

# Walking Trails Classification and Improvement Project

Update no.7 December 2008

The Walking Trails Classification and Improvement Project is funded under 'Go for your life', which is a Victorian Government initiative that aims to promote the health and wellbeing of all Victorians through healthy eating and increased participation in physical activity.

There are two parts to the project:

- Developing a new Standard Classification system for walking trails
- Undertaking upgrades to selected State forest walking trails in Victoria

The Walking Trails Classification and Improvement Project is funded for 4 years and is coordinated through the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE).

## Research underway – testing of walking trail classification systems

Instinct and Reason, a social research company based in Sydney, has been contracted to undertake the final research phase of the project that involves testing new and existing walking trail classification systems on walkers across Australia. This research commenced in October 2008 and will be concluded by February 2009. The end result of the research will be the identification of the most user friendly system that is accepted by users as meeting their needs; and provides the most appropriate level of information to assist walkers in their decision making. This research takes into account:

- Walkers of varying abilities and experience
- Different climatic conditions and the effect on the walking experience across Australia
- Different landscapes and environments
- Both urban and rural environments
- Varying levels of users' mobility

An initial qualitative phase was completed by early November. Focus groups of walkers were held across Australia to ascertain walkers' needs for information and the attributes of walking trail classification systems that were of most use to them when

making decisions about the trails they were going to walk.

Interim results from the focus groups revealed that most walkers come to the trailhead having done some research prior to the walk. Key questions for walkers were: can I do this walk? And, can I do this walk **now**? In the focus groups, walkers identified that the following attributes of a walking trail classification system were of use to them:

- Distance – how far is it?
- Gradient – presence of steps and frequency of ascents and descents
- Type of surface – whether formed or unformed
- Experience needed including navigation skills

The qualitative phase also explored the motivations of walkers and what walking adds to people's lives. People were seeking a change in perspective from their everyday lives, a sense of belonging either to the environment or their companions, and for some, the physical challenge was the main motivating factor. For the challenge seekers, it was found that warnings and other safety messages were generally ignored, with the exception of 'equipment needed', which seemed to cause those inadequately equipped to think about their limitations.

An interesting aside in the interim results was that many people walked in order to have social contact with others, but in some cases found it difficult to connect with like minded people who wanted to walk. This has implications for bushwalking clubs who could potentially play a role in connecting socially isolated people.

These results are preliminary only at this stage and more definitive results will be available in 2009.

### **Werribee River Walk re-opened**

The Werribee River Walk was originally constructed in the 1970s as part of an employment scheme. It was closed a couple of years ago due to unsafe footbridges which no longer complied with today's standards.

As part of the Walking Trails Classification and Improvement Project, the walk was upgraded in 2008, footbridges replaced, landscaping works completed at the car park and picnic area, and the walk was recently re-opened.

The walk is a 4.5km return loop and follows the Werribee River through the forest near Daylesford. The walk can be accessed from the Ballan-Daylesford Road and starts from the Werribee River Picnic Ground on the Bunding-Blakeville Road north of Ballan.

The work was coordinated by Merydth Whitehead and Robin Holmes of DSE Daylesford.

### **For more information**

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