

Walking Free and Unimpeded?

Good afternoon,

My comments this afternoon have a very strong Western Australian bias. I know that in WA they will be of interest to more people than bushwalkers, and I know from talking to others here that there are similar things happening in other States.

I represent the Federation of Western Australian Bushwalkers Inc. We have a total of about 900 members in nine different clubs. That is a relatively small proportion of 63,500 people in WA who go bushwalking, and an even smaller part of the 617,000 people who go walking. I quote both of these numbers because there is a considerable overlap, with some walkers who walk on trails in the bush, and some bush walkers who walk on trails in the town.

As walkers though, we are the serious ones. We are organised into Clubs, with management committees; we have policies and procedures and constitutions and by-laws; and of course we have walk leaders. We have insurance policies, and risk management policies, and we operate to very stringent peer enforced minimum impact bushwalking practices. We are the ones who cause land management authorities the least amount of concern.

If our members ever go on a commercial walk, as they often do, they are part of the resource that the leader has access to when things happen that shouldn't happen.

Our members are passionate and very thankful users of the formal tracks and trails. We are very proud of Western Australia's icon long distance trails the Bibbulmun Track, and the Cape to Cape Track. Many of us contributed time and energy into construction and alignment of the Bibbulmun Track. Our members are involved in track maintenance. One of our member clubs built the Eagle View Track, in the John Forrest National Park, on the eastern edge of the Perth metropolitan area.

Despite this support for formal trails, many of our members find that their best walking experience is on informal routes. These routes usually lead to features that are worth visiting in their own right, or are simple explorations to pick up the lay of the land, often to pick up detail that is missing from maps. These informal routes might follow animal tracks, or ridgelines, or rock outcrops, that take a convenient line through the bush. The route may include long disused railway formations or disused forestry tracks – some of them so disused that they are barely recognisable. These are part of our heritage from the days when the forest sustained a major timber harvesting industry.

If the route gets a lot of use, it may develop into a beaten track, and with even more wear it may possibly require some engineering to. Sometimes these routes become incorporated into major new trails, as happened when bushwalkers donated their routes over the little mountains south east of Perth to make up some of the best sections of the Bibbulmun Track. This wearing process can take a very long time – or it may never happen. There are areas in the bush behind Perth where bushwalking has been carried out for many years, where track routes and notes were published more than 20 years ago, and one needs extremely sharp eyes to detect any evidence of

human foot traffic. Evidence though of the earlier work of timber getters is still plain to see.

These informal routes are described in Australian Standard, AS 2156.1 as Class 5 and Class 6 Routes. Very briefly, for those unfamiliar with this standard, a Class 1 track is engineered for large numbers of people and can be expected to have many facilities and much signage. It can accept wheelchairs. Class 2 tracks are a little more rugged, for a smaller number of people and with a lesser number of facilities, and so on. Class 6 routes have no engineering at all, have no facilities, and no marking, and follow substantially unmodified terrain.

The people who use Class 5 and Class 6 tracks are much much small in number. They have navigation and map reading skills, and superior bushcraft skills. They are substantially independent of outside assistance. They are not necessarily super fit, although some of our members are remarkable so. They are not necessarily super strong, and although some are Amazons, many are quite petite. They are comfortable in the bush without a lot of gear. They are extremely conscious of the environmental impact of all that they do in the bush. A large number of them have first aid skills. They have a very realistic knowledge of their own capabilities and limitations, and it is most unusual for them to expose themselves to situations that are beyond those capabilities.

Bushwalkers with these skills ought to be able to go very nearly anywhere they want to.

However they do face a few impediments! And why should they. Walking is good for you, bushwalking is good for the soul. The best return on any dollar spent on health would be spent on getting people to walk more. Recent headlines in the press, “Obesity kills more people than terrorism”.

Despite the skill of our walkers, we still need leaders to organise the when and where and who, the transport, the water supply, the access permits, etc, etc. Our clubs never have enough leaders.

There have been several incidents in the recent past in Western Australia where there have been injuries and deaths incurred in commercial bushwalking activities. These have reinforced, in the mind of land managers, the need for regulation. Despite the excellent safety record of the bushwalking clubs there is the perception among many of our leaders, who are all volunteers, that they will be caught up in this ‘industry’ wide push for certification. Certification under existing regulation is expensive and time consuming, and many of our leaders declare that if the concept is pursued in its current form they will decline to lead. This will lead to a greater number of less qualified and unregulated groups walking in the bush, with an increase in the number of incidents requiring outside assistance, more injury and more danger. Too much regulation could have the exact opposite effect to that which is intended.

Australia’s first colonists arrived some 40,000 years, some say perhaps 60,000 years ago. They managed their bush with fire. They had many factors to consider, but I am sure there were two most paramount messages. If they didn’t regularly burn their bush: it would get too thick for them and they quarry to move through and they would

starve; and the debris would build up on the forest floor and they would perish in next wildfire. Both these facts are still true, and they both still limit bushwalkers.

In Western Australia there are, I think, several groups of people who are charged with conducting maintenance burns. We give our thanks and appreciation to these hard working men and women, and wish that they could be given enough resources to get all the burns done that they know should be done.

There is a limitation imposed by the aridity (and salinity) of the Western Australian countryside. Most natural surface water is ephemeral and unreliable. Bushwalkers are limited, by their physical strength to carry the weight of the required water, to a maximum of about 36 hours between water sources. The prudent bushwalker planning a multi day walk would want to guarantee the presence of potable water before starting the walk – usually by using a motor vehicle. Also some trails don't get enough foot traffic to keep them passable. And motor vehicle activity helps to keep the track viable

Locking motor vehicles out of the bush is likely to lead to less bushwalking rather than more.

We have another impediment, and it is causing us some pain. Perth is perched on the coast, between the Darling Scarp and the sea. Further east, beyond the Darling Scarp and its bush, there is cleared and mostly privately owned farming land. This bush is substantially the only area within cooee (to use an exact bushwalking expression) of Perth that offers good opportunities for bushwalking. It is also the only area where the creeks and rivers are substantial and run fresh; and it is very important for water supply. The fresh water rivers in this bush have been dammed progressively for water supply, and fallen under the influence of water supply authorities. These authorities are rightly very concerned about the potential for this water to be contaminated, especially by pathogens, and for these pathogens to find their way into the human population, with disastrous results. They are very zealous in their efforts.

When drawing attention to the risk of pathogens in drinking water the WA authorities commonly quote the case of Walkerton in Canada. What happened at Walkerton, a town of 4800 people in western Ontario was indeed a disaster. In spring 2000, a farmer spread cattle manure on the ground above a well-head which was being used to draw drinking water for supply to the town. Un-seasonal rain washed the manure into the water supply. The well was badly situated, in geological strata susceptible to surface contamination. The filtration and chlorination system was not operating properly. The routine water-sampling programme was not being done properly – in fact much of the test data was falsified. By the time contamination of the water supply was identified, and a 'boil water' edict issued, some 2400 people had become ill, some very seriously, and seven people had died. Most of those who died were children.

The water supply authorities in Western Australia quote the Walkerton incident as justification for a policy banning all traditional bushwalking activity in drinking water catchments except on designated tracks and designated campsites. This is despite traditional bushwalking being accepted in drinking water catchments from the beginning of organised bushwalking in Western Australia until the turn of this

century, despite the fact that there has never been an incident where bushwalkers have caused public drinking water pollution anywhere in the reported literature for the whole world, and despite the fact that the problem at Walkerton was first and foremost an engineering and management failure. We bushwalkers couldn't imaginably be dangerous as that farmer spreading cow manure. And if there was a dangerous activity taking place we may even note it long before anyone else does.

All Perth's drinking water is at least filtered before consumption. Apparently turbidity in water can adversely affect filtration performance, and allow pathogens to pass. (At this point I should mention that pathogens are common in catchments; carried by native animals such as kangaroos and emus, and feral animals such as pigs, dogs and cattle. There are major highways passing through the catchments. There are mines and forestry operation in catchments. There are towns in the catchments.) We are assured that bushwalkers can cause turbidity by trampling vegetation. Whatever trampling our members might do pales into insignificance when compared to the impact of bulldozers used on occasions by the same authorities to thin vegetation to increase run-off into the reservoirs, or what tree felling machinery and trucks engaged in forestry operations might do.

We have debated with the Water Supply authorities and agreed on the risk that we pose, and the risks posed by other activities. Because we have been told that their inspectors are few in number, and never get out of their trucks and never leave made roads, we offered to be eyes and ears in the catchments.

The response was something along the lines: "We recognise that what you propose represents a negligible risk, but it is an extra risk, and we cannot agree to any extra risk", and "We acknowledge that there are much greater risks than you, but we cannot control these risks, and we can control you".

So the net result of a policy aimed at securing Perth's water supply is likely to have the exact opposite effect. The good guys (that's us) are excluded, and our intelligence is lost! Any bad guys in the catchments, who rely on secrecy and the absence of other eyes, have enhanced opportunities to do whatever they wish.

We will win this issue of water catchment access for traditional bushwalking activities. We continue to negotiate with the appropriate authorities. We have great support from the Department of Conservation and Land Management, the Department of Sport and Recreation, and from Outdoors WA. We are a patient and persistent and thorough lot, and find ourselves on the same side of the conference table with trail bike riders, four wheel drivers, equestrians and mountain bike riders.....

Let me say in conclusion, that although competent skilled and fit bushwalkers appear to be able to walk anywhere, anytime this is practically not the case. Unless the bush is properly managed it can be too thick to walk through, the risk of wildfire can make it dangerous, the inability to prove water sources can be problematic, and an inappropriate regulatory regime can make leaders unwilling to lead. Inappropriate and unfair access rules can certainly inhibit our activities, and in doing so make WA's water supply less secure rather than more.

Thankyou very much for listening.