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## **Koalas, sun, sea, sand and trails: beat that New Zealand!**

### **A proposal for mountain bike investment in the Great Koala National Park**

#### **Summary**

The diverse groups promoting the Great Koala National Park are calling for the new park to be accompanied by regional recreational planning so that diverse recreational needs can be accommodated. A key step in this is a \$6 million investment to develop a concept plan to upgrade existing mountain bike hubs and create new cycling infrastructure to link hubs, towns and villages. Mountain bike tourism is demonstrated to bring strong economic returns, and is a sub-set of nature-based tourism that is currently worth over \$19.6 billion annually to NSW<sup>1</sup>. Along with the beach, visitation to national parks is the key driver of this tourism industry. Evidence from existing mountain bike trails suggests this level of investment would return in the order of \$60 million per annum to the region. By making this investment—while protecting areas of high conservation value—the Great Koala National Park can help save koalas and create new business opportunities for the Coffs Coast. This will add to the magnificent offerings the Coffs Coast already possesses and create a truly world-class nature-based tourism destination.

#### **Introduction**

The Coffs Coast and hinterland is a stunning landscape of majestic hills and escarpments that give way to idyllic valleys like Bellinger and Nambucca. It's a nature-lovers paradise where, in the space of a few kilometres, visitors can get lost in wilderness, enjoy coast walks and the beach, see paradise riflebirds in rainforests and swim in waterfalls. It's also a hugely important area for koalas, containing some of the best koala habitat in NSW. Given koalas are the world's favourite animal, it's clear that the Coffs Coast possesses some serious tourism weaponry!

The Great Koala National Park (GKNP) proposal is a response to growing threats to koalas from native forest logging. New logging laws recently released by the NSW Government will see an 'intensive harvesting zone'<sup>2</sup> established over many of the forests earmarked for inclusion in the GKNP, resulting in widespread clearfelling of koala habitat. This will spell disaster for koalas because, as any koala will tell you, 'no tree, no me'.

In contrast, the GKNP would add 175,000 hectares of state forests to existing protected areas to form a 315,000-hectare reserve stretching from Woolgoolga in the north to near Kempsey in the

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<sup>1</sup>Destination NSW. *Nature-based tourism to NSW. Year ended September 2017.*, <<https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/nature-based-tourism-to-nsw-snapshot-ye-sept-2017.pdf>> (2018).

<sup>2</sup><http://bit.ly/IntensiveLoggingZone>

south and west to New England. The GKNP would encompass public land in five Local Government Areas: Clarence Valley, Coffs Harbour, Bellingen, Nambucca and Kempsey.

Cycling tourism is growing in demand, with mountain biking a particularly prominent part of this growth. Mountain bike tourists are a subset of nature-based visitors who are known to stay longer and spend more money than typical visitors. Nature-based tourism is currently worth \$19.6 billion annually to NSW and is a growing industry<sup>3</sup>. National parks are an important driver of the industry<sup>3</sup> because, as the name implies, nature-based tourism is entirely reliant on the beauty and inspiration of the natural world in which the visitors are immersed, and national parks are the best means to protect this. Several state forests in the proposed GKNP already host mountain bike infrastructure with varying levels of formality, but their economic potential cannot be maximised as logging is incompatible with high value nature-based tourism.

The GKNP therefore offers an outstanding opportunity to ensure that koalas are protected while delivering a serious economic injection to the Coffs Coast and hinterland and offering people the chance to enjoy nature by bike. Koalas, sun, sea, sand and trails. Beat that New Zealand!

### **Cycling in the Great Koala National Park**

We're asking the government to commit \$6 million to upgrade existing mountain bike hubs to create a world-class offering. The network of hubs would support over 100km of trails catering for riders of differing abilities and would include areas for cross-country, all-mountain, touring, downhill and free riding. Tracks and signage would be professionally constructed in consultation with ecologists in accordance with International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA) standards. Hubs are proposed from Woolgoolga in the north (Wedding Bells and Bucca) to South West Rocks in the south (Ingleba) at Nambucca Heads (Jacks Ridge), Urunga (Newry), Coffs Harbour (Mount Coramba) and Sawtell (Pine Creek) (Figure 1). We also support the development of a new cycling hub in Bellingen Shire, potentially in Dorrigo, subject to community consultation.

It is proposed that the hubs are linked to each other, where possible via existing forest tracks, and to the existing NSW Coastal Cycle Trail<sup>4</sup> between Woolgoolga and South West Rocks to maximise opportunities for cycling visitors to experience both the coast and mountain bike hubs (Figure 2). Linking hubs to each other and to settlements on the coast and in hinterland valleys will maximise opportunities for visitors to drop off and will help increase stay length.

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<sup>3</sup>Destination NSW. *Nature-based tourism to NSW. Year ended September 2017.*, <<https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/nature-based-tourism-to-nsw-snapshot-ye-sept-2017.pdf>> (2018).

<sup>4</sup><https://www.nswcoastcycle.com/>

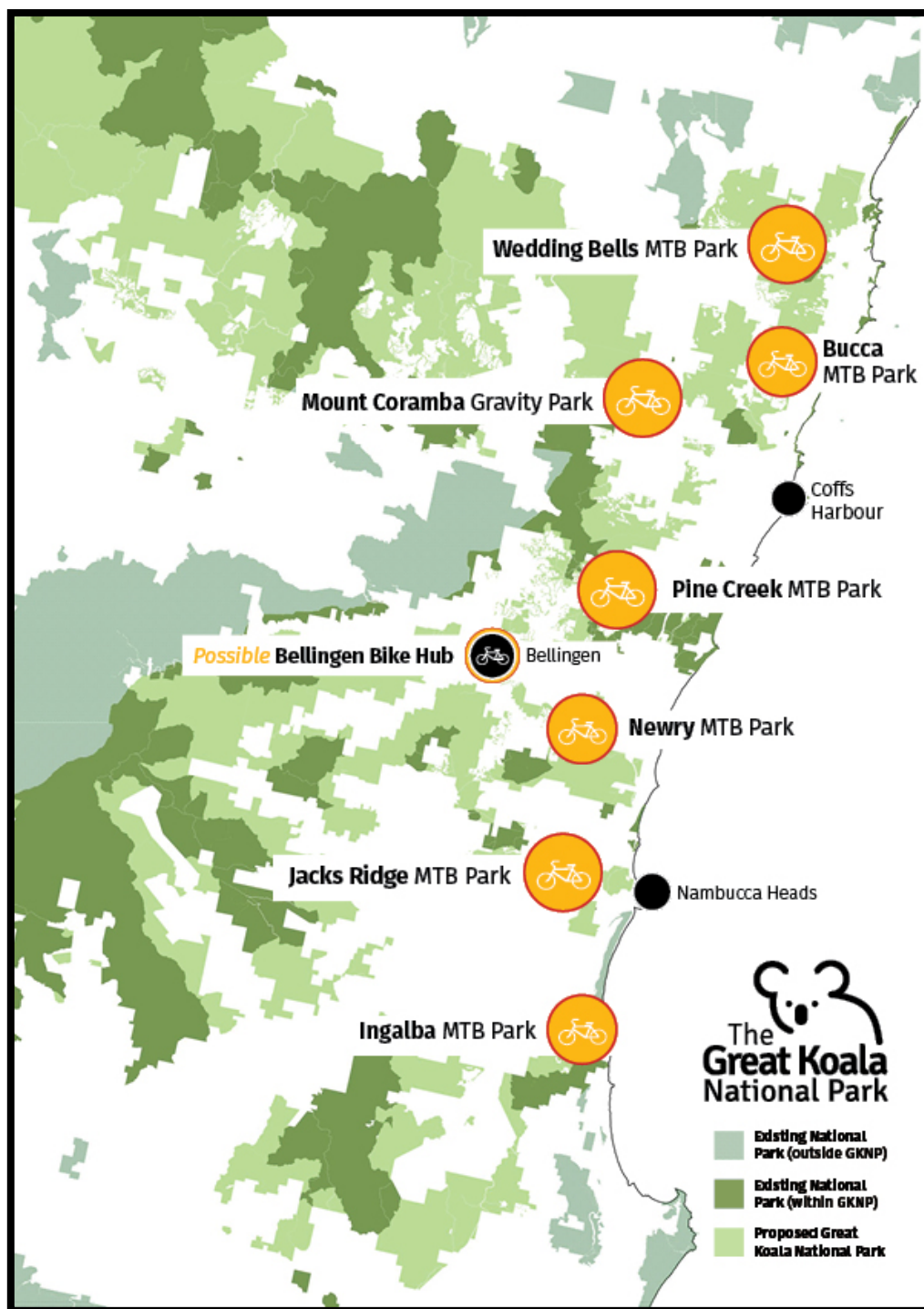


Figure 1: Indicative map of six existing mountain bike hubs that are proposed to be upgraded, plus a possible hub in Bellingen.

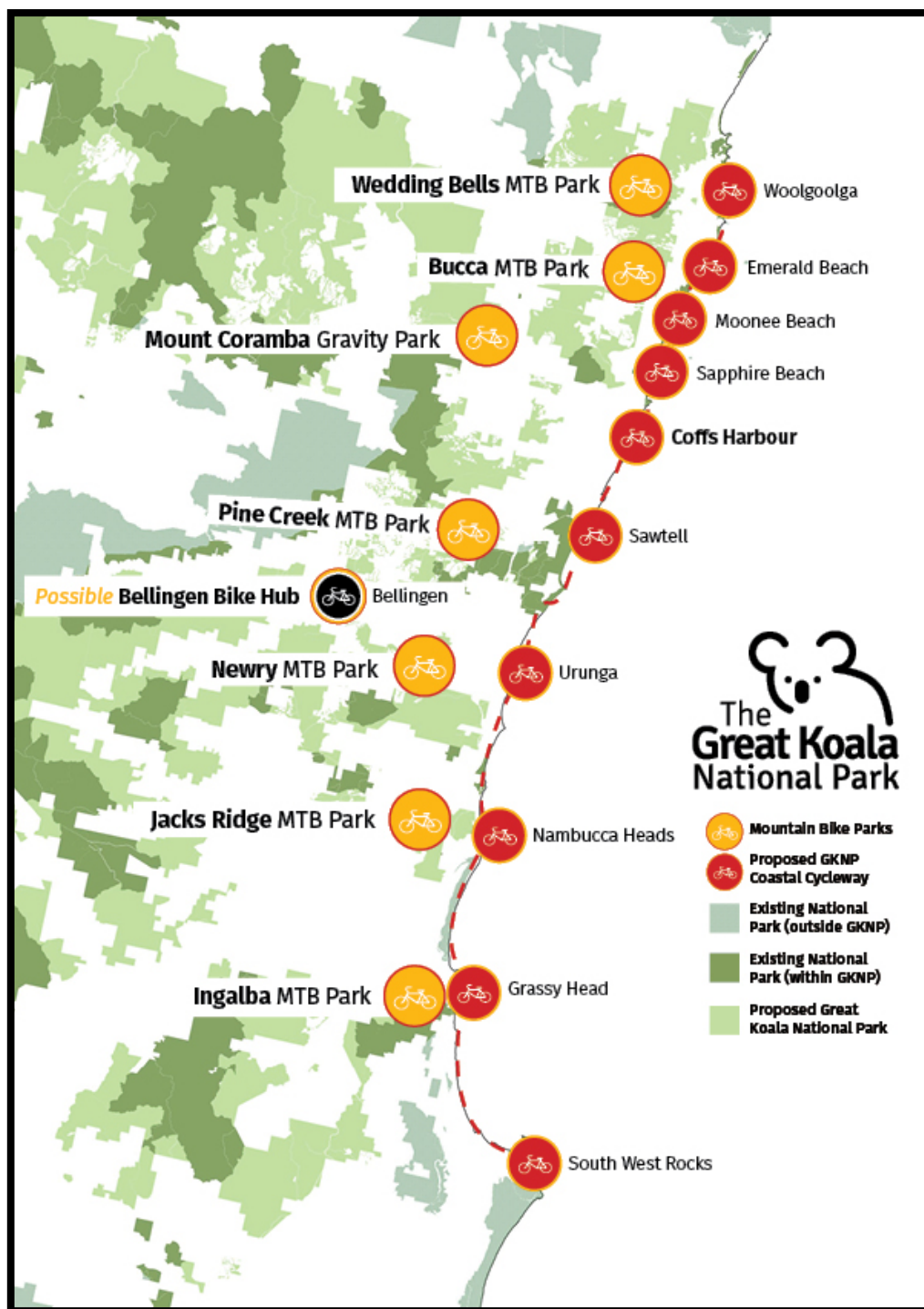


Figure 2: Relationship between mountain bike hubs (orange circles) and existing locations on the NSW Coastal Cycleway (red circles).

## Why do we need this level of investment?

There are existing mountain bike tracks in state forests but they do not have high quality facilities because they do not have security of tenure. Because state forests are subject to logging—logging that will become more intensive in the near future—it would be madness to invest millions of dollars in constructing trails that were at risk of destruction when the log trucks rolled in. That’s why existing tracks are not professionally constructed with the assistance of ecologists and don’t have facilities like picnic tables and toilets that enable broader community and visitor use. With a strategic approach to the development of hubs they can be linked to each other and to local towns and villages, which will allow better integration of bicycle tourism with existing offerings. Finally, professional trail builders in consultation with ecologists conforming to IMBA standards will see the construction of trails that deliver the highest possible environmental standards—and deliver the highest possible economic returns.

## Estimated budget and priority items

Item	Estimated cost
Concept and feasibility plan	\$100,000
Detailed trail masterplan	\$200,000
Apply for Development Approvals	\$300,000
Trail construction*	\$4,000,000
Amenities construction^	\$1,000,000
Community consultation	\$200,000
Marketing strategy development	\$200,000
Estimated total	<b>\$6,000,000</b>

\*Estimates trail construction at \$33,000 per kilometre

^Includes construction of toilets, shelters, cleaning facilities and signage

## Steps to minimise environmental impact and conflict

Mountain biking does have ecological impacts<sup>5,6,7</sup>, the severity of which are determined by ten primary factors<sup>8</sup>, and can result in conflict with other user groups if not well managed. To avoid negative outcomes, we propose the following ten steps:

1. Consultation with Traditional Owners occurs prior to any trail construction to ensure no impacts on cultural heritage;
2. Participation of mountain bikers and conservation groups in the planning of hubs;
3. Professional trail builders are employed along with ecologists to ensure trails avoid sensitive areas and trails accord with the IMBA standards;
4. Trails are not put in areas with erodible soils, sensitive vegetation and/or threatened and rare ecological communities;
5. Strong biosecurity measures are implemented via cleaning stands and brushes at trail heads; provision of information to local and regional accommodation and signage at transport hubs;

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<sup>5</sup>Miistakis Institute. *Mountain Biking: a Review of the Ecological Effects. A literature review for Parks Canada - National Office (Visitor Experience Branch)*, <<https://www.lib.washington.edu/msd/norestriction/b67566091.pdf>> (2010).

<sup>6</sup>Pickering, C. M., Hill, W., Newsome, D. & Leung, Y.-F. Comparing hiking, mountain biking and horse riding impacts on vegetation and soils in Australia and the United States of America. *Journal of Environmental Management* **91**, 551-562, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2009.09.025> (2010).

<sup>7</sup>Pickering, C. M. & Hill, W. Impacts of recreation and tourism on plant biodiversity and vegetation in protected areas in Australia. *Journal of Environmental Management* **85**, 791-800, doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvman.2006.11.021> (2007).

<sup>8</sup>Pickering, C. M. Ten Factors that Affect the Severity of Environmental Impacts of Visitors in Protected Areas. *AMBIO* **39**, 70-77, doi:10.1007/s13280-009-0007-6 (2010).

6. Creek and swail crossings are either avoided or bridged to protect water quality, and trail closures may occur in times of heavy rain and flood;
7. Night riding is avoided to minimise disturbance to fauna;
8. Trails are clearly marked and coded according to their difficulty, with walking and biking trails kept separate where possible;
9. New infrastructure (toilets, picnic areas etc) is located in existing clearings and close to tracks to minimise disturbance to vegetation;
10. Illegal trail building is discouraged and illegal trails removed; trails in ecologically-sensitive areas are relocated to lower impact areas.

### Reserve category and management authority

We propose the management authority to be the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). NPWS already has experience in managing mountain bike trails in a number of other reserves including Bongil Bongil National Park and Garigal National Park (see case study) and has developed a Sustainable Mountain Bike Strategy<sup>9</sup> that can guide the implementation and maintenance of the hubs. All of the forests proposed for protection would be reserved under the umbrella of the Great Koala National Park and managed subject to the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* (NPW Act). At a finer scale though, different reserve categories will be required to accommodate existing recreational activities, including mountain biking.

### Suggested timeline and priority steps

Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
1. Create GKNP and secure funding	1. Engage trail builders and employ managers	1. Complete work on existing hubs and begin work on new hub
2. Consultation with traditional owners	2. Begin work to upgrade existing hubs	2. Install infrastructure (toilets, picnic tables etc)
3. Consultation with mountain bike and conservation communities	3. Complete concept design for Bellingen hub	3. Complete links between hubs
4. Consultation over new hub in Bellingen Shire	4. Complete Plans of Management	4. Develop and launch marketing strategy
5. Concept, feasibility studies and masterplan completed	5. Plan and develop links between hubs and to towns and villages	
6. Development Approvals submitted		

<sup>9</sup>NSW Office of Environment and Heritage. *Sustainable Mountain Biking Strategy*, <<https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/-/media/OEH/Corporate-Site/Documents/Policy-and-law/sustainable-mountain-biking-strategy-110649.pdf>> (2011).



## Case Studies

### ***Rotorua, New Zealand***

Logging of public native forests is not permitted in New Zealand. Rotorua has developed a range of successful recreational and adventure nature-based tourism opportunities in its local forests.

The most well-known is the Whakarewarewa - Redwoods forest, located 5 kilometres from Rotorua. The former State Forest Park comprises two types of management: management of 288 ha of the Redwoods section of the forest (exotic Californian Redwoods and native forest) by the Rotorua District Council as a recreational and conservation forest; and management of 2,427 ha of the Whakarewarewa plantation forest (exotic) by the Timberlands Ltd management company for timber production.

The protection of the Redwoods forest for conservation and recreational purposes since the 1980s has resulted in investment in recreational and tourism infrastructure, including a Visitors Centre, café and shop, upgraded car parking and the development of a network of walking, dog walking, orienteering and mountain-biking trails. Recreational activities include horse riding, mountain biking, walking, hiking and the Redwoods Treewalk (canopy suspension bridges).

Licensed businesses provide services in the forest, including nine mountain bike guiding, education, skills clinics and touring companies, one mountain bike uplift transport company, and one event and function management company (conferences and weddings are popular events in the forest).

Whakarewarewa - Redwoods forest has developed an international reputation for mountain biking in particular, with over 160km of mountain bike tracks from Grade 1 (beginners) to Grade 6 (competitive/extreme). It is one of six destinations worldwide awarded the most prestigious 'gold-level' ride centre status by the International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA). In 2010 the Australian Mountain Bike Magazine named the Whakarewarewa/Redwoods trails as the best in the world, and in 2013 Red Bull named it one of the eight top mountain biking destinations on earth.

Rotorua and the Whakarewarewa - Redwoods forest have become established hosts of national and world mountain biking championships, downhill and endurance events, including the UCI World Mountain Bike Championships and the annual Crankworx World Tour competitions.

An economic assessment of the impact of the 2016 Crankworx event concluded:

- NZ\$8 million was contributed to the Rotorua economy, a \$4.2 million increase on 2015 event;
- Of this, NZ\$5.8 million came from domestic visitors and \$2.2 million from international visitors;
- 15,439 people attended, 90 per cent from New Zealand;
- 94.3% of the visitors surveyed said they would return the following year<sup>10</sup>.

In 2007, mountain biking accounted for 85,000 of the 282,000 recreational visits to the Whakarewarewa/Redwoods forest<sup>11</sup>. Just over half were visitors, of which 48 per cent were domestic and 3 per cent were international. 54 per cent of bikers visited Rotorua specifically to go mountain biking.

A strong marketing and tourism services segment has developed in Rotorua to support visitor mountain biking, with dedicated maps, apps and websites including [www.riderotorua.com](http://www.riderotorua.com).

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<sup>10</sup>Rotorua Daily Post, 'Crankworx Rotorua adds \$8 million to the city', 6 July 2016, [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rotorua-daily-post/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=1503438&objectid=11669503](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/rotorua-daily-post/news/article.cfm?c_id=1503438&objectid=11669503)

<sup>11</sup>TRC, 'Potential for Mountain Biking in North Eastern Tasmania: Market Demand and Economic Assessment', 2013, [www.trctourism.com](http://www.trctourism.com), p. 49.

### ***Derby, Tasmania***

Located in north-eastern Tasmania, the Blue Derby forest reserves are home to the Blue Derby mountain bike trails. Since their establishment in 2015, they have attracted an estimated additional 30,000 visitors<sup>12</sup> (approximately 250 per cent<sup>13</sup>) to the region each year and has seen a revitalisation in Derby's economy.

The Federal government contributed \$2.45 million of the \$3 million investment in the construction of the Blue Derby trails, the largest single mountain bike project undertaken in Australia to date. With a total length of 80km, this corresponds with a conservative cost of \$37,500 per km.

Mountain bike tourism has been hailed as an economic boost for regional economies and country towns like Derby, with the community witnessing tangible economic benefits from mountain biking. Mountain bike tourists were also observed to be high yielding visitors<sup>14</sup> with additional flow-on spending effects across wider Tasmania, contributing an estimated \$30 million return to the local economy per year<sup>15</sup>.

With an estimated 30,000 visitors per year, applying an average collective spend for Tasmanian tourism per domestic overnight visitor of \$1,794<sup>16</sup> and a NSW proportion of nature based tourism spending of 56.4%<sup>17</sup>, a total benefit of \$30.4 million in nature based tourism spending is attributed to the Blue Derby trails.

Despite investment costs associated with the establishment of the Blue Derby trails, the sustainable and successful attraction of mountain bikers and tourists, as relatively high yield customers, suggest a viable financial return. Estimated annual spend produces a return significantly higher than investment costs and are likely to increase with future extensions of the trails. Similarly, the flow-on effects from mountain bike spending include other regional economies outside Derby and state origins, further suggesting viable economic returns.

The success of mountain biking adventure tourism has encouraged Derby's local council to investigate opportunities from other adventure tourism activities, to further grow Derby's tourism sector<sup>18</sup>. This suggests that investing in key tourism infrastructure projects can promote increased economic activity and employment in other sectors such as food, accommodation and tourism services, while continuing to attract investment inflows. The success of these opportunities, however, are contingent upon the effective conservation of forests and the promotion of its ecological value<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup>ABC News 2017, *Mountain bike boom a boon for country towns in the race for tourism dollars*. Available online at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/mountain-bike-boom-a-boon-for-country-towns/9153572>

<sup>13</sup>Tasmanian Greens 2017, *Forestry Bill – Potential Logging at Derby*. Available online at: <https://tasmps.greens.org.au/content/forestry-bill-potential-logging-derby>

<sup>14</sup>ABC News 2017, *Mountain bike boom a boon for country towns in the race for tourism dollars*. Available online at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/mountain-bike-boom-a-boon-for-country-towns/9153572>

<sup>15</sup>ABC News 2017, *Wheels of progress: What happens when a rural town becomes the mountain bike capital of Australia?* Available at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-26/mountain-bike-trails-driving-major-change-in-derby/9276384>

<sup>16</sup>Tourism Tasmania 2017, *Average Expenditure in Tasmania per Interstate Visitor by Origin*. Available online at: <http://www.tvsanalyser.com.au/>

<sup>17</sup>Destination NSW 2017, *Nature Based Tourism to NSW*. Available online at: <https://www.destinationnsw.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/nature-based-tourism-to-nsw-snapshot-ye-sept-2017.pdf>

<sup>18</sup>ABC News 2017, *Mountain bike boom a boon for country towns in the race for tourism dollars*. Available online at: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-08/mountain-bike-boom-a-boon-for-country-towns/9153572>.

<sup>19</sup>The Wilderness Society 2017, *Hodgman targets Blue Derby forests for logging as part of plan to undo reserves*. Available online at: <https://www.wilderness.org.au/hodgman-targets-blue-derby-forests-logging-part-plan-undo-reserves>.