



**NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service**

# **Improving camping in New South Wales national parks**

**Consultation paper**



# Acknowledgement of Country

NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we work and live.

We pay our respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

This resource may contain images or names of deceased persons in photographs or historical content.



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Front cover: Wombeyan Caves campground (Remy Brand/DCCEEW)

Page 3: Kinchega National Park (John Spencer/DCCEEW)

Page 4: Bonnie Vale (Andrew Elliot/DCCEEW)

Page 5: Tomaree Coastal Walk (Remy Brand/DCCEEW)

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Page 12: Glendora campground (John Spencer/DCCEEW), Bouddi National Park (Jared Lyons/DCCEEW)

Page 13: Tomaree Coastal Walk (D Parsons/DCCEEW)

Page 14: Thredbo Diggings campground (Jimmy Mellowes/DCCEEW)

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# Introduction

This consultation paper sets out proposed changes to the camping fee system for national parks and reserves in New South Wales and the reasons why these changes are needed.

The current camping fee system has not been reviewed for many years and is not designed to manage issues experienced in modern campgrounds.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is proposing changes to make it simpler, fairer and easier for people to use campgrounds in national parks while also addressing campground issues.

The changes were developed following consultation with more than 200,000 national park visitors and campers.

These changes would deliver consistent and equitable camping fees for all New South Wales national parks and support sustainable management of visitation into the future.

## Have your say

**Community comment on the proposed changes to camping fees outlined in this consultation paper is invited from 15 April to 25 May 2025.**

Public submissions should be provided by 11:59 pm on 25 May 2025. You can make a submission or complete our online survey. For full details, visit [haveyoursay.nsw.gov.au/camping](https://haveyoursay.nsw.gov.au/camping).

In addition to public consultation, targeted stakeholder engagement and consultation is being undertaken with:

- Aboriginal joint management partners
- the state-wide NSW National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council and 8 regional advisory committees
- peak bodies and key stakeholders.

## Benefits of proposed changes

Proposed changes to camping fees in New South Wales national parks and reserves are designed to support a better experience for park visitors. Key benefits of the proposed changes include:

- consistent and equitable camping fees linked to services, facilities and demand
- a simpler fee per campsite per night
- removal of booking and extra-person fees
- free camping in basic campgrounds and lower-cost camping options during off-peak periods
- more generous refunds of up to 80% to encourage cancellations when plans change
- improved management of persistent campground issues such as ghost bookings (i.e. no-shows)
- more investment in campground services and facilities to enhance the visitor experience.



# New South Wales national parks

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service manages 895 parks and reserves – representing more than 10% of the state’s land area and 50% of its coastline.

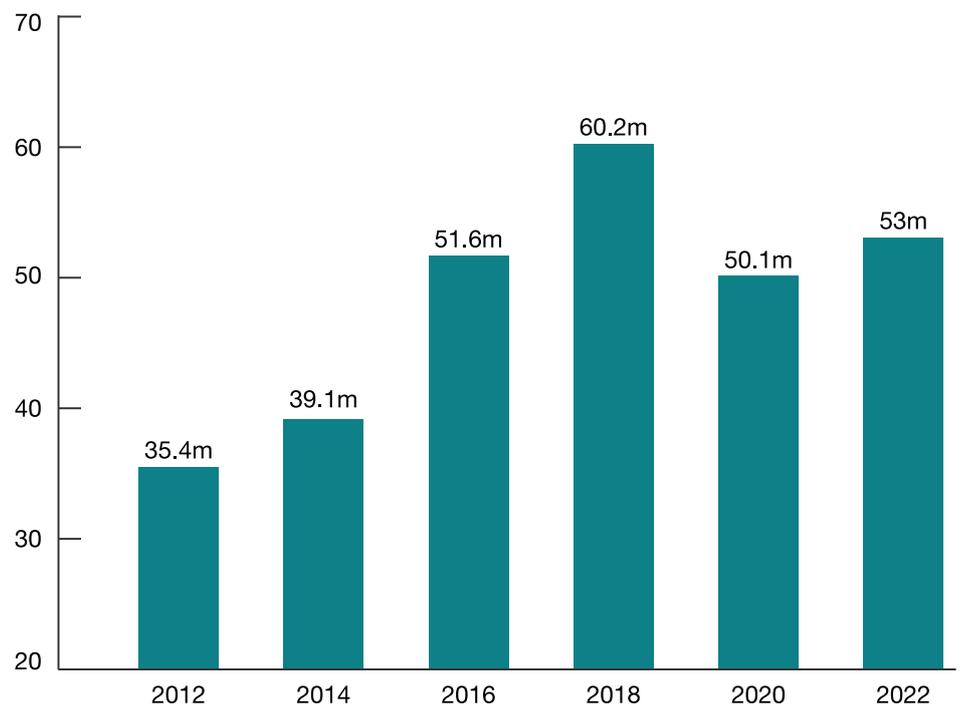
New South Wales national parks and reserves are popular, and visitation has grown 49% over the last decade (Figure 1). There are now more than 50 million visits to national parks every year, including 1.8 million overnight campground stays.

National parks are special places where people can connect with nature and one another, learn about Aboriginal culture and historic heritage, and enjoy unique experiences.

Visitors take part in a variety of recreational activities within national parks and reserves including camping, walking, sightseeing, picnicking, cycling, car and motorcycle touring, fishing, horse riding, canyoning, kayaking and more.

National parks offer the community affordable day trips and holiday opportunities in extraordinary locations.

Number of visits (million)



**Figure 1** Visitation to New South Wales national parks and reserves





# Why change is needed

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service is proposing changes to camping fees to make it simpler and easier for visitors to enjoy time in nature and experience our collective heritage.

The proposed changes have been developed following consideration of extensive visitor feedback including:

- 2,000 responses to a survey of the most frequent national park campers
- 220,000 post-stay surveys
- consultation with partners and industry representatives.

Feedback from campers indicates there is a high level of satisfaction with New South Wales national park campgrounds, but visitors want solutions to ghost bookings and the current complicated fee system. Visitors also indicated they would be willing to pay additional fees for increased levels of service.

A 2022 survey of the most frequent national park campers found that:

- 90% were satisfied or very satisfied with their experience
- 69% indicated they were willing to pay fees (or increased fees) for a better experience and supported fees being based on facilities, services, location and season
- 87% wanted to be able to book a site because it gives them certainty.

The survey also identified several persistent issues:

- **Ghost bookings/no-shows** – people sometimes book a campsite but don't turn up or book more sites than they need. This is inequitable, creates frustration and results in complaints when visitors see an unused space they cannot access because it is booked.
- **Perceived lack of management presence** – campers want to refer disputes over space or noise to NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service staff, feel safe through staff presence, ask for advice about things to do and see campgrounds being serviced.
- **Maintenance** – some campers believe some facilities are not maintained to the standard they expect.

In addition to these issues, current campground pricing in New South Wales national parks can be inconsistent and complex.

Camping fees differ across New South Wales national parks because fees for each campground have historically been individually set. This has left a legacy of inconsistency and fees do not reflect levels of service and amenity.

Currently, campsite bookings may include a site fee, an extra per-person charge and a booking fee. The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service recognises this complex fee structure can cause frustration when making a booking.

There have been no significant changes to New South Wales national park camping fees since 2017 and no indexation based on the consumer price index. This is despite substantial increases in visitation, record investment in campground infrastructure, increased park management costs and changing community expectations.

# The proposal

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service proposes the introduction of a consistent state-wide camping fee system based on campground facilities, services and demand.

Refunds and/or credits for cancellations would also be increased.

The proposed new system would:

- help address legacy issues such as ghost bookings/no-shows and inconsistent fees
- encourage visitors to cancel bookings when plans change
- encourage visitors to share space and discourage booking more sites than they need
- support an increase in servicing and staff presence.

Transparent information about fees and standards of service would also support greater levels of satisfaction by providing visitors with an upfront understanding of what to expect from their camping experience.

Standard fees linked to service levels would also help park management to budget and plan for essential servicing/maintenance works and campground upgrades.



## A fair and consistent system

The introduction of a standardised, tiered fee system across campgrounds would ensure that camping in New South Wales national parks and reserves is equitable for all visitors.

Fees would be set on a sliding scale based on the type of campground services and facilities provided.

Some modest fee increases would support ongoing maintenance and provision of onsite visitor services.

The proposed camping fee system would include 6 tiers that provide a range of experience and cost options for visitors in locations throughout the state. For example:

- tier 1 campgrounds would be free and have minimal facilities
- tier 2–5 campgrounds would have fees aligned with the range of services provided, quality of facilities and visitor demand
- tier 6 campgrounds would attract the highest fee, with facilities such as camp kitchens, shower blocks and hot water.

About 86% of campgrounds in New South Wales would be in tiers 2–5.

Seasonal price variations would be applied to encourage visitation in off-peak periods. Higher fees would be applied to manage pressure on high-demand locations and limit monopolised and speculative bookings in peak periods.

Most campgrounds would be available at the low-season fee for the majority of the year. High season lasts around 90 days of the year and is at different times in different campgrounds. For example, winter is low season along the coast while summer is low season in places like Kosciuszko National Park and the outback.

Table 1 sets out the indicative tiered fee system and includes current average fees for comparison. Figures are per campsite per night.

Under the proposal, there would be no booking fees for campground bookings and no extra charges for additional people. A standard site can accommodate up to 6 people including 4 adults. There would also be discounts for smaller sites suitable for one or 2 campers and discounted group sites. Sites with special features like power and large sites would attract a premium.

If the proposed new system is adopted, a routine consumer price index increase would be applied annually. This would deliver fair and predictable fee increases to help meet ongoing service provision costs.



**Table 1** Proposed tiered fee system for campgrounds in national parks (per site per night)

Tier	Facilities	Servicing	Low season	High season	Current average	Average cost if CPI applied	% NPWS campgrounds
1	Vehicle or walk-in access	Low frequency	Free	Free	\$2.81	\$3.57	10%
2	Pit toilet	Fortnightly	\$13	\$22	\$16.94	\$21.51	28%
3	+ tables, barbecue	Weekly	\$20	\$36	\$19.83	\$25.18	29%
4	+ shelters	3 days/week	\$28	\$54	\$27.42	\$34.82	18%
5	+ flush toilet, cold shower	Daily	\$38	\$65	\$37.29	\$47.35	11%
6	+ hot shower	On-site	\$54	\$89	\$48.71	\$61.87	4%

Note: CPI = consumer price index; + represents facilities in addition to those in the previous tier. 'Current average' has been included for comparison. 'Average cost if CPI applied' has been included for comparison to show the cost of a campsite today if consumer price index increases had been applied since 2017. Camping arrangements in NSW national parks have not changed since 2017.



### Example

For most campers, fees would increase in high season and be cheaper in low season. For example, a family of 4 currently pays \$68/night in a beachfront campground (tier 6), but with the proposed tiered system they would pay \$89/night in high season or \$54/night in low season.



### Example

Two friends who like to hike and camp in remote areas currently need to book and pay a booking fee of \$6 at basic campsites. Under the proposed system, no booking fee would apply and they could enjoy a free camping experience (tier 1).

## Bookings

Campgrounds in tiers 2–6 would continue to require a booking. This is based on visitor feedback that the ability to book a site is preferred because it provides certainty that the site will be available upon arrival.

Bookings would not be required for tier 1 campgrounds. These campgrounds would operate on a 'first come, first served' basis and existing booking fees would be removed. However, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service would encourage campers to complete a trip intention form so contact could be made with campers in an emergency.



## Cancellations

The proposed camping fee system is designed to discourage people from booking more sites than they need and incentivise visitors to cancel bookings when plans change.

Up to 80% of fees would be returned to customers as a credit or refund if they cancel at least 3 days before the booking commences. Cancellations made after this time would receive a 50% credit or refund including any unused portion of the booking.

Full refunds are not provided for cancellations as it can lead to people booking more sites than they need and cancelling very late.

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service would continue to refund 100% of fees if a park closes due to an emergency or for operational reasons.

Ongoing monitoring would be undertaken to determine whether these measures are successful. If not, additional measures would be considered to reduce the risk of ghost bookings.

## Alternative approaches considered

The NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has tried or considered a range of other solutions to the issues raised by campers. These include:

- **First come, first served** – results in campers setting up equipment sometimes days before their intended stay to hold a spot, which prevents other campers from using these sites.
- **Bookings with no or low fees** – results in campers booking sites they don't use or failing to cancel, which prevents other campers booking and using sites.
- **Full refunds** – results in an increase in speculative bookings.
- **Fines for not using bookings or leaving campsites unattended** – difficult to enforce.
- **Camping anywhere in a park** – permitted in some parks but can lead to environmental damage and most campers prefer campgrounds with some facilities and services.
- **Free camping** – results in reduced levels of service and means campers do not contribute to the extra cost of the services they enjoy.
- **Fees based on type of vehicle or set-up** – results in a complex fee system that is difficult to explain.
- **Per-person pricing** – this fee system currently exists in some parks and is more complex. Campers told us that they preferred a simpler fee structure. We also found that per-person fees encourage people to spread out rather than share a campsite.
- **Surge or dynamic pricing** – campers told us that they found this strategy of significantly raising prices during peak demand periods unfair and that camping should be affordable for all.

With the complexities and drawbacks of the above approaches in mind, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service developed this proposal to:

- improve the visitor experience in national park campgrounds
- address growing visitor concerns with campground access and usage
- deliver a simple and fair system for all users
- ensure reasonable contributions are made by those who use camping facilities
- provide an opportunity to stay for free in basic campgrounds
- protect environmental and cultural values within national parks
- manage demand through consistent and modest fee increases during peak periods and lower prices in off-peak periods
- provide transparency around pricing and services being delivered across campgrounds.

## Multi-day walks

Multi-day walk campgrounds would be priced at the tier 4 premium level, based on facilities, servicing levels and demand.

## Built accommodation

Pricing for built accommodation in national parks such as cabins, homesteads and historic buildings is currently based on similar properties in the local area or, in the case of leased property, set by a private operator. There is no proposed change to this model.

## Implementation

If any proposed changes are adopted, visitors and key stakeholders would be notified prior to implementation. New fees would not apply to existing bookings made prior to the implementation date.



### Example

A retired couple with a caravan currently pay \$34.85/night to stay in a coastal campground with moderate facilities (tier 4). Under the proposed system, they would pay \$54 per night in high season and \$28 per night in low season.



### Example

Two couples who are good friends camping on adjacent sites in a tier 3 campground in low season currently pay \$24.60/night for each site or \$49.20/night for both sites. Under the proposed system, they would pay \$40/night for 2 sites or could choose to share a site that accommodates 4 adults for \$20/night.



## Contributions to national parks

It is common and accepted practice for national park agencies to charge fees. Across Australia and internationally, fees paid by those staying in national parks are an important contribution to help manage parks and provide a range of visitor services.

All fees collected by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service are invested back into the management of national parks. This is a legal requirement under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*.

Park visitor management costs are subsidised by the NSW Government. This means the revenue generated by park entry, camping and other fees does not cover the cost of providing services to visitors. This subsidy is reasonable given the significant mental and physical health benefits national parks provide together with the important economic benefits visitors to national parks deliver for local businesses in regional and rural areas.

This proposal maintains the NSW Government's approach of supporting public access to, and enjoyment of, national parks.

Proposed changes would contribute to a modest increase in revenue, but they do not represent cost recovery. Additional revenue would make a small contribution toward the rising costs to maintain existing services and amenities as well as support investment in:

- improved campground management and maintenance in response to visitor feedback
- frontline visitor services that support and enhance the visitor experience
- resilient and low-impact infrastructure, including walking tracks and visitor precincts
- accessibility improvements to make national parks more inclusive.

## Jointly managed parks

Some national parks and reserves are managed jointly with Aboriginal owners and custodians. These statutory arrangements have been in place for the last 5 to 25 years, depending on the park.

There are currently 7 Aboriginal-owned parks under Part 4A of the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974*. These parks each have a board of management, which determines fees and exemptions from payment of fees, in accordance with their leases.

If any of the proposals in this paper proceed, each board would make its own decision about whether to adopt them in the parks they manage.

## Next steps

Following closure of the public consultation period, a submissions report with a summary of community feedback will be published on the [Environment and Heritage website](#).

Any changes to national park camping fees that are adopted by the NSW Government will be published before coming into effect. Key stakeholders and visitors will be notified.

