



A hiking group enjoying a stroll through Wandoo National Park.

# Preserving bushland walking trails

BY MADELIN HAYES

Bushwalking has been gaining in popularity as more Western Australians look to explore their backyards, drawn in by the natural beauty of our national parks.

But many are concerned for the future of our forests, with continued deforestation due to mining operations and the mistreatment of trails through illegal four-wheel driving and trail bike riding.

Situated between Great Southern Highway and Brookton Highway in the Perth Hills, Wandoo National Park comprises 44,000 hectares of granite outcrops and eucalyptus wandoo.

As a passionate bushwalker and volunteer in the area, Tony Rouphael has noticed its increase in popularity amongst day users, though he said some were attending the area to unlawfully test their four-wheel drive skills or to ride motorbikes in restricted areas.

"The rangers do have the power to delegate infringements onto trail bike riders or four-wheel drive users who are illegally using the trails in Wandoo as their own adventure playground," he said.

"But the issue is, there's not enough rangers in the area to patrol it."

According to Mr Rouphael, Wandoo National Park is now inundated with trail damage, destroyed vegetation and a proliferation of new deeply rutted and eroding tracks.

"I think people do avoid the park due to the impact on the aesthetics, but also the noise of the motorbikes," he said.

When the State Government announced the Plan for Our Parks in 2019 to create five million hectares of new national and marine parks across Western Australia, it had bushwalkers like Mr Rouphael puzzled.

"I would like to see them manage the existing parks better before they spend a lot more money on new parks," he said.

"They need more patrolling and more rangers present, especially on the weekends, as that's when the park is at its busiest."

Regular bushwalkers in the area would like educational signage to be placed around Wandoo to indicate what you can and can't do while enjoying the national park.

"Most trail bike riders and four-wheel drive users will do the right thing if they are aware of the problems they can cause," Mr Rouphael said.

"Nobody is calling for a lockout, we're not saying to people you can't come to the national parks and forest areas – we're only conveying the importance of abiding by the rules."

Illegal off-road activity is just one issue

associated with WA national park conservation. Mr Rouphael said conservationists were also concerned about the impact of bauxite mining on the forest areas.

"Mining is important to the state, we all benefit from it, but there's areas where it should be better managed," he said.

HikeWest president and acting executive officer David Osborne said mining was taking its toll on Perth's bushland.

"Mining leases cover a majority of forested walk areas close to Perth, outside of the national parks," he said.

"Through their bushwalking activities across much of the state forests and reserves over the past half century, bushwalkers have a unique insight into the impacts that bauxite mining and minesite rehabilitation are having on the forests and landscapes of the Darling Range."

Mr Osborne said while mining companies were required to restore the landscape once mining had ceased in a particular location, they could not entirely replicate natural processes.

"The mining companies claim they can restore 100 per cent of the plant species diversely when they're reseeding because they're all planted at the same time," he said.

"Which is quite unnatural, it ends up with a blanket-like young forest which looks very much like a plantation and is often very dense."

With minimal forest thinning, the jarrah trees are closely spaced, often left competing for resources, according to Mr Osborne.

"You tend to get mass death of the jarrah trees, as they're all fighting for water," he said.

Mr Osborne warned there may be a diminished quality of bushwalking opportunities in the region over the coming years due to more mining expansion proposals.

"Bushwalking areas to be affected by mining will in the future stretch from Bannister Hill in the south to beyond Mount Dale in the north," he said.

Mr Osborne said it was important for the community to get involved in public environmental reviews where possible.

"The key public review at the moment is the major Alcoa expansion affecting Jarrahdale and Dwellingup," he said.

The public is being called upon to voice any concerns about Alcoa Australia's proposal to expand its Huntly bauxite mine and increase production at its Pinjarra Alumina Refinery, with the public review of the miner's Environmental Review Document to be open from December 10, 2021 to February 10, 2022.

"It's pretty rare for approvals to be open for public comment, most of the time the decision making is done internally," Mr Osborne said.

"So certainly HikeWest will be having a close look at that."



Bauxite mine operations from the near summit of Mount Solus, Darling Ranges.



An illegal trail biker at Helena River in Wandoo National Park.