

Response to the Draft Hunter Regional Plan

from the Wollombi Valley Progress Association, January 2016

We, the Wollombi Valley Progress Association (WVPA), representing the communities of Wollombi and Laguna, welcome the opportunity to respond to the Draft Hunter Regional Plan. The WVPA seeks to protect the rural villages of Wollombi and Laguna and the rural settlement of the entire Wollombi Valley. In view of this, it makes the following points in relation to the Draft Hunter Regional Plan.

- The Draft Hunter Regional Plan does not mention Wollombi, Laguna or the Wollombi Valley either in text or map. This is a serious omission and means that the Plan fails to recognise the cultural, historic, economic and environmental significance of this area of the Hunter Valley.
- In Figure 2, the 'Western Hunter' subregion does not mark the location of Wollombi and Laguna. In Figure 9, the Wollombi Valley is not identified as a rural resource. In Figures 11 and 12, the two villages and the Wollombi Valley are not recognised for the high environmental values they possess. In Figure 14 the Wollombi Valley is not recognised as an integral part of an important water catchment. We see these serious omissions as a lack of planning for the future. A Hunter Regional Plan, we believe, needs the necessary scope and vision to protect, not only to develop.

Wollombi, Laguna and the Wollombi Valley need to be identified with the following unique qualities which taken together, differentiate the area from the wider Western Hunter subregion:

1. Natural Environment

Despite its relative proximity to the city and urban developments of Sydney, Central Coast and Newcastle the Wollombi Valley still possesses a remarkable, wide range of native animal and plant diversity. The Wollombi Valley is close to National Parks, both Yengo and Wollemi. It is at the head of the Wollombi Water Catchment. It has important waterways of creeks, brooks and wetlands that flow into the Hunter River (Direction 3.2).

We believe in the imperative need to conserve and enhance the biodiversity of this Valley, and for it to remain mining-free, thus avoiding the negative impacts that mining would bring to our extremely valuable area.

If the Regional Plan is sincere in its objective to enhance habitat connectivity across the Hunter then protection of the Wollombi Valley is vital, with its position between the National Parks of Yengo and Watagans (Action 3.1.2).



Wollombi, Laguna and the Wollombi Valley possess high environmental values which are not currently protected under legislation, regulation policy or intergovernmental agreement. We seek recognition and protection of these values of our area from urban and mining development. The Wollombi Valley needs to be shown in Figures 11 and 12.

Wollombi Valley's natural environment is unique in the Hunter region being relatively free of large scale development including mining. The diversity of local flora and fauna is enhanced by the immediate proximity of the Yengo National Park and Wilderness Area. The Wollombi Valley is the natural unspoilt corner of the Hunter and needs to be protected as such. Once it's gone it's not easy to get back.

Statement from Chris Jackson, President Wollombi Valley Landcare

2. Aboriginal Culture

The Wollombi Valley, close to Mount Yengo, contains indigenous cultural property that needs to be protected. Mount Yengo was and continues to be a highly significant site to Aboriginal people not only of the Wollombi area but of coastal and inland NSW.

Action 4.4.2 of the plan outlines the need to identify and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage values. The Plan also cites that the NSW Government will support regional Aboriginal cultural heritage. Therefore the Wollombi Valley needs identification and protection, and to be shown in Figures 11 and 12.

The spiritual and cultural significance of the Wollombi Valley is very diverse, ranging from traditional Aboriginal culture, to the integration process of early settlers to the reconciliation time of today. The Wollombi Valley is a central place for all people who walk with spirit.

Statement from Adam Drylie, Director Ngurra Bu Aboriginal Corporation, Wollombi

3. History

We believe the Wollombi Valley possesses natural and built assets that characterise this region and need protection, for example the World Heritage listed Great North Road. The colonial era sandstone and timber buildings in the townships of both Wollombi and Laguna, particularly the schools, churches, old Courthouse, and the Wollombi cemetery stand as testament to a convict and colonial history that proved vital to the early survival of the colony.

Planning for the future of the Hunter Valley region for the next twenty years should include the important historic and cultural values of the Wollombi Valley. I notice with great concern that the "Draft Hunter Regional Plan" makes no mention of the Valley.

Wollombi became the most important regional centre between Sydney and Newcastle when settlers started to arrive after the building of the Great North Road in the mid to late 1820s. It had its own magistrate and courthouse and large parts of the township have survived modern development, making Wollombi an important tourist destination today.

The Great North Road has seen a revival after the Convict Trail project was launched which resulted in restoration and large scale interpretation projects along the road. This, along with the history of the Wollombi Valley, has added to the tourism value of the whole Hunter Valley region, as some 20% of visitors have indicated that heritage and history are key reasons for them to visit the area.

Heritage and the natural environment are under constant threat of modern development. This makes the Wollombi Valley a very vulnerable area. There is a critical need for the Hunter Regional Plan to define the whole Valley as a unique place that needs protecting, and I support this initiative by the Wollombi Progress Association to give Wollombi a prominent place in the planning process, and the Regional Plan.

Statement from Paul Budde
Chairman and initiator of the Convict Trail Project,
President Bucketty Bush Community

4. Tourism

The Wollombi Valley is an important tourist destination with unique colonial, Indigenous and natural attractions. It is appealing to people, not only seeking a rural lifestyle in close proximity to the city, but also for tourists wishing to spend leisure time.

Tourist Drive 33 should be included in the Action 2.2.2.

The draft Regional Plan recognises tourism as a potential growth area for the Hunter and therefore should include the unique combination of factors within Wollombi that will considerably enhance the visitor experience.

Tourism within the Wollombi Valley is a critical economic driver of the area and generates important economic benefits including employment and significant multiplier benefits. It also contributes greatly to the identity of the area and the Hunter Valley generally.

The viticulture cluster and small scale farming around Wollombi Valley together with places of historic significance including the Wollombi Endeavour Museum which displays early colonial, convict and indigenous history (there is no similar Museum in the Hunter Valley), helps to provide clear differentiators for tourism.

Small businesses are developing in the area to support the tourists coming to the area, which is good for both the Wollombi Valley and the Hunter Region.

It is therefore appropriate that the significance of Wollombi Valley is fully incorporated into the Hunter Valley Regional Plan.

Statement from Graham Skeates, President Wollombi Valley Chamber of Commerce

I register my serious concern about the omission of the Wollombi Valley in the NSW Department of Planning & Environment's "Draft Hunter Regional Plan". I have spent the past 20 years as a part-time resident of the Hunter Valley and consider myself knowledgeable in the unique qualities across all of the Hunter Valley.

Failure to recognise the Wollombi Valley reflects a failure to differentiate the area from the wider Western Hunter sub-region.

Future planning for the Hunter Valley without proper recognition of the Wollombi Valley would place in jeopardy different aspects of our culture and history. It should include a very significant reflection of Indigenous cultures in the region as well as our convict and colonial past. The Wollombi Valley is one of the few areas in the state that sees tourism, vineyards and farming work in social harmony.

Statement from John Hartigan, former Chairman & CEO News Limited, current Chairman Destination NSW and landholder, Wollombi

5. Community

Rural living is a popular lifestyle choice in the Wollombi Valley. Community events showcasing rural living cater to tourists and locals: Wollombi Valley Wine Trail, Sculpture in the Vineyards, Wood Chop Competitions, Small Farms Fair. This lifestyle needs to be protected from demands that are predominantly catered to mining employment (Action 4.1.2 and Direction 4.2).

Laguna Public School was established in 1873 on the Great North Road and has been providing education to the children of the Wollombi Valley ever since. The original school classroom, now the library, is a beautiful sandstone building built in 1881. The school's proximity to many significant cultural sites, as well as its bush location, make it a unique location for students studying our colonial past, Aboriginal education and environmental education. Laguna Public School also plays a crucial role in the vitality and well-being of our local community by providing a meeting place for families, hosting school and community events and establishing links with the many local groups and organisations. I fully support the submission by the Wollombi Valley Progress Association to have our unique and beautiful valley recognised in the Draft Hunter Regional Plan.

Statement from Craig Howe, Principal, Laguna Public School

The Wollombi Valley communities of Wollombi and Laguna take pride and responsibility in their townships. The Tidy Valley committee have engaged in beautification projects of tree planting and installation of gardens, Aboriginal and colonial cultural programs working with Aboriginal elder Les Elvin to create a community art place, flood lighting of Wollombi's convict and colonial era buildings, creating a wildlife corridor from Narone Creek to Negro Street along the banks of Wollombi Brook, establishment of Anzac Reserve and maintenance of convict-built culverts on The Great North Road. Our small townships are unique in their history, both Aboriginal and Colonial and in the preservation and maintenance of sandstone and timber, colonial buildings. Wollombi and Laguna are special places appreciated by both residents and tourists.

Statement from Pat Evans and Bernice Brown, Wollombi Tidy Valleys Committee

6. Critical Industry Cluster

Vineyards

Wollombi is the southern gateway to the Hunter Valley wine and tourism areas. There are at least 9 separate vineyards within the Wollombi Valley including cellar doors: Undercliff Winery and Gallery in Yango Creek Road Wollombi, Wollombi Village Vineyard in Paynes Crossing Road, Noyce Brothers Wines in Wollombi Village, Wollombi Wines in Wollombi Road Wollombi, Stonehurst Wines in Wollombi Road Cedar Creek, and Millbrook Estate Winery and Gallery in Mt View Road Millfield.

Given the growing wine tourism in the area, key parts of the Wollombi Valley should be declared a *viticulture critical industry cluster* area, as are parts of Broke and Pokolbin (Action 2.1.2 and Figure 9).

With its proximity to Broke and Pokolbin, wine tourism is growing in Wollombi Valley and brings important economic benefits to the area.

Statement from Michael Noyce, Noyce Brothers Wine, Wollombi and member of Wollombi Wine Trail

Olives

In the Wollombi Valley there are approximately 30 olive groves with over 40,000 olive trees.

Over the last 30 or so years the Valley has been transformed as "tree changers" have settled and re-established small scale agricultural enterprises. At first the focus was on grapes but more recently many people have established small scale olive groves, producing both oil and table fruit, capitalising on the proximity to the Sydney market. People are also experimenting with other speciality crops, enriching the diversity of the region and enhancing the tourist appeal. Whereas the Valley was once an important source of dairy produce, the cattle industry has also diversified, with the focus now on beef production from smaller, high quality herds. In one sense the Valley is returning to what it was more than 150 years ago, with many small farms providing produce for Sydney. As this trend continues more and more opportunities are emerging for "farm stay" holidays close to Sydney.

Statement from Peter Herborn, Executive, Hunter Olive Association

Livestock

An important historical and current land use of the Wollombi, Laguna and Wollombi Valley is livestock, and the largest of this is cattle. It is a high economic, agricultural endeavour, with monthly cattle sales held at Wollombi. There has been continuous agricultural output from this area since European settlement in the Valley.

It is necessary for the Regional Plan to protect and preserve agriculturally productive land.

Statement from Steve Annis-Brown, Stock and Station Agent, Wollombi

7. Encroachment from mining and coal seam gas exploration and development

Mining activities are absolutely inappropriate for the Wollombi Valley because of, but not limited to:

- negative impact on the water catchment, and the pollution of water for agricultural needs,
- degradation of the unique landscape and character of the valley,
- negative impact on significant Aboriginal and World Heritage listed sites,
- regular and significant flooding of the waterways within the valley making mining more hazardous,
- negative impacts on the local tourist economy, and
- incompatibility of heavy industrial traffic through a natural, rural and tourist landscape.

It is small relief that Action 2.4.4 of the Plan cites the need to manage and minimise blast fumes, however, the lack of detail in Figure 18 is cause for concern. It is this Association's belief that the Wollombi Valley should not be mapped as part of a Current and Potential Mining Area (Figure 18).

The Wollombi Valley Progress Association requests that the Hunter Regional Plan be redrafted in order that Wollombi, Laguna and the Wollombi Valley be identified on Figures 9, 11, 12, 14 and 18. Identification on these Figures will highlight the importance of these areas to the Hunter Region, and in particular to the Western Hunter Subregion, and will serve to bring these areas to the attention of the members of the Hunter Regional Plan Coordination and Monitoring Committee as they set about their work coordinating and driving the delivery of actions.

In support of our request, WVPA points out that in relation to Figure 9, the implementation of the following Actions will be of particular significance to Wollombi, Laguna and the Wollombi Valley:-

- 2.1.3 Develop local strategies to support sustainable agriculture and agribusiness;
- 2.2.2 Develop strategies for enhancing tourism infrastructure to increase national competitiveness;
- 2.4.2 Avoid urban and rural residential encroachment into identified agricultural and extractive resource lands when preparing long term settlement strategies, and
- 2.4.4 Implement a robust assessment process to consider social, economic and environmental implications of mining activities and manage these throughout the life of the project.

In relation to Figures 11 and 12, of particular significance will be the implementation of Actions:-

- 3.1.1 Improve the quality of and access to information relating to high environmental values and use this information to avoid, minimise and mitigate the impacts of development on significant environmental assets;
- 3.1.2 Identify priority investment within regional habitat corridors and prepare local strategies to protect and manage corridors, and
- 3.1.3 Encourage greater participation in private conservation schemes to provide more flexibility and options for investing in conservation, including biodiversity offsets.

In relation to Figure 14, of particular significance to us will be the implementation of Action:-

- 4.4.2 Identify and protect Aboriginal cultural heritage values

In the current draft Plan, Wollombi, Laguna and Wollombi Valley are not identified in a single Figure. WVPA requests that this omission be redressed in the final version of the Plan.

We, the Wollombi Valley Progress Association, seek to ensure the protection of the uniqueness of Wollombi, Laguna and the Wollombi Valley for future generations, for and beyond the next twenty years.

President, Wollombi Valley Progress Association

This response was passed unanimously at WVPA general meeting, Saturday, 30th January 2016.