

# Imagine ... a long walk in the woods

Light Airs David Miller



AUSTRALIAN VISITORS TO the English countryside often remark on the network of public footpaths that criss-cross the whole land.

Why should this be so remarkable? We have lots more space here, but no such infrastructure. These are ancient paths going back a thousand years or so and even more noteworthy, much of this infrastructure is not mixed with road traffic.

When land was distributed here 200 years ago, the traditional Aboriginal paths, 'the Songlines' were not recognised and obliterated with fences. Properties were allocated cheek by jowl without liberal public access in-between and bang went 50,000 years of common access.

We have many beautiful beaches and national parks to be sure, but mostly need a car to get there. Anyone with a dog is even more restricted in this great wide land.

Our cycle ways and footpaths are mostly along roads, even without separation from the traffic. These tracks can be scary and polluted and walking next to highways is not encouraged. Opportunity for a long walk in a natural setting can be a dilemma.

But wait! A cubic centimetre of opportunity has suddenly presented to provide a wonderful countryside non-motorised track, all because the NSW state government recently announced that the train service between Casino and Murwillumbah will not be re-opened and this track is fallow.

It is a very long paddock and straddles four shires. A casual observer can spot the old line at bridges and level crossings. It's easy to miss because it is very

“Suppose a decision to make a modern songline was made”

overgrown through long disuse.

Most of this now defunct railway track goes through splendid countryside. I remember it, in the afternoon light, because I used to catch the sleeper overnight to Sydney from Mullumbimby station. It was such a good service in 1975 that passengers could carry their cars in a special carriage at the rear of the train. But that was in the 'good ol' days'.

The original rail construction is a tribute to the skill of early 20th century Aussie engineers. The drains, the grading and contours are all intact. Trains do not go well on hills, so it is mostly flat, which would be good for a long ramble, even for elders or wheelchair. There are some tunnels and bridges.

Unfortunately the steel rails, splintery sleepers and the rough gravel surface create conditions impassable to bike and foot.

This land is owned by the SRA and could be a juicy piece of real estate. It is wider than just a train. Service roads run alongside the whole length, camouflaged in bush. How wide? I don't know. I'm not an expert, but probably wide enough for a string of townhouses.

Hopefully, no sections have been sold off and the whole length remains intact. Perhaps the NSW government has become more constrained and transparent in its dealings.

Just supposing that a statesmanlike decision was made to create a modern Songline, what about the logistics? To take up

the rails and the sleepers would be expensive, but then again, these are valuable commodities. Quid pro quo maybe.

If imagination runs riot it is not impossible to imagine kiosks in old stations, hotels and lodgings serving an area with a massive tourist population. Many residents wonder how to entertain the great numbers of guests to our area, where to go and what to do, especially without having to drive there. Send them for a good long walk in our amazing country.

There is plenty of precedent. For example, here in Queensland and Victoria and in Britain and Canada, the conversion of disused railway tracks into walking and riding trails has been achieved with great success.

The good news is that a steering committee exists, but there is not much in the papers to engender political will. This opportunity towards health for our children's children could do with voice from doctors.

**You may think I'm a dreamer,  
But I'm not the only one  
Today you can join us,  
So the Northern Rivers  
can be as one.**

Find out more about a potential North Coast rail trail here:  
[www.railtrails.org.au/trail-descriptions/nsw-and-act/country-nsw-and-act?view=trail&id=221](http://www.railtrails.org.au/trail-descriptions/nsw-and-act/country-nsw-and-act?view=trail&id=221)

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