

Cutting Through Political Scrub- Jen Brown

Lake Geeves and Federation Peak are stunning. It's easy to see why people want to visit them. I've braved the trip to Federation Peak towering above Lake Geeves on three occasions, but only made the summit once. Unforgiving weather stopped me the other times.

Standing on the summit of Federation Peaks is extraordinarily rewarding and the view down to Lake Geeves is breathtaking. There can't be many people standing atop 'Fedders' who wouldn't think, "gee I'd like to visit that lake down there". But most people think again after considering the kilometres of horizontal scrub between the Federation Peak track and Lake Geeves. In the words of the wilderness legend Deny King: "so fierce were the stands of the dreaded horizontal and bauera scrub that the average travel time was four kilometer's a day and this reduced at times to only one."

The walk to the summit is usually two or three solid days (if you're lucky) of hauling a loaded backpack up, over and under slippery wet logs, or pushing through wet, boggy button grass plains. On a lucky year you might get one or two weeks between January and March where the waist-deep bogs dry up to knee depth and the weather stays calm enough to make your trip slightly less unrelenting.

To cut a new track to Lake Geeves would be a serious challenge. It is possible but, for what? Who plans to be in charge of the track upgrade and maintenance? Parks and Wildlife?

Better get in line, behind the equally stunning, already existing tracks in need of upgrade.

The existing Port Davey track has not been upgraded since the bushfires of 2013. Two bridges require rebuilding and a number of burnt-out 'duck boards' and drainage steps make the mud relentless. At the Spring River crossing, the lack of toilets, or even simple signage about minimal impact, has caused a health hazard by inexperienced visitors.

The track to Lake Judd below Mt Anne has deteriorated significantly over the past five years. At a minimum it needs new drainage - perhaps 'duck boards' are wishful thinking.

The popular South Coast track over the South Cape Range has neck deep mud that no one can pass through, like a good minimal impact walker should. The result is forcing an ever widening track. This track is a leg fracture waiting to happen for an inexperienced walker.

The Parks and Wildlife Service have had funding drained out of them, so understandably maintenance has needed to go to high use areas like Freycinet and Cradle Mountain.

The argument is that if Lake Geeves is so beautiful, why couldn't it be a high use area? The answer to that is no. Tasmania's Southwest Wilderness is wild. The weather for the vast majority of the year is wet, windy and unpleasant. Track maintenance in these areas is difficult and expensive. The drive to a track start is not easy, the distance from the nearest services is significant.

An entirely new track would need to be cut to Lake Geeves because the existing track to Federation Peak is a significant distance away. The walk would scar the largest intact river system in Tasmania, the New River catchment basin, that remains entirely free of post-colonial human disturbance. It is purely wild country, and as remote as anywhere in the Southwest from roads, settlements, logging and dams.

If you need a walk to a stunning lake flanked by an incredible cliff face, try Lake Tahune at Frenchman's Cap. The existing upgraded track funded by Dick Smith's million dollar donation was completed last year and it makes for amazing walking, while the existing facilities are beautiful.

Let's keep those impulsive ideas that come to mind atop a mountain - like building a track to Lake Geeves - right where they belong: in our heads. Let's put the money where it belongs, into existing Parks and Wildlife track management.

But first and foremost, let's concentrate our efforts on protecting the Wilderness World Heritage Area from climate change, so future generations can continue to marvel at its beauty.