

HOW OLD ARE WE?

Yes, we at Rail Trails Australia are grappling with a simple question: exactly how old is RTA? We celebrated our 21st birthday 11 years ago, in the autumn 2014 edition of Connections, but time seems to be going faster than a steam train and we've somehow let our 30th birthday slip by uncelebrated - until now.

So welcome to our celebration of 3 decades of Rail Trails Australia, where we look back and see how far we've come! As you'll read on page 11, the whole reason RTA President and editor of this magazine Damian McCrohan became involved in RTA was to preserve a railway line that has, just this month, seen the last piece of its puzzle installed (Tallangatta Creek at Bullioh on the High Country Rail Trail).

This final link was officially opened to ride (or walk, or run, or ride on a horse...) in March 2025. Damian says the idea for that rail trail started in 1995, in very different times. *"Thirty years ago, some rail trails faced violent opposition,"*

he recalls. Today, communities are aware of what rail trails can bring to their area: recreational opportunities, events and money-spending tourists.

We know that some rail trails still face some opposition from landholders and others, but groups like the Hamilton-Coleraine Rail Reserve Committee have come up with creative ways to meet that opposition - read that story on page 14 of this edition of Connections too! As Damian reflects: "Where you can, open to a high standard, but if that's not feasible at the beginning, get the thing open to a low standard. At least really keen people can use it. Then you build it up. Those first people, that reinforces that people will come."

Heading back in time, we know that 1993 was the year that Mark Plummer, Rail Trails Australia's founding president, began to moot the idea of a formal support organisation, and that Victorian state government Member of Parliament Graeme Stoney wrote a letter to the Victorian Environment minister proposing a formal statewide project to consider the huge number of disused railway corridors as 'rail trails'.

In our 21st birthday article in 2014 we were apologising for the plentiful Victoria coverage, and we still will. We were also bemoaning the lack of activity in NSW, which we also still will! It's also important to note that some rail trails extend back further than 3 decades. For instance, the Railway Reserves Heritage Trail on the outskirts of Perth is one of Australia's oldest (in 1978 a report to the Western Australian government identified the potential of these reserves for recreational purposes). The O'Keefe Rail Trail in Northern Victoria was an early starter and South Australia's

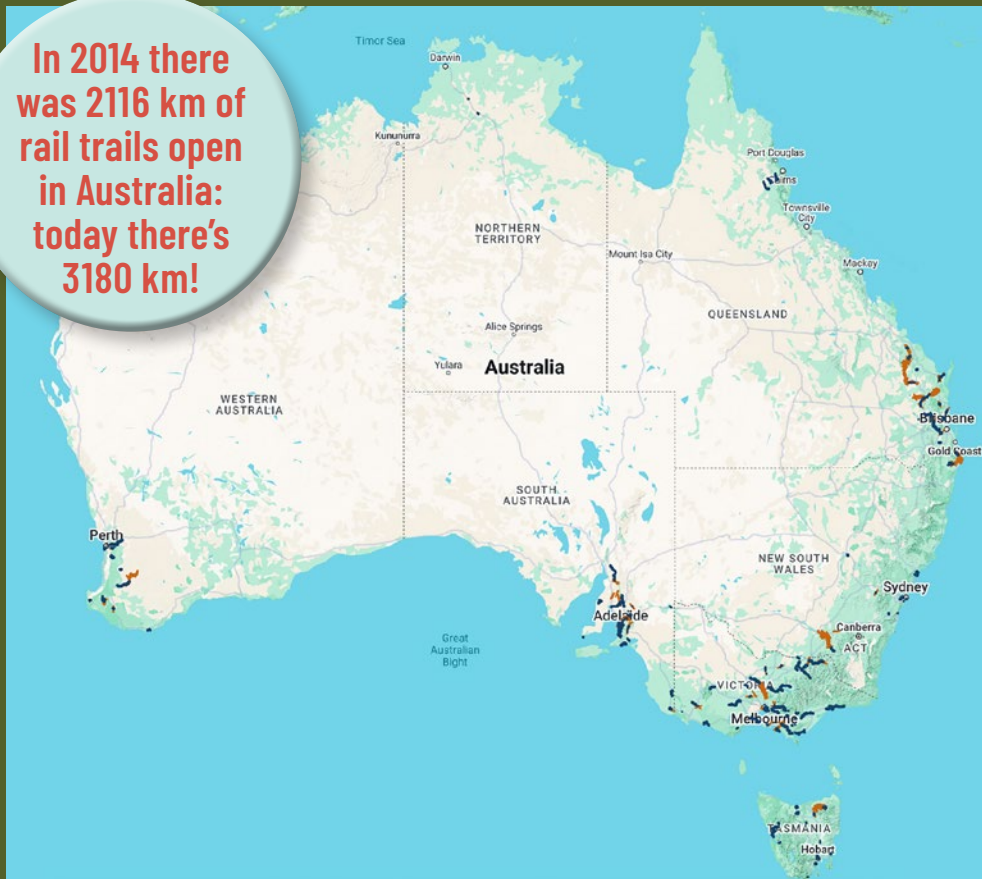
Riesling Trail opened in 1994.

The additions of rail trails to our landscape (and our website!) continues: one is even opening this month (welcome to the family Waranga Rail Trail in Victoria!).

Friends groups were already forming when the national body was established and remain critical to the successful establishment and improvement of trails. These improvements often revolve around looking after the natural environment, obtaining grants to plant trees and where possible improve the natural state of the rail corridor. A byproduct of the rail lines is that many of the adjacent land corridors were not farmed or logged and hold important ecological significance.

As rail trails have increased in number over the past decade, so have our number of members: almost tripling since 2014 - from roughly 500, to over 1350 paid members helping support RTA's work today. A very big thank you to you, and also to the very generous donors whose

In 2014 there was 2116 km of rail trails open in Australia: today there's 3180 km!





support has also been essential! Just like in 2014, we still do not receive government funding, and rely on memberships, advertising on our website and in our magazine as well as any profits from sales of books and merchandise to run our volunteer-led organisation. A push to increase advertising on the website, in the newsletters, in social media, and in this magazine has resulted in more support for RTA, information for rail trail users, and a source of revenue for the organisation.

Our increased focus on social media has also significantly increased the public's awareness of RTA, and resulted in a massive increase in the number of followers. Our printed guidebooks remain hugely successful. Back when we turned 21 we were excited about launching digital editions of the books. Interestingly, despite what seems to be a whole world going online - today printed copies of our guidebooks make up more than double the orders of electronic copies!



REGIONAL REPS TO THE RESCUE!

It's important to note that all of Australia's rail trails have RTA Regional Representatives who keep an eye on things, feed vital information back to RTA and do what they can when needed. The regional reps program began in 2017, and after an induction, training and with on-going mentoring, these volunteers keep our website's rail trail descriptions up-to-date and let us know what's going on in their patch for the News section on our website.

Currently 20 regional reps cover Australia's rail trails. Ten years ago there were a few informal reps, with Damian himself doing most of the interaction with the different rail trails, supporters, councils, committees and Friends groups. Today, this large network of Regional Reps has become an essential part of Rail Trails Australia and one we are very proud of. Thanks to those who are volunteering their time and energy. You can read about them on our website under About Us, The Rail Trails Team.

The Past Decade's Top 5 Highlights

There have been plenty of highlights since we turned 21, and our Top 5 (drum roll!) are:

- 1 Continued development of the rail trail network. In 2014 there was 2116 km open and as of today 3180 km open! The sub-highlights of this are:
 - A The very long-awaited openings of the Tumbarumba to Rosewood and Northern Rivers Rail Trails in NSW. Given the decades of work they took, they certainly feel like major achievements for RTA and all those involved for that time.
 - B Queensland has seen the Brisbane Valley Rail Trail and South Burnett Rail Trails become really valued by their communities. There's been progress on other rail trails, particularly the volunteer-driven Boyne Burnett Inland Rail Trail.
 - C South Australia has seen the start of the Amy Gillett Rail Trail in the Adelaide Hills which RTA began lobbying for more than 20 years ago!
 - D Victoria has continued to lead the way (sorry, not sorry) with a network of higher-quality rail trails - but the standout would be the Great Southern Rail Trail which, 11 years ago, was a couple of short disconnected sections but is now one of Australia's premium rail trails.

2 Tour companies have started providing packages with bikes, food and accommodation for rail trail users. Other businesses have developed directly related to rail trails in various locations, though more are needed.

3 Rail trails have been incorporated into the broader tourism scene, turning them into high quality tourism experiences, utilised by tourism companies, and supported by Local Government Areas as part of the attractiveness/liveability of the region.

This regional approach has led to consideration of linking rail trails together with other trails. One Victorian example is the Old Beechy/Timboon/Tiger trails - all part of Great Ocean Road tourism linking Surf Coast Walk/ Great Ocean Walk and 12 Apostles with the extension to Port Campbell. Rail trails are part of the recreational and tourist planning of all three levels of government, in part due to the relentless advocacy of RTA.

4 Our regional representatives.

5 Our current website launched in 2021 that was developed with a huge amount of effort and provides all users (RTA team, supporters and the general public) with a far better platform to provide information, share reviews and manage memberships.

Art & e-bikes

When it comes to rail trail usage, and attracting users, there have been two very big changes in the past decade: art and e-bikes!

Today, rail trails are attracting users by creating interesting experiences for them on and by the rail trail. There's a focus on art projects, with South Australia's Riesling Rail Trail being one of the first. According to Damian, they've had sculptures for over 10 years. "Everybody thought that was great!" he reflects. "It gives you other things to look at while you're having a break or a rest, and usually there's local people doing the artwork, so the trails are supporting

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those people, and the pieces often feature some of the local highlights," he says. Art on rail trails is almost a given now: the Great Victorian Rail Trail led the way with a major art project and the Murray to Mountains Rail Trail and Brisbane Valley Rail Trail have their own projects in progress. Artworks also add

greater attraction for walkers who want to add a short experience on the rail trail as part of their reason to visit a region.

E-bikes are without a doubt a rail trail game-changer, opening up rail trails to anyone who can access and ride one (and encouraging new e-bike hire companies to open up near the trails!). As Damian explains, e-bikes are helping increase the popularity of rail trails. "Even with the Warburton Rail Trail people would not have considered cycling 40 km, people would say: "What are you crazy?" But with e-bikes, now those distances are easier to cover and people will enjoy it more because they don't feel exhausted and hot and sweaty at the end! It changes from 'whoah I'm glad it's over', to: 'that was fantastic! I'll do it again! It's about having a great experience, not necessarily exhausting yourself,'" says Damian.

The next decade

It is wonderful to take time out to look back over what has been achieved over the last 3 decades. We are however always looking to the future where we see thousands of kilometres of potential rail trails being developed, especially in NSW. RTA also wants more businesses supporting rail trails to enable more visitors to enjoy them. Readers who have been fortunate enough to experience rail trails overseas regularly attest to the much more wide-spread user-friendly support that is available there.

