

**Submission to Brisbane City Council on the Mt. Coot-tha Forest Draft Management
Plan**

Submitted by Mountain Bike Australia

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Specific Comments on the Draft Management Plan

MTBA welcomes the proactive stance being taken by the Brisbane City Council in addressing the often, conflicting issues involved in balancing recreational and conservation needs in the Mt Coot-tha Forest. We applaud the goals of securing these areas for conservation purposes for generations to come.

As stated in the draft mountain biking clearly falls under the general term 'appropriate self-reliant recreation' and there is a wealth of information to support the notion that off road cycling can have as little impact as more traditional user groups given suitable trail alignment, user education and appropriate management decisions.

We therefore have concerns, and make comment to, the intent and direction of some aspects for cycling access in the Mt. Coot-tha Forest as stated in the draft in the following areas.

Visitor Experiences (page 28):

It is pleasing to note that the draft recognizes that mountain biking is a legitimate activity within the Mt. Coot-tha forest. There are however several points made that need some clarification.

As a rule cyclists do not create new track systems. Cyclists largely ride on tracks that have already been established by either other user groups or by animals. Track creation is a substantial exercise and cannot be done easily. Damage to the existing track network can be minimized by taking appropriate action to realign the track to ensure its sustainability or to modify the track construction to ensure that fragile sections are suitable hardened. Conflicts over track use usually arise from a perception of sole ownership or from speed differentials. The former needs to be addressed in a consultative manner between all the user groups and the later can be again addressed by subtle changes in the track design. Exclusion of cyclists from core habitat regions can be successfully done if cyclists (and other user groups) are given the information about the key timelines that are special to the local fauna. It is important to recognize that while cyclists are more or less confined to a narrow corridor (the track) other user groups have essentially free access to all areas

within the forest. The potential impact on flora and fauna is thus much greater in those cases than in the case of cyclists.

Management Solutions, Mountain Biking (page 32):

We support the exclusion of cyclists from highly eroded areas and we would expect that such exclusion would be equally applied to all user groups in the rehabilitation efforts.

We have a similar view on wet areas.

We support the initiative to engage the cycling groups in a consultative process, but in our experience this will only give lasting results if the end result is seen as equitable. It should be pointed out that off road cycling in urban park systems is an issue with land managers worldwide. In those areas where the MTB groups have had a large input into the decision-making process the access has been found to be long lasting and beneficial to both the cyclists and land managers.

We would suggest that there are any number of suitable 'codes of conduct' available to draw on. The code from MTBA is based on that from the International Mountain Bike Association (IMBA), with whom we are affiliated.

We also agree that if off road cycling experiences are taken away from Mt. Coot-tha then there is an implicit need to provide for that experience elsewhere in a close proximity to the Brisbane CBD.

Management Solutions, Access (page 34):

We agree with a track rationalization. Land managers have typically more track and trail than they can manage. However the MTB user groups must be involved in this process. Many of the tracks and trails in Mt. Coot-tha are very suitable for off road cycling and are very sustainable, either in an as-is basis or with some additional effort. Given that land managers are stretched with their resources it would make good sense to actively involve the very user groups who have the greatest amount to gain by retaining tracks – the MTB user groups. We support the notion of trail signage and would suggest that it as minimal as possible within the forest itself but that comprehensive information be given to users at the trailheads. We would also suggest that a specific track be designated for interpretative purposes that introduce the users to the flora and fauna they may encounter further inside the forest.

Issue Papers, Mountain Bike riding (page 82):

It is very important to try and divorce the two issues of recreation and sporting (racing) when addressing off road cycling facilities in Mt. Coot-tha Forest. It is totally inappropriate for un-sanctioned racing events to occur in a recreational park setting – the impacts are significantly higher than those found in recreational off road cycling. This notwithstanding, the percentage of off road cyclists wishing to undertake a downhill riding experience is now probably greater than your 1997 survey found. This means that the Mt. Coot-tha land managers have a greater imperative to be pro-active in ensuring that a suitable location for this activity can be found within the forest or find a suitable location close to the Brisbane CBD.

The conflicts mentioned revolve around speed differential on narrow or even management tracks. The overseas experience is that constraining cycling to management tracks to minimize conflicts does not achieve this aim. Speeds are higher and the potential for more serious accidents are greater. Speed differential is best managed on the narrow track system with subtle changes to the track alignment and sight lines. The perception of conflict is best dealt with by ensuring that all user groups have a sense of sharing and expectation.

The issue of soil types and the environmental sustainability of the tracks placed upon them is absolutely linked to slope and the exact alignment of the track within that slope. Overseas experience has found that tracks with a sustained slope of more than 10% or a track with more than 50% of the fall line slope will be unsustainable regardless of the usage patterns, ie regardless of use by walkers, cyclists or equestrians. We note that a significant area of the forest has a slope greater than 15%. This, in itself, does not preclude sustainable cycling (and other) activities within the forest but it does point to the fact that tracks need to be very carefully located and aligned to be ultimately sustainable. This will require a complete audit of the existing track network and tables drawn up that identify the overall and peak slopes along their length.

All user groups should be excluded from erosion gullies and other environmentally degraded areas.

The track system ultimately designated within Mt. Coot-tha should be as extensive as possible. In short, unless a track has a special usage pattern it is best to simply make all tracks available to off road cycling. In the long term users will tend to gravitate to those tracks that provide them with the experience they need or want. By carefully modifying the existing track network land managers are able to influence which user group uses which

track without the need for much land manager intervention or punitive actions. Taking this approach engenders a spirit of community, of sharing and ultimately will enable land managers to apply their scarce resources to specific areas on a needs basis.

Issue Papers, Forest Access, Tracks and Trails (page 88):

It is very important for the Mt. Coot-tha land managers to adopt a track rationalization audit. However, before the removal and rehabilitation of informal tracks is undertaken extensive consultation with the MTB user group should occur, since some of those informal tracks may be providing the experience that is lacking elsewhere in the forest on the established track network. If such tracks are identified and they meet the sustainability requirements now or, with modification, in the near future then it is our recommendation that the MTB users be given the opportunity to develop those tracks to a suitable specification. MTB users are a young, fit and very willing group of volunteers that will serve to supplement the land managers in a very effective fashion.

Conflict minimization is not just about a 'yield to' strategy, although it will certainly provide the framework of understanding. What is required is a concept of sharing and expectation – that by sharing a track one can expect to meet other user groups. It is entirely appropriate for some small sections of the forest to be designated for use by a particular user group to the exclusion of others, but as mentioned before this is best enacted by track or experience design rather than by mandating user group exclusions.

Issue Papers, Forest Entrances and Signage (page 89):

Main trailheads should be established at all the parking areas and forest entrance points. In recognition of the ability for cyclists to access the forest along the entire forest perimeter, trailheads should also be established at major entrance points along the forest perimeter. The trailheads should be posted with a map of the track system, special points to note in the forest and special notices such as particular track closures due to work, fauna key times or wet conditions. Minimal track direction signage should be placed within the forest itself so as to ensure riders have the isolation experience as much as possible.

Grading tracks is a good idea, but in general the tracks should be placed in a 'stacked loop' arrangement where the tracks closest to the trailhead are wider and less technical and the tracks further out in the forest become a destination frequented by the more experienced riders. Nevertheless it is imperative to introduce riders to a taste of the technicality of the track they are about to ride very early into their ride. Riders are notoriously bad at estimating their skill

level and any grading system is by definition subjective. Introducing riders to the type of ride they are about to embark on near the start of the track in question will serve to minimize the liability exposure to Council by not enticing unskilled riders onto a trail that is above their ability.

Research (page 90)

We would be very interested in knowing about any research undertaken in Mt. Coot-tha as it pertains to off road cycling and its impact on the track system.