



# Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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**Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow**

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## **Re: Katoomba Masterplan preliminary consultation**

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (the Society) is a community-based volunteer organization with over 850 members. Its mission is to help conserve the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains, and to increase awareness of the natural environment in general.

The Society is pleased to have the opportunity to make some preliminary comments on the Katoomba Masterplan.

### **General comments**

First, the Society wishes to congratulate Council for purchasing the Katoomba Golf Clubhouse for a global Planetary Health Leadership Centre. Over several years, in submissions to the District Plans and Local Strategic Planning statement, the Society has called for or strongly supported such an initiative which clearly befits our status as a city in a World Heritage Area.

The Society's main interest in the Katoomba Masterplan is the southern escarpment tourism precinct, which directly abuts the national park/World Heritage Area. The Society's concerns relate to inappropriate development on the escarpment, such as the previously proposed Katoomba Christian Convention mega-centre on Cliff Drive. We are also concerned about residential over-development in the area, with the approved expansion of The Escarpments estate yet to be built, and the 'zombie' development approval of a 120-room hotel next to The Escarpments yet to be implemented. While this development may become a medium-density housing estate instead, further intensive development in this area is likely to reduce existing residential amenity and create traffic chaos on the narrow roads around this part of the escarpment.

The Katoomba Masterplan, particularly in the southern escarpment tourism precinct, presents *the* opportunity for Council to:

- Demonstrate why it achieved Eco Destination Certification status.
- Further implement its commitment to protecting the National Park and World Heritage Area.

- Better manage tourist visitation and experience now and into the future.
- Achieve its goal of becoming ‘the sustainability capital of Australia’.

The Society requests that the area of the masterplan be extended to the north to include another significant tourism area for which the same considerations apply; viz, MinneHaHa Falls Reserve. The area (both within the Crown Land and National Park) is being seriously degraded as a result of the lack of infrastructure to cope with the high visitation rates. Resolution of this issue needs to be planned in the context of other high use tourist locations in Katoomba, rather than as an isolated problem.

### **The Society’s priorities for the southern escarpment tourism precinct and Katoomba generally**

The Society’s top priorities are:

- Protection of the Southern Escarpment scenic values and the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area.
- Conservation and enhancement of Katoomba Golf Course as a public open space recreational area for Blue Mountains residents and visitors, and rehabilitation of environmentally sensitive areas on the site. **The Society believes this is best achieved through reclassifying the golf course as ‘community land’.**
- A sustainable and diversified tourism sector with an emphasis on encouraging localised environmentally conscious tourism operators.
- Development of the Blue Mountains, and Katoomba in particular, as a ‘Green City’, with an emphasis on sustainable businesses and industries that align with the strengths and values of living within a World Heritage Area.

We discuss these priorities in detail below:

- ***Protection of the Southern Escarpment scenic values and the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area***

The Society will continue to object to proposals that would intensify development on the southern escarpment and compromise World Heritage Values, particularly scenic values. We are therefore concerned about the “Christian accommodation and event sites” nominated in the southern escarpment tourism precinct. We are also concerned about future development at Scenic World, which now has the benefit of SP3 Tourism zoning. We know from submissions to the Tourism Strategy that other tourism operators or land owners on the escarpment (e.g. Echoes guesthouse, 19 Birdwood Ave) were seeking greater development potential through requesting that their properties be re-zoned to SP3. The greater development potential of the SP3 zone on the escarpment is incompatible with World Heritage values.

It is essential that the integrity of the Blue Mountains National Park, and hence the World Heritage Area, is maintained and respected. This includes ensuring that any new and existing developments do not encroach into the national park, including perceived “minor incursions”. This includes landholders adjacent to the national park trying to use the national park as a potential asset protection zone for new developments.

- **Maintain and enhance the Katoomba Golf Course as a public open space recreational area for Blue Mountains residents and visitors. Reclassify the golf course as ‘community land’**

The Katoomba golf course is a rare large public open space area and valuable community recreational asset. It is currently used by walkers, picnickers and birdwatchers. The Society believes this valuable recreational facility should be enhanced as part of the Katoomba Masterplan.

However, as Council is well aware, a large-scale hotel/resort/conference centre on the golf course has been a focus of developer interest over many years. The Katoomba Golf Course has long been viewed as an ideal large ‘greenfield’ site for such a development or tourism development precinct. In a letter to the Editor of the *Blue Mountains Gazette* (13/3/2019, p.22) Philip Hammon of Scenic World urged us to “think big, big, big” in promoting a conference centre on the site: “The old Katoomba golf course is sitting here begging for a conference centre/hotel to be built on it. We lost the opportunity on Peter Carrol Oval, let’s not make the same mistake again”. So it is with some concern that we read in the Council meeting Business Paper 25/8/20 (p.95) that the golf course is regarded as an “opportunity site”.

The Society would strongly resist any moves to alienate public land and/or rezone the golf course to allow for hotel/conference centre development or ‘tourism precinct’ featuring amusements. The Society’s position is that the golf course should remain an open space recreational area for Blue Mountains residents and visitors. We would like to see environmentally sensitive areas of the golf course (e.g. along the creeklines) be restored to bushland and public facilities improved.

**The Society therefore calls for the golf course to be reclassified as ‘community land’ through the Katoomba Masterplan process.** This will provide better protection for the community’s long-term interest in the land.

Some preliminary ideas for the use of the golf course which could complement the proposed global Planetary Health Leadership Centre at the old clubhouse:

- Weed removal and regeneration/revegetation of the site, particularly in environmentally sensitive areas and around the ponds where aquatic birdlife in particular is regularly observed.
- A nature park with trails and information boards.
- World Heritage Area and environmentally-related educational facilities and activities for schools, the community and visitors.
- Local Indigenous history with a signposted path from the golf course through the caravan park to The Gully Aboriginal Place.

- **Sustainable tourism**

The Society reiterates its long-standing position on tourism. We oppose:

- Intensive tourist development and large-scale hotel and resort development, especially on the escarpment.
- Alienation of public land.
- Glamping and eco-lodge accommodation in national parks.

The Society supports encouraging more tourism of the low environmental impact, low eco footprint kind provided by small local businesses.

We also believe Council has to seriously address the question: ‘what is sustainable tourism in a World Heritage Area’?

The term ‘sustainable tourism’ is often used to badge tourism in the Blue Mountains. The *Blue Mountains Destination Management Plan* (2017, p.17 at point 2.3) states that sustainable tourism “recognises the needs of both visitors and residents, while protecting and enhancing opportunities for tourism growth into the future. It requires careful and sensitive management to ensure that that destination’s social, cultural and environmental capital are protected and remain an asset envied by those that visit and treasured by those that live here. In the Blue Mountains context, a sustainable tourism offer requires a strong commitment to the World Heritage listed natural environment together with close collaboration between community, tourism operators and Council. A strong partnership will ensure tourism works in harmony with the local environment to deliver not only a strong tourism sector but a resilient community who benefit directly from the visitors it hosts. This approach will secure the environmental, economic and social outcomes required to be both a world class premier tourist destination and an enviable liveable city within a world heritage national park for its residents”.

However, the *Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area Strategic Plan* (2009) identifies one threat to World Heritage values as “inappropriate recreation and tourism activities, including the development of tourism infrastructure, under increasing visitor pressure from Australian, overseas and commercial ventures”, and another threat as “lack of understanding of heritage values” (p.23). Further, the *GBMWA Strategic Plan* states that there is “some concern that benefits will not be evenly spread, that larger business interests may dominate at the expense of both Aboriginal tourism enterprises and smaller, locally based and more eco-oriented tourism enterprises and that a high turnover in tourism and hospitality operators (due to business failures) may be detrimental to the quality of visitor services” (p.36).

‘Business as usual’ mass-market tourism in the Blue Mountains is arguably already unsustainable on the definition above – with crowding and traffic chaos at peak times, inadequate waste disposal and toilets, and negative effects on residential amenity – let alone with a projected range of 1-2 million *additional* visitors p.a. by 2038 (a 33% increase on current annual visitation, p.52 *Visitor Economy Study*). With the hiatus in international tourist visitation due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the Society would like to see Council take this opportunity to pause and take a breath and seriously consider what post-pandemic sustainable tourism could look like, and particularly a greater diversification of the tourist economy and tourist experience. We don’t want to a return to unsustainable ‘business as usual’ tourism.

As recommended in our submission on the draft Local Strategic Planning Statement, the Society would like to see Council working towards quantifying the concept of ‘sustainable tourism’ and developing measurable performance indicators related to defined ‘sustainable tourism’ objectives, in consultation with relevant expert natural area managers (e.g. NPWS) as well as the tourism industry. Council can be guided in this by UNESCO’s *Managing Tourism at World Heritage Sites: a Practical Manual for World Heritage Site Managers*: (<http://whc.unesco.org/uploads/activities/documents/activity-113-2.pdf> and the experience of the only other city in a World Heritage National Park, Banff in Canada (see <https://banff.ca/558/Economic-Impact-Study>).

- ***Blue Mountains ‘Green City’***

In our submission on the draft Local Strategic Planning Statement, we argued for the development of a more diversified and resilient Blue Mountains economy based on knowledge-based sustainable businesses and industries, citing the *Sustainable Blue Mountains 2025. Community Strategic Plan*. The Society supported many of the actions directed to developing relations with tertiary educational institutions and improving TAFE

course offerings in the Blue Mountains related to outdoor recreation and eco-tourism. However, we suggested that local TAFE course offerings be expanded to include environmental science, natural area management, conservation and sustainability. These are courses available through TAFE but are not offered in the Blue Mountains. The Blue Mountains TAFE was recognised across the state as a centre of excellence for its courses in interpretative guiding and bush regeneration for a period of about 10 years up to around 2010.

Many of these courses offer a credit transfer pathway to university courses or an integrated diploma to degree course. Demand for such courses locally at TAFE and university level could be generated through Council developing Katoomba into a centre for sustainable industries that align with the strengths and values of living within a World Heritage Area, and nurturing the already emerging but often unrecognised local sustainability-related economy.

The success of the proposed global Planetary Health Leadership Centre at the old golf clubhouse also requires the Blue Mountains to develop a reputation, culture and identity as a sustainability 'hub'. This can be achieved by Council investigating opportunities for Katoomba to become a centre for sustainable businesses and industries. We suggested that Council could start by supporting the existing sustainability-related businesses, industries and groups in the Blue Mountains in the areas of nature tourism and education, local agricultural produce, native plants and bush regeneration, alternative or re-used building materials, sustainable housing design and renewable energy.

The Society looks forward to ongoing discussions and the opportunity to respond to the draft Katoomba Masterplan when it becomes publicly available.

Yours sincerely,



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