



Exciting news – National Parks trails to be reopened for horse riding!

I've been standing in front of you at the AGM every year now for well over 10 years reporting on progress in defending our trails. During that time I've told you about the gradual shift in attitude that we've seen from the National Parks & Wildlife Service, from anti-horse policies and rules to a more positive and co-operative approach.

But I have never had so many exciting developments and changes to report.

Firstly, some of you will remember that at the Putty Ride last year, I announced I had been invited by the then Head of the National Parks & Wildlife Service (NPWS), Sally Barnes, to apply for appointment to the state-wide expert committee providing advice from National Parks stakeholders, known as the Advisory Council. This had to be approved by the Minister for the Environment Robyn Parker, and State Cabinet.

I am very happy to inform you that you now have an endurance rider with a direct advisory role to the most senior National Parks staff in NSW.

You might also recall that at last year's AGM I told you about the revision of the Wollemi and Blue Mountains/Kanangra Boyd Plans of Management, and that I had been asked to write the first draft of the horse riding section for Blue Mountains/Kanangra Boyd. The Wollemi POM revision has been postponed. The details of the horse riding section of the Blue Mountains/Kanangra Boyd plan, as I expected, have been the subject of quite a battle, but this is a fight that I am fully expecting to win.

And why do I expect to win it? That brings me to the most exciting announcement I have ever had the pleasure to make at an AGM. But for those of you who are new to endurance riding, for you to understand the background, first I need to give you a little bit of history.

When endurance riding was young, there were no formal restrictions on where we were allowed to ride. We could ride on existing trails, and we could create new trails, and nobody minded.

Then slowly, National Parks came into existence, and with them came rules and regulations about where we could ride. The conservation movement brought in the concept of wilderness areas where only so-called "self-reliant" recreation was permitted, and the extreme greens convinced National Parks that horse riding was not self-reliant. Many State Forests, which had no restrictions on horse riding, were converted to National Parks or Nature Reserves and their trails were then closed to horses.

When horse riders realised that we were losing our riding opportunities to the lobbying of the highly-organised green movement, a number of groups were formed to fight this trend in the political and bureaucratic arena, including the Public Land User's Alliance, the Outdoor Recreation Party, and the Horse Riders Party. The one which eventually emerged as the most effective and long-lasting was the Australian Horse Alliance, of which NSWERA, represented by myself, is a foundation member.



Over the years, there have been protest rides down Macquarie Street, highly-publicised run-ins with representatives of the green movement, petitions, endless fights over individual parks and individual trails, struggles to have horse riders appointed to local advisory committees and the state-wide Advisory Council, thousands of written submissions, dozens of conferences, and hundreds of meetings with National Parks bureaucrats and politicians from both sides.

Slowly we began to make some progress, and over the past few years you will have heard me sounding cautiously optimistic about the trend I was seeing. We rewrote the internal National Parks horse riding policy to be more horse-friendly; we negotiated the appointment of the first horse riding representative on the Advisory Council, my predecessor Nick Jacomas, and we began seeing Plans of Management for parks which talked about allowing horse riding instead of prohibiting it.

But the one thing that has really turned out to make a difference is a document which I originally thought would not be worth the paper it was written on.

In 2006, the Australian Horse Alliance and the Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group negotiated and signed a Memorandum of Understanding, or MOU with the NSW Liberal/National Coalition, who of course were not then in government. A Memorandum of Understanding is essentially a written record of an agreement.

This MOU acknowledges that many areas were closed to horse riders for philosophical rather than scientific reasons – in other words, because of the opinions of the extreme Greens, not because of any actual impacts. It supports the notion of promoting and encouraging public access by horse riders to reserve areas. Most importantly, it includes a commitment by the Liberal and National Parties to initiate a review of restrictions on horse riding access in national park managed lands.

Well, in 2011 the Liberal/National Party came to power, and as promised in the MOU, the first steps were taken towards a review of existing horse riding trails. On the instructions of the new Premier, Barry O'Farrell, the National Parks & Wildlife Service formed a committee called the Horse Riding in Parks Consultative Group. This group is presently chaired by the Acting Head of National Parks and includes other senior staff responsible for Park Management and for Tourism & Partnerships.

On the horse riding side, the committee includes Richard Smallwood (Convenor of the Australian Horse Alliance), Nick Jacomas (representing the Australian Trail Horse Riders Association and Bicentennial National Trail), Peter Cochran and Clive Edwards (representing the Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group) and myself.

At this point I'd like to give credit to Richard, Nick, Peter and Clive, who together with myself and many others, have spent countless hours fighting these battles on your behalf. Don't get the idea it's just been me. Each of us has contributed in the way that best suited our abilities, and it has been a privilege to work with them.



The first big change to come through these Consultative Group meetings was when National Parks stated to us that when a Plan of Management is silent on horse access, whether for the whole park or on a specific trail, riding IS permitted with consent from the Regional Manager. This represents a major change of attitude. Previously, if a Plan of Management did not explicitly allow horse riding, it was presumed to be prohibited.

This change of attitude alone opens up a whole new realm of riding possibilities without needing a single change to a Plan of Management. A simple phone call, email or letter to the Regional Manager, and a trail which was formerly assumed to be off-limits might become available for training or for use in an endurance ride.

Now the reality is, in some areas where the local National Parks office has a good relationship with riders, this might already be the case. But in other areas with more hostile or more inflexible staff, this could make a big difference.

But the best was yet to come. At the Consultative Group's second meeting, National Parks turned up with a document which mapped the 2006 Memorandum of Understanding, point by point, to the current situation in National Parks-managed lands, and then identified possibilities for future change. This document must have taken hours if not days to prepare. Clearly they have been handed the Memorandum of Understanding document with the instruction: DO IT. MAKE IT HAPPEN.

And so, in a huge turnaround from the days when we were fighting just to keep existing trails open, for 2012 National Parks has made a commitment that in order to provide high quality, sustainable opportunities for horse riding, they will examine options to INCREASE horse riding access.

The Minister for the Environment, Robyn Parker, joined the Consultative Group briefly at its first meeting for 2012 to restate her government's commitment to diversification of recreational experiences and to increased access for horse riders.

To quote from an email from Bob Conroy, Acting Head of National Parks: "I feel that a very positive relationship has been established and that it is clear that the NSW Government, the Minister and senior staff in the NPWS are committed to enhancing access arrangements in parks across NSW."

I can't emphasise enough what a huge change of attitude this represents. For years and years our aim has been merely to prevent the loss of more trails, and to protect what we still have. Now it's like we've been hammering on a locked door for years, and suddenly the door has opened and we've fallen through into a whole new world. It's like Alice in Wonderland.

So, we have government and bureaucracy promising to increase horse riding access – but how exactly?

National Parks intends to focus on areas of highest demand, with particular attention to tracks with cultural heritage significance, and tracks and areas where horse riders would like to have opportunities to ride.



Cultural heritage can mean riding history and tradition, for example trails used in early Quilty rides or other early endurance rides; historic routes used by bushrangers, stockmen or Cobb & Co coaches; or just places which are precious to horse riders for personal or historical reasons.

Highest demand means that riders need to speak up now. The squeaky wheels will get the grease.

So what new riding opportunities can we look forward to?

Options being considered include:

- reopening trails closed to horses under present policies and management plans
- rediscovering forgotten or disused trails
- allowing horses where never previously permitted
- creating new link trails to form loop rides

I need to emphasise that these are options, not guarantees or definite plans yet.

We've been told to focus on the future rather than on the past. National Parks won't be opening up trails just because they used to be open to horses. If nobody wants to ride there any more, there's no point wasting our efforts on them. That's why "demand" is so important. We're only talking about opening up trails that are actually going to be ridden on. We have to be realistic and ask ourselves "will I really use this trail or not?" We mustn't get over-excited and ask for every trail in every park. National Parks time and resources are limited so we will have to be selective when it comes to actually making things happen.

On the other hand, just because no-one has been allowed to ride on a trail in the past, this no longer means you automatically can't ride on it in the future.

We all know how much more enjoyable it is to ride a circuit rather than turn around and come back the same way. We all know how much safer and more pleasant it is to have a ride leg that's made up of one or more loops rather than going out and back with riders passing each other in opposite directions. Now at last National Parks understands this too.

So I have some homework for you all.

Ask yourself three questions:

- Where would I like to ride?
- Why would I like to ride there?
- What connecting links between trails would create loop rides?

Don't worry about the current status of the trails, let us sort that out. Everything under National Parks management is open for reconsideration. The only areas we can't look at are private property, which includes mines and quarries; state forests; catchment areas; and crown land.



Think about how creating new link trails could provide new options for endurance ride courses as well as improving your training tracks. National Parks thinks endurance riders are wonderful - we have insurance, we have an organisational structure with National, State and local committees, and we have proven ourselves to be responsible riders who take care of our parks. Ride committees have formed good relationships with local National Parks offices and rangers. We can now make all of these things work to our benefit.

So , your heads are probably already buzzing with ideas – trails you'd like to explore, trails you used to ride on, trails you'd like to connect up. What happens next?

What I need you to do is, identify the trails or locations by

- drawing them on a map
- describing them using specific place, trail or road names
- marking any obstacles to access like locked gates, cattle grids or fences
- if possible, identify the park they are in

The more information you provide, the better – you can make it easier for us and for them.

In some cases you might just be able to photocopy a page from a street directory or use a local tourism map. National Parks Head Office can also provide maps to help us if you need them, but you will have to be able to tell me exactly which park and/or location you need the maps for. Also the National Parks maps are not always detailed enough, and too often they don't show all the trails. Topographical maps are usually the best, and in fact old topo maps are even better, because they often show trails which have mysteriously disappeared from the more recent editions.

As well as the maps, you need to provide some accompanying information. No particular format, point form or handwritten is fine, but it needs to be written down.

- Include information on why you and others would like to ride there.
- Get other riders involved - not just endurance riders but anyone who uses trails in your area. Remember National Parks will give priority to areas of highest demand. Also try to collaborate when drawing the maps so I don't get multiple sets showing the same trails.

Ideally I'd ask you to get together with your friends and have a brain-storming session, so that I end up with just one set of maps and one set of suggestions for a particular area. Maybe the Zone committees and ride committees can step in here and co-ordinate some sessions, and this might also be a good way to economise on the cost of maps. Otherwise I'm going to be struggling to collate and combine all the feedback that comes in.



- Describe how you can help – if you are willing to pay for a gate, say so! If you are willing to give up some time working to clear a track – say so! National Parks is making a big push for partnerships with volunteers, so don't be concerned if you are asked to sign a volunteer form – it puts you in a stronger position in your dealings with National Parks and could possibly give you authority to do things you might not otherwise be allowed to do.
- Provide your contact details so that I or National Parks can contact you for more information, and list all the people who have contributed to your proposal
- You may be asked to show National Parks the trails or areas, whether by car, on foot or on horseback. Or you might be asked to meet with them at your local National Parks office to go over the maps.

You can make it happen – not me. I need you to take ownership of your trails, and make an effort. I can't do this alone, I'm really counting on you for support.

Now, this is very important: SEND me the information – don't just tell me! My contact details are always in the newsletter. You have to put it down in writing and on maps. You can then get it to me by post, email or by handing it to me at a ride.

Please don't rush up to me in the next break or at the next ride to describe your suggestions in great detail – it won't mean anything to me, I won't remember, and National Parks can't act on it without specific details. By all means check with me if you need something clarified or if you need help with getting maps, but there's only one of me, and I simply can't memorise all of your local trails, and I would like to have a conversation about something else just occasionally!

The sooner you can do this, the more quickly we can start to act on your trail suggestions, and the more likely we are to make it happen. We have the momentum now, National Parks is ready to act, and I'm confident that the first wave of changes will start happening fairly quickly. We're targeting the second half of March for a review of our first list of proposals, so that doesn't leave a lot of time.

Although there will be other opportunities later – this is not your only chance - if you leave it for six months, you could be waiting a lot longer to see some action.

Each proposal will be assessed on factors such as

- suitability of the location
- feasibility of opening it to horses
- level of demand
- legal obstacles
- practical obstacles
- cost



The National Parks buzz-words are "low impact" and "sustainability". It's anyone's guess how this will actually be interpreted. Indications are, however, that the "blame game" is over, and instead of pointing fingers at horse riders and accusing us of damaging the bush, National Parks will be working with us instead of against us, and using what they call an "adaptive management framework" to minimise horse riding impacts through such things as trail maintenance, monitoring of usage levels, and partnerships with horse riders as volunteers assisting with park management. That means ride committees in particular, but individuals as well.

Obviously, it will be easier, quicker and cheaper to reopen a closed trail if it still exists in fairly good condition, than it will be if the trail is completely overgrown. However, reopening disused or overgrown trails is still a possibility, especially if you are prepared to share in the work, so dust off your old maps, dig deep into your memories, and see whether there might have been a trail there in days gone by.

Practical obstacles are most likely to be cattle grids, or locked gates which are often only intended to keep out 4WDs and motorbikes but which also prevent horse entry. So don't forget to mark these on your maps. National Parks doesn't fully understand yet that it's not good enough to say you can pick up a key when you want to use a trail. Sometimes the office with the key might be several hours drive away, and you need to pick up and return the key during business hours, which is not practical for most horse riders.

So we need to keep pushing for "step-overs" or cavaletti gates like in SA and Canberra, which prevent vehicle entry and discourage motor bikes. These have already been used in a small number of NSW locations, and we are trying to get them more widely adopted.

Legal obstacles include Plan of Management wording, current National Parks internal policies and other land management interests such as overlapping catchment areas. All these things are under discussion but they are much harder to overcome.

Proposals to create new link trails are likely to require an Environmental Impact Statement so these are also going to take some time to bring to reality and may be faced with some opposition.

And finally, we can dream all we like, but National Parks is a government department on a shrinking budget, so low cost proposals are much more likely to happen – and in larger numbers - than expensive ones.

Sponsorship is not out of the question. Peter Cochran from the Snowy Mountains Bush Users Group has already negotiated substantial sponsorship for the construction of a section of trail in the Snowy Mountains which takes part of the Bicentennial National Trail off a main road and into Kosziusko National Park.

OK, so you've given me your maps, your list of trail names, and all the details of why we should open them up. What happens next, and how do you stay informed on what's happening?



I won't be able to keep all of you individually updated on the progress of your specific proposal. There will be too much going on, and I won't be personally involved in all of it. So you will need to watch and listen for progress updates which I will try to provide in various ways:

- in the newsletter
- on the chatline
- on the website
- to your Zone Delegates
- announcements at pre-ride talks

The Zone Delegates are likely to have a role to play here. National Parks will be given up-to-date contact details for Zone Delegates as key contact points for their area. Zone Delegates can put local National Parks offices in touch with the right people with knowledge of specific trails or areas, or help to coordinate meetings between horse riders and National Parks staff. Or you might be contacted directly by someone from your local Parks office.

Finally, please - be patient!

- It won't happen overnight
- Some changes will be quicker than others

Each change will be taken on a case by case basis, and some might sound wonderful on paper but turn out to be impossible to put into practice.

The initial priority will be given to "quick wins" where all that is needed is something fairly simple to arrange, such as the Regional Manager's consent, or the installation of a gate or step-over. National Parks are keen to demonstrate to us that these changes are not just more talk, and we've told them that in order to recover horse riders' trust and confidence, they will have to prove themselves willing to follow through.

In the best case scenario, all it will need is agreement from the Regional Manager, not even necessarily in writing, so in these cases we might be able to arrange for access permission quite quickly.

More often, there will be barriers in the form of current National Parks internal policies covering that particular land classification, so the policy will have to change before the situation does.

Some Plans of Management make specific statements which will prevent access, and these will need to be amended before access is allowed. Those amendments must be passed by State parliament. It may be possible to put them through in batches rather than one by one, but this could also take some time.



Most importantly,

- Don't anticipate by riding on trails BEFORE they are officially open to horses
- Don't create any new link trails without formal consent from National Parks or you could be prosecuted

If we jump the gun we could get ourselves into all sorts of trouble. All of this doesn't mean we CAN ride in these places yet, only that we have taken a major step towards being able to. I know you're going to want to rush home and start exploring, but at this point you'll need to do that exploring on foot or on paper, or in your memory or in your imagination.

But I am very, very optimistic that we will start to see trails re-opening soon, and that we will continue to see these changes happening for quite some time to come.

Fiona Meller