

DESTINATION PAGODA

A grand new tourism attraction for Lithgow

*Gardens of Stone pagodas.
Photo © Henry Gold.
Lithgow can just be seen
behind the Sphinx Pagoda
Henry is the Hon. Photographer
of the Colong Foundation*



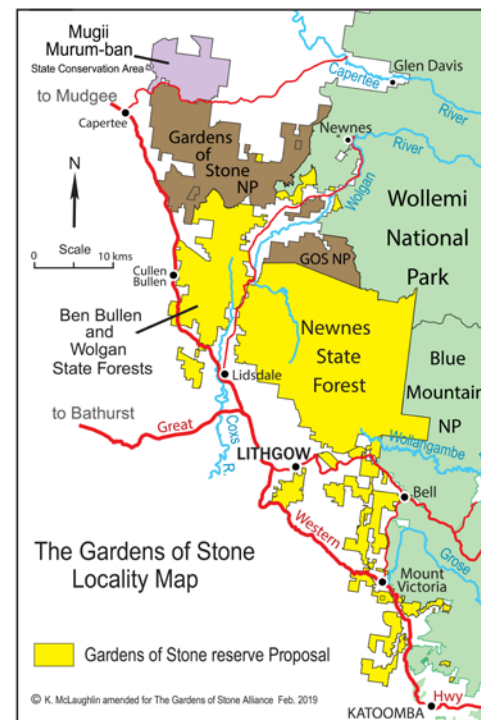
Bob Brown at the Gardens of Stone, 26 March 2018. Photo © Ian Brown

Destination Pagoda - a plan for a world-class tourism and conservation reserve on Lithgow's doorstep

by Keith Muir
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To win support for a long-standing proposal on the western edge of the Blue Mountains, local conservationists have developed a detailed reserve establishment plan. Through *Destination Pagoda* they believe Lithgow can become a mecca for families who wish

to experience a bit of real Blue Mountains' bushland but are reluctant to step far from their car. New visitor opportunities in nature can help Lithgow can build community resilience through diversifying its economy. It's estimated that the plan can easily generate over \$10 million per year and more than 100 jobs in Lithgow. It has already won support, including from Communications and Approvals Manager for Centennial Coal, Katie Brassil, who was quoted in the Sun Herald saying that the *Destination Pagoda* initiative "is something we can support" and "we believe it is a vision we can share" (April 7, 2019). Centennial Coal has the largest coal mining operations in the Lithgow area. The new reserve would be called the Gardens of Stone and will complete Myles Dunphy's visionary 1932 Blue Mountains



Scribbly Gum with Pagoda Photo © Ian Brown

National Park scheme. It would become a low-key version of Royal and Ku-ring-gai national parks. The forests beside Lithgow are known to be amongst the most diverse in NSW and contain 84 threatened plant and animal species, including the Blue Mountains Water Skink and Giant Dragonfly, as well as 16 rare and threatened communities. The key design element of *Destination Pagoda* is the creation of low-key visitor opportunities close to Lithgow beside upgraded existing road access linked to the town. Adequate funding for Lithgow-focused signage and communications are also essential for securing the town as the gateway to the Gardens of Stone. *Destination Pagoda* can achieve the town's ambitions for its tourism economy as on-going highway improvements have



Evening glow. Photo © Henry Gold

increased accessibility to its must-see natural and cultural heritage. There are many potential visitor activities in these forests near Lithgow. The gentle plateau terrain with its distinctive pagoda rocks contain many sites for a variety of family-suitable, low-key visitor facilities that combine to give Lithgow's



Rare and threatened swampland Newnes Plateau. Photo © Ian Brown

Gardens of Stone great potential to attract visitors interested in experiencing nature. On short walks families can discover pagodas, dramatic gorges, escarpments, wildflowers, sweeping upland swamps and montane heathlands, grassy woodlands and forest glades.

There is also iconic Aboriginal rock art. Wiradjuri Elder Auntie Helen Riley, on behalf of Mingaan Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation, has expressed support for the proposal and said: "The respect for the land is paramount to ensure not



Pagoda Daisy
Photo © Jaime Plaza van Roon



Giant Dragonfly. Photo © Dr Ian Baird

only the protection of the environment but equally Aboriginal culture." Protection and effective management of these many heritage values must be funded as a package to ensure the new reserve would provide long-term employment benefits for the next generation and to encourage visitors to stay in Lithgow. It will also contribute to Lithgow's lifestyle attractions and encourage new residents. A Gardens of Stone Conservation Area would allow both coal mining



Carne Creek Gorge. Photo © Ian Brown

and protection of significant heritage values upon which future tourism industry jobs must depend. It will help to de-escalate political conflict over the future of these forests. The rehabilitation of the Gardens of Stone and the establishment of the Gardens of Stone reserve can also provide medium-term jobs for older workers in the energy sector who find themselves unemployed in these uncertain times.

There is a growing consensus of business, unions and political parties that a revival plan is needed for Lithgow that protects all heritage aspects in the region and builds its tourism economy. *Destination Pagoda* can achieve all of Lithgow's tourism



Gardens of Stone
Photo © Joel Robinson

ambitions in one hit. Photogenic pagoda landscapes are the cachet that can distinguish Lithgow's nature tourism in a competitive market through strong brand recognition. They are the town's point of difference

in that market. In other words, its unique and internationally significant Pagoda landscapes can define the town as a major tourist destination.

Visitors to Lithgow's pagodas are more likely to stay a night, and then visit other sights in the region, like those in Capertee Valley, before returning to Sydney having had an authentic western Blue Mountains experience.

As Ms Madi Maclean of the Blue Mountains Conservation Society said: "Lithgow's pagoda landscapes can deliver economic, community and environmental benefits to the town. The plan is a win-win-win for

Landscape of ancient ruins. Photo © Henry Gold



workers, community and the environment! And when diverse groups come together to find a common vision, history happens."

For more info. see the *Destination Pagoda* report, www.gardensofstone.org.au

Gardens of Stone National Park

Pagoda rock formations are a prominent feature of the 15,230 hectare Gardens of Stone National Park which conserves a terrain varying from limestone outcrops to sandstone escarpments. The pagoda formations occur near sandstone escarpment edges where the processes of erosion have sculpted 'bee hive' domes and a curious array of other shapes.

Banksias, dwarf she-oak and other wind-pruned heathland plants grow amongst the rocky outcrops to complete a garden-like effect.

Below the cliffs, steep slopes with eucalypt forest and woodland support rare animals such as koalas, yellow bellied gliders and powerful owls. The drier ironbark-box woodlands near Capertee are important habitat remnants for the rareregent honeyeater and turquoise parrot. In this area the major creeks have incised steep-sided gullies exposing 400 million year old limestone outcrops.

The area was first recognised as a significant area for conservation in 1977, when Pantoneys Crown Nature Reserve was established. In November 1994 Gardens of Stone National Park was created with Pantoneys Crown Nature Reserve as its core. Both these areas were combined a year later to form the current Gardens of Stone National Park.

Visitors to the Park

The park has limited visitor facilities apart from a few fire trails which provide walking opportunities.

Walkers can walk anywhere within Gardens of Stone National Park. You should take a map and compass because navigation can be tricky. Minimal impact bushwalking techniques should be practiced. Cave visitation is by permit only and these can be obtained from the Upper Mountains Area manager at the NPWS Blue Mountains Region office in Blackheath.

Camping is permitted anywhere within the park 200 metres away from any road. Camping is not permitted in caves or on limestone areas or within 200 metres of limestone. Only fuel stoves are permitted. Do not clear around the stove area.