

## **Long-Distance Walking Tracks: Offering Regional Tourism in the Slow Lane**

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## **Long-Distance Walking Tracks: Offering Regional Tourism in the Slow Lane**

**ABSTRACT:** Nature-based destination tourism has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, particularly in Regional Areas. This type of tourism is for people who do not want to merely passively view scenic landscape but to actively immerse themselves within it, for example by undertaking long-distance walks. Many tourism agencies and local governments have responded to such demand by developing, branding and promoting ‘walking products’; overseas examples include the UK’s Pennine Way, the USA’s Appalachian Trail, Peru’s Inca Trail and New Zealand’s Milford Track. In Australia, enthusiasts can tackle the Overland Track and South Coast Track (Tasmania), Larapinta Trail and Jatbula Trail (Northern Territory) and Thorsborne Trail (Queensland). Such products offer benefits to visitors in terms of healthy exercise undertaken in stunning scenery, along with enhanced awareness and appreciation of the natural environment. Local governments, commercial tourism operators and land conservation agencies within whose purview such walks are located, derive economic benefits in terms of increased employment and/or income with minimal outlay in the development of the walking tracks. In this paper we review trends in consumer behaviour driving demand for such products; describe a proposal for a new long distance walking track in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area in New South Wales; and consider potential regional economic benefits arising from such products.

**Keywords:** long-distance walks; bush recreation, enhancement of regional economy, camping holiday, multi-day hiking

### **Introduction**

Tourism has been estimated to account for approximately 10% of worldwide gross domestic product (Balmford et al., 2009) and, internationally, nature-based tourism has been one of the fastest growing segments of the industry in recent decades (Goodwin, 1996; Davenport et al., 2002; Balmford et al., 2009). The same trend has been observed in Australia, where nature-based tourism is also a growing segment of the tourism market (Newsome et al., 2002; Pickering and Hill, 2007; Balmford et al., 2009). However, the attraction of nature for recreation is not a recent phenomenon.

The practice of walking for health, pleasure and recreation was already a well-established pastime of Europeans before their arrival in colonial Australia. Within Australia, the emergence of ‘bush tourism’ was particularly encouraged by the works of artists and writers who extolled the virtues of the Australian bush. As a consequence, walking for pleasure became a popular pastime.

Early ‘bushwalking’ attractions were the landscape and bushland around Katoomba, west of Sydney in the Blue Mountains (Harper, 2007). This area has remained one of

Australia's premier tourist destinations (Hardiman and Burgin, 2013). Another early outcome of the popularity of bush recreation was the gazettal of the first national park (Royal National Park) in Australia, and the second in the world, in 1879 (Burgin, 2015). However, destination nature-based tourism is not simply an historic pastime. It has witnessed substantial growth in recent years, particularly in Regional areas such as South-West Tasmania (Byers, 1996) and the Mount Kosciuszko Alpine Area (Pickering and Buckley, 2003; Pickering et al., 2003).

Many nature-based tourists do not, however, choose to merely passively view scenic landscapes but wish to actively immerse themselves within them, for example by undertaking long-distance walks. Indeed, 'real' bushwalks are often conceived as being long-distance walks of multiple days, with the walkers being self-sufficient and camping on-route. This type of multi-day walking is growing in popularity (Harper, 2007) and such walking holidays (cf. hiking; trekking) are a fast growing sector of the tourism industry. As a consequence, internationally, many tourism agencies and local governments have responded to such demand by developing, branding and promoting 'walking products' (e.g., the Pennine Way [United Kingdom] - TPWA, 2015; the Appalachian Trail [USA] - National Park Service, undated; the Inca Trail [Peru] - Andean Travel Web (2000-2010); the Tongariro Northern Circuit and Milford Track [New Zealand] - Department of Conservation [a] and [b], undated). In Australia, enthusiasts have a range of choices including the Overland Track and South Coast Track (Tasmania; The Sunstand Pty Ltd, undated); the Larapinta Trail (Epicurious Travel, undated); the Jatbula Trail (Northern Territory; Parks and Wildlife Commission NT, 2015), and the Thorsborne Trail (Queensland Government, 2015)<sup>1</sup>. Independent studies suggest that: (i) a walk of 5 nights/6 days duration has greatest appeal; (ii) the setting should be diverse and spectacular and must be moderately difficult yet challenging (Parks and Wildlife Service, 2007). The strong and growing popularity of such long-distance walking tracks is illustrated by two Australasian examples: (i) the Overland Track, Tasmania, where walker numbers increased from 1,407 in 1971-1972 to 7,902 in 2013-2014 (Parks and Wildlife Service, undated), and the Milford Track, New Zealand, where walker numbers increased from 6,749 in 1995-1996 to 14,700 in 2006 (Department of Conservation, 1998; 2006). Both tracks now charge user fees and have walker numbers 'capped' in peak season to manage visitor demand and environmental impacts.

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<sup>1</sup> For summary information see Table 1.

Table 1: Examples of overseas and Australian long-distance ‘walkers-only’ tracks

Trail	Length (km)	Location	Visitors per annum	Reference
Appalachian Trail	3,354	USA	~2-3 million (sections); ~200,000 entire length	Appalachian Trail Conservancy (undated)
Pennine Way	429	UK	~200,000 (sections); 1,500-1,700 entire length	Peak District National Park Authority (undated)
Inca Trail	43	Peru	Annual visitors unknown; daily walker limit 500	Andean Travel Web (2000-2010)
Tongariro Northern Circuit	43	New Zealand	5882 entire length in 2010/11; walker number limits & booking required	Harbrow (undated)
Milford Track	54	New Zealand	~14,700 entire length in 2006; walker number limits & booking required	Department of Conservation (2006)
Overland Track	65	Tasmania	7902 entire length in 2013-14; walker number limits and booking required	Parks and Wildlife Service (undated)
South Coast Track	85	Tasmania	~1300 entire length	DPIPWE (undated)
Larapinta Trail	223	Northern Territory	>1000 (sections + entire length)	Mackay and Brown, 2004
Jatbula Trail	62	Northern Territory	Annual visitors unknown; walker number limits & booking required	Parks and Wildlife Commission NT (2015)
Thorsborne Trail	32	Queensland	Annual visitors unknown; walker number limits & booking required	DNPSR (2015)

All the long-distance walking tracks mentioned in Table 1, (i) rely upon stunning scenic beauty as a major element of their appeal; (ii) are located within national parks for all or most of their length and (iii) are ‘walkers-only’. However, other popular long-distance walking tracks may be partly or wholly accessible to other modes of recreational transport, including horse riding, mountain biking and motorised vehicles and traverse a wide range of public and private land tenures. Australian examples of such multi-use and/or multi-tenure tracks include the Bicentennial National Trail (Anon., undated a; Bicentennial National Trail,

2015), the Great North Walk (Anon., undated b; NSW T&I, 2010a), the Hume and Hovell Walking Track (NSW T&I, 2010b), and Six Foot Track (Life's An Adventure, 2009).

The Bicentennial National Trail was originally developed as a horse-riding trail and is now also open to walkers and cyclists. Stretching 5,330 km along Australia's eastern seaboard, it has been reported to be the longest waymarked trail in the world (Anon., undated a; Bicentennial National Trail, 2015) and takes travelers through a huge variety of landscapes as it follows the foothills of the Great Dividing Range and the Eastern Escapement from Cooktown (Northern Queensland) to Healesville (Victoria). The Great North Walk (Anon., undated b; NSW T&I, 2010a) also passes through many different land tenures and landscapes, including the vineyards of the Hunter Valley, along its 250 km route between Sydney and Newcastle city centres. Another track, the Hume and Hovell Walking Track (NSW T&I, 2010b) follows the 1824 expedition route of its explorer namesakes and so adds cultural to natural heritage appeal to attract walkers to its 440 km of walking trail (some sections are also open to motor vehicles and cyclists) between Yass and Albury (NSW). Along its route it provides exposure to a wide range of historical features including Aboriginal, explorer, agricultural, and mining history (Daly and Daly, 2012).

A final example of the appeal of long-distance walking tracks is the Six-Foot Track (NSW T&I, 2010c). Located to the west of the Blue Mountains (NSW), this track follows the old bridle trail between Katoomba and Jenolan Caves. The track is 44 km in length with two overnight stops, with the full walk typically taking 2.5-3 days. Despite not being located within a national park, with no outstanding scenic beauty, and walkers forced to share the track with 4WD vehicles and/or mountain bikes for approximately 40% of its length (pers. obs.), the track is extremely popular, with its own Website and Forum (Sixfoottrack.com, undated). The track is waymarked and the majority of walkers are self-guided, although commercial guiding and portering are available (e.g., Life's An Adventure, 2009). Annually, it receives thousands of visitors, and on weekends and public holidays the track is especially busy with vehicular traffic. Many of the walkers are relatively inexperienced, often tackling their first multi-day walk (pers. obs.). The track is also used for an annual charity fundraising marathon race, which had in excess of 1,200 entrants in 2015 (Sixfoot Track Marathon, 2015).

In this paper we have thus far shown evidence of trends in consumer behaviour indicating strong and growing demand for long-distance walking tracks, both internationally and in Australia specifically. We suggest that the development of such tracks, if well located and marketed, would act as powerful drawcards to attract tourist dollars to Regional Australia

where such products do not currently exist. For example, income could be generated via increasing demand for fuel, accommodation and hospitality, food and supplies for such walks and, in addition, as souvenirs, tour guides, and portage.

We will now provide a proposal for a new long-distance walking track as an example of what could potentially be achieved, and lastly comment on the potential economic benefits of such walking tracks in Regional Australia.

## **Proposed Track**

### *Site Description*

The proposed track is located within the Greater Blue Mountains, a segment of the Great Dividing Range where it abuts the eastern edge of the Greater Sydney urban conurbation. The Blue Mountains have been a nature tourism destination since the 1860s when the trans-mountain railway was completed. In particular, the upper Blue Mountains, centred on Katoomba, have historically been especially popular with Sydneysiders because of the majestic views of the area and cool summer climate.

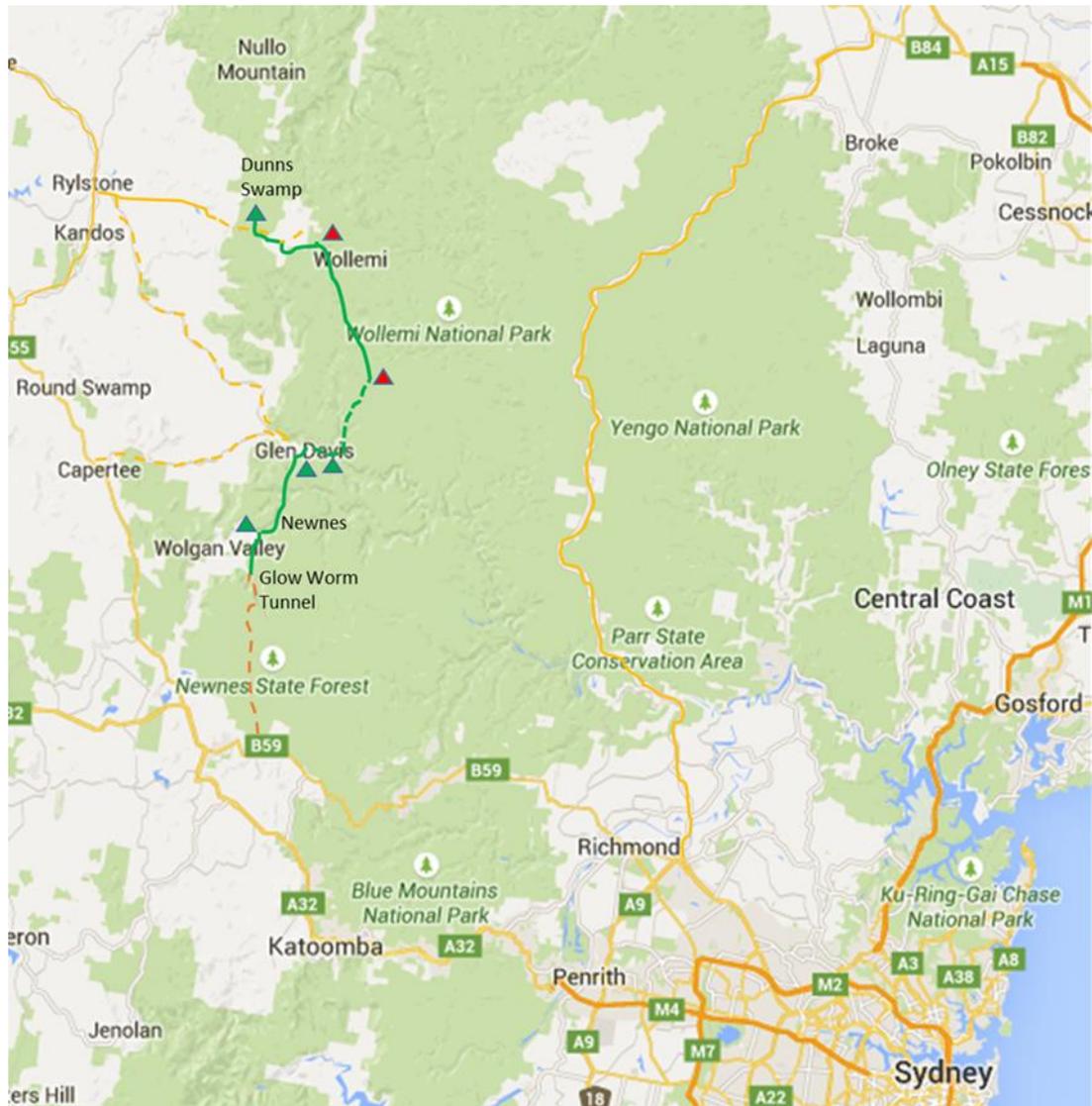
Over time, the Region has become recognised as one of the most highly environmentally valued and comprehensively protected areas in Australia. Since original protection of 63,000 hectares as a National Park in 1959, the protected area has expanded. In 2000 the Park, along with other, contiguous protected areas, encompassing approximately 1.03 million hectares, was declared a World Heritage Area (WHA) – the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area ([GBMWhA]; UNESCO 1992-2015). The GBMWhA incorporates seven national parks (Blue Mountains, Wollemi, Yengo, Nattai, Kanangra-Boyd, Gardens of Stone, Thirlmere Lakes), and the Jenolan Karst Conservation Reserve, together with at least segments of 12 local government areas (DECC 2009). Although many waymarked walking trails exist within the GBMWhA, they are usually short, taking only around 1-3 hours to complete and typically located along the cliff edges in the upper mountains, especially around the tourist ‘hotspots’ of Katoomba and Blackheath. Elsewhere in the GBMWhA, despite its large geographical size, dramatic scenic beauty and high floral and faunal biodiversity, no multi-day branded and waymarked trails exist, wherein self-reliant tourists with limited navigation skills might enjoy a true Australian wilderness experience.

The proposed track, ‘The Wollemi Trail’, would be an 85 km, five day walking-only track (some sections walkable separately) located substantially within the Wollemi National Park Wilderness within the GBMWhA. This wilderness Park comprises some 488,620 ha of

rugged, dissected sandstone plateau on the north-west edge of the Sydney Basin (Figure 1). It is the largest National Park within the GBMWhA and the second largest in New South Wales (NPWS, 2001). The Park is important for its spectacular scenery (Figure 2; 3), awe-inspiring geological and geomorphological features and rich ecological diversity, including many native threatened and endemic plant (e.g., Wollemi Pine [*Wollemia nobilis*]) and animal species (e.g., broad-headed snake [*Hoplocephalus bungaroides*]; at least 120 Aboriginal cultural sites; and several European heritage artefacts of Regional and National significance (e.g., shale oil mining/refining and railway relics [Newnes; Glen Davis; Glow Worm Tunnel]; Burke, 1991; NPWS, 2001).

The area's large size, low nutrient soils, dry climate and rugged terrain have historically combined to limit human exploitation for agriculture and facilitated protection of local biodiversity and maintenance of natural ecological processes with limited human interference. With the exception of a relatively small portion of its south-east, the Park has an absence of public vehicular access. This natural protection was enhanced by the declaration in 1997 and 1999 of 387,000 hectares as the Wollemi Wilderness Area under the Wilderness Act 1987 (NPWS, 2001; NSW Government, 1987). Wilderness is identified as 'an area of land ... that is ... together with its plant and animal communities, in a state that has not been substantially modified by humans and their works or is capable of being restored to such a state; ... is of a sufficient size to make its maintenance in such a state feasible, and ... is capable of providing opportunities for solitude and appropriate self-reliant recreation' (NSW Government, 1987, p. 4). In the Wollemi Wilderness Area, identified 'appropriate' recreational activities include bushwalking, orienteering/regaining, camping, caving, fishing, li-loing, canyoning, canoeing, abseiling, and climbing (NPWS, 2001). Some of these require consent, either for safety reasons, protection of significant sites or to ensure that wilderness qualities are unimpaired for other users (e.g., group activities that may reduce opportunities for solitude). Horse riding, 4WD driving and cycling are all prohibited, essentially meaning public access is only by foot, and camping must be 'primitive'. Fixed structures and vehicular access are not permitted unless needed for essential wilderness management, water quality management purposes or to provide access to existing private property or Aboriginal cultural sites where there is no other reasonable alternative access. Information and walking tracks may be signposted outside of wilderness areas but not within them (NPWS, 2001).

Figure 1: The Wollemi Trail and Wollemi National Park: Regional context



Key

-  Existing walking track
-  Proposed new walking track section
-  Existing camp site
-  Proposed new camp site

Source: adapted from Google Maps

Figure 2: Newnes historic site, Wolgan Valley, NSW (Photo: NSW Office of Environment and Heritage)



Figure 3: Capertee Valley landscape, NSW (Photo: R. Nicolai)



### *Details of the Trail*

Focusing on minimum impact to the landscape, a multi-day route has been identified that encompasses the vistas, wilderness solitude, and historical relics of the area while using, wherever possible, existing (or abandoned) walking tracks and/or roads and open space to provide walkers a unique experience with a minimum of ecological disturbance. This is particularly important in this instance because the proposed track is located substantially within the wilderness of The Wollemi National Park. This area was chosen because it offers an outstanding opportunity for domestic and international visitors to experience Australian natural and cultural heritage in a wilderness setting.

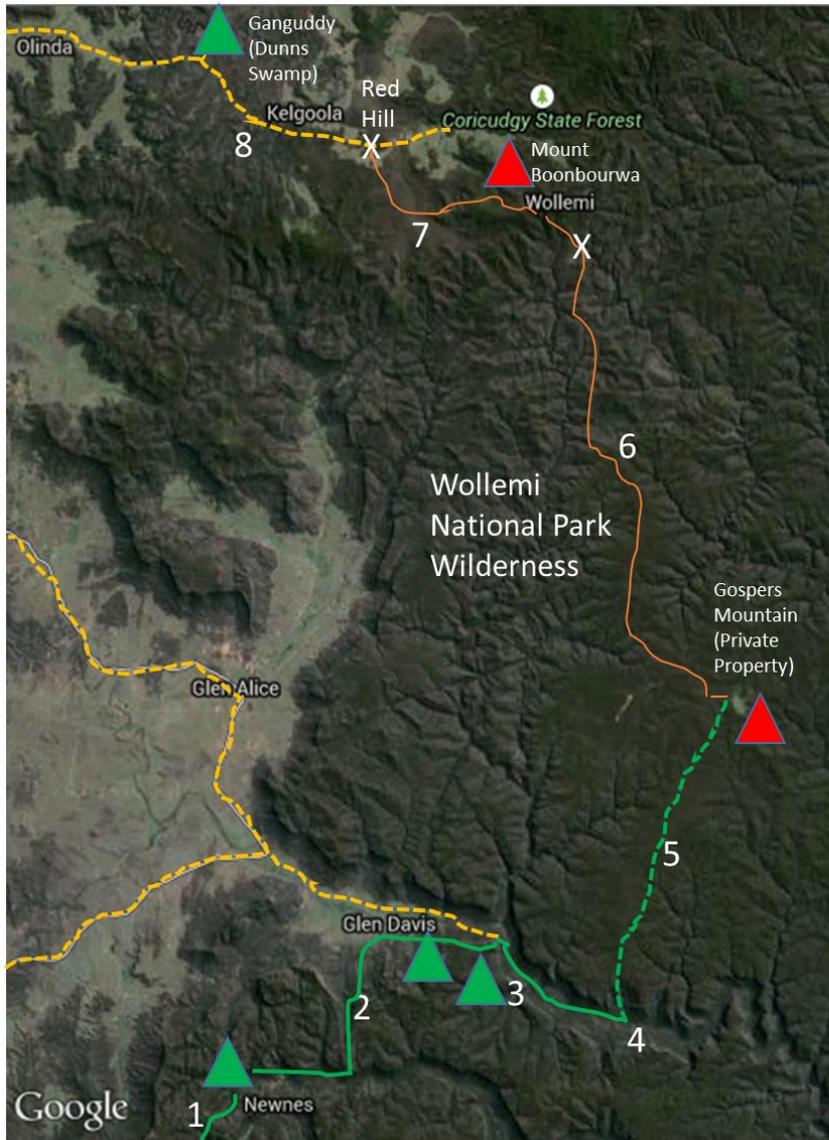
Because of its proposed location, development of ‘The Wollemi Trail’ would require a careful realisation of opportunity while being fully compliant with wilderness legislation and values. Of particular concern would be minimising the need for sections of new trail creation, and the placement of basic campsites that would need to include water supply and toileting facilities. This proposal therefore envisages (a) use of existing tracks and campsites within or adjacent to the Park; (b) creation of two new camp sites outside of, but adjacent to, the Park and (c) creation of one new track section within the Park.

This proposal envisages the linking-up of existing tracks and the waymarking of one new 15 kilometres section of track (Section 5; Figure 4) to create an 85 km end-to-end track (The Wollemi Trail), accessible only to walkers for substantially its entire length. It would run from the Glow Worm Tunnel near Lithgow to Ganguddy (Dunns Swamp) at Kandos Weir near Rylstone. The full length of the Trail would typically take at least five days and could be commenced and completed at either end.

Development of the Trail would leverage the Region’s natural and cultural heritage, and offer adventurous domestic and international tourists that are ‘reasonably’ fit and self-reliant (or willing to be professionally guided) with a unique experience. This is because the Trail would offer the opportunity for walker/s to traverse Australian wilderness, undisturbed by motorised vehicles, horse riders or mountain bikers and away from human habitation, while being surrounded by world-class scenic beauty within the heart of a World Heritage Area. Visitors attracted by the walk would directly and indirectly generate economic benefits for a surrounding Region struggling to develop a new tourism-based economy following the historical downturn in mining and agriculture industries in the area.

Although the Trail could be walked from either end, we have arbitrarily chosen to present the Trail here from the south end, moving north in eight identified sections, each section bounded by potential overnight camping sites (Figure 4).

Figure 4: The Wollemi Trail: proposed route and topography



Key

-  Public road (unsealed)
-  4WD track (public walking access)
-  Existing walking track
-  Proposed new walking track
-  Existing camp site
-  Proposed camp site
- 1-8 Proposed section of Wollemi Trail

Source: adapted from Google Maps

Section 1: the first section of the Trail is approximately 10 km long. It would commence at an existing public car park 1 km south of the Glow Worm Tunnel on the Newnes Plateau. It would then lead into the Wolgan Valley by the walker's choice of either the Pagoda Track or the Glow Worm Tunnel.

The Tunnel was originally built and operated as part of the railway line serving the Newnes and Glen Davis Kerosene Shale Works between 1906 and 1937. Today, it is a popular tourist destination owing to the bioluminescent display created by the larvae of the native fungus gnat *Arachnocampa richardsae* (Cartoscope, undated). Beyond the tunnel the Trail would follow an existing, disused railway route open to walkers and mountain bikers to an existing campsite at Newnes (Figure 4). This camp site has vehicle-access, drinkable creek water, self-composting toilets, and cabins.

Sections 2 and 3: the Trail would follow an existing track through the historic Newnes Kerosene Shale Works ruins and downstream alongside the Wolgan River for two kilometres before turning north and rising steeply uphill and over the plateau via the existing 'Pipeline Track' to a choice of two existing vehicle-accessible camp sites at Glen Davis (Figure 4). One, at the village centre, has modern camping facilities (e.g., showers; flush toilets); accommodation is also available in cottages or a boutique hotel. Alternatively, walkers could continue a further 4 km along the next section of the Trail on an unsealed road to Coorongooba camp site which has more basic camping facilities (e.g., self-composting toilets; creek water).

Sections 4 and 5: from Coorongooba camp site the Trail would follow an existing walking track for five kilometres downstream alongside the Capertee River. A new section of track would need to be waymarked (e.g., biodegradable tape on trees) that would lead across the river and ascend very steeply (460 m height in 2 km) up a narrow spur with breathtaking views (pers. obs.) to the top of the escarpment on the north side of the valley. Here, the Trail would connect with the southern end of the disused 'Army Road'. This 4WD road was built in the 1960s by the Australian Defence Force for training purposes. Despite being closed for many years and now overgrown, its route can still be faintly discerned on the ground (pers. obs.). The new section of waymarked Trail would follow the route of the old road north for approximately 13 km to Gaspers Mountain. This is a private cattle grazing property of 189 acres surrounded by the Wollemi National Park. The owner has an agreement with National Parks and Wildlife Service for private 4WD access to the property. Public vehicular access is otherwise prohibited, and enforced by locks on a gate at Mount Boonbourwa and Red Hill (Coricudgy Road; Figure 4). The owner is currently seeking to sell the property (Kirk, pers.

comm.) and thus an opportunity exists for an organisation (e.g., private tourism operator; local council; NPWS) to purchase all or part the property and establish basic camping facilities for walkers and (potentially) a much more sophisticated hotel complex.

Section 6: from Gospers Mountain, the Trail would follow the abovementioned 4WD road north for approximately 23 kilometres, crossing into the Coricudgy State Forest near Mount Boonbourwa (Figure 4). A new, basic camp site would be required at or near this point in the State Forest since there are no alternative facilities available and any new facilities would need to be outside of the wilderness area. Water should be available from the several nearby creeks; otherwise water tanks would be required and self-composting toilets would need to be built to develop a basic camp site.

Sections 7 and 8: from Mount Boonbourwa, walkers would follow the Trail westward along the existing 4WD road, through State Forest for approximately 10 km and either finish at the locked gate at Red Hill on the Coricudgy Road or walk a further 8 km to the existing Ganguddy (Dunns Swamp) campsite at Kandos Weir near Rylstone (vehicular access; creek water; self-composting toilets). This camp site is encased in The Wollemi National Park.

### **Alternative options to wilderness for walking tracks and potential economic benefits**

Although the Trail proposed here, and most other long-distance tracks, are located within and/or closely associated with national parks for at least most of their length, there is also the potential to develop multi-day walking products beyond the typical ‘wilderness walks’. These could, for example, encompass historical (e.g., the Hume and Hovell Walk, see above and e.g., Daly and Daly, 2012); aboriginal heritage; engineering/mining artifacts (e.g., partly encompassed within the Wollemi Trail outlined above); railway or travelling stock routes; river, city, agricultural landscapes; coastal or desert walks. They might also incorporate multiple landscapes and cultural/historical relics or other activities. To be sustainable in the longer term, however, long-distance walking tracks need to be ecologically sustainable and ‘holistic integrated person-environment systems’ for them to maximise economic benefits and ensure that they have strong market appeal as ecotourism destinations in their own right, not merely linkages between destinations (Hugo, 1999).

Where the focus of the walk is primarily for economic benefit of the community (we assume in most, if not all situations), it is desirable to consider developing the walk to include, either directly or indirectly, access to local outlets (e.g., hotels, Bed and Breakfast or other accommodation; wine and/or fine food outlets or outlets selling local foods and other produce; museums or other historical displays and/or sites; art galleries). Secure parking at

the track head; accommodation; sale/hire of walking needs (e.g., maps and/or self-guided tour information, Global Positioning System devices and/or Personal Locator Beacons, light weight foods, other walking equipment); souvenirs and memorabilia; ‘shuttle buses’ [including taxi service] to and from track heads; tour guides/porterage and maintenance workers are also likely to (directly and indirectly) provide income for the local community.

## **Conclusion**

Multi-day walking tracks are increasingly popular in Australia and elsewhere, and it has been demonstrated that they have the potential to generate significant economic benefits for areas in which they are located.

While the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area contains world-class scenery and natural heritage for visitors seeking immersion in a bush-walking eco-tourism experience, many other areas of Australia also have unique landscapes and/or historical features that would provide a basis for exciting multi-day bushwalks. Carefully-planned tracks based on existing infrastructure and/or unique cultural and/or heritage attributes could generally be achieved with modest funding and, potentially, government funding. For example, the Federal Government has contributed \$500k for construction of a 13.2 km walking/cycling track (‘Greater Blue Mountains Trail’) between Katoomba and Blackheath (Albanese, 2013).

Carefully developed to maximise income to the local community, and properly advertised and maintained, such walking tracks can substantially enhance income to the Regional community and such potential is becoming increasingly widely recognised. For example, a recent report identified the value of direct and indirect tourism expenditure from the Overland Track in Tasmania for 2012-2013 at \$16.36 million and supported 85 full-time equivalent jobs. In the same state, a feasibility study for the creation of the new Three Capes Track in the Abel Tasman National Park has estimated the track could attract up to 10,000 walkers during the peak season, generate an additional 50,000 bed nights per annum locally, generate \$18.6 million per annum in visitor expenditure and create 35 direct new jobs in the Region (Parks and Wildlife Service, 2007). Elsewhere in Australia, *Victoria’s Trails Strategy 2014-24* estimates the annual economic benefits of the Great Ocean Walk (opened in 2006) as \$15 million and more than 100 full-time equivalent jobs (Victorian Government, 2014).

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