



NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service

Illawarra escarpment walking tracks master plan



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Cover photo: The view north from Mount Keira in the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area. Nick Cubbin/DPE

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Acknowledgments

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) and Wollongong City Council (Council) acknowledge that the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area is in the traditional country of the Wodi Wodi Aboriginal People of the Dharawal language group.

The NPWS and Council recognise that the escarpment, named Merrigong, has great symbolic and historical importance for the local Aboriginal people, who have a continuing association with the area.

The NPWS and Council would like to thank the Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council, National Parks Association, Illawarra Escarpment Alliance, Destination Wollongong, University of Wollongong and the Seacliff Coasters, which were part of a stakeholder advisory group assisting NPWS and Council in developing this plan.

Introduction

The New South Wales Government recognises the importance of bushwalking as a recreational activity. Bushwalking bestows significant lifestyle, health and economic benefits on the Illawarra region and the broader community.

The Illawarra escarpment is a desirable and popular venue for bushwalking. The escarpment walking tracks follow ancient Aboriginal travelling routes. They provide ready access to unique environments, but their amenity, sustainability and interpretation need to be improved.

The *Illawarra escarpment walking track master plan* (the master plan) updates the *Draft Illawarra escarpment walking tracks master plan*, developed for the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) in 2006. It provides a blueprint for the development of a sustainable walking track network on the Illawarra escarpment that is integrated with adjacent services, facilities and attractions. The master plan aims to ensure opportunities for bushwalking on the escarpment that are safe and consistent with environmental, cultural and social values.

Formal walking tracks on the escarpment are mostly confined to the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area (IESCA), which is managed by NPWS. The IESCA extends along the escarpment but consists of isolated land parcels surrounded by other land tenure, from Wollongong City Council (Council), private land and mining land. Track heads and supporting services and infrastructure, such as tourist information, parking, public transport, lookouts, cafes and amenities, are located outside the IESCA.

Mount Keira, Mount Kembla, Sublime Point and Stanwell Park currently serve as the main entrance points for bushwalking in the IESCA. Walking tracks within the reserve consist of isolated local networks and there are no meaningful connections to other reserves.

In June 2021, the NSW Government announced the establishment of the Great Southern Walk, a new 59-kilometre walk starting in the IESCA though the Royal National Park and finishing at Kamay–Botany National Park. This project will include the upgrading of existing walking tracks and the construction of sections of new track to develop an uninterrupted walking experience. For the IESCA section, the Great Southern Walk will start at the Southern Gateway (Bulli Tops) and continue through to Bald Hill and will use tracks identified in the master plan. These tracks include the lookout track, Woodward Track, Forest Walk, sections of the Wodi Wodi Track and the Bald Hill Track.

The master plan identifies 65 kilometres of walks between Bald Hill and Mount Kembla. The network comprises approximately 40 kilometres of improved or new walking tracks and 25 kilometres of management trails, with additional links to Royal National Park, Garawarra State Conservation Area, adjacent facilities and urban areas. The master plan caters for all bushwalking styles and users and is multi-tenure.

Full implementation of the master plan is subject to further funding, environmental assessment under the NSW *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*, local government approvals, and consent agreements with private landholders.

Planning context

Background

Demand for bushwalking recreation and tourism on the Illawarra escarpment is rapidly growing. The Illawarra escarpment's physical features (elevation, wild forested character, scenic outlook and varied terrain) and peri-urban location make it a logical bushwalking venue.

The escarpment is also one of the region's most important environmental, cultural and economic assets. It is a refuge for the region's unique biodiversity, including rare species and plant communities, and species that are reliant on its natural habitats. It has important Aboriginal and non-Indigenous cultural heritage values and is listed on the register of the National Trust as a scenic landscape of statewide significance. Many of these values have a low tolerance for disturbance and are threatened by human activities.

The escarpment landform is also naturally prone to extreme erosion, weed infestations and slope instability. It is therefore a highly constrained environment, and large areas are only suitable for low-key development and passive activities such as bushwalking.

The primary purposes of state conservation areas are conservation, sustainable use and enjoyment, research, and education. To date, infrastructure on the escarpment has catered for low-volume use. Many existing walking tracks are isolated and service local demand in 4 localities: Mount Kembla, Mount Keira, Austinmer and Stanwell Park. Better walking tracks are needed to service growth in local use and tourism and to meet commercial and environmental expectations.

The 2006 NPWS *Draft Illawarra escarpment walking tracks master plan* proposed a suite of improved local walking track networks connected by a new escarpment walking track, as well as links to neighbouring parks and walking tracks in Royal National Park and Garawarra State Conservation Area. The draft master plan was developed with detailed planning and assessment and extensive community input.

In 2021, NPWS and Council reviewed and updated the 2006 draft master plan using information from environmental and cultural heritage studies, and in consultation with key stakeholders, via a Walking Tracks Advisory Group. Membership of the advisory group included NPWS, Council, the Illawarra Local Aboriginal Land Council, the NSW National Parks Association, the Illawarra Escarpment Alliance, Destination Wollongong, the University of Wollongong and the Seacliff Coasters.

Planning needs

The diversity, quality and volume of walking tracks are to be increased and the connectivity of the walking track network needs to be improved to meet visitor expectations and use and to manage environmental impacts and maintenance costs within acceptable levels.

Approximately 31 kilometres of existing walking tracks need to be improved and 14 kilometres of new tracks need to be constructed to deliver the identified network.

Dedicated single-purpose walking tracks are required because they are safer and more enjoyable for walkers, allow more intimate experiences, and have lower impacts and maintenance costs than shared tracks.

A broader, more integrated network is necessary to satisfy emerging and future demand. Visitation needs to be managed better to lessen traffic congestion in residential streets and

harden tracks that receive high visitation – for instance, Sublime Point Walking Track – to lessen the environmental impact. Better facilities and alternative walking tracks that provide a similar walking experience will have an overall positive benefit.

Signage and other visitor information need to be improved to enable trip planning and navigation. Signage needs to be consistent across different land tenures.

Route selection

Planning applied the following criteria:

- The design of the network needs to provide realistic day walks that integrate with key existing attractions, points of interest, facilities and services, parking, footpaths, cycle paths and public transport, notably train stations. The master plan network does this by dividing the escarpment into the following precincts:
 - Mount Kembla Village to North Wollongong
 - North Wollongong to Austinmer
 - Austinmer to Stanwell Park
 - Stanwell Park to the Royal National Park coast track
- the need for a safe and iconic walk to suit a broad range of park visitors
- greater access to network connectivity and recreational amenity
- protection of plants and animals and their habitat
- protection of heritage
- protection of Aboriginal cultural heritage, including areas of Aboriginal significance
- slope stability, mine subsidence and other hazards
- construction and maintenance costs and associated impacts
- the traffic impact associated with proposed upgraded bushwalks on private property and residential amenity
- land ownership and zoning.

The 2006 *Draft Illawarra escarpment walking tracks master plan* was developed with information from environmental studies and field assessments and input from state and local government, non-government tourism, conservation or recreation organisations, the Aboriginal community, the general community and other stakeholders.

In 2021, NPWS and Council reviewed and updated the draft master plan with input from the Walking Tracks Advisory Group. The key views of the advisory group have been included in the criteria for the route selection and include:

- The preference is to utilise and enhance existing trails where possible and avoid sensitive areas, such as poorly conserved, rare, threatened or regionally important plant communities.
- Opportunities to develop regional tourism and short-stay accommodation along extended walks should be investigated.
- It is important to avoid areas that are prone to slope instability, extreme soil erosion or flooding, avoid street-level impacts, and consider the need for a manageable network.
- A consistent look and signage are needed regardless of tenure, including wayfinding – for example, to public roads and train stations.
- There is a need to look for alternatives to take pressure off existing tracks that have high use – for example, Sublime Point walking track.
- The walking track network needs to be continuous and constructed and maintained to the desirable classification.

- There must be coordinated delivery of external supporting assets for the proposed upgraded bushwalks, such as path connections, parking expansion and facilities such as toilets.

The review confirmed the validity of the track network identified in 2006 and a need for new tracks in some areas to improve network function.

Challenges

To establish a continuous walking track along the length of the Illawarra escarpment will require sections of new walking track to be built on other land tenure. Where feasible, NPWS and Council will develop consent agreements with landholders and companies to allow walking tracks and walkers to go across their land. Agreements with Transport for NSW may be required where walking track proposals interact with the Princes Motorway, Bulli Pass and Mount Ousley Road.

Other challenges with constructing a continuous walking track across the Illawarra escarpment include managing the crossing at Bulli Pass and areas of rock instability that have previously closed sections of walking tracks, and addressing local residents' concerns about traffic congestion issues at major entrances to the walking track network.

Illawarra escarpment walking tracks plan

The master plan identifies a total network of 65 kilometres of short, medium and extended point-to-point and loop walks between Bald Hill and Farmborough Heights.

Forty kilometres of dedicated walking tracks are proposed. The majority will be provided on lands managed by NPWS. The plan utilises 25 kilometres of existing fire trails to connect isolated parts of the network.

Connections with neighbouring attractions, services and amenities, including lookouts, parking, public transport, cafes and picnic areas, are also identified. Parking and access are dispersed throughout the network to provide a range of entry and exit points, avoid concentrated use and maintain a sense of remoteness near the urban environment.

The concept follows the Australian standard for walking track classification and design (AS 2156) and the NPWS park signs and facilities design and construction standards.

An overview of the full walking track network is provided in the map at [Figure 1](#). Network structure, function and implementation are described below.

For maps, refer to [Figure 1](#), [Figure 2](#), [Figure 3](#) and [Figure 4](#). Implementation stages are identified in [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#).

Short walks

Short walks comprise Class 1 paths and Class 2 walking tracks less than 2 kilometres in length. Class 1 tracks provide a modified surface and easy access that is suitable for reduced-mobility visitors. They will comply with the Australian design standard for access and mobility (AS 1428). Class 2 and 3 tracks offer easy walks for moderately fit able-bodied visitors. Class 1, 2 and 3 tracks are also suitable for large-group activities.

The following tracks are identified short walks.

Table 1 Short walks

Park precinct	Walking track	Class (AS 2156)	Configuration
Stanwell Park	Bald Hill Track	3	Point to point
Sublime Pt–Austinmer	Woodward Track	1	Loop (disabled)
	Gibson's Track	3	Loop
Mount Keira	Robertson's Lookout	1	Point to point (disabled)
	Robertson's Knoll Track	3	Point to point
	Dave Walsh's Track	3	Point to point

The Bald Hill Track is a new track that will formalise an informal route between Bald Hill Lookout and Stanwell Park beach and link the Illawarra and Royal National Park, which form part of the Great Southern Walk.

Upgrades of the existing Woodward and Robertson’s Lookout tracks will provide new opportunities for mobility-impaired visitors in 2 key precincts.

Improvements to the existing Dave Walsh’s Track will improve safety and access on the only formal ascent of Mount Keira and function as part of a new loop walk to the summit.

Medium walks

Identified medium walks are up to 6 kilometres in length and require a moderate level of fitness. They will meet the Australian standard (AS 2156) for Class 3 and 4 walking tracks. Class 3 and 4 tracks generally provide an unmodified natural surface and require no special navigation skills.

The following tracks are identified medium-length walks.

Table 2 Medium walks

Park precinct	Walking track	Class (AS 2156)	Configuration
Stanwell Park	Wodi Wodi Track	4	Loop
Sublime Pt–Austinmer	Sublime Point Track	4	Point to point
	Sublime Point Lookout to Bulli Heights Track	3	Point to point
	Lower track from Gibson’s Track to the Lower Escarpment Fire Trail	4	Point to Point
Mount Keira	Keira Summit Track	4	Point to point
	Mount Keira Ring Track	3	Loop
	Mount Pleasant Track	3	Loop
	Ken Ausburn Track	4	Point to point
	Stafford’s Farm Track	4	Point to point
Mount Kembla	Mount Kembla Ring Track	3	Loop
	Mount Kembla Summit Track	4	Point to point

The master plan includes the following new medium-length walks:

- a Class 3 track linking Panorama House and the Southern Gateway Tourist Information Centre at Bulli Heights
- a Class 4 track linking Gibson’s Track to the Lower Escarpment Fire Trail on Bulli Pass
- a Class 4 climb to Mount Keira summit from the Ring Track near Geordies Flat, Mount Keira Road
- a Class 4 route between Robertson’s Lookout and Mount Kembla via Stafford’s Farm.

The new Mount Keira Summit Track provides a challenging ascent to the mountain summit and an alternative to the Sublime Point Track. With the Ken Ausburn Track, Mount Keira Ring Track and Dave Walsh’s Track, it completes a circuit walk to the summit that is accessible using public transport to University of Wollongong or by car to Byarong Park.

Other track combinations that offer medium-distance loop walks via public transport include:

- Wodi Wodi Track: 3 kilometres, accessible by train to Stanwell Park or Coalcliff
- Ken Ausburn Track–Keira Ring Track–Keira Summit Track–Dave Walsh Track: 6 kilometres, accessible by bus to the University of Wollongong or Wollongong Botanic Gardens
- Ken Ausburn Track–Keira Ring Track–Mount Pleasant Track–Mount Pleasant management trail: 5 kilometres, accessible by bus to the University of Wollongong and Botanic Gardens.

The Stafford’s Farm Track provides the southern-most leg of the Illawarra Escarpment Walking Track, to Farmborough Heights and Unanderra.

Extended walks

Extended walks span multiple park precincts, combining formal walking tracks and management roads, providing day walks for fit walkers.

The following tracks are identified extended walks.

Table 3 Extended walks

Park precincts	Walking track	Class (AS 2156)	Configuration
Otford to Mount Kembla	Illawarra Escarpment Walking Track	4	Point to point
Stanwell Park to Austinmer	Wodi Wodi Track–Forest Walk–Sublime Point Track	4	Point to point/loop

The Illawarra Escarpment Walking Track is the master plan’s iconic and unifying feature. It offers a continuous north–south walk between Bald Hill and Mount Kembla, unites local networks and joins the Illawarra Escarpment and the Royal National Park walking track networks. It contributes to a multi-day trek as a part of the Great Southern Walk.

The Royal National Park to IESCA link is also a key part of the Great Southern Walk.

The 13-kilometre Stanwell Park to Austinmer loop is accessible by public transport from railway stations at Stanwell Park, Coalcliff and Austinmer.

Implementation

Construction stages

The master plan has been prioritised for delivery over 3 stages: short, medium and long term. The construction stages are in [Figure 5](#) and [Figure 6](#).

Stage 1 (short term) – Otford to Bulli Heights and Austinmer

Stage 1 establishes the Illawarra as an iconic bushwalking destination, delivering key segments of the Great Southern Walk and the Illawarra Escarpment Walking Track, with connections to Sydney, the Grand Pacific Walk and Southern Tourist Gateway.

Main features:

- 20 kilometres of dedicated walking tracks (19 kilometres within NPWS tenure), or 30 percent of the total identified network
- the Illawarra section of the Great Southern Walk (Bald Hill to the Southern Tourist Gateway)
- Royal National Park–Illawarra Escarpment link (Royal National Park Coast Walk to Bald Hill)
- Stanwell Park to Austinmer extended loop walk
- short, medium and extended walks, loop and point-to-point tracks, including Woodward Track (mobility-impaired design), Sublime Point Track and Forest Walk
- formal off-park links to urban areas, public transport, parking, picnic areas, cafes and amenities.

Stage 2 (medium term)

Stage 2 revitalises and unites the Mount Keira and Mount Kembla walking track networks. Stage 2 delivers 24 kilometres of walks (16km within NPWS tenure), representing 37 percent of the total network. Access agreements with landowners are required to implement Stage 2.

Main features:

- improved network diversity and potential connectivity to local streets and amenities
- Mount Keira and Mount Kembla summit ascents
- a challenging alternative to the Sublime Point Track
- mobility-impaired options
- connections with public transport to the University of Wollongong and Botanic Gardens
- enhanced appeal for walkers through network integration and a broader range of walks.

Stage 3 (long term)

Stage 3 delivers the final segments of the Illawarra Escarpment Walking Track, uniting all stages into a single network and providing connectivity to urban areas. Land acquisitions or access agreements with landowners are required to implement Stage 3.

Relevant legislation and policy

Legislation, planning instruments and policies that affect the implementation of this strategy include:

- *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974* and *National Parks and Wildlife Regulation 2019* (NSW)
- *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979* (NSW)
- *Threatened Species Conservation Act 1995* (NSW)
- *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (NSW)
- *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (Cth)
- *Heritage Act 1977* (NSW)
- Wollongong Local Environmental Plan 2009
- State Environmental Planning Policy (Infrastructure) 2007
- *Illawarra Escarpment strategic management plan 2015*, Wollongong City Council 2015
- *Stanwell Park Reserve and Bald Hill Lookout plan of management 2009*, Wollongong City Council
- *Mount Keira Summit Park plan of management 2019*, Wollongong City Council
- *Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area plan of management 2018*, NPWS
- *Draft plan of management for the Illawarra Escarpment State Conservation Area 1980*, NPWS
- NPWS management policies, including the *Parks facilities manual 2016* and *Park signage manual 2017*
- NPWS procedures and guidelines, including the *Construction assessment procedures 2011* and *Guidelines for preparing a review of environmental factors 2016*
- *NPWS Sustainability guidelines for visitor use and tourism in NSW national parks 2011*.

What's next?

This master plan will provide a basis for consultation with the Aboriginal traditional owners who have registered a native title claim over the escarpment.

Detailed construction plans will be prepared for the walking track network. The plans will then be subject to environmental assessment under the NSW *Environmental Planning and Assessment Act 1979*. The appropriate level of environmental assessment for works within NPWS estate is a Review of Environmental Factors.

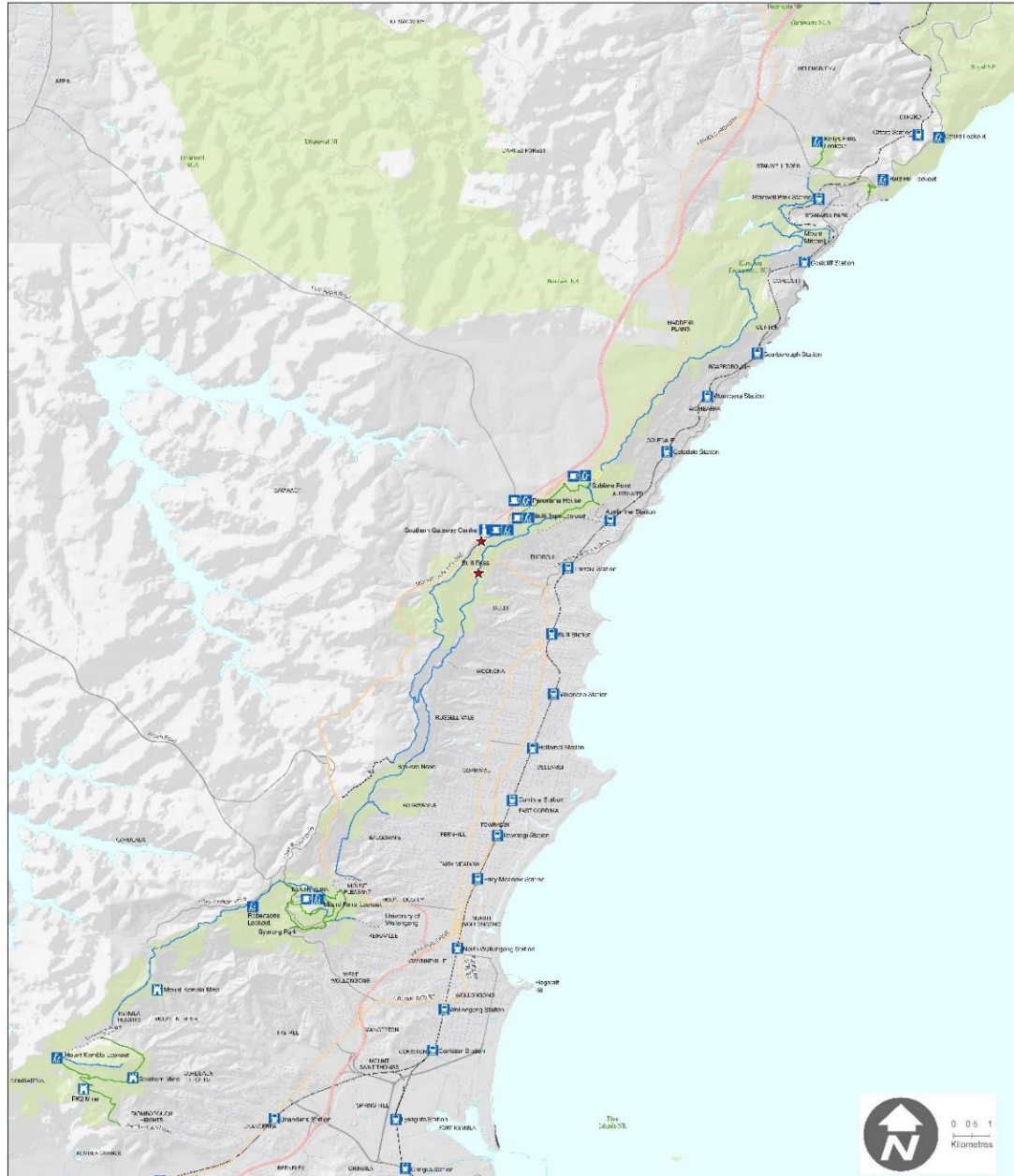
Implementing the master plan will depend on the availability of resources to deliver and maintain the approved tracks and associated facilities.

Development within the IESCA will be in accordance with the determined Review of Environmental Factors, the plan of management for the IESCA, and NPWS policies. Developments in NPWS parks can only be approved where the values of the park would not be diminished.

Maps



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 1: Overview walking track network



- | | | |
|--------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|
| Lookout | Illawarra Walking Track (by class) | Major Road |
| Refreshment | | Primary Road |
| Information Centre | 1/2 | Local Road |
| Train Station | 3 | NPWS Managed Land |
| Historic Site | 4 | Waterbody |
| | Fire Road | |
| | Pedestrian Link | |
| | Pedestrian Bridge | |



Figure 1 Overview of walking track network



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 2 - Bald Hill to Maddens Plains



- | | | |
|--------------------|---|-------------------|
| Lookout | Illawarra Walking Track (by class) | Major Road |
| Refreshment | 1/2 | Primary Road |
| Information Centre | 3 | Local Road |
| Train Station | 4 | NPWS Managed Land |
| Historic Site | Fire Road | Waterbody |
| | Pedestrian Link | |



Figure 2 Bald Hill to Maddens Plains



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 3: Maddens Plains to Bulli Pass



- Lookout
- Refreshment
- Information Centre
- Train Station
- Historic Site

- Illawarra Walking Track (by class)
- 1/2
 - 3
 - 4
 - Fire Road
 - Pedestrian Link
 - Pedestrian Bridge

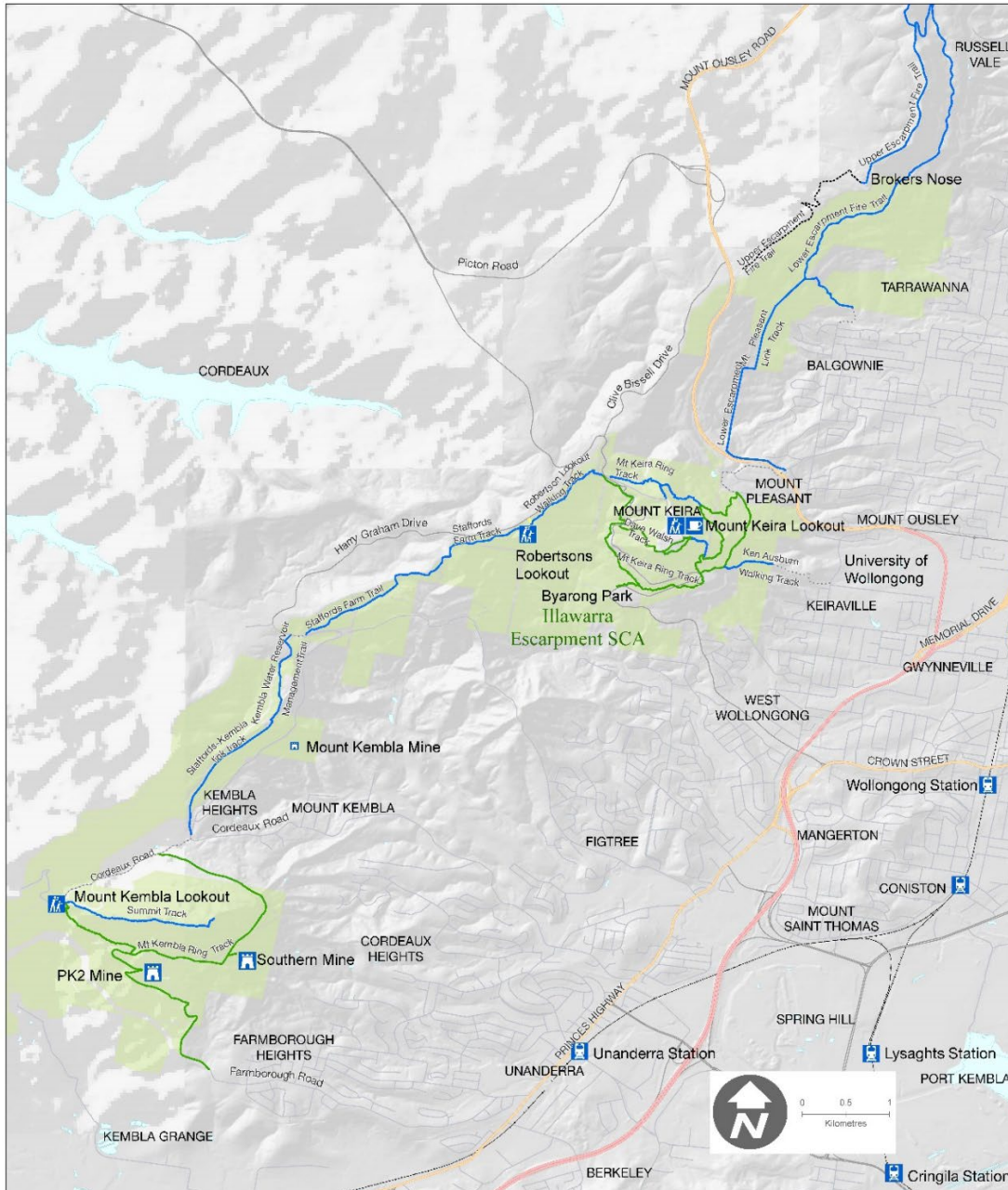
- Major Road
- Primary Road
- Local Road
- NPWS Managed Land
- Waterbody



Figure 3 Maddens Plains to Bulli Pass



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 4: Bulli Pass to Mount Kembla



Lookout	Illawarra Walking Track (by class)	Major Road
Refreshment	3	Primary Road
Information Centre	4	Local Road
Train Station	Fire Road	NPWS Managed Land
Historic Site	Pedestrian Link	Waterbody



Figure 4 Bulli Pass to Mount Kembla



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 5: Implementation stages

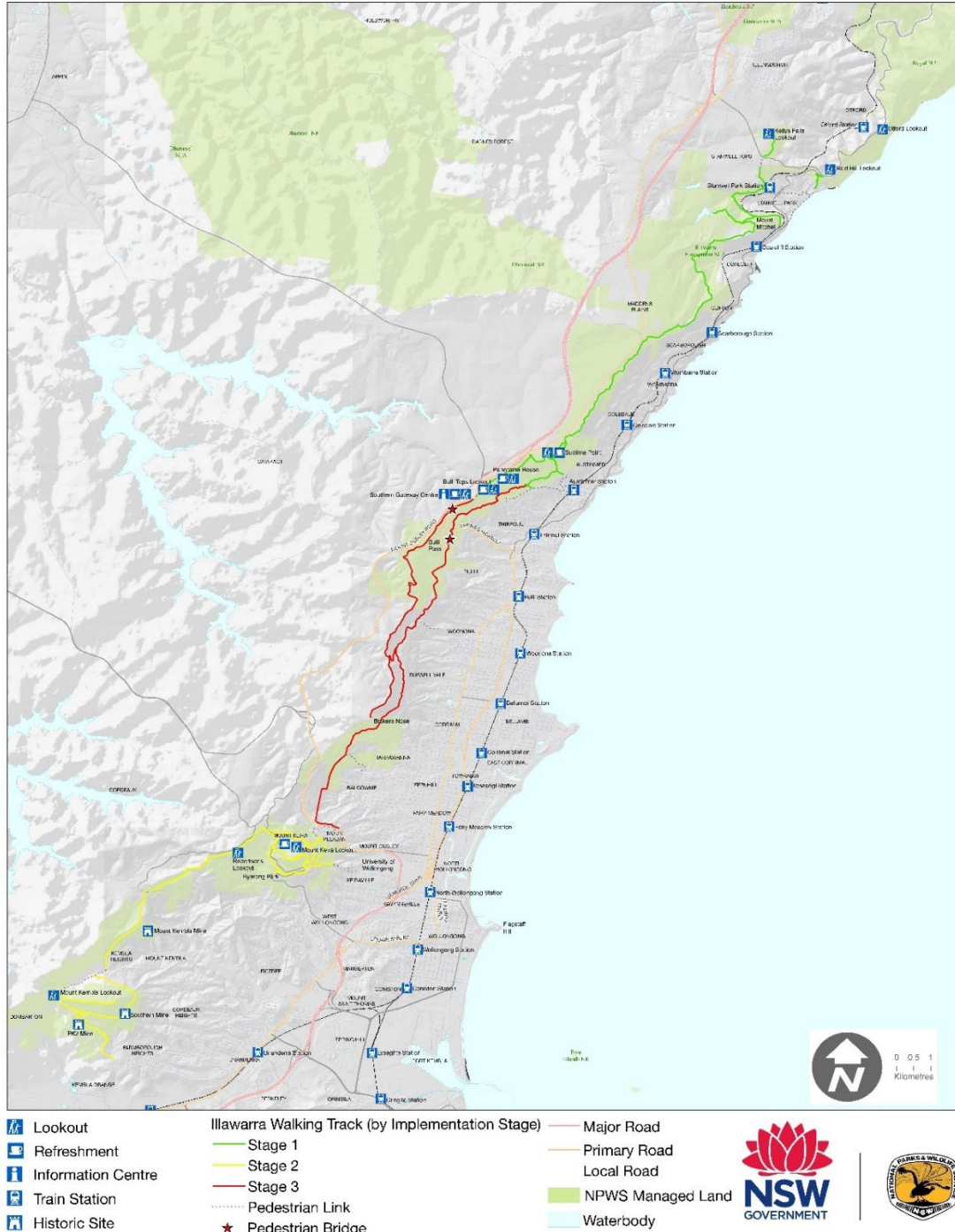


Figure 5 Implementation stages



Illawarra escarpment walking tracks Map 6: Implementation stages by status (proposed and existing)

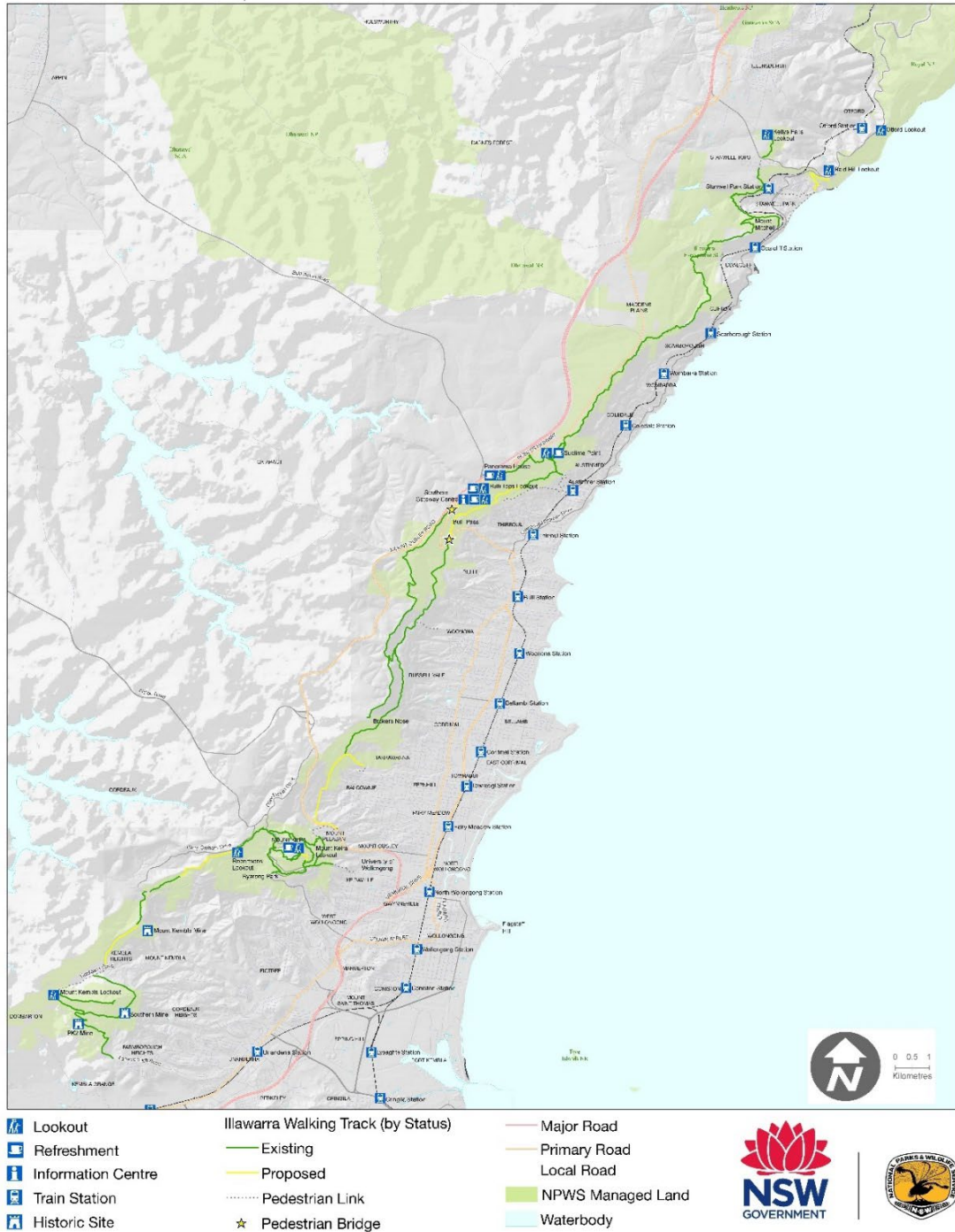


Figure 6 Implementation stages by status (proposed and existing)

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