

EcoNetwork – Port Stephens Inc.

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SUBMISSION

Re: Tomaree National Park Plan of Management - Draft Amendment including the Draft Tomaree Coastal Walk Strategy

EcoNetwork-Port Stephens is a grassroots community-based environmental and sustainability network comprising 25 community and environment groups and eco-businesses with a focus on sustainable planning. We are non-party political and do not donate to political parties. The comments that follow relate mainly to environmental aspects of the proposed Tomaree Coastal Walk.

EcoNetwork in principle supports the Tomaree Coastal Walk as set out in the Plan of Management Draft Amendment. We believe that nature walks if they are largely unobtrusive and sensitively planned to minimise environmental impacts, can be ecologically sustainable while benefitting the local and wider community.

- They connect people with the natural environment in a uniquely personal way.
- The experience provides an appreciation of the value of the natural environment that might be otherwise be out of reach
- Such an appreciation is vital to generating support for conservation per se and protection of native habitat
- Making it easy to access spectacular views and flora including wildflowers is likely to encourage walkers to stay 'on trail' and reduce the likelihood of some making their own routes through the bush with resulting negative impacts.

Native fauna and flora

Among species encountered on or near the Tomaree Headland summit walk, and which are very likely to inhabit the proposed walk corridor are echidnas, diamond pythons, koalas and lace monitors, and of course many bird species. In relation to flora, apart from eucalypts, there are abundant species including Eastern Myall Wattle found in the southwest slopes, and Bracken Fern on the lower slopes and flourishing in the gullies of remnant soils. Umbrella Palm can be seen from walkways on the lower west and south west slopes. Further south on existing walking tracks

rare orchids including the Tomaree Orchid may be encountered. We recommend consultation with the Port Stephens Walking Group, who know the location of these orchids. Construction of the walk needs to be done in a manner that minimises disturbance to native animals and flora.

A stated objective of the Tomaree Coastal Walk is to “provide a signature walking experience with part, single and multi-day walking opportunities...” To this end, feeder trails and links enabling **circular paths** could be included and shown in the Strategy and the proposed Master Plan. Circular paths would allow walkers to be less reliant on pickup and set down points. For example, an upgrade to existing trails on Tomaree Head and the connection to the Shoal Bay foreshore at the northern eastern end could allow for a one-way circuit trail connecting the Summit from the point where it departs the red brick path, should be feasible economically and environmentally. We acknowledge that the current trail is narrow creating considerable cross-cutting though our casual observations that is predominately by runners. If the current trail was retained at existing width, permitted in one direction only and cross cuts rehabilitated, would another new path to complete the circuit be possible? Having the summit component as a circuit rather than an ‘up and retrace’, would reduce congestion between head-on groups and improve the visitor experience.

The proposed walk passes coastward to the treatment plant at Boulder Bay. We recommend retaining the existing access link from Boulder Bay Road to Big Rocky (which passes through sections of macrozamia), enabling this popular section of the walk to be undertaken as a shorter walk, linking to form part of a circular walk. Several circular link opportunities exist between Shoal Bay and the Big Rocky track that could be identified to complement the project [Western Australia’s Cape to Cape Track although a much longer trail, incorporates many circular walks identified in a book “Walking in Circles”]. A walking link from the 2WD carpark at the southern end of the Big Rocky 2WD track could be included. While the proposed wetland walk may link to various carparks, existing informal walk tracks on the eastern side of the 4WD track (currently featuring a 4WD barrier) should be signposted.

Where circular tracks are NOT possible, we recommend that information on the proposed trail identify where existing Port Stephens bus routes can be used for pick up and set down opportunities. For example, walkers commencing at Tomaree Head and exiting at Box Beach or Fingal Bay could connect with the bus that routes along Tomaree Road and Marine drive. This strategy reduces the need for additional parking: An extra 500m - 1 km is not a problem for walkers. The bus also links at Boat Harbour, and a new link walk track from Birubi SLSC through the park near the Gan Gan Road Beach Access would enable bus links at this end point of the Coastal Walk.

Wetland

The potential for a boardwalk associated with the wetland area, while out-of-scope, has been identified in this strategy. While this would bring an additional visitor experience to the area, and opportunities to link with the Koala Sanctuary and Treescapes, it would be better to avoid impacting an area of landscape that seems not to have existing intrusions. While out of scope, the wetland at the rear of Shoal Bay has several old vehicle tracks which could be enhanced with boarding in some wet areas to bring a wonderful additional experience for locals and visitors wanting a short and predominately shady walk near town and beach.

Sand hills

We are concerned that where a walk corridor traverses a sand hill (such as between Box Beach and Fingal Bay) that it does so without damaging dune vegetation and grasses that act to stabilise dunes. We recognise that NPWS will take contours into account, but we are not totally convinced of the need to traverse dunes. While sand trails can be very scenic and a great experience, our preference would be for the trails to be set in forested sections and avoid sand except in rare instances.

Aesthetics

One objection raised against the proposed walk is that it will ruin otherwise pristine views of hills such as Stephens Peak and Quarry Hill, especially from the summit of Tomaree Head, by creating a scar across the landscape. However, they are distant views, limited in perspective and what may be seen will depend on the type of construction, the width of the trail and the extent of the canopy. For example, except for a small section of metal walkway near the top, the existing walk up Tomaree Head can hardly be seen from western Shoal Bay – we would hope that the proposed walk is similarly unobtrusive.

Parking

Parking will be a key issue at walk access points and the Plan of Management Draft Amendment mentions that NPWS will liaise with Port Stephens Council about car park upgrades. However, one area needs special consideration and that is parking near the entrance of the main walking track to the summit of Tomaree Head. The plan mentions that around 200,000 visitors use this track each year. Once work has been completed on the walk visitor numbers can be expected to further increase. Furthermore, tour companies are likely to include the walk as part of their offerings. This raises the question of parking for coaches as well as private cars. At present parking is woefully inadequate even for current numbers. The best solution is to have the grassed area (locally known as the rabbit patch) at the vehicular entrance to Tomaree Lodge adjoining the start of the walk to be opened up for parking. Obviously, this will require agreement by Communities and Justice, should that department continue to have jurisdiction over the Tomaree Lodge precinct. By the

time the Coastal Walk is completed Tomaree Lodge will have been vacated (the remaining residents are scheduled to be transferred to group homes by December 2019). Access to the 'rabbit patch' can be provided via a side entrance after moving the boom gate further east along the roadway. The likelihood of extensive patronage will require a hard surface to be constructed. Who will pay for this? Maintenance of this car park and others at the various access points will require close cooperation with Port Stephens Council.

Other entry locations requiring attention include Box Beach, Barry Park, Fingal Bay SLSC (highly congested at holiday time), One Mile (may need hard surfacing), Boat Harbour, Fisherman's Bay (on-street only) and Birubi (very congested). Also, if there is to be a Wreck Beach access point the only parking currently available is on-street.

Helicopter flights to Fingal Island

The draft amendment makes mention of the possibility of helicopter flights to Fingal island as part of a licensed commercial activity. Although not part of the proposed coastal walk, we would like to comment as follows: we are not convinced about the value of helicopter flights to Fingal Island because they introduce a noisy element of commercialisation that will benefit relatively few visitors to the area. The Fingal spit undergoes washouts from time to time, preventing access by foot to the Island and lighthouse. However, it has always been known to recover, and when it does, provides at low tide safe access from Fingal Bay beach.

Signage

Interpretive signage will play an important part in making the walk more meaningful in terms of whale watching and identifying local flora and fauna (especially threatened species like sea eagles and oystercatchers), geography, geology, Aboriginal middens and remnants of military history. We suggest NPWS investigate the following:

The story of our volcanic coast and ancient lava fields, understood to date back more than 14 million years. These are evident along the coast from Tomaree Headland to Birubi Point in the form of rocks of rhyolite granite or what is known to geologists as ignimbrite with andesites among other strata. Where vents have breached the earth's crust molten lava has formed cones, one of which is now barely visible on Samurai Point between One Mile and Samurai Beaches. Ancient lava fields with dykes can best be appreciated at Morna Point at low tides.

History of sea level rise and fall, accompanied by local sand dune formation around 17,000 years ago, followed by colonisation by vegetation communities and formation of wetlands.

Notable shipwrecks – more than 20 have been recorded on the proposed walk coastline. The most notable are: SS Oakland (28.5.1903) north east of Cabbage Tree Island – 12 crew die; SS Macleay (11.10.1911) southeast of Little Island- 15 crew die; SS Cora Lynne (16.11.1914) Wreck Beach; SS Pappinbarra (11.9.1929) Point Stephens (Fingal Island); SS Wallamba (11.7.1923) Morna Point; Barque Olmara (27.9.1903) Birubi Point. There are the unmarked graves of around 12 shipwrecked seamen noted at the Birubi Point Heritage Cemetery. Other wrecks include the SS Thordis (4.3.1906) on Yacaaba Headland.

Military remnants

The gun emplacements, radar platform and other military structures identified on the Tomaree Headland summit walk are only part of what is in reality a large open-air military museum on the Tomaree Lodge peninsular. The torpedo tubes platform, Hotchkiss cannon fort and WWII Heritage listed lodge buildings should be included in the story, even though they are not on NPWS land. Ideally there needs to be an interpretive centre, perhaps located within the lodge and while this may be outside the purview of NPWS, we feel there needs to be some engagement with the lodge site management otherwise the narrative will not be complete.

Further consultation

Computer modelling would assist the community in forming an opinion on potential impacts. We acknowledge that the Master Plan will provide more detail for community consultation. It would be useful for the Interpretation Plan to be similarly available.

Conclusion

EcoNetwork in principle supports the Tomaree Coastal Walk. We believe that nature walks if they are largely unobtrusive and sensitively planned to minimise environmental impacts, can be ecologically sustainable while benefitting the local and wider community. In terms of accessibility, we recommend that where possible circular walks be factored in for the sake of walker convenience. Where this is not possible, walkers should be advised how they link with Port Stephens bus routes. Given the plans for Tomaree Head, local parking is likely to be a major issue and the grassed area (locally known as the rabbit patch) at the vehicular entrance to Tomaree Lodge should be opened up for parking. Finally, signage should take account of our volcanic coast and ancient lava fields, and notable shipwrecks.



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on behalf of EcoNetwork-Port Stephens Inc.