Office of Environment & Heritage
NSW National Parks & Wildlife Service

Recreational Activities

Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area

Discussion Paper

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Introduction

A new plan of management is being prepared by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) for Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area.

Discussion papers have been prepared to describe and explore challenging issues that need to be addressed in the new plan. These papers are designed to help people understand each issue and generate discussion and ideas. Community feedback will help inform development of the new plan of management

This paper should be read in conjunction with the discussion papers on visitor destinations, mountain biking and commercial activities.

The challenge

The challenge is to protect the natural environment and cultural heritage of the parks and provide an enjoyable and rewarding experience for visitors.

Purpose of this paper

This paper invites discussion about how we can continue to provide recreational opportunities for park visitors and protect the natural and cultural values of the parks. Development of the new plan of management provides a crucial opportunity for considering new ideas and developing options to meet these dual objectives.

Recreation management

Recreation management in these parks has two key elements:

- **managing visitor destinations** (also referred to as precincts) where large numbers of visitors spend time picnicking and relaxing. Options for the future management of these parts of the park are addressed in the discussion paper on visitor destinations.
- **managing the wide range of recreational activities**. Activities in these parks range from walking, running, and mountain biking to swimming, kayaking and horse riding. They occur in a variety of different landscapes across the parks and make use of facilities such as tracks, trails, toilets, camping areas and parking.

Factors affecting how we manage recreational activities

- Royal National Park is one of the most visited parks in NSW, with over 3.2 million visits in 2014.
- Royal National Park is within a 30 minute drive of some of the densest urban areas in Australia, has easy access by car and public transport, and is increasing in demand as open space for these communities. It is expected that visitation to these parks will continue to grow.

- Visitors to these parks participate in a wide variety of recreational activities, including walking, mountain biking, running, fitness training and exercising, nature-watching (birds, whales etc.), surfing, swimming, fishing, kayaking, as well as horse riding, car touring and other activities. Visitor safety and managing conflicting activities are important components of recreation management.
- These parks cater for different physical capabilities and types of nature-based experiences, from family picnicking, café lunches and drive-in beachside camping to remote walking tracks and self-reliant overnight hikes.
- Visitor expectations and interests continue to evolve and change. There are increasing numbers of people coming to these parks seeking new places to go and new ways to experience the outdoors. Interest in these new places or activities is increasingly driven by social media.
- Many people visit parks to enjoy natural surroundings and get away from everyday life. Maintaining these qualities of naturalness and remoteness has to be balanced against the provision of visitor facilities that may be needed to protect the environment and ensure an enjoyable experience.
- At certain times of the year the demand for some visitor facilities, e.g. toilets, carparks and in some instances walking tracks, is more than the environment and the facilities can cope with. The location of visitor facilities, the types of infrastructure and technology used, and how we manage the numbers of visitors are all key factors in making visitor facilities as sustainable as possible and minimising impacts on the environment.

Planning for the future

Walking

There is an extensive walking track network in Royal National Park. In Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area this network is less developed and relies more on walkers using management trails (these are formed trails used by park management vehicles).

Future directions – walking

Future management of the walking track network will focus on sustainability and visitor safety by progressively improving track condition and increasing directional signposting.

Options include:

- using raised boardwalks, or other protective techniques, to reduce erosion and surface impacts of tracks where necessary. In some cases, tracks may need to be rerouted, closed or new connections made to address existing issues
- providing toilet facilities for some busy tracks to reduce impacts on the surrounding areas and ensure a good experience for walkers
- for track improvements, giving priority to tracks with high visitor use or where there are significant impacts on park values
- for considering proposals for new walking tracks, weighing the potential benefits against the track maintenance requirements and any environmental impacts.

Royal Coast Track

The Royal Coast Track is the busiest walking track in Royal National Park with an estimated 90,000 walkers each year. The number of people walking this track has significantly increased in recent years, attracted by spectacular coastal views and scenery.

Some parts of the track are overgrown, eroded and lacking adequate signposting. Some of the related existing camping and accommodation opportunities are not adequate for this iconic walking experience.

Future directions – Royal Coast Track

The NSW Government continues to progressively upgrade the Royal Coast Track to improve visitor experience and environmental sustainability.

These works started at Bundeena and will progress southwards. So far section from Bundeena to Wattamolla have completed including boardwalk, stone steps, small viewing platforms, rest stops and walking bridges. Work has also been completed at the southern end of the track at Burning Palms and North Garie Headland.

Upgrades will continue over the next few years with Wattamolla to Garie Beach the next major section scheduled for completion.

Future management options include:

- expanding camping and overnight accommodation along or in proximity to the Royal Coast Track at Wattamolla and Garie (see the discussion paper on visitor destinations)
- exploring overnight accommodation at Garawarra Farm, linked to increased opportunities for Aboriginal community involvement and promotion of cultural values at this location (see the discussion paper on Aboriginal cultural heritage and landscapes)
- closing the existing North Era campground to overnight camping, due to the difficulties in servicing and maintaining this remote site. Camping at this site could possibly be considered under a permit system for guided walks by commercial tour operators or supervised groups
- implementing a booking system for walking the Royal Coast Track. Similar approaches are used in national parks around the world to ensure the use of popular tracks and trails is sustainable and visitor enjoyment is not diminished by overuse or crowding

NPWS anticipates that improvements in track condition and accommodation will further improve the visitor experience of this iconic walk

Mountain bike riding

The demand for mountain bike riding opportunities in these parks has significantly increased in recent years.

Future directions – mountain bike riding

A strategy for managing this activity is presented in the discussion paper on mountain biking.

Camping

There are two types of camping facilities in these parks: car-based camping, available at Bonnie Vale campground in Royal National Park, and a limited number of walk-in camping areas for bushwalkers currently located at North Era and Uloola Falls in Royal National Park. Heathcote National Park has walk-in camping only at Kingfisher Pool, Mirang Pool and Lake Eckersley.

Future directions – camping

Future management of camping activities will focus on minimising the environmental impacts of camping and strategically locating camping areas to improve the experience for visitors.

Options include:

- establishing an on-site campground manager for Bonnie Vale campground and considering other options for accommodation in the campground, including cabins or semi-permanent tents
- providing camping/overnight opportunities at Wattamolla, Garie and Garawarra Farm for walkers, groups and commercial operators using the Royal Coast Track. Overnight opportunities for drive-in visitors could also be considered at some or all of these locations.
- continuing to require booking for all overnight accommodation including camping
- using small-scale camping platforms where possible to minimise impacts on the ground, support an efficient booking system and ensure a comfortable stay
- locating camping areas where they can be readily accessed for servicing and where supporting facilities such as drinking water and toilets can be provided
- considering closing camping areas that are difficult to access for maintenance, e.g. North Era camping area, or limiting more remote camping options to those supported by experienced and licensed tour guides or supervised groups, enabling remote experiences to be provided safely and with minimal environmental impact
- providing overnight hard-stand for campervans at an appropriate location in Royal National Park
- investigating how best to provide for public camping and for camping as part of a commercial tour or organised group.

See the paper on visitor destinations for further discussion of future options for camping and overnight accommodation at Bonnie Vale, Wattamolla and Garie.

Horse riding

Horse riding is currently permitted with consent on a number of management trails in Garawarra State Conservation Area. These trails provide for short, day use trail riding. There are no facilities in these parks for holding yards or camping with horses.

Horse riding tour groups accessed Kellys Falls for many years before the area became part of Garawarra State Conservation Area. This activity is currently unauthorised and there is evidence of adverse impacts close to the top of the falls.

Future directions – horse riding

Future management of horse riding activities will focus on ensuring that existing authorised management trails are well-signposted and horse riders are well-informed about where they can ride. Given the environmental values of the parks and the need to balance access and recreational use across a range of activities, NPWS does not proposed to provide additional authorised access for horse riding.

NPWS will consider whether there is an ongoing need for non-commercial users to obtain consent before using the authorised horse riding trails in Garawarra State Conservation Area.

Horse riding access at Kellys Falls could be authorised – restricted to a licenced commercial tour operator. Group size, frequency and location could be managed through the licensing process. This would ensure that impacts on the environment, including the watercourse, and impacts on other visitors, are appropriate and acceptable.

Adventure activities

Activities such as rock climbing, abseiling, canyoning and hang gliding etc. are referred to as ‘adventure activities’. These activities can risk the safety of people involved or those observing and as such they require consent from the park manager (under the National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2009). Some adventure activities have the potential to damage fragile rock features such as caves and outcrops and any associated Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Future directions – adventure activities

The current approach to management of these activities will continue, with written consent required for all adventure activities.

Water-based activities

Access to water is a major attraction for visitors to these parks. Coastal visitor precincts in Royal National Park, at Bonnie Vale, Wattamolla and Garie, provide beach access for swimming surfing and fishing. Limited beach patrols are provided by surf life-saving clubs at beaches at Garie, Burning Palms and Era.

Boating on Port Hacking and the Hacking River offers a scenic alternative for appreciating Royal National Park. Kayaks, canoes or small boats can be carried across the beach to access the Hacking River at Reids Flat and Port Hacking at Bonnie Vale day use area. Public moorings are available for overnight stays in South West Arm, off Port Hacking, and a boat wharf is available just below Audley Weir for boats to tie-up and access facilities on the shore. Boat hire is also available from the historic boat shed above the Audley Weir.

Fishing is popular from coastal rock platforms in Royal National Park. Freshwater fishing is permitted. However, the use of traps, such as for yabbies, is not permitted to protect the freshwater ecology of creeks and rivers in the park.

Future directions – water-based activities

NPWS involvement in the management of boating activities is generally limited to the onshore component of this activity. However, Royal National Park is also one of the few parks in New South Wales which protects land below the high water mark, encompassing the marine beds of South West Arm and Cabbage Tree Basin. Once on water, boating activities are subject to relevant maritime regulations.

Options for the future management of boating activities by NPWS include:

- phasing out the launching of power boats or jet skis from Bonnie Vale day use area. This will improve safety for the large numbers of swimmers and beach users, protect the fragile dune system and improve pedestrian safety in the carpark
- considering providing boat tie-up access as part of the adaptive re-use of Simpson's Hotel site at Bonnie Vale
- examining how to improve boat access to Audley, while continuing to restrict the launch of private craft above the weir
- retaining the six public boat moorings in South West Arm to mitigate the impact of vessels anchoring on the seabed. Moorings are available to the public on a 'first-in first-served' basis with an occupation limit of 24 hours.

Group activities

Group activities are popular in these parks, and involve activities such as fitness training and exercising, walking and nature appreciation. Group activities may be commercially run operations, where people pay to participate (see the discussion paper on commercial activities), or be undertaken by non-paying clubs, groups or gatherings.

Currently, non-commercial group activities in these parks require consent for groups of over 20 people. All commercial activities require a consent or licence, regardless of the number of participants.

Organised groups can provide opportunities for people who would otherwise not be able to experience the parks. Guided group activities can promote environmental or cultural understanding and reduce environmental impacts by ensuring that activities follow guidelines for low-impact use. However, large-scale group activities in key visitor destinations need to be managed to minimise impacts on other park visitors. Guided experiences are available through the NPWS Discovery program and commercial tour operators. Commercial tour operators are required to be licensed by NPWS (see the discussion paper on commercial activities).

Future directions – group activities

Future management of group activities will focus on recognising the opportunities these activities can provide for visitors, and ensuring that environmental impacts and impacts on other park users are minimised through the licensing or consent process.

Access to particular locations of Royal National Park for large events, such as competitive sporting or fundraising events, may need to be limited or carefully managed through booking

systems to minimise impacts on environmental values and other visitors. This may include popular locations such as Audley and the Royal Coast Track.

Another option for these parks is to allow non-commercial activities without consent for groups of up to 40 people – as required by the National Parks and Wildlife Regulation – rather than the current limit for these parks which requires consent for groups over 20 people.

Drones and other remotely controlled aircraft

The use of drones (unmanned aerial vehicles [UAV] or remotely piloted aircraft [RPA]) is becoming increasingly popular for recreation and commercial activities such as photography.

Use of drones and other remotely controlled aircraft in parks can interfere with visitor enjoyment and privacy, and can impact wildlife. Drones can also dangerously interfere with park operations, such as fire management.

Drones are aircraft and are covered by civil aviation laws. NPWS does not control aircraft above parks, but can regulate certain behaviour in parks.

NPWS has developed a Drones in Parks policy. This policy requires visitors wishing to use drones in parks to obtain consent from the park manager. This policy will be reviewed later in 2017. (See the Drones in Parks policy for where to submit comments for this review.)

NPWS needs to balance the commercial and recreational use of drones and other remotely controlled aircraft in parks with the protection of wildlife and the appreciation and enjoyment of a park's natural and cultural values.

Future directions – drones

Opportunities for the use of recreational drones in these parks are limited by the availability of open space, and the large number of visitors frequently using of these open areas for picnicking and relaxation.

Anyone operating a drone must comply with Civil Aviation Safety Authority (CASA) rules. The requirement for drones to be kept 30m away from other people, means that this activity is generally not appropriate in high use visitor precincts, as it can impact on other people's enjoyment, safety and privacy.

For these reasons, there are likely to be limited opportunities for drones to be used in these parks.

The approach to managing this issue will be further considered in developing the plan of management and after considering community views. It may be determined that there are no locations in these parks where drones are appropriate. However, if it is found that there is some scope for such activities, written consent from NPWS would still be required. Consent would only be granted after considering the location, time and likelihood of impacting on other park users and the natural or cultural values of the park.

Commercial use of drones, as with all commercial activities, requires consent (see the discussion paper on commercial activities).

Information about the restrictions on the use of drones will be clearly communicated to park visitors on signs and park information.

Access to parks may be restricted or prohibited on days of heightened fire danger.

Future directions for planning recreational activities

Adaptive management

Recreational activities in these parks continue to evolve and change. New activities emerge and new locations attract visitors. Park managers must continually review and assess the impact of activities on park values, other visitors and public safety. Responding to these changes requires us to continually review and adapt our management approach.

Capacity management

Managing visitor numbers in peak season is a high priority if we are to deliver high quality visitor experiences and protect the parks' environmental values. Future management needs to include innovative approaches to capacity management including online booking for particular locations or experiences.

Partnerships

Visitor experiences can be expanded and enhanced through partnerships with communities and commercial operators. Future management needs to encourage these partnerships to deliver high quality visitor experiences that promote and protect park values.

Volunteering

Volunteering programs and activities build connections between NPWS, communities and individuals in supporting park operations or conservation projects. Volunteering as a recreational or tourism experience is also increasing in demand. Expanding the range of opportunities for volunteering can deliver a rewarding experience to volunteers and significantly contribute to the operations of the park.

Opportunities could include involving volunteers in interpretation of park values, track maintenance and visitor engagement, such as the NPWS Campground Host Program. Volunteers from other organisations such as surf life-saving clubs also provide volunteer services that benefit park visitors. Friends of Royal (Friends of the Royal National Park Inc.) is a voluntary group with the goal of protecting, preserving and appreciating Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area. This group runs a range of volunteer activities that contribute to management of these parks.

What do you think?

Your thoughts, ideas and comments on this discussion paper are now invited and can be provided using an online submission form, by email to royal.plan@environment.nsw.gov.au or by writing to The Planner, NPWS, PO Box 144, Sutherland NSW 1499.

All input will inform the development of a new plan of management for Royal National Park, Heathcote National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area.

There will be another opportunity to have your say when the draft plan is completed and put on public exhibition. If you would like to be notified when the draft plan is available, please register your details.