

10.5. New Years Eve access arrangements - Balls Head Reserve

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ATTACHMENTS	1. NYE 2023/24 vegetation damage Balls Head [10.5.1 - 7 pages] 2. Balls Head Reserve NYE Closure plan [10.5.2 - 1 page]
CSP LINK	1. Our Living Environment 1.1 Protected, enhanced and biodiverse natural environment

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this report is to detail the impact of previously unmanaged access to Balls Head Reserve on NYE, and to propose alternate options for future management.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

- Balls Head Reserve is North Sydney's single largest bushland remnant, occupying 10Ha of the Waverton Peninsula, with iconic bushland-framed views of Sydney Harbour.
- The Reserve has been a popular destination for members of the public to view the New Years Eve (NYE) fireworks displays yet is an unmanaged vantage point with no Council supervision, no enforcement of alcohol restrictions, no limit on attendees, nor an emergency evacuation plan.
- Bushland vegetation at Balls Head has been damaged every NYE due to large numbers of attendees spilling out of the formal vantage points and into sensitive bushland areas. This has led to a cycle of declining vegetative cover, soil loss/instability, weed invasion, and reducing species diversity, all of which has required rehabilitation resources to be reallocated from other, more ecologically, significant areas in the reserve.
- From January 2019 to December 2022, NYE attendance in Balls Head Reserve was either absent or very limited, due to severe bushfire conditions, COVID-19, and inclement weather. During this time, previously impacted bushland vegetation made a substantial recovery.
- In 2023, larger-than-expected crowds returned to Balls Head Reserve for NYE, resulting in significant damage to these regenerating bushland areas.
- Options to address the costly environmental impact caused by unmanaged NYE crowds to the Reserve include full reserve closure (as recommended in Council's Bushland Plan of Management 2022) or supervised/regulated access with numbers capped at a sustainable level.

RECOMMENDATION:

- 1. THAT** the report on management of public access to Balls Head Reserve on NYE be noted.
- 2. THAT** Council implement the closure of Balls Head Reserve on NYE as per Option 2 outlined in this report.

Background

Balls Head is North Sydney Council's largest bushland reserve, occupying just over 10 hectares of the Waverton Peninsula. Rich with sites of Aboriginal and European heritage significance, the reserve also contains a network of walking tracks, formal lookouts, public amenities, and picnic areas. With stunning bushland-framed views of Port Jackson, the city skyline, and the Sydney Harbour Bridge, Balls Head Reserve is a popular destination for locals and visitor alike.

North Sydney Council's parks and reserves provide some of the best publicly accessible NYE vantage points available in the inner harbour area. Whilst not actively publicised as a key NYE vantage point, Balls Head Reserve is included in most official communications regarding the event and is well-known as an unmanaged/uncapped attendee vantage point in the wider Sydney community.

Report

Prior to 2019, Council's Bushland Management Team was familiar with an annual pattern of bushland degradation in Balls Head Reserve that revolved around NYE.

As an unmanaged venue, Council has not provided supervision of NYE crowds entering the reserve, and there has been no enforcement of alcohol restrictions, limitations on crowd numbers, and no emergency evacuation planning. Consequently, bushland areas surrounding the popular harbour-facing vantage points suffered annual damage from overcrowding and trampling. Trees and shrubs that obscured views of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and the city were routinely snapped off or ripped out of the ground, and any apparent opening in the bushland (e.g., such a meadow of native grasses or sandstone outcrop) would be targeted as an informal vantage, resulting in tracks being trampled through bushland and young plants crushed under picnic blankets and shelter tents etc. Soils also become destabilised by the foot traffic and vegetation removal, exacerbating erosion and diminishing the Bushland Team's ability to implement post-event rehabilitation actions in these areas.

In addition, revellers often place themselves and others at risk, being positioned along cliff edges and steep drop-offs.

In summary, the impacts of unmanaged access include:

- *heavy use of informal paths through the bush to access unauthorised vantage points.* Some of these are old historic paths that the Bushland Team have closed as part of rationalising the walking track network and preventing access to unsafe and/or ecologically sensitive parts of the reserve. Apart from the physical damage caused to trampled plants, informal paths leave a signature in the landscape that is difficult to erase, inviting ongoing impacts.
- *the flattening of grasses, groundcovers, and small regenerating plants where people set up their blankets etc in unauthorised vantage points.*

This sets bushland rehabilitation back by months, years, or even decades, depending on the species affected, and can exacerbate other management issues such as erosion and the incursion of weed species.

- *snapping off stems and branches of trees and shrubs that are in view-lines or obstructing a vantage point.*

This occurs in both the official look-out areas as well as unauthorised vantage points that are dotted throughout the bushland. This damage causes susceptibility to pest and disease attack, potentially leading to premature death, habitat loss, reduction in seed-bank recharge, loss of plant form and aesthetic quality, and the exposure of shallow/fragile soils to erosion and/or weed invasion.

- *long-term loss of canopy cover in certain areas as replacement plantings and naturally regenerating saplings are prevented from maturing.*
- *damage to sites of Aboriginal heritage significance, including an extensive midden near “Themeda Point”, and sandstone outcrops which contain other traces of the area’s traditional custodians, the Cammeraygal.*

This annual pattern of impact has resulted in certain parts of the Reserve’s bushland being in a state of cyclical decline. In years of good rainfall, some level of vegetation recovery would occur before the next NYE event; however, during periods of prolonged drought (e.g., 2018/19), heavily impacted areas were in severe decline, with little-to-no vegetation recovery possible between each NYE.

In the five-year period between January 2019 and December 2023, a combination of extreme weather events and the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in NYE attendance in Balls Head Reserve that was either minimal or completely absent. Combined with wetter-than-average weather conditions between 2020 and 2023, extensive vegetation recovery was seen across most of the previously impacted bushland areas.

However, following NYE 2023, the Reserve sustained a significant level of vegetation damage in areas surrounding the main lookouts, as well as in old or informal vantage points. The post-NYE cleanup (including removal of litter, broken glass, discarded tents/shelters/camping chairs etc.) indicated that larger-than-expected crowds had attended Balls Head on NYE – consistent with reports from other North Sydney vantage points such as Bradfield Park, Blues Point, Carradah Park, and Cremorne Point.

Despite high-visibility rope fencing and “Environmentally Sensitive Area” signage installed in the lead-up to NYE 2023, the level of impact sustained signalled a return to the pre-2019 pattern, where much of the progress rehabilitating affected areas over the preceding year was reversed in one night of intense activity. Consequently, time and resources that should be expended where the ecological need is greatest in Balls Head Reserve, are instead diverted to mitigating NYE damage and facilitating some level of vegetation recovery.

Council invests significant resources each year in the management and ecological rehabilitation of Balls Head Reserve. Through the combined efforts of bush regeneration contractors, Council's Bush Regeneration Team, and volunteers from the Balls Head Bushcare Group, the Reserve's endemic vegetation communities, which support over 190 native plant species, represent a significant proportion of North Sydney's biodiversity assets. Given the regression in bushland recovery that resulted from NYE 2023/24, consideration should be given to changing the public access arrangements for Balls Head Reserve for future NYE events.

Attachment 1 to this report contains photos which depict the type of damage that has been sustained across the vantage points within the Reserve. Unfortunately, the images do not fully convey the extent of impact and damage as it is hard to capture effectively, especially when many of the affected plants are seedlings or small juveniles.

Aside from the environmental impacts that result from unmanaged access to Balls Head Reserve on NYE, the other major factor to consider is public safety. The topography of Balls Head features numerous cliff-lines, sandstone over-hangs, steep embankments, and uneven low-traction surfaces. Lighting in the Reserve is confined to the loop road, adding to the risk of slips and falls within the bushland zone, where all vantage points are located. These factors, combined with the likely consumption of alcohol and/or other impairments, have led to NYE revellers sustaining injuries in previous years.

These risks would be further compounded in the (unlikely) event of a public emergency developing, in which mass evacuation of the Reserve becomes necessary. As an unmanaged venue, there are no Council staff, security personnel, or permanently stationed police in the Reserve to assist the public in leaving, account for all persons present, and ensure order is maintained.

Foreseeing the need to consider future management of access to the Reserve on NYE, the question: *Would you support restricting or prohibiting access to Balls Head Reserve on New Years Eve to protect its environmental value to our community?* was asked as part of Council's recent community consultation on the *Open Space and Recreation Discussion Paper* (North Sydney's next ten years). The result of this consultation question is displayed in Figure 1 on the next page. Of the 211 responses to this question, nearly 80% supported restricting or prohibiting access to Balls Head Reserve on NYE.

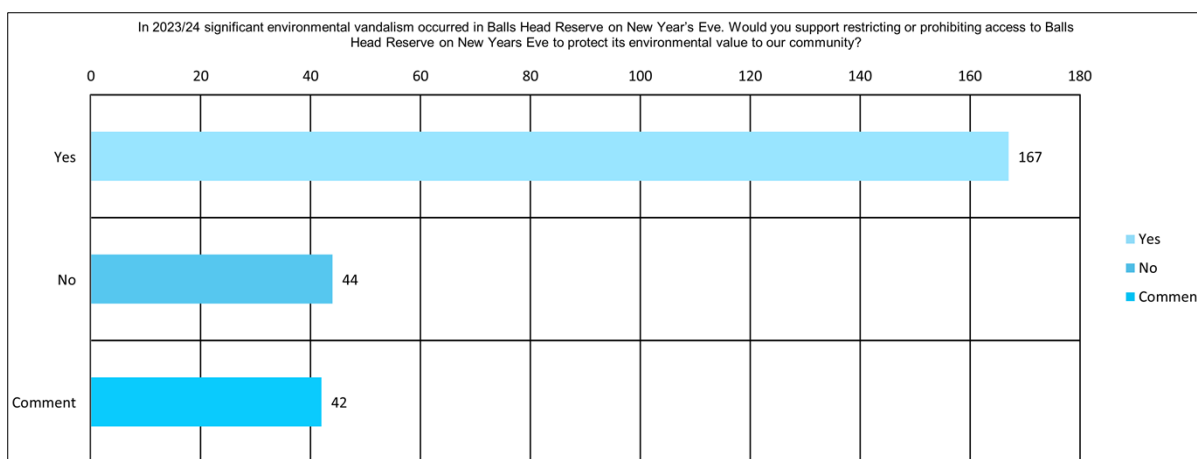


Figure 1: extract from the NSC Open Space and Recreation Discussion Paper community consultation

Options

Council has the following options in relation to this matter:

1. Do nothing/take no action/maintain the status quo
2. Close Balls Head Reserve to public access on NYE, as recommended in Council's 2022 Bushland Plan of Management
3. Implement managed access to Balls Head Reserve with attendance numbers capped at a level commensurate with the carrying capacity of formal vantage areas.

These options are assessed in the table below.

Option	Finance/Resourcing	Risk/Opportunity	Consultation
1.	No additional funds or resourcing necessary. Existing management arrangements include provision of portable lighting hire, port-a-loos, and no-alcohol signage. This is funded out of Council's overall budget for NYE vantage site management.	<p>NYE in Balls Head Reserve is not managed by Council, with no visitor supervision.</p> <p>Vegetation in affected parts of the Reserve will continue to degrade, leading to loss of native cover, declining species diversity, weed incursion, and erosion/soil instability.</p> <p>No negative reactions from the wider Sydney community.</p> <p>Unresolved safety risks to attendees, including unmarked cliff-lines, unstable ground, and evacuation constraints in a bushfire scenario.</p>	Not applicable

<p>2.</p>	<p>Fencing hire Security personnel x4 Signage Communications Est. cost \$16,800*</p> <p>*Attachment 2 provides an indicative plan for closing Balls Head Reserve on NYE. This operations plan was used previously in 2019 due to “Severe” bushfire weather and a declared Total Fire Ban. In 2020, the Reserve’s closure plan was again implemented as part of the police response to COVID-19 restrictions.</p>	<p>Negative community reaction to the closure of public land for NYE. Additional crowd-loading at other North Sydney vantage points.</p> <p>Potential for confrontation with security staff as uninformed attendees arrive at Balls Head and try to enter. Police command centre at the Coal Loader may ameliorate this risk.</p> <p>Damage to the Reserve’s bushland is averted, leading to more effective investment of rehabilitation resources, and improving bushland condition.</p> <p>Public safety concerns are alleviated.</p>	<p>Extensive communications would be required from an early stage to ensure minimal confusion among NYE visitors to the North Sydney LGA.</p>
<p>3.</p>	<p>Fencing Hire Garbage bins Portable lighting hire Security Personnel x11 Signage and vantage point infrastructure Port-a-loo hire Marquee & table hire for ticket admin/searched entry Development of an emergency evacuation Plan Staff time and resources to administer ticketing Est. cost \$60,000+</p>	<p>Public land available for NYE.</p> <p>Attendee numbers, based on evaluation of all formal/ accessible vantage points in Balls Head Reserve, limited to 283 attendees.</p> <p>Estimated cost per attendee is \$212, substantially higher than other managed-access vantage points such as Bradfield Park and Blues Point.</p> <p>Upgrading of handrails and fences to comply with Australian Standards would need to be considered. \$140K-\$200K (approx.).</p> <p>Could adopt cost-recovery model by selling tickets. Alternatively, access to Balls Head for could be managed on an invitation-only basis for NSC volunteer program participants.</p>	<p>Extensive communications will be required from an early stage to ensure minimal confusion among NYE visitors.</p>

Option 2, is recommended for the following reasons:

- Closing Balls Head Reserve to public access on NYE eliminates the risk of ongoing vegetation damage and the resulting gradual degradation of affected vantage point areas. Sites of Aboriginal cultural heritage are also protected, particularly the exposed midden at “Themeda Point”.
- Compared to managed access, which only caters for 283 people at an estimated cost of \$212 per-person (if the Reserve were to be ticketed), closing Balls Head Reserve is a more cost-effective option, both immediately and in terms of post-NYE clean-up and bushland rehabilitation costs.
- The Council-adopted Bushland Plan of Management (PoM) 2022 recommends the closure of Balls Head Reserve on NYE to address the damaging impacts caused by unrestricted and unsupervised access to the reserve. The Bushland PoM was placed on public exhibition prior to its adoption – no community concern was raised regarding the proposed closure at that time.
- Closing Balls Head Reserve eliminates an underlying public safety issue that is inherent in an unlit, natural bushland area with numerous rocky outcrops etc
- Whilst the closure of Balls Head Reserve will cause localised crowd displacement, this impact will be off-set by the future redevelopment of a new open-space parkland on the Berrys Bay foreshore, connecting Carradah Park with the old Woodleys shipyard site.

Consultation requirements

Internal consultation with Council’s Events Team regarding the potential implications and logistics of implementing Option 2 has occurred. The Events Team are supportive of the proposal and will assist the Bushland Management Team with implementation. NSW Police have also expressed support for the proposed closure of Balls Head Reserve during NYE events when the topic has been discussed at the Mosman - North Sydney - Willoughby Bush Fire Management Committee.

As outlined earlier in the report, the majority of community respondents who engaged in the Open Space and Recreation Discussion Paper indicated they supported the concept of restricted access to Balls Head Reserve on NYE.

Financial/Resource Implications

Changing the current access arrangements in Balls Head Reserve for future NYE events requires the allocation of additional resources. As outlined above in Option 2, the provision of temporary fencing; security personnel and signage for the option of full reserve closure has been costed at approximately \$13,500 per annum.

Advice from the Events Team is that the existing Council budget allocation for managing NYE vantage points is fully committed. Implementing closure of Balls Head Reserve requires an additional allocation of \$16,800 (PA) to be made. It is suggested that this funding could be sourced from the Environmental Levy Reserve and included as a recurring annual allocation within the Bushland Projects budget.

Implementing managed access with capped attendee numbers (Option 3) commensurate with the carrying capacity of each formal vantage point in the reserve requires a higher level of coordination and resource input. The indicative budget for this option is \$60,000+ per annum, however, this is a conservative estimate, and the true cost may be higher. Furthermore, managed access to Balls Head Reserve would require a substantial investment in the upgrading of handrails and fencing around the formal vantage points in order to comply with the current Australian Standards.

Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Above: trampling of small, establishing shrubs planted 24-36 months ago by the Bush Regen Team

Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Above: a flattened dense stand of locally rare native plants *Lepidosperma laterale*

Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Above: trampled native groundcovers and newly germinated seedlings on skeletal shallow soils

Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Above: snapped-off branches from small native tree *Pittosporum undulatum*

Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24

Other random damage – mostly snapped branches and stems of establishing native plants



Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Balls Head Reserve New Years Eve vegetation damage 2023/24



Balls Head Reserve – NYE closure operations plan



A: main entrance to Balls Head Reserve via Balls Head Drive. 45m temporary fence with gates on the inbound and outbound road corridors for emergency vehicle access. 2x security guards stationed at this entry point. 2x security guards patrolling reserve; vantage points and secondary access points
⊗ : Coal Loader pedestrian tunnel gates closed and locked; Coal Loader east apron path gates to Balls Head Drive closed and locked.
B: secondary/informal entrance off Balls Head Road. 35m temporary fence installed along the old Woodleys Boatshed access road. No security guard required. Regularly patrolled by roving security team.