



Thursday June 16th, 2022

The Manager
Planning and Assessment
NPWS
Locked Bag 5022
Parramatta NSW 2124

Dear Sir/Madam,

Submission of the Gardens of Stone SCA draft plan of management

Wilderness Australia, founded in 1968, is Australia's the oldest wilderness conservation group. The organisation has played a critical role in the gazettal of over 2 million hectares of wilderness and many national parks and reserves, including this reserve.

Wilderness Australia welcomes the NSW Government's reservation of Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area on May 6th, 2022. We wish to ensure this reserve is a success and make the following suggestions and comments that seek to improve conservation outcomes, visitor experience and benefits to the Lithgow community.

The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area should be managed primarily for nature conservation, and appropriate visitor use must be *compatible with* conservation of heritage values¹. The region is a natural wonderland, and the 'theme park' elements of the proposed management will, if adopted, reduce reservation benefits.

Most visitors enjoy nature best if well-designed, nature-focused facilities are provided, such as walking tracks, carparks and lookouts serviced by good 2WD roads. Visitor access and facilities should be defined on the map in the reserve's plan of management through an open transparent process. This tried and proven approach has enabled effective visitor management for decades.

Tourism growth should not be an objective as proposed for reserve management, as nature-focused tourism best flows from reserve management that protects and presents the outstanding values of the Gardens of Stone. The management principles of the state conservation area are enshrined in the objects of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974. These principles require tourist use to be compatible with the conservation of the reserve's natural and cultural values.

The adventure tourism proposals in the draft plan demonstrate the consequences of ignoring this legislated compatibility with nature principle. As the following sections explain, not only are these tourism proposals environmentally damaging, they harm visitor enjoyment, put visitors off and reduce tourism. Ironically excessive pursuit of tourism growth will result in less benefit to Lithgow because of conflicts between visitor groups and the lack of attention to environmental restoration.

Direct visitors to Lithgow

Reserve management plan should remove the proposed visitor entry to the reserve by Old Bells Line of Road from an eastern entrance at Clarence. Visitors will be put off by a large, ugly quarry on this entry route. Visitors who use this road will also probably leave the reserve by this route, and so bypass Lithgow. Also, there would be no time-saving benefit for visitors travelling west by the Great Western Highway to use the Old Bells Line of Road. The time taken to reach the reserve using the Great Western Highway via Lithgow and then State Mine Gully Road is no slower than going by Clarence.

A prominent heavy truck warning sign is required at Clarence near the Zig Zag carpark to direct reserve visitors to Lithgow. The warning sign is necessary to prevent traffic accidents, as visitors inexperienced with dirt road driving will otherwise risk dodging large 5-axle trucks with dog trailers that use this narrow, winding road. Further, proposals for lookouts at Bungleboori Creek south, Bald Trig and Farmers Creek Dam should not be developed as these draw visitors to this access route. The Old Bells Line of Road entry defeats intended creation of a network of access and facilities that would make Lithgow the visitor hub for the reserve.

A 2WD vehicle circuit loop road benefits more visitors

To make Lithgow the hub and gateway to the reserve, a 2WD vehicle tourism loop road is required. This 2WD vehicle loop road can be created by upgrading Maiyingu Marragu Road. By upgrading this road, the proposed visitor facilities at the Temple of Doom, the Wolgan Gorge lookout and Wolgan Falls lookout that stem off this road become available to almost all reserve visitors, including families, education groups, tourists, grey nomads and most special interest groups.

The loop road is a key element in visitor management design proposed by environment groups in the *Destination Pagoda* vision document as it associates visitor infrastructure with Lithgow and builds community connections and Lithgow's 'pagoda brand'. These additional facilities will relieve visitor pressure on the over used Glow Worm Tunnel attraction and can be associated with environmental restoration work as proposed in the draft Master Plan.

Protect wilderness

The draft plan should ensure 2,351 hectares of NPWS identified Wollemi wilderness in Bungleboori, Nayook and Dingo Creek catchments are unspoilt by infrastructure and access. These areas should be declared under the Wilderness Act. The proposed visitor management in the draft Master Plan is generally compatible with this proposal, except that the redundant northern Deep Pass access road in Wollemi National Park that should be dispensed with.

Keep Lost City for quiet enjoyment from the proposed iconic lookout

The proposed visitor precinct at Lost City, a vast natural monument of pagodas in sandstone, needs to follow the example of Echo Point where the Skyway and Scenic railway aren't in view of the Three Sisters but tucked round the corner. The proposal to locate adventure tourism facilities prominently at the bottom of the iconic Lost City pagoda complex in the view from the proposed lookout above it creates significant visual blight and logistical difficulties. Large numbers of adventure tourists must

find their way from the zipline landing platform to the top lookout. Invariably road access will be required to the adventure base at the foot of the Lost City pagodas to service these users.

The reserve's proposed adventure tourism hub is better located just over the hill from Lost City in pagoda studded State Mine Creek gully. Adventure tourism would then compliment the mountain bike trail network proposed for this scenic valley. Users of ziplines, flying foxes, raised walkways and via ferrata ladders can then experience the enigmatic Sphinx Pagoda landscape. The State Mine and Lost City roads provide access to the top and bottom zipline platforms without additional intrusive access infrastructure, and so is a more efficient solution. The savings made on infrastructure expenditure for adventure tourism at this location would perhaps permit acquisition of the State Mine gully land.

Separating passive enjoyment of Lost City views from the excitement of adventure tourism at State Mine Gully creates better visitor experiences. The Mountain Bike Hub, with adventure facilities and perhaps a coffee shop at the State Mine Heritage Park and Railway Museum creates unimagined tourism potential for the museum, without impacting the new reserve. It could help create a 'History World' destination at the Museum, perhaps generate sufficient visitor traffic to justify future provision of steam trains to and from Lithgow town centre along the existing standard gauge spur line.

No Built Accommodation

The proposal for up to four commercial accommodation units or glamour camps in the reserve are opposed. The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area should not have high end facilities that set aside in the best parts of this reserve for those who can pay. All visitors should have access to those sites. The best attractions must not be monopolised through commercial tourism leases negotiated in private.

The proposed cabins or glamour camps will require road access, as many heavy items must be driven in daily, such as fresh food and wine, and energy resources for the lavish meals prepared in a kitchen. These requirements increase the development footprint in prominent scenic locations. For these reasons the Wilderness Australia opposes the proposed accommodation hubs that alter the experience of nature. The appropriate recreational enjoyment compatible with nature conservation does not extend to built accommodation with additional road access.

The relatively gentle terrain of the new reserve makes it ideal for inexperienced walkers and campers. Wilderness Australia supports the proposed multi-day walking track loop that would assist inexperienced walkers to gain bush skills. Experience teaches campers that all you need to enjoy an overnight walk are good skills and light weight gear.

Access provisions

Wilderness Australia supports proposals to restrict vehicles, including motorised trail bikes, to approved park roads as indicated on a map in the plan of management. Vehicle access should be primarily on 2WD park roads accessible to all, with minor provision of 4WD trails where they can be managed sustainably and at low cost.

The proposed "open door" management provisions for negotiation of additional approved access routes through private consultations with the stakeholder groups who want it is strongly opposed. Special management arrangements for trail bikes and 4WD vehicles that have caused so much

damage to the Gardens of Stone region is inappropriate. If adopted, these management proposals could lead to an access free-for-all where everyone is disadvantaged by the stress of user conflicts and further environmental damage. Access decisions must be made through the plan of management by an open public processes.

Use of biodiversity offset funds and integration of environmental restoration with other aspects of reserve management

The Gardens of Stone region has been neglected for decades and past damage will require priority restoration during on-going management, as well as through reserve establishment. The Statement of Management Intent sets restoration priorities, and so it is surprising that the dPoM does not continue with them.

Centennial Coal's contributions payments to swamp and other national heritage offset funds are part of the reserve budget. Works proposed to spend this fund should be defined in the plan of management. In representations to the former Federal Environment Minister, the Hon Sussan Ley, the Blue Mountains Conservation Society wrote:

'Reservation would protect and improve the affected swamps of the new reserve to achieve a conservation gain through integrated reserve management by the NPWS. If fire, visitor use and pest species management are not integrated through reserve management plan, then protection of these national listed swamps remains difficult and ad hoc under schemes like the Saving our Species program. These swamps are currently under threat from, among other things, inappropriate visitor use by trail bikes and other offroad vehicles who ride through them. Reservation under the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974 provides additional management that is agreed by the community through a thorough public process. This is the best way to protect these nationally threatened swamps on public land.'

This arrangement is agreed by Centennial Coal, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the NSW Department Planning, Industry and Environment as the most practicable way to protect the remaining swamps on this spectacular region. There is little public transparency if the management measures taken to protect national heritage values and spend the biodiversity offset funds are not detailed in the plan of management.

The NSW Government allocated \$50 million for capital works to build visitor facilities and roads. Up to half of these funds are to provide capital works that subsidise infrastructure to support the proposed commercial adventure theme park and accommodation facilities.

The remaining allocation for reserve establishment is the \$28 million in the biodiversity offset fund. Wilderness Australia is concerned that a large chunk of the offset fund will go towards general reserve operations and staff employment.

Biodiversity offset funds are provided as compensation for the harm caused to those aspects of nature that are nationally listed. This Fund is not a fund for our benefit, but for nature's benefit. The biodiversity offset funds should not be used for general park operations, environmental restoration associated with visitor facilities, or the employment of staff. Except in limited circumstances, such as an elevated walking to present a nationally endangered swamp, visitor facilities should usually avoid areas with national heritage values and even in these circumstances it is doubtful if the use offset funds is appropriate.

Pine plantation restoration

The former 2,000 hectare pine plantation should be rehabilitated with endemic native species to restore the natural, low-density woodlands of Newnes Plateau. Only modest revenue from storing carbon through environmental restoration works would be appropriate.

Any proposals to change national park laws to permit carbon farming in this or for any other reserve would be inappropriate as it would change the pine plantation into a carbon farm and work to defeat the purpose of reserving the area.

The draft plan of management must be redrafted and re-exhibited

The current draft plan of management does not describe the proposed conservation works undertaken using the biodiversity offset fund or outline restoration works for the former pine forest. The draft plan fails to make Lithgow a gateway town located at the hub of 2WD suitable tourism loop road of unique pagoda landscape attractions that almost all visitors may enjoy.

The draft plan proposals for the Lost City attraction will disappoint most visitors who come to view the stunning geodiversity of this internationally significant pagoda landscape. Many will see the adventure facilities as visual blight.

As a result of these failures in environmental restoration and presentation of significant heritage values, the projected levels of tourism growth are unlikely to be achieved by this draft plan of management.

Due to these failings the draft plan must be revised so it defines the location and extent of proposed visitor facilities and access, with criteria set out that ensure this work is done in an environmentally sustainable manner and in accordance with the NPW Act.

Issues and comments on specific sections of the draft plan of management

Introduction

Page 1, Line 1 Correction:

Reservation date for the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area is the date of proclamation, 6 May 2022, not the 29 April 2022 as stated.

Page 1, paragraph 5, add: 'Clarence Colliery' and 'Angus Place Mine'

Insert: 'Clarence Colliery': that has been in operation since 1974 and has a consent that runs until 2026. Also insert of 'Angus Place Mine' which has been in care and maintenance since 2015 and has a development consent that runs until 2024. These coal mines underlie the reserve.

Page 1, paragraph 6, addition: 'Turon River'; as its headwaters include Baal Bone Creek catchment that is within state conservation area.

Planning Context

Page 3, paragraph 4: after Springvale Mine ... 2028 ...

Insert 'Clarence Colliery has current consents that run until 2026 and Angus Place Mine which has been in care and maintenance since 2015 and has a development consent that runs until 2024.'

Section 3.2 The Park Planning Framework

Page 4, paragraphs 1 to 3: The claim in this draft Plan that the NPWS 'implements plans of management through a framework-based approach to park operations' is misleading because the proposed approach defines a scheme of operations (SOO) that will, if adopted, set a precedent for reserve management in NSW.

The proposed framework of strategies does not define a scheme of operations (SOO) as previously understood. The draft plan is apparently inconsistent with the requirements of section 72AA(4) as only high-level broad objective and strategic intentions are set out, and these provide little certainty for future management outcomes to guide park operations. Without defined management outcomes it is difficult to track delivery of these proposed strategic intentions. This proposed framework of strategic intentions has questionable legal standing and is probably invalid. The proposed SOO lacks a clear definition previously provided by clear statements of intended management outcomes that were referenced to the map in the plan of management.

NPWS plans of management have typically outlined a SOO for work on visitor facilities through the identification of specific footprints for the work on a map. These previous plans of management set out what would be done in each visitor facilities footprint and set criteria that required the works to be undertaken in a sustainable manner and a set timeframe.

When work was of a detailed nature, precinct plans for a proposed activities are sometimes used to provide more specification. These precinct plans are usually advertised.

The Gardens of Stone SCA draft plan of management sets a precedent by proposing a different, intermediate planning step to a precinct plan. The draft Plan of Management proposes short-term service delivery plans (pg 4).

The draft Master Plan is the one of perhaps eight of these short-term service delivery plans. It proposes an 'aspirational set' of visitor facilities that are beyond delivery by the reserve's \$50 million budget. Further, neither the draft Plan of Management or Master Plan explains and defines in precise terms the SOO for visitor management aspect of the planning framework.

The draft plan of management only defines proposed visitor facility locations for commercial operations by a small map (figure 3, page 11) giving the footprint for the adventure activity precinct and seven 'approximate locations' for accommodation nodes, out of which up to four locations may be selected for development.

SOO should be detailed in the draft plan of management, not in secondary documents with no legal force. The draft Master Plan contains ambiguities regarding visitor management intentions for its aspirational range of works, a selection of which may go into a final SOO. Seven of the short-term service delivery plans for reserve management indicated in the park planning framework (Fig 1, pg 4, dPoM) are yet to be exhibited.

The proposed scheme of operations (SOO) is clearly incomplete and inadequate. The SOO should include those for reserve operations after reserve establishment, including those carried over from the Statement of Management Intent. The current plan just focuses on the strategies needed to establish the park and commence its protection (pg 4). Experience indicates that plans of management operate for over a decade before public review and amendment, so the life of this plan of management will extend beyond reserve establishment. The draft Plan's strategic intentions also fails to adequately outline SOO's for environmental restoration.

Given these uncertainties and inadequacies, the draft Plan of Management and draft Master Plan are part of a penultimate set of planning documents that might be organised into an defined SOO.

The draft plan of management requires significant revision to include SOO specification for reserve establishment and operation phases.

Page 4, paragraph 4: The management actions in a dPoM are usually tabulated into a set of short, medium and long term action priorities. The reference in the draft Plan to all strategic intentions being of 'a high priority that will be implemented in the short to medium term' assumes that the plan of management will not continue beyond reserve establishment phase.

Page 4, paragraph 5: The draft plan of management reference to the development of a Master Plan that will determine 'specific type and location of new infrastructure and the location of areas to be designated' ... for visitor activities is also an admission that the dPoM does not set the SOO.

'Plans of Management' are proposed to be developed and implemented as described in Figure 1. This figure is also not a scheme of operations but a 'mind map' to develop a set of detailed but non-integrated work programs across eight plans. Further, many of the strategies in the draft Plan are intentions, not strategies and fail to give adequate guidance to the delivery of these subordinate plans. In the case of the draft Master Plan, the authors decided that replication of the objectives and strategies was necessary to frame that document.

A strategy is a plan of specific actions designed to achieve an objective. The proposed park planning framework in figure 1 shall create a lot of eight times the paperwork of the usual draft plan of management and will fail to deliver an integrated scheme of operations that could deliver effective reserve management.

4 Management objectives and strategies

Page 5 Section 4.1 Establishing a major new visitor destination

Strategies

The 2-wheel drive access roads proposed by the draft plan will actively discourage most visitors from accessing the reserve by Lithgow as primary access is by Old Bells Line of Road, defeating the the inappropriate objective; tourism growth.

The proposed 4-wheel drive touring routes strategic provide access to the Temple of Doom, Wolgan Gorge lookout and Wolgan Falls lookout, will remain inaccessible to many visitors. Visitors who own a 2-wheel drive vehicle are unlikely to use the proposed 4-wheel drive tourist loop road with Lithgow at its hub. As a result, the access strategy will not deliver to Lithgow the full potential benefit of this reserve.

Other than for vehicle access, this section contains no objectives or strategies for 'Establishing a major new visitor destination in the Blue Mountains' only a list of intentions. The draft plan of management is unclear on what is intended to be achieved other than a scatter of visitor sites, camping sites, recreation tracks and trails, and a multi-day walk in the reserve.

4.2 Setting a sound foundation for the conservation of biodiversity

The management principles specified in the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974 for SCAs need to be fleshed out by strategies with specific actions to present and protect the heritage values of the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area. If management actions do not restore this reserve as a

priority, then tourism growth is unlikely, as nature-focused visitors will not visit this degraded reserve.

Page 6 The Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area is probably the most well researched nature area to become a NPWS reserve. The statement that ‘further work is required to identify gaps, share knowledge and establish a solid foundation for future conservation work. NPWS welcomes partnerships with universities, researchers and scientific specialists to progress projects that will inform conservation work’ is true of any reserve, but less so for this reserve than others.

The first restoration action should be to *collate the existing knowledge* and work with local experts like Dr Ian Baird, Roger Lembit as well as Centennial Coal consultants to develop a SOO for environmental restoration works. There is no need to ‘reinvent the wheel’ when a great deal of local knowledge exists from decades of environmental impact assessment and monitoring, as well as independent research.

The statement ‘A thorough understanding of the impacts arising from threatening processes – including erosion of tracks, subsidence of upland swamps, pest animals, weeds and habitat fragmentation arising from past activities – is required to inform management of natural values’ assumes that local experts with decades of working knowledge do not know what should be done to restore the reserve. This is just not the case.

4.3 Supporting Wiradjuri aspirations for Council

Page 7 Wiradjuri objectives and strategies should be defined through consultation, and all management actions must ensure that cultural heritage is protected.

Wilderness Australia supports a revised draft Plan of Management that details the specific works and actions recommended by the Aboriginal community through agreed objectives and strategies.

4.4 Assisting the recovery of a landscape under stress

Restoration must be part of reserve establishment. The draft plan should specify under this section a SOO to use the environmental offset money on environmental restoration as a high priority and in a manner that integrates with other aspects of reserve management.

Killing pines and pine wildlings should be part of reserve establishment, in addition to facilitating the return of endemic vegetation to the former softwood plantation area. There is also an inconsistency with the draft Master Plan. The proposal in the draft Master Plan to delay the pine forest restoration for at least five years, is inappropriate.

Page 8

Wilderness Australia strongly opposes any proposal to amend the National Parks and Wildlife Act to ‘boost investment and enable carbon and conservation works’. A carbon project beyond the legal requirements would inappropriately replace the previous softwood plantation with a tree farm for little or no conservation gain.

Restoration and rehabilitation are allowed under the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1974 if conservation of biodiversity is achieved. If the draft Plan of Management contains a SOO produce carbon gains, these must be specified for an environmental restoration objective that specifies the use of endemic native species at low planting densities appropriate for Newnes Plateau forests.

A carbon ‘investment’ project was poorly delivered in nearby Capertee National Park where a depauperate grassy woodland was densely replanted with species from another forest ecosystem.

This carbon project damaged that park as the objective was to secure a carbon investment, not to improve nature conservation outcomes.

Authorised Activities Table 1 Page 9,

Mining: add 'Clarence Colliery' and 'Angus Place' to this list of mines.

Accommodation: The proposed development and operation of built commercial accommodation are opposed by Wilderness Australia. Built commercial accommodation should not be provided in a State Conservation Area as leasehold title creates exclusive possession that displaces the public from the use and enjoyment of the best camp sites.

Adventure recreation infrastructure: Development and operation should be relocated to State Mine Gully to prevent Lithgow's best scenic attraction, Lost City, being blighted by the range of facilities proposed to be installed front of the best viewpoint, the Marangaroo Creek South locality.

State Mine Gully is a superior location for elevated walkways, zip-lines, rope swings, high ropes, via ferrata and flying fox infrastructure because better, shorter road access is available to the top and bottom platforms in this gully. Further, this location ensures that the State Mine Railway and Heritage Park benefits from the visitation generated by being beside these facilities. The State Mine Gully site is on offer to the NPWS and its acquisition may be cheaper than the cost of subsidised provision of access and infrastructure to the Lost City site.

Operators of the adventure hub will require good vehicle access between the zipline launching and landing pads. Lost City will require constant maintenance of 10.6 kilometres of dirt road; and State Mine Gully has 2.4 kilometres of road, mostly on sealed pavement. State Mine Gully is a kilometre from power, water and sewage services, while the provision of these services at the more remote Lost City locality would be much more expensive.

Page 10

Vehicle access must be on approved roads as indicated on the plan of management map. The statement that 'Vehicle access may also be authorised on additional roads and trails upon their designation for vehicle access', is strongly opposed. The plan of management will fail to effectively regulate use if it is open-ended and can continue to grant further access to user groups.

Similarly, the proposed horse riding provision is opposed in the State Conservation Area. The statement that 'It may also be authorised on additional tracks and trails upon their designation for horse riding' opens up the reserve to unspecified horse riding opportunities. The proposed cycling provision is also opposed in the State Conservation Area due to the unspecified cycling opportunities the provision creates.

As previously stated, motorised trail bikes and 4WD vehicles have caused much damage to the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area. Wilderness Australia strongly supports the restriction of motorised trail bikes and 4WD vehicles to approved park roads. If open-ended provisions are adopted, however, the draft plan proposals will lead to an access free-for-all where everyone is disadvantaged by the stress of user conflicts and further environmental damage. Access decisions must be defined on the plan of management map by an open public process.

The proposal that 'Wood fires are prohibited elsewhere' is contrary to past bush walker use of this reserve. Wood fires out of the fire season should be permitted for bushwalkers.

Page 11 Figure 2

The location of access roads indicated in figure 2 requires definition of proposals for 2WD road

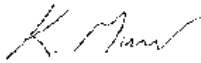
access and 4WD road access, in addition to the definition of public and park roads. The northern road to Deep Pass should be closed and rehabilitated. One road to the Deep Pass camp site is adequate. Closure of the northern road to Deep Pass permits the extension of the NPWS identified Wollemi Wilderness over the Nayook Creek catchment.

Page 12 Figure 3

The location of visitor facilities is incomplete requires definition of all proposals, not just the proposed commercial facilities.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Yours sincerely,



Keith Muir O.A.M.
Hon Project Officer
Wilderness Australia

ⁱ dPoM, Appendix B, section 30G of the NPW Act, clause (e).