

The first Rail Trail in NSW organised locally

The popularity of bicycle riding in Australia is increasing rapidly making riding a bicycle one of the fastest growing leisure and fitness activity in the country. Two of the main reasons for this resurgence in popularity are the fact that bicycling is a low impact way of getting or staying fit, and that it is an activity that the whole family can enjoy together.

This popularity has been reflected in the development of rail trails around the country, especially in Victoria. There, rail lines that are no longer required by the railways are turned into experiential trails for bicyclists and walkers; and these trails have proven to be extremely popular with cyclists of all ages.

Local cyclist Owen Fitzgerald enjoys using the rail trails when he is on holiday. "Rail trails allow people to enjoy cycling without having to worry about traffic and pot holes on the road. The drivers also appreciate not having to deal with bicyclists on the road."

Yet despite all this popularity, New South Wales has lagged behind and doesn't have a single rail trail anywhere in the State, despite having thousands of kilometres of railway line that is no longer required by State Rail.



And if the Victorian experience is anything to go by, rail trails are a significant tourist attraction, and are a magnet for families every weekend and all through school holidays, rain or shine. These visitors will often stay locally, eat at the local cafes and restaurants, and buy souvenirs of their journey along the rail trail.

So the lack of a rail trail anywhere in New South Wales is a little surprising.

However, the planning for the first two rail trails is well underway, and the first rail trails in New South Wales will be through one of the most spectacularly scenic regions of the State: from Wagga Wagga to Tumbarumba, past wineries and into the foothills of the Snowy Mountains, past orchards and lush farmland.

A local group, with representatives from the four Local Government Areas that the old railway line passes through, the Riverina Regional Development Board, the NSW Department of Lands, the Bicycle Users Group, a representative from Wagga RAAF base, and local bicycling enthusiasts, has been formed to investigate the possibility of this region developing the first Rail Trail in the State.

At a recent meeting, the Riverina Highlands Rail Trails Committee, considered a list of preferred consultants, one of which will be chosen to undertake a feasibility study along with extensive community consultation. Chair of the Committee, Owen Fitzgerald, is pleased to see the first stage of the Project complete.

"So far we have focused on doing all the pre-planning work that will allow the feasibility study to be undertaken. We have investigated whether it is possible to turn the old, unused railway lines between Tumut and Batlow and between Wagga and Tumbarumba into rail trails, and looked at how well the trails have been received by communities around the country and in New Zealand. All our initial investigations have been very positive, and that has given us the confidence to apply for a grant to undertake the feasibility study," Mr Fitzgerald said.

The feasibility study and consultation process will begin in the New Year with a report expected back within three months. This report will outline the feasibility of both rail trails and the potential positive economic impacts to local communities through the improvement of tourist facilities.

All the Councils have shown strong support for the rail trail project and Tumbarumba Shire Council's Tourism Project Officer, David Sell, is enthusiastic about the benefits that such a development can bring to the region.

"A rail trail encourages people to get out and explore the area" Mr Sell said, "and this has a positive benefit for the local cafes and accommodation houses. But the benefit is not only economic. Experience elsewhere has shown that the local history is revived with icons and stories from the days when trains regularly travelled through

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the region being displayed at points along the trail. The local stories and heritage have been saved, and the local towns have an enduring link to the past."

Riverina Highlands Rail Trails Starts Newsletter

The Riverina Highlands Rail Trails Committee will start a quarterly newsletter to keep all interested people up-to-date with the progress of the Project.

The Committee Chair, Owen Fitzgerald, is enthusiastic about the newsletter.

"We will be able to keep everyone informed about the progress of the project and about when stages of the rail trail will be opened." Mr Fitzgerald said. "We want as many interested people as possible to sign up for the newsletter. That way they will be the first to know about developments along the rail trail and will receive invitations to the opening of each stage."

The newsletter will be delivered electronically and will also report on the progress of the feasibility study and provide a central information point for anyone interested in the Project.

People who would like to receive the newsletter can record their interest with Riverina Regional Development Board Executive Officer, Peter Dale. email: riverinanatural@rrdb.com.au

What can you expect along the rail trail?

The 32 kilometre Tumut to Batlow Rail Trail will take people from the Tumut Railway Station, up into Gilmore Valley and get their first view of the magnificent vista of the Australian Alps.

The Wagga Wagga to Tumbarumba Rail Trail will stretch for 130 kilometres, taking riders through Forest Hill and past RAAF base and the Air Force Museum, through Ladysmith where Tumbarail will be able to offer the riders the opportunity to get out of the saddle and experience a ride on the old rail lines on one of their rail trikes.

Leaving Ladysmith, riders will head for Tarcutta, known as being the "halfway town" - half way between Sydney and Melbourne and, coincidentally Tarcutta is also the Halfway Town for the rail trail.

Riders then travel on to Humula and pass through plantation forests

and then on into the rolling farmland and vineyards of the Tumbarumba region.

A highlight of this journey will be when riders encounter the "Downfall" - a 4 kilometre zigzag that allowed the trains to climb or descend. Legend has it that the Downfall was excavated by Chinese workers with picks, shovels and wheelbarrows.

When riders reach this point they will also enjoy their first view of the Snowy Mountains.

Having visited the region on many occasions and having ridden most of the Rail Trails in Victoria, The Honourable Tony Kelly MLA, the NSW Minister for Lands, is also an enthusiastic supporter of the project and is looking forward to the day when he can ride his bicycle from end to end of both trails.

The first section of the two railway lines to be transformed into a rail trail will probably be the stretch from Wagga Wagga to Forest Hill.

"As well as providing a recreational opportunity for the general public, this will give personnel from the Air Force Base at Forest Hill a safe route for running or cycling." Chair of the Riverina Highlands Rail Trails Committee, Mr Owen Fitzgerald said. ■



Cycling & Hiking for Life!