

# Bushwalking *Australia*



## **Towards a Walkable Australia**

A draft policy

### ***Executive Summary***

*Walkable Australia* is a program to identify and overcome barriers that discourage or prevent Australians from walking, and therefore experiencing, living and enjoying the country in a sustainable way.

*Walkable Australia* draws on the history and traditions of Australia extending beyond European settlement, and capturing the freedoms and ideals that we cherish.

*Walkable Australia* includes both urban and rural Australia.

*Walkable Australia* draws together and supports many existing initiatives and programs in health, environment, planning, recreation, tourism, transport, education and local government.

A *Walkable Australia* is consistent with sound economic as well as social and environmental policy. Walkable communities spend less of their economic output on transport, and waste less time on unproductive travel. Urban infrastructure costs are reduced, and less land is paved over. A greater variety and depth of natural and cultural experience is found within a given area. With a healthier and more active community, health costs are lower. The elderly and incapacitated are within closer reach of the facilities they need, and more able to reach them through better public and emergency transport.

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## **Background**

The freedom to move about the country safely and appreciate Australia unpretentiously is an important part of the Australian psyche. People have walked on the oldest continent for 50,000 years and more.

Walking is the human activity that does not degrade our environment. Through walking we can appreciate the environment more closely and better than any other way. It is an activity we as modern Australians can share with the generations of those who have trod the land before.

Sadly, walking is an aspect of life that we take for granted. The ability to walk is something we really only appreciate when we can no longer do it. An unfortunately large proportion of the population does not walk nearly often enough for its own well being. The levels of childhood obesity have risen to epidemic proportions in little more than a generation; at the same time as a massive reduction in the numbers of children walking to school.

Where walking is not seen as practical, desirable or safe, quality of life suffers. With reductions in the levels of walking, communities suffer. Local facilities close, and people commute greater distances, invariably by car, for almost every aspect of life. Large specialised complexes dominate suburban life, surrounded by huge deserts of asphalt.

Rodney Tolley, the international expert on sustainable transport said, “*Walkers are the indicator species of quality of life*”, a phrase that has since become recognized worldwide. Where walking is an activity of choice, communities are desirable and vibrant. Sustainable economic activity follows, small business flourishes, and in-bound tourism becomes an economic contributor.

## **The Vision**

We envisage a program called *Walkable Australia*, in which the people of Australia have an environment where they enjoy walking, can walk freely, and frequently do. The program would include walking down the street, the local park, conservation reserves, and remote wilderness areas. It would include walking to school, walking the dog, walking in towns, strolling in the park, day-walking and backpacking. It would identify and attempt to lower the barriers to walking including lack of pleasant accessible areas, prohibited and alienated land, lack of trails, footpaths and links, gates and stiles. The program would include making roads safer for walkers to cross, and giving priority to pedestrians in the transport system. Literally anything that makes walking unpleasant, dangerous or impractical anywhere would be within the scope of *Walkable Australia*.

*Walkable Australia* is a timely project. Australia still has significant areas that have not been alienated by population pressure or intensive

development. Overseas visitors regard Australia as open, friendly and attractive. We must ensure they are not disappointed.

## **Funding**

*Walkable Australia* builds upon the natural strengths of Australia, and initiatives and investments already made. It would utilize programs already underway across a great many portfolio areas at federal, state and local levels. Rather than requiring additional funding, it can make our existing programs and investments more effective and better appreciated.

Walking is a minor and often unrecognized aspect of many existing government programs and initiatives, and is generally swamped by other issues. Programs are uncoordinated, and results are fragmented. Where outcomes are achieved, they are inequitably distributed across the community. There is often little real attempt to engage the community, or recognize and build upon efforts already being made by community organizations.

## **Objectives**

*Walkable Australia* will be strategically driven to ensure its objectives are achieved:

- It will regularly measure the levels of walking within the community according to geographical and sociological dimensions.
- Where the level of walking is low, it will identify the contributing factors.
- It will identify barriers to walking, as they apply generally and in particular locations.
- It will provide means to overcome those barriers.
- It will ensure that walking is an attractive option for people wherever they live.
- It will identify and provide incentives for people to walk, wherever it is practical to do so.

## **Operations and Responsibilities**

To achieve these objectives, *Walkable Australia* will involve government (federal, state and local) agencies in the six major portfolio areas (health, recreation and sport, environment, tourism, planning and transport) together with relevant community organizations such as Bushwalking Australia, Pedestrian Council of Australia, service clubs and others.

## **Areas and Actions**

### **Health**

Obesity created by a sedentary lifestyle is fast rising to become the greatest health issue of western societies, especially Australia.

Walking is the form of physical activity with the greatest potential to benefit the largest cross-section of the community.

A dollar spent encouraging regular walking has a far greater potential benefit than a dollar spent on any other health program.

Because walking is a recreation suitable for all ages, developing regular walking habits has benefits that can be carried through a lifetime.

### **Actions**

- Devote a significant proportion of the preventive health budget to facilitating, promoting and encouraging walking, particularly where participation levels are currently low.
- Ensure appropriate connection with and resourcing of community organizations able to provide a wide range of congenial opportunities for people to walk regularly with others.

### **Environment and Conservation**

Walking is by far the best way to see and appreciate the natural landscape and the biodiversity within it. The development of appropriately located walking trails enables a wide range of people to experience this environment at close hand and with minimal impact. Others more experienced and capable in the bush can gain an even greater and richer experience with even lower impact, without the need for man-made tracks or other infrastructure.

As an inherently sustainable form of transport, walking also has broad environmental and conservation advantages that are further discussed under the transport heading below.

### **Actions**

- Encourage walking as the primary means of accessing natural areas.
- Work with community organizations such as Bushwalking Australia, its state and local affiliates to develop appropriate trails, and manage walker access generally.

### **Planning**

Planning has a major role in ensuring that developments (particularly in urban areas) provide attractive, livable

environments consistent with economic prosperity, social and environmental sustainability and social equity. The development of walkable communities is an essential part of these objectives.

Past policies have not always recognized this connection. For example, street layouts often provide poor connectivity, requiring walkers to travel by circuitous routes to reach basic local facilities. Zoning systems have often meant that needed services are not within a walkable distance. At the same time, planning laws have become codified and adversarial, with broader public interest often being pitted unsuccessfully against narrow sectional interest.

Once built, the urban form is very difficult to change, so mistakes, omissions and unfortunate legal decisions of the past are very difficult to correct. Opportunity to correct these mistakes occurs very rarely (e.g. when former industrial or public housing estates are redeveloped.)

Recently higher density living has become acceptable and even sought after. Gated communities are also popular. While these developments should allow facilities to be within a walkable distance. In practice such things as street trees, footpaths and pedestrian entrances are often sacrificed, being replaced by solid walls and garage doors.

### **Actions**

- Reserve landscape and corridors for access by walking, especially in peri-urban areas.
- Ensure that as far as possible, urban developments provide basic and regularly needed facilities within walking distance, rather than require travel by private car.
- Ensure that walking is always an attractive option for transport and recreation, especially during land subdivision and urban consolidation processes.
- Ensure that walkability considerations are an explicit part of planning law.
- Encourage the development of business clusters and community facilities so that people can walk rather than drive between engagements.

### **Recreation and Sport**

Australians have a very high regard for sport, which has led to an impressive level of sporting success for the size of our population.

This success in elite sport is to be contrasted with a poor and falling level of physical fitness in the general population. Our enthusiasm for sport has become increasingly directed at watching elite spectator sport, rather than actual participation. People tend to drop out when they can no longer compete, or when they reach their limit of attainability.

By contrast, active recreation pursuits such as walking can be kept up over a lifetime. Nearly all members of the community can participate in some level of walking.

Greater priority must be given to walking as the activity that has the greatest potential to improve community health.

### **Actions**

- In conjunction with private and public land managers (including national parks, forestry, local government and private landholders), develop and maintain networks of walking trails. These trails should be open to the public, and useable by people with a range of skill levels, endurance and ages.
- Support and encourage community organizations such as national and state walking federations, walking clubs and individuals to enable them to encourage a greater level of participation in the community.
- Encourage the development of appropriate leadership skills within the community, so that they can lead groups of beginners, children and other dependant groups.

### **Local Government**

Local government is responsible, largely by default, for the provision of local walking facilities including urban footpaths, municipal parks, and pedestrian access to community facilities. It is responsible for local and minor roads, unmade road reserves, and other areas of public space. Local government also shares responsibilities with state transport agencies for traffic and road safety related infrastructure such pedestrian crossings.

Local government councils will need to be key agencies for implementing *Walkable Australia* policies and programs.

Local government councils vary considerably in their size and capacity to implement programs such as *Walkable Australia*. Some councils already have staff skilled in the area, and have already achieved major outcomes. Others barely appreciate the needs and the opportunities within their own boundaries.

Some councils may feel that walking “isn’t an issue” within their area. If so, they will need to ask themselves “why not?” If there is very little walking, the community will most likely have major issues, perhaps not obviously related to walking, but flowing from the lack of walking. If on the other hand there is a significant amount of walking, this usually indicates council is doing something right.

### **Actions**

- Develop expertise within local government in understanding and managing walking and pedestrian issues.
- Assess the level of walking in the local community.
- Undertake projects to facilitate and encourage walking, especially where the level of walking is low.
- Develop and maintain local trails with the assistance of trail user organization, tourism authorities and so on.
- Retain and conserve public spaces suitable for walking, including unmade road reserves.

### **Tourism**

Walking is inextricably linked to tourism. A mark of a successful tourism program occurs when tourists are prepared to step outside their hotel or vehicle and experience at first hand the place and/or the people. Trails, footpaths and walker-friendly spaces are invariably needed to create a positive tourist experience.

Short footpaths and trails are needed to provide a physical and psychological separation between car parks and the attractions they serve. Surrounding an attraction with car-parking invariably detracts from the tourist experience. Tourists vary in their walking ability, and allowance must be made for the disabled.

Medium length trails of several hours or a day in length are needed as experiences in their own right, and to lead to special places of interest like vantage points.

While walking is relevant to all tourism, one class of tourist warrants special attention. Adventure tourists come with the intention of walking a major trail, and are usually well prepared for the rigors involved.

Tourists (particularly from overseas) are increasingly reluctant to drive long distances, preferring instead to spend quality time at a restricted number of locations. These tourists require a walkable environment and attractions that can be experienced and appreciated on foot.

### **Actions**

- Provide financial support for walking trails, particularly in areas likely to be attractive to overseas tourists.
- Develop and adopt signage and track marking systems that are clearly understandable to people from a non-English speaking culture.
- Develop tourism opportunities that are not dependant on tourists owning or renting cars. Public transport (eg intrastate bus routes) should provide connections where they cross significant walking trails.
- Ensure that tourist attractions are reachable as a walking experience.

### **Transport**

Walking is the primary form of transport, although many people do not necessarily think of walking in this way. Almost every journey starts and ends with a walking segment. By disregarding the walking segments, or minimizing the amount of walking we do, we clutter our working and living environments with cars, contributing to congestion, frustration and pollution. For many people, incidental walking is their only form of exercise.

We need to recognize walking as the best form of transport for short journeys, and as a key part of each and every journey. Walking also extends the effective range of public transport.

Walking may not be suitable for every journey. People still need vehicles for long haul trips, but many are short enough to be walkable.

Walking is discouraged by the ready availability of sedentary modes of door-to-door transport, and by the perception that walking is unsafe, low status, inconvenient or time consuming.

There is little likelihood that a public relations campaign alone, however well resourced, will have a measurable effect on the level of walking in the community. The barriers to walking are many, and no single solution is at hand.

To encourage walking, we must better manage the use of other forms of transport, particularly private car use. An environment congested with or polluted by motor vehicles is unattractive to walk in as well frustrating to drive in. Previous transport policies and practices have tended to facilitate the use of vehicles and control the movement of people. In the future we need to facilitate the movement of people, and control the use of vehicles.

Walking and other socially and environmentally forms of transport are discouraged because of perverse financial incentives that fail to account for the externalities created by car use. Most of the costs to the user are in simply having a vehicle, whereas most of the impact comes from their use. Under fringe benefits tax arrangements, excessive and inappropriate car use is virtually compulsory. Technology is readily available that would collect car usage data and enable the major reforms needed, without posing an unwarranted administrative burden on the user or government.

### **Actions**

- Allocate road and transport funding to walking in a way that recognizes (1) the contribution walking needs to make to the transport task, and (2) the unacceptably high level of road trauma to pedestrians.
- Make walking the transport mode of choice for all journeys of walkable length.
- Implement regional plans to facilitate walking and regulate vehicle use (rather than vice versa as in the past).
- Use pricing and planning policies to encourage walking and discourage the use of vehicles for short journeys.
- Where vehicle access is required, encourage people to “park once” and walk between points of business.
- Control and manage parking at a regional or state level, so that transport and planning policies to encourage walking, are not undermined by inappropriate vehicle use.

- Use technology to capture vehicle usage, enabling vehicle registration and other fixed charges to be replaced by a direct charge on road use.
- Reform tax laws as they relate to vehicle use.

## **Education**

During their formative years, children develop lifetime attitudes and habits from school, parents and peers. Their attitude to walking is formed at this time, usually in an unconscious way. It is not necessary to “teach” walking within an already overcrowded curriculum, but there are many creative ways in which walking can be part of the learning experience.

Until very recently, the vast majority of children walked to school, but this ratio is now reversed. This has been caused by excessive concern for the safety of children, and an often mistaken belief that they were safer in the family car than on foot, public transport or in the company of peers.

Concern about liability has also affected the willingness of schools to take children on walking excursions. As a consequence, valuable opportunities to use walking as an educational tool are lost.

Disability considerations have discouraged the integration of walking in the curriculum. While special provision has to be made for the small proportion of children unable to walk, this should not prevent walking based activities for the majority of children.

## **Actions**

- Encourage initiatives like the “walking bus” where children walk to school together in the company of a responsible adult.
- Provide legal and insurance protection for children walking and their custodians that are as comprehensive, and no more onerous, than currently applies to travel by car, bus or train.
- Develop programs similar to “Bike Ed” to encourage walking, and extend them broadly across the school system, not just in selected schools.
- Provide in-service and pre-service training for teachers on the importance of physical activity, and in the use of walking as an educational tool.
- Develop subject resources that use walking.

- Control and manage parental pick up and drop off facilities to encourage children to walk at least part of the journey, and to prevent dangers associated with the mixing of children and vehicles.

## **Community Organisations**

The encouragement of walking requires supportive networks within the community. A program that uses public relations efforts alone will not achieve the sustainable impact required. *Walkable Australia* needs the leverage of those individuals and organizations already sympathetic with the aims of the program.

As well as walking clubs, there are service clubs, conservation groups, local community groups, schools, churches and so on containing people who care enough about society and the environment to support the *Walkable Australia* concept. The provision of funding opportunities for specific projects would help direct their efforts where it was required.

In addition to active supporters, the walking clubs contain a broad base of members who simply “enjoy walking in pleasant surroundings”, but perhaps are not motivated to lead walks or serve in any way. These members can have a major role in piloting the program, because they represent the broader community, who might be encouraged to walk in the right circumstances.

## **Actions**

- Provide forms of funding to community organizations that can encourage a higher level of walking in the community.

## **Coordination and Administration**

The *Walkable Australia* program has many facets that will be managed by the respective agencies of government, and at federal, state and local levels.

Although additional funding is generally not required, it will be necessary for the appropriate key performance indicators to be written into the various terms of reference and agreements with the respective agencies.

Some “head of power” legislation will be needed to drive the process through the various agencies and levels of government. Low financial impact models for this type of legislation over the years have included racial and disability discrimination, metric conversion, and national competition policy.

Small coordinating agencies will be needed at state and federal level. These agencies will need to be accountable for the broad range of benefits and impacts of *Walkable Australia*, and not become captive to just one particular aspect of the program. With strong legislative and policy backing as envisaged, coordinating agencies could be located almost anywhere within government. This would avoid the need for a separate bureaucracy, or overloading existing central agencies.

*Walkable Australia* will need a council at state and federal levels to provide a forum for the various agencies and key community organizations to meet within an atmosphere of trust and cooperation. Because agencies will be inherently responsible for those aspects of walking that fall within their jurisdiction, there should be little opportunity for “duck shoving” at these forums.

## **Actions**

- *Walkable Australia* to be endorsed by the federal government.
- Head of power legislation to be prepared at federal level, with a steering committee of interested prominent figures.
- States to endorse the program by setting up or nominating a coordinating agency
- Councils to be set up in each state

## **Commonwealth Government**

The fragmented and non-strategic nature of current programs is most evident at the national level. There has been no national walking policy. There has been no walking sector equivalent to the Australian Bicycle Council.

The commonwealth already sets national direction and leadership in many areas potentially relevant to walking, even though the delivery of those services is largely a state and local responsibility. It does this principally by providing tied grants to state and local governments.

The commonwealth also has direct responsibility for the taxation system that currently discourages walking by providing subsidies for private car use.

## **State Government**

State government agencies deliver programs in transport, environment, health, tourism, planning and education using money largely derived from federal sources.

In each of these agencies walking is either ignored completely or handled at a junior level. As a result, walking is almost invisible at the senior levels of state government, and has not so far featured in any negotiations with federal agencies.