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16 December 2020

Mr Jim Betts  
Secretary  
Department of Planning, Industry and Environment  
Via email: [illawarra@planning.nsw.gov.au](mailto:illawarra@planning.nsw.gov.au)

**Re: Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041 Submission**

Dear Mr Betts

I'm writing on behalf of the northern Illawarra trail running organisation, [REDACTED] to provide the following submission in relation to the *Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041 (The Regional Plan)*.

For your reference, [REDACTED] is a local group of 350+ members who enjoy running along bush trails through the Illawarra Escarpment, predominately due to its exquisite terrain, vibrant community, accessibility and uninterrupted wilderness.

Our submission relates specifically to an opportunity to link the existing clifftop trails across the Illawarra escarpment with ocean outlooks in an official sanctioned route – a project we have called the ***Continuous Illawarra Escarpment Trail***.

This submission outlines the context, opportunity and the steps required to implement a project that we believe will bring significant social, environmental and economic benefit to the Illawarra, at a very limited cost. The proposal aligns strongly with Objective 5, in its capacity to create a regionally significant eco-tourism destination. It also supports Objective 11, in its capacity to formalise, connect and regulate conservation areas that are used in a deregulated way.

Like any ambitious project, it has its challenges. But we believe that the Regional Plan has the capacity to set the direction for further investigation and the detailed work required to unlock this unique opportunity. We recognise that the Regional Plan is the first step in a process that will include a number of more detailed plans. We would be pleased to explore any of the elements of this submission in more detail.

**Context**

The Illawarra Escarpment is a world class recreational and environmental asset; an uninterrupted corridor of native green space, traversed by established trails, that is nonetheless accessible from major urban and tourist centres and infrastructure. With its stunning landscape it is significant to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people. Biologically diverse, the escarpment is home to 22 vegetation communities and 21 threatened native animals. The unique cultural and natural assets of the

escarpment present enormous opportunities to enhance the region's economy and quality of life for local residents and visitors to the region.<sup>1</sup>

*"The [Illawarra Escarpment] provides a significant recreational resource for the local community, with easy access from adjacent urban areas, allowing a sense of solitude and remoteness close to the facilities afforded by the city of Wollongong."*<sup>1</sup>

## Opportunity

There are hundreds of kilometres of formal and informal walking tracks and fire trails along the Illawarra escarpment and ocean-edge, from the Royal National Park in the north to Berry in the south. These trails are predominately in state and federal ownership and managed in different ways. There is, however, no single plan or strategy that links these trails in any formally recognised way.

We believe there is a considerable opportunity to create a formalised trail that links a network of existing tracks passing through a chain of conservation reserves along the *Illawarra Moist Corridor* – which extends south from the Royal National Park to the Budderoo National Park. The new Illawarra Escarpment trail will create a continuous and official route from Bundeena to Berry. Based on existing forest tracks and fire trails, this natural trail would require minimal infrastructure (i.e. predominately only signage to mark the trail and to denote local flora, fauna and sites of cultural significance).

## The Benefits

The escarpment's spectacular scenery and rainforests, the diversity of its wildflowers and native birds, the variety of historic heritage features, scenic views and lookouts, combined with a network of existing walking tracks provide largely untapped local recreational opportunities. In addition, the area has the potential to be vitally important for bringing ecotourism and cultural tourism to the Illawarra. Benefits of the proposed trail include:

- **Increase sustainable tourism:** Creation of an iconic nature trail will attract tourists to the Illawarra. Guided walking tours and wildlife viewing with overnight stays in local commercial properties or camping sites, could attract substantial revenue (consider, for instance, the value of The Overland Track in Tasmania).
- **Protect the escarpment:** Managed access and maintenance of an authorised trail traversing the escarpment will ensure fragile features of the escarpment are protected. An official trail promotes safe use and environmental sustainability consistent with the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area management plan.
- **Showcase local indigenous heritage:** Highlight relevant Indigenous stories and significant features along the trail with appropriate signage, information and stories.
- **Enhance physical and mental health:** Enable local residents and visitors to disconnect from the digital and urban world and connect to the land and nature, on the escarpment's stimulating and magical natural environment.
- **Promote sustainable recreation:** Promote a range of sustainable recreation and educational opportunities, focussed on walking and running through a range of landscapes and vegetation types.

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<sup>1</sup> NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (2018). Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area Plan of Management. State of NSW and the Office of Environment and Heritage. ISBN 978-1-925754-67-4

## The Challenge

An official continuous trail route across the Illawarra Escarpment will need to:

- Cross a variety of land tenures and link with facilities, including some limited access through privately-owned land.
- Use management trails (e.g. fire trails) and other links to integrate with roads, public transport and parking.
- Partnerships with Wollongong City Council and other stakeholders will be required to integrate local facilities and to provide track users with track-head information.

## The Route

Determining an official sanctioned continuous trail route will require broad stakeholder consultation, with literally thousands of minor variations to choose from. The following proposed route offers a starting point (see map in appendix)

The trail could start in the Royal National Park following the 30km **Coast Track**. **The Coast Track** traverses the wind- and wave-cut sandstone cliffs where they meet the deepwater of the East Australian Current. As you pass through the coastal scrub, native grasslands, and remote beaches of the Royal National Park you are quite often accompanied by migrating whales travelling just offshore. You can then leave the Royal National park at Otford, passing over Bald Hill, famous as a preeminent venue for coastal soaring, and through Stanwell Park Village. Making use of **The Grand Pacific Walk** you can climb back into the escarpment via the **Wodi Wodi Track**, and **The Forest Track** through areas of endangered subtropical rainforest, and then into high stands of escarpment eucalypt populated with echidna and crowded with the giant gymea lily wildflower.

From the aptly named **Sublime Point Lookout** you can travel south passing over Broker's Nose and along the popular **Mt Kiera Ring Track** - a spectacular section of subtropical rainforest. From Kiera you can follow the escarpment ridges to the imposing Mt Kembla with its uninterrupted views stretching over the city of Wollongong, Port Kembla, Lake Illawarra and extending to Kiama where once again the escarpment meets the sea. From Mt Kembla we can piece together fire trails that lead all the way to the **Barren Grounds Nature Reserve** in the Shoalhaven - not far from the rural hamlet of Berry, an area famous for its fine wine and food.

A continuous Illawarra escarpment trail could be up to 100km and one of the longest and most spectacular wilderness trails in the world - equal to the **Milford Track** (53km), **The Overland Track** (65km), **The Larapinta Trail** (230km), and **The Appalachian Trail** (2190mi).

Thank you again for the opportunity to submit this proposal. We would be pleased to provide further detail or explanation should you have any questions. We are also available to participate in working groups, stakeholder participation, or otherwise to further explore and develop this opportunity as part of the Illawarra Shoalhaven Regional Plan 2041.

Kind regards,

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Approximate route map (to be determined in consultation)

