



Red Box forest, Genowlan plateau

Executive summary

The Gardens of Stone Park Proposal Stage Two (GoS2) covers an area of 40 000 hectares of sandstone escarpment and plateau in the western Blue Mountains. It takes in parts of the upper Capertee Valley, Coxs River headwaters, Newnes Plateau and Blue Mountains western escarpment (see Map 1).

The objective of the GoS2 proposal is to achieve better management and protection of this area's many important natural and cultural values. The GoS2 park is proposed to be a mixture of state conservation area (SCA) and national park tenure. SCA status allows underground coal mining to continue.

This plan for nature-based recreation and tourism offers a positive economic vision for the GoS2 proposal under conservation management.

The GoS2 area

GoS2 comprises a large part of that distinctive and remarkable landscape that forms the high western edge of the Blue Mountains sandstone plateau. Extending into the Gardens of Stone National Park and Wollemi National Park, this region is characterised by a unique assemblage of spectacular rock formations, coloured clifflines, canyons, forested valleys, windswept plateau heathlands, rainforest gorges and montane woodlands and swamps. The rugged landscape has moulded specific human responses from Aboriginal exploration to modern industries, creating a culturally distinctive heritage.

Existing recreation and tourism in GoS2

Recreational use of GoS2 is less intense than in the adjacent, more well known parts of the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWA), and relatively undeveloped in terms of facilities and promotion. Recreational development in GoS2 north of Chifley Road (Newnes Plateau northwards) is embryonic, while the area to the south (Blue Mountains western escarpment) is at a more mature stage. The western escarpment features access roads, lookouts, walking tracks, several camping/picnic areas and historic features. Blackfellows Hand is a popular Aboriginal site with no facilities and a camping area is provided at Bungleboori in Newnes State Forest.

Informal recreational use independent of facilities is more widespread throughout GoS2, and includes vehicle touring, vehicular recreation (4WD and trail bike), dispersed

camping, off-track bushwalking, canyoning, rockclimbing and mountain biking. Some of this activity is illegal and some is creating widespread and unmanaged impacts.

Commercial activities and tours are limited to infrequent vehicle tours and bushwalking throughout the GoS2 area, and abseiling and rockclimbing on the Blue Mountains western escarpment. The Zig Zag Railway and Glow Worm Tunnel are popular attractions on the periphery of GoS2, while the Blue Mountains western escarpment features the Mount York historic precinct and a number of lookouts and walking tracks. A range of tourist accommodation is available in the local centres of Lithgow, Mount Victoria, Blackheath and Medlow Bath. The Greater Blue Mountains Drive is a series of vehicle touring routes throughout the GBMWH, linking major highways to 18 more remote Discovery Trails, four of which provide access to GoS2.

The future of nature-based tourism and recreation in GoS2

There is a need to establish an effective recreational management regime over GoS2, so as to:

- protect the values of the area;
- exclude illegal activities;
- make sustainable those activities that are currently ecologically unsustainable;
- provide for and promote ecologically sustainable and environmentally acceptable recreation and tourism activities.

The potential of the GoS2 area for low-impact, nature-based recreation and tourism is great, but under-recognised and under-utilised at present. The natural and cultural attractions are many, varied, widespread across the area and highly appealing. Some features (e.g. Lost City, Carne Creek gorge, New Hartley mining heritage, Wolgan Valley Rail Trail) have the potential to become iconic attractions of wide fame. A number of easy wildlife viewing opportunities exist and several Aboriginal heritage experiences are available. This basic resource of varied opportunities is enhanced by a high level of accessibility and large areas of relatively gentle terrain.

The existing park areas close to GoS2 offer similar features and experiences, but are less accessible. GoS2 brings this remarkable landscape to the people, by offering a wider range of experiences. GoS2 has the potential to complement the world heritage area by presenting less daunting Blue Mountains bushland which is more readily accessible to vehicles and visitors lacking specialist bush skills.

A comprehensive range of visitor opportunities can be established relatively easily across GoS2, to support a high level of nature-based tourism (see Maps 2 and 3). An identified suite of touring routes for motor vehicles and bicycles provides access to a range of potential camping areas, bushwalks, lookouts and cultural and wildlife experiences. Most of the proposed places of interest can be linked into a ‘Gardens of Stone Grand Tour’ which could be taken over one to three days by 4WD vehicle.

This network of visitor experiences would provide the basis of a whole new nature-based marketing initiative for the western Blue Mountains, promoting the *Gardens of Stone* as the very distinctive *other side of the Blue Mountains*. Such a future could realise significant economic opportunities through visitor expenditure, and for both specialised

services (tours, eco-accommodation) and more general commercial activity in the surrounding area.

Economic benefits of GoS2

Estimating tourism to protected areas and economic benefits can be difficult. Based on comparable statistics and studies from NSW, Queensland and Victoria, the upper estimate for tourism to a GoS2 park with the proposed facilities is 50 000 visitors a year. This level of tourism activity is estimated to produce net benefits in the order of \$28M to \$38M, depending on the discount rate used. These net benefits may represent a minimum value since management costs savings to Forests NSW have not been able to be included and the levels of timber production and royalties assumed may be conservatively high.

The regional economic benefit produced by 50 000 visitors to GoS2 is estimated as a direct spend of around \$3M to \$4M. This does not include expenditure on park management, nor the expansion of commercial tour activities and the establishment of new visitor accommodation in nearby areas which is likely to follow.



Evening light