
Mountain Biking in Tasmania:

A summary of current trends and future opportunities



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1 Background and acknowledgement

*Visit from
IMBA trails
expert*

In 2003 Joey Klein, a trails expert with the International Mountain Bicycling Association (IMBA)ⁱ, visited Tasmania to hold a series of presentations on mountain biking and trail design for land managers and riders. Joey's visit generated significant interest in mountain biking and encouraged land managers to think about how sustainable trails could be designed to accommodate mountain bikers and other trail users. The visit also inspired the local mountain bike community to become involved in track construction and maintenance and broader land management issues.

Much of the information and many of the photographs presented in this document would not have been available without the support of Joey Klein, who provided the information to Sport and Recreation Tasmania during his visit in 2003.



Joey Klein talks with riders and land managers – Trevallyn 2003
(Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)

ⁱ IMBA is an advocacy group for mountain bikers, which was formed in 1988 in California and now has over 32,000 members in 30 countries.

2 Executive summary

Growth in mountain biking

Mountain biking is a relatively new recreational activity that developed around the late 1970s and early 1980s. Since that time mountain biking has experienced a rapid growth in popularity world wide. In Tasmania the majority of growth has been over the last decade.

Mountain bikers seek off-road areas to ride

As the number of mountain bikers has increased, the number of riders seeking opportunities to ride off-road has also increased. Without dedicated mountain bike trails or areas to ride, mountain bikers have typically found their own places to ride and have usually turned to four-wheel drive tracks, fire trails and walking tracks.

Slow management response

When the number of riders was low and the perceived environmental impact, or impact on other users, was relatively low, mountain biking was allowed to occur in an unplanned manner. Land managers knew mountain bikers were accessing land but took no management action. However, as the number of riders increase and improved bike technology allows riders to access terrain that would have been impossible to ride 10-15 years ago, land managers are being forced to take action. In most cases, the typical response has been to close individual trails or access to whole areas.

World-wide trends are evident in Tasmania

This pattern of unplanned growth followed by management intervention, trail closures and reduced access to mountain biking has been experienced world-wide and is now evident in areas around Tasmania. Illegal trail construction indicates there is an unmet demand for mountain biking facilities and suggests that riders are keen to work on trail construction and maintenance.

Tasmania offers significant opportunities

Opportunities are available to provide facilities that meet local needs and at the same time, attract visitors to the area. If Tasmania can adapt models used in Wales, Scotland and Canada, there may be potential significant economic benefits for the State.

3 Mountain bike facilities in Tasmania

3.1 Recognised mountain bike facilities in Tasmania

Mt Wellington

Very few areas in Tasmania are specifically designed for use by mountain bikers. One of the most significant areas where mountain biking is recognised as a legitimate activity is Mt Wellington, in Hobart. Within the Wellington Park Bike Strategy there are numerous trails that are identified as legal for mountain bike use¹. The majority of these trails are along fire trails, which tend to cater for the cross country style of riders. These trails existed well before the strategy was developed and, as such, have not been designed specifically for mountain biking.

Mountain bikers around the world tend to seek out narrow ‘singletrack’² trails which, in the case of Mt Wellington, tend to be reserved for walkers. The continued use of walking tracks by riders has led to conflict between walkers and riders and resulted in some riders being fined and others ending up in court³.

Dial Range

The Dial Range in the north-west is another major area where mountain biking is recognised and promoted. The Dial Range is an area jointly managed by Forestry Tasmania and the Parks and Wildlife Service, where mountain biking, walking, horse riding and trail bike riding is promoted and encouraged. The Dial Range Management Plan⁴ identifies key trails and specific areas where mountain biking is allowed. To a large extent, the area tends to promote spatial separation of users as a way of minimising conflict rather than encouraging multiple-use of the same areas.

Tasmanian Trail

The Tasmanian Trail is a long distance multiple-use trail (mountain biking, walking and equestrian), which extends from Devonport in the north to Dover in the south⁵. This trail forms part of the national bicentennial trail running the length of the country from the north of Queensland to the south of Tasmania. Given the length of the trail and terrain it covers, it offers a wide range of tracks, from sealed roads to steep rocky sections. As a result, local mountain bikers tend to seek out specific sections of the Tasmanian Trail that offer the best riding rather than riding the trail as a continuous trip.

3.2 New developments

Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park

In addition to these three areas two new developments are under construction and, for the first time, have been designed with mountain bikes in mind. The first is a mountain bike park at Glenorchy on the edge of Wellington Park. This area will specifically cater for the more technical or ‘extreme’ types of riding (downhill, ‘north shore’, dirt jumps and mountain cross/4X) as well as providing links to existing cross country trails on the mountain (see photo page 5). The Glenorchy City Council, the Wellington Park Management Trust and Sport and Recreation Tasmania have been working closely with local riders to plan and develop the parkⁱⁱ.

ⁱⁱ Volunteers have put in over 1000 hours, with up to 60 riders helping on construction days.



Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park opening - June 2005 (Photo: Brook Teale, SRT)

Lilydale Dirt Jump Park

The second new development is at Lilydale, where the Launceston City Council and the local community are developing a BMX style dirt jump park. This will be the first purpose built and authorised dirt jump park in Tasmaniaⁱⁱⁱ.

3.3 Other areas accessible to mountain bike riders

Fire trails, 4WD tracks and walking tracks

Around the State there are many other areas used by mountain bikers, including land managed by Forestry Tasmania, the Parks and Wildlife Service, Local Government and Hydro Tasmania. In these areas mountain biking may be acceptable but is generally not encouraged or promoted. The lack of promotion means these areas are often only known to local riders. The other difference is that, where mountain biking is allowed, it tends to be confined to roads, fire trails and 4WD tracks. These types of trails only cater for a small portion of mountain bikers.

Illegal construction highlights unmet demand

Riders seeking narrow singletracks in these areas will either use walking tracks illegally, make their own trails or go elsewhere. Around Tasmania an increasing number of illegal trails and technical trail features (TTF)^{iv} are being constructed on public land. When riders make their own trails or build technical features they are usually unauthorised, unplanned, poorly constructed, environmentally unsustainable and often unsafe for riders and other users. While this is an undesirable situation for land managers, it clearly illustrates an unmet demand for specific mountain bike facilities.

ⁱⁱⁱ There is a dirt jump area within the larger Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park. Lilydale will be developed solely as a dirt jump park.

^{iv} Technical trail feature (TTF) is a term used to describe jumps, rocks, logs, bridges, drop-offs and other obstacles found on or alongside trails that are deliberately placed to challenge the bike handling skills of riders.

4 Mountain biking market

*New, growing
and evolving
market*

Given the short history and evolving nature of mountain biking, limited statistical information accurately describes the mountain biking 'market', particularly in Australia. Therefore, various surveys along with sales figures for mountain bikes provide an indication of the scale of the mountain bike market.

*Bikes are
popular,
particularly
mountain
bikes*

4.1 Mountain bike ownership

- 60% of the population owns a bicycle⁶
- Bike sales increased 29% in 2002-03⁷
- 80% of all the bikes sold today are mountain bikes⁸.

4.2 Participation in mountain biking

An Australian Bureau of Statistics survey⁹ estimated in 2000 there were:

- 3,300 mountain bikers in Northern Tasmania (3.2%)
- 15,300 mountain bikers in Tasmania (4.2%).

*Few surveys
have looked
specifically at
mountain
biking*

Most large Australian surveys that consider trends in sport and recreation participation have not isolated mountain biking as a separate activity from other forms of cycling. Therefore, it is difficult to make definitive conclusions about participation rates in mountain biking in comparison to other activities. However, the popularity of cycling generally (along with the dominance of mountain bike sales over road bikes), provides a reasonable indication of participation trends.

A Sport and Recreation survey of Northern Tasmanians in 2000¹⁰ found:

- 10.5% had participated in cycling in the previous 12 months
- 6.4% indicated that cycling was one of their main activities
- Cycling was the sixth most popular sport or recreation activity in the northern region^v.

According to a 2003 Australian Sports Commission (ASC) survey¹¹:

*Increased
participation
in cycling*

- Cycling was the fourth most popular sport or recreation activity behind walking, swimming and aerobics/fitness
- Tasmanian participation in cycling had increased to 9.7% (35,900 people), up from 8.2% in 2002 and 6.8% in 2001^{vi}.

Given recent increases in the ownership of mountain bikes it is reasonable to conclude that a significant proportion of the increased participation in cycling can be attributed to mountain biking.

^v This survey only looked at participation in people 16 years and above and does not take into account what is probably a large user group (i.e. riders under 16 years of age).

^{vi} Because of differences in methodology the results of different participation surveys cannot be directly compared.

4.3 Mountain bike sales

Mountain bike sales indicate the popularity of the sport

The Australian Bicycle Council notes that the number of mountain bikes imported into Australia has continued to increase since 1995-96 as outlined below⁶:

- 1995-96 – 754,000 mountain bikes imported into Australia
- 2002-03 – 1,128,000 mountain bikes imported into Australia
- 2002-03 – bicycle imports increased 33% in the past 12 months

The number of bicycle retailers indicates the popularity of cycling

Five specialist bike shops are located in Launceston and nine in the greater Hobart area. In addition to bike shops, a number of larger retailers such as K-mart and Target sell bikes, while smaller ‘mobile’ bike shops and bike hire companies also sell, hire or repair bikes. The number of retailers supporting cyclists in Launceston and Hobart suggests there are a considerable number of bike riders in these cities. Sales figures suggest that the majority of these cyclists are riding mountain bikes⁸.

4.4 Mountain bike clubs and events

Only 10% of riders belong to an organised group

Australian and overseas research suggests that less than 10% of mountain bike riders belong to an organised club or group¹². Therefore, gaining an accurate estimate of the number of mountain bikers in a particular area is difficult.

Three clubs hold mountain bike races in Tasmania

Three clubs conduct mountain bike events in Tasmania: the Launceston Mountain Bike Club (LMBC), the Hobart Wheelers/Dirt Devils (Dirt Devils) and the City of Burnie Cycling Club (CBCC). The LMBC caters only for mountain bike riders, whereas the other two clubs cater for mountain bikers along with other cyclists. All three clubs have recently become affiliated with Mountain Bike Australia (MTBA) which provides an opportunity to run a State mountain bike series and better coordinate a calendar of events throughout the State.

The LMBC, which has been operating for one year, currently has 35 members¹³. The club regularly attracts 60-70 people to their downhill and cross country races¹⁴ and expects membership to double over the next year as their race calendar expands^{vii}.

In the south the Dirt Devils held five mountain bike races over the last year¹⁵. The club currently has 25 mountain bike members and attracts around 50 competitors to their events¹⁶. The club indicated it has experienced some difficulty holding events due to a lack of suitable facilities. However, with the introduction of the new mountain bike park at Glenorchy, the club plans to increase the number of events and hopes to expand its membership as a result¹⁶.

^{vii} The club plan to hold up to 25 events over the next year, after holding four events in the first year of incorporation.

The City of Burnie Cycling Club currently only has six mountain bike members¹⁷. The club has been the most active in the State in terms of events, with a race every six weeks and has attracted between 20 and 45 riders to each event¹⁸.

Because the vast majority of people tend to ride for exercise or fun^{viii,10} rather than competition, the 45 to 70 participants the three clubs attract to events in their area are likely to represent only a small proportion of the riders in each of those regions.

Walking, orienteering and multi-sport groups increasingly cater for mountain biking

In addition to mountain bike clubs, other groups around the State also cater for mountain biking in some form. Bicycle Tasmania¹⁹ and walking clubs²⁰ are beginning to hold social rides across the State that typically attract between 10 and 20 riders at a time. Orienteering clubs have recently held mountain bike orienteering events that combine aspects of traditional orienteering with mountain biking. The sport is still in its infancy but continuing to grow in popularity^{ix,21}. Similarly, multi-sport races that combine mountain biking with other activities such as running, road cycling, skiing and kayaking also continue to grow in popularity. These examples demonstrate the increasing popularity of mountain biking and the demand for appropriate venues.

4.4.1 Wildside MTB

Wildside MTB race attracts national and international riders

The most prominent race on the Tasmanian mountain bike calendar is the annual, four-day Wildside MTB which sees over 300 participants ride cross country trails from Cradle Mountain to Strahan. This event is supported by Events Tasmania, recognising that approximately half the competitors and their support crews come from mainland States or overseas and contribute significantly to the local economies on the race route. The race has attracted national and international media attention and regularly attracts the top cross country riders from around Australia, including several Olympians.

Riders need places to train for races

The race is very popular with Tasmanian riders, with the quota for Tasmanians the first category to fill each year²². Anecdotal evidence suggests that riders training specifically for this race have increased the demands for, and pressures on, riding areas around Tasmania.

4.5 Types of mountain biking

There are many different types of mountain bikes and styles of riding and it is difficult to categorise any particular rider. However, surveys that ask the rider to nominate the form of riding they prefer, or do most regularly, may provide some indication of the most popular forms of mountain biking.

^{viii} The Sport and Recreation Tasmania participation survey found that competition was the main motivation for participation in cycling for only 3.9% of participants.

^{ix} The second State championship held recently in the north attracted 35 competitors, including 8 women.

*Cross country
is the most
popular form
of riding*

Surveys have consistently shown that cross country riding is the most popular form of mountain biking. A survey of riders at Mt Wellington⁸ found:

- 64% considered themselves to be cross country riders
- 23% participated in cross country and downhill riding.

A survey of IMBA members²³ regarding the types of riding members had participated in over the previous 12 months found:

*Riders are
difficult to
categorise
because they
will often try
more than
one style of
riding*

- 89% had been cross country riding
- 65% had ridden on a dirt road or rail trail (cross country)
- 23% had been freeriding
- 18% had been downhilling
- 14% had done trials riding.



Cross country – singletrack (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)



Cross country – beginner or novice trail (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)



Downhill – 1996 World Championships, Cairns, Qld (Photo: Keith Ryan, SRT)



‘North Shore’ / Freeriding – North Vancouver (Photos: Keith Ryan, SRT)



Dirt jump park – Tamarack, Idaho (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)



Urban trials area – British Columbia, Canada (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)

4.6 Types of mountain bikes

The types of bikes people ride does provide an indication of the more popular styles of riding. However, it is important to remember that riders might own a bike that is a ‘typical’ downhill bike (see photo page 12) but prefer to ride cross country, while a person with a bike designed for cross country riding (see photo below) might be proficient enough to ride it over extreme downhill trails. The survey of riders at Mt Wellington⁸ found:

- 43% had no suspension
- 42% had front suspension
- 14% had dual suspension.

The Mt Wellington survey results suggest that the majority of bikes could be regarded as cross country bikes (no suspension, or front suspension). These figures support the participation statistics, which indicate that cross country riding is the most popular form of mountain biking.

*Cross country
bikes are the
most common*



Cross country or ‘hardtail’ mountain bike (Photo: Keith Ryan, SRT)

*Changes to
bike
technology
impact on
riding styles*

Mountain bike technology is rapidly changing and as it improves, riding styles change. As bikes become lighter, have greater suspension, become stronger and more efficient to pedal, people are riding distances and trails that would not have been imaginable 20 years ago. Part of the development of freeriding, downhill and the more extreme riding styles is that some people will always be willing to test the limits of the technology. Similarly, trail builders will build trails that test both their ability and new bike technology. Therefore, land managers need to be aware that freeriding, in particular, is constantly evolving. Because of this, trails will need to be adaptable to allow technical features to be changed, or new ones added, in order to challenge riders. Land managers must also provide a range of opportunities to test individuals at different skill levels.

*Downhill
bikes borrow
motorbike
technology*



Dual suspension downhill mountain bike (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)

4.7 Economic benefits and tourism potential of mountain biking

The potential economic benefits of providing high quality mountain bike facilities in Tasmania are difficult to quantify because of the limited number of opportunities that currently exist. However, it is possible to draw on international experiences to demonstrate the economic benefits to an area that actively seeks to attract mountain bikers. Several examples are outlined below. However, additional examples are provided on the IMBA website²⁴.

4.7.1 The Welsh mountain bike initiative

The Welsh Mountain Bike initiative^x started with a single forestry worker who had a passion for mountain biking. Davit Davis worked in a small forestry reserve, Coed y Brenin, in the west of Wales, which had declining visitation rates. Working with an initial budget of £750 and a few dedicated volunteers, he managed to develop the area into a highly successful mountain bike park.

^x The information relating to the Welsh initiative comes from presentations by Joey Klein, who has worked with Davit Davis on developing the various mountain bike parks in Wales.

Mountain bike trails have brought visitors to a depressed area of Wales

As the initial trails at Coed y Brenin became popular, and his construction techniques improved, Davis sought sponsorship to help expand his trail developments. He even used corporate training days and local air force cadets as a source of 'volunteer' labour. As more trails were added and high profile events were held at the site, the number of visitors coming specifically to ride the trails increased dramatically. The figures below show how mountain biking developments attracted visitors to the area:

- 1994 – 13,980 visitors for the year
- 1995 – three trails built with a £750 budget
- 1996 – 'Red Bull Trail' opened and 35,590 visitors for the year
- 1998 – 'Karrimor Trail' and 'Flight Path' opened, with 72,802 visitors
- 2002 – 'MBR Trail' opened, with 170,000 visitors



Opening of MBR trail – Coed y Brenin, Wales, 2002 (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)

Welsh expand to 5 mountain bike parks across Wales

After the success of the Coed y Brenin project, the Welsh decided to invest in four similar mountain bike parks in areas throughout Wales. Using various surveys and statistics they have established that:

- 61% of riders stay overnight at local accommodation
- Visitors stay an average of two days
- The average spend is \$60 a day.

With free entry riders tend to stay longer

The Welsh Government recognised the economic benefits associated with attracting visitors to economically depressed areas and chose not to charge an entry fee to any of the Welsh mountain bike parks.

\$25 Million a year from trails

Based on the estimates above, the approximate income from trails in Wales in 2003 was \$25 million a year. The Welsh have set the goal of having three per cent of the Welsh Gross National Product (GNP) coming from trails by 2005.

4.7.2 Scotland's 7stanes project

Seeing the success of the Welsh initiative, and with a devastated tourist industry after the foot-and-mouth outbreak, the Forestry Commission in Scotland saw the potential to develop mountain bike parks as a way of boosting visitor numbers to the south of Scotland²⁵.

Scotland learns from the Welsh and taps into EU tourism funding

The Forestry Commission decided to build seven mountain bike parks, known as the 7stanes (from the Scottish word for stone), using European Union funding to initiate the project²⁶. The project now has a £2 million budget²⁷ and the length of the trail network continues to grow each year.

4.7.3 Whistler Mountain Bike Park

Whistler Mountain Bike Park is very different from the mountain bike parks of Wales and Scotland, which predominantly cater for cross country riders on singletracks. Whistler and other ski resorts in North America and Europe are beginning to utilise ski lifts, ski runs and other infrastructure to attract mountain bikers in the summer months. With mountains and dramatic changes in altitude, such facilities are very popular with freeride and downhill riders.

Growth in mountain biking mirrors snowboarding in the '80s

Visitor statistics from Whistler show that mountain biking is mirroring the development of snow boarding in the 1980s. Initially, it was seen as an 'extreme' or unpopular fringe activity. However, it is now seen as an essential component for the survival of the resort and municipality during the summer months.

Whistler now has over 200km of lift-serviced trails, three challenge parks, a dirt jump park and a mountain cross or 4X track²⁸. When the lifts were opened to mountain bike riders in 1999 they recorded 10,000 mountain bike visits²⁹. In 2003 Whistler recorded 80,000 mountain bike visits, an increase of 30% from 2002.

Mountain biking is predicted to attract more riders than skiers and snowboarders

The resort predicts that if current growth continues, they will record 250,000 mountain bike visits by 2008, which will surpass ski/snowboard visits for the corresponding year²⁹.

Ski resorts are becoming mountain bike resorts in summer



Whistler Mountain Bike Park – BC, Canada (Photo: Joey Klein, IMBA)

4.7.4 Tasmania as a mountain bike destination

*Tourism
Tasmania
Visitor
Surveys show
riding is
popular with
visitors*

Based on Tourism Tasmania Tasmanian Visitor Surveys over the last five years, it is estimated that between 12,850 and 15,950 visitors cycled or rode a bike off-road during their time in Tasmania³⁰. This represents about two to three per cent of visitors per year, over the past five years.

*Tasmania's
reputation as
a specific
mountain bike
destination is
growing:*

In the 12 months ending September 2004, the average visitor to Tasmania spent \$1,458 during their stay³¹. Although statistically unreliable, the data suggests that people who ride during their trip spend more than the average visitor during their trip³¹. It should, therefore, follow that attracting more riders to Tasmania would have direct economic benefits to the State.

In addition to visitors riding during their trip, various events and developments see Tasmania gaining a reputation as a mountain biking destination, where people come specifically to ride mountain bikes.

Wildside MTB

The annual Wildside MTB race attracts a field that is capped at 300, with over half of those participants coming from interstate or overseas.

*Glenorchy
Mountain
Bike Park*

The Glenorchy Mountain Bike Park was designed to incorporate a mountain cross/4X track^{xi} that will be of international standard and able to cater for national and international events³². MTBA has recently announced that Tasmania (Glenorchy) will host a round of the national mountain bike series. This event is expected to attract approximately 300 competitors, many from the mainland States.

*Great Tassie
Bike Ride*

Every two years Bicycle Victoria conducts a 'Great Tasmanian Bike Ride' that attracts around 1000 riders, mainly from interstate³³.

*Railtrails of
Tasmania*

Railtrails Australia have recently produced a book *Railtrails of Tasmania* promoting 19 different mountain bike trails and cycling tracks along old or existing railway lines in Tasmania³⁴.

*The
Tasmanian
Trail*

The Tasmanian Trail forms part of the nationally recognised bicentennial trail that runs the length of the country. As Tasmania builds its reputation as a mountain biking destination, this trail is likely to attract riders who are specifically looking for the challenge of riding the complete trail.

^{xi} 4X or mountain cross is four racers riding at the same time down a track approximately 30 seconds long.

5 Conclusion

Mountain biking continues to grow and evolve

Mountain biking is an evolving activity that continues to grow in popularity world-wide. Over the last decade we have witnessed the start of this growth in Tasmania and current trends suggest there will be increased demands for areas to ride and a diversity of facilities to cater for different riding styles. Magazines, the internet, videos and DVDs have raised both the awareness and expectations of local riders.

Australia has hosted international events

As well as exposure to international trends, Australia has hosted some high profile mountain bike events. The World Championships were held in Cairns in 1996, the Olympic Games were held in Sydney in 2000, and in 2006 the Commonwealth Games will be held in Listerfield Reserve in Victoria. These events have led to the development of some high quality facilities for mountain biking that have ongoing benefits for local users.

Tourism potential has been demonstrated

Recently the tourism potential of mountain biking has been recognised around the world. Examples from Wales, Scotland, Canada and the USA show there is an increasing market for mountain biking tourism. Tasmania has many of the attributes that would attract visiting mountain bike riders.

Local developments recognise there is a need for facilities

In Tasmania the Glenorchy City Council, Sport and Recreation Tasmania and the Wellington Park Management Trust are building a mountain bike park at the foothills of Mt Wellington. Various councils around the State are looking at developing dirt jump parks, Forestry Tasmania is considering developing a mountain bike park and the Parks and Wildlife Service is developing a management plan for the Trevallyn Reserve, in order to provide trails for mountain bike riders. All of these examples highlight that land managers have recognised a clear need for mountain biking facilities in Tasmania. However, it also shows that land managers have only recently begun to respond to what is a real and growing recreational demand.

Land managers have the opportunity to be proactive and strategic in their response to mountain biking

Given global trends, it is likely that demands from users will increase. Over time, land managers will be required to respond to the needs of users, and land management responses will have to become more strategic. Rather than being a reactive solution to perceived impacts or conflict, land managers have the opportunity to be proactive and deal with the issue before it becomes a problem. Better methods of dealing with mountain biking issues are required, including a concerted effort being made to address user needs and engage the cycling community in solutions. Land managers have the opportunity, both separately and collectively, to provide a planned, strategic and coordinated response to mountain biking across the State and across various land tenures.

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