

## **Impressions from Tracks and Trails Conference Maroochydore 2008**

In March 2008 I attended the 7<sup>th</sup> Tracks and Trails Conference held at Maroochydore Queensland.

There were trail builders, land managers, tourism authorities and representatives, and track users. The track users included bushwalkers, mountain bike riders, equestrians, trail bike riders, four wheel drivers, donkey trekkers – the whole gamut.

I attended in my role as the President of the Federation of Western Australian Bushwalkers inc, to present a paper on access issues in the Western Australian bush, in particular focussing on the illogical and unfair access policies for drinking water catchments produced by the WA Department of Water. There are similar issues in other states, but WA bushwalkers are particularly affected by catchment policies because they have fewer other options for bushwalking. The paper was well received by the conference, but of course the conference was the 'Australian Stage' to air these issues in public. During the gestation of the paper the Department of Water has had a considerable softening of attitude, which I strongly suspect is due to behind the scenes working by WA Department of Sport and Recreation, WA Department of Environment and Conservation, and especially the informal WARSTA alliance which is the brainchild of Mike Wood. The Federation has been working with all these groups.

Mountain bike riders were particularly well represented with the second day keynote speaker the persuasive president of the World Mountain Bike Federation and the third day keynote speaker a articulate young lady from Stanes in Scotland. The first speaker put a very convincing case for land managers to build many tracks to cater for all the different nuances of mountain biking from racing to downhill to touring etc. The very impressive presentation on the development of the Stanes mountain biking centre in the south east of Scotland, which had been responsible for turning a depressed area with high unemployment into a growth area based on tourism and mountain biking, showed that if the population and market is available, as it is in the north east of England and in south east Scotland there can be a financial return from getting people to generate endorphins and burn kilojoules.

A thought provoking presentation was made by Steve and Valerie Pretzel, a husband and wife team from Western Australia, representing Trail Bike Management. They played upon all the typical "snobbishness" hierarchy of forest users, with bushwalkers considering themselves the most pure of all users and suffering the presence of the others, the mountain bikers being next in line, then on to the equestrians and the trail bike riders to the four wheel drivers, who came last of all. They highlighted the nonsense in this with many users being in multiple camps, and the generation of endorphins not necessarily being the key to worthiness. The danger posed by inconsiderate mountain bikers to bushwalkers was compared to the lack of danger but the noise nuisance caused by trail bike riders.

Many of the people at the conference want trails made, and mostly made by others, but want them constructed to a higher standard than bushwalkers want or need. Many would like to use our trails, but to make this possible our trails would need to be hardened, and sign posted, and equipped with more parking areas, holding yards,

loading ramps, overnight accommodation with flushing toilets etc. The bushwalking wilderness experience that we are looking for would be lost. The concept of our Class five and six routes is beyond many of them.

There is considerable value in attending these conferences. We can formally and informally present a point of view. We can hear formal papers presented by others. We can take part in a huge number of 'corridor' and 'dinner table' conferences with like-minded people – in fact this is probably more valuable than the formal proceedings. We can raise our profile and engage the regulators and land managers – again a very valuable result. We can learn, and we can bring the new knowledge back to Western Australia and pass it on formally in reports like this, and informally in everyday representation of bushwalking tracks and trails issues.

I am convinced that we must be present as bushwalkers, we must engage the land managers and regulators at local, state and federal level, through our Clubs, our State Federations and at a Federal level. This we are doing and we need to do it more often and better.

I would like to thank the WA Department of Sport and Recreation for giving me some financial assistance to attend this conference.

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