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The Role of Recreational Walking Advocacy Groups in the Development of a Healthy Parks System

Tony Walker – Bushwalking Victoria

This paper has been written to support and complement the workshop of the same title presented at the 'Healthy Parks Healthy People' congress.

The workshop focuses on the role of groups such as Bushwalking Victoria (BWV) in their role as representatives of the recreational walking public and how their efforts contribute to the development of a healthy parks system. It seeks to promote discussion of the key issues and questions that affect the role of organisations like BWV and the experience of other similar organisations from around the world in dealing with these questions and issues.

The paper discusses the relationship between recreational walking advocacy and the development of a healthy parks system in Victoria, with reference to some current Victorian and Federal Government initiatives, and with particular reference to the issues arising from events such as major bushfires and climate change impacts.

It also provides some background on Bushwalking Victoria, the role it has played, and seeks to play for the benefit of the walking community, its key objectives, and the strategies and initiatives it has taken in pursuit of these objectives.

The paper concludes by outlining the role BWV sees organisations like itself playing in the future in partnership with land managers, environment groups, health promotion agencies, and other organisations concerned with the creation of a healthier society supported by a healthy parks system. It summarises some of the key enabling factors which will assist that role, and some of the barriers which may need to be overcome.

Author Details

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Background:

Organisations such as Bushwalking Victoria have existed for upwards of 100 years in 'western' societies. They evolved from the tensions which naturally existed between private land-ownership, and the desire of an increasing number of people to walk freely across the countryside.

In many parts of Europe, ancient 'rights of way' had been compromised or covertly suppressed by landowners anxious to establish undisputed private ownership of once public or common land. In Britain, this led to a low-key form of civil disobedience over many years eventually resulting in the 'right to roam' concept now well established in the community.

Societies like Australia, which derive their legal systems and land-tenure systems from English practice, have inherited the same issues and tensions, overlaid by the peculiarities of the colonial settlement process.

Parks and Reserves in Victoria

During the late 19th, and through the 20th centuries most developed societies have created systems of parks and reserves under the stewardship of various land owners or land managers, aimed at providing, amongst other things, recreational amenities for the general public.

In general, these parks have been enthusiastically embraced by the population, and it would now be inconceivable to undertake any urban planning initiative without integrating 'natural' recreational space into the proposal.

Around major cities and regional urban areas in Victoria, parks are however often subject to considerable pressures from a number of sources:

- development – particularly as cities grow and spread – this often leads to 'islanding' – natural parks become surrounded by urban development and become islands of green in a sea of houses
- usage – larger populations can damage and degrade parks through well meaning overuse
- organised sports – some sports do not 'share' well with the general population
- conflicting interests – some users want parks as 'natural' as possible whilst other want sophisticated and 'obtrusive' facilities
- underfunding – it is easy (and politically often advantageous) to proclaim a new park; it is less simple to provide the funds needed for its establishment, development and upkeep
- agricultural – some parks are proclaimed in areas subject to long-term agricultural usage (such as Victorian Alpine areas). Pastoralists deprived of a long-used facility are naturally resistant (and often politically effective)
- ecological degradation – through weeds, feral animals etc, often brought in (deliberately or inadvertently) by user groups or neighbouring gardeners or farmers
- climate change

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How People Use Parks

Recreational statistics (for example, the Australian Bureau of Statistics ERASS¹ surveys), clearly show that recreational walking is very easily the most common form of exercise taken by Australians. It is noteworthy that ERASS separates 'bushwalkers' (self defined), from other walkers, and that this group is ranked 8th overall in participation by Australians. An extract from the 2008 ERASS² survey is shown below.

Activity	Number of Participants (000)	% of Respondents Involved
Aerobics/Fitness	3901.9	23.5
Cycling	1928.1	11.6
Golf	1181.1	7.1
Running	1649.4	9.9
Swimming	2414.2	14.5
Tennis	1122.5	6.8
Walking (Bush)	1067.3	6.4
Walking (Other)	6508.4	39.2

It is a reasonable assumption that a large proportion of the Walking (other) category walk in parks and reserves at least part of the time, and hence it is reasonable to assert that the largest group of people using the parks system is recreational walkers.

The definition of recreational walker is necessarily rather vague – it includes people walking for exercise, dog-walkers, families walking to and from a picnic or play area, organised walking groups, and a host of other users, each with their own reasons for wanting to walk. An increasingly important group are people walking for reasons directly associated with health recovery or maintenance – walkers who want to lose weight, improve cardio-vascular capabilities, those with conditions such as depression who benefit from the open air and sun-shine and many others.

The challenge for an organisation such as Bushwalking Victoria lies in attempting to represent the interests of such disparate groups – the very title of the organisation betrays its origins, and is to a degree misleading. BWV increasingly uses the term 'recreational walking in natural areas' to point up its interest areas and in particular, in the context of its community focussed 'green walking' initiatives.

Why Do We Need Healthy Parks?

What Is a 'Healthy Park'

The Parks Forum (the peak body for parks organisations in Australia and New Zealand) has produced a publication 'The Value of Parks'³

¹ Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey

² Australian Government, *Participation in Exercise, Recreation and Sport ERASS 2008 Survey* – data extracted from section 9.1.5 Total Participation in Specific Activities, table 13

³ Parks Forum 2008 'The Value of Parks' ISBN 978-0-646-49197-4

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In that document they define the role of a parks system as being to provide places to inspire, refresh, conserve, protect, and play.

A healthy parks system therefore must consist of natural areas set aside for public use which meet these objectives.

I have had some difficulty in finding a single definition of a healthy parks system, but my research leads me to describe it as follows:

- the parks must be ecologically sustainable – they must be of sufficient number and area to be able to sustain the visitor load they receive
- the parks must be appropriately managed – they must provide the facilities, signage, tracks and trails, and supporting literature so people are comfortable and happy to use them
- they must be accessible to the general community
- they must provide rich natural experiences
- they must protect and conserve areas or ecosystems of natural or cultural value
- they must provide opportunities for adventure, relaxation, exercise and play

Clearly no single park is likely to provide all of these, and some may be incompatible with others (for example exercise and play may not fit well with contemplation of nature, or relaxation), so a variety of parks with different characteristics is needed. A single 'healthy park' does not make a healthy parks system!

How does the Community Benefit

'The Value of Parks' makes the following statement

The human species has evolved from, and been nurtured by, the natural environment - we are a biological product of the earth itself. This deep connection is one that we must all remember. Our parks are the storehouse of our past, and more importantly, our future

It is outside the scope of this paper to discuss in detail, the means and extent to which individual people and groups benefit from contact with the natural world, but there is a wealth of literature describing these benefits, and conversely, the adverse effects of deprivation of contact with the natural environment. The very fact that people will make considerable efforts and go to considerable expense and trouble to achieve contact with nature underlines the strong connection we feel. Even gardening represents the creation of a natural microcosm around our homes.

People benefit psychologically, physically and spiritually from contact with nature. In a world where land usage is ever more intensive, and where unutilised space is becoming scarce, they need a healthy parks system to allow them this contact. As 'The Value of Parks' states:

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Even in our increasingly urbanised lives, most people still have a strong need to 'touch green', to immerse themselves in a natural space – in their own garden, a local park, a large recreation area on the city's edge or a great national park or reserve. These natural spaces often become our favourite places, having special meaning in our lives. They are crucial to our sense of wellbeing.

It can therefore reasonably be asserted that a healthy parks system is a prerequisite to a healthy community.

Political Impacts on the Healthy Parks Healthy People Relationship

Walking is not spectacular – it features in international athletics in a rather esoteric form, but is definitely not a high-profile sport. Politicians may enjoy opening a new sports pavilion or swimming pool, but a walking track rarely commands the same media attention. To be blunt, our politicians have decided that sport is a vote catcher, but recreation in general, and recreational walking in particular, is not. No one would seriously hope to sell an 'Australian Institute of Walking' to our politicians in Canberra or Melbourne, with even a fraction of the funding of the Australian Institute of Sport.

And yet...walking is one of the first things we learn, and one of the last things we lose in our lives. Almost everyone can do it, and a very large number of people do it regularly and frequently. It is however, quite difficult to find accurate statistics on how much walking people actually do. 'Making Walking Count', an initiative arising from the 2006 Walk21 forum, represents a systematic attempt to derive these figures. The program is being carried out in London, Barcelona, Copenhagen and New York, and hopefully in the future, elsewhere in the world. It has also led to a joint project with COST (European Cooperation in Science and Technology⁴). Bushwalking Victoria is not aware of any systematic attempt to gather recreational walking statistics in Australia outside of the ERASS surveys which do not provide information about where walking is done, or in any detail, for what purpose.

It has often been stated that in the political sphere 'walking is everyone's responsibility – and hence no-one's'. In Victoria, at least six government departments have a direct or indirect interest in walking, yet none of them has walking as a primary focus. The concept of a 'Walking Plan' - a comprehensive strategy to embed walking into every aspect of urban and community planning and infrastructure development, has been before the Victorian Government since 2002, but progress has been very slow and uneven.

A number of government sponsored programs have emerged in recent years, focussed on encouraging the community to do more walking. These include 'Go For Your Life', 'Victoria Walks' and the Bushwalking Victoria delivered 'Go Further' and 'Walking Communities' programs. They represent a most welcome recognition of the benefits of walking, and it is to be hoped that they are used as a basis for giving recreational walking a higher profile in the Victorian community. Much however, remains to be done.

It is of particular interest, although of very little satisfaction, that a panel of experts from Australia and around the world, using subjective information (not hard statistics),

⁴ COST Action 358 '*Pedestrian Quality Needs*' - '*Measuring Walking*'

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formed the clear impression that whilst recreational walking in Australia was increasing, necessary walking (defined as walking as active transport) was decreasing⁵ – most disturbingly, particularly among children going to and from school. If this is correct, it further emphasises the need to improve the walking facilities and opportunities in our society. A healthy parks system plays an essential role in achieving this.

So organisations like Bushwalking Victoria need to work ever harder to raise awareness of the needs of recreational walkers and the benefits that walking in natural areas bring to the community.

Climate Change Impacts

Victoria has suffered a 13 year drought (since 1996), which most authorities link to climate change factors. Average summer temperatures have risen significantly compared to historic data which has meant that an environment historically prone to bushfires has become even more so.

The catastrophic events of early 2009 which resulted in widespread fire damage and many deaths are well known and have influenced government thinking on the management of parks and reserves.

Along with the tragic loss of lives and property, many tracks and trails were damaged, and their recovery may take some years. In addition, it is likely that parks and reserves will more frequently be subjected to controlled burning – with consequent impact on recreational walking and possibly, on the ecology of some parks.

The effects of this are threefold: – firstly, the need for organised recreational walkers to check whether individual areas are usable/accessible and to have a ‘plan B’ if they are not; secondly (and more importantly) a disincentive for more casual walkers (often families), to impulsively go into natural areas which are increasingly seen as dangerous; and finally, an impression that many of the best walking areas have been destroyed so there is nowhere worthwhile to walk.

Climate change has also caused changes in the vegetation and wildlife distribution in parks and reserves, and has placed greater stress on many plants and animals that remain. This in turn places greater demands on land managers (already overstretched by the demands of increased fire prevention activities) at a time when funding is also under stress.

In the medium term, this combination of factors represents a real threat to the integrity and quality of many of our parks and reserves.

Bushwalking Victoria

Bushwalking Victoria, as its name suggests originally grew from a federation of bushwalking clubs. It was founded in 1934 with a primary aim of ensuring that natural areas were preserved so that future generations could experience adventures and walk

⁵ Presentation given at Melbourne Walk21 2006 *‘Walking Around The World – Where are we Now Where are we Going’* (Rod Tolley, Director, Walk21)

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and revive their spirits in such places. It now has a network of some 80 affiliated and associated clubs throughout Victoria.

Over many years there has been a trend for bushwalking clubs to broaden their activities to include walking not only in remote areas, but in the parks, reserves and forests in and around our towns and cities. A study by Bushwalking Victoria⁶, presented at the Melbourne Walk21 conference noted that for many clubs, this is now a major part of their activities.

In this context, BWV believes that it has become meaningless to separate 'bushwalking' from other recreational walking – no definitive differentiation exists. Bushwalking Victoria has therefore adopted as its slogan

Bushwalking: At a natural pace in a natural place

which applies to all walking activities which occur in a natural setting, and has set out to try to represent the needs of all recreational walkers whether they regard themselves as bushwalkers or not.

BWV is a signatory to the Walk21 International Charter for Walking, fully supports the principles set out in the charter, and has incorporated those that apply to recreational walking into its strategy and planning.

Historically, in Victoria at least, recreational walkers and their advocacy groups have tended to be inwardly focussed – almost invisible to governments and very low-key in relationships with land managers. Advocacy was mainly directed towards influencing decisions by individual land managers.

Over the last five years, BWV has changed this. The organisation realised that recreational walking facilities would only get priority if it became more assertive on behalf of walkers. This meant carefully targeting its advocacy effort within two main areas:

- The general community – making a wider public aware of the benefits of walking in natural areas, and hence of the need to invest public money in a quality parks system
- Political decision-makers – who establish land management policies and allocate resources

BWV came to the conclusion that increased community participation in recreational walking in parks would foster a wider awareness of the value of these natural areas and the importance of maintaining their environmental integrity and quality. This in turn would assist the organisation to lobby and influence land managers and politicians with consequent benefits to the health of the parks system.

In 2009, BWV evolved its second 4 year Strategy Plan covering 2009-2013. It decided that it needed to focus on a vision that:

Bushwalking Victoria is the 'go to' organisation for information and expertise on all recreational walking matters

⁶ Reid and Guerin 2006, *Advocacy for Recreational Walkers*, Bushwalking Victoria

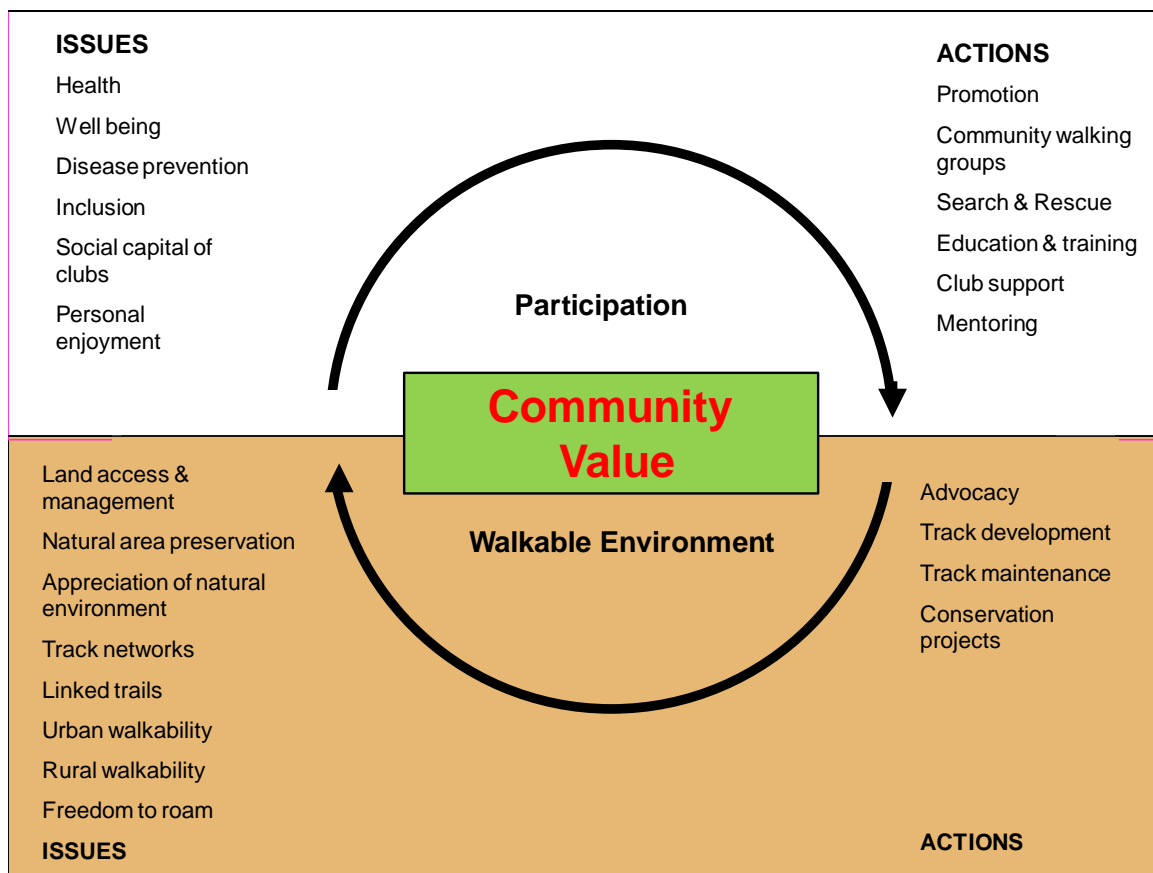
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For the period, BWV set a small number of key objectives:

- Gain a better quantitative and qualitative understanding of participation in recreational walking in natural areas as a baseline for developing increased participation initiatives (who, how many, how often, why)
- Enhance services to member clubs
- Positively influence the provision of recreational walking infrastructure in Victoria
- Maintain and broaden the application of our expertise for community benefit
- Increase capacity for our clubs to build membership and to deliver walking opportunities to their local communities
- Enhance management and governance

As shown in the diagram below⁷, BWV sees its key roles as:

- Facilitating sustained participation in recreational walking and provision of community services
- Creating a walkable environment (of which an essential part is a healthy parks system)



⁷ Bushwalking Victoria *Strategy Plan 2009-2013*, Bushwalking Victoria 2009

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What Has Bushwalking Victoria Achieved

Over the past five years, focussing on ensuring a healthy parks system now and for future generations, Bushwalking Victoria has:

- Signed a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) with Parks Victoria covering input into the development of new parks, the management strategy for existing parks, and the development of walking related infrastructure in parks, and any development likely to affect walking amenities in parks
- Developed a 'Green Walking' program designed to help those in the community for whom there are barriers to walking, to participate (this initiative is the subject of another workshop at the Healthy Parks Healthy People congress)
- Begun work on a project (Melwalk™) designed to establish a network of walking routes focussed on Melbourne's creeks and rivers, with standard signage and mapping. This project is aimed at bringing many existing walking routes under one system, so intending walkers can access information at one place. It also seeks to move beyond the tendency of existing walks to be created, described and publicised by any of a large number of different land managers and authorities working in isolation
- Participated actively, on a state-wide basis in walking programs designed to encourage seniors to walk and explore our parks
- Formed relationships with government and other organisations which seek to encourage walking as a means to improved community health – for example, the Heart Foundation
- Developed in partnership with land managers and friends groups, a program of walking track and bush restoration projects that contribute in a practical way to a healthy parks system.

The Next Ten Years

Bushwalking Victoria has a clear view that walking is a very cost-effective way of maintaining and improving community health in an aging society.

As an example, there is no doubt that obesity is a problem which besets almost all developed countries, and Australia is no exception.

In general, Australian Federal and State Governments have recognised this problem, but BWV believes much more needs to be done to encourage community life-style decisions that underpin community health. A crucial aspect of this is the recognition that there needs to be a more appropriate balance between the funding and focus on elite and competitive sport and the less glamorous active recreation sector.

BWV believes that the concept of walking as a preferred method of short distance travel needs to be an essential part of all urban design. The 'travel' aspects of walking need to be blended as seamlessly as possible into recreational walking opportunities. Parks need to be linked by attractive walking tracks, clearly and consistently signed.

There is an urgent need for a uniform national system of walking track grading, identification and signage, which will help make walking for pleasure more accessible

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to all, and BWV is committed to work towards this goal, with its colleagues in other states and through the national peak body Bushwalking Australia.

Bushwalking Victoria believes that a healthy parks system - an essential part of building a healthier community - has certain key requirements:

- adequate funding and resourcing to enable parks to be managed properly
- community support – our parks need to be valued
- protection from inappropriate development either in or immediately adjacent to any park, where these will adversely affect the amenity of the park
- accessibility to parks, and within parks at an appropriate level – some parks are wilderness, where access is quite correctly, very restricted; others contain sensitive and vulnerable ecosystems which may also require access to be limited
- infrastructure such as parking, toilets, and litter collecting which are essential to protection of the environment
- tracks and trails which invite usage and exploration without compromising the natural setting of the park

Above all, BWV believes that a healthy parks system needs government and community support – funding, resourcing and loving!

Over the next decade, BWV wants to help form community and government opinion such that these beliefs become an integral part of Victorian community thinking and will vigorously lobby to achieve this.

Enablers and Barriers

If Bushwalking Victoria's advocacy is to succeed in improving the environment and facilities for recreational walking, it must capitalise on its strengths and overcome its weaknesses. There is a 'glass half empty/full' aspect to this section. It does not seek to quantify the impact of each factor, but attempts to look at the key factors on either side. The focus is on recreational walking but walking as transport does relate closely in many ways.

The lists below are far from comprehensive – they show only what BWV perceives as the major drivers in its environment.

Positive Factors	Impact
Greater community awareness of health benefits of walking	More people understand why they should walk and want to walk
Greater government awareness of health benefits of walking	More funding for and promotion of walking and walking infrastructure
Credibility of Bushwalking Victoria	BWV considers that it has established a position as a responsible and knowledgeable contributor.
BWV's state-wide network of clubs	BWV's member clubs cover the whole of Victoria and have a unique knowledge of the countryside and walking environment. They can add considerable value to their local communities

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Positive Factors	Impact
BWV's technical expertise	BWV has proven expertise in Parks planning and establishment, track and trails construction and maintenance, bush search and rescue etc.
Increasing decision maker awareness of and interaction with BWV	The organisation is better able to articulate its issues and concerns and propose positive solutions
Increasing public awareness of the importance of natural recreational areas	Applies more pressure at the political level for greater investment of public funds into maintaining and expanding a healthy parks system

Negative Factors	Impact
Planning inertia	Resistance to change – cars have dominated infrastructure planning for the last 75 years
Overcoming 'sport mania'	Difficult to convince governments that walking and provision of good walking facilities (in a healthy parks system) should get funding comparable to their favourite (spectator) sport
Climate change	Degradation of some parks – restrictions on usage and higher management costs – bushfire factor as a deterrent to users
Financial constraints	Economic and community benefits of a healthy parks and reserves system not understood or appreciated by governments, so viewed solely as an expense
Benefits of walking difficult to quantify	Hard to influence governments to spend money on programs without directly measurable benefits
Difficult to quantify participation rates	Adds to the difficulty of influencing decision makers, especially when competing for influence and resources with competitive sport where participation can be accurately measured

Bushwalking Victoria needs to remain alert and sensitive to changes in government direction, but more importantly, wants to positively influence government thinking in those areas that affect recreational walkers. Bushwalking Victoria wants to be seen as a 'thought leader' in the field of recreational walking in Victoria. In essence, the future role of organisations like BWV needs to be proactive, not reactive. Organisations like BWV need to promote solutions, not just state problems.

BWV needs to form alliances with organisations promoting environmental integrity, active transport, pedestrian rights, and walkability in our environmental planning.

BWV believes that it must continue to advocate strongly for more resources to extend, preserve and manage Victoria's network of parks and reserves, and to enhance appropriate levels of accessibility and provision of facilities.

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Conclusions

Recreational walking and the Victorian parks system have not to date, received the attention and funding from government that they merit. It would appear to BWV that this is also the norm in most interstate and overseas jurisdictions.

Organisations like BWV need to advocate lobby and organise more effectively in the immediate and longer term future, in order to ensure that walking is seen as a fundamental part of the community's daily life, and an important aid to community health and wellbeing. In order to do this, recreational walking must not be considered totally separately from walking as transport.

Bushwalking Victoria needs to keep in close touch with similar organisations throughout Australia, and throughout the world, to share knowledge, compare experiences, and so to learn from each other.

Finally, an organisation like Bushwalking Victoria has, through its advocacy and practical initiatives, a key role to play in contributing to the provision and maintenance of a healthy parks system into the future, and hence to improve the wellbeing and health of the community.

Tony Walker

April 2010