

**Submission
No 431**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Date received: 31/08/2012



MATHOURA

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The General Purpose Standing Committee No. 5

Inquiry into the Management of Public Land

In New South Wales

The Mathoura Chamber of Commerce and Citizens incorporated is a small community committee that has been active for over 25 years. It has a well recognised status and in addition represents the interests of the whole community in its charter. The Chamber has a good working relationship with Murray Shire Council, and prior to the conversion of the forests to National Parks, with Forests NSW.

In view of this it was disappointing that there was no contact from the National Parks and Wild Life Service (NP&WLS) during the process of conversion or following conversion. There appeared to be a Sydney centric approach where the National Parks hierarchy believed they knew best and how it was going to work, without the need to consult locally. Examples of this being the naming of all the forests as Riverina Parks, the selection of the boundaries for the Regional Parks, and the initial works program. Fortunately a concession was made to the Park name after significant lobbying to allow the well known forests such as Moira, Millewa and Gulpa Island to at least have a precinct name. Some of the initial works that has been carried out has been spent without considering the need or cost benefit, such as the crushed concrete used on the Gulpa Creek Walk trail at Mathoura, and the fill provided to raise the height of the car park at the bird hide. The Gulpa Creek Walk Trail was an initiative of the Chamber, supported by Forests NSW and Council. It consists of over 4km of trail, two bridges and several board walks built over a 10 years period. The National Parks management didn't even know or bother to find out who built the trail. Without any consultation or discussion on the need, NP&WLS spread crushed concrete on most of the trail. The result was an unnecessary expenditure, compounded with a poor choice of product, that has left the path surface rough and less enjoyable to walk on.

On a more general assessment of the impacts of the conversion to National Parks, the town feels as though its timber heritage has been taken from them. Mathoura has a proud history

as a timber town, and red gum runs deep in their veins. At the entrances to the town there are large red gum logs with MATHOURA carved in them. The Football-Netball Club is known as the Timber Cutters, and the Public School has a red gum tree as its emblem on their uniforms.

The loss of employment in the timber industry has impacted on the town. The Chamber has not surveyed residents to find out the net loss of workers, as some took the redundancy and retired, some retrenched from Forests NSW were re employed by NP&WLS, while others have moved to firewood or the Crump Sawmill. However there were still job losses and in a small town this impact is more noticeable. Fortunately the NP&WLS have taken over the use of the Forestry Works Depot at Mathoura which continues the benefits derived from this local facility. However the main office is in Moama, hence Mathoura does not gain any benefit from these staff or visiting management.

The Standing Committee Panel were particularly interested in the impact on tourism as a result of the change to National Parks. The following dot points are a summary of the comments by accommodation businesses in Mathoura and at Picnic Point.

- Last Easter there was over 50% drop in campers in the forest. One example of this impact is that my accommodation lost 8 to 10 regular clients who are family members of a large camping group. Some of these are senior, others women with young children and another disabled, who each prefer our overnight accommodation. These campers, like most others, stay for over a week and previously patronised the businesses in Mathoura for their stores. The reasons given for the cancellation was the restriction on dogs and the collection of camp firewood in the forests.
- Figures provided to the ABS were a 20 to 25% reduction in accommodation rates since National Parks were introduced.
- Cabin rental down 50% since National Parks created. Ban on dogs in the forest the major deterrent. Even caravan park patrons have nowhere to walk their dogs now other than on the Shire roads. There are more dog lease free areas in Brunswick than at Picnic Point.
- In previous years we have sold 4 cabins on average , but only one since the creation of the National Park.
- No drop in clients, probably because no incentive to camp in the forest with the ban on dogs and the firewood restrictions. No one is camping in the forest, it is so quiet.
- Many customers camp in our park but use the forest for their recreation, as not all visitor fish or water ski; that is until National Parks took over. For some clients motor bike riding has been a family recreation in the forest in the past. A small motocross circuit

existed near the Edward River Bridge that many junior family members enjoyed, but this and riding in general is no longer tolerated.

- Mathoura has lost a big part of its economic base with the reduction in visitor camping, because these campers stayed for extended periods and bought their supplies in Mathoura.

By far the biggest concern is the reduction in visitors that camp not only in the forests along the Murray and Edward Rivers, but also in the various accommodation options available and the primary reason for this has been the introduction of the ban on dogs, and to a lesser degree the ban on firewood collection and motor bikes. Forest camping has been a ritual for many people over many years. There are any number of camping locations along the rivers such that camps can be well spaced out. Hence campers with their dogs have previously enjoyed the freedom to camp within the forest, beside a stream, and not feel restricted in their use of firewood or recreational pursuits. Personally I have not been aware of any issues or complaints about camper's dogs, or their motor bike riding, although the police have at times had issues with unlicensed rider and unregistered bikes. Campers enjoyed the space and there was great camaraderie between them. If this was not so, then why would so many return year after year if the camp environment was not to their liking.

National Parks have quoted various hypothetical figures on the number of visitors the Parks will attract, however unless they stay in the area for a number of days then the loss of the traditional camper will significantly out way the perceived benefits from these possible visitors.

On a positive note a number of Mathoura businesses were fortunate to receive funds from the Riverina Red Gum Grants. The expenditure of the funds have in most cases assisted local tradesmen, however the challenge now is to be creative in a very difficult economic environment to capitalise on their business enhancement.

In conclusion, it is disappointing that red gum can no longer be harvested because it is such a valuable and renewable resource. The economic loss of this fine timber, the loss of the employment it generated, and the restrictions imposed by National Parks to our community land, not only near Mathoura but elsewhere in the Riverina, is almost a travesty of justice and an unjustified penalty to our community.

Yours sincerely,

David Keech
President