



16 December 2019

Transport for NSW
Roads and Maritime Services
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AUSTRALIAN CLIMBING ASSOCIATION OF NSW Inc FEEDBACK ON BLACKHEATH GWH DUPLICATION OPTIONS

We are writing on behalf of the Australian Climbing Association NSW Inc (ACANSW) in regard to the significant damage that a western duplication of the Great Western Highway (GWH) through Blackheath will have on:

- a) the sensitive local environment and recreational opportunities in this area
- b) access and amenity of the world-class rock-climbing areas that exist in this area.

The ACANSW is a recently formed peak body representing climbers in NSW, and its affiliate members include the Sydney Rock Climbing Club. The Sydney Rock-climbing Club (SRC) incorporated in 1951 and was involved in climbing access issues up until formation of ACANSW. SRC has nearly 400 members, with over 2000 social media followers.

ACANSW is now your first point of contact whenever dealing with rock climbing issues within the BMLGA, including at the very early stages of developing GWH upgrade options that impact climbers, climbing areas and access. The aim of the ACANSW is to advocate for and promote responsible and sustainable access to rock climbing and abseiling areas in NSW.

The Blue Mountains area provides national and international climbers of all ages and abilities with access to over 6,000 climbing routes and contributes significantly to the visitor economy. On the western fringes of Blackheath alone, there are 10 major crag destinations within walking distance of the Blackheath village. The crags are located within an extremely beautiful natural landscape that is remarkable given its ease of access. All of these climbing destinations (crag) lie within, or within close proximity to, the proposed GWH upgrade route option which considers bridges and tunnels crossing over or under Shipley Road, Centennial Glen and Porters Pass. The crags include

- Megalong Valley
- Shipley Upper
- Shipley Lower
- Centennial Glen, including Wave Wall
- Porters Pass
- Gateway
- The Fortress
- Celebrity Crag, including Jimmy Cliff & Sharon Stone cliffs
- Heathcliff
- Mount Boyce cliffs



Location of these key crags is shown in Figure 1 below (© thecrag.com)



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Figure 1: Location of Key Crags on Western Escarpment (Medlow to Mt Boyce)

Across these major crag destinations there are nearly 700 high quality, and extremely popular, rock climbing routes. These routes are frequented by local and visiting climbers. Many climbers have chosen to relocate to Blackheath and include beginners, couples with or without families, elite athletes, enthusiastic amateurs, and retirees. They do so because of the proximity of high-quality climbing. Only in this unique village of Blackheath can a fabulous work-climb-family-social balance be achieved.

History of Climbing in Centennial Glen

Centennial Glen is the home of sport climbing in Australia. Affectionately known to climbers as “The Glen”, it presents climbers with all styles and difficulty levels. You can climb here in winter, summer, during the snow or in a heatwave. Some walls are sheltered from wind and rain. You can walk here from town, meaning it is one of the few quality climbing destinations in Australia accessible by public transport.

Whilst the walking tracks in The Glen and Porters Pass date back to 1868/1869, climbing in this area dates back to the early 1970s and a burst of development in the late 1980s and 1990s by John Smoothy, Mike Law, Giles Bradbury and Mark Baker. These climbers paved the way for sport climbing in the Blue Mountains that is now enjoyed by so many. Giles and Mike who are now in their 60’s still frequently climb in the area. Simultaneously, the area is enjoyed by our youth and elite climbing athletes. Many youth climbers have had their first outdoor climbing experience in this area because of the quality of the climbs and proximity to Blackheath. Some of these youth climbers are NSW State and National Sport Climbing team members and in particular Tom O’Halloran and Angie Scarth-Johnson are currently looking to represent Australia in the 2020 Olympic Climbing team. Angie was climbing in the Glen when she was just 8 years old. By age 9, Angie, who moved with her family to the Blue Mountains because of the quality of accessible climbing, became a world record holder and the youngest person to climb an expert grade 31 route. The value that this area has to our current and future youth cannot be understated.

This area is now the heart of Blue Mountains climbing.

Monique Forestier Climbing in Centennial Glen © Simon Carter Photography

Social Impact of Climbing

Climbing is a social sport. Climbers are keen contributors to the society and economy of Blackheath and the upper Blue Mountains towns. The proximity of such a beautiful, high quality climbing area to the town of Blackheath has enriched the town, with frequent visitors from overseas and interstate travellers. Climbers work in local hospitals, medical centres, primary and high school, cafes and art galleries and run many local businesses. Centennial Glen and area are important parts of the local community, and while in some towns, the beach or parks are meeting and social places, the walking tracks of Centennial Glen are a major meeting point and social area for the climbers and hikers and people of Blackheath. The alteration that a highway would create at Centennial Glen is analogous to placing the Cahill Expressway over Bondi Beach in terms of loss of the visitor experience.



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The destruction of access or alteration to the current experience at the crags of Shipley, Centennial Glen and Porters Pass would devastate the climbing community and rob our youth of the opportunities to experience their first outdoor climbs in such a special location.

**International Climber, Stefan Glowacz climbing “Soul Catcher, 25” in Porters Pass. ©
Simon Carter Photography**

User Statistics

Across the 700 routes spread out across the 10 key crag areas mentioned above (all in close proximity to western Blackheath and in the direct path of the proposed western bypass option), climbers have recorded some 45,000 all-time ascents (via www.thecrag.com online database). Based on a recent survey by the Save Centennial Group, it is estimated that actual ascents, including those not recorded online, amount to nearly **60,000 ascents per year** for the Centennial Glen area alone. Based on face-to-face survey data collected by the Save Centennial Glen Group, the number of individual climbing days in the Centennial Glen around is estimated to be **11,000** (most individuals complete on average just over 5 routes per day) per year.

In addition to the frequency of climbing in this area, 3 of the top 5 five most popular outdoor climbs in all of NSW can be found within the Shipley Upper and Centennial Glen area. Furthermore, 2 outdoor routes are ranked within the top 10 for all time popularity in Australia.

Survey data shows that over 80% of climbers visit the area from other suburbs in the Blue Mountains, Sydney and interstate. A small percentage (6%) of climbers visit from overseas, including from North America and Europe. Most of the climbers which come to climb here visit local cafes, restaurants, pubs, bakeries and supermarkets in Blackheath. Just under half of visitors paid for overnight accommodation in Blackheath, some of this in walking distance to Centennial Glen, highlighting the importance this area has to the climbing community.

In addition to climbers, CragCare and Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC) trip counters (taken over a 3-year period) have registered **30,000 visits per annum** to the Centennial Glen reserve area. CragCare (established in 2005) have recorded 7,500 volunteer hours on track care in the area, with effort put in by 800 individuals who have moved over 150 tonnes of stone with a financial investment by BMCC exceeding \$500,000 for this work alone.

Why ACANSW Oppose the GWH Upgrade Options

The ACANSW officially opposes the option of GWH duplication that impacts on western Blackheath including bridges or tunnels through the Megalong Valley, Shipley, Centennial Glen and Porters Pass because of the following reasons:

- Environmental destruction will directly impact on sensitive cliff environments where climbing routes are located. The environment includes cliffs, hanging swamps, waterfalls, cascades, canyons and all variety of clifftop vegetation communities. Porters Pass is the annual nesting place of variety of birds including Cockatoo's, Kestrels and Falcons. The impact of bridges over quiet valleys and tunnel portals in sensitive swamp and cliff environments would be catastrophic. This image below is a view of the western escarpment of Porter Pass (Shipley in the background) where Transport for NSW



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propose bridges and tunnels. The pristine beauty of this area is clearly visible in both images, while being accessed from Blackheath on foot.

View of Porters Pass from Celebrity Crags © Karen Allan

- Negative impact on the historical significance of climbing and may severely restrict the ability of future and current generations to continue to enjoy high quality climbing within close proximity of Blackheath. This area is entirely unique and must be protected.
- Direct negative impact on recreational climbing access, affecting some 11,000 number of climbers who have known to visit the area each year
- and the subsequent impacts this will have on the economy of the small village of Blackheath.
- Increased noise associated with realignment of the GWH to the west of Blackheath will significantly impact on the peaceful ambience of the area.

View of the Canyon perched between Centennial Glen & Porters Pass © Karen Allan

TfNSW objectives will not be met

Transport for NSW (TfNSW) have stated its objectives for the GWH Upgrade program will improve safety, connect communities, boost regional economies, preserve the natural environment, improve freight connection and reduce travel time. The proposed western Blackheath bypass option does not satisfy all of the Transport for NSW objectives. It will

- NOT improve safety, by making access to key western Blackheath climbing areas difficult or impossible. There is no evidence that duplicating the highway is safer for Blackheath residents and none of the current alignment options address improving safety at the current railway level crossing, which climbers use to access the western climbing areas.
- NOT connect our community – it will destroy access to and enjoyment of key western Blackheath climbing areas.
- NOT boost local Blackheath economy – by destroying local access to one of the only major climbing destinations in Australia that can be accessed by public transport, directly reducing visitation to and economy of the Blackheath village.
- NOT preserve the natural environment – it will destroy sensitive natural environments that are irreplaceable. Destruction of this valuable environment for 10 minutes saving in travel time is ethically irresponsible and not in the interests of the local community or climbers.

The only objectives that are likely to be satisfied are improved freight connection and reduced travel time. These objectives should not be met at the expense of the other key objectives. ACANSW strongly suggests that improved freight connection be considered more holistically in conjunction with the existing rail corridor, or even with duplication of the rail corridor beneath Blackheath.



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Supporting Documentation

This document opposing the Blackheath Great Western Highway western bypass and options including bridges and tunnels in the vicinity of Shipley, Centennial Glen and Porters Pass is accompanied by the attached letters written by key members of our climbing community, mentioned above, including:

- Giles Bradbury – one of the first climbing developers in the Centennial Glen area and resident of Blackheath.
- Mike Law – also one of the first route developers in the Centennial Glen area and long-time advocate of climbing in NSW
- Tom O’Halloran – Internationally acclaimed and Australia’s highest achieving male rock climber, Ninja Warrior and 2020 Olympic contender and resident of Gordon Avenue, Blackheath.
- Angie Scarth-Johnson – Internationally acclaimed and Australia’s most famous female rock climber, world record holder and 2020 Olympic contender and resident of Blue Mountains.
- Adam Darragh – local mountain guide and instructor at Blue Mountains TAFE, One of Australia’s most experienced guides and instructors, Adam has a formidable climbing resume which includes expeditions to Peak Kommunisma (7,495mts), Nanga Parbat (8,125mts), Dhaulagiri (8,167mts) and the first solo ascent of Mt Cholatse (6,145mts) via the difficult West Rib. His Big Wall experience includes the Salathe and Shield Routes on El Capitan and ascents of numerous hard free routes including “North Face” of the Rostrum and “Astroman” in Yosemite Valley. Adam has over forty ascents in New Zealand’s Southern Alps including the South Face of Mt Hicks and eight different routes on Mt Cook.
- Katariina Rahikainen – Local resident, climber, and coordinator for CragCare, an initiative by the Blue Mountains rock climbers to maintain and upgrade heritage listed walking tracks in the Centennial Glen area.
- Interviews with youth from the Camp Street Climbing group in Katoomba.

Yours sincerely

For and on behalf of
Australian Climbing Association of NSW Inc.
INC1901498



<https://www.facebook.com/Australian-Climbing-Association-NSW-100368274700764/>

Attachments – Supporting Letters and Interviews