

2019 GREAT SOUTHERN TRAIL FORUM

02 August 2019

PROCEEDINGS



Contact Details:

Great Southern Centre for Outdoor Recreation Excellence (GSCORE)

22 Collie Street Albany WA 6330

Phone: (08) 9892 0115

Email: trails@gscore.com.au

Website: www.gscore.com.au

Report prepared by Karl Hansom, Ben Maisey Kyle-Little, and Lenore Lyons. © GSCORE.

Photo credits: Cover – Tourism WA; internal – GSCORE.

The 2019 Great Southern Trail Forum was delivered in partnership with the following stakeholders:



Department of
**Local Government, Sport
and Cultural Industries**



We respectfully acknowledge the Wagyl Kapi and Southern Noongar people, the Traditional Owners of the land on which we operate. Their Elders past, present, and future play an important role in providing leadership to our community. Operating in an eco-friendly sustainable way on Australia's land and waterways is important to us, as is respecting sacred indigenous sites.

BACKGROUND

The 2019 Great Southern Trail Forum was delivered in partnership between the Great Southern Centre for Outdoor Recreation Excellence (GSCORE), the City of Albany, and the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries (DLGSC). The Forum was opened by Noongar Elder Mr Lester Coyne who gave a traditional Welcome to Country to forum delegates, highlighting the importance of trails in Noongar heritage.

The Forum builds on the success of the 2018 Albany Trail Town Forum. The 2018 Forum focused on three case studies providing insights into the economic benefits of trails and trail towns. The Theme for the 2019 Great Southern Trail Forum was:

Trails are for everyone: Building community resilience through trail development

Trails provide a valuable outlet for exercise, challenge, recreation and adventure. They improve community awareness and appreciation of the natural environment, contribute to personal and community wellbeing, and are a major driver of tourism visitation.

The purpose of the 2019 Forum was to showcase the role of trails as a major driver of regional economic growth and of social and community resilience. The first part of the forum included presentations from three speakers – Matt Harrington (Yarra Ranges Council, Victoria), Karen Herlihy (South Coast NRM), and Chelle Fisher (She Seeks Adventure). The second part of the forum was an interactive workshop in which participants were broken into trail user activities (e.g. hiking, cycling, horse-riding) to consider key questions about barriers to using trails and how to make trails more inclusive.

KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Matt Harrington

Project Manager, Warburton MTB Destination
Yarra Ranges Shire Council, Victoria

Mr Harrington provided an overview of the Warburton Mountain Bike (MTB) Destination Project. Warburton, a town on 2000 residents in the Yarra Valley in Victoria, was experiencing economic stagnation, high unemployment, poor health of residents, and limited opportunities for physical activity. Planning for trails has not been a priority, with the result that trails were unplanned and unsustainable.

The Warburton MTB Destination project provides a solution to address unsanctioned trail construction and enhanced environmental, social and health outcomes. The goal is to position Warburton as the world's best mountain bike destination.

**“Putting trails on the doorstep enables people to have fit and healthy lifestyles. Proximity to a residential area gives everyone the chance to take part in and value health and wellbeing. But we need to get the experience right”
(Matt Harrington)**

The area has a varied topography, well suited to a range of MTB experiences. It includes ancient forests and epic scenery. With 4 million people within 1.5 hours drive away, proximity to an international airport, and existing supporting infrastructure, Warburton was deemed to have the “perfect mix of elements” to succeed as a MTB destination.

The Warburton Mountain Bike Destination Project began in 2013, with master planning commencing in 2016, and detailed market research completed in 2018. The aim of the market research was to understand target markets not just products. This led to a significant change in thinking about the project - from a ‘MTB trails project’ to developing a ‘trail tourism destination’. The project will offer different grades and experiences, capable of attracting mountain bike tourists from all over Australia and overseas, thus becoming a nationally significant tourism attraction.

Funding for Stage 1 (\$11.3 million) has been secured via Federal and State Government grants, the Yarra Ranges Shire Council, and the Warburton and Yarra Junction Community Bank (Bendigo Bank). The long-term goal is to construct 130km of trail. All trails will return to town, ensuring that business opportunities are enhanced. Yarra Ranges Council has estimated a return of \$20M to economy, and health benefits of \$15M over 25 years. As an indication of the potential impact of the project when it is completed, house prices increased by 35% when the Warburton MTB project was announced.

**“Formal partnerships have contributed funding for the project
- shared cost means shared glory!” (Matt Harrington)**

Key challenges

- **Addressing user needs** - to meet the expectations of visitors, the facilities must be of high quality, and the community needs to welcome and value riders and their travel companions.
- **Environment**– there are several threatened species in the project area. The challenges of protecting these species are not insurmountable but require a dedicated approach to ensuring that mitigation measures enhance environmental outcomes. The aim is to leave the environment in a better condition than when the project started. All strategies are backed up by a rigorous scientific approach and ongoing data monitoring.
- **Heritage values, particularly indigenous heritage** – requires ongoing open dialogue with Aboriginal groups to ensure that their concerns are heard and addressed in the planning process.
- **Monitoring the social and economic impacts** – there are often entrenched negative views about mountain-biking and one of the challenges is overcoming these perceptions. Strategies have included using an adaptive management model based on peer reviewed data; and seconding a staff member from Parks Victoria to the local Council to lead the project and strengthen relationships. This has helped to overcome organisational cultural bias and led to a shift in thinking. Matt Harrington took key staff from different agencies to several different trails in Australia and overseas to experience trails firsthand. This helped to improve their understanding and narrow the knowledge gap.
- **Lack of experienced, skilled trail builders** – there is significant national demand for trail designers and builders, and with the industry still in its infancy, it will be a challenge to secure experienced staff and build local jobs.
- **Community values** – the project team has undertaken extensive community consultation in order to identify what is important to local residents so that the project is designed with their needs and aspirations in mind.
- **Maintenance** – maintaining the trails to a high standard is crucial if the project is to attract return visitors. The Yarra Ranges Council has opted to support the establishment of an Incorporated Association that will be responsible for managing the trails. This model provides greater flexibility and will ensure opportunities for both public and private investment. The project team is already in discussion with large companies and events for high yield sponsorship agreements.

Success factors

Partnerships

- The project manager, Matt Harrington was seconded from Parks Victoria to Yarra Ranges Shire to strengthen and build relationships between different stakeholder groups
- Team approach - all stakeholders have a clear understanding of their roles and co-own the problems and solutions
- Political advocacy to secure funding (also requires robust feasibility, broad support and collaboration, effective planning, persistence)
- Build maintenance into ongoing planning and management

Destination Thinking

- Understanding market/product
- Involve business community at all stages
- Focus on creating complimentary products, not just the MTB trail experience
- Destination/town front of mind
- Don't compromise on design and construction for the sake of cost

Passion, drive and commitment

- Extensive and ongoing community consultation. The community needs to be on board. As a result of this engagement, plans changed several times. However, at the end of the day it isn't possible to satisfy all interests in the community. What is important is that everyone has had an opportunity to be involved in shaping the planning process.
- Identify Advocates early in the process - local, environmental, political
- Energy and persistence – it will take commitment (and it will be a long haul)
- Be ready to change your thinking - reimagine and re-evaluate to provide the best experience



Figure 1: Trail Forum Speakers: Karen Herlihy, Matt Harrington, and Chelle Fisher.

CASE STUDY PRESENTATIONS

Karen Herlihy

Program Manager

South Coast NRM, Albany

Strong and Proud – Wumbudin koul-yee-rah (program) using outdoor experiences to engage with youth

Karen Herlihy provided a presentation on the Strong and Proud program which connects Aboriginal youth to country.

The program is improving resilience, participation, and mental health for young Aboriginal people in Albany. Connection to culture is the main objective of the project. The program involves Noongar elders and mentors who provide support and connections to community to the younger participants.

200 youth have been engaged via recreational activities, thus improving their health and wellbeing, connection to community, and skills. The activity locations all have cultural significance. The program operates for 10-weeks with a weekend camp for those showing high levels of commitment. Participants learn about country via a range of outdoor recreation, cultural and environmental activities. Outdoor recreation activities include hiking, mountain biking, canoeing and snorkelling.

Lessons learned:

- Trails are helping to tackle social disadvantage, build resilience and improve mental health for Noongar youth in Albany
- Being involved in outdoor activities builds self-confidence and independence

Challenges:

- A range of trail offerings are needed. This includes beginner level trails as well as more challenging options. The quality of trails must be improved to provide both safety and appeal
- Need trail interpretation that focuses on cultural and environmental values
- Facilities – toilets, shelter, water, seating
- Equipment for hire or loan (bikes, canoes, snorkels) - most students don't have their own equipment and it is expensive to hire
- Finding recreation leaders, and future Aboriginal guides. This could be a business opportunity; two companies have started Aboriginal tourism businesses in the Great Southern
- Funding to keep delivering the program in Albany and expand the program to other towns.

Chelle Fisher

Chairperson and Co-founder
She Seeks Adventure

Outdoor recreation, nature and mental health

Chelle Fisher gave a very personal talk on the benefits of trails to individual mental health.

She Seeks Adventure Incorporated is a Not-For-Profit organisation dedicated to providing women with a multitude of opportunities to explore the world outside of their comfort zone. Their goal is to inspire women to push through their barriers and fears by providing new and challenging experiences. Participants meet like-minded women in a safe and inclusive environment while interacting with Mother Nature. Their aim is to encourage women's personal growth by providing adventures that build self-confidence and assist in the creation of a positive mindset.

Chelle explained her difficulties growing up as a victim of drug and alcohol related domestic violence. She sought solace and found refuge in the outdoors, where nature provided a haven for safety and wellbeing. Chelle's love for the outdoors and bushwalking grew out of adversity, but she realised that being in the bush and connecting with nature had a major influence on her own wellbeing, mental health and confidence. Chelle's personal story has led her to find ways of encouraging others. She has become a strong advocate of the benefits of interacting with nature, particularly by hiking, and has successfully started two businesses aimed at developing positive outdoor experiences.

Lessons learned:

- Victims of domestic violence can overcome adversity in many different ways
- Being outdoors and interacting with nature provides positive benefits for personal health and wellbeing
- Outdoor recreation builds knowledge, confidence, independence, and a sense adventure



Figure 2: Trail Forum attendees

GREAT SOUTHERN REGIONAL TRAILS MASTER PLAN

Lenore Lyons (Executive Director, Great Southern Centre for Outdoor Recreation Excellence) provided an update on the *Great Southern Regional Trails Master Plan* (RTMP). GSCORE is leading the development of the master plan on behalf of all Great Southern local government authorities. The need for a regional master plan is highlighted in the *WA Trails Blueprint*, which recommends that regional plans be developed to support local trail plans.

The RTMP will identify a ten-year program of infrastructure delivery for a range of different trail types and user groups across the region. It will be a critical tool in budget planning by State and local governments for trail development.

The project commenced in early 2019 with extensive community consultation during March-May. A Trails Background Report was completed in June. The report identifies trail gaps across the region, and community and user aspirations for new trail projects. Expert trail consultants have been engaged to develop activity-specific trail plans (e.g. hiking, cycling, paddling, horse-riding). The draft RTMP will be released for public comment in November 2019.

Further information about the RTMP is available at: <https://gscore.com.au/projects/great-southern-regional-trails-master-plan/>

INTERACTIVE WORKSHOP

The final part of the Trail Forum was an interactive workshop in which attendees were invited to consider ways to make trails more inclusive. Participants were broken into the following trail user groups:

- Bushwalking/hiking
- Equestrian/Horse riding
- Mountain bike and cycling
- Paddling (canoe, kayak)
- Aquatic (snorkelling, diving)

Each group was asked to consider the following questions:

What are the barriers to using trails?

The discussion revealed that the barriers are similar for all types of trail activities. These barriers fall into five key areas:

- **Access** – issues included lack of suitable trail locations, poor transport options, and lack of direct access to or distance from trail heads. Except for walking (which was regarded as the most inclusive of all activities in terms of being available to the greatest number of participants), other activities could be costly in terms of purchase or hire of equipment, and insurance.
- **Abilities** – all groups identified the need to cater to a diverse range of abilities, from beginners to advanced trail users. Problems included the lack of trails designed for specific user groups, poor signage or grading of trails, and lack of opportunities to develop or improve skills.

- **Knowledge** – all groups asserted that there is currently a lack of information about existing trails (location, grade, access, length, etc), including few maps, poor or non-existent signage, and a lack of digital or online resources. The other critical knowledge gap is in relation to risk management, safety, and environmental impact.
- **Infrastructure** – the region lacks sufficient supply of quality trails for different user groups, and many existing trails lack appropriate infrastructure (e.g. parking, toilets, water, signage).
- **Environmental** – biosecurity, dieback and poor maintenance (e.g. erosion, overgrown) were identified as key issues limiting access to trails. For aquatic trails (paddling, snorkelling, etc), weather, water conditions and fear of sharks are also significant barriers.

How do we make trails more inclusive?

Many of the solutions for making trails more inclusive were directly aligned with the barriers identified above.

- **Access** – provide trails close to where people live; provide a range of trail types to suit different user groups, including wheelchair accessible trails or access points; and provide access to equipment.
- **Abilities** – develop programs for different user groups and cohorts to encourage participation and improve skills.
- **Knowledge** – provide better information about trails (maps, brochures, websites, apps); improve signage; provide interpretation.
- **Infrastructure** – trail design needs to consider a hierarchy of different grades, abilities, and skills progression; and adequate facilities (e.g. parking, signage, etc). For aquatic trails, shark nets, lifesaving buoys, and ropes may be required. For bridle trails, larger parking areas, and water are important.

How do we ensure that trails deliver strong health benefits?

The groups identified a range of strategies to maximise the health and wellbeing outcomes of trail activities:

- **Promotion** – public campaigns to encourage active leisure, including information about where to access trail information; better information about community-driven programs and events.
- **Education** – develop and deliver education and skills-development programs that improve skills and confidence; target programs in schools, community groups, and amongst specific cohorts (e.g. youth, seniors, non-English speaking background, Aboriginal); promote respect and understanding of different trail users.
- **Access** – remove barriers such as distance to trail-heads, cost of using trails (e.g. subsidised hire of equipment).
- **Infrastructure** – design trails to include elements that improve mental health; develop trail management models based on community ownership to encourage participation and pride in local trails.
- **Research** – monitor and measure the health benefits of trails and the environmental impact of trails; disseminate this information.

CONCLUSION

Almost one hundred participants attended the 2019 Trail Forum, and registrations had to be closed one-week before the forum due to a lack of seating at the venue. An additional 25 Councillors and staff from six Great Southern local governments attended a briefing session with the keynote speaker, Matt Harrington. Forum attendees came from diverse backgrounds and locations across the Great Southern region and there was representation from trail user groups, local governments, state government agencies, business owners, TAFE and UWA staff and students, social services and mental health organisations. A survey of attendees revealed that 93% of respondents found the forum to be informative, with a 97% satisfaction level with the keynote presentation.

The presentations by the invited speakers provided much food for thought. They highlighted the opportunities and the subsequent economic and social benefits of trails. The information collected through the workshop will inform the development of the *Great Southern Regional Trails Master Plan*.

Based on the feedback received from participants, and the overwhelming interest in the forum, GSCORE has committed to making the Great Southern Trail Forum an annual event.



Figure 3: Attendees start to brainstorm

Appendix A: Workshop Responses

The following tables have been transcribed from the notes produced by the workshop attendees.

WALKING/HIKING		
What are the barriers to using trails?	How can we make trails more inclusive?	How do we ensure health benefits from trails?
<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To suitable land • Transport to trail locations • Safe access to and from trails • Distance from the trail <p>Abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of trail users • Grading of trails • Lack of trails designed for specific types of users <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of maps • Lack of education about safety and dangers of trails <p>Infrastructure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parking • Toilets • Water • Signage • Linear nature of trails (instead having loops) <p>Environmental:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biosecurity (Phytophthora) 	<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walking is the most inclusive activity in terms of access to greatest number of participants but need to be inclusive of all activities (e.g. contemplative walking to trail running) • Improve access for all groups <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better information about trails • Cultural stories (indigenous, flora & fauna, iconic highlights) included in trail brochures and signs <p>Abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan accordingly for range of users (single use, multi-use) so that all abilities catered for • Identify user needs <p>Infrastructure – better and in more locations</p>	<p>Promotion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Public campaigns to encourage walking • Change the culture • Advertising • Promote connection to place <p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School programs • Liaison with medical practitioners to ensure natural nature-based therapy rather than drugs <p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community driven events/programs • Remove barriers (accessibility without a car) • Reduce cost • Connect to supporting groups/programs • Establish and support groups that encourage individuals to join <p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Variety of trails • Provide both physically active environments and quiet nature-based environments <p>Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On health benefits • Protect environment

CYCLING

What are the barriers to using trails?	How can we make trails more inclusive?	How do we ensure health benefits from trails?
<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cost • Time poor • Proximity to trail head <p>Abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressions • Skills & confidence • Perception <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of trails • Safety • Signage of trail route <p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of appropriate infrastructure • Connectivity to other trails • Funding to build trails 	<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Education programs • Introductory programs • Training & development opportunities • Availability of bikes • Funding for participants <p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hierarchy of trails (Easy – difficult) • Progression of trail development • Opportunities for advanced skill level <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promotion of trail locations • Levels of skills required 	<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities for exercise • Community engagement opportunities • Lower cost (long term) <p>Promotion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote benefits • Build confidence <p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design trails to include elements which improve mental health • Nature-based trails <p>Research:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor & measure improvements (bikes sales, health data)

PADDLING & SNORKELLING

What are the barriers to using trails?	How can we make trails more inclusive?	How do we ensure health benefits from trails?
<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Availability of equipment • Connectivity • Transport/Transfer <p>Abilities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills • Confidence <p>Environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weather • Safe water <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Of trails • Risk management • Information • Signage • Environmental factors • Safety • Fear (e.g. sharks) <p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilities • Value adding to the experience (e.g. camps/photography) 	<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to regional town/centres • Wheelchair accessible • Tour operators/equipment hire • Consistent community engagement to ensure inclusivity • Different cost options • Disability access • Encourage groups • Aged access • Cultural sensitivity <p>Trail design:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good pathways • Single purpose use (safety) • Nearby parking • Shark net & life savers • Ropes to hold on to for the inexperienced • Varied levels of difficulty <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear grading/rating related to experience/skill level • Public education and marketing (including multi-lingual) • Signage (Multi-lingual, Interpretive, Safety) • Fear 	<p>Promotion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic/social environmental benefits • Promote physical and mental health benefits • Intercultural connection • Need an app with maps & information <p>Community development:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership • Purpose • Pride • Identity <p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mutual respect and understanding • Give people a reason to get out <p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with organisations that look after people with mental health issues • Work with schools & other youth organisations • Target the more mature: to the benefits of exercise and the outdoors to health • Target social groups too

EQUESTRIAN

What are the barriers to using trails?	How can we make trails more inclusive?	How do we ensure health benefits from trails?
<p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Getting there • Distance from parking • Tenure - Who owns the land/purpose of the land • Roads as barriers – Safety • Availability for hiring horses • Cost • Public liability insurance costs <p>Environment:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication with DBCA • Cost of biosecurity • Trail maintenance costs <p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information as to what is available • Safety • Cultural sensitivities 	<p>Knowledge:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify use/needs • Essential website with Information available <p>Programs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Equine therapy, Mental health • Commercial enterprise • Family bonding • Clubs • Endurance • Trail riding • Clinics <p>Access:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proximity to town facilities • Disability access • Infrastructure: • Linking with other trails • Appropriate infrastructure 	<p>Infrastructure:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scenic trails • Variety of trails <p>Education:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pretraining/skills assessment prior to trail riding • Promotion: • Development of mental health program • Facilitating mental health programs • Back to country program