

SCA – The Anti-MTB Authority



Mountain bikers in and around the Sydney area need to get familiar with the Sydney Catchment Authority. Why? Well being ignorant of their access restrictions could cost you dearly. And while areas in and around Sydney are the focus now, it won't be too long before other catchment areas and public lands suffer the same fate. The Sydney Catchment Authority (SCA) manages the water supply catchments for metropolitan Sydney and the Illawarra (jointly with the Department of Environment and Climate Change). Where a catchment area is a source of drinking water for a population, water managers such as the SCA have a duty to guarantee water quality to their customers. Part of their doctrine to maintain water quality involves restrictions on access to water catchment areas.

According to the SCA, "Public access and human activity in the catchment causes a decline in water quality through erosion and sedimentation of streams and storages, and by pollution of waterways. It can also harm ecological integrity and damage plant and animal communities."

The SCA controls access to catchment through use of 'special areas' and it is a

serious criminal offence to be caught entering or doing certain activities within these areas. The seriousness of these offences is reflected in the \$11,000 maximum penalty.

This may seem perfectly justified in the name of clean drinking water, but there are serious inequities relating to mountain bike access within SCA controlled land.

Nonsensical Laws

SCA special areas cover 370,000 hectares within the Blue Mountains, Southern Highlands and the Illawarra Escarpment. There are two categories of special area: 'schedule one' areas close to water storages and 'schedule two' areas which act as buffers to schedule one lands. No access is allowed to schedule one land—this includes walking, mountain biking or any other activity. However, walkers (and not mountain bikes) have some exemptions to this absolute exclusion rule. They are allowed to access narrow corridors that follow a few popular tracks.

The SCA says, "Walking is permitted subject to a number of conditions... because the risk to water quality and ecological integrity is not as great [and because it] maintains links along historically significant tracks like the Katoomba to Mittagong walking track." The SCA can also issue permits to enter special areas, but does so rarely and usually only for research groups.

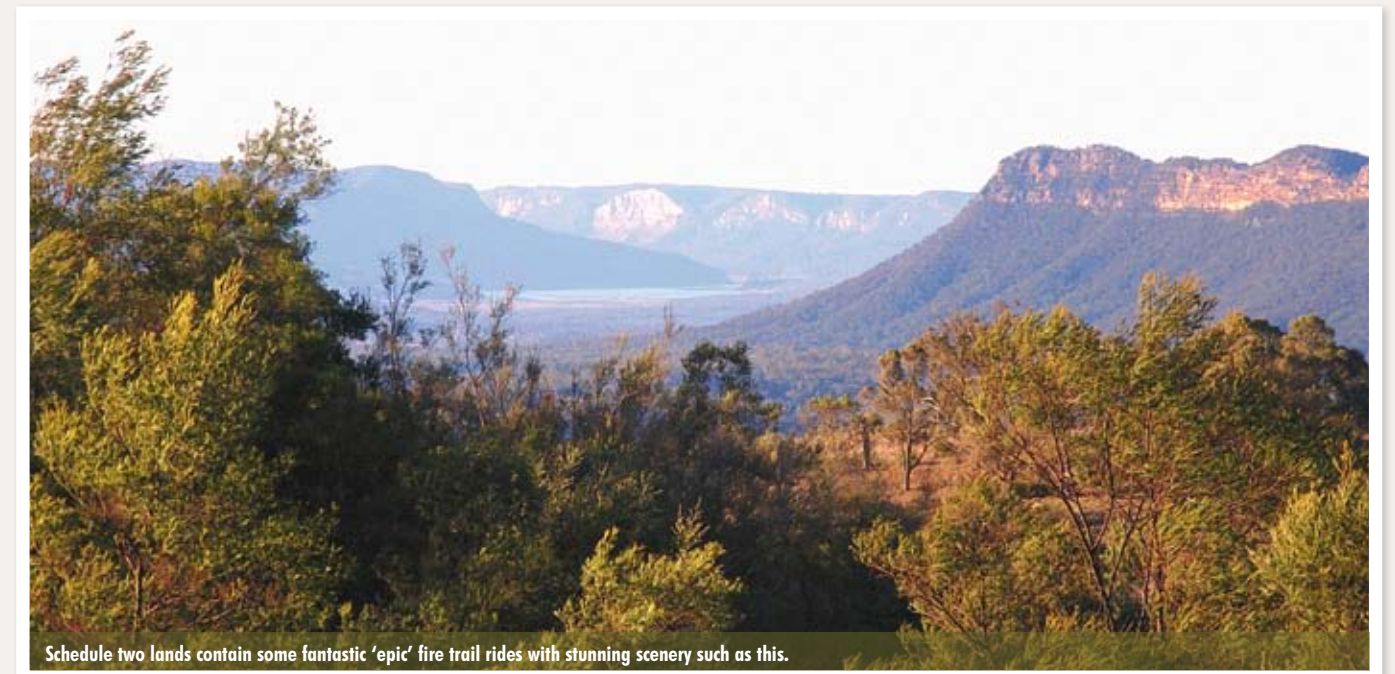
However, these corridors through schedule one land are not exactly 'fragile walking tracks' where erosion issues may hold some genuine concern. The vast majority of the Katoomba to Mittagong route consists of wide hard-packed fire trails that see regular use from Catchment Authority 4WDs and trucks—Scott's Main Range and Sheepwalk Drive for example. The sections that are genuine walking tracks are so steep and unrideable that even Hans Rey would struggle (the infamous Mt Cookem and Beloon Pass). These are clearly walking only, even for the most skilled rider. As a result, your environmental impact on these more rugged portions would be no greater than that of a walker.

"At the same time you are deemed a criminal if you ride on a 4WD track that may be high up on a ridge in 'schedule two' lands. How can that possibly have more impact than swimming in the bloody water??!"

When you factor in that the Katoomba to Mittagong trip is a 120 km plus epic that would see fewer than 50 riders per year, you really have to question the logic behind SCA's decision to lock mountain bikers out due to some perceived threat to water quality. In reality a bike rider would cause less impact than a walker on this trip. Why? Well it may be a solid six day walk but it only takes one to three days by bike—that's a lot less camping and far less impact on the catchment. Get with the program and wake up to yourselves SCA!

Some schedule one lands are farcical in their own right. There are small islands of land between the F6 freeway and the old Princes Highway south of Helensburgh that are schedule one total exclusion areas. The Illawarra Escarpment also has islands of schedule one land. Cars, buses, even chemical and sewerage trucks can drive on the roads either side of these 'islands' but riding your bike there is a serious crime.

Other issues relate to trails fringing on protected land that are deemed no-go areas—the Watershed Trail from McMahon's Lookout Road (Wentworth Falls) is one such example. This trail should be legal as it follows the boundary of the restricted land—just keep to the non-catchment side of the trail! However, SCA has seen fit to expand their exclusion zone a



Schedule two lands contain some fantastic 'epic' fire trail rides with stunning scenery such as this.

few extra metres to keep us out.

If that is not ridiculous enough, the rules relating to the schedule two 'buffer zone' are even worse. In schedule two land you can walk, camp and even fish. But wait, there's more... it is actually legal to kayak and swim in a watercourse within the schedule two zone. At the same time you are deemed a criminal if you ride on a 4WD track that may be high up on a ridge in schedule two lands. How can that possibly have more impact than swimming in the bloody water??!!

MTB Terrorists?

SCA has always had these restrictions in place but they have really begun to enforce them of late. The power-trip has been spurred on by the proposed terrorist threat, the drought as well as blue-green algae and cryptosporidium outbreaks. All of these factors have amplified the media focus on the SCA and they want to be seen as the revered guardians of our water supplies—it is after all an important resource.

Even so, why pick on a relatively innocuous user group such as mountain bikers? Blind Freddy can see that we have more in common with bushwalkers and kayakers than motorised users like 4WDs and dirt-bikers. The legal side of the argument is simple. We are classed as a vehicle in the eyes of the law and that is how SCA sees it. When the obvious differences are brought to their attention, SCA cites a 2006 Cooperative Research Centre for Water Quality and Treatment report. SCA says the report concluded that mountain biking in catchments contributed to, "Soil

erosion, gullyng of tracks, ground compaction, clearing of vegetation, increased runoff, turbidity and saltation, dust, increased fire risk and weed infestation." That's the end of the argument as far as they are concerned.

The reality of the situation is that it is just easier for SCA to say 'no' to mountain bike access. While the catchment areas are huge and impossible to patrol properly, riders do get busted. Total exclusion means there are no grey areas and they can just fine you on sight or at least threaten to do so. In 2006, SCA issued 60 fines of \$330 for breaching the catchment access rules, of which about 20% were mountain bike riders. I personally know of at least three riders who have been caught out.

By giving mountain bikers the same treatment as walkers, the Authority could easily, painlessly and safely, allow mountain bikes to use the trails they have been riding for many years before their recent 'crackdown'. Despite all of the arguments for MTB access, SCA don't want to change. As far as they are concerned, "The mountain bike community can observe the access restrictions and signage."

So, is there anything constructive that we can do? According to Martin Geliot, one of the many trail access advocates who has been lobbying for greater catchment access, "To get better access to catchments mountain bikers need better education about low impact riding and the importance of protecting the environment. We need to polish our public image to have any hope of getting on side with bodies such as the SCA."

Positive steps include lobbying politicians. Mountain biking is associated with a healthy active lifestyle, which is what the government wants to encourage. Absurd restrictions that turn upstanding citizens into criminals need to be rectified. The State Government effectively employs the SCA, so working on suitable politicians can bring about change.

There is power in numbers so mountain bike groups need to align themselves with other concerned user groups. By that I don't mean shooters or 4WDers, we need to associate with 'passive user groups' such as bushwalkers and birdwatchers. While mountain bike riding may still be seen as 'radical' by some, this perception is changing as the sport grows in popularity. The broader community is slowly but surely becoming aware that most mountain bikers are normal people and we are not all 'extreme dudes'.

Finally, the mountain bike community could form a protest group with the aim of bringing this stupid regulation to the attention of the media, politicians and the broader community.

Change won't happen overnight and it will take a lot of hard work. In the long run it would be well and truly worth it. Anyone who is familiar with these special areas will know that they contain some breathtaking scenery and many great trails. If you are concerned, pick up your pen or log on and start typing. Change won't happen unless you make it—viva la MTB revolution!

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An unfortunate sign of the times.