



THE SOUTHERN VILLAGES ICONIC TRAIL

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Our area has long been a draw card for mountain bikers from Canberra, Sydney and surrounds with major events including the 3 Ring Circus, The Willo and The Highland Fling bringing a brief-but-welcome influx of tourists. In recent years we've also seen trail running events in both Wingello and Bundanoon - part of a larger trend, events grew ten-fold globally between 2008 and 2018.

With COVID's impact on team sports, mountain biking in particular saw huge growth. Families were forced to abandon the time-honored tradition of huddling along the edge of a frozen field watching sport, replacing it with a family ride along tree-lined trails far away from traffic. Both mountain biking and trail running encourage a healthy lifestyle and are intertwined with a deep appreciation of outdoor spaces - something our region, until last year, had offered in spades.

Beyond the immediate and deep tragedy of last January's bushfires, the loss of Wingello State Forest forced riders - local and from afar - to find other places to ride. Alongside that, many of the trails of Morton National Park remain closed, giving trail runners little incentive to visit our part of the world.

The volunteers of Highlands Trails have been working with the Forestry Corporation of NSW since the bushfires to establish a recovery plan for the Wingello State Forest trails. By the end of the year, with a lot of work and just a little luck, will see the majority of those trails reopened. However, with the growth of 'trail destinations', the forest trails alone are not enough to compete with the draw of Thredbo, Tathra or Derby, let alone the grand plans Canberra and Wollongong have proposed for trail-based tourism.

If we want to capitalise on the growth of these activities we need to think bigger.

We in the Southern Villages - Exeter, Bundanoon, Penrose and Wingello - are uniquely situated on the edge of a spectacular network of gorges as far as the eye can see. A mixed-use trail - used by walkers, runners and riders alike - linking the villages would provide an invaluable asset for locals and would offer tourists a multi-day experience with views and surrounds unique to our area.

The Southern Villages Iconic Trail would start at the Wingello State Forest camp, incorporating parts of the forest's trail network before branching off, following the ridgeline above Johnstones Creek, south of Penrose through to Bundanoon. Continuing on, the trail would skirt the edge of Exeter as it winds its way through Meryla to Fitzroy Falls before a final descent into Kangaroo Valley. With access points to and from each village the trail could be done in sizeable chunks or, for those looking to push their limits, the 80km+ journey could be completed in a single day.

This Iconic Trail would present new opportunities for local businesses. Cafés, pubs and accommodation providers would benefit from the increased traffic and new markets would open up, not only for bike shops and outdoor equipment retailers, but for support businesses such as tour guides and shuttle services.

By giving an immersive experience through Morton National Park, trail users would gain a greater appreciation of our natural surrounds. Information boards along the trail could mark points of interest and acknowledge locations and events in the history of the Gundangara and Tharawal people.

Iconic trails like these have precedent - Thredbo Valley Trail links Thredbo Village, Lake Crackenback Resort and Jindabyne as it winds along the



Thredbo River through Kosciuszko National Park. Canberra has the Centenary Trail, a 140km loop that traces the city's boundaries. Both of these cater for a wide variety of skill levels of runners, walkers and mountain bikers.

Much would need to be done before rakes could hit the ground. The Morton National Park Plan of Management needs to be updated to allow mountain bike use, and access to segments of crown and council land would be required for a viable route. Feasibility studies, environmental and cultural heritage impact assessments would all need to take place before a push to secure funding for the project.

And yet, if it came to fruition, the Southern Villages Iconic Trail would be a playground for locals, an invitation for previous visitors and a beacon for those new to the area and the sports that bring them here. The project wouldn't be easy but, like the proposed trail itself, exceptional experiences are never easy. In the end, the rewards are sure to outweigh the hard work.

If you'd like to support the push for the Southern Villages Iconic Trail, go to:
<https://highlandstrails.com.au/southern-villages-iconic-trail>