

WHEN IS A TRAIL NO LONGER WILD?

It's a commonly shared opinion among the Wild community: Too many tracks are over-engineered. But what do those who actually construct and/or manage the trails we walk on have to say on the matter? Rebecca Burton speaks with three of them to learn their opinions.

Words **REBECCA BURTON**

As I hiked on carved wooden logs and hardened paths, I had no idea I was 'dodging the bog.' The bog—better known as the 'Soddon Loddons', as I'd come to learn—was a notoriously muddy stretch of trail on the 54km Frenchmans Cap Track in Tasmania's south. Prior to 2022, when I hiked the trail, daring adventurers would sometimes have to endure waist-deep mud to venture across the South Loddon Plains.

But after ten consecutive annual donations of \$100,000 from hiking enthusiast Dick Smith, matched by \$50,000 yearly contributions from the Tasmanian Government, this piece of bushwalking history was re-routed. Instead of waist-deep mud, hikers on the Frenchmans Cap Track now follow a 4.6km reroute around the South Loddon Plains and the lower section of Philips Lead.

The Soddon Loddons were no more, and in its wake, a debate unfolded in the worn pages of the hut guest book—one that I later traced into online forums after returning home.

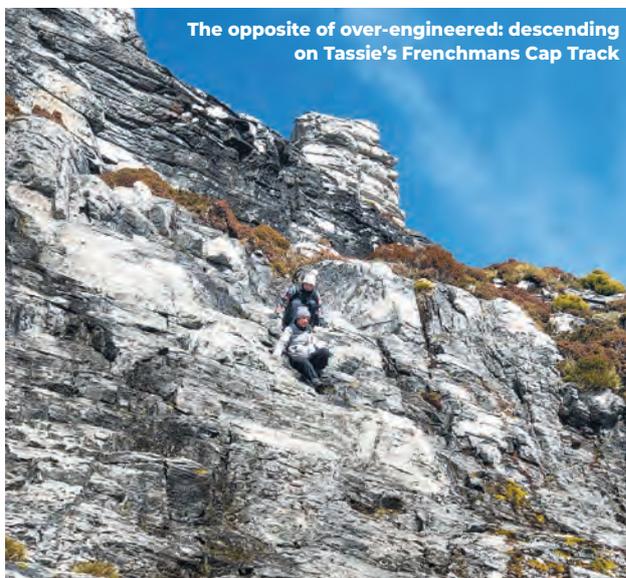
Hikers lamented the loss of knee-deep mud and raw trails, with comments such as "a significant part of Tasmanian bushwalking history slipping away" or "as a relative newbie, I ... saw the Soddon Loddons as a rite of passage for Tassie bushwalkers."

I started to wonder: Was my experience wild enough? Were the critics in a different league of truly diehard hikers, or were they simply nostalgic for a time when Tasmania's trails felt more rugged and untamed?

At the core of the debate, one frequently referenced in *Wild*, I found a growing tension. As investment in wild spaces increases and a mix of novice and seasoned hikers fill the trails, we're being forced to ask: Should trails prioritise accessibility and enjoyment, or should they remain raw and wild? And if we try to do both, are we striking the right balance between low-key paths and highly engineered tracks? (*Ed's Note: For a shocking example of the latter, check out p34 in this issue's Green Pages.*)



Wooden boardwalk in Bouddi NP



The opposite of over-engineered: descending on Tassie's Frenchmans Cap Track

LATE ON A FRIDAY AFTERNOON, I speak with Garreth Paton, Director of Iconic Trails, a Canberra-based company that builds trails for mountain bikers and walkers. The company has benefited from increased government funding for trail construction and maintenance in recent years, and right now, he's wrapping up a week in Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, where his team is working on the Skyline Trail.

Tidbinbilla is an example of a project he classifies as a 'low-key track' tailored for more passionate, experienced hikers—not families looking for a day out with five-year-old kids.

"[We're] trying to define the trail and make it as sustainable as we can without looking like it's been manufactured," he says. He believes it ticks all the boxes for diehard hikers who want a challenge—slippery sections, sketchy terrain, and gruelling inclines—unless, he adds, "they don't want any track at all, or are using an old-school compass."

The challenge he describes is the feeling I had hiking Frenchmans Cap. My legs burned with every uphill step, and I felt a sense of adventure as I scrambled over rocks. It's not a hike for daytrippers, but compared to the sentiments in forums and guest books—tales of punishing slogs through endless bogs—my hike was vastly different. I walked away with relatively clean hiking pants and a feeling of enjoyment rather than survival.

It makes me wonder: Who are we building modern-day trails for—the diehards or the daytrippers?

As I dig in further, the proximity to Australia's major cities seems to be a key factor in how well-defined a trail is and in the shift towards more accessible, engineered tracks. When speaking to Paton about how they're able to keep the Tidbinbilla track he's been working on 'low-key', he says it's mainly due to low visitor numbers. "If it's a really popular track, you've got to build it for the masses," he says. "Near the suburbs or just really



A peaceful moment on the popular Grand Canyon Walk in Blue Mountains NP. Credit: Harry Godwin

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popular tourist destinations where you’ve got a big mix of people, the [trails] have to be built for the masses for safety.”

THE BLUE MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK in NSW is a prime example of how shifting visitation patterns are reshaping trail design and accessibility, reflecting changes in both demand and management priorities.

I speak with Tim Lanyon—Principal Project Officer for the Blue Mountains Branch of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and the project lead for the recently opened Grand Cliff Top Walk—about these changes.

Lanyon notes that while visitation patterns have “reverted back to pre-COVID patterns,” some lesser-known trails gained lasting popularity. For example, coinciding with track upgrades, the Grand Canyon Walk saw visitation more than triple in recent years, growing from around 30,000 annually to consistently over 100,000.

“We’ve got wilderness areas right next to a city of five-million people [and] growing,” says Lanyon. “More people are going to want to access the national parks.” He added that nearly one in five Sydneysiders will walk on a Blue Mountains track annually.

Catering to this growing demand is a main reason for the NSW

Government’s \$450-million investment announced in 2022, aimed at adding 750km of new and upgraded tracks and visitor infrastructure, with the majority of funds allocated to renewing existing trails. When asked why this funding is happening now, Lanyon says it’s not for him to comment, but he believes it is to address conservation, wellbeing and safety needs.

Later in the conversation, however, Lanyon adds that the funding is to improve ‘accessibility’. “We have a very limited number of all-access paths, which is a concrete path with an easy grade for wheelchair access,” he says. “If [they’re getting] really overcrowded, we’ll be looking for opportunities to provide additions to that type of walking experience.”

Currently, the Blue Mountains primarily caters to mid-range hikers who favour half-day or short walks, but who may venture into longer day hikes. Of the park’s approximately 400km of trails, around 100km fall into the more challenging Grade Five or Six categories, offering little-to-no guidance. In contrast, only three to four kilometres are fully accessible. The remaining trails sit within the middle range, featuring built steps, bridges, and signage—such as the new Grand Cliff Top Walk, which is classified as a Grade Three hike.

INTERSTATE, WE’RE SEEING SIMILAR patterns of how growing demands and proximity to a city shapes the future of trails. Ella Carr, a former Parks Victoria ranger, worked in both Wilsons Promontory—one of Victoria’s busiest parks—and the more remote Alpine National Park. She observed a significant rise in day visitors to Wilsons Promontory, particularly since COVID, attributing the increase to its accessibility from Melbourne. But in Carr’s opinion, where Parks Victoria may differ from NPWS is investment.

“I’d say if money wasn’t an issue,” Carr tells me, “there would probably be way more development happening, but because there’s just no money, they don’t really do much. [Just] trying to keep trails open is the benchmark right now.”

But even that is a challenge, she says. “It feels like there just isn’t enough focus on keeping tracks open.” As an example, she pointed to the Sealers Cove Walk in Wilsons Promontory, where a section of the boardwalk has been closed for years due to storm damage and the high cost of repairs.

Funding or not, there is agreement that more-engineered tracks cost more. When asking about the investment for a low-key versus highly engineered track, Paton says the gap is huge. “When it comes to low-key trails, there’s obviously not as much infrastructure that needs to go in, but ... it’s not going to be as sustainable if it gets quite popular.”

Lanyon agrees there is a cost difference between the two. “[We] wouldn’t build anything on those remote tracks; they’re basically just track routes. The only change would be if more people started using it, [or if] all of a sudden a remote track for whatever reason became crowded. Then we’d have to do something, because there are huge erosion gullies or dangers.”

With this in mind, it seems fair to argue that more low-key tracks could mean more trails. But Paton believes that while funding can stretch further on low-key tracks, “that’s not saying you’re going to get the approvals to build the extra trails.” The process, especially in sensitive areas, can take years. “Behind the scenes,” he says, “people [work] for years getting all the assessments and approvals.” For tracks with fewer users, “there’s less motivation to push for it.”

I THINK ABOUT THE CHANGES to Australian hiking trails as I walk the recently opened Murramarang South Coast Walk—one of the trail projects funded by additional NSW Government investment. It’s the middle of the week and out of school holidays, so the trail is mostly empty, except for a few kangaroos blocking the trail for lunch. The stretch I walk across is a mix of exposed rock seawall at low tide and sections of beautifully crafted stone steps that blend with the natural surroundings. If the goal is to create trails that cater to the masses while also preserving the natural landscape, this walk feels like we’re on the right track. But there is nothing rough or rugged about this track, leaving the needs of more hardened hikers in the dust. *(Ed: As regular readers know, I’ve frequently been critical of over-engineered walking tracks. But I nonetheless genuinely enjoyed the Murramarang South Coast Walk.)*

“It just seems to be ‘let’s just get bulk,’ Paton said. “Let’s get as many people as we can up there, which is great, but it takes away from those who don’t want the masses around them or an easy hike.” Lanyon, on the other hand, believes they’re getting the



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balance right, but they are always seeking improvement. When they do create new tracks, or renew existing ones, the consultation process includes local communities such as bushwalkers and conservationists, knowing they’ll provide an opinion. Carr, for her part, agrees that getting more people outside is ultimately a good thing. “It’s just, how do you manage that?” she asks.

The solution, at least the solution currently arrived upon by government agencies, appears to be shifting towards more manicured trails, driven by the interconnected concerns of increasing hiker volume and the need for safety and environmental protection. As Paton says, “As soon as you start to formalise something or put someone’s name on it, there’s a lot more responsibility.”

Lanyon adds a practical example that if someone were to fall off a cliff right next to a track and there’s no barrier, then they (the NPWS) are at fault. “If someone takes us to court, the judge will say there should have been a barrier here. There has to be a barrier here. These are the guidelines.”

Then there’s the environment. When I read more about why the Soddon Loddons section of track ceased to exist, the main



reason was erosion. While the bog may have been fun for some, the ever-widening track—caused by hikers skirting the mud—became a growing environmental concern. And while an alternative to engineered tracks could simply be to walk ‘off-track’, this almost supports the argument that we may need more regulation to keep our environment safe.

Some terrains simply lend themselves better to less-regulated hiking. At Wilsons Promontory, Carr explains that in her time there, off-track walking was rare because the thick coastal bush made it nearly impossible. “People just don’t do it down there because it would suck,” she says. But in the Alpine National Park, it’s different. “It’s more openly accessible, so you’re allowed to do more things because of the lower visitation and how spread out it is.”

But Carr also argues that sometimes conservation should take precedence over accessibility in national parks. “I definitely don’t think all national parks in Victoria or Australia should be made accessible to everyone. The purpose of a national park is to preserve the environment and the values that are there. That should be the primary focus. [But] they’re also there for public enjoyment, so if you can find a balance, that’s great.”

Lanyon confirms that environmental considerations are central when deciding on trail development. “One of the key decision-making factors is the environmental impact—whether the condition of the current asset is affecting threatened plants or important animal habitat.”

And while there are various trail-building guidelines including the Australian Walking Track Grading System (AWTGS), they don’t explicitly set out environmental guidelines. But Lanyon adds there are separate environmental assessments that are part of the process. Even seemingly aesthetic additions like a boardwalk may be serving a more important purpose.

While there is no clear-cut answer—and a lot of red tape—in the struggle to balance wild, untamed trails with sustainable and accessible ones, one thing is clear: No matter what kind of hiker we are, we’re all seeking a way to connect with or discover nature. The real challenge lies in finding the balance that works for everyone.

Lanyon captures this idea perfectly: “As track builders, we always have the awareness that we’re putting our signature on the country.” He adds, “As much as we can, [we want to] build things that are in harmony with nature for walking.” **W**

IMAGES - LEFT TO RIGHT, TOP TO BOTTOM

Bypassing the infamous Sodden Lodons on Day One of the Frenchmans Cap Track, along the rerouted section now known as ‘Laughtons Lead’

Tim Lanyon, Project Officer for the Blue Mtns Branch of the NPWS

Garreth Paton, Director of Iconic Trails

Rebecca on a precarious boardwalk along the Frenchmans Cap Track

No tracks in sight, just freestyle scrambling to ascend Frenchmans Cap

Four styles of engineered trails. Upper left: Stepping stones, Grand Canyon, Blue Mountains NP, NSW. Credit: Harry Godwin. Upper right: Wooden boardwalk with chicken wire, Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers NP, Tasmania. Lower left: Log ladder, Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers NP, Tasmania. Lower right: Plastic boardwalk on the Coast Track, Royal NP, NSW. Up to nearly one-third of the track is on boardwalk

CONTRIBUTOR: Rebecca is a freelance writer based in Sydney, NSW. When she’s not navigating the paths of corporate media life, she’s out discovering new places through hiking—mid-range, with die-hard aspirations.