



Harcourt Mountain Bike Park Proposal

Scoping Study and Reference Framework May 2014



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Executive Summary

Harcourt Mountain Bike Park Proposal

Seizing an opportunity to drive regional development

Securing Harcourt's future prosperity and growth through cycling tourism

"..there is no question that mountain biking is now being driven by tourism..." Philip Gomes, noted SBS cycling commentator ¹

Vision

To build a State significant mountain bike facility on the western slopes of Mount Alexander, near Harcourt, that enhances the ecological and amenity values of a former pine plantation, encourages sustainable recreational and economic activities and supports the Goldfields Track as a spine for cycling tourism across the Goldfields region.

The western slopes of Mount Alexander, adjacent to Harcourt, present a once-in-a-lifetime occasion for strategic investment — a former pine plantation (degraded public land) available at the end of plantation lease. It is an ideal location (close to Melbourne, great transport connections) in a region already boasting quality tourism services, in an iconic landscape (the Victorian Goldfields) and possessing all the characteristics behind the success stories of world-class mountain parks (topography, scenery, terrain and accessibility).

In late 2013, the Victorian Government's Regional Growth Fund (administered by Regional Development Victoria) allocated funding to Goldfields Tourism Incorporated (GTI) to scope the development of a world standard mountain bike park. This first stage involved establishment of a steering committee to oversee a feasibility study and develop a master plan for the park design.

The findings from this initial stage point to the immense economic and social benefits to be realised by the construction and operation of the proposed mountain bike park. Options for the mountain bike park's long-term management/maintenance are considered sustainable and have been well received by stakeholders.

The project is anticipated to deliver outcomes consistent with State, Regional and municipal strategies. The case for investment of \$2 million in this State-significant sporting facility is strategic and compelling.


Project Findings


The feasibility study's headline conclusion leaves no doubt that the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park proposal stacks up in terms of its relevance, viability and economic opportunities and benefits. The creation of a world-standard mountain bike park on Mount Alexander is strategic, compelling, and sustainable.

The Mountain Bike Park supports Harcourt as a hub for cycling. Harcourt already hosts regular State-level cycling events and is fast gaining a reputation as a quality, supportive and welcoming destination.


The required investment of \$2 million, will provide a world class, state-significant sporting facility of 34km of stacked, loop tracks, associated infrastructure, land care and linkages into Harcourt township.

The Harcourt Mountain Bike Park will deliver significant economic benefit for Harcourt and the greater area, building over 5 years as visitation reaches an expected 100,000 visitors. ²

 Year 1 - \$2.4million

 Year 5 - \$9.8million annually.

The above estimates are based on day-trip visitation, and would be significantly higher for overnight visitation. Tourism Victoria research shows domestic overnight adventure based visitors stay on average 3.7 nights.

 If the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park visitors stayed only two nights in the region, the benefit in the first year would be at least \$5.15million.

¹ Gomes, P. 2014, *The Fall and Rise of Mountain Biking*. Cycling Central SBS (27 March 2014)

²Based on tourism expenditure in Bendigo Loddon area. Mount Alexander Shire, *Economic Development Strategy & Profile*, August 2013.


The Park will deliver new jobs for the area. A 2012 report *Developing Victoria's Goldfields into Australia's Cultural Heritage Region*³, estimated that tourism in the Goldfields employs 5,300 – approximately 4% of total jobs in the region. The report went on to detail tourism expenditure and its direct correlation to jobs. It is estimated in regional Victoria there is one direct job in tourism for every \$170,000 of tourism spend. Based on these figures, the Park could deliver 14 new jobs in the first year and 57.6 jobs within 5 years.

The investment will provide a quality, self-directed recreational facility for the community. Such facilities deliver a direct benefit to a local community's health and wellbeing. Such facilities improve the liveability of an area, and support the State Government's *Good Move* program. The Harcourt Mountain Bike Park will most certainly assist in improving the liveability of the Mt Alexander Shire.

The cementing of Harcourt as a cycle hub for the region will foster greater community pride and further support the local community, strengthening new business opportunities, and supporting existing complementary businesses. The local community will also directly benefit during the construction phase of the Park. The use of local tradespersons and labour, and external contractors utilising local businesses. The design of the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park will allow for the delivery of world-class events. Events are a key driver for visitation to regional Victoria, playing a key role in introducing visitors to a particular region and repeat visitation. The quality of tracks in the proposed Park will allow event organisers to deliver professional events, attracting national and international media coverage, notoriety, visitation and economic returns.

Strategic Context

Victoria is taking a proactive approach to Cycle Tourism as articulated in the State Government's *Victoria's Cycle Tourism Action Plan 2011-2015*. The Plan's primary vision is for Melbourne and Victoria to '*be the premier cycling destination in Australia*'. Cycle tourism is an establishing market with considerable potential growth. The *Action Plan* estimated the:

-  Total estimated expenditure for the year ending December 2010 by domestic overnight, daytrip and international overnight visitors that participated in cycling in Victoria is \$362 million.
-  Total estimated expenditure of cycle tourists in Australia is approximately \$2.4 billion (including domestic overnight, daytrip and international overnight visitors participating in cycling as an activity).






Victoria's reputation for cycling is excellent. A 2010 Brand Health survey ranked Victoria as No. 1 in Australia for cycling. The State can cement this recognition through strategic investment.

Tourism Victoria research shows that cycle tourism has the potential to deliver visitor growth for regional Victoria and to stimulate regional and rural economies. Cycle tourists stay on average 70% longer and do 60% more activities than total domestic overnight visitors.

Victoria's high country, offers a robust and diverse range of cycling experiences, is seeing excellent economic benefits from their investment in cycle tourism. They have three times as many domestic and international visitors seeking a cycling experience, compared to those visiting for other reasons.

Results are expected to continue to grow with the increasing participation in cycling in Australia. Australian Sports Commission research shows cycling is now the fourth most popular activity nationally, and participation levels across the age groups continue to climb, and retail research indicates more than half of the bikes sold in Australia per annum are mountain bikes. This is a growing sport.

Road cycling and mountain biking has been identified as a priority in the Regional Tourism Action Plan (RTAP) for the Goldfields region. The development of the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park also aligns with the following strategies:

-  Loddon Mallee (South) Regional Strategic Plan - particularly the priorities of 'Strengthening our communities/ *small towns*', and '*diversify our economy*'.
-  Loddon Mallee Regional Trails Strategy
-  Harcourt – After The Bypass Report
-  Mt Alexander Shire Economic Development Strategy
-  Mt Alexander Shire Walking and Cycling Strategy

³ Tonkin, Howard and Street, 2012, *Developing Victoria's Goldfields into Australia's Cultural Heritage Region*

Ride Goldfields

The Harcourt Mountain Bike Park integrates with GTI's *Ride Goldfields* concept.

The Goldfields Track connects Bendigo and Ballarat via Creswick, Daylesford, Castlemaine and Harcourt. *Ride Goldfields* will be an inclusive, all-of-region and all cycling, interactive online showcase.






From Ballarat to Bendigo, Avoca to Heathcote, and Woodend to Dunolly – Ride Goldfields will provide compelling reasons for cycle tourists to visit, extend their stay and disperse across the greater Goldfields region.

Ride Goldfields will showcase information on mountain bike experiences, rail trails, road cycling, driving routes and regional towns.








Successful Examples

A key to the design and development of the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park was consideration of comparable mountain bike parks in Australia and overseas. The feasibility study reviewed a number of parks and identified key elements that ensure a successful facility. Through the work of the Steering Committee and the design team, it is considered all these factors have been met, including:

-  A strong and supportive local cycling fraternity and wider community
-  A variety of trails catering for the needs of all abilities and styles of riding
-  Very accessible both in regard to accessing the actual park, and negotiating around the park itself.
-  Attractive topography and terrain suited to challenging, and stimulating mountain bike riding
-  Showcasing unique and iconic landscapes with a range of complimentary, accessible tourism facilities.

The feasibility study reviewed visitation data for these comparable parks. The numbers are positive and confirm that a quality, mountain bike park delivers visitors:

-  You Yangs, Victoria - 50kms of graded track - 125,000 visitors per annum
-  Mount Buller, Victoria – 110k trails/40km of single trail - 40,000-50,000 visitors annually (Sept-May)
-  Stromlo, Canberra - 50km of trails - 100,000 visitors per annum
-  Valmont Bike Park, Boulder, USA - Diversity of trails – 500 visitors per day
-  Rotorua, NZ - 30 trails in 50ha - 185,000 visitors per annum, \$4.35mill economic benefit

Future and Ongoing Management

The future management of the land has been discussed with the land owner, Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI), and the adjoining land manager, Parks Victoria. Both are supportive of the proposal through the appropriate reservation of the land, formation of a Committee of Management (COM), and ongoing sustainability strategies. Discussions have taken place with Dja Dja Wurrung RAP to engage indigenous support and relevant participation in the project.

Goldfields Tourism Incorporated, along with community groups, mountain bike clubs and local government, is committed to the long term management/maintenance of the mountain bike park. This will be achieved through the formation of a skilled based COM, encouraging volunteer involvement through 'adopt a track', and income generation through a combination of sponsorship, events and online promotion.










Making it Happen in Harcourt

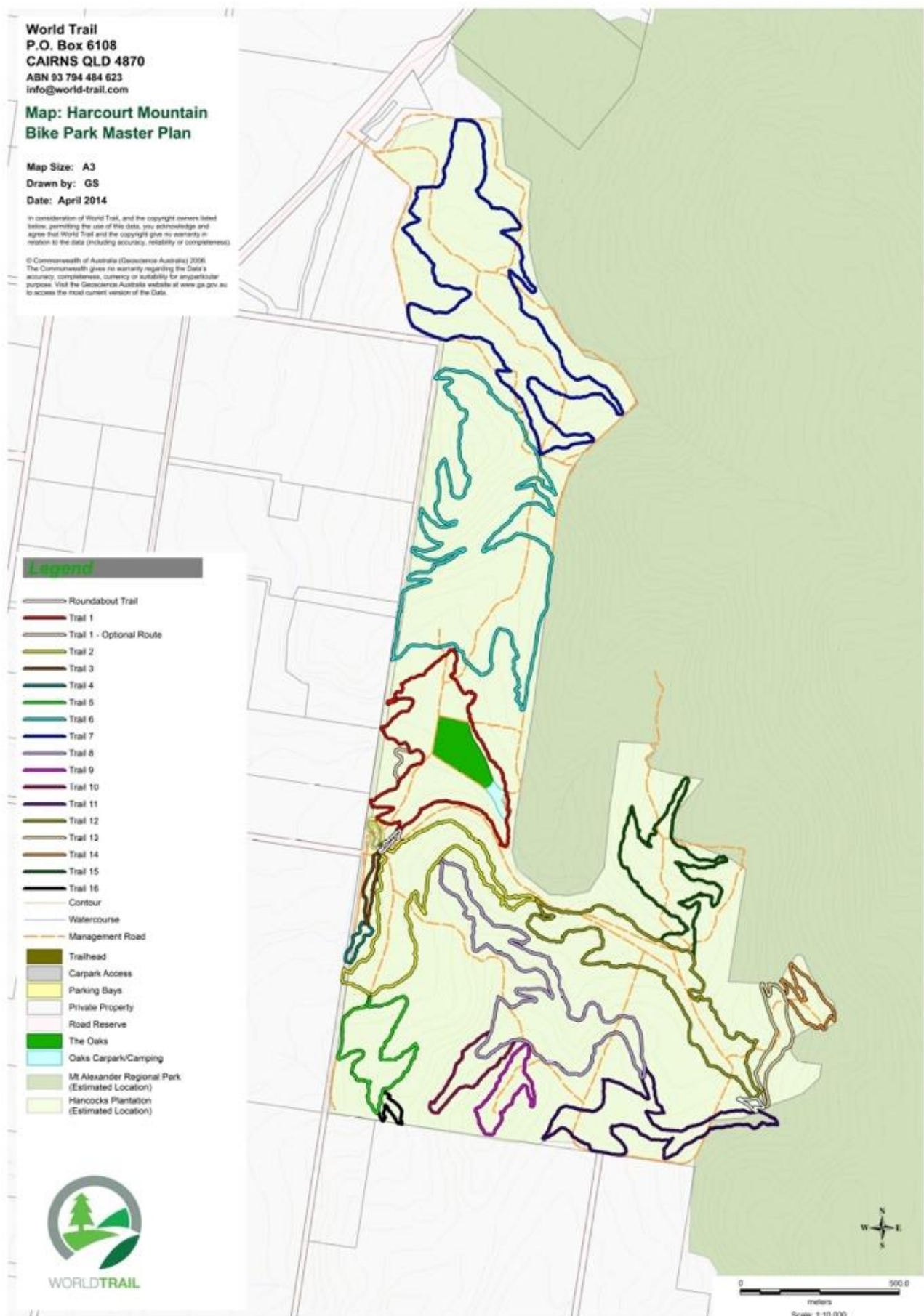
Investment is needed

All the evidence shows there are substantial economic benefits flowing from investment in the construction of strategic stand-out mountain bike parks.

Implementation of the Master Plan design of the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park promises to deliver a quality facility that will attract riders from overseas and around the country, event organisers and deliver direct benefits for the local community.

The budget for the whole package of works is estimated at \$2 million, to deliver the following

-  Construction of trail network catering to all skill levels - 18 trails covering approx total of 34km
-  Signage fabrication and installation
-  Trail head (car parking for 60-70 vehicles)
-  Toilets, picnic tables, shelter and non-potable water
-  Mapping including onsite and via other outlets.
-  Landcare works – weed control and revegetation works
-  Road signage
-  Planning and construction management
-  Linkage to Harcourt township/Mount Alexander Shire's road cycling hub



Masterplan of the proposed Harcourt Mountain Bike Park trail network.

Harcourt Mountain Bike Park Proposal

Scoping Study and Reference Framework May 2014

1.0 Vision and Objectives

Vision

To build a State significant mountain bike facility on the western slopes of Mount Alexander, near Harcourt, that enhances the ecological and amenity values of a former pine plantation, encourages sustainable recreational and economic activities and supports the Goldfields Track as a spine for cycling tourism across the Goldfields region.



Objectives:

- To design and develop a mountain bike park to the highest international design standards.
- To present the Victorian Government with a significant economic development opportunity that meets regional needs.
- To capture the input and involvement of stakeholders, the community and local representative groups to inform the design and provision of a quality mountain bike park that reflects the expectations of intended users and stakeholders.
- To add to the initiative of Harcourt as a cycling centre of excellence.
- To establish a governance arrangement that provides clear and decisive direction and supports sustainability of the proposal in every way.
- To deliver a mountain bike park that is sensitive and fluid in its siting and complements the landscape.

2.0 Introduction

Goldfields Tourism Incorporated secured funding from the Victorian State Government's Regional Growth Fund through Regional Development Victoria (RDV) to scope the development of an international standard mountain bike park (MBP) on the western slopes of Mount Alexander and to prepare a masterplan outlining a proposed trail design for the site.

Freerunning was engaged to prepare the scoping document and reference framework to determine the feasibility of the proposal. World Trail Pty. Ltd was commissioned to prepare a Masterplan that will enable the development of contract documentation for construction of a track network, skills course and supporting areas.

The creation of the Harcourt MBP will create a cycling centre of excellence, provide economic stimulus to the township of Harcourt and surrounds, as well as being a cycling draw-card for Central Victoria.

The facility has a central location and proximity to Melbourne and major transport connections – the Calder Freeway and Melbourne-Bendigo railway.

The project fits into a larger vision of Goldfields Tourism Incorporated, to work with a range of local interest groups, government agencies and associations to develop *Ride Goldfields*, a regional initiative using the Goldfields Track as a spine connecting existing or proposed tracks throughout the greater Goldfields Region.

2.1 Harcourt

Set in a productive valley at the foot of Mount Alexander, Harcourt is a small town with a population of around 500, situated 9 kilometres northeast of Castlemaine in Central Victoria. It was once the premier apple-growing region in Australia. Still the apple centre of Victoria, the local area is fast acquiring a name for its excellence in wine and cider production. Other things of interest in and around the town include cycling, fishing and the numerous walking tracks in Mount Alexander Regional Park.

Within the pine plantation boundary there is an old oak forest that was initially established for the tanning industry for the acorns in the early part of the last century. The trees are now mature, although not 'managed' in any formal or commercial way and provide a colourful, deciduous forest setting for passive recreational use.

Each year on the March Labour Day long weekend the town hosts "The Harcourt Applefest" - with local produce on sale in stalls, music concerts and several sports on show.

Harcourt granite stone, extracted from former quarries across the mountain, was widely used throughout Australia for soldier memorials, headstones and buildings of historical note. A number of these now decommissioned quarries are within or close to the Harcourt MBP boundary.

An opportunity exists to create a state of the art mountain bike facility that will establish Harcourt as a conveniently located hub for a range of different cycling events. Because of its size and locality, the township is well suited to hosting road and trail cycling events and activities and there is already a regular regional road-cycling criterium series that is conducted in Harcourt each year hosted and supported by Castlemaine and Bendigo Cycling Clubs. The cross-country mountain bike trails that link in to the Goldfields Track going north to Bendigo and south to Ballarat, provide excellent diversity and physical challenges for mountain bike riders of varying levels of ability seeking different endurance and technical riding experiences.

A mountain bike park will help formalise the recognition of Harcourt and its strengths of recreation, food, wine and scenic attributes as an outstanding and accessible tourism areas with many unique qualities leading to increased business investment in supporting services such as accommodation, cafes, and tours.

2.2 Harcourt After the Bypass

The opening of the Harcourt bypass section of the Calder Freeway project occurred on 20th April 2009 and was estimated to create a daily reduction of nine thousand vehicle movements through the town.

The Shire in partnership with the Harcourt community required the development of a strategic action plan. This document helped identify land use, infrastructure and socio-economic development and tourism options to secure the township's future prosperity and growth over the longer term. Mount Alexander Shire Council subsequently commissioned SED Consulting to undertake a Strategic Action Plan, which the local community named "Harcourt After the Bypass"⁴.

Specifically the strategy focused on the following key elements:

- a Place to Live: strengthening the local economy through residential growth and associated growth of facilities and services;
- the Town Centre: creating an attractive and vibrant community space; and
- tourism: making Harcourt a destination of choice.

⁴ SED Consulting. *Mount Alexander Shire. Harcourt After the Bypass Strategic Action Plan* (May 2009)

In the course of the *After the Bypass* study, the feasibility and options for improving linkage between Mount Alexander Regional Park (MARP) and Harcourt, particularly walking and cycle trails running east to west, was investigated. There was also an opportunity identified to investigate potential and market demand/interest to develop MARP based tourism around the granite quarry sites, Indigenous tourism potential, and nature-based tourism initiatives.

The study recognised that Mount Alexander Regional Park

- is an under-utilised resource for increased tourism and economic activity for the area;
- has limited direct access from the township of Harcourt with the main access roads being to the north and south;
- directional signage, internally and externally, to MARP and trails and interpretative signage within MARP is poor;
- has had sporadic investment in infrastructure and assets including signage, lookouts and maintenance of trails and
- needs to be further explored in terms of sympathetic tourism development and investment including: tourist accommodation; the rich indigenous history and granite quarries of the MARP; and improved signage, walking and cycling tracks.

The strategy went on to list a series of existing and potential events to help promote the tourism profile for the township and surrounds. One particular reference relates to the opportunities around cycling events:

“Opportunities may exist to attract national cycling events to the region, or to build cycling hill climb events and to derive greater benefits from walkers and cyclists using the Great Dividing Trail through the MARP”.

The conclusive comments of the strategy encourage the development of a holistic response to the challenges and opportunities for Harcourt to work collectively to realise the aims of the community.

The Harcourt MBP proposal is well positioned to address many of these identified opportunities and inject extensive positive benefit into Harcourt’s economy and revitalization objectives.

3.0 Mountain Biking – Historical Context

Mountain biking is typically the sport of riding bicycles off-road⁵ using specially designed mountain bikes and has its origins in North America and Europe. Records of American soldiers in the 1800s riding bicycles across country on unformed trails suggests an early form of how the recreation has evolved but it was more likely the development of ‘cyclo cross’ bikes originally designed as a winter training method for road racing cyclists in Europe that became the catalyst for the development of mountain biking in its many contemporary forms.

Mountain biking can generally be divided into multiple categories that include cross country (XC), trail riding, all mountain, downhill, freeride, slopestyle, dirt jumping and trials. The vast majority of mountain biking falls into the recreational cross-country, trail riding and enduro categories.

Mountain biking was introduced as a Summer Olympics sport in 1996 in Atlanta, USA, but has since grown internationally to be a highly popular and increasingly mainstream recreation activity. The focus of competition at the elite level is the World Cup series and World Championships. These events are held at a number of locations worldwide. Riders qualify for events by accumulating points in events such as the Australian Championships, Oceania Championships or NORBA series (national series held in the USA).

In Australia, various mountain biking associations organise a variety of events nation wide. Some of these events contribute to national points; others are merely to encourage participation. Events cater for a range of abilities with novice, sport, expert and veteran classes commonly available. The demand for recreational

⁵ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mountain_biking

mountain biking options continues to increase as off-road bikes become more affordable and readily available from department stores as well as specialty bike shops and on-line orders.

In Australia, mountain biking appears to be continuing rapid growth, although there remains limited understanding of the size and scope of the market. Statistics for estimated national participation rates in cycling activities (including road and mountain cycling) in 2012 was 10% for males and 5 % for females (⁶ABS *Participation in Sport and Physical Recreation, Australia, 2011-12*). Across gender and age groups, cycling appears to remain strong in the top four recreational activities in which Australians choose to participate.

In 2006 cycling was reported to be the fourth largest physical activity in Australia for people over 15 years. Of the 753,843 bikes sold in Australia in 2004, 69.8% were mountain bikes. At the retail level, one billion dollars is spent in the cycling industry in Australia every year (⁷Bradshaw 2006). According to IBIS World⁸ industry analyst Teruni Nugawila, ‘...in contrast to industry revenue, cyclist numbers increased solidly over the past five years.’ Cycling is one of Australia's most popular activities. IBIS World estimates that in 2011-12 approximately 2.4 million Australians ride regularly – up from 1.6 million in 2006-07.

Skyrocketing fuel prices accelerated the cycling trend. As fuel prices increased, more people rode bicycles for short trips instead of driving cars. ‘Despite this seemingly good news for the industry,’ Nugawila adds, ‘the increase in cyclists was driven by Australians dusting off their existing bikes and pumping up the tyres.’ The number of bikes sold in Australia remained steady despite increased cyclist numbers. However, the outlook for the next five years for the bicycle industry is bright, with governments investing heavily in building bike paths and lanes to improve safety. Local councils are requiring bike lanes in new estates, while state and federal government programs to raise awareness of healthy living will all help boost demand. Industry revenue is expected to increase over the five years through 2016-17. This research of course does not make the distinction between road and off-road cycling, but the emergence of the ‘mountain bike park’ concept appears to be influencing a return to the popularity of mountain biking as a preferred cycling activity choice.

According to Philip Gomes⁹ in his article “the fall and Rise of Mountain Biking” on SBS Cycling Central (27 March 2014) there is no question that mountain biking is now on the way back, and that tourism is the driver. “...last year, *Tourism Intelligence Scotland* stated that mountain-biking visitors were worth £119m (\$214m AUD) to the country in a tourist economy worth a total of £4.3bn (\$7bn AUD). That's a significant sum, particularly to the rural communities mountain-bikers favour.”

In Australia several significant efforts to stimulate tourism through mountain biking are becoming evident. Victoria has Bike Buller and You Yangs Regional Park as well as Lysterfield, site of the 2006 Commonwealth Games event and Forrest Mountain Bike Park. Far North Queensland has Ride Cairns, ACT has Stromlo Forest Park and Tasmania offers Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park (*Appendix 1*). Most centres have spent significant sums in trail building and other infrastructure to good effect.

4.0 The Mountain Bike Park Concept

In the mid-first decade of the 21st century, an increasing number of mountain bike-oriented parks/resorts opened. These were often similar to, or in the same complex as a ski resort. Mountain bike parks which operate as summer season activities at ski resorts often include chairlifts adapted to bikes, a number of trails of varying difficulty, and bicycle rental facilities. This concept has taken off in Australia where impacts of climate change have seen a reduction in regular snow cover and declining winter ski seasons.

The Mt. Buller Alpine Resort Management Board reported in the 2012/13 Annual Report¹⁰ that for the first time ever the number of summer visits exceeded winter visits to the resort. This was in large part due to the increase

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics, *Participation in Sport & Physical Recreation, Australia 2011-12*

⁷ Bradshaw, G., 2006, *The Australian bicycle industry report 2006*, Bicycle Industries Australia, Graphyte Media Pty Ltd, Melbourne, Australia

⁸ IBIS World, *Bicycles in Australia Industry Market Research Report* (15 April 2014)

⁹ Gomes, P. 2014, *The Fall & Rise of Mountain Biking*. Cycling Central SBS (27 March 2014)

¹⁰ Mt. Buller Alpine Resort Management Board, Annual Report 2012-13

in mountain biking facilities, events and infrastructure. With over 30km of mountain bike trails constructed in the resort area since 2007/08, the resort has seen a steady growth in use of the trails, recorded through the application of trail counters.

The development of mountain bike parks in Australia may well be linked to the changing needs of the demographic that pursues this form of recreational activity. A 2008 tourism study on mountain-biking trends in Tasmania¹¹ suggests the primary motivators for mountain biking in that state include:

- *convenience/accessibility* (e.g. the majority of independent mountain bikers seem to seek out day ride destinations);
- *trail quality* (e.g. diversity of terrain, trail features, and amount of single track) and quantity of riding available in an area; and
- *iconic experience* – riding in a unique, natural landscape setting, with high scenic value.

Dedicated mountain bike facilities do seek to address these key criteria and are better placed to promote cycling tourism initiatives as a result of consideration of such factors.

Location near rail links, international airports, major road networks and established commercial centres create improved opportunities, not only for major events and competitions, but for regular recreational use.

Quality construction of trails and facilities must also be addressed. A key factor in mountain biking worldwide is the role of the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA). IMBA was formed in 1988 and now provides an extremely strong platform for the activity, particularly as an advocate for mountain biking¹², but also in establishing benchmark standards for construction. IMBA's advocacy, combined with its ability to offer technical solutions, equips groups with the ability to form very effective partnerships with land managers – or to lobby effectively on behalf of their activity if required. IMBA aims to balance the social, recreational and environmental needs of various users so mountain biking can be sustainable.

The variety of natural settings provided in the various mountain bike parks across Australia also means there is diversity, a combination of very different terrains and landscapes and unique attractions coupled with the facilities themselves as part of a broader tourism offer in each region. From the World Heritage areas of far north Queensland and South-West Tasmania; the Alpine landscapes of Victoria and NSW or the coastal trail networks in Western Australia, the provision of mountain bike parks is a distinct and attractive proposition to the range of MTB riders seeking a safe, but challenging and diverse experience.

The Harcourt MBP proposal will serve to compliment that situation further, offering a completely different riding experience in a unique setting, already serviced with ready access, close proximity to major urban and metropolitan centres and an existing, established tourism industry in the region.

¹¹ Inspiring Place P/L., *Mountain Bike Tourism Market Profile for Tasmania*, (December 2008)

¹² Dept. of Conservation, Western Australia. *Mountain Bike Management Guidelines*, (May 2007)

5.0 Harcourt Mountain Bike Park

5.1 The Site

The Harcourt Mountain Bike Park (HMBP) proposal is structured around the notion of providing a network of mountain bike single-track trails and loops, within a purpose built facility, close to the township of Harcourt in central Victoria.

While the land has been managed as a pine plantation for over 100 years, the creation of the Harcourt MBP on this now disturbed site on the western flank of Mount Alexander, which adjoins the Mt. Alexander Regional Park, will seek to improve environmental values, while at the same time provide economic stimulus to Harcourt and its surrounds. The site has attractive topography and terrain suited to challenging, but stimulating mountain bike riding, and is conveniently located close to good transport connections (i.e. the Calder Freeway and Bendigo-Melbourne rail link).

Parks Victoria has indicated due to the relatively low environmental values of the site, and the interest in establishing a MTB, it is preferable to not include any of the 300 hectares in the adjoining regional park.

5.2 Landform and Features

The summit of Mt. Alexander is 746m above sea level and is part of the Great Dividing Range, Western Uplands of central Victoria. The HMBP site lies on the undulating western side of Mt. Alexander, providing ample variation in topography for mountain biking.

The granitic soils of Mt. Alexander are fertile and its slopes were once heavily forested with the Box – Ironbark sclerophyll woodlands, characteristic of the area. While much of the indigenous timber cover was removed through clearing for various agriculture practices, and the introduction of exotic species has impacted heavily, the slowly regenerating forest has originated from pockets of remnant native vegetation.

Several rare or endangered plant species have been located within the Regional Park and are listed as threatened under Schedule 2 of the Flora Fauna Guarantee Act (1998) Vic¹³. However these have not been identified on the plantation site, which is heavily modified. *Dianella tarda* (Late flowered Flax Lily) has been recorded on the site and possibly *Dianella sp. aff. longifolia* (Benambra) Arching Flax Lily, both of which are VROT listed vulnerable species and will be considered in relation to track siting and development.

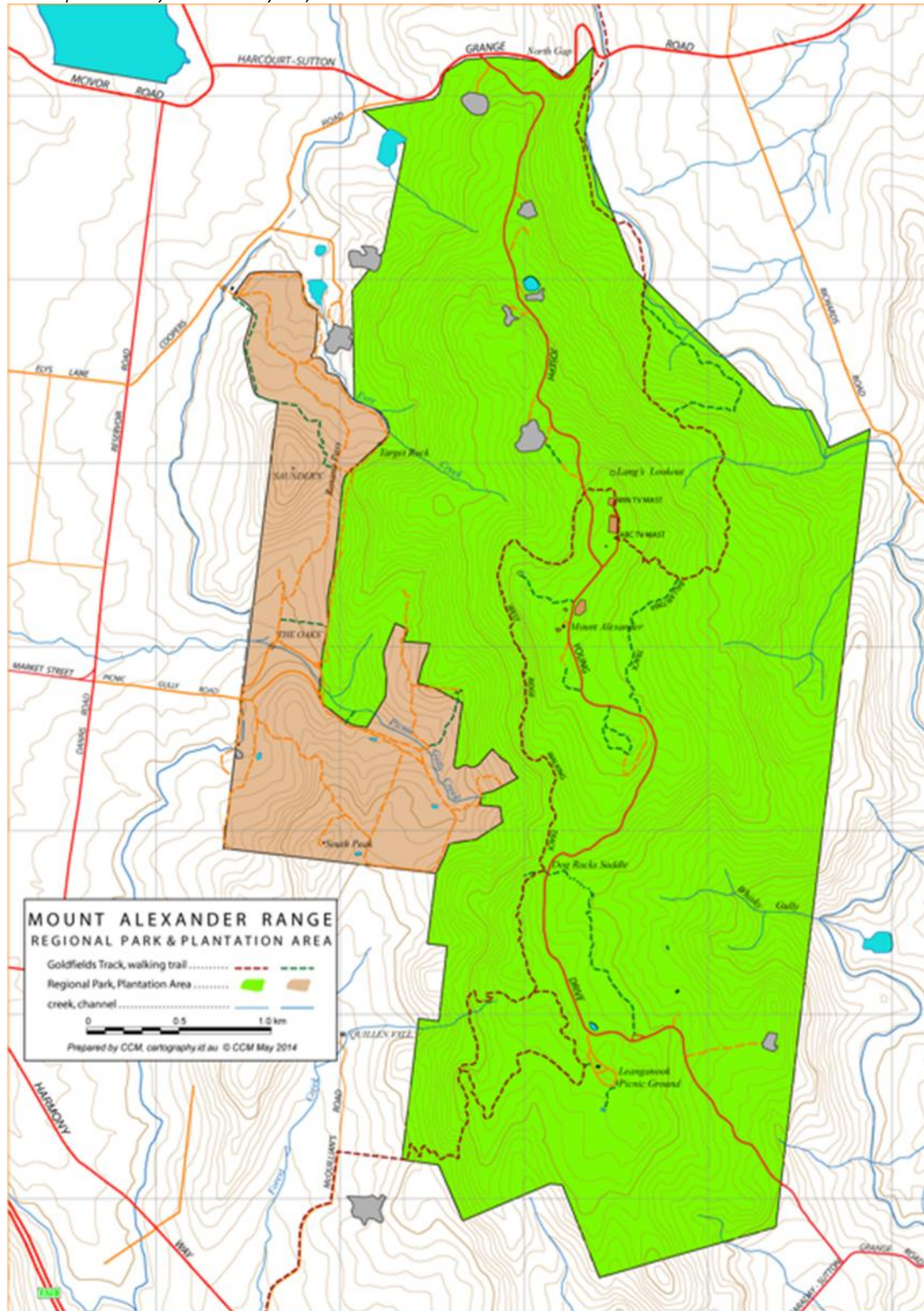


¹³ Bannear D., *Harcourt Mountain Bike Park – Hancocks Pine Plantation Heritage Impact Statement – Aboriginal & Historic Cultural Heritage*. (February 2014)

The Oak forest, planted in the early 1900s, lies close to the site's main entry, off Picnic Gully Road (Figure 1). The oak forest is a collection of exotic deciduous and coniferous trees and remains largely intact, although harvesting operations and commercial use of the forest has long since ceased. It now provides colourful passive recreation, and limited camping opportunities for locals and visitors.

It is intended to protect the heritage character of this area through the promotion of existing recreation use, and to avoid developing designated mountain bike trails through the Oak forest.

Figure 1. Site map of the proposed Harcourt Mountain Bike Park and related features.
(reproduced with kind permission by Mal 'Jase' Haysom)



5.3 Land Tenure

The site identified consists of a 300 hectare, unreserved Crown land allotment, currently under lease to Hancock Victorian Plantations Holdings Pty Ltd., a private forestry management business, based in Victoria.

Under the Victorian Plantations Corporation Act 1993 – Section 17A¹⁴, the subject land is due to be “...divested from the Corporation and reverts to the Crown as unalienated Crown Land...” on 1 January 2015. A requirement of the lessee is that “upon completion of the final harvest of the plantation on the (identified) land...(a) the land from which the timber has been harvested must be treated to a sufficient extent to enable the successful seeding of eucalypt species native to the general locality; and (b) that land must be seeded with such species to the standard agreed upon between the Corporation and the Secretary.”

The future management of the land has been discussed with the land owner, Department of Environment and Primary Industries (DEPI) and the adjoining land manager, Parks Victoria. Both are showing support for the proposal through the appropriate reservation of the land, formation of a Committee of Management (COM) and ongoing sustainability strategies. Discussions have taken place with Dja Dja Wurrung RAP to engage Indigenous support and relevant participation in the project.

Goldfields Tourism Incorporated, along with community groups, mountain bike clubs and local government is committed to the long term management/maintenance of the mountain bike park. This will be achieved through the formation of a skill based CoM, encouraging volunteer involvement through ‘adopt a track’ and income generation through a combination of sponsorship, events and online promotion.

5.4 Aboriginal and Cultural Heritage

An initial desktop study examining Aboriginal and historic cultural heritage value of the former plantation was produced in February 2014 (Appendix 2). The report has been prepared with the intent to inform the selection of track corridors to ensure sensitive areas of cultural heritage are avoided where possible, and to minimise disturbance to significant identified values. Formal investigations, such as a due diligence report and monitoring, will occur if the project proceeds.

The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DDWCAC) is the Registered Aboriginal Party (RAP) for the area. An Indigenous Land Use Agreement (ILUA) was registered in November 2013 recognising the Dja Dja Wurrung community as the traditional owners of the country that includes the proposed HMBP site.

The desktop study identifies the obligations of the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006) with respect to Aboriginal cultural heritage protection and management. Two Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register/Sensitivity Zone sites that have an impact on the current HMBP proposal have been noted in the preparation of this study. One site is located within the Mount Alexander Regional Park, while the second is just within the boundary of the pine plantation. Under provisions of the Aboriginal Heritage Act (2006), areas of Aboriginal cultural sensitivity includes anywhere within 50m of a registered site. In addition to this, it has been noted that a recent survey for Aboriginal sites on the adjoining Mount Alexander Regional Park indicated that stone scatters are more likely to be found at higher elevations and along saddles between higher ground – places that provide views and access. World Trail has been advised of these details and adjusted their trail design to avoid unnecessary disturbance or impact. Other techniques including building upon the surface rather than excavation, should minimise impacts and ensure compliance with legislation.

Further discussion with DDWCAC will continue to ensure obligations of the Aboriginal Heritage Act are satisfied through ongoing development and eventual construction phase should that proceed. The Victorian Heritage Register lists places and objects that have been determined to be of significance to the State of Victoria. There are no places within the pine plantation lease area listed on the Victorian Heritage Register, however there are two places noted in the adjoining Regional Park; Blights Quarry and Silkworm Farm.

¹⁴ State Govt. of Victoria. *Victorian Plantations Corporation Act (1993) – Sect 17A*.

Other requirements of the Heritage Act (1995) relate to sites of historical archaeological interest and their automatic protection over 50 years old, regardless if Heritage Victoria records them. There are two such sites listed on the Heritage Inventory within the plantation, these being the Harcourt Oak Forest Reserve, and Picnic Gully Road house site. The proposed tracks and trails of the HMBP will not pass directly through the Oak Forest Reserve, and the house site is of little significance as the record only lists the stumps of a removed timber house and remnant garden.

5.5 Local Government Planning Scheme

A planning scheme is a statutory document that sets out objectives, policies and provisions relating to the use, development, protection and conservation of land in the area to which it applies. Each local government area in Victoria is covered by a planning scheme. Planning schemes may include a Heritage Overlay, Significant Landscape Overlay and/or the Vegetation Protection Overlay.

The Mount Alexander Shire planning scheme includes the subject site, but does not list any places of significance under its overlay provisions for this area. The land use planning and development vision for the Shire¹⁵ states: *“The Mount Alexander Shire’s townships and rural environs engender an identifiable character which reflects the areas unique heritage, its beautiful landscapes and the quality of life. The Shire Council will seek to manage and sensitively develop the built and natural resources of the Shire in ways which are ecologically sustainable so as to secure an improved economic future, enhance the lifestyle quality of the community and maintain the unique heritage character.”*

6.0 Related Opportunities

Many different markets are attracted by the benefits of mountain biking. It can be a source of fitness, fun, mental activity, technical challenge, recreation and entertainment in the natural environment. Cycling has demonstrated how it can provide a range of social and economic benefits to regional areas and the wider community by stimulating tourism and recreational spending (IMBA 2004¹⁶). Cycle tourism in Australia remains relatively undeveloped despite the obvious growth in the sport in this country and the apparent popularity of cycling as a participative recreation activity.

6.1 Cycle Tourism

Victoria is demonstrating a proactive approach to Cycle Tourism through the preparation of the State Government’s *“Victoria’s Cycle Tourism Action Plan 2011-2015”*¹⁷.

The plan recognises that ‘...cycle tourism is a niche market with considerable potential growth. The total estimated expenditure for the year ending December 2010 by domestic overnight, daytrip and international overnight visitors that participated in cycling in Victoria is \$362 million. The estimated total expenditure of cycle tourists in Australia is approximately \$2.4 billion (including domestic overnight, daytrip and international overnight visitors that participated in cycling as an activity).’

It goes on to identify that ‘Victoria’s cycle tourism sector differs from the rest of Australia. Victoria offers tourists an array of cycling experiences including mountain biking, tracks and trails, road cycling and events, which enhance the State’s position as a premium cycle tourism destination.’

Points of difference include comprehensive cycle tourism product offerings sitting alongside captivating and unique natural landscapes, quaint towns within close proximity to each other, and complementary tourism products, accessibility to numerous trails and a climate and terrain that is conducive to a variety of cycling activities.

¹⁵ Mount Alexander Shire Council. *Mount Alexander Shire Planning Scheme* (2007)

¹⁶ International Mountain Biking Association (IMBA), *Trail solutions, IMBA’s guide to building sweet single track*, IMBA, Boulder, Colorado, United States. (2004).

¹⁷ Tourism Victoria. *Victoria’s Cycle Tourism Action Plan. 2011-2015*.

The plan aims to assist Victoria's cycle tourism industry to leverage Victoria's Nature-based Tourism Strategy¹⁸ and continue to build strong consumer demand for cycle tourism experiences. One of the challenges facing Victoria's cycle tourism sector is the limited economic analysis and research. However, available research demonstrates that cycle tourism has the potential to deliver tourism growth for regional Victoria and to stimulate regional and rural economies; particularly as cycle tourists stay longer and do more when travelling.

The Cycle Tourism Plan is a very relevant planning document in the context of this study as its primary vision is for "...Melbourne and Victoria to be the premier cycling destination in Australia."

The key objectives to help achieve this are identified as:

- Attracting major cycling events to Melbourne and regional Victoria.
- Capitalising on existing strengths of diverse experiences, captivating and unique natural landscapes, creative towns within close proximity to each other, access to numerous trails and a climate and terrain that is conducive to a variety of cycling activities.
- Positioning Melbourne as the cycling capital of Australia and the gateway to regional Victoria's cycling experiences
- Positioning regional Victoria as the premier destination for cycling trails and road cycling.

The plan further recognises the Goldfields Region's cycle product primary strengths as 'Trails' and 'Major cycling events', and secondary strengths as 'Road cycling' and 'Mountain biking' and has identified these priorities in the Regional Tourism Action Plan (RTAP) for the region.

Research from Victoria's high country, which has a robust and diverse range of cycling experiences on offer, indicates excellent economic benefits from those seeking cycling experiences.

This area of Victoria made the commitment to invest in cycling as a result of the downturn in the local agricultural sector and the effects of climate change. These factors have seen once thriving wine and tobacco industries reduced or almost completely removed. The ski industry now has a very short frame to make any profits, and their certainty of income each year is diminishing.

Cycling has reversed this trend for the High Country region and delivered significant visitor numbers. For both domestic and international visitors, there are three times as many seeking a cycling experience, compared to those visiting for other reasons.

Victoria's mountain bike experiences, including events, mainly attract males aged 30-39 years, who are well-educated professionals, with high disposable incomes. This segment consider mountain biking a personal challenge and their motivation for riding is health and fitness, and spending time with like-minded people. This market engages in purpose driven travel and will generally participate in a specific activity, such as a mountain bike event. Victoria is recognised for its quality mountain bike infrastructure and events, and offers opportunities to attract interstate participants and visitors.

6.2 Visitors to Mount Alexander Shire

Mount Alexander is part of the Bendigo Loddon sub-region of the Goldfields Tourism Campaign Region. In the year ended June 2012¹⁹, Mount Alexander attracted:

- 411,000 day visitors,
- 149,000 domestic overnight visitors staying 373,000 visitor nights, average 2.5 nights per visitor,
- an estimated 3,200 international overnight visitors staying an average of 25,500 visitor nights.

Total tourist expenditure in Mount Alexander in 2012 was estimated at \$78.9 million, of which \$78.7 million was derived from domestic visitors.

¹⁸ Tourism Victoria. *Victoria's Nature-based Tourism Strategy 2008-2012*

¹⁹ Mount Alexander Shire, *Economic Development Strategy & Profile. August 2013*

Estimated total tourism expenditure to Bendigo Loddon was based on the visitor number profile described above and an estimated expenditure of \$98 per day for day visitors, \$103 per night for domestic overnight visitors, and \$63 per night for international overnight visitors.

Of the expenditure made by domestic visitors, it was estimated that:

- \$25.6 million is spent on food and drink,
- \$9 million is spent on accommodation,
- \$16.9 million is spent on shopping,
- \$3.4 million is spent on entertainment.

Some of the interesting features of the characteristics of visitors to Mount Alexander Shire include:

- the average length of stay is greater for older visitors and greatest (for domestic overnight visitors) for those aged 65+,
- the average length of stay is greater for domestic overnight visitors travelling for holiday/leisure, and staying in “other” accommodation (caravan parks, camping grounds, private cottages, B&Bs etc),
- the average length of stay for international overnight visitors is substantially greater for those staying with friends/relatives,
- domestic overnight visitors from regional Victoria stay longer, on average, than those from Melbourne.

6.3 The Goldfields Track and Ride Goldfields

The Goldfields Track, is a 210 kilometre walking and cycling trail that connects the towns of Ballarat and Bendigo via scenic towns such as Castlemaine, Hepburn, Daylesford and Creswick. It is identified as a priority for infrastructure development, including accommodation, in the Regional Tourism Action Plan.

The current Goldfields Track offers a shared mountain bike and bushwalking experience. As many sections of the track are suited to more experienced users, the current route is under review to create an overall alternative riding experiences. This review has been identified as a priority in the *Loddon Mallee Regional 2014 Investment Prospectus*. By expanding its scope to cater for less experienced riders, the Goldfields Track will become a true touring experience, where riders travel between towns, staying overnight, and experiencing what’s on offer.

To leverage off the Goldfields Track, Goldfields Tourism Inc. is developing a cycling tourism campaign to promote the region - *Ride Goldfields*²⁰. *Ride Goldfields* is about connecting tracks, trails and touring routes across the Goldfields region and promoting them as a single tourism package. In the process of enhancing cycle tourism, it will deal with the critical issues regarding trail diversity, accessibility and quality in order to meet the needs of current road and mountain bike cyclists, and encouraging new riders to participate.

Using the Goldfields Track as the north-south running “spine”, existing (and new) tracks, trails, touring routes, cycling and mountain bike hubs (existing and new) will be connected to encourage visitors to explore and experience the unique landscapes of the region. These cycling experiences will be connected to communities, and towns and all that they offer to support a visitor experience; accommodation, eating, drinking, shopping, arts and cultures, history and heritage, and transport.

Ride Goldfields will provide something to suit all skill levels and interest groups. It will profile all the trails and hubs on offer, so encourage greater visitation, dispersal and compelling reasons to increase length of stay and repeat visitation. All forms of cycling will be showcased, which helps further illustrate the depth of experiences available in the region. *Ride Goldfields* will offer interesting ways to travel from one town to another, and in combination with driving routes, offer another experience to compliment a cycling holiday in the region. Other benefits from *Ride Goldfields* will include increasing community ownership and a sense of connection with places, decreasing health costs due to inactivity, improve mental health for participants, and provide opportunities for economic diversification for towns, new business and employment.

²⁰ Goldfields Tourism Inc. *Ride Goldfields: Linking the greater Goldfields region through outdoor experiences*. Feb 2014

The initial *Ride Goldfields* concept will profile experiences along the entire Goldfields Track and neighbouring areas; from Ballarat to Bendigo, Avoca and Dunolly, and Heathcote and the Macedon Ranges. As the concept and available hubs, tracks and trails are developed the offering can be expanded. *Ride Goldfields* will use an interactive website to showcase the various experiences. Towns, tracks, trails and hubs will be highlighted, with information available on each experience. Visitors can view a video, and relevant details such as track length, suggested ride duration, points of interest etc. Where relevant, and available, links to other websites will be provided.

The *Ride Goldfields* concept has the potential to dramatically increase visitation to the region from an ever growing and active market. It will deliver significant economic benefits to local businesses and communities, and has the potential to assist communities that may currently be limited in their visitor offering.

In the process of enhancing cycle tourism, it will deal with the critical issues regarding trail diversity, accessibility and quality in order to meet the needs of current road and mountain bike cyclists and encourage new riders to participate.

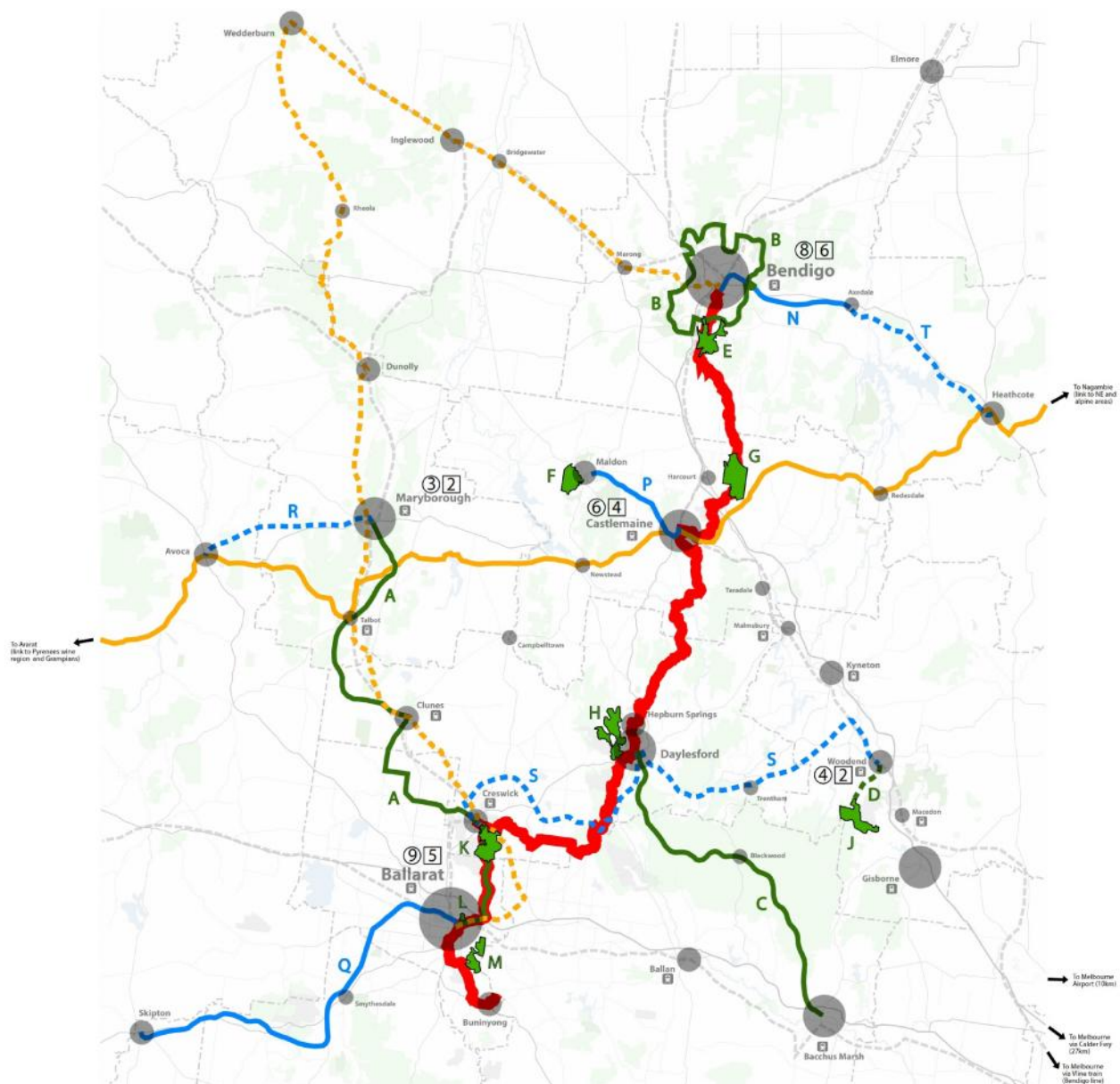


Figure 2 - *Ride Goldfields* draft concept map.

6.4 Events

Due to its topography, Harcourt already hosts a number of events on the winter calendar of Cycle Victoria, including the annual Victorian Country Road Championships and the Victorian Metro Road Championships and, on occasion, Masters Time Trails and Road Race Championships. These attract cyclists from all over Victoria. The courses, with their wide roads and undulating landscapes, prove challenging, providing opportunities for the hill climbers but also plenty of opportunities for seasoned sprinters.

The *Ride Goldfields* concept will further enable the promotion of additional cycling events throughout the region, underpinning the strength of cycle tourism opportunities and embedding the association of the region with premier cycling events and activities.

The provision of a dedicated MTB facility at Harcourt only enhances the opportunity to attract additional major cycling events to the region, particularly endurance racing (e.g. 24 hour events), technical challenges and 'Epic' point to point cross-country events.

The proximity to the larger population centres of Bendigo and Castlemaine opens up a greater prospective visitor base from which potential mountain bike enthusiasts can be attracted. The benefit of 'value-added' experiences available through access to these markets significantly improves the opportunities presented in the location and offer of the HMBP.

6.5 Outdoor Education

Outdoor Education activities operate regularly throughout the region. The Latrobe University campus in Bendigo offers more Outdoor and Environmental Education courses than any university worldwide and more outdoor professional courses than any university in Australia²¹.

The activities this institution alone undertakes includes rock-climbing, trail walking, camping and orienteering in addition to mountain biking. The practical elements of the coursework often involve teaching and working with school-age students in natural settings with facilities to support the specific activities.

The availability and access to the HMBP will provide a wealth of opportunity for primary and secondary schools, and tertiary institutions throughout northern and central Victoria and Melbourne, as there are no similar dedicated mountain bike facilities anywhere in the region.

6.6 Other Activities

Because of the nature of the proposed network of trails and the versatility of the masterplan design, the opportunities for use of the proposed facility is not limited to mountain biking. As demonstrated at a number of other mountain bike park facilities across Australia and around the world (see Appendix 1.), many alternative events and activities are often conducted on the mountain bike trails.

At the You Yangs Regional Park near Geelong for example, trail running, orienteering, mountain bike orienteering and cross-country triathlons are all held in the park using the mountain bike trails. At Stromlo Forest Park regular cross-country athletics events are held on the site. Smithfield in Cairns hosts trail running and multi-sport events in addition to the range of mountain biking disciplines.

The HMBP proposal lends itself well to the potential use of trails for alternative sports and recreation events that will have minimal impact on the high quality standard of the trails. It also opens the opportunity for possible events not currently offered in the region such as multi-sport races that combine road cycling, mountain-biking, trail running and paddling (Harcourt Reservoir) in one event.

The linkage with the Goldfields Track further encourages use of the HMBP as a 'technical addition' to a cross country single track event on the Goldfields Track or as a staging point between destinations for an 'Epic' endurance event.

²¹ Latrobe University. <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/education/outdoors>



7.0 Governance

There are a variety of management options that apply to the different Mountain Bike Park facilities in Australia and around the world (Appendix 1). Some of the international examples have been established on freehold land as independent commercial operations. In Australia, most of the larger facilities have been constructed on Government owned or Crown land, but a number of different models for how the parks are managed exist.

In Tasmania the Glenorchy MTB Park is built on Crown land and is managed by Local Government. But some of the trails cross into adjoining Crown land managed by a separate authority, which creates some inconsistency in management.

In Queensland, the Smithfield Conservation Park is on Crown land administered by the Queensland government, but the MTB trail use operates under licence to the Cairns MTB Club.

The Stromlo Forest Park in the ACT is currently “unleased Territory land”, ACT Government managed land. Part of the park comes under ACT Government jurisdiction and the majority comes under the National Capital Authority that is a Commonwealth Agency. Territory Venues and Events (TVE), which is an ACT Government body, manage the land/park.

In Victoria both Lysterfield and the You Yangs MTB facilities are within existing public reserves managed by Parks Victoria. In both cases these sites cater for a range of other recreation interests, but mountain biking is the largest regular activity drawing from 120,000 to 140,000 riders in each park annually using the trails.

At Mt Buller, the Alpine Resort Management Board has been established as a Statutory Authority to manage the Crown Land that has been set aside as an alpine recreation reserve across Mt. Buller and Mt. Stirling. The MTB facilities have been constructed in recent years to compliment the annual visitation to the resort and to provide an alternative use of the alpine resort facilities in the off-season.

The proposed HMBP site consists of 300 hectares of Crown land currently under lease to Hancocks Plantations P/L who is due to return the whole site to DEPI at the end of 2014. Under normal circumstances this land would most likely be added to the adjoining Mt. Alexander Regional Park and come under the management jurisdiction of Parks Victoria.

Parks Victoria however, has indicated that because of the relatively low environmental values of the site and the interest in establishing a MTB park on the land, it is preferable to not include any of the 300 hectares in the Regional Park.

DEPI will identify the most appropriate land reservation for the mountain bike park (and protection of heritage values) as it proceeds.

7.1 Committee of Management Option

“Crown land is public land, provided for the enjoyment and benefit of the people of Victoria.²²”

The Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978²³ provides the opportunity for community based groups or organisations to form a Committee of Management (COM) to manage and administer public land vested in its control. The powers given under this legislation enable the appointed COM to:

- manage and develop the reserve;
- undertake financial transactions, including borrowing money (incorporated committees only, with the Victorian Treasurer’s consent) and entering contracts;
- negotiate leasing and licensing arrangements for all or part of the reserve (subject to Minister’s approval);
- employ people; and
- enforce regulations.

The Minister for Environment and Climate Change appoints committees to manage Crown land reserves under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978. The powers and responsibilities of committees of management are derived from the Act. For each committee, the Minister retains the right to place limitations on how these powers are executed and to prescribe in more detail the extent of responsibilities.

Most committees will run for a three year term, but this is generally determined in consultation with DEPI at the time of appointment.

An option for the management of the HMBP is to seek the appointment of a COM comprising relevant community representation related to the use of the whole site. Any COM should have a similar diversity of representative interests and skills as that of the current Project Steering Committee formed to progress the preparation of this scoping document and the masterplan design. For details on the current Steering Committee membership see 8.3 Stakeholder Engagement.

If successful, this COM will assume responsibility for the whole Crown land reserve including the plantation area and the Oak Forest. The Committee will then oversee the construction of the mountain bike park, redevelopment of the Oak Forest picnic and camping area and the establishment of a trail-head and car-park within the reserve. The appointed COM will address ongoing maintenance and future development. This option should be the preferred. Other options considered are Shire management, Parks Victoria management and/or leasing of the land, but these have not been supported by any of the representative agencies and organisations.

It may be appropriate for a Crown Land Licence to be taken out as a prelude to the reservation of the land and formation of a COM.

²² State Govt. of Victoria. *Committee of Management Responsibilities and Good Practice Guidelines* (2011)

²³ State Govt. of Victoria. *Crown Land (Reserves) Act 1978*



7.2 Maintenance Operations

Once the mountain bike park is constructed and in operation, an appropriate schedule of maintenance will be required to ensure tracks, trails, infrastructure and other facilities are maintained in an acceptable and safe condition. IMBA construction standards require regular review of the trail network and its features. Attention to erosion control, drainage patterns, track surfacing, rock movement and berm compactness are examples of the specific monitoring that is frequently required in a facility such as the HMBP.

To ensure that the high standard of track design and construction is well maintained, it is imperative to have a reliable review system in place and practitioners that know what to do. Parks Victoria has prepared a 'Trail Construction and Maintenance Estimates'²⁴ (Appendix 3) document that details the types of maintenance considerations that need to be made following establishment of a dedicated MTB facility.

World Trail Pty Ltd who was commissioned to prepare the initial masterplan has included a section on Trail Maintenance in their documentation, specific to the HMBP proposal concept design²⁵. They identify the common practices required to monitor and respond to the impacts of high use or excessive wear, as well as the effects of adverse weather conditions and surrounding vegetation.

Different MTB parks in Australia have different ways of maintaining their respective facilities. While many of these sites rely on devoted volunteer networks to attend to regular maintenance activities through working bees, in-kind labour and material supply, some organisations have salaried staff and/or contract provisions to provide the required levels of maintenance. An effective maintenance regime not only ensures the best MTB riding experience but allows a measure of risk management that improves safety and affords some protection for the responsible authority.

The HMBP will no doubt be reliant on volunteer support to some degree to maintain and care for the completed trails, but the COM may be well placed to return revenue from regular club use, events, sponsors, donations and fund-raiser activities into the maintenance and upkeep of the track infrastructure

An innovative approach to secure adequate money for maintenance may involve seeking champions for different sections of the trail network. These champions will accept responsibility for generating funds, and coordinating resources and activities related to a specific section or length(s) of track.

²⁴ Parks Victoria. *You Yangs Regional Park. Trail Construction & Maintenance Estimates* 2013

²⁵ World Trail Pty Ltd., *Harcourt Mountain Bike Park Masterplan* April 2014

7.3 Sponsorship

A viable marketing opportunity exists with commercial sponsorship related to the Harcourt MTB. A COM is not bound by any regulated affiliations with commercial interests and both local and multi-national businesses, organisations and/or bodies may be interested in naming rights for the whole site or sections.

Certainly major events will attract corporate and commercial sponsorship opportunities and should be pursued in an attempt to raise the profile and secure a reliable revenue stream that will sustain and support the upkeep and maintenance of high standard tracks, trails and features.

Other MTB centres in Victoria have been offered commercial sponsorship at a level that would support the employment of full-time or part-time staff to manage and supervise the operation of a recognised facility that demonstrates strong rider use and high levels of participation.

Private sector mountain bike parks in other parts of the world attract major product and service providers as commercial sponsors of their sites (for example, BikePark Wales is supported by Trek, Shimano, Continental and Vito Sport amongst others).

Both Bendigo and Castlemaine have produced cyclists in a range of disciplines who have successfully competed at local, state, national and international levels. It is certainly worth considering the use of one or a number of these individuals, particularly the mountain bike specialists who have excelled at the peak levels, to be a 'face' for the HMBP and to champion the development and promotion of the site.

8.0 Design and Development

The design and development of an international class mountain bike park needs to satisfy a number of criteria to ensure the network of trails is safe, that the features of the site are considered to maximum advantage, that erosion and wear are minimised with high use and that the riding experience is challenging but enjoyable enough to encourage repeat visitation.

IMBA's track construction standards and recommendations are generally used to inform the process for good trail design and will include consideration of detail such as:

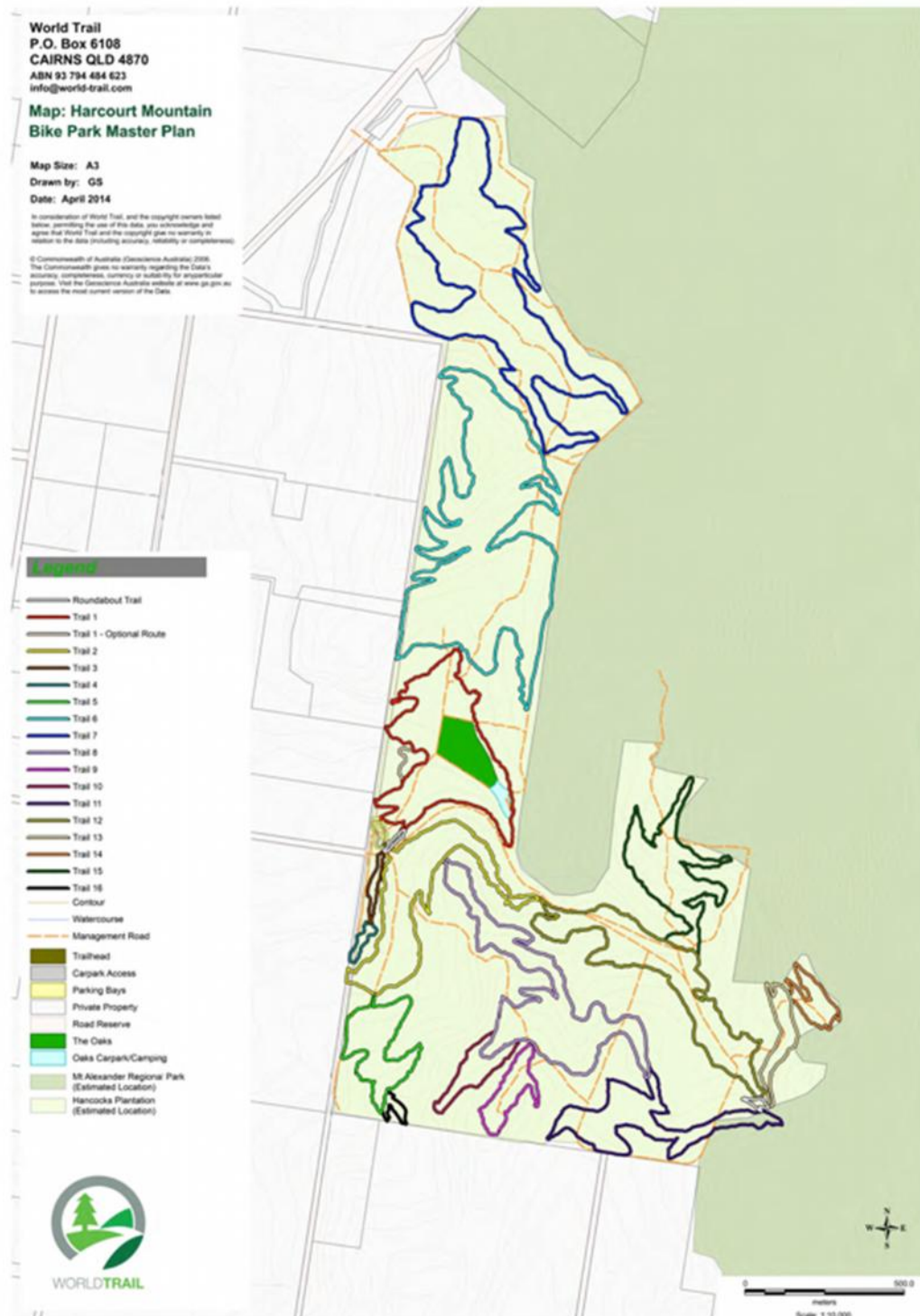
- trail difficulty ratings (international standards) – to identify trails suited to varying skill levels and rider ability,
- location of easier trails near the trail-head as a basic risk management technique,
- one direction riding on all single track to reduce the likelihood of head-on collisions and ensure good visitor experience,
- ease of navigation along trails and generally provided as 'named' loops to assist with orientation,
- a trail network that recognises the benefit of terrain and topography and is sympathetic to natural features in its siting and extent,
- maximising use of existing trails, management roads etc., to avoid duplication and unnecessary construction costs, and
- new sections of trail designed according to contemporary best-practice guidelines for sustainable trail construction.

8.1 Concept Design

Goldfields Tourism Inc. appointed World Trail Pty. Ltd. to prepare the initial masterplan design for the HMBP proposal. World Trail P/L spent considerable time on site assessing the terrain, topography and natural features of the area to develop the design proposal (Figure 3) that seeks to provide:

- approximately 34kms of tracks comprising a network of Green (easy/beginner), Blue (intermediate) trails extending out from the Green trails; and Black (experienced) trails extending from the Blue trails to the furthest parts of the site,
- trailhead and car park/entry point to the trail network and The Oaks picnic area, and a skills course to include technical trail features such as (but not limited to) drop offs, step-ups, rollovers, tabletops, a rock garden, balance beams, etc.

Figure 3. Masterplan of the proposed Harcourt Mountain Bike Park



The concept design phase has been followed by extensive ‘ground-truthing’ of the proposed trail network to verify the location of the specific route of the trail and to ensure any on-site sensitivities (eg natural features, cultural heritage values, slope, surface and topographical variations etc) are taken into account.

The concept design also includes reference to a proposed trailhead and makes some recommendations for its location and orientation relative to the track. While an indicative trailhead design is provided, further detail including the area and number of car parks, the type and design of infrastructure (eg toilets/change-rooms, shelters, retail, administration facilities etc.) will need to be determined.



8.2 Approvals

Prior to progressing any design and development detail, it is important to understand the requirements of the land tenure and whether any formal approvals, permits and/or authorisations are necessary.

The State Government of Victoria has produced a ‘Public Land Mountain Bike Guidelines²⁶’ (Appendix 4) document that outlines the legislative framework with respect to cycling on Public Land and the considerations that may be required before any excavation or construction commences.

The Guidelines also includes Strategic and Detailed Planning Assessment templates which seek to test the viability and relevance of new or upgraded mountain bike trail proposals as well as assessing in detail natural and cultural values and costs and on ground requirements.

²⁶ State Govt. of Victoria. *Public Land Mountain Bike Guidelines* May 2013

Because the HMBP proposal recommends the establishment of a Committee of Management to assume responsibility for the site, it is not obligatory to conduct the assessment expected under these guidelines, however it does provide a useful reference for ensuring an appropriate approach to new trail development is considered.

Under the Crown Lands (Reserves) Act 1978 cycling is a permissible activity in this reserve and subject to the support of the Minister for Environment & Climate Change through the Department of Environment & Primary Industries (DEPI) this proposal will proceed.

The Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation (DDWCAC) has been consulted with respect to the proposal and will continue to be involved in the determination of any requirements, e.g. Native Title, due diligence reporting and/or monitoring as part of further design or construction.

Mount Alexander Shire's Planning Scheme²⁷ identifies the area that includes the Plantation site as 'Farming Zone' (FZ). The purposes for this zoning under the Local Planning Policy Framework includes the following objectives relative to this proposal:

- to encourage the retention of employment and population to support rural communities and
- to encourage use and development of land based on comprehensive and sustainable land management practices and infrastructure provision.

It would appear that under this definition an outdoor recreation facility that does not have an adverse effect on environmental or economic values and supports the employment opportunities for local people would not require a permit for development.

The Victorian Government's Department of State Development and Business Innovation (DSDBI) has developed a 'statutory endorsement referral authority consultation checklist'²⁸ to ensure all relevant checks and approvals are undertaken prior to any development proposal.

This checklist includes reference to state authorities such as the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) – for works approval in the event of creating any contamination or waste; DEPI – for the removal of native vegetation; SPI Powernet – for works within 60 metres of a major electricity transmission line or easement; Coliban Water – for works within or that may affect special water supply catchment areas. It also includes a number of non-statutory agency consultations such as Public Land Stewardship, Office of Land & Fire and Parks Victoria for matters that may arise relating to ground and surface water, Crown land, native vegetation, land management, tenure arrangements and native title.

While not all identified authorities or approvals are relevant or necessary for the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park proposal, the list is nonetheless a useful reference to guide the process for ensuring all activities relating to the development are considered and compliant.

8.3 Stakeholder Engagement

The task of developing a proposal that involves so many elements of community and different levels and responsibilities of government relating to the use of public land means that a comprehensive consultation process has been required.

The Project Steering Committee (PSC) appointed to develop the proposal is representative of a diverse range of community interests and key stakeholders and has influenced the opportunity to engage with a range of other contributors with positive input.

²⁷ Mount Alexander Shire Local Planning Policy (http://planningschemes.dpcd.vic.gov.au/schemes/vpps/35_07.pdf)

²⁸ Department of State Development and Business Innovation. Statutory Authority Endorsement Referral Consultation Checklist 2013

The PSC consists of the following groups and representatives:

- Goldfields Tourism Inc/Goldfields Track – Peter Skilbeck (Interim Chair), and David Bannear
- Harcourt Landcare Group – Jarrod Coote
- Harcourt Progress Association – David Heath
- Harcourt Valley Heritage & Tourism Centre Heritage Committee – George Milford, and Neil Charter
- Mount Alexander Sustainability Group – Andrew McKenna
- Bendigo Mountain Bike Club – Shaun Quayle
- Castlemaine Rocky Riders – Nick Lewis
- Mount Alexander Shire – David Leathem
- Department of Environment and Primary Industries(DEPI) – Calum Walker
- Hancock Plantations Victoria – Dean Turner

Others that have been consulted with respect to this proposal include:

- Parks Victoria – John Williamson, David Major, and Mark Urquhart
- Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation – Kane Weeks, Dianna Smith
- Goldfields Tourism Inc. – Andrew Bos
- Mapping Consultant – Jase Haysom
- World Trail P/L – Gerard McHugh, Grant Suckling
- Friends of Box-Ironbark Forests – Marie Jones, Bernard Slattery
- Castlemaine Rocky Riders photographer – Anthony Salpietro
- DEPI – Adam Melis
- Minister for Sport & Recreation & Veteran Affairs – the Hon. Damian Drum MP
- Bendigo Mountain Bike Club – Peter Carr
- Sports Event Consultant and Olympic Cyclist Champion – Scott McGrory

9.0 Delivery and Implementation

9.1 Construction

World Trail P/L has prepared a concept Masterplan (Appendix 5) based on the project brief to provide “approximately 34kms of tracks comprising a network of graded trails to the furthest parts of the site, a car park/entry point to the trail network and the Oak Forest, and a skills course to include technical trail features...”

The final Master Plan design incorporates diagrammatic mapping of the proposed trail network, full documentation of route description, track features and loop profiles for each track. It provides a signage plan that recommends the use of trailhead signs, decision point signs and way-markers, and an estimate of sign quantities and locations required to service the expectations of this particular design.

The Master Plan describes appropriate trail construction guidelines to support the approach of sustainable mountain biking trail construction based on IMBA standards. This includes consideration of construction techniques such as ‘rolling contours’ - to build the trail in a side-slope location, aligned along the contours of the hillside; ‘outslope’ - falls no greater than 5% across the surface of the trail to minimise erosion; trail gradient – steepness of the trail should not exceed half the grade of the hillside that the trail traverses and be an average of 10% or less; grade reversals – dips and crests incorporated into the trail to assist water-shed and minimise erosion as well as making the trail ‘interesting’.

A contract to construct the proposed trail will be tendered with specialist trail builders who demonstrate relevant experience and sensitivity to the requirements of building a sustainable and compatible trail within the features and character of the landscape. There may be further minor adjustments and specific variations to the final trail layout during the construction phase as any site-peculiar characteristics are discovered. But the proposed design will serve as a key reference for the composition of the total trail network.

Dja Dja Wurrung Enterprise has expressed interest in utilising its field crews to assist in the construction of the trails and other facilities associated with the site. This would operate under a fee for service arrangement but would carry the added advantage of having a traditional owner presence on site during this phase of development.

9.2 Safety and Risks

By providing a variety of track route options to what will be a broad visitor profile means that riders can select trail routes that ensure experiences are matched to their capability. The grading system used by World Trail to distinguish levels of difficulty is based on the IMBA grading standards and should serve as an indicator to inform trail users of the varying levels of difficulty that can be expected.

The experience at You Yangs Regional Park in Victoria suggests that despite the use of a similar 'graded' designation of track difficulty, the majority of reported incidents happen on the lower graded trails²⁹.

There is an assumption that there will be some incidents that occur as a result of normal trail use, but that the value in providing a challenging, exciting and rewarding experience far outweighs the possibility of potential injury. It is not the role of a mountain bike facility to train novice riders in safety aspects of the activity, although this may be offered as a fee for service by a potential concessionaire at some point in the operation of the facility.

It is fair to assume that visitors who bring their own bikes will be familiar with its safe and appropriate use and any communication associated with the trails should reinforce common practice. Specific local knowledge that would be included in trail communication will assist visitors to make informed decisions about trail selection, and the expected level of skill and ability required to safely negotiate its technical offer. This works in much the same way as alpine ski and snow resorts do in informing their respective facility users of the dangers and responsibilities associated with tackling different ski runs.

9.3 Concessions and Commercial Opportunities

While the feasibility of potential commercial operators is yet to be explored in relation to the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park proposal, precedents in other similar examples suggest the possibility to provide a range of concessions and commercial operations is very real.

Lysterfield Park, has an independent lessee (Trailmix) within the site that operates a café, bike store, information centre and recreational services facility. Based at the former visitor centre, Trailmix services all park users, offering food and drinks, maps, information, bike servicing, sales from the worlds leading brands (Specialized, Cannondale, Yeti, Pivot and Merida), bike rentals and mountain bike skills clinics.

At Mt Buller the resort offers 'uplifts' via a shuttle bus that transports cyclists up the hill to allow downhill riding of the one-way mountain bike trail. In other mountain bike parks in Australia, different levels of infrastructure and concessions are available within or nearby the facility to support their operations.

Harcourt is ideally placed less than 2km from the proposed trailhead of the HMBP to provide a selection of support services for the users of the mountain bike facility. Existing services include accommodation, food, fuel and rest/toilet facilities within the Harcourt township itself. Additional tourist and consumer opportunities in the wine, cider, fruit and vegetable industries are well established and readily available and can easily be geared up to cater for increased visitation.

Specific opportunities related to the HBMP proposal may extend to include bike sales, hire and maintenance, shuttle services to and from the mountain bike park as well as to designated sites (eg wineries, cideries etc) or drop-off points along the Goldfields Track. The opportunity to provide a track maintenance service, pest plant and animal control and re-vegetation of the site may be additional sources of employment and income for an enterprising operator.

Training, skills clinics, trail-guiding cycle groups and/or accommodating school visits are further possibilities to be considered in forming concessions and commercial operations associated with the site.

²⁹ pers comm. Mark Urquhart, Ranger in Charge, Parks Victoria, You Yangs Regional Park

9.4 Funding Opportunities

World Trail has provided a cost estimate for typical construction types and rates for the trail network. The total figure amounts to \$1,094,700.00 although it is noted that additional costs can be expected for GST, contractor expenses, costs associated with obtaining permits and approvals, further design or consulting costs that may be required. Other items not included in the World Trail quote are signage fabrication and installation, trailhead design and construction, improvements to existing roads, car park construction and other infrastructure costs.

A conservative estimate to completely fund the proposal in its entirety is \$2,000,000.

Given that it is expected the mountain bike park/*Ride Goldfields* brand will contribute to regional economic development, attract interstate and international visitation, and that it will be a state significant sporting facility, the State Government is considered the best starting point to secure the necessary funding.

World Trail suggests that construction of the trail network could be achieved within 18 weeks, if three construction crews are engaged simultaneously. It may be possible to stage the construction over a longer period of time if funding is limited or unavailable as a lump sum.

Some funding sources require matching dollars or a portion thereof before approval is given and funds are made available. In that case, gap funding will be sought from local government, potential sponsors and fund-raising activities within the community.

Regional Development Victoria has a number of initiative programs that support infrastructure development, regional growth, tourism development and community capacity building in regional and rural Victoria.

The Regional Growth Fund will support major strategic infrastructure and community-led local initiatives that improve both the competitiveness and livability of regional and rural Victoria, creating more jobs and better career opportunities³⁰. Within the Regional Growth Fund program there are different opportunities to seek funding support from the State Government.

The Local Government Infrastructure Program (LGIP) component of the RGF aims to provide regional and rural councils with certainty to plan for and build new infrastructure or renew assets. For the HMBP proposal, Mount Alexander Shire would be the recipient of funding allocated as a notional four-year total for this project nominated within the Shire's Forward Capital Works Plan.

The Putting Locals First Program (PLFP) has been designed to support the development of local solutions to address gaps in services and infrastructure in regional communities.

Other State Government funding opportunities for the HBMP may exist with the Department of Sport & Recreation, and Tourism Victoria.

Ongoing funding associated with operational management, maintenance and improvement of the facility following completion will rely on external sponsorship, user contributions, event income and local government support.

³⁰ Regional Development Victoria. <http://www.rdv.vic.gov.au/regional-growth-fund>

9.5 Timeframes

As previously noted the construction timeframe is variable based on the availability of resources and government support to deliver the project. Depending on this, and COM and governance approvals, the timeframe for completion will be much clearer. Once this has been confirmed and a clear direction for proceeding with the proposal is obtained, then all approvals can be pursued.

It is anticipated that should all relevant support and approvals to proceed are obtained readily, then construction and initial operation of the facility to a standard that can host local and state level mountain bike competition could be achieved within twelve months from commencement.

10.0 Conclusion

There is no doubt that the Harcourt Mountain Bike Park proposal stacks up in terms of its relevance, viability and opportunity for the injection of employment, tourism, community revival and recreation experience in a part of Victoria that is conducive to this form of activity.

The population growth and expansion of development in Central Victoria coupled with the increasing interest and embedding of competitive and recreational cycling as a priority activity in this state augurs well for the development of such a significant infrastructure proposal in a location that is ideally placed to deliver and support its establishment.

The provision of a standout mountain bike facility on the western slopes of Mount Alexander, near Harcourt will certainly enhance the ecological and amenity values of a former pine plantation, encourage sustainable recreational and economic activities and support the Goldfields Track as a spine for cycling tourism in the Goldfields Region.



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12.0 Appendices:

- Appendix 1. Comparative Analysis of Mountain Bike Parks in Australia and Overseas
- Appendix 2. Harcourt Mountain Bike Park – Hancocks Plantation Historic Impact Statement 2014
- Appendix 3. Parks Victoria. You Yangs Regional Park. Trail Construction and Maintenance Estimates
- Appendix 4. Public Land Mountain Bike Guidelines 2012
- Appendix 5. Harcourt Mountain Bike Park Master Plan 2014.

Photography courtesy Anthony Salpietro, and, Chris McCormack