

# More to ANSTO Than Meets the Eye

Advocates Come Out of the Woodwork to Protect their Facility Against the Shutdown

by James Hart

The Menai track was ripe for riding in the early hours of July 1. The forest floor still lay buried in a carpet of winter foliage as the first of the day's riders barrelled down the trailhead. Underneath the tree canopy, they navigated through whole gorges and chasms borne out of once-flowing riverbeds. They bounded across boulder archipelagos connected by thin strips of pine and plywood. Tottering wooden bridges launched the riders several meters up from the trail, hurling each of them through the treeline at speeds that pulled the tears from their eyes straight back into their hair.

As good a day as any other, but it would be the last time they or anyone else would ever ride the trail.



*In the interest of curbing environmental degradation in the area and preventing potential injuries from cycling, the Australian National Nuclear Research and Development Organisation (ANSTO) closed the trails to mountain bikers, and posted signage to let riders know that the decision was permanent. Photo courtesy of ansto.gov.au.*

In the interest of curbing environmental degradation in the area and preventing potential injuries from cycling, the Australian National Nuclear Research and Development Organisation (ANSTO), Menai's largest landowner, closed the trails to mountain bikers, and posted signage to let enthusiasts know that the decision was permanent.

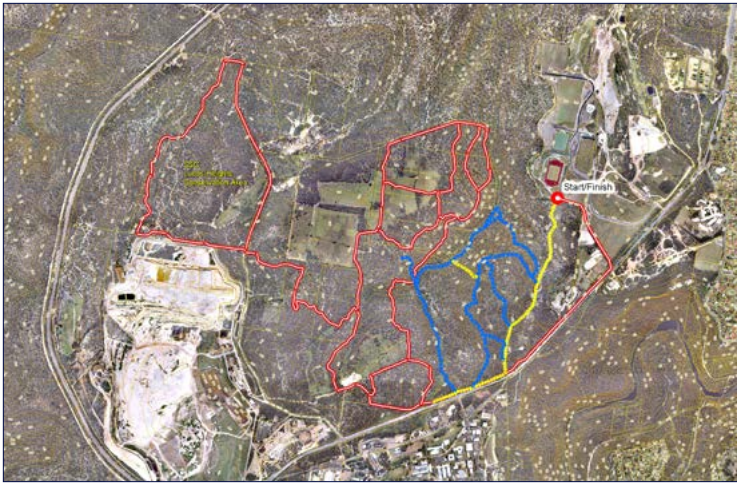
A minor issue for the organization, who undoubtedly believed the decision would only affect the small number of local kids and teens who used the trails behind their research facility. As a consolation, ANSTO reminded those concerned that there were still over two kilometres of walking paths they were keeping open for the public to enjoy. Satisfied with the compromise, no further public statements were made.

That same day, blog posts began announcing the news, and riders began posting pictures of the signs on their Facebook pages. A slurry of angry posts flooded cycling forums. Some, like cyclist Steve Mowle, decided to take more direct action.

"Everyone else looked like they were going to lie down," Mowle said, "but I said, 'look, I'm not going to take this.'" He spent a couple days putting some figures together, and two days later he called up ANSTO's media relations officer. It took him three phone calls and multiple messages before he could connect.

Mowle was plain and to the point: ANSTO had unwittingly created a serious problem. Menai wasn't a backyard playground for a handful of minors; it was the primary mountain biking location for 1,500 expert riders who no longer had a place to go. Events organized by dozens of mountain biking clubs would now have to be cancelled, and there was already talk about riders ignoring the notice or worse, ripping the signs down or protesting.

That last part caught media officer Gavin Atkins' attention. ANSTO wasn't a stranger to protests: the latest incident at the facility involved Greenpeace's attempts to stop the delivery of medical isotopes to area hospitals. They blocked the road, preventing whole truckloads of isotopes to be delivered, some of which only had a half-life of



Over the past four decades, Menai has become one of the largest facilities of its kind. The site is home to early 70 kilometers of trail. Photo courtesy of [sscebp.ssc.nsw.gov.au](http://sscebp.ssc.nsw.gov.au).

a few days. After hours of standoff, a team of armed Australian Federal Police were called in to remove the protestors.

ANTSO didn't want a similar incident on their hands, so they agreed to meet with some local community representatives to explain their position. They would come to learn much about Menai and mountain biking in New South Wales.

Cycling is one of the fastest growing sports in Australia. Each year, Sydney experiences significant increases in ridership, despite the controversy involving the cycle paths. In some areas, bikes are beginning to outsell cars.

"It's booming in this country," Mowle said. But despite the expanding ridership, facilities across the state are ill-prepared to keep up with demand. The funding and aid received by New South Wales for mountain biking is behind all other states and territories. "We're way behind those guys, and yet we have a higher population, and a higher number of active mountain bikers," he admitted.

Small wonder, then, why Menai had grown to become such a favorite. Most of its trails had existed since the 1960s. The Royal Fire Service (RFS) started creating a network of fire trails through the area's forests, which became frequented by motorcross riders, four wheel drive vehicles and mountain cyclists. The local Toyota Land Cruiser club had been using Menai for their driver training for over twenty years.

Over the past four decades, new trails and pathways were created, making Menai one of the largest facilities of its kind; the site is home to early 70 kilometers of trail.

"They had no idea about the magnitude of the use in terms of the numbers of riders, or in terms of kilometres of trail," Mowle said. "When we told them there's just under 70k of trail out there, they said, 'it can't be. We've walked out there.' So we pulled out some maps."

The original RFS fire trails can be easily seen in area satellite images, but Mowle and others helped expand the existing Sutherland Shire Council maps by uploading data from riders' GPS units. When overlaid with the satellite photos, the immense spiderweb of Menai trails, paths and causeways makes it hard to see the trees.

After ANTSO looked at the data, they had to agree that the situation was a lot more complicated than they first believed. "I think they're a lot more relaxed and



ANTSO representatives are now working with other local land-owners, Council and aboriginal community members and advocates like Steve Mowle to re-open parts of the existing trails. Photo courtesy of [ansto.gov.au](http://ansto.gov.au).

approachable now that they've seen the big picture," Mowle said. "They were overwhelmed by the figures."

Stakeholders held another meeting Aug. 29 to discuss the future of Menai for riders. According to Mowle, he's been receiving help from other groups such as the Australian Mountain Biking Association to deal with the bureaucracy and land use issues involved.

"That's not been just helpful," he said, "I don't think we could have done it without their support. It's great to have people on board who have had the experience that they have had."

ANTSO representatives are now working with other local landowners, Council and aboriginal community members and advocates like Mowle to re-open parts of the existing trails. The plan is to continue to provide a significant recreational facility for cyclists while preventing further environmental damage due to over-use.

"One of the things that we're trying to propose is that we close down fifty percent of the trails, to let those other 30-odd k of trails naturally regenerate," Mowle said. "It doesn't take long in a place like that."

Whatever future the Menai trails might hold, it's been thanks to trail advocates like Mowle and others that landowners and local government are even coming together to discuss it.