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FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

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Inquiry into the value of the natural environment to an urbanising Canberra

The ACT Equestrian Association Inc (ACTEA) wishes to comment on the importance to the Canberra equestrian community of access to the natural environment and public open space in the Territory. ACTEA argues that there has been a significant reduction in public natural spaces since the 2003 fire storm and this has serious implications for our recreational sector.

ACTEA is a totally volunteer peak body representing around 20 sporting and recreational equestrian clubs and associations in the ACT. A subcommittee of ACTEA manages a 58 hectare competition facility on the Cotter Road in Curtin. ACTEA receives a total of \$44,000 annually from Active Canberra toward its operational costs and the management and development of Equestrian Park. One of ACTEA's most time and energy consuming activities is negotiating with various the elements of the ACT government for protection of existing and development of new access to public open space constantly under threat from urban development and infrastructure upgrades.

Horses in the ACT

Horse riding, in its many manifestations, contributes economically and socially to the special fabric of Canberra. The ACT has the largest ratio of recreational horses per capita in Australia. We are enthusiastic, practical and philosophical supporters of the concept of the 'Bush Capital'. Horses live and are used, as befits the Bush Capital, in close quarters to Canberra's urban landscape. The present estimate of the number of horses in the Territory is around 2,500. They are maintained on a mix of private property, commercial agistment centres and government horse holding paddocks.

ACTEA supported by funding from Sport and Recreation Services ACT

With their horses Canberrans participate in a range of equestrian sports including the international disciplines (Dressage, Showjumping, Eventing, Endurance Riding, Vaulting and Carriage Driving) and specialist competitions (Showing, Mounted Games, Reining, Western Pleasure, Western Sports, Horse Agility and Polocrosse). These sports are organised through local discipline specific clubs, adult riding clubs, breed associations and pony clubs, using a range of facilities in and around the Territory. A lot of horse riders belong to nothing but they are all happy and active users of the city's trails and public open space.

Economic Contribution

It has been estimated¹ that every horse, even while doing nothing much, contributes around \$10,000 each year to the local economy. If the horse is an elite competition athlete the contribution multiplies. The equestrian community supports a network of coaches, breeders, private agistment facilities, horse trainers, farriers, veterinary surgeons, dentists, masseurs, chiropractors, saddlers, saddleries, and feed suppliers. They also purchase and maintain four wheel drives, horse floats and trucks and fill them with petrol and LPG gas. Horses, in this way, contribute around \$26 million annually to the ACT economy. Horse-riding events in Canberra are a specialist tourism draw-card but the Territory needs to maintain a critical mass of interrelated infrastructure and activities to continue to be a magnet for regional horse activities.

Social Benefits

Horses contribute a great deal to well-being in all age groups. Children are drawn into horse-riding activities at the Canberra riding schools and ACT and regional pony clubs and many become riders for life or come back to the sport once their children have grown. The benefits of working with animals are many: it gives young people an active outdoor hobby which teaches responsibility and discipline; it gives the middle-aged a physical outlet for themselves or through involvement in their children or grand-children's activities; and for older people a continuation of a life time of outdoor activity with measurable benefits in terms of physical and mental health. Equestrian activities are particularly popular with women of all ages, many of whom would not otherwise engage in an organised sport or into their very senior years.

Equestrian Trails in the ACT

The most important requirement for a safe equestrian trail is space – space to share safely with other users of routes, space to move out of harm's way and space to see what is happening in the surrounding environment.

An extensive network of equestrian trails was developed and mapped in central Canberra in the 1970s and 1980s. The system was conceived to provide safe horse riding routes linking government horse holding paddocks, pony club grounds and commercial agistment centres with competition venues and recreational riding destinations. **This concept of connectivity is integral to the long term viability of equestrian recreation in the ACT.** Many Canberra equestrian trails are clearly marked with a horse icon in the Canberra UBD Street Directory. It is still possible to trace a safe riding route from Macarthur Horse Paddocks on the Monaro Highway to Stromlo Forest Park using generous public open space and elements of the Canberra Nature Park. Google Earth shows quite clearly that there is no such capacity for long linkages through the environment in Belconnen and Gungahlin; all but the bare minimum of land north of Aranda has disappeared under housing as the government has foregone public amenity for economic return.

¹ Jenny Gordon, *The Horse Industry Contributing to the Australian economy: A report for the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation*, Centre for International Economics, June 2001

The Bicentennial National Trail (BNT), created in 1988, is the longest, marked, non-motorised, self-reliant trekking route in the world; 5,330 kilometres link Cooktown in North Queensland to Healesville in Victoria. Canberra is the only Australian city that the BNT traverses rather than avoids. In Canberra the BNT is a winding route, mostly on the western edge of the city, running north-south between Mulligan's Flat Reserve and the southern border in Namadgi National Park many historic horse trails.

Recreation Pressure in the ACT

In the year 2000 there were around 311,000 people in Canberra. The Territory is expected to hit 400,000 this year and to be gunning for 500,000 by 2036. All these people will be looking for somewhere to recreate in their local environment. The loss of the extensive Stromlo Forest to housing estates after the 2003 fire storm and the Lower Cotter Catchment in 2009 to the enlarged Cotter Dam catchment as well as the miserliness with which our planners incorporate green spaces into more recent housing precincts have concentrated outdoor recreators into an ever decreasing public space, much of which is now contained in the various elements of Canberra's Nature Park.

Public areas in which horse riding could take place in the ACT were significantly diminished by the 1999 Canberra Nature Park Management Plan which effectively locked horse riders out of most of the Territory's reserve system. While a Parks and Conservation organisation legitimately expects the protection of the natural environment and at-risk ecological systems to be its main task, ignoring the reality of recreation pressure is planning for the future by turning a blind eye. Recreation pressure will be a major issue for the Canberra Nature Park over the next couple of decades.

Of the 40 Reserves which were listed as making up the Canberra Nature Park in the new 2016 Preliminary Draft Management Plan, horse riding is indicated as being permitted in 15. The Draft Management Plan implies that an extensive, pleasurable riding network exists connecting horse paddocks and nature reserves when, in truth, access to these Reserves is extremely limited and the links are increasingly under threat by urban development and proliferating infrastructure. In at least half of these 15 reserves horse riding is restricted to either an external fenced laneway or a single boundary through track. Horse riding is not permitted IN most of these reserves. ACTEA can understand why dog walking, horse riding and mountain biking might be limited to particular areas in order to protect the natural and cultural values of reserves or to minimise pressure on more sensitive pathways. We have seen no evidence-based rationale for why mountain bikes have access to formed vehicle tracks in most reserves while equestrians remain significantly restricted.

While there are many reserves that are highly sensitive to recreation impact and access for all users might need to be limited, there are others with existing high use and situated on established equestrian routes where access to internal management tracks would make horse riding in the city much safer and more enjoyable with little detriment to the environment. **ACTEA would like to see increased equestrian access to Wanniasa Hills, Mount Taylor, Oakey Hill, McQuoids Hill, Isaacs Ridge and Coleman Ridge Reserves.** The Draft Management Plan seems, however, to have disappeared without trace!

Equestrian Trails Under Pressure

The BNT was originally designed to traverse the then western edge of Canberra and use several camping sites within the ACT. The spread of Canberra's suburbs has meant the Trail is almost constantly on the move as it is incrementally pushed further to the western border and becomes longer and more constrained. The distances between watering opportunities and available camping facilities are now longer than is optimal

for the well being of horses. The BNT was designed to be shared by horse riders, walkers and touring cyclists but is, in parts, increasingly used by mountain bikers.

Most equestrian spaces are shared. This is not a significant problem provided the trail is of sufficient width and other users behave responsibly. Several trails have been made inaccessible or unsafe or are under physical threat. The erection of fences and gates without regard for traditional equestrian access is one way in which riding opportunities have been reduced in recent years. Others are increasing road traffic, narrowing of road verges so they are no longer safe for riding, erection of large signs and other structures on verges and incompatible landscaping. Some are under threat because they have been co-opted by the Centenary Trail, an initiative which aimed to encourage an additional 18,000 cyclist and walker users of Canberra's trails each year². The proliferation of 'shared use' bitumen paths designed only for walkers and cyclists (sometimes constructed on top of existing equestrian trails) means there is an increasing need for signage and infrastructure which specifically provides for an equestrian presence in places where they have historically been present. In recent years Roads ACT has been cooperating with ACTEA to increase signage in shared spaces to encourage recognition of equestrian use of these spaces and to increase awareness of appropriate behaviour around horses.

Equestrians have not, in the past, required formally designated trails and have been happy with unformed open space. However, increasing urbanisation without consideration of how this might impact on local equestrians or making alternative provisions for them has put pressure on the important concept of **connectivity**. As a consequence ACTEA is now frequently negotiating for specific, signed, equestrian trails and even fenced corridors for the BNT.

The Future

ACTEA has been proactive in protecting its access in the Territory.

1. It is signatory to a Memorandum of Understanding with the responsible agencies and the Bicentennial National Trail Board to keep the BNT open and safe in Canberra.
2. It has signed another MOU more generally agreeing on a strategic approach to equestrian facilities in the ACT.
3. It has argued for and achieved consideration of new and existing equestrian trails in Estate Development Codes under the ACT Planning and Development Act.
4. In 2016 ACTEA put some effort into participating in discussions about a new Canberra Nature Park Management Plan with a view to gaining increased access to a handful of reserves which are on or near to existing equestrian routes. The 2016 draft CNP Management Plan seems to have disappeared without trace.

Retrofitting green space into suburbs in the north of Canberra that have been short changed by planners over the years is not likely to happen. However, given the reality that population pressure on existing green spaces and reserves can only increase, Canberra's equestrians would encourage a more sustainable planning model which, rather than building on every inch of open space or bitumening over it so it can be traversed at the fastest pace possible, incorporates slow, linked green spaces threaded throughout the

² CB Richard Ellis, Canberra Centenary Trail Draft Feasibility Report: A Report Prepared For Territory And Municipal Services, November 2010

suburbs and greater access for our community to those parts of the Canberra Nature Park connected by them.

We also feel that it is inevitable that the Parks and Conservation Service is going to have to develop a Nature Reserve hierarchy which allows a sliding scale of permitted community activity in relation to the sensitivity of individual reserves. There seems to be few alternatives to managing the increasing pressure for natural recreation places in the city. Horse riders, as long term users of Canberra's open space, definitely feel they are unfairly excluded from the reserve system on the basis of outdated research and attitudes.

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