

DISCUSSION PAPER

DOG WALKING ACTIVITIES in the MORNINGTON PENINSULA NATIONAL PARK

1. Introduction

This discussion paper aims to provide the community with background information on the issue of dog walking in the Mornington Peninsula National Park. It outlines the current issues associated with dog walking in the park and options for proposed changes to the current dog walking regulations for Parks Victoria to consider in consultation with the community.

Under the Mornington Peninsula National Park Management Plan 1998, on-leash dog walking is currently permitted between sunrise and 9.00am every day in the following park areas (refer Figure 1):

- between London Bridge and 300 metres east of the Gunnamatta Surf Life Saving Clubhouse (except for a section of the Portsea Surf Beach where dogs are prohibited during the period from November to April inclusive); and
- along the Flinders coastal section between West Head and Stockyard Creek (except within the Mushroom Reef Marine Sanctuary area).

Changes to the current dog walking regulations are necessary to improve the breeding success of shore birds including the threatened Hooded Plover, to enhance protection of wildlife, to address the major issue of non-compliance with the current regulations, and to enhance the enjoyment of other park visitors.

The Mornington Peninsula National Park is particularly important for biodiversity conservation and 32 species of native fauna listed as endangered, vulnerable or near threatened in Victoria have been recorded in the Park¹ including 16 species listed under the Victorian *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* and 6 species listed as endangered or vulnerable under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

The ocean beaches on the Mornington Peninsula provide habitat to some 15% of the Victorian FFG listed Hooded Plover breeding population (Ewers et al. 2011) which is the second highest density population on the Victorian coast. The ocean beaches provide habitat, feeding or resting areas for significant wader and marine bird species including the Sooty Oystercatcher, Fairy Prion, Pacific Gull and a number of Petrel species.

2. Background

Dog walking has occurred along the Mornington Peninsula ocean beaches for many years including the period before much of the coastline was first declared in 1975 under the *National Parks Act 1975* which was then known as Cape Schanck Coastal Park.

A Draft Management Plan for the Mornington Peninsula National Park prepared in 1996 recommended that dogs be prohibited from the park effective from March 1998. The ban was proposed to reduce conflicts with nature conservation objectives and other park users. At the time, many complaints and concerns were

¹ Department of Sustainability and Environment List of Threatened Invertebrate Fauna in Victoria 2009

expressed about threatening dogs, dog attacks, annoying dog behaviour, interference with wildlife particularly the Hooded Plover and other shore birds, and fouling of tracks and beaches. Due to the common practice of owners allowing dogs to run free many of these problems have been intensified.

In response to public submissions on the exhibited draft management plan, the final approved management plan (Parks Victoria 1998) introduced additional restrictions on when dogs could be walked rather than a blanket prohibition across the whole park. The approved management plan recommended a 12 month trial to monitor compliance with the new restrictions, and to consider further restrictions or a total prohibition if non-compliance with the regulations continued to be a major problem, and there were on-going impacts of dogs on park values and other visitors.

Following the 12 month trial, and despite on-going impacts and poor levels of compliance with the regulations, no changes to the dog walking regulations were made until 2009 when a seasonal Shorebird Protection Zone was established in the Portsea Surf Beach area.

Despite more than 14 years of considerable efforts by rangers in community education and compliance, there continues to be consistent high levels of non-compliance with the current regulations, particularly dogs off leash. There are also on-going negative effects on park values from dog walking activities including impacts on breeding success of Hooded Plovers which has been confirmed through nest and chick research and monitoring by Birdlife Australia, Parks Victoria and the Friends of the Hooded Plover.

Parks Victoria is seeking the views of the local and broader community and key stakeholders that have a special interest in the Mornington Peninsula National Park on options to address the impacts of dogs and the issue of non-compliance with the Park Regulations.

The views of the community will help inform a decision on what dog walking opportunities may continue to be provided for, or if a complete prohibition on dogs in the Mornington Peninsula National Park should be introduced.

3. Key considerations:

Benefits of dog walking

Dogs are popular recreation companions and contribute to human health and well-being. Walking has many benefits, such as reduced stress, enhanced mood, increased heart and lung fitness and a number of social benefits.² Many people enjoy walking with a dog in natural areas such as parkland, open space, bush and coastal areas. Dog walking is popular in the coastal section of the Mornington Peninsula National Park due to the beach environment and most of this activity is undertaken by neighbours within walking distance, and local residents and visitors that drive to park areas where dogs are permitted.

Walking with dogs provides companionship and security for many people. No formal surveys have been undertaken in the park however it is expected that many walkers may feel more secure when with their dog, particularly when walking along the walking tracks in densely vegetated areas and walking in more remote areas of the park.

Non-compliance with Regulations

Research has demonstrated that wherever dogs are permitted on Australian beaches, most of them will be off the leash regardless of the prevailing regulations or management efforts (Weston 2003)

Several factors may cause non-compliance with dog regulations including the perception by some dog walkers that their dog does not pose a threat to wildlife and the belief that unleashed dog exercise is beneficial to dogs (Henry 2006).

Birds Australia volunteer records over the period from 2006-2011 show that dog walkers in the Mornington Peninsula National Park often allow dogs off leash with some 80% of all dogs observed being off leash

² Parkweb: www.parkweb.vic.gov.au

Opportunities for dog walking

National parks in Victoria are primarily managed for conservation purposes and are generally considered to be sanctuaries for native animals. Dog walking is usually not provided for in national parks and dogs are currently prohibited in the majority of Victoria's 46 national parks. Exceptions include the Mornington Peninsula, Great Otway, Greater Bendigo, Kinglake, Dandenong Ranges, Lake Eildon, Heathcote-Graytown and Lower Glenelg National Parks where dogs are permitted in specific restricted areas.

Where permitted in national parks in Victoria, **dogs must be kept on leash at all times and can only be walked in areas set aside for dog walking** under the *National Parks (Park) Regulations 2004*.

There are extensive opportunities for on-leash dog walking on the Mornington Peninsula including a range of local Shire parks and reserves, foreshores on both Port Phillip and Western Port Bays and other reserves managed by community-based Committees of Management.

The Mornington Peninsula Shire provides 59 designated 'leash-free' areas where dogs may be exercised off-leash at all times all year round.³ Parks Victoria provides opportunities for off-leash dog exercise in metropolitan parks managed primarily for recreation purposes.

The Mornington Peninsula Shire prohibits dogs in most of the more than 200 bushland reserves managed by the Shire. These reserves are important for nature conservation and if dogs are permitted they must be kept on a leash.

Impacts of dogs on natural values

Dogs are known to have adverse impacts on birds and other fauna, and their presence, scent and noise may disturb fauna and prevent foraging in some areas where dogs have been (Banks & Bryant 2007).

A study by Banks and Bryant found that even on-leash dog walking in natural areas reduced bird abundance and bird diversity, particularly affecting ground dwelling birds. In coastal areas, birds such as the Hooded Plover require protection from disturbance caused by dogs (Weston 2003). Dogs can have serious impacts on bird populations and other wildlife (Kirby et al 1993) and are known to be highly disturbing to breeding birds by chasing and killing individual birds and accidentally crushing nests (Weston 2003).

Dogs can also have direct impacts on fauna in the park including wallabies and small mammals such as the White-footed Dunnart and the Long-nosed Bandicoot. Dogs can prey on, harass, injure and spread disease to wildlife (Practical Ecology 2011). Dogs can also disturb wildlife by their scent, sounds, scratching and digging. Dog excrement and urine may attract foxes increasing threats to wildlife.



Hooded Plover nest monitoring in the park has occurred over many years and monitoring over the past 5 years has demonstrated that dogs impact on the threatened Hooded Plover in the Mornington Peninsula National Park by disturbing nesting birds and trampling nests, particularly as many dog owners allow their dogs to run free off leash.

Hooded Plovers nest on beaches and in the adjacent sand dunes each year from September to March⁴ which is the period when dog walking is also most popular.

Hooded Plover (photograph courtesy of Glen Emhke)

³ Refer to Mornington Peninsula Shire Leash Free link www.mornpen.vic.gov.au

⁴ The Hooded Plover breeding season can extend from as early as August to April in some years.

Hooded Plover pairs often have multiple nesting attempts each season however there is a low level of successful nests that result in fledged⁵ birds. Hooded Plover nests abandoned by adult birds as a consequence of disturbance are prone to increased risks of failure due to exposure of eggs or chicks to weather and predation.

On-leash dog walking is only permitted on one section of the many beach areas in the Phillip Island Nature Park. On average, some 23% of nests on Phillip Island successfully produce fledglings compared with an average of some 11 % of nests on the Mornington Peninsula.

Hooded Plover Breeding Success

The Hooded Plover Breeding Season Report for Victoria in 2007-2008 found that dogs were implicated in 18% of Hooded Plover egg failures and some 17% of chick failures (source Birds Australia 2008)

Birdlife Australia monitoring of the Hooded Plover on the Mornington Peninsula since 2006 has shown that Hooded Plover breeding success is much higher in areas where dogs are prohibited, with 70% of chicks having successfully fledged in "no dog" areas (Gunnamatta east and Point Nepean)

Impacts of dogs on visitor experiences

Dogs are a source of annoyance, distress and sometimes harm to park visitors, especially along walking tracks and on beaches if dogs are not on leads, are not properly controlled and if dog owners do not clean up dog excrement. Some people are frightened of dogs and dog excrement can cause offence to visitors and have environmental, amenity and health impacts. Parks Victoria receives many complaints about dogs and people feeling threatened.

Some people simply object to dogs in national parks because they are not part of the natural environment and make wildlife more difficult to observe.

Impacts of dogs on park management

Since 1998, despite on-going education and compliance patrols by rangers, there has been little improvement in compliance with the dog regulations. The presence of dogs in the Mornington Peninsula National Park, in particular the issue of significant non-compliance with both the on-lead rule and 9.00am curfew, leads to considerable ranger resources allocated to manage this issue at the expense of other management activities. No noticeable improvement in dog walker behaviours is evident from data on infringements.

It is evident from ranger patrol records that where dogs are permitted in the park, dogs are often allowed to run off leash. Comparatively, there are relatively few non-compliance issues in areas of the park where dogs are prohibited (e.g. Gunnamatta to Fingal Beach, Cape Schanck to Bushrangers Bay and Greens Bush). There are also similar low levels of non-compliance with regulations in Arthurs Seat State Park and nearby conservation reserves where dog walking is not permitted.

A high ranger and volunteer presence is required to monitor and protect vulnerable Hooded Plover nests and chicks throughout the breeding season and dogs are known to be one of the most prevalent causes of breeding failure that can be prevented or minimised by management intervention.

Targeted fox control is undertaken annually on the Mornington Peninsula ocean beaches to reduce fox predation of Hooded Plover eggs and chicks and on other important species including the White-footed Dunnart and the Long-nosed Bandicoot. The majority of fox baiting is currently undertaken in the Gunnamatta and Point Nepean areas where dogs are prohibited and there are lower risks of wandering dogs from neighbouring residential areas.

Fox Predation

Fox predation is considered to be a particularly significant cause of Hooded Plover breeding failure, and along with reducing the impacts of dogs, can also be influenced by park management action.

In Victoria, foxes were implicated in some 40% of non-natural causes of Hooded Plover egg failure and 34% of chick failure in the 2007/08 breeding season (source Birds Australia 2008).

⁵ Fledged means that chicks are able to fly and avoid many threats.



The White-footed Dunnart (pictured left) is a small carnivorous mammal measuring up to 20 centimetres in total length. It has been re-discovered in the coastal portion of the Mornington Peninsula National Park through the use of remote sensing cameras. This species is listed under the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act and is near threatened in Victoria.

The ability to expand the current targeted fox control program to improve Hooded Plover breeding success and enhance protection of other fauna including the White-footed Dunnart and the Long-nosed Bandicoot is constrained by the presence of dogs in the park, combined with the problem of dogs being allowed to run off-leash. Dogs are highly susceptible to fox baits, and soft-jaw leg traps which are more expensive than baiting is also compromised by dogs running free.



The Long-nosed Bandicoot (pictured left) also occurs along the coastal portion of the Mornington Peninsula National Park. The body length measures up to 42 centimetres and it is a regionally significant fauna species. The bandicoot is one of many species threatened by foxes and cats which would benefit from increased fox control.

4. Management options

There are diverse community views on the issue of dog walking in the Mornington Peninsula National Park and there are a range of options for future dog access that may be applied to reduce the impacts of dogs in the park.

Many in the community believe that the Mornington Peninsula ocean beach environs are important for a range of recreational activities which focus on enjoyment of the coast – the park is after all the most visited national park in Victoria with over 3 million visitors annually. The ocean beaches are also very important for nature conservation and in the coastal areas where on-leash dog walking is currently permitted some 21 significant native fauna species listed as endangered, vulnerable or near threatened have been recorded.

The need to mitigate threats posed by dogs to wildlife is an action which can be influenced by management intervention with community support. The breeding success of the Hooded Plover is also threatened by natural processes such as predation by other birds and coastal erosion from storm surges and high tides. Impacts of coastal erosion, which is currently occurring, may increase with predicted climate change effects and result in decreased suitable habitat for the Hooded Plover and make it more important to take action on threats posed by dogs and people on beaches.

The following options are presented for consideration to address the threats posed by dogs in the park. These options only apply to those areas of the park where dog walking is currently permitted as no changes are proposed to those areas of the park where dogs are currently prohibited.

Option 1 – Seasonal prohibition in selected park areas

This option entails establishing additional park areas where dogs would be prohibited during the period from October to March inclusive, in selected high value fauna habitat (Figure 2). These habitat areas generally comprise known Hooded Plover breeding locations and habitat for significant mammals including the Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act listed White-footed Dunnart and the regionally significant Long-nosed Bandicoot.

Recent remote camera monitoring has identified that the London Bridge to Sphinx Rock area is particularly important for other significant fauna including White-footed Dunnart and the Long-nosed Bandicoot, with 14 recorded sightings.

While the majority of ocean beaches are utilised by the Hooded Plover, areas with the highest level of breeding activity are those beaches with adjacent sand dune systems and not beaches backed by rocky cliffs or escarpments. Designated areas where on-leash dog walking is currently permitted and where Hooded Plover breeding activity is commonly highest include:

- London Bridge to Sphinx Rock (Portsea Surf Beach)
- Koonya Ocean Beach
- Number 16 to Rye Ocean Beach (including St Andrews Beach)
- Rye Ocean Beach to Boags Rocks
- Gunnamatta Beach to Boags Rocks

This option will entail a seasonal prohibition on dog walking on beaches as well as all adjacent bushland and walking tracks and will cover all of the above- listed areas.

While this option is expected to improve fauna protection outcomes including enhanced Hooded Plover breeding success, and would have less impact on dog walkers than the other options, it would result in overall less benefit to fauna compared to the other options due to an overall higher level of continued dog walking opportunities (i.e. dog walking all year in some areas and seasonally in designated areas).

Should designated ‘no dog areas’ be impacted on by natural processes (e.g. coastal erosion resulting in loss of suitable nesting habitat), review of the designated sites will need to be undertaken and possibly shifted to ensure increased efforts are made to protect nests and chicks in other areas.

Option 2: Seasonal prohibition across the entire park

This option proposes to only provide for dog walking during the period from April to September inclusive. This period generally coincides with the non-breeding season of the Hooded Plover, although the breeding season can vary from year to year and extend from August to April inclusive.

A ban on dog walking in all areas of the park during the October to March period inclusive will significantly improve breeding success in conjunction with actively managing of other threats to breeding such as predator control.

Prohibiting dogs during the October to March inclusive would facilitate opportunities to extend fox control baiting and leg trapping programs to provide for enhanced fauna protection outcomes for shorebirds, wallabies and small mammals such as the Long-nosed Bandicoot and the White-footed Dunnart. There would also be significantly less impacts on other park visitors, including those seeking nature-based experiences, as the October to March inclusive also coincides with the higher visitation period.

As for Option 4, a total seasonal prohibition would provide a straightforward message for the community to understand and for park managers to maintain compliance and provide on-going education programs. As experienced elsewhere in conservation areas where dogs are not permitted, non-compliance is anticipated to decline to low and manageable levels over time.

Option 3: Restrict dog walking to designated high use visitor sites

This option proposes that dog walking is limited to selected visitor sites between sunrise and 9.00am and maintains the opportunity for dog walkers to experience the ocean beach environs in a restricted manner.

Dog walking would be restricted to key visitor sites where recreational use is a primary activity in accordance with the park management zoning applied in the approved Management Plan. High use visitor sites generally have lower levels of wildlife and Hooded Plover breeding activity hence this option would result in lower potential impact on fauna.

The primary visitor sites include Portsea Surf Beach, Sorrento Back Beach, Rye Ocean Beach, Gunnamatta Ocean Beach and sections of Flinders Ocean Beach (Figure 3). On-leash dog walking would only be permitted within designated and sign-posted areas within these visitor sites.

This option is expected to provide significant improvements in reducing impacts of dogs on wildlife and other park users, particularly those seeking nature-based experiences along the coastal walking tracks and more isolated beaches. This option also provides for enhanced fox control opportunities to provide additional protection of wildlife, particularly Hooded Plovers and small mammals at key locations.

Impacts on other park visitors may increase at the designated dog walking visitor sites as a consequence of higher numbers of dogs within these restricted sections of the beach coinciding with higher numbers of other visitors. These impacts should be manageable if dog walkers comply with on-lead requirements, as demonstrated on bay beaches that are very popular for recreation and dog walking.

Option 4: Year-round prohibition across the entire park

The option to prohibit dogs from the entire park is expected to provide the most optimal benefits for fauna protection and Hooded Plover breeding success, and the greatest benefit for other park visitors.

A total prohibition of dogs from the park would enable increased opportunities for targeted fox control using poison baiting and soft jaw leg trapping to benefit all fauna in the Park.

A total prohibition would provide the most straightforward message for the community to understand and accept and for park managers to maintain compliance and provide on-going education programs. As experienced elsewhere in conservation areas where dogs are not permitted, non-compliance is anticipated to decline to low and manageable levels over time.

This option would result in overall positive and sustained outcomes for park management resourcing and effectiveness in the medium to long term in addition to achieving improved outcomes for fauna conservation and enhanced experiences for other visitors.

5. Conclusions:

A year-round prohibition of dogs from the Mornington Peninsula National Park would provide the most optimum benefits for fauna conservation, other park visitors and management efficiency gains, and is likely to be the easiest for the community to understand and comply with.

Communication on the selected option will be undertaken to ensure visitors and park neighbours are aware of the changes that may be implemented. A transition period would be provided to give dog walkers time to understand the changes and also change how and where they can exercise with their dogs.

Following the transition period, compliance with the adopted option will be undertaken and appropriately enforced. Should the selected option be one that provides for continued dog walking opportunities, and if monitoring shows that non-compliance continues to impact on fauna and other park users, then a further review will be undertaken within 2 years of the selected option being implemented.

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Further Reading

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