



Monaro Rail Trail Inc

Response to

NSW Government Planning and Environment

Draft

South East and Tablelands Regional Plan



About Monaro Rail Trail Inc

Monaro Rail Trail Incorporated is an association of individuals from communities along the Queanbeyan to Bombala rail corridor. They have come together to support the call for a feasibility study into establishing a recreation trail along sections of the disused and unproductive rail line. The Association's mission statement is:

To put the disused Monaro railway line to productive use, boosting tourism, the economy and the wellbeing of the region, while preserving the wonderful old buildings, bridges and tunnels that are part of Monaro history.

For further information or queries please contact

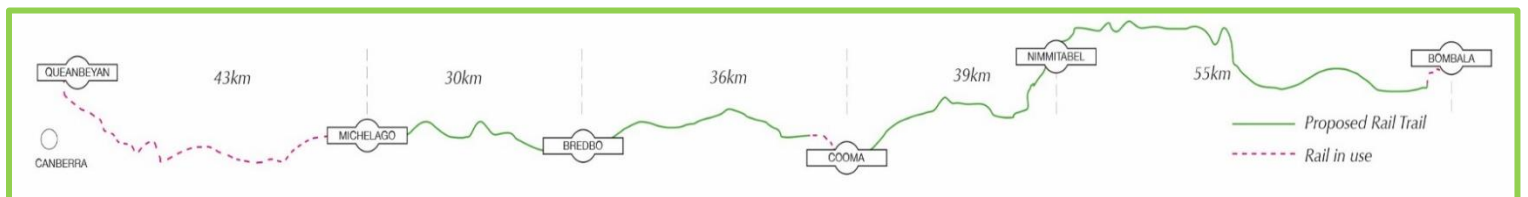
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Objectives of this submission

Monaro Rail Trail Inc (MRT Inc) welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Draft Regional Plan for the South East and Tablelands. Our submission focuses on the Monaro area of the region and:

1. Comments on the goals and actions of the Draft Plan
2. Explains the relevance to the Regional Plan of a rail trail in the Queanbeyan to Bombala rail corridor
3. Summarises the Monaro Rail Trail proposal
4. Shows how the rail trail can help achieve the goals of the Regional Plan.

1. Executive Summary

MRT Inc supports the proposed vision for the South East and Tablelands. A rail trail can do much to build resilient and sustainable communities. It will bring growth opportunities by allowing residents and visitors to experience the region's environment and lifestyle. It will build economic opportunities in the first of the suggested priority growth sectors, tourism.

Goal 1: *Sustainably manage growth opportunities arising from the ACT*

This goal is commendable. However growth opportunities will arise not just from growth within the ACT but from development of tourism within the region. Other regional activities will also contribute to the region's growth and will require improved transport connectivity.

Goal 2: *Protect and enhance the region's natural environment*

MRT Inc supports this goal and asks for the Goal's Directions and Actions to mention specifically the built heritage and to include an action to conserve or adaptively reuse this heritage.

Goal 3: *Strengthen the economic opportunities of the region.*

Again MRT Inc supports this goal and asks for the inclusion of an action for the NSW Government to facilitate and support the development of 'trails and experiences'.

Goal 4: *Build communities that are strong, healthy and well connected.*

MRT Inc supports this vision and asks for the inclusion of an action for the NSW Government to facilitate, fund and support opportunities for physical activity and facilities such as walkways, and cycleways.



2. The SE Draft Regional Plan and the Monaro Rail Trail

As the ACT and regional population (and other state capitals cities) expands there will be a greater need for recreational outlets. The MRT will be a natural outlet for walking and cycling.

An economic stimulus will be created by these users taking on the 4 or 5-day ride as they seek meals and accommodation in each of the villages along the route.

Cultural heritage such as rail bridges will be preserved as part of building the trail and rail history in the stations and freight yards along the route will be showcased to the thousands of trail users. The proposal is a fine example of a new tourist activity that will not impact on the physical environment as the recreational trail is merely a new use for the existing rail corridor.

Finally, the successful development of the MRT will connect all the communities along the route as they will all be part of the activity and all will share in its success.



3. The Monaro Rail Trail

A Monaro Rail Trail would convert 164km of the disused rail corridor between Michelago and Bombala to a recreational trail, for people to walk and cycle. This would preserve the disused rail corridor between Queanbeyan and Bombala in public ownership for any future need to restore rail or for other public purposes.

Sections of the corridor may incorporate tourist train operations at some future time. Queanbeyan to Michelago, Chakola to Cooma and a small section at Bombala are unused at present but can be kept if tourist train or trike operations become feasible. Remaining trackside infrastructure and the heritage listed bridges can be preserved and incorporated into the rail trail.

The NSW Government has listed rail heritage sites at; Michelago, Bredbo, Cooma and Bombala. At these sites the station buildings, freight yards and bridges will add to the trail users experience and create a very unique recreational trail. The many tourists will in turn create incentive to preserve and to show case this rail history.

Villages and towns along the route to benefit will be Michelago, Bredbo, Cooma, Nimmitabel and Bombala. Benefits will arise from the need to service the inflow of cycle tourists. Well documented data from existing rail trails in Australia and New Zealand have revealed the potential of rail trails to bring in new categories of tourists. In the case of the Monaro Rail Trail 15,000 to 20,000 cycle tourists per year from Australia and overseas can be expected to complete the full trail which will be four or five days of riding. The villages along the route are conveniently spaced apart by a day's ride which means many people will be comfortably able to do day and weekend trips.

The ideal time for people to experience this new cycle tourism activity will be when the autumn tints are at their peak. Spring will be another opportunity to see the Monaro at its greenest. This will complement the busy winter snow sports season. The rail trail will also complement the mountain biking activities in the Snowy Mountains, its new road riding proposals and the recently built trails at Mt Gladstone in Cooma.

The Monaro landscapes, the rail history, the attractive autumn weather and the proximity of the huge population centers of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne will make the Monaro a highly favoured cycle tourism destination for Australian and international tourists.



4. Impact on goals of SE Regional Plan

Goal 1. Sustainably manage growth opportunities arising from the ACT.

This goal is commendable, but it needs to be broader. It considers how growth in the ACT will result in more people living in the Greater Capital Region and travelling to the ACT to work, for education and for services such as health. Direction 1.2, refers to 'large daily movement of workers and school students between NSW and the ACT' but does not mention movement in the other direction. The goal appears to overlook the growth opportunities that will arise from the economic stimulus triggered by ACT residents' spending on travel and recreation in the Region. The directions and actions under this goal should reflect this.

Canberra has a population that will exceed 400,000 this calendar year and put together with the region's population this figure could grow to 800,000 by 2050. This represents enormous opportunities for the leisure industry as cycling tourism is a growing activity.

Developments such as the Monaro Rail Trail will generate jobs in the hospitality and transport sector and will increase transport movements in the region.

Significant numbers of Canberrans ride a bicycle:

- 81,700 or 21.2% of the population ride in a typical week
- 170,200, 44.1% of residents ride at least once in a typical year
- Of the people who cycled in the last month, 72% cycled for recreation.
- The proportion of households with one or more working bicycles is much greater in the ACT than the Australian average with 65% of households having access to a bicycle¹

If even a small proportion of these riders are attracted to the Region it will increase jobs and transport movements.

Other forms of recreation and tourism arising from ACT residents will add to the need for housing planning and development to take into account the housing needs of people who work in the Region's recreation and tourism sector. Cross border transport connectivity will need to take into account the movement of Canberrans through the Region for recreation and tourism.

The Draft mentions the March 2014 Southern Regional Transport Plan. That Plan:

- notes that 'tourism demands can exceed local network capacity'
- states 'We will work to ensure that any transport project or land use development includes appropriate provision for walking and cycling from the design stage.'
- includes actions that:
 - support proposals to investigate walking and cycling trails including disused rail lines
 - improve tourism-related transport services

These items from the Transport Plan should be included in the Regional Plan.

¹ 2015 National Cycling Participation Survey - www.onlinepublications.austroads.com.au/items/AP-C91-15

Goal 2. Protect and enhance the region's natural environment

MRT Inc supports Goal 2 and in particular Action 2.1.2 Protect the region's biodiversity corridors, and Direction 2.5 Protect the region's cultural heritage. The directions and actions under this goal do not mention specifically the built heritage. They should. Action 2.5.1 refers to 'adaptive reuse of heritage resources' in the context of councils preparing local planning controls, but there is no mention of action to actually conserve or adaptively reuse this heritage. There should be.

Direction 2.5 Protect the region's cultural heritage

Use of the rail corridor for cycle tourism will create a new use for existing infrastructure with links to Monaro history and help ensure those links and biodiversity corridors are preserved.

Development of the Queanbeyan to Bombala rail line is an important part of the Monaro cultural history. The first sector, Queanbeyan to Cooma, was completed in 1889 and the sector Cooma to Bombala was completed in 1921. Commercial rail traffic terminated in 1989 and the ACT Division of the Australian Rail Historical Society Canberra ceased use of the line south to Royalla in 2007. The Cooma Monaro Railway has made use of the short section from Cooma to Chakola for tourist trains but operations have been suspended for a number of years due to track deterioration.



The NSW Government Office of Environment and Heritage has recognized the long rail history of the Monaro and the trade skills used to construct infrastructure such as bridges along the route. Heritage listed stations and freight yards are at Michelago, Cooma and Bombala. Two bridges are also heritage listed, one at Ingelara Creek and the other at Bredbo.

The Cooma Monaro Local Environment Plan 2013 records other rail related items in its heritage register. Near Bredbo is the Colinton tunnel and near Chakola is a rail bridge considered to be amongst the longer timber rail bridges in NSW. At Nimmitabel the railway station group is listed.

Although not heritage listed there are many other pieces of infrastructure that form part of the landscape for local communities. Substantial rail bridges at Michelago, Colinton, Cooma township, Old Bombala Road and the MacLaughlin River are all landscape features that local communities enjoy. Also there are wayside station buildings and sidings e.g. Chakola and Bukalong that are not heritage listed but yet are important historical landmarks to local communities.

Development of the MRT proposal will mean that there will be a new group of users needing properly maintained infrastructure such as bridges. As well there will be many cycle tourists observing and enjoying the rail history showcased in the rail stations and freight yards.

This new tourist activity can be leveraged to support preservation of the rail history of the Monaro. Management of the recreational trail will ensure the heritage items are not overlooked and left to deteriorate. Infrastructure such as bridges will be an integral and essential part of the trail and as such must be maintained. Rail history groups will be supported by trail management to continue their work of showcasing Monaro rail history.



Goal 3. Strengthen the economic opportunities of the region.

MRT Inc supports Goal 3, particularly Direction 3.1 Support and promote the growth of the tourism industry which notes:

A strong and vibrant year-round visitor economy is necessary to support and sustain a growing and strong regional economy...

Tourism organisations in the region have developed destination management plans that aim to capitalise on:

- trails and experiences...

There should be an action for the NSW Government to facilitate and support the development of 'trails and experiences'.

The NSW Government has identified five goals for regional economic development, two of which are relevant to our commentary. Firstly, drive regional employment and regional business growth and secondly, invest in economic infrastructure and connectivity. The NSW Government has also focused on tourism as a growth sector and the Regional Plan in turn aims to support and promote the growth of the tourism industry.

The Monaro Rail Trail has a very clear and compelling case demonstrating that it will expand tourism and hence regional employment and business growth.

The recently released *Kosciuszko National Park Cycling Strategy: Consultation draft* highlights the global increase in cycle tourism with cycle tour companies seeing a 59% increase in profits over 2013, and quotes Tourism Research Australia 2014 reports:

Just over 1 million domestic day-trippers went cycling in Australia in 2013, representing growth of 15% from the previous year and an annual average growth rate of 15% from 2006. This growth rate is much greater than that of day trips across Australia over the same period (5%). For domestic overnight visitors, approximately 1.5 million cycled while on holiday in Australia in 2013. This rate has remained stable since 2011, but grew steadily from 2006 when close to 900,000 domestic overnight visitors participated in cycling while on holiday. Victoria and New South Wales generate the lion's share of cycle tourism activity followed by Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia.

...

In 2013, it was estimated that 314,120 international visitors went cycling while in Australia, representing growth of 6.5% on the previous year and an average annual growth of 11% from 2006. The percentage of international visitors who go cycling in Australia has increased at a much greater rate than the growth rate in international visitors over the same period (2%).

It also notes that general visitation to the Snowy Mountains has been static or declining over the last five years, with 2.2 million domestic overnight visitors for the year ending December 2014, down by 12.4% on the year before.

- see <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/parks/kosciuszko-cycling.htm>

A very strong argument for the 164 km long Monaro Rail Trail is that it is of sufficient length to attract cycling tourists from Australia and overseas for a multiday trip. People can build a holiday around the Monaro RT for a weekend or for up to five days. People from outside the region could travel to Cooma, Canberra or Bombala to ride their choice of sections of the rail trail. For a longer ride they can arrive on the weekend to start the ride on Monday and finish on Thursday or Friday and then return home the next weekend. This is a very appealing pattern for modern society where holidays are tending to be of a shorter duration. For a weekend break the Cooma to Michelago section would be very appealing.

This pattern of cycle tourism will bring economic benefits to the Monaro region by boosting visitor numbers. As indicated earlier New Zealand's Otago Central Rail Trail with its similar length and geography shows the economic potential of the Monaro Rail Trail. Based on data from the Otago Rail Trail, 15,000 to 25,000 people per year can be expected.

-see Otago Central Rail Trail Plan for the Future 2012-2022 (ref 4).

Importantly, all the villages and towns along the rail corridor route will almost equally share in servicing the needs of these riders. By chance the distance between adjacent villages is sufficient for one day of riding so each village will be accommodating the riders as they move along the bike trail.

About 50 riders would need accommodation per night in peak seasons of autumn and spring and riders will have four to five nights on the route. Some riders may decide to have two nights in Cooma and extra trails around the town could be built to encourage this stayover. Bombala could do the same.

Small business will be the beneficiary of this extra tourism and this is important as in Australia this business sector is considered to be the major employer. Business groups to directly benefit will be meal and accommodation providers, bike hire and service, shuttle bus operators and travel operators providing package tours for the trail. The existing accommodation and meals outlets in villages might be sufficient to handle initial tourist numbers but very quickly opportunities will be there for new niche outlets such as on farm B & B's and other higher quality accommodation. For the longer distance sections such as Cooma to Nimmitabel and Nimmitabel to Bombala there will also be opportunity for new on farm cafes between the villages as occurs on the Otago Central Rail Trail.

Opportunity also exists at villages such as Nimmitabel for enterprising locals to run micro tours to local features e.g. the wind farm. There are opportunities for operators in Cooma and Bombala to provide longer tours to the Snowy Mountains and to the Far South Coast. This would provide new visitors for the already existing tourist destinations in these areas.

An indication of the potential of the Monaro RT to bring visitors to the region and have them stay in the region is shown in the table below.

Area or region	Feature	Economic benefit per year
Victoria state total	Cycle associated tourism	\$362 million 2010 ref 1
Bright to Wangaratta Vic. Surveyed 55,000 users per year	A 2-day ride on 75 km sealed surface rail trail	\$26.3 million 2010 ref 2
Otago Trail New Zealand Surveyed 12,000 users per year. 15% overseas visitors	A 3 or 4 day ride on 155 km of gravel surface rail trail	\$10 million NZ 2015 ref 3
Proposed Launceston Tasmania, estimated 22,000 users per year	A 2 or 3-day ride on 90 km of gravel surface rail trail	\$3.5 million growing to \$11.2 million over 15 years ref 5
Proposed Monaro Rail Trail, Estimated 15,000 to 25,000 users per year	A 4 to 5-day ride on 164 km of gravel surface rail trail	Perhaps \$15 million to \$25 million

Table 1: Examples of measured tourism spend in different areas and the possible spend for the Monaro Rail Trail.

The numbers shown in the table for the Otago RT are for riders who do the complete trip on the one occasion. There will be many more users who do single day outings. The same will apply to the Monaro RT

The demographics of people who use rail trails suggest they are a very worthwhile group of tourists to attract. They will include single riders, families, retired couples and school groups at primary and secondary level. Single riders will move faster and do the trip in three or four days whereas the majority of riders, families and couples, are slower and will do the trip in four to five days or may decide to break the trip into several stages over a number of visits.

Surveys of users of the Otago Rail Trail reveal that the average age of users is 45 and that there are almost equal numbers of male and female riders. There are several consequences of this. One is

that the older riders tend to be slower moving and therefore spend more time in the region and after the ride they are likely to stay for several more days and perhaps go to the coast or the mountains. Older riders are also often associated with a greater spending propensity and are considered to spend more per day than other categories of tourists. These riders will be seeking a higher quality of accommodation than currently exists in the villages and this will create opportunities to build new boutique B& B's in the village and on farms.

Job creation has been a feature of the positive outcomes on the NZ Otago Trail. Surveys have shown that 102 full time equivalent jobs have been created since the trail opened in 2000. On the Monaro with an anticipated much larger number of users the demand for tourist services will be greater and job creation would most likely exceed that shown for NZ.

Goal 4. Build communities that are strong, healthy and well connected.

MRT Inc supports Goal 4, particularly Direction 4.4 Build socially inclusive, safe and healthy communities and the observations:

Opportunities for people to be physically active where they work and in their neighbourhoods will be delivered through the design and location of recreation facilities, sporting infrastructure, parks and public buildings.

Opportunities will be taken, wherever possible, to reconnect neighbourhood communities with the surrounding landscape.

Walkways, cycleways and public transport will be provided to make access to these places easier.

Recreation and cultural activities are important ingredients in building healthy communities. There should be an action for the NSW Government to facilitate, fund and support these opportunities and facilities quoted above.

The South East and Tablelands regional plan identifies several principles that will contribute to achievement of this goal. These include availability of local jobs, access to local natural landscapes and access to sporting and leisure facilities. The proposed Monaro RT supports these principles.

Although all the communities along the rail corridor are also connected by a highway they are not necessarily connected as communities. The Monaro RT could change that by making them an integral part of a new and exciting tourist activity that will rejuvenate and or boost turnover economic activity. Over time small businesses in the communities will be united and in turn the communities along the trail will be united to make the MRT a success in which they will have a share. A regional pride for the Monaro will emerge in the same way the Otago rail trail has developed an international and local NZ recognition for the Otago region.

Monaro residents recognize they are part of region with a landscape and climate quite different to that in most of Australia. The Monaro RT as a cycle or walking path will give residents and tourists access to that landscape and in a very sustainable way as its development and continuation will have little or no impact on the physical landscape.

Healthy communities emerge where there is opportunity for active leisure pursuits. A walkway and cycle path such as the Monaro RT will give residents in each town and village that opportunity. This will benefit not only the younger members of the community but also the increasing numbers of seniors who will be seeking more leisure opportunities than deemed necessary in the past.



References.

Ref 1: Victorian cycle tourism plan 2011-2015 page 3

Ref 2: North East Victoria Tourism Gap analysis page 32

Ref 3: Otago Central Rail Trail Plan for the Future 2014-2015

Ref 4: Otago Central Rail Trail Plan for the Future 2012-2022

Ref 5: North East Rail Trail Preliminary Demand and Economics Benefit Assessment for North Tasmania Development by TRC Tourism Pty Ltd Feb 2014

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/parks/kosciuszko-cycling.htm>