



WILDFLOWER SOCIETY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA (Inc)

## Position Statement

# Mountain bike trails in the Conservation Estate

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The Wildflower Society of Western Australia (the Society) is opposed to the development of trails for mountain bike riding, within the conservation estate, unless the areas proposed for development are completely degraded.

### Background

#### Area of Application

In Western Australia, the Conservation Estate is a collective term which includes national parks, conservation parks and nature reserves. These reserves contain the State's most significant natural and cultural heritage assets. For this position statement, A Class reserves are included as part of the Conservation Estate as the term "A Class" is used solely to protect areas of high conservation or high community value and are afforded the greatest degree of protection under the Land Administration Act.

Other areas of high conservation value are protected under the federal Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation (EPBC) Act, the WA Biodiversity Act and planning legislation. This includes areas that contain Threatened or Priority Ecological Communities, Regional Parks and Bush Forever sites.

For the purposes of this position paper, all of these areas are considered part of the broader conservation estate.

#### Definition of the Activity

Mountain biking is a sport of riding pedal/electric powered bicycles off-road, often over rough terrain, usually using specially designed mountain bikes.

#### Current Situation

Currently mountain biking is promoted through WestCycle and described in the Western Australian Mountain Bike Strategy 2015-2020 and actively promoted to Local Government and the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA) as a key activity to boost local tourism. It is estimated that almost 120,000 mountain bikes are purchased in WA every year with 80% of the riders being in the 25-50 age group and only 12% of riders being female.

Mountain biking is promoted as a highly competitive sport with major events of national interest being conducted annually at Dwellingup and in the South-West Capes region. The Munda Biddi Track is a popular mountain biking route and attracts an informal competition between riders to establish records for completion of sectional, one-way and return journey tours. Anecdotal evidence suggests such competitions make trails unsuitable for casual riders and they often involve night riding, which brings additional issues with it.

## Impacts of Mountain Biking

Mountain bike riding is an active, rather than a passive, recreational pursuit. Mountain bike trails cater for many diverse levels of interest, expertise and skills. Mountain bike trails may be located on flat land or in hilly terrain, but all usually involve the construction of a suitable trail which caters for the level of challenge desired.

As a consequence, mountain bike trails when established in native vegetation cause a number of unacceptable environmental, social and cultural impacts. These include the following:

- destruction and removal of native plants;
- disturbance and loss of native animals;
- interference with the breeding of native animals;
- erosion;
- reduction of safety for walkers;
- introduction of weeds and disease such as *Phytophthora* dieback via bikes and equipment;
- destruction of and interference with sacred sites, especially on mountain peaks;
- disturbance of peaceful surroundings; and
- damage to views and landscapes.

The impacts of mountain bike trails on plants and animals does not stop at the edge of the trail but can extend for more than 10 m either side of the physically cleared area. Further, mountain bike riders are frequently not content with the officially constructed mountain bike trails, resulting in additional or interconnecting trails being created by enthusiasts without authorisation and using unacceptable techniques or with inappropriate features.

Construction of multiple trails in a single natural area, results in fragmentation of the area with an increased edge/area ratio of those fragmented patches. This results in increased potential for weed and disease introduction, impairment of key ecosystem functions, isolation of flora and fauna, and the disruption of animal movement pathways within the original area.

## Considerations (associated with the development of mountain bike trails)

The Society holds the view that mountain bike trails should not be constructed in the conservation estate, nor in areas containing Threatened or Priority species or Ecological Communities. Furthermore, WSWA believes that National Parks and Nature Reserves are for the conservation of nature and pedestrian recreation only, not higher impact recreational pursuits such as mountain biking, trail bikes or horse riding.

Any proposal to construct mountain bike trails that involves the clearing of native vegetation must undergo environmental impact assessment which is open to public submission. Nonetheless, the Society holds the view that intact native vegetation should not be cleared specifically to accommodate mountain bike trails. Rather, mountain bike trails could and should be built on already cleared and/or degraded land, such as the following:

- land that has already been utilised for other recreational pursuits such as horse riding or motorised sport;
- non-native forests and plantations;
- cleared paddocks;
- old degraded road/rail alignments; and
- abandoned mine and quarry sites.

Mountain Bike Master Plans should be carefully developed after surveys and preliminary consultation with stakeholders. Environmental and cultural surveys should be a prerequisite for all Mountain Bike Master Plans. To avoid any real or perceived conflict of interest, these surveys should also be undertaken by competent, independent consultants. Finally, the Master Plan needs to include active enforcement measures, trail maintenance programs and actions to be taken for the rapid removal and repair of any unauthorised trails by the manager of the facility.

The focus for location of trails should be on degraded areas without a specific nature conservation purpose, to give mountain bike riders what they are after, whilst also ensuring the protection of natural areas and areas of passive recreation. Siting mountain bike trails in areas to be revegetated, other than those established as offsets for land clearing, would deliver multiple benefits, including utilising currently degraded, under-utilised areas, carbon capture and storage, delivering tourist attractions and creating custom-designed trails.

Further, any proposed mountain bike trails must not be in areas prone to land degradation and the number of mountain bike trails permitted in any one area should be minimised. Future expansion of established trails should not be permitted where the expansion may impact environmental and cultural values of the area.

If DBCA is to be a proponent for mountain bike trails in an area, or mountain biking, it should not be part of the evaluation team for Master Plans. Rather, DBCA's involvement should be to actively discourage establishment of mountain bike trails within areas of the conservation estate.

E-mountain bikes should be considered a motor vehicle and be restricted to road access in any area. They should not be used on mountain bike trails, in much the same way as off-road motorcycles are not permitted to use those areas. Existing road accesses within the conservation estate, on which the public is currently permitted to use a motorised vehicle, should be accessible for e-mountain biking.

There should be regular reviews of performance and environmental impact of any mountain bike facility. There should also be a rehabilitation plan for disused tracks or if the facility fails in some way.

**Endorsed by the Society's Management Committee at its meeting on 23 March 2022.**

Wildflower Society of Western Australia (Inc.) [www.wildflowersocietywa.org.au](http://www.wildflowersocietywa.org.au)