



www.bushwalkingaustralia.org



Submission to the Independent Review of Sport

July 2009

Introduction

Distinguishing Characteristics of Bushwalking

Bushwalking is a high participation, low impact activity that people can enjoy throughout most of their lives. This is abundantly clear from the ERASS data (Figure 1). Yet despite the huge amount of physical activity it delivers to the population at large, bushwalking and other forms of recreational walking receive very little official recognition or support.

Bushwalking is distinguished from other sports in that it is largely non-competitive and people do not have to be members of a club to participate. This means that there are very few opportunities to generate funds through membership fees, corporate sponsorship and so forth. Additionally, bushwalking areas are generally open to the public. You can't put turnstiles on walking tracks. This "free-loader" problem, limits both numbers of people counted and the amounts they are prepared to pay for something they regard as a right.

A distinction is usually drawn between bushwalking and other forms of walking including incidental walking for everyday purposes. In reality the boundaries are blurred, and there is a continuum between a stroll in the local park and a wilderness expedition. The common element is a willingness to walk, and an appreciation of the environment surrounding the walking experience.

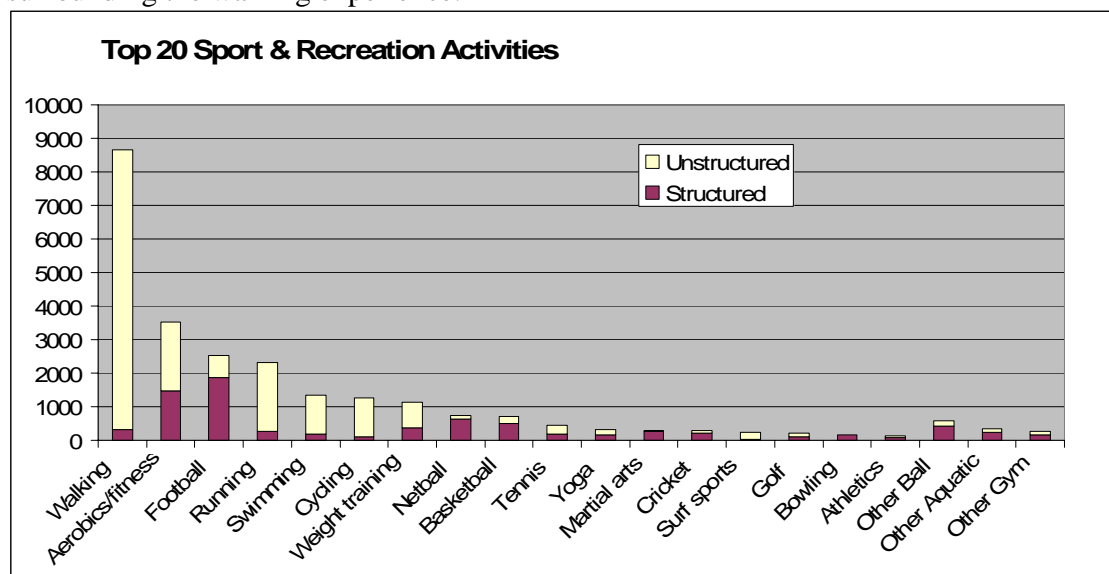


Figure 1 Top 20 Sports and Recreations Activities in Australia (derived from ERASS 2006)

When unstructured recreation is included, walking provides by far the largest amount of physical activity; over three times the benefit of all football codes combined.

The Organisation of Bushwalking in Australia

Bushwalking Australia is comprised of the six bushwalking federations operating in each state. In turn, state federations have specialist bushwalking clubs as members. However, some clubs extend their activities to other outdoor pursuits such as skiing, canoeing and cycling. Some clubs specialize in long-distance (multiday) walks in wilderness areas, and others are restricted to day-length or shorter walks, often in areas close to home.

Bushwalking does not need to be organized like other sports. Individual bushwalkers join clubs for a variety of benefits including

- (1) a program of regular, planned walks
- (2) access to experienced leaders
- (3) the opportunity to learn map-reading, navigation, leadership and other “bush” skills
- (4) the chance to visit and experience new areas (sometimes untracked) that are attractive to walk in
- (5) safety advantages of walking with a group
- (6) the benefits of joining a social network of like minded people
- (7) access to insurance (personal accident and public liability)

Bushwalking Australia (and its constituent state organizations) share the dual aims of (1) promoting walking and (2) protecting the natural characteristics of the areas through which they walk. In one sense national parks are the equivalent of the sports-fields and venues that other sports require. The difference is that walkers do not require exclusive access to an area, because our activities are low impact and can readily co-exist with others.

Members of bushwalking clubs comprise only a minority of those who bushwalk. Nevertheless they are generally representative of the population at large.

Related Organisations and Activities

Bushwalking Australia is affiliated with the Outdoor Council of Australia. At state level, we work with local conservation organisations in the protection of natural areas. Additionally, we work with a range of organizations (both government and non-government) in the Health, Local Government, Natural Resources, Land Administration, Transport, Road Safety and community areas.

Inquiry Terms of Reference

It is unfortunate that the present inquiry perpetuates the false assumption that sport must be competitive in order to be worthwhile. Not only is this wrong, it actually encourages people to be spectators rather than participants. Indeed the very selection process used by elite sports to identify talent puts more than 90% of the youth population on the physical activity scrap-heap. Little wonder that Australia's performance at elite sport is matched by a poor and declining level of physical fitness amongst the general population.

We note that the terms of reference for the review focus on elite and spectator sport, completely ignoring unstructured activities such as bushwalking that have a high level of participation and deliver physical activity broadly across the community.

For these reasons, we have confined our comments to your second term of reference.

Term of Reference No 2

“Better place sport and physical activity as a key component of the Government's preventative health approach”

In our submission to the recent House of Representatives inquiry into Obesity, we argued that health funding should be broadly allocated according to the prevalence of the diseases involved and their lifetime impact. If this basic principle was adopted, sport and physical activity should naturally receive its due attention and level of funding.

At the same time, governments (who after all have limited resources) need to consider the capacity for activities to be self-funding. This particularly applies to sport and health industries that have their shares of both battlers and highly paid elites. Structured sports generally have the capacity to charge match and affiliation fees that cover the costs involved. Similarly, access to single-purpose or closed venues (like swimming pools, gymnasiums and fitness centres) can be controlled and charged for, even if the activity itself is unstructured.

Unstructured sports like bushwalking (and other outdoor pursuits) lack the ability to generate the funds needed to maintain walking tracks and access to walking areas. Fortunately, these costs are low compared to the costs of closed venues. This means that money spent on walking tracks can be more cost-effective than many other public investments in sport and recreation.

“Examine Government frameworks to ensure an on-going focus on grassroots and community sport and physical activity.”

Other submissions have already drawn attention to the fact that a focus on elite sport has been largely counterproductive for grass-roots and community sport.

Bushwalking suffers under additional discrimination because it is non-competitive, and therefore falls outside the Australian Sports Commission’s definition of sport. This arbitrary and unsupportable exclusion does not apply in other advanced countries such as the UK and USA. Removal of this restriction would enable a much fairer and more effective application of the available funds.

“Examine Government programs to increase participation rates in sport and physical activity, including analysis of existing programs.”

Evidence from ERASS clearly shows a high and otherwise unrecognized level of physical activity provided to the community through bushwalking and walking in general. Further analysis of ERASS data suggests that walking in all its forms could make an even greater contribution, especially amongst those who currently get insufficient exercise (Figure 2).

One problem is that we know very little about where people walk, why they walk, and what would encourage them to walk more. For instance, transport and ABS statistics routinely collect data on vehicle travel and cycling, but not on walking.

Bushwalking Australia would be keen to participate in programs to measure and increase the level of walking in the community. Our networks of clubs provide access to representative sections of the population who are already motivated to walk. Programs that fail to work when piloted on our members are unlikely to achieve traction with the general population. Similarly, carefully researched programs that work within the club context could work within the general community.

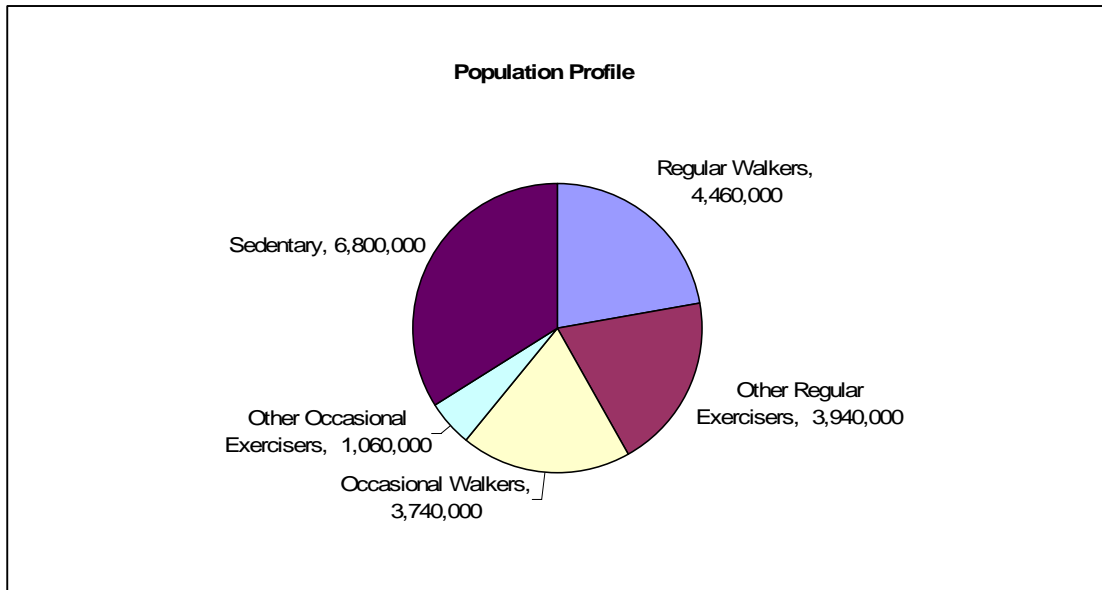


Figure 2 – Walking in the Australian Population (calculated from ERASS 2006)

Walkers make up more than half the people who regularly exercise, and most of those who exercise occasionally. They need to walk more. The challenge is the 6.8 million (almost a third of the total population) who don't exercise at all. Walking would enable them to start exercising with dignity.

“Identify and recommend opportunities to break down barriers to participation at junior, adult and senior ages with a view to making it simpler and easier for Australians to participate in the sport or physical activity of their choice, including for women, the disabled and Indigenous people.”

The fact that bushwalking can be a lifetime activity with few obvious age and skill barriers creates unique problems that are in many ways more serious than in structured or competitive sports.

Competitive sports need to constantly recruit and develop new talent, and to find opportunities such as masters programs to retain senior participants. This creates separate niches for participants, coaches, officials and administrators, as well as an “open door” for young talent. It also leads to the establishment of tribunals and quasi-legal systems, all of which provide opportunities for specialization.

By contrast, bushwalking leaders must retain a high level of physical ability as well as knowledge, and there are few opportunities for specialization. A bushwalking party is as strong as its weakest member, and the leader must support the rest of the group physically as well as through leadership. It means that bushwalkers tend to stay as a cohort for a long period, sharing leadership duties between them. It can be even more difficult to “break into” a group, which is one reason why smaller bushwalking clubs have difficulty in attracting new members. Over time, members of a group tend to adjust the length and difficulty of walks as they age.

We see it as important to encourage the formation of new clubs, and for existing clubs to rejuvenate themselves. The “cohort” nature of walking provides particular opportunities for people in minority and marginalized groups to come together as distinct walking groups.

Walking is a social activity, as well as a physical one. There are opportunities for people to dialogue as they walk as well as around the campfire at night. This level of social engagement without drugs or alcohol does not happen in most other sports.

People who are deaf can walk, and there are a number of blind and sight impaired people in regular walking clubs. Variants of bushwalking are also possible for the mobility-impaired. This should enable them to sample some (though obviously not all) benefits of bushwalking.

Indigenous people are a particular case, with modern bushwalking sharing many characteristics with indigenous people prior to 1770. There is scope for indigenous people to rediscover their cultural roots through bushwalking, and for today’s bushwalker to learn about aboriginal society.

“Recommend strategies to increase the effectiveness of the promotion of sport by the Federal Government to better communicate positive health and activity messages to the broader community.”

In the past government support for physical activity has been limited to specific funding of elite sports, and by general public relations campaigns that were poorly targeted, and didn't integrate at all with the existing social structures or support networks.

It appears that many past government efforts have actively tried to avoid engaging with the community, or being held accountable to the community. While it may have been necessary in some instances to bypass poorly managed or dysfunctional associations, this must not become the norm. It is an insult to the dedicated volunteer efforts that are necessary for the successful continuance of all sports and active recreations.

Instead, government should seek using “a bit of carrot, and a bit of stick” to leverage the enthusiasm within organizations such as our own. Governments should provide organizations with funding in return for performance against KPIs based on community-wide objectives and knowledge of the particular sport. Overloading such organizations with meaningless red-tape, forcing them to meet unreasonable and ill-considered standards, or engaging associations in a competition for too few funds against unfair rules, is bound to destroy any such enthusiasm.

There is plenty of scope for walking groups to form, and for existing groups to be more welcoming of new members.