

# OPEN LETTER

From Southern Highlands Environment Community Groups

## Signed By:

### Australian Wildlife Society

#### John Creighton

- Wombat Care Bundanoon

#### Tania Clancy

- Environmental Educator  
Wildlife Carer

#### Alexander Seddon

- Potoroo Palace, Native Animal Education Sanctuary
- Cowsnest Community Farm and Wildlife Refuge
- Member of Wires
- 2019 Vince Serventy Award - Australian Wildlife Society

#### Warren Walker

- Wariapendi Nursery

#### Clive West

- WinZero - Net Zero Emissions
- Berrima Bushcare

#### Mary Moore

- Berrima Bushcare Convenor

#### Suzannah Porter

- Wildlife Carer

Dear Frensham Board of Governors

We are calling upon the Board of Winifred West Schools to abandon its DA for student accommodation in the Lower Holt (bushland opposite the main campus). The DA will destroy valuable wildlife habitat and sever an important biodiversity corridor.

The nine buildings proposed (six dormitories, two staff cabins, a communal hall with a large fire pit amphitheatre) are intended to give the 72 students a “bush experience”. The school says that the accommodation will only occupy 0.8 hectares but fails to clarify that 4.2 hectares (11 acres) of the bush will be cleared, because of the fire regulations requiring an “Asset Protection Zone”. Also, the accommodation is to be located directly on top of a collective (“Wisdom”) of 12 wombat burrows.

The wombats are in the only spot that completely avoids the 100-year flood line. This is why the wombats chose it many generations ago. Human habitation is to replace the wombat habitation. Humans have other nearby locations to choose from, the wombats do not. Destruction of habitat is the greatest threat facing our wildlife in Australia. What environmental lesson is the Frensham Board providing the students in locating the accommodation here?

A bush experience can be gained without destroying the bush by walking the 10 minutes from the main campus and or camping. Where is the outdoor challenge of staying in an ‘eco’ hut less than 10 minutes from the boarding house.

Of the 249 trees to be removed, 85 are native trees, including 16 Koala Feed Trees. The pine trees to be removed, while not native, nevertheless provide important wildlife habitat and should be replaced over an extended period of time to further restore this “Critically Endangered Ecological Community”. This gradual

**Signed By:****Adrienne Bradney-Smith**

- Wombatised Inc

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- Landcare Southern Highlands

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- Honorary Life Member Australian Plants S H

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- Conservation Officer, Birdlife Australia, S H

**Christine Goodwin**

- Mt Gibraltar Bushcare

**Philip Hazard**

- Bachelor of Veterinary Science

**Sarah Cains**

- Horticulturist Mt Gibraltar Bushcare

**Maree Byrne**

- OAM - service to Community

**Nigel Hartley**

- President, BirdLife Southern Highlands

**Bill Mullard**

- President Southern Highlands group Australian Plants Society

restoration of the remnant forest will save the rich and diverse wildlife presently there by allowing them to adapt as the pines are sensitively removed. The resident wildlife presently in the Lower Holt includes possums, sugar gliders, endangered bats, flying foxes, echidnas, platypuses, both rescued and native wombats, wallabies, not to mention the many species of birds, frogs, and insects, all the way down to micro organisms. In fact, the platypus is something of a canary in the coal mine indicating in spite of weed species a currently healthy and wholistic ecosystem.

The Council planner's recommendation for approval was based on a biodiversity report that was incomplete and highly inaccurate. Due to a break down in council procedure the DA never went to council's environment department and was not overlaid with the green web mapping available. The wildlife carers who have worked for many years with Frensham in this location were not consulted.

The biodiversity report dismissed the location as being part of a significant wildlife corridor. While the Hume Highway and rail line are a problem that should be addressed, the biodiversity map below from Wingecarribee Council shows that the site is in a crucial part of the **Primary** Biodiversity Corridor running between Mt Gibraltar and Mt Alexandra. Connectivity of habitats is essential to maintain and enhance biodiversity and is particularly important with the advance of climate change. This development will effectively break that connectivity.

The biodiversity report is also seriously deficient in the range of wildlife said to exist there. The report said they observed only one wombat scat, notwithstanding that the wildlife carers know that there are at least 12 wombats in the Wisdom. Six of these are rescued orphans, that wildlife carers rehabilitated (a process that takes 2 to 3 years) as part of a loved and valued environmental studies program for the students. Frensham has made its own video declaring the importance of the the Lower Holt as a wildlife corridor, its work with 'Land for Wildlife' and its history of the girls being involved in wildlife protection. See: <https://youtu.be/IkHUpXMNOSA>

There have been recorded sightings of koalas and

platypuses in the wildlife corridor, none of which are noted in the biodiversity report. Platypus are shy almost nocturnal animals and the presence of 72 students, four teachers and social events around the fire pit less than 50 metres away from the Nattai River will drive the resident platypus population away. There is no mention of the required permits (NSW wildlife regulations) to relocate wombats, though they are planning to fence them out of their wisdom. This is a disastrous situation for the wombats but is also a safety concern for surrounding locals and road users.

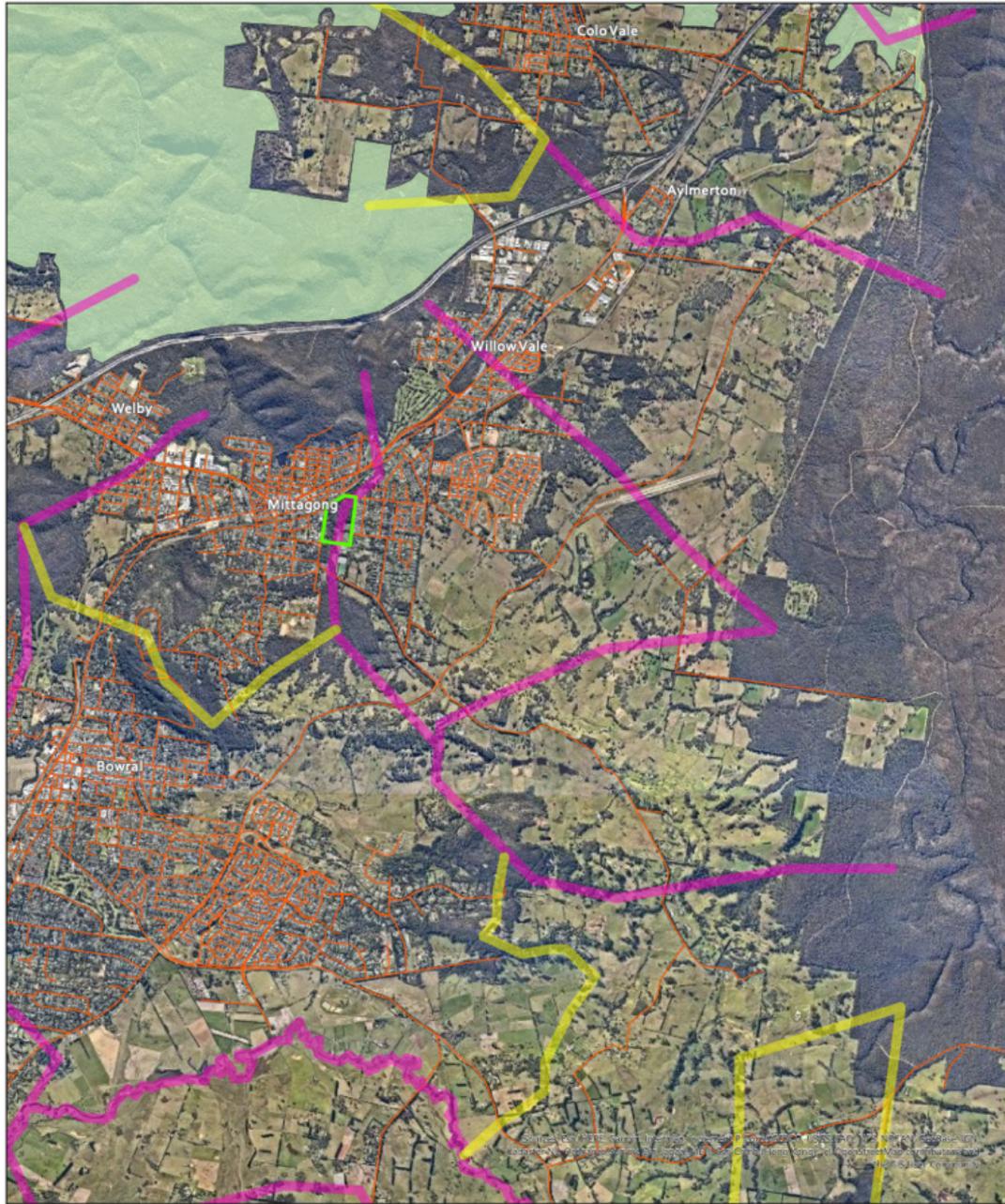
As a private school on private land, Frensham enjoys considerable public funding and tax relief. The school also functions as a significant member of the local community.

We the undersigned call on the Board of Winifred West Schools to honour their responsibilities of good citizenship by treating the local community with respect and hearing its voice. Also, we call on the Board to uphold the moral responsibility the school owes to its own family by honouring the spirit of stewardship of the land prescribed by the schools' progressive founder, Winifred West.

In the spirit of Sir David Attenborough, we ask the Board to heed the perilous situation of wild creatures that cannot speak for themselves.

*“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot,  
nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”  
The Lorax.*

**Wingecarribee Council Map showing the Primary Biodiversity Corridor in purple (area of corridor severed by the development marked in green)**



**Wingecarribee Biodiversity Corridors**

- Property of Interest
- Road Segments
- Biodiversity Strategy Corridors**
  - Primary Biodiversity corridor
  - Secondary Biodiversity Corridor
  - Regional Biodiversity Corridors



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Data sources : Biodiversity corridors from Wingecarribee Environment Strategy (2003) and HCMNA Regional Biodiversity Corridors.

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Aerial view of vegetation corridor

Frensham proposed clearing shown in green (which effectively severs the connectivity)

### Habitat Corridor Mt Gibraltar to Mt Alexandra



**Map showing Ancient Wombat Wisdom to be destroyed (burrows numbered 1 to 12) superimposed over the location for the cabins**



**An excerpt from a study by Tania Clancy, Frensham educator, conservationist, registered wildlife carer:**

**Burrow 1**

This is a burrow network. The Frensham students called this the “Family Chambers”. This is where the wombat wisdom meets. There are at least four entrances to a simple maze where lots of wombat interaction and expression transpires.

**Burrow 2.** Unfortunately, this site is where the wombat could possibly contract mange due to the presence of the fox who is a resistant carrier of mange. Mange was brought in by the early settlers. Mange is the same family as scabies.

**Burrow 3** “The Twin Burrows” is the site where the girls are filmed talking about the wildlife monitoring hut they were building.

**Burrows 4, 5, 7** “The sanctuary burrows in this area are approximately more than 4 burrows because some are hidden. One of the burrows here featured in a student photography exhibition titled sanctuary.

**Burrow 6** This is a nursery burrow

**Burrows 9, 10, 11, 12** are homes and bolt holes for safety.