

## **UPDATE ON HELICOPTERS and KATOOMBA AIRFIELD**

Katoomba airfield is an (approx.) 36 ha parcel of Crown Land towards the end of Grand Canyon Rd Medlow Bath. It is located just before Point Pilcher adjacent to the world famous Grand Canyon bushwalk, in the upper reaches of the Grose Valley.

This area is a favourite for bushwalkers, canyoneers, including both Grand and Jugglers canyons above Beauchamp Falls. It is also above Rodriguez Pass, a key access point for walking the Grose valley floor. It is completely surrounded by the Blue Mountains National Park from which it was excised in the 1960s under condition that it be returned in 1988, at the expiry of the lease. Unfortunately this did not happen.

Since the previous article on this issue (Hut News October 2018) an application for a long term lease of the airfield site by 'direct negotiation' has been received by Department of Industry, Crown Lands.

We still have no specific details on the proposal which has been put forward to Crown Lands.. We are aware that it involves upgrading of the airfield and airfield surface for use as a helipad for tourist helicopter flights. Wherever these helicopter flights originate or wherever they go, whatever 'routes' they fly they will be landing and taking off in the middle of the National Park.

### **World Heritage Area**

Since 2000 this National Park has been declared a World Heritage Area and with the increasing pressures placed on our bushland and wilderness, the protection of this public land, rather than its commercialisation, is more important than ever.

These intrusive activities are not allowed in US national parks like Yosemite and the Grand Canyon to protect the "natural quiet and experience of the park". (ref online document: "Special Flight Rules Area in the Vicinity of Grand Canyon National Park - Actions to Substantially Restore Natural Quiet")

But in our part of the world, in places like Fox Glacier in NZ and the Bungle Bungles in WA, quiet enjoyment is being ruined by the constant buzz of these giant mozzies.

The airspace over our World Heritage Areas should be regulated!

### **What about the impacts on wildlife?**

The US National Parks Service says: "Wildlife rely on natural sounds for survival. When noise covers up natural sounds, the entire natural area shows the effects. Animals use their hearing to detect predators and prey as well as to find mates."The US has had a National Parks Overflights Act to control noisy aircraft since 1987. The concept of "natural quiet" should be legislated here before it is too late.

There has been an observed impact of helicopters on Honeyeater migration in Autumn 2018. Every year in autumn over 200,000 Yellow-faced Honeyeaters and other species congregate and migrate in the higher Blue Mountains altitudes.

These birds sweep up onto the plateau from the southern valley, feed on heath and woodland plants especially Banksias and dependant insects, then continue their flight north across the Grose and beyond. Figures obtained from the 2018 honeyeater count and observations of the counters indicated that helicopters involved in the site preparation for the Mt Solitary hazard reduction fire had an immediate negative impact on migrating flocks. This honeyeater bird migration is a world recognised phenomenon of great significance. **How can the commercial interests of just a few people be allowed to inflict such damage on Blue Mountains wildlife?**

## **Emergency Airfield**

It is important to note that the airfield has had significant use by emergency services over the years and that the Civil Aviation Safety Authority would also like the strip to be available for emergency landings. Both of these needs are well recognised and fully supported by the Society.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service manages a number of airfields within national parks for management and emergency purposes. Specific funding to repair and restore the airfield could be allocated from the Bushfire Risk Mitigation and Resilience Program managed by NSW Treasury.

If another commercial lease were granted, the NPWS and RFS would need to pay compensation to the lessee for loss of earnings for each day they take control of the airfield for bushfires or other emergency purposes ... We, the taxpayers would be funding this situation!

## **Have your Say**

As awareness of the potential impact of this proposed helipad/helicopter commercial operation grows so does the call for the return of this Crown Land into National Park, from which it was excised in 1968.

Community Groups have formed since February 2019 in the three townships most affected- Medlow Bath, Blackheath and Katoomba. These groups have joined together to form a very active Alliance.

They are gathering a petition to take this issue to the floor of the NSW Parliament. Details of where you can sign the petition and keep up to date on their activity can be found on their website, [www.ourblueys.org](http://www.ourblueys.org). The Society is also busy writing letters, contacting environment and bushwalking groups as well as relevant agencies and politicians. See our website for letters and responses

Community consultation is expected to take place in and to include an online submission process, drop in sessions and some other (yet to be advised) activities.

We fear the Department may attempt to limit the "community engagement process" to a narrow discussion around the specific commercial plans of a developer. We believe that the community has a right to have a say on whether OUR public land should go back into Park or whether it should be developed for commercial gain. We suggest you get involved and raise your voice. We also ask you to write to the two relevant Ministers

the Minister responsible for Crown Lands -

Hon Melinda Pavey MP,  
Minister for Water, Property and Housing  
GPO Box 5341, Sydney NSW 2001  
email: via <https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/ministers/minister-for-water-property-and-housing/>

and the Minister responsible for NPWS

The Hon. Matt Kean MP  
Minister for Energy and Environment  
GPO Box 5341, Sydney NSW 2001  
email via <https://www.nsw.gov.au/your-government/ministers/minister-for-energy-and-environment/>

If sending an email via the website is difficult, you could email our local member Trish Doyle MP and ask her to forward it to both these Ministers. ([bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au](mailto:bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au)).

By the time you receive this Hut News the “consultation” may have started, so if you would like to participate, which we urge you to do, please email or ring Crown Lands now and ask to be informed and included by contacting:

Mark Maloney [mark.maloney@crowmland.nsw.gov.au](mailto:mark.maloney@crowmland.nsw.gov.au) or 9842 8346  
Crown Property Services, NSW Department of Industry | Crown Lands & Water  
10 Valentine Ave, Parramatta | PO Box 2185| Dangar NSW 2309

**What we want is:**

No noisy helicopter flights that upset people and other animals

No commercial airfield/heliport development inside the Blue Mountains National Park

**We ask you to join our campaign to support the return of Katoomba Airfield into the Blue Mountains National Park, to be managed solely as an emergency airfield.**

We suggest you make these points

- **Support** the reinstatement of the **Katoomba Airfield into the national park?**
- **Object** to any plan to lease Katoomba Airfield for commercial uses
- **Ask** that the process of issuing a lease be stopped immediately
- **Ask** that you be considered a key stakeholder in the upcoming community consultation
- Ask that the consultation considers the option of incorporating the airfield into the surrounding national park

*Katoomba Airfield Subcommittee (with assistance for Ian Brown.)*