

“Mountain Biking as a sustainable tourism  
option in national parks and other state  
reserves.”

Submission by AROC Sport Pty Ltd to the Taskforce on Tourism  
and National Parks.

Area: Mogo State Forest, Eurobodalla Coast, NSW

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This submission looks at forest cycling and mountain biking, as part of a growing market in Cycle Tourism, as a sustainable tourism option within NSW National Parks and State Forest.

In particular, this submission is to obtain assistance for:

- a) The Netti MTB Enduro held annually within the Mogo State Forest. This event is currently capped at 750 riders but could easily cater for and has the demand for 2000 riders. The event runs over 2 days and consists of 10km, 50km and 100km events plus an event hub and bike expo. Increasing numbers of riders would require development and maintenance of a trail network.
- b) Development of a mountain bike trail network within the Mogo State Forest which can be showcased by the Netti MTB Enduro event and create a permanent set of tracks for mountain bike riders providing tourism opportunities throughout the year.

Cycle Tourism is a growing market within the tourism sector and within nature-based tourism in particular – albeit coming off a small base. There is increasing evidence available which demonstrates cycle tourism has the potential to make an active contribution towards the economic revitalisation of regional Australia as well as improve quality of life for its residents (Bicycle Federation of Australia). The niche is an ecologically sustainable tourism product, which is expected to grow in popularity.

Whilst Cycle Tourism may encompass, social and recreational riding, touring, competition, cycling festivals and spectator events, this submission looks predominantly at forest cycling and mountain biking.

### **Background**

Mountain biking is a relatively new recreational activity that developed around the 1970s and early 1980s, but since that time has experienced rapid growth and has exploded in popularity world wide.

Mountain bikers typically prefer off-road riding and as such seek opportunities where they can. Without dedicated mountain bike trails or areas to ride, mountain bikers find their own places to ride and have usually turned to four-wheel drive tracks, fire trails and walking tracks. Along with the increases in bikers, technology has advanced, allowing riders to access terrain that would have been impossible to ride 10-15 years ago.

While numbers remained low, and the perceived environmental impact or impact on other users relatively low, mountain biking was allowed to occur. However as the number of riders increase, land managers and owners largely have become increasingly protective of the land and have responded by closing individual trails or access to whole areas by mountain bikers. This is a phenomenon that has been experienced world wide.

Opportunities are available however which have the potential to provide facilities for mountain biking, meet local needs and at the same time flow onto other benefits such as enhancing sustainable tourism in national parks and other state reserves, without impinging on the conservation of protected areas.

This submission focuses on mountain biking as a sustainable tourism activity, highlighting other mountain biking tourism success stories, and providing reason to consider supporting mountain biking as a sustainable tourism opportunity in national parks and other state reserves.

### **Accessible Areas**

Around the State there are many areas used by mountain bikers, including land managed by State Forest, the Parks and Wildlife Service. In these areas mountain biking may be acceptable but is generally not encouraged or promoted. The lack of promotion means these

areas are often only known to local riders. Where mountain biking is allowed, it tends to be confined to roads, fire trails and 4WD tracks. These types of trails only cater for a small portion of mountain bikers.

Mountain bikers around the world tend to seek out narrow 'singletrack' trails<sup>1</sup>. In the absence of narrow singletracks in these areas riders will use walking tracks illegally, make their own trails or go elsewhere. When riders make their own trails or build technical features<sup>2</sup> they are usually unauthorised, unplanned, poorly constructed, environmentally unsustainable and often unsafe for riders and other users. While this is an undesirable situation for land managers, it clearly illustrates an unmet demand for specific mountain bike facilities.

## **Popularity**

Most large Australian surveys<sup>3</sup> that consider trends in sport and recreation participation have not isolated mountain biking as a separate activity from other forms of cycling. Therefore, it is difficult to make definitive conclusions about participation rates in mountain biking in comparison to other activities. However, sales figures for mountain bikes and participation rates in organised mountain biking events provide a reasonable indication of the popularity of mountain biking and its growing nature.

As mentioned, sales figures for mountain bikes also provide evidence of the scale of the mountain bike market. The Australian Bicycle Council notes that the number of mountain bikes imported into Australia has continued to increase since 1995-96 as outlined below:

- 1995-96 – 754,000 mountain bikes imported into Australia
- 2002-03 – 1,128,000 mountain bikes imported into Australia

Australian and overseas research suggests that less than 10% of mountain bike riders belong to an organised club or group. However an increasing popularity in mountain biking events such as the Netti MTB Enduro, provides a reasonable indication of popularity.

## **Growth of mountain biking through event based activity**

While mountain biking is an activity that riders can do independently, mountain biking events are proving very popular, as seen by the increase of mountain biking event on the calendar.

One example that has experienced the growth of mountain biking is the Netti MTB Enduro put on by adventure race company AROC Sport. The Netti MTB Enduro is held in Mogo, NSW South Coast and offers riders 10km, 50km and 100km courses. Held for the first time in 2007 this event attracted 550 entrants. In the second year riders were capped at 750 (determined by State Forestry) with all 750 entries taken up within the first three weeks of opening, and a waitlist of another 300 people hoping to be part of the race. The event could easily accommodate greater numbers owing not only to the success of the first year, but also to an increasing interest into this sport.

Whilst largely a spectator event, this year's Tour Down Under - the first UCI ProTour event ever staged outside of Europe - has been a record breaker for South Australia. Preliminary economic impact and research figures received show that the 2008 Tour Down Under has provided a major economic boost, by injecting \$17.3 million into the South Australian economy, attracting a record 548,000 spectators, generating 195,200 visitor nights and has inspired 15,100 people to participate in the cycling events which were held as part of the Tour Down Under. In addition, the Tour generated \$41.7 million in editorial media coverage to date and more than 76 hours of broadcast television programming in Australia and countries around the world.

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<sup>1</sup> IMBA, The importance of Singletrack, International Mountain Bicycling Association Print Centre: [http://imba.com/resources/bike\\_management/singletrack.html](http://imba.com/resources/bike_management/singletrack.html)

<sup>2</sup> Technical features is a term used to describe jumps, rocks, logs, bridges, drop-offs and other obstacles found on or alongside trails that are deliberately placed to challenge the bike handling skills of riders.

<sup>3</sup> According to a 2003 Australian Sports Commission (ASC) survey, cycling was the fourth most popular sport or recreation activity behind walking, swimming and aerobics/fitness.

In Victoria, research has revealed that cyclists in the annual Audax Alpine Classic (a two day, long distance cycling event, running for 24 years and capped at 2000 cyclists) spend more than \$814,000. The total benefit to the region of this event is closer to \$1.5million (as the figure is based on cyclists and not their family, friends and general spectators).

“The interesting statistic for us is that more than 75% of respondents said they were ‘likely’ or ‘extremely likely’ to return to Bright for a holiday and nearly 40% stay for three nights.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Growth of mountain biking through the integration with other sporting activity**

Orienteering clubs have recently held mountain bike orienteering events that combine aspects of traditional orienteering with mountain biking. Similarly, multi-sport and adventure racing combine mountain biking with other activities such as running and kayaking also continue to grow in popularity. These examples demonstrate the increasing popularity of mountain biking and demand for appropriate venues.

### **Economic benefits and tourism potential of mountain biking**

It is possible to draw on both Australian and international experiences to demonstrate the economic benefits to an area that seeks to attract mountain bikers. Several examples are listed below with further detail in Attachment A.

#### International

- The Welsh Mountain Bike Initiative, Wales
- 7stanes Project, Scotland
- The Maah Daah Hey Trail, Medora, North Dakota
- Fruita, Colorado
- Rotorua, USA
- Whistler Mountain Bike Park, Canada

#### Australia

- Melrose, Southern Flinders Ranges, South Australia
- Thredbo, New South Wales
- Munda Biddi Trail, Western Australia

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but does demonstrate mountain biking tourism success stories.

In 2007, the first year the Netti MTB Enduro was held, 97% of entrants from outside the local region participated in the event. This year’s event was a sellout, with 750 entries taken up within the first three weeks of opening, and a waitlist of another 300 people hoping to be part of the race. The waitlist was closed after only a week. We believe that this event can easily accommodate 2000 riders and become one of the best events in Australia. Of the 750 entrants, 96% are from outside the local region. This event has great potential for attracting not only riders, but their families, friends and supporters who choose to make it a weekend getaway, and entries are only limited by the quota determined by Forests NSW.

Projected impact on the local economy can be estimated by taking into account the dollar spend on the event weekend by competitors and non-competitors. For example, 800 competitors, staying one night could easily equate to \$80,000 (with an average spend of \$100 per night) injection into the local economy for the event.

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<sup>4</sup> Chair of the Alpine Region Tourism Board, John Kroeger commented on the research undertaken at this year’s Audax Alpine Classic by Southern Cross University, the University of Canberra and the University of Queensland.

Add to that calculation the fact that some people choose to stay on the Friday night as well and some riders come down to the event with their whole family including children all of which are potentially other visitor nights. Average spending during the day (lunch, breakfast & snacks, craft purchases, activities for significant others, etc.) also contribute to the dollar injection of the Mogo township. The potential gain to the region would be around the \$1.5 million based on the figures of the Audax event.

This financial gain to the local region is within non tourist season and a time when the local economy struggles.

Over the past two years, AROC Sport has worked together with the Eurobodalla Coast Tourism to produce a promotional brochure which showcases the local and regional attractions, as well as the event. Production and distribution of the brochure has been targeted to riders, bicycle outlets, relevant sporting associations predominantly in the NSW and ACT region. In addition, AROC in collaboration with the Eurobodalla Coast Tourism has encouraged local and business involvement in the event. Offering local businesses an opportunity to prepare for the flux of increased buyer potential of those involved in the event, through early marketing.

The success of an event such as the Netti MTB Enduro, also relies heavily on a working with relationship with not only tourism bodies, but local government and forest management. Over the past two years, AROC Sport has worked in collaboration with Eurobodalla Coast Tourism, the Eurobodalla Council and Forests NSW for access to the Mogo State Forest and gaining permission. Furthermore, AROC Sport have invested a number of hours building and maintaining tracks which not only benefits the Netti MTB Event, but is an investment in the future to ensuring that others can enjoy the Mogo State Forest, beyond the event.

The benefits of mountain biking is not just an economic argument. Other benefits derived from such an activity can include:

#### Personal

- sense of achievement
- sense of belonging

#### Health

- enhancing infrastructure of local community and its potential to encourage healthy activities. Obesity is one of the biggest financial drains on the economy today. Providing sporting infrastructure is vital to encourage improved health.

#### Social

- sense of pride and community identity
- bringing family together
- meeting like-minded people
- increased community ownership and responsibility

#### Environment

- Managing impact on the locations used for cycling
- Increased access to countryside
- Celebration of regions environmental resources
- Minimising the impacts of off road cycling on the land through education

### **Mountain Biking and Mogo State Forest**

New South Wales has many of the attributes that would attract local and visiting mountain bike riders. Mountain biking, particularly forest cycling, trails, promotion of events and purpose build facilities provide opportunities to enhance sustainable tourism in national parks and other state reserves, without impinging on the conservation of protected areas.

The Netti MTB Enduro event showcases the magnificent Mogo State Forest featuring some of the best single track riding, even against international comparisons. The township of Mogo

and the Eurobodalla Coast region enjoys an influx of visitors outside peak tourist seasons. An investment into permanent trails in the Mogo State Forest and other national parks, forests and reserves could see a sustainable tourism industry through mountain biking activity, both at the recreational level and the more competitive enthusiasts.

As seen the tourism potential of mountain biking has been recognised around the world. Examples on the international front from Wales, Scotland, Canada and the USA and the Australian front show there is an increasing market for mountain biking tourism.

“Trails-for-tourism initiatives have been undertaken all over the world and in some case, have transformed struggling rural economies into tourism success stories. Singletrack trails in particular have won favour with communities wanting to build sustainable tourism industries with relatively little impact on the land.”<sup>5</sup>

With nature tourism as a major drawcard for visitors to NSW, mountain biking fits in well with showcasing our natural assets in a sustainable way and without impinging on the conservation of protected areas.

## ATTACHMENT A

### The International and Australian Experience

#### The Welsh mountain bike initiative

The Welsh Mountain Bike Initiative started with a single forestry worker who had a passion for mountain biking. Davit Davis worked in a small forestry reserve, Coed y Brenin, in the west of Wales, which had declining visitation rates. Working with an initial budget of £750 (\$1000) and a few dedicated volunteers, he managed to develop the area into a highly successful mountain bike park. The trails proved an instant success and use of the park doubled almost immediately. Davis obtained sponsorship from corporate backers such as the drink manufacturer Red Bull and U.K. Forest Enterprises helped him obtain mechanised equipment to build trails faster. As more trails were added and high profile events were held at the site, the number of visitors coming specifically to ride the trails increased dramatically. The figures below show how mountain biking developments attracted visitors to the area:

- 1994 – 13,980 visitors for the year
- 1995 – three trails built with a £750 budget
- 1996 – ‘Red Bull Trail’ opened and 35,590 visitors for the year
- 1998 – ‘Karrimore Trail’ and ‘Flight Path’ opened, with 72,802 visitors
- 2002 – ‘MBR Trail’ opened, with 170,000 visitors

After the success of the Coed y Brenin project, the Welsh decided to invest in four similar mountain bike parks in the areas throughout Wales. Using various surveys and statistics they have established that:

- 61% of riders stay overnight at local accommodation
- Visitors stay an average of two days
- The average spend is \$60 a day

The Welsh Government recognised the economic benefits associated with attracting visitors to economically depressed areas and chose not to charge an entry fee to any of the Welsh mountain bike parks. Based on the estimates above, the approximate income from trails in Wales in 2003 was \$25 million a year.

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<sup>5</sup> Project Co-ordinator, *Carcross Singletrack to Success*, project looks to build more than 55 kilometres of trails across the sprawling expanse of Montana Mountains, Yukon USA

## Scotland's 7stanes Project

Seeing the success of the Welsh initiative and with a devastated tourist industry after the foot-and-mouth outbreak, the Forestry Commission in Scotland saw the potential to develop mountain biking parks as a way of boosting visitor numbers in the south of Scotland.

In 2001, the Forestry Commission decided to build seven mountain bike parks, known as the 7stanes (from the Scottish word for stone) at each of the 7stanes locations, you'll find a stone sculpture reflecting a local myth or legend. What is incredibly innovative here is the harmonious blending of mountain biking, with natural wilderness whilst exposing the rider to local culture and knowledge. The 7stanes has already won numerous awards and have turned southern Scotland into the perfect mountain biking holiday destination. Indeed the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA) now rate Scotland, including the 7stanes mountain biking trails, as the '**Global Superstar**', i.e. Scotland is the best place in the world to ride!

The 7stanes is a partnership project which recently finished its second phase. The emphasis of phase two was to create more trails for family, novice and entry-level riders, thus expanding the appeal of the 7stanes overall.

An evaluation of phase two of the project showed that almost 400,000 mountain bikers are now visiting the trail centres on an annual basis bringing in over £9million to the economy of the south of Scotland. In addition, the evaluation found:

- The project has helped create 205 jobs
- Overseas visitors and UK visitors to the 7Stanes from outside Scotland have increased to 37 per cent – an increase of over 60% since 2004.
- The number of mountain bikers who bring their children with them has also increased to 15 per cent from 10 percent in 2004.
- The total number of visitors riding all the 7Stanes puts it amongst the top 20 visitor attractions in Scotland.

Based on this demand, there is business development opportunities for accommodation providers and local businesses offering products or services to the mountain biker.

## Medora, North Dakota - The Maah Daah Hey Trail

In the early 1990s, local U.S. Forest Service managers began their dream of building a singletrack trail through the Little Missouri National Grasslands and the Theodore Roosevelt National Park. With time, and lobbying for federal funds, the Forest Service and National Park Service succeeded in constructing a 90-mile singletrack trail, which they named "Maah Daah Hey", a Native American term meaning "an area that will be around for a long time."

The soft clay soils of the Badlands proved excellent for building a trail that is extremely smooth and is perhaps the ultimate beginner ride. Where else can a beginner cyclist ride 90 miles through the backcountry on singletrack? The Forest Service has installed four backcountry campgrounds that have water wells, facilitating overnight camping on what is typically a four-day ride.

## Fruita, Colorado

Ten miles west of Grand Junction, Colorado, the town of Fruita once prospered with irrigated agriculture and a local oil refinery. The refinery closed in the late 1980s, and many farms were subdivided into housing developments. The town of 2,000 saw its unemployment rate soar to 20 per cent. Since that time, community leaders have welcomed the huge growth in tourism spurred by two mountain bike trail systems.

The first system developed was based around Kokopelli's Trail on Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land. The federal agency and a host of volunteers constructed and

mapped the route in the late 1980s to provide a ride from Fruita to Moab, Utah. While many cyclists have ridden the 120-mile journey, short loops at the beginning of the route proved more popular. The BLM and local bicycling clubs gradually improved the singletrack system into a network that is outstanding by any measure.

In the mid-1990s, a young bicycle racer from Ohio moved to Fruita and opened a bike shop in the quiet downtown. Troy Rarick inspired the second trail system at the base of the Book Cliffs, ten miles north of town. With Rarick's shop centered between the Kokopelli's and Book Cliffs trail systems, downtown Fruita isn't so quiet anymore. Fruita has established an international reputation and the news has travelled widely. Some 20,000 a year wheel through town looking for the rugged terrain praised in magazines. A recent visitor from Maryland commented that his trip to Fruita was spurred by an article in a bicycle magazine from Germany.

### **Rotorua, USA**

Whakarewarewa Forest on the southern outskirts of Rotorua contains one of the oldest trail systems in the USA. The forest land is owned by the Crown, the tree crop itself is owned by a US investment company with recreation managed by Rotorua District Council. The commercial forest management operations are conducted by a local private company as a production forest and they generously allow recreational use in the forest.

Riding the trails is free and even when the carpark is full, the mainly one way system keeps the forest from being crowded. The cost of building and maintaining the trails is met and informally shared by, the local mountain bike club, volunteers and freelancers who give up their own time to build and maintain trails and work crews from the Department of Corrections.

### **Whistler Mountain Bike Park**

Whistler Mountain Bike Park is very different from the mountain bike parks of Wales and Scotland, which predominantly cater for cross country riders on single tracks. Whistler and other ski resorts in North America and Europe are beginning to utilise ski lifts, ski runs and other infrastructure to attract mountain bikers in the summer months. With mountains and dramatic changes in altitude, such facilities are very popular with freeride and downhill riders.

Visitor statistics from Whistler show that mountain biking is mirroring the development of snow boarding in the 1980s. Initially, it was seen as an 'extreme' or unpopular fringe activity. However, it is now seen as an essential component for the survival of the resort and municipality during the summer months.

Whistler now has over 200km of lift-serviced trails, three challenge parks, a dirt jump park and a mountain cross or 4x track. When the lifts were opened to mountain bike riders in 1999 they recorded 10,000 mountain bike visitors. In 2003 Whistler recorded 80,000 mountain bike visitors, an increase of 30% from 2002.

In 2006, the Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association conducted a pilot study<sup>6</sup> to measure the economic impact of mountain biking in the Sea to Sky Corridor (which included the communities of North Vancouver and West Vancouver, Squamish and Whistler). The study concluded that the Sea to Sky trails were estimated to have brought nearly \$10.3 million in non-resident spending, supporting 194 jobs and just over \$6.3million in wages and salaries, during the period 4 June to 17 September 2006 (approx 3 months).

The resort predicts that if current growth continues, they will record 250,000 mountain bike visitors in 2008, which will surpass ski/snowboard visits for the corresponding year.

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<sup>6</sup> The Sea to Sky Mountain Biking Economic Impact Study conducted by Western Canada Mountain Bike Tourism Association in 2006, provides quantifiable data which demonstrates the economic impact of mountain biking on the host community.

## **The Australian Experience**

### **Melrose, Southern Flinders Ranges, South Australia**

The new bike trails at Melrose are part of an ongoing project jointly funded by the Southern Flinders Ranges Development Board and State Government, including a \$50,000 government contribution to cycling tourism in the southern Flinders Ranges. Other funding has been provided by the Southern Flinders Ranges Tourism Authority and Northern Areas and Mount Remarkable District Councils, providing an additional 80 kilometres of mountain biking trails to the existing 35 kilometres of trails in Melrose. Another 150 kilometres of trails is planned for the region by 2010 in conjunction with the recently launched Southern Flinders Ranges Cycle Tourism Master Plan.

### **Munda Biddi Trail, Western Australia**

The Munda Biddi (meaning path through the forest in the Nyoongar Aboriginal language) Trail has been designed for all mountain bike enthusiasts and recreational cyclists who are seeking a safe and enjoyable bush cycling experience.

The Department of Environment and Conservation is designing and planning the trail in consultation with the Munda Biddi Trail Foundation, the Department of Sport and Recreation, the Western Australian Mountain Bike Association and other representatives of the cycling community.

Stage 1 of the 900 kilometre trail is complete. Starting in Sculpture Park, Mundaring, the trail once completed, will wind its way through national parks and State forest in the south west before reaching the picturesque coastal town of Albany. Cyclists can expect to experience changing landscapes such as the rugged Darling Range, winding river valleys, native forests and coastline. The Munda Biddi has been designed to cater for cyclists of all levels, with challenging loops and spurs to be added once the main trail is completed.

The Munda Biddi Trail is already bringing new visitors to the towns it passes through. Opportunities exist for new businesses to service the needs of off-road cycle tourists – be they the casual day riders or international backpackers on bikes. Companies offering equipment hire, transport to the trail, accommodation, supplies, food and beverages and supported tours are already in demand.

### **Thredbo, New South Wales**

Similar to the Whistler experience, Thredbo has seen that during the summer season the high action excitement of skiing & snowboarding is replaced with the equally challenging sport of mountain bike riding. Whether you are interested in a cross country ride through the spectacular scenery of the Australian high country or want to test yourself with some high speed downhill riding using the resorts chairlifts.

In 2007 Raw NRG and Thredbo Alpine Village hosted three major mountain bike races, Round 3 of the National Series, the Shimano Australian Interschool Championships and the UCI Oceania Mountain Bike Championships in conjunction with the Australian Open of Mountain Biking.

Billed as “The next generation of mountain bike events”, the Australian Open of Mountain Biking comprised of 9 events over 4 days, and elite athletes competed in the Oceania Championships in the Olympic Distance Cross Country, Downhill and Mountain Cross disciplines. As spectator events, they certainly showcased Thredbo as a popular return destination for mountain biking enthusiasts along, providing world class experiences within minutes walk of restaurants and accommodation.