

## ***Bicycle User Research Group***

providing and promoting cycling and walking research from a user perspective

factsheet #1

### **cycling and walking paths ...**

### **an unnatural attraction to water and bush?**

**Introduction:** Increasingly, environmental, conservation and restoration groups are receiving support from government, industry and community to conserve and/or restore remnant bushland and watercourses including from programmes such as Greening Australia, Landcare and the National Heritage Trust. While in rural areas and managed recreation and reserve systems (eg National Parks), pathways may be designed, located and maintained to reduce impact on and maintain natural values and are subject to relatively low use rates, the positioning of paths for walking and cycling in urban parklands and remnant natural areas is not subject to these management and design protocols. If successful, the urban pathways are often subject to overuse and/or conflict between the various users and uses (eg Coronation Drive Bikeway).

If natural remnants are to remain available for conservation and/or restoration, conservation values must be taken into much higher account in decisions regarding both locations and routes for pathways, in particular, those with transport/commuting functions (eg Griffith University and Toohey Forest paths). Arguably, transport routes should never be located through such areas but rather provide access along and hence to them. Access into the natural area would then be subject to specific but quite different design requirements. The following criteria aim to clarify the different requirements and conflicts.

**Criteria:** For transport purposes (eg the Western Freeway Bikeway), paths and tracks require considerable width to allow joint use by pedestrians and cyclists of varying abilities, surfaces and design engineered for relatively fast cycling (30-40kph minimum), considerable earthworks to provide flat slopes and resting spots for people with access disabilities (AS 1428), high levels of personal security (single females at night) and hence night lighting. The facility has to meet these criteria to attract sufficient use to generate security through use. However, the width of path, high levels of use, edge effects due to earthworks, night lighting, tree removal and habitat disconnection, alteration of drainage flows etc are substantial and permanent impacts typical of the very environmental impacts which reduce ecological and biological values. High use generates increased maintenance, rubbish removal etc. Seemingly, wherever possible, such routes should form continuous links in networks of cycling-friendly streets, utilising adjoining roads and streets or open parklands where the benefits of more people and less impacts are mutually beneficial. For general recreational and (local) touring cycling, such routes are optimal as they meet both transport/commuting and recreational cycling and walking/running/exercise needs.

For conservation and/or restoration purposes, paths should have minimal impact and maximize the environmental and ecological values of the place. While slopes and access for people with access disabilities remain a requirement, minimum width paths, constructed on routes to maximize the experience of the visit and minimize impacts will inevitably produce tracks unsuitable for high speed cycling. Normally, night lighting would be unacceptable. Pathways should not require changes to watercourses or disturbances to adjoining natural conditions to minimise edge effects to reduce weed invasion and maintenance, maintain natural conditions with use of natural materials to avoid changing soil conditions and careful design to minimise runoff. To experience ecological and natural values and maximise conservation and/or restoration potential, paths should be either dead-end or out-and-back loops with resting spots and secure bicycle parking at the intersection with the transport pathways.

**Summary:** Arguably, the optimum requirements for transport and for ecological purposes are substantially opposed despite obvious community preferences for cycling and walking through natural areas. For long term outcomes for both groups of users and for optimum management of natural areas, the criteria above should be addressed, demonstrated and resolved wherever such paths are proposed.

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