



# Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

ABN 38 686 119 087

PO Box 29 Wentworth Falls NSW 2782

Phone: (02) 4757 1872

E-Mail: [bmcs@bluemountains.org.au](mailto:bmcs@bluemountains.org.au) Web Site: [www.bluemountains.org.au](http://www.bluemountains.org.au)

## Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

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**The Planner**  
**National Parks and Wildlife Service**  
**P O Box 144**  
**SUTHERLAND NSW 1499**

**By email: [msh.planning@environment.nsw.gov.au](mailto:msh.planning@environment.nsw.gov.au)**

### **The Thirlmere Lakes Draft Plan of Management (dPoM)**

#### **1. Preamble**

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (BMCS and also 'The Society' in the present submission) has a membership which fluctuates in the range 800-850. The membership is mainly drawn from the City of the Blue Mountains and the Greater Sydney region, but a scattering of members exists throughout NSW and also interstate.

The Society has a strong interest in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area (GBMWhA) in terms of protecting its many parks and reserves. The Thirlmere Lakes National Park is part of the GBMWhA and should be protected both in its own right and in the context of its contribution to the diverse values of the GBMWhA.

BMCS made submissions to and was actively involved with the Independent Inquiry into the water losses from the Thirlmere Lakes (2012). The Society again formally registers its disappointment with the findings of that Inquiry to the extent that it ascribed most of the changes in the lakes' water levels over the past 40 years to climatic variations. This is despite much uncertainty remaining about the geomorphology and hydrology of the lakes and their surrounds, and, in the face of excellent **independent** research by Philip Pells, the purported inability to separate mining-induced groundwater changes from other factors.

Without impugning the integrity of the Committee of Inquiry, the Chairperson had strong opinions (inadequately justified in the Society's opinion) which conflicted with past research. Furthermore, in relation to the Bald Hill Claystone (BHC), the Committee seemingly accepted the conventional wisdom that it is impermeable, effectively separating the geohydrology of the supra-BHC from the infra-BHC. The work of Pells showed that this is not the case! It is outrageous that Pells' work was not pursued in order to establish the truth of what is happening. Instead, uncertainties were exploited to minimize the impact of longwall mining and thereby enable its continuance.

In the subsequent Chief Scientist and Engineer's Report (2013), it was noted that a better understanding of the Thirlmere Lakes hydrology and groundwater system is required before any remediation options can be considered. The Society contends that this conclusion, although superficially reasonable, enabled continuation of mining. In contrast, proper adherence to the Precautionary Principle would have necessitated stopped the longwall mining until much-needed independent research was completed.

The Society has considered the dPoM (November 2014) and endorses the natural and cultural values identified in dPoM Section 1.2. The Society supports the majority of the management provisions in this dPoM, but notes deficiencies in relation to the matters detailed in Section 2 (below).

## 2. dPoM deficiencies

The concerns are largely dealt with in accordance with their sequence in the dPoM. No relative degree of importance is implied by BMCS in adopting this order.

BMCS notes that:

- As with all national parks, the purpose is to conserve nature and cultural heritage whilst providing for visitor-use in ways which do not damage conservation values.
- The park is Schedule 2 land within the Warragamba Special Area and, as such, aims to protect the quality of Sydney's principal water supply and maintain the catchment's ecological integrity.
- The park, being World Heritage listed, is subject to obligations under the World Heritage Convention.

Inadequate adherence to the three dot-points is the basis for the concerns in the ensuing subsections.

### 2.1 Hydrology of the Lakes

The Society notes that the **desired outcomes** (dPoM p11) require: (i) human-induced impacts on the hydrology to be adequately identified by scientific research and monitoring; and (ii) where such changes are identified, remediation options be evaluated prior to implementation.

This leads to **management responses** involving: (i) developing a research program to investigate causes of the changes in lake levels; (ii) encouraging research that improves understanding of the hydrology; (iii) evaluating any remedial action where human-induced impacts on the hydrology are identified; and, working with authorities to mitigate any impacts on park values.

Sadly, none of this deals with the facts that damage has already been done, longwall mining is a significant contributing factor, and continuing with the mining has the potential to exacerbate the damage. **The Society believes that the dPoM of such an important area as the Lakes should aggressively protect the values rather than defer action pending 'unassailable' attribution of the percentage-cause of impacts.**

### 2.2 Horse riding

Allowing horse riding on Dry Lakes Road Management Trail for the purpose of accessing the park from Dry Lakes Road is effectively encouraging and thereby endorsing a less restricted use of horses. This will unfortunately result in an expansion of horse riding (unless very heavily 'policed' by NPWS personnel) along the Thirlmere Lakes Walking Track and the powerline easement access road and fire management roads. It will also result in the riders using the lake-beds, when exposed due to lower water levels, for relatively vegetation-free gallops

The Society strongly believes that unless NPWS is resourced at a level capable of controlling encroachment by horse-riders and other forms of high-impact recreation (trail bikes and 4wd-use), it is grossly wrong to convey degrees of flexibility.

**Horse riding should not be permitted in this high-sensitivity park.**

### 2.3 Water-based activities

Canoeing, kayaking and shallow-draft sailing are welcomed in lakes Werri Berri, Couridjah and Nerrigorang when there are adequate amounts of water. BMCS notes, however, that lakes Gandangarra and Baraba are more remote and lack public access to facilitate these activities. If accessibility is the only inhibiting factor, there is nothing to stop more adventurous visitors and those who appreciate a challenge from attempting to use these two lakes. **The dPoM should be modified to clearly state that the previously mentioned water-based activities are prohibited on lakes Gandangarra and Baraba.**

The Society fully endorses the dPoM's ban on the use of any motorised vessel on any of the Thirlmere Lakes. Such vessels have the potential to pollute the lakes, adversely impact the native fauna and flora, and, through noise pollution, adversely impact the enjoyment of other users of the park.

BMCS acknowledges that erosion of slopes in heavily used picnic areas and car parks should be closely monitored and overnight camping should be prohibited. This would be consistent with the 'desired outcome' (dPoM p24) that facilities and activities should be "...planned and managed to provide a satisfying visitor experience and minimise impacts" and that there should be "...no unacceptable impacts on the natural and cultural heritage values of the park or other users."

## 2.4 Pests

### 2.4.1 Dingos

As the park is a dingo management area in the *Pest Control Order for Wild Dogs* (dPoM p28), it is critical that the management plan addresses control **and conservation objectives**. Despite this, it seems that dingos and wild dogs are controlled in consultation with neighbouring properties and 'relevant authorities', whatever the latter means.

The Society is most concerned that **conservation** of dingos has become a subordinate matter, particularly as the management response is to "*Undertake ongoing control programs for wild dogs*" and work with "...stakeholders in the management of dingo and wild dog issues including inclusion of the park in strategic planning, where appropriate." Frankly, these are just words designed to skirt around the conservation aspects of dingo populations. BMCS acknowledges that distinguishing between wild dogs and dingos is somewhat contentious, but as both terms are used in the dPoM, **the Society firmly believes that the dPoM should proactively address dingo conservation rather than allowing it to be subordinate to wild-dog control.**

### 2.4.2 Aquatic pests

There is little doubt that the release of exotic fish species and turtles comprise a major threat to the native aquatic organisms and ecosystems of the Thirlmere Lakes, and thus on native fish and frog species. The management response largely focuses on (dPoM p28) monitoring environmental weeds and treating new outbreaks 'where possible', and removing exotic fish and other introduced aqueous Animalia should the lake levels fall and even dry out.

BMCS accepts the difficulties associated with controlling aquatic pests. An additional approach could be to have signage and pamphlets emphasising the difficulties and drawing attention to 'avoidance' by not releasing unwanted 'aqueous pets' into the lakes

## 2.5 Implementation

In Sections 2.1-2.4 the Society has focused on a few specific deficiencies. Even if there were no such deficiencies in terms of desired outcomes and management responses, the implementation of responses in terms of their priority (dPoM Section 6, Table 4) merit additional comment.

The comments in the following subsections are made in the context of dPoM Table 4, List of Management Responses.

### 2.5.1 World Heritage values

Table 4, 3.1.1 assigns **medium priority** to "*Facilitating the ongoing development and implementation of research and monitoring programs to detect any changes in the World Heritage values of the park*". Yet Australia has an obligation to ensure that the integrity and authenticity of World Heritage properties at the time of their inscription are maintained. The Society contends that the obligation extends to the range of values rather than just to the original value for which listing was recognized. It is therefore inconceivable that Table 4, 3.1.1 should have anything other than **high priority**. Similarly, working on the basis that the lakes and associated wetlands are urgently in need of protection, BMCS believes that Table 4, 3.2.1-3.2.2 should have **high priority**.

These contentions are supported by the high priority management responses in Table 4, 3.3.1-3.3.3. They are also consistent with the fact that Thirlmere Lakes provide an excellent record of entrenched meanders

left stranded by tectonically-driven re-direction of rivers associated with the evolution of the Lapstone Monocline and fault system. Not surprisingly, despite this value not being listed by the World Heritage Committee in 2000, it was flagged as part of a value which could form part of the World Heritage Area's re-nomination.

### **2.5.2 Historic heritage and National Heritage listing**

This principally refers to Section 6, Table 4, Sections 3.6 and 3.7.

The significance of the lakes in terms of nineteenth and twentieth century aboriginal and non-indigenous history is moderately well documented, although much has still to be done in relation to earlier aboriginal history.

BMCS notes that recording and conserving aboriginal sites is **ongoing**, although the extent to which this is proactively pursued is not clear. BMCS is conversely disappointed that encouraging research into aboriginal cultural heritage within the park only has **medium priority** (Table 4, 3.6.4). Surely finding sites and understanding their implications within the context of the lakes should have **high priority**, particularly so given the relatively heavy non-indigenous use and the potential for adverse impacts?

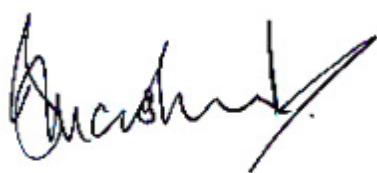
Non-indigenous heritage items are seemingly of little significance based on Table 4, items 3.7.1 and 3.7.4 only having **low priority**. In view of the threats to the lakes and the increased visitation desired by the NSW State Plan and supported by OEH, it seems strange that assessing heritage items, ensuring adequate protection and providing signage is not seen to be a **high priority**.

To increase understanding of why and how the region became a national park, the dPoM should have sections on the conservation history, including information on the original World Heritage listing, the current potential for re-nomination (see Section 2.5.1), and the status of National Heritage listing. **These are glaring omissions.**

### **3. In conclusion**

The Society recognizes that resources are limited and that not everything can be designated 'high priority'. Nevertheless, BMCS hopes that the identified deficiencies are rectified in the final PoM; only by ensuring the matters are incorporated and/or given a higher priority will the values of this small park be properly recognized and suitably preserved.

Finally, the Society appreciates the opportunity to comment on the dPoM.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Marshall', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

***Dr Brian Marshall,  
For the Management Committee.***