 Draft

Master Plan) of \$50 for “independent walks” seems to us excessive for a 12-night walk - \$600 for the whole trail – well beyond the means of students, low income earners and those on fixed social benefits, while, given this level of projected expenditure, even somewhat more favoured socio-economic groups might opt for an alternative source of enjoyment that is more cost-effective. That barrier to entry is likely to engender consumer resistance and undermine the financial projections made for the trail..

Even assuming an average sojourn on the trail of only 3 nights (page 68), the expense is still not inconsiderable for the less-financially-well-off levels of society, and we would not wish to see any economic group excluded from the walk. We also note (page 91) that the \$50 proposed is the second highest of the 8 iconic Australian walks (including the GPT) which are referenced in the Master Plan, and we think that it is too high.

We understand that the subject of fees is still open to discussion. We note that large portions of the route the Trail will be approximately following have been walked for free by our members for decades. As we do not want disincentives affecting one-day walkers to be introduced, we would strongly support the view that walking should be free, and that only accommodation should be charged. Although historically, our walkers have camped for free, we recognise that it is appropriate for our walkers to contribute something towards the maintenance of new track infrastructure, much of which will be concentrated at campsites.

We understand that the possibility of bush camps being permitted greater than 1km from set campsites has not been ruled out. While we welcome the flexibility this would allow trail users, we are worried about the ramifications this could have in terms of the health and hygiene of walkers, the environment, water purity and the aesthetics of the Trail. We are also concerned about the charges that would be levied on walkers using bush camps – we do not support charges being applied where no facilities are provided. On balance, we do not support bush camps for the GPT.

We have serious concerns that relate to the safety of walkers on the Trail. One of the issues here is the lack of mobile phone coverage along significant sections of the Trail, and we hope that Parks Victoria will successfully negotiate with Telstra to redress this defect by persuading them to transmit back into the Park (page 93). Lack of mobile phone coverage could have particularly dangerous ramifications in situations of sudden fire emergency.

The lack of potable water along the Trail is another safety issue that needs to be addressed. While we understand that there will be rainwater collected in tanks at formal campsites (which walkers may treat as they wish to effect purity), we are not confident that a sufficient supply will be available, especially in times of drought, to sustain the number of walkers who will be employing the Trail unless they carry a volume which will seriously compromise their ability to walk it.

We think it is a pity that the proposed route of the Trail does not take in more of the magnificent Serra Range. Having said that, we are very happy that the planned route does encompass Redman Bluff, Mt William and Durd Durd. Nonetheless, the Trail would be very much scenically enhanced were it to switch to the Serra Range from the Mt William Range at Jimmy Creek, possibly picking up Mt Nelson on a side track. We support the concept of creating short loop walks associated with the Trail in the Wonderland and Dunkeld-Mt Sturgeon-Piccaninny-Mt Abrupt-Signal Peak areas.

We consider it very important that privately-funded lodges on the Trail should be designed, constructed and managed so as to be visually unobtrusive, and to minimise environmental impact.

We have reservations about the concept of lost environment being replaced by the addition of land elsewhere, as such trade-offs have historically often been less than qualitatively equal. We support the concept of fire-resistant infrastructure, including more use of locally-occurring sandstone, but we would also like to see rust-resistant steelwork that does not become an eyesore with the passage of time. Aluminium denatures during bushfires and is not our favoured option. We support fire-management overlays having the highest possible precedence in GPT planning.

We hope that there will be sufficient Grade 5 portions of the Trail to keep adventurous bushwalkers interested while not deterring less dedicated walkers from undertaking the walk. The reported average of Grade 3-4 represents a reasonable balance, but hopefully this will be skewed towards the Grade 4 rather than the Grade 3, particularly as Grade 3 tracks often come at considerable environmental cost. We prefer unobtrusive tracks that blend into the landscape and provide a challenging walking experience, rather than over-engineered trails, visually at odds with their surroundings, which seek to cushion walkers from every risk.

We do not support “events” being held on the Trail if they have the potential to endanger, or disrupt the enjoyment of other Trail users. We also believe that all Trail users should subscribe to the ‘minimum impact’ ethos supported by bushwalkers.

We trust that comprehensive geomorphological, cultural heritage (with Indigenous consultation) and environmental surveys will be conducted along all sections of the proposed route of the track prior to their opening, in order to protect natural landscapes and important geological features, cultural sites and indigenous flora and fauna.

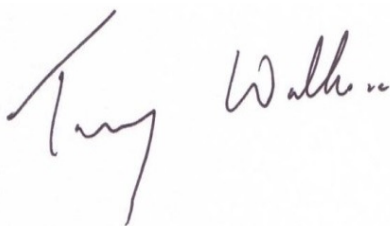
Public transport serving the Grampians area is currently very poor, and if the GPT is to become a viable proposition, we suspect that transport will have to be significantly upgraded to facilitate visitor access to the region generally and trailheads specifically.

There should be toilets at both major and minor trailheads.

The maintenance of the Trail will be a demanding exercise, and we doubt that Parks Victoria will have sufficient staff or funding to achieve it on their own. Given this, we urge that a plan be immediately developed to engage Friends groups, school parties, bushwalking bodies and other volunteers in the ongoing upkeep of the Trail. We also urge the creation and implementation of a plan to involve the NP Advisory Committee in the evolving development of the Trail.

We trust that you will take our views into account in reaching decisions about the final version of the Master Plan.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Tony Walker". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Tony Walker
President
Bushwalking Victoria