

INQUIRY INTO ACCESS RESTRICTIONS TO PUBLIC LANDS AND WATERWAYS

Organisation: Access for All

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Select Committee on Access Restrictions to Public Lands and Waterways.
New South Wales Legislative Council.

21 July 2025

Dear Sirs,

ACCESS FOR ALL® Inc., (AFA) is a Not-for-Profit regional Association with a membership of over 100 families spread from Southern Queensland to Central Victoria and formed some 25 years ago.

Our organisation has long advocated for balanced and equitable policies that preserve both the unique natural heritage of our state and the public's ability to engage with these treasured spaces.

Our ongoing involvement with legislative processes and community consultation has given us a clear perspective on the complexities of public land management. We believe that public access to these areas should be maintained in a manner that respects the environment, acknowledges cultural significance, and honours historical recreational uses.

It is with these principles in mind that we address the current policy directions and express our position on the evolving management frameworks under consideration.

Since 1999, we have advocated reopening historic bridle tracks that were made inaccessible to horse riders after large areas of Wilderness were declared in National Parks across Southern New South Wales and beyond. These declarations lacked adequate consultation and overlooked heritage concerns, restricting access to important aspects of bush heritage and recreation. Over 20 years, through extensive meetings and trials, we secured recognition and partial restoration of access on designated tracks. Since then, AFA has helped maintain several historic bridle tracks and fostered collaboration with National Parks (NSW) in SE NSW.

In addition, and for some years now, AFA has expressed concerns regarding a 3 stage proposal by consecutive NSW Governments to transfer ownership of all National Parks in New South Wales to local aboriginal groups under the proposed **Development of a new Aboriginal joint management model for NSW national parks**, published by the Environment and Heritage Group, Department of Planning and Environment NSW, July 2022.

The document states:

"Land title is central...Accordingly it is anticipated the new model will provide for the potential handback of title to all NSW national parks- covering nearly 10% of the state - subject to the land being leased back - for its continued use and management as a national park."

"[It] will be a significant practical step towards Closing the Gap targets."

"In developing a model that provides for the title to be held by Aboriginal people, the new model will seek alignment with native title processes and outcomes".

Our concerns with this proposal are as significant as they are alarming.

- The NSW Government under the Department of Environment currently manages national parks on behalf of all NSW citizens including indigenous. Their first responsibility is to provide best practice to manage the parks.
- Under the National Parks and Wildlife Act there are responsibilities on NPWS to manage Aboriginal sites appropriately, but NSW National Parks should not be used by Government to placate the misplaced “guilt” of colonial settlement.
- The aim of the proposal is *“to develop a model that will deliver a range of significant social and economic benefits for Aboriginal people”*. While most Australians would support such assistance it is not right to gift exclusive title to one group of Australians and then rent it back. If one understands this aim is to the exclusion of all others, it is too wide.
- NSW Government should ensure the best qualified people with the most relevant skills are employed to manage and operate the parks for the preservation of natural and cultural heritage. In many cases this would Aboriginal people.
- Employing Aboriginal people would be favourably viewed and accepted by most citizens. Training and professional education opportunities could be offered.
- The land does not need to be gifted for ongoing *“Implementing fire management....Implementing feral animal control, threatened species protection and other on-ground land management”*.
- The model’s consultation process intends to undermine an established existing system without adequate planning or consultation and will cause dissidence from many other stake holders.
- The document is presented as ‘beyond discussion’, a fait accompli, with only its implementation to be discussed, that transfer of title to one of a variety of types of aboriginal communities is required.
- This model does not identify transparency, or accountability. Stage 1 and 2 should have been inclusive of all stakeholders who use and value our national parks - not only the *“Custodians Network”* and Aboriginal communities. The consultation stage, Stage 3 is too late as it refers to *“refining a proposed model and releasing for public comment”*.
- According to the document, currently 2.2% of the national park estate is held under title to Aboriginal people. NSW Government should undertake performance audits to provide insight as to agreement performances, outcomes and impact on other stakeholders.
- The document acknowledges a range of complex issues, including the appropriate mechanism for identifying Aboriginal owners for each national park. How does that work?

These comments are exclusive to the implementation of best practice for management of national parks in NSW. Access for All supports Closing the Gap but strongly objects to the government’s proposal to exclude ALL Australians from ownership of these public lands.

[Note: Many of the above statements were sent to the NSW Parliament in August 2022 following adoption by the AFA Committee.]

Access for All would like to make clear it supports the simultaneous policy of increasing aboriginal staffing ratios in our National Parks - so that all Australians and visitors can better appreciate , amongst other benefits, the values of the oldest civilization on earth – provided always the inherent rights of access to our wonderful National Parks by the general public are not swamped by the application of unreasonable cultural values as has happened, for example to ALL non-aboriginal male, and ALL female (whether indigenous or not}, members of our community across the **entirety** of Mt. Warning National Park.

We find it difficult to avoid making adverse remarks concerning the Mt. Warning lock-out.

Turning to a more general response to this enquiry, we observe; -

- The need for more genuine consultation by the government over questions about the ownership and management of our National Parks.
- Rules regarding access are arbitrary or excessive.
- More money is required.*
- Problems of feral animals, weed control and fire are not being successfully addressed.

We seek favourable consideration of these remarks and advise of our wish to appear before the Committee in due course.

Respectfully,

H. R. Hodgkinson
ACCESS FOR ALL
Honorary Secretary

*As an aside, this writer was shocked to discover that on transfer of responsibility for the public land that became the state's second-biggest National Park, NO FUNDING was budgeted for the new Wollemi NP by the NPWS in its first year of operation.