

National Parks Australia Council

Working together for nature conservation areas



Submission from the National Parks Australia Council

The National Parks Australia Council (NPAC) was formed in 1975. It is a national body that coordinates and represents the views of a range of State and Territory non-government organisations concerned with protecting the natural environment and furthering national parks.

Member groups represent over 50,000 members from the Victorian National Parks Association (VNPA), the National Parks Association of NSW (NSW NPA), the National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ), the Tasmanian National Parks Association (TNPA), the National Parks Association of the ACT, (NPA ACT) and the Nature Conservation Society of South Australia (NCSSA).

Re: Changes to the Commonwealth Grants Rules and Guidelines

NPAC recommends that Commonwealth Grant Rules and Guidelines should include a requirement to consider the protection of biodiversity and the values of national parks when funds are being allocated to state and local governments for facilities in parks and reserves. The impact of climate change on parks and reserves should also be considered when projects are being funded in protected areas. Grant guidelines should be explicit that grant applications must have written agreement of all relevant landowners/managers, or whoever is legally responsible for the property prior to any application for a grant. This would ensure that granting of funds would only be recommended if all parties involved agree at the beginning of the application process.

The Commonwealth Government plays a key leadership role in protecting Australia's biodiversity¹, including through the National Reserve System which includes national parks (and many other tenure types).²

In a survey undertaken by NPAC in 2022, 88% of Australians agreed that protecting Australia's fauna and flora is a key responsibility of state and federal governments. These survey results also highlighted that 89% agreed that national parks are one of the best ways to protect Australia's biodiversity. Aligned with this is a concern about funding for national parks, 85% surveyed supported an increased in funding for national parks.

A copy of this survey is included in this submission as Attachment 1.

Funding for upgrades and facilities in national parks and reserves from Australian Government grants should not be at the expense of the values for which parks are protected. It must be acknowledged that there is a fundamental problem with allocating grant funding to a proposal in a national park that is still at the

¹ <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/biodiversity>

² <https://www.dcceew.gov.au/environment/land/nrs>



‘concept’ stage. This may pre-empt a proper planning process by putting enormous pressure on all relevant authorities to approve the proposal regardless of its merits or impacts, or risk losing the funds. It should be noted that a proposal may comply with the grant program criteria while failing to meet other planning criteria. There should be a standard clause for all grant agreements that **grant funding must be conditional on proposal receiving all required approvals**.

In Victoria for example, the Australian Government provided funding through a tourism stream to a local council for the construction of 44 trails covering 177 kilometres of bike trails including 22 km (about 12-15% of the project) through sensitive areas of the Yarra Ranges National Park. This trail will intersect important wildlife habitat including cool temperate rainforest and critically endangered species which the park was established to protect. This park has also been assigned an IUCN Category II (National Parks), which reflects the conservation value of this ecosystem.

This project was not supported by Parks Victoria (the land manager) or the Victorian National Parks Association. There was no consultation with key stakeholders by the Australian Government on the allocation of the funding or the negative impact on the natural values of the area. It is our understanding that the project received a total of \$15.3 million in Commonwealth funding for the first stage of the project.

- \$10m - Regional Growth Fund, announced by Federal Member for Casey, Tony Smith MP, 30th March 2019-Stage One funding <https://www.rideyarraranges.com.au/regional-growth-funding-boost-for-warburton-mtb-destination-and-yarra-valley-trail/>
- \$3m - Building Better Regions Fund Jim Child spokesperson, July 17th 2018 <https://www.rideyarraranges.com.au/warburton-mountain-bike-trails-to-receive-3m-funding-win/>
- a further \$2.3m Regional Growth Fund, announced later into the process.

The project has gone through an Environmental Effects Statement process in Victoria at considerable costs, funded by either tax payers or rate payers. A final report is now sitting with the Victorian Planning Minister and was due in August 2022 and is well overdue.

While the most controversial part of the project, Stage 2 in the Yarra Ranges National Park <https://vnpa.org.au/controversial-mountain-bike-track-decision-pending/> is yet to receive funding or relevant statutory approvals for construction in National Park, the EES process and subsequent costs and community concern highlight the need to consider the role of project funding early in decision making process.

Another similar example is funding that was provided through Regional Development Australia³ for mountain bike trails inside Mount Remarkable National Park in South Australia⁴. The important conservation values of this Park, including the presence of threatened ecological communities and plants protected under the Commonwealth’s own *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, were not considered prior to the funds being allocated.

In Tasmania the Commonwealth Government is committed to providing \$30 million towards the construction of the Cradle Mountain Cableway project through the Community Development Grants Programme. This funding was initially promised in the context of the 2017 Braddon by-election on the basis

³ <https://www.rda.gov.au/>

⁴ <https://www.environment.sa.gov.au/news-hub/news/articles/2022/02/remarkable-mountain-biking-trails-open-in-the-southern-flinders-ranges>

of the 'Cradle Mountain Master Plan' which is essentially an ambit claim from the tourism industry written on the premise that Cradle Mountain needs the gimmick of a cable car to attract even more visitors. This has pre-empted any objective planning for visitor access into Cradle Valley and a recent visitor survey conducted by the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service has shown a very high level of satisfaction with the existing shuttle bus service.

As these three examples highlight, if Australian Government funding is to be provided for facilities that will impact on a national park, then the values for which this park was established MUST be considered in assessing the application for funding.

In contrast to the above examples, in South Australia, the recent round of tourism grants required 'in principle' support from the National Parks and Wildlife Service prior to lodging a grant application for an activity 'on park', as well as funding not being released until all approvals are in place. NPAC would like to see the Commonwealth Government adopt a similar approach when assessing grant funding for projects in state and territory parks and reserves.

NPAC is not against funding for facilities in national parks, or for national park management particularly when this funding will support increased enjoyment and awareness of national parks. What NPAC does want to see is funding for small scale development including Visitor Centres and interpretation centres that help people understand and enjoy parks, and important facilities including parking areas and toilet facilities. This is consistent with the view of majority of Australians vision for National Parks and protected areas. See National Poll form Feb 2022 <https://vnpa.org.au/publications/polling-2022/> and <https://vnpa.org.au/media-polling-2022/>

NPAC would also like to see funding to support developments in towns and areas adjacent to national parks and protected areas, which will encourage people to visit and enjoy national parks and the wildlife in these parks and at the same time support regional economies. Importantly at present there appears to be no process for screening projects for either ecological impact or subsequent approvals, before significant federal funding is provided, which in turn drives an expectation that the project will be delivered no matter the consequences for nature.

We look forward to your consideration of the issues raised in our submission, and to the outcomes of this Inquiry.

Bruce McGregor

President

National Parks Australia Council

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