

SKYTREK Media

January 2012

Skytrek is a well known, full day, scenic 4WD family adventure enjoyed by 1000's visiting the Flinders Ranges for the past 16 years. Of the latest achievements the track was voted #7 of Australia's Ultimate 4WD Adventures by 4WD Action Magazine issue 166 and also voted #8 of 20 tracks that must be driven in Australia by 4WD Action Magazine issue 145, it's a Flinders Ranges icon.

Skytrek was opened by the Reynolds family in June 1995 and consists of a series of Station roads, old mining and goat shooters tracks, a fire break, linked together by 26km of constructed track over Mt. Caernarvon to complete the circular route. In May 2001, a proportion of Willow Springs Station {34,000 acres} was sold off to a sub branch of the Sporting Shooters Association of Australian (SSAA) later to become the Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby Preservation Association (YFRWPA) on the understanding that Willow Springs Station would lease back this proportion of the track and provide the association with ongoing funding.

Originally we were of the understanding that we were providing a service of public access and continuous funds to the Yellow Footed Rock Wallaby Preservation Association (YFRWPA) which was of mutual benefit to both parties, however today we face the problem of the association's management committee requesting an unsustainable amount of money to access the existing track going through their land and still expect us to maintain the track and meet other cost.

A loop hole has surfaced in the Skytrek agreement and the YFRWPA management committee feel it's their obligation to exercise their rights on this matter. There is little we can do legally to allow our clients to access the Bunkers Conservation Park. Obviously we are very disappointed with the Association because after 16 years of a lot of promoting and providing a service to the public that has won Willow Springs Station numerous awards, popularity and good publicity, it is with regret that on the 11th Nov. 2011 we did not renew the lease as we refuse to pay the \$12,660 renewal fee requested by the management committee. It's simply not sustainable. There is no way that proportion of land can generate a renewal fee of this magnitude plus cover other expenses and provide some profit for the operator. We are very disappointed in knowing that when the lease expires on March 24th we will no longer be able provide the public with access to this part of a regional tourism icon. We did have a workable agreement that was documented, discussed and agreed to, so we don't understand why their Secretary and their Vice President changed it without consulting with us or our lawyer.

We are of two minds as to why this matter is happening.

The committee doesn't have a full understanding of the issues/factors of running a business of this nature in an isolated area and is acting on poor advice.

Or is it the ongoing intentions of several members of this committee to deliberately prevent Willow Springs to provide ongoing public access to this conservation park. Public access is a commitment that the Association has with the federal government as part of their \$162,000 grant to acquire the land from Willow Springs Station in 2001. We naturally assume it is the later of the two.

The valuation they provided us with, requested by the secretary only showed the executive summary of the valuation but did not offer further information as to how this summary was calculated. Because of the lack of information presented to us, we can only assume the valuation is biased and is based on our turnover with the fabricated volumes of traffic and circumstances. We feel that if a valuation has been drawn up by a commercial valuer (because of the difficulties of setting the renewal fee five years ago) and the Association considers it to be fair and reasonable, then why not make the *whole* document public and allow everyone to understand how it was calculated, otherwise what is the point of the valuation?

At the time of renewing the first Skytrek agreement, 5 years ago, the YFRWPA tried to force upon us a 300% increase in the renewal fee from \$4,000 per annum to \$12,000 per annum. We argued with supporting documentation that it was agreed originally that the renewal would be \$4,000 plus or minus C.P.I. and eventually convinced the committee that the fee was unrealistic and they reduced the fee back to \$9,000. To our surprise, the Association then took off a further \$1,000 per annum for good will. Money is obviously not the issue. Later with support from the local community we approached our local MP Graham Gunn who contacted the Minister of Tourism, at the time, Jane Lomax Smith who appointed Mr Bill Cossey as a mediator. To cut a much larger story short we had to make a difficult decision and decided to put the tourist first. We took a risk and increased our access fee by 35% and was fortunately blessed with water in Lake Eyre which increased the visitation to the Flinders Ranges to record levels.

The National Heritage Trust (NHT) funding was to purchase the land to protect the Yellow Footed Rock Wallabies, setting a renewal fee like a treadmill is a recipe for a financial disaster. As the management committee of the Association has informed us there will be no negotiation of this renewal fee, we on deadline of November 11th 2011 had little choice but to start considering diverting the route and have the entire Skytrek route on Willow Springs Station. The Association's response to this is that they will call for expression of interest for another tour operator. Most people know Willow Springs Station has the largest proportion of the tour, most of the attractions and owns the entrance and the exit to the Bunkers Conservation Reserve of the existing track excluding the emergency exits. We also have registered the brand name and have the support of the local community. I believe it's in the best interest of the tax payers of this nation, the tourist industry in this state and the future image of the SSAA that this regional tourist icon **Skytrek** should remain in its existing route as always intended.

The Reynolds family are all about moving forward and making a better future for the Flinders Ranges. We want **Skytrek** to remain intact for the sake of the public as it offers a complete Flinders Ranges experience catering to people of all interests, such as photographers, 4WDers, families, etc.

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