

I am strongly against the Wombat State Forest (Wombat Forest) becoming Wombat Lerderderg National Park (National Park). As one of a number of local horse riders who enjoy regularly riding around the local Wombat Forest, my current ability to ride freely around this forest will be severely inhibited if it becomes National Park. Losing the ability to ride freely, or to be severely restricted in riding around the Wombat Forest, would be devastating to me and, I believe, to every one of the local horse riders as well. This is my main reason for putting forward my submission today against the Wombat Forest becoming National Park, as will be discussed further below.

There are currently approximately 40-50 local private horse riders including myself, many of whom own a number of horses, using the local area Wombat Forest including the following areas: Daylesford, Hepburn, Newlyn, Newlyn North, Langdons Hill, Eganstown, Sailors Falls, Blampied, Korweinguboorra, Spargo Creek, Barkstead and Rocklyn.

The local trail riding school at Newlyn North, also conducts trail rides on most days, covering several of these locations in the Wombat Forest. This business has been operating for over ten years and relies upon being able to take tourists and other individuals on rides through the Wombat Forest. These visitors generate highly valued business to the local area including accommodation, meals, tourist activities and expenditure in the local towns.

Currently, myself and other local horse riders enjoy the freedom of riding unrestricted around the Wombat Forest. Speaking on behalf of my fellow horse riders, we all love riding around this natural habitat and taking in the serenity and beautiful ambience of the forest throughout the changing seasons of the year. We love watching the birds, koalas, kangaroos, wallbys and other wildlife, as well as admiring the stunning scenery including the beautiful trees, plants and flowers. I believe we as local horse riders all feel that riding a horse through the Wombat Forest is a wonderfully unique experience and that this is part of the reason that each one of us chooses to reside in the area.

Riding in the Wombat Forest is a right that horse riders have enjoyed for hundreds of years and this right should remain for many hundreds of years in future, for our future generations to enjoy in the same that we do. The urbanisation of towns, including faster roads and increased traffic, makes riding horses on main roads and in urban areas an ever increasing hazard. Myself and other local horse riders rely on having the Wombat Forest to ride in as a safe, quiet, relaxing and enjoyable experience for both horse and rider.

There is no valid argument that either horses themselves or horse tracks/paths in the Wombat Forest should be reduced or eliminated. *The Central West Investigation – Draft Proposals Paper* (Draft Proposals) confirms on page 134 that the Wombat Forest is in good order, and has one of the most intact landscapes around:

*The Wombat-Macedon block general scores highly for landscape content. As in the site condition modelling, the Wombat State Forest... have a high landscape context score and are identified as a largely-intact landscape – the only such landscape between the Grampians and the eastern highlands.*

If the Wombat Forest was to become a National Park, then Parks Victoria would have the power to determine where horse riders could go, and if certain tracks/paths did not comply with its requirements, horse riders would lose that right of use, even if it was a vitally important track/path for a horse rider.

If the Wombat State Forest became National Park and the “Draft Recommendation for National Parks” at page 104 of the Draft Proposals was implemented, then in accordance with clause A(b)(vi) the Wombat Forest would be restricted for use for “*horse riding on roads and tracks specified by the land manager*” (ie Parks Victoria). This would give Parks Victoria the power to dictate where in the Wombat Forest horses would be permitted. Such roads/tracks could be minimal in number and may even be non-existent in certain areas that horse riders currently enjoy.

This would mean that local horse riders including myself would lose the right to ride freely around the Wombat Forest; a right that horse riders have enjoyed for hundreds of years, as part of our heritage, and myself and the other local horse riders are strongly against having such rights taken away. Further, even once Parks Victoria approved specific paths for horse riders in the Wombat Forest, these rights would also be at risk of being changed or reduced at any time, at Parks Victoria’s discretion.

There is also ambiguity surrounding the type of tracks and roads that horses would be permitted to use if the Wombat Forest became National Park. Page 104 of the “Central West Investigation Draft Proposal Paper” states that horse riding in National Parks is restricted to “formed roads and tracks”. There is no mention as to whether a “formed road” needs to be a certain width, or be machine-made. If there is a requirement of being machine-made or a certain width, this would mean deem many current riding tracks to be uncompliant and thus no longer usable. This would include many smaller tracks needed to ride safely in order to avoid main roads, which can be dangerous for horses, including those to join up other horse riders from nearby properties.

Keeping small tracks and pathways open does not adversely affect the environment. These tracks are already in existence and erosion to the ground from horses is almost non-existent, both in smaller and wider paths. I believe that riding in the Wombat Forest benefits the environment, since horse riders help to keep pathways open and clear, and also keep a lookout for anything adversely affecting the area eg picking up litter or stray wire; releasing a wallaby or sheep caught in fencing; or reporting a damaged fence or sick animal to a farmer.

Another restriction on horses if the Wombat Forest becoming a National Park is that, in accordance with Note 1 of clause A(b)(vi) “*Camping with horses, and grazing and feeding of horses is not permitted*”. Therefore, horse riders will no longer have the freedom to camp with their horses, or even graze them, in the Wombat Forest. These once more are basic rights which have been enjoyed by horse riders in the Wombat Forest for hundreds of years and I am strongly against these rights being taken away.

There are many other groups of people who would be adversely affected should the Wombat Forest become a National Park. Whilst this submission focuses on horse riding, there are many other important activities that I believe are equally as important and which should be preserved in the Wombat Forest including: dog walking, dog sledging, hobby gold prospecting, camping, picnicking, bird watching, bee keeping, trail bike riding, fishing and walking.

To conclude, I believe the Wombat Forest should remain a State Forest, so that it can continue to be used and enjoyed by horses and riders, as well as the many other groups, so that everyone can enjoy their various pursuits, with the same rights as they have always had, for many years to come and for future generations.