

Meeting Notes

Meeting: Grampians/Gariwerd National Park: Rock Climbing
Roundtable #4

Date: Thursday 5 March 2020

Time: 3.00pm – 6.00pm

Location: 535 Bourke Street Melbourne & Parks Victoria Office in Halls Gap

Roundtable Chair: Mark Dingle, Deloitte

Attendees:

Group
Australian Climbing Association (Vic) Inc (ACAV)
Bouldering representative
Climbing QTs
Wimmera Gariwerd Reconciliation Network
LTO representative
Outdoors Victoria
RMIT Outdoors Club
Sport & Recreation Victoria
Sports Climbing Australia
Victorian Climbing Club
Western Victorian Climbing Club

Parks Victoria representation

- Jeff Floyd, Chair
- Matthew Jackson, CEO
- Supporting Parks Victoria staff

Attachments

- Attachment 1: Gariwerd assessment update
- Attachment 2: Areas subject to archaeological surveys
- Attachment 3: ACAV handout

Welcome and introductions

The Chair gave an Acknowledgement of Country, welcomed all participants including those who have recently joined the group.

Opening remarks from the Chair

The agenda was presented and requests for any additional items.

One participant requested that a discussion be held regarding Parks Victoria's booking systems to climbing sites. The VCC representative noted its request for discussion on matters raised in its letter to Parks Victoria dated 4 March, if not already being covered by presentations. Whilst another requested an ongoing commitment from Parks Victoria to work with the climbing community. The Chair noted these requests for discussion during the meeting.

Opening remarks from Parks Victoria's Board Chair

The Board Chair welcomed all participants and specifically acknowledged the commitment and response by Parks Victoria staff to what has been a very traumatic and demanding fire season.

Presentation from Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director, Environment and Science, Parks Victoria

The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director presented on the environmental surveys undertaken to date in Gariwerd, (Refer Attachment 1), and confirmed the process that PV is following to assess environmental and cultural heritage risks, of which these surveys are one part. The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director reiterated that no new decisions have been made about access and that the current management arrangements remain unchanged.

The site assessment process and decision framework was presented, highlighting how assessment sites were ranked (low to high risk). The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director apologised for the error presented at the previous roundtable, clarifying the estimated area environmentally impacted to be 0.7 hectares over 8 sites rather than 7 hectares. Following the assessments at these 8 sites the findings were extrapolated to ~200 sites to predict that approximately 18 hectares of vegetation is likely to be impacted, and ~108km of informally developed walking tracks across the park. It was reiterated that this damage cannot be attributed to just rock climbing activities and assessments take in all human impacts.

One participant stated that more damage to environmental and cultural values are occurring in the park resulting from tourists leaving litter behind and walking off formal walking tracks. They believed that the management plan should be focussing more on appropriate management of visitors and not focussing on rock climbers. The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director responded that the intent of these assessments was to determine the scale of environmental impacts at known climbing sites which may inform management decisions and reiterated that the management plan will not be focussing only on rock climbing but on responsible management of the landscape for all users.

One participant questioned whether Bundaleer is in a SPA. Parks Victoria took this question on notice and agreed to get back to the Roundtable with a response.

The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director provided information on the Eastern Wall climbing area and clarified the status of set asides, previous road closures (Rosea and Homestead Tracks) due to protection of the Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby, fire and flood recovery programs, and seasonal road closures that are currently applied. One participant confirmed their previous question was more about removing the seasonal road closures in place to enable easier access to the climbing areas year-round. Parks Victoria

agreed to take this request on notice and will consider through the management planning process, noting the environmental sensitivities of the area due to the presence of the Brush Tailed Rock Wallaby population. The participant agreed to provide more information and to clarify the extent of this request.

The Chief Conservation Scientist and Executive Director then answered a question regarding impacts to Parks Victoria's estate as a result of this season's bushfires. He stated that the loss of biodiversity is unprecedented in post European history. We have entered uncharted waters and priority conservation areas that have not been impacted across the state will become more significant, for example brush tailed rock wallaby colonies, rainforests.

Presentation from Director, Managing Country Together, Parks Victoria

The Director, Managing Country Together presented on the cultural surveys undertaken, described as three projects:

1. Assessing areas for tangible Aboriginal cultural heritage values
2. Impacts on rock art sites within SPAs from rock climbing activities
3. Conservation works at 8 focus areas in the Northern Victoria Range.

The Director, Managing Country Together distributed Attachment 2 which listed the areas subject to the assessments and clarified that there may be some confusion over site/ place names due to inconsistent application of these amongst different groups. She also outlined how Parks Victoria prioritised the list of sites to be assessed, that tangible heritage could be defined as 'material' heritage (for example rock art, quarry sites) and that sites which were rediscovered are called this because they are new to post European history. The Director, Managing Country Together reiterated throughout the presentation that, of the impacts to cultural heritage observed, some could be attributed to rock climbing activities and that some may not.

A participant asked how many of the rediscovered sites are located outside of SPAs. Parks Victoria took this question on notice and agreed to get back to the Roundtable with a response. The Director, Managing Country Together also stated that for those sites rediscovered which are located outside SPAs there will be no changes to access for now, unless urgent protections are requested by Traditional Owners, but this information will inform the management plan process. She also confirmed that all rediscovered sites will need to be registered, reviewed by Aboriginal Victoria and Traditional Owners before a management response can be confirmed.

Parks Victoria has applied for a \$400,000 grant from the Commonwealth Government to undertake lidar surveys of the Grampians National Park. This funding only applies to federally listed cultural heritage sites and, if successful, the funds will assist Parks Victoria to identify priority areas for future cultural surveys.

A participant asked how Parks Victoria determines which Aboriginal groups it consults with. The Director, Managing Country Together outlined the current legal status of the three Aboriginal corporations – Eastern Maar Aboriginal Corporation, Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation, and Barengi Gadjin Land Council Aboriginal Corporation – and that Parks Victoria is required to work with all three corporations, and Aboriginal Victoria. It was also clarified that 'SPC' as listed on the presentation refers to the Strategic Partnership Committee which consists of all three corporations and Parks Victoria. One of the roles of this committee is to draft principles to inform decision making about which sites may be accessible for park users, including climbers. Parks Victoria confirmed its willingness to work with the climbing community to inform these conversations with Traditional Owners. However, it is important to note that if Traditional Owners do not want recreational activities at sites of cultural significance in the future then all parties need

to accept and respect this decision. The Director, Managing Country Together asked that we don't get too far ahead of ourselves and work through the process step by step.

The Director, Managing Country Together clarified that the rock art sites assessed focussed on the new SPAs, which were set aside in 2019 due to presence of rock art and other cultural values, rather than the SPA's that are outlined in the 2003 Grampians Management Plan.

A general discussion took place regarding conservation works at cultural heritage sites to remediate harm to sites that may have been impacted by recreational activities. Participants suggested an in-kind option from the climbing community to assist in this program. Parks Victoria acknowledged this good-will gesture. It was also noted that the costs to remove bolts may be much higher than initial estimates provided to Parks Victoria.

Proposals for future climbing access will be included in the draft Greater Gariwerd (Grampians) Landscape Management Plan due to be released in the second half of 2020. New SPAs or changes to existing SPAs may be proposed in the draft plan but would have no force or effect, until the final plan is approved and boundaries formally established. Until then all current SPAs will remain in place.

A participant asked if Parks Victoria could provide more information on the existing SPA numbers and names, and clarification of whether the sites studied are in or outside SPAs. Parks Victoria took this question on notice and agreed to get back to the Roundtable with a response.

A participant noted that, in their view, the consultation process for the management plan has been rapid and asked if there will be room to amend/ modify throughout the finalisation period and if there will be ongoing dialogue with stakeholders/ community throughout this period. Parks Victoria advised that there will be opportunities to continually improve the plan until it is finalised and approved. It was also noted that there may be a Joint Management Plan with Traditional Owners in the future.

A participant asked what Parks Victoria is doing to 'future-proof' the plan currently being drafted. Parks Victoria responded that working with Traditional Owners and understanding their values and aspirations will assist in preparing a robust long-term plan.

Parks Victoria confirmed its commitment to consulting with all stakeholders including the climbing community throughout the management planning process, and that the new plan should reference Parks Victoria's willingness to work with peak bodies to resolve management issues.

The timelines for the management plan process was confirmed by Parks Victoria. The draft is due to the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change by the end of June 2020. The Minister will then consider the draft for release for public consultation.

The meeting Chair asked that the photos taken of the presentation and hard copies provided not be shared until the meeting notes and presentation have been formally distributed.

ACAV update

The ACAV representative tabled a handout (Attachment 3) and spoke about the draft Victorian Climbing Management Guidelines (volunteer recreational climbing) that have recently been further developed, stating that ACAV is reviewing rock climbing best practice from around the world to ensure its final guidelines are setting the benchmark.

A discussion then followed regarding a volunteer stewardship program in which climbers could become

involved in conservation projects – the focus of climbers being to look after values, cliffs and the environment. This program may be linked to the Cliffcare program.

It was mentioned that informal discussions have commenced between Parks Victoria and climbers at a local level on how a volunteer program might operate. It has been communicated at these meetings that Traditional Owner involvement in these programs will be essential and that Parks Victoria has internal and legal processes to follow. There was plenty of good-will in this discussion and Parks Victoria has asked the climbing community to discuss amongst itself how this program might look, be managed and coordinated from its perspective; and submit a formal proposal for Parks Victoria to consider and respond to.

The ACAV representative mentioned it is disappointed that 13 months has passed since climbing restrictions have been in place and that there have been limited discussions with the stakeholders/ community. Parks Victoria responded by confirming it has undertaken broad consultation on the management plan, it has established a Stakeholder Reference Group and a rock climbing Roundtable and has also conducted a series of community forums and a drop-in session in Natimuk.

The ACAV representative raised concerns that an archaeological academic paper “Rock art and rock climbing: an escalating conflict” is biased against climbers. Parks Victoria responded by stating that it did not commission this paper, and it is not part of the surveying or management planning process, nor is it the position of Parks Victoria.

The ACAV representative asked if the cultural heritage report prepared for Parks Victoria will be publicly released. Parks Victoria confirmed that the results of the assessments will be released, as far as cultural sensitivities will allow, to help people understand the landscape and its unique qualities when considering future management strategies that will be proposed in the draft management plan.

The ACAV representative advised that the Victorian Climbing Management Guidelines will be released under the name of the ACAV and will lay the foundation for the stewardship program. He also mentioned that media interactions will continue and that there are ongoing fund-raising efforts to support ACAV.

Other business

The Outdoors Victoria representative updated the meeting by stating that Sport and Recreation Victoria has provided funding to employ a project officer who will undertake benchmarking/ research, consult with the climbing community on options for a framework/ structure. This may result in the establishment of a peak body with sub committees - but will be confirmed once the process has been completed. The project officer will be in touch with climbing clubs and the broader climbing community over coming months.

The LTO representative raised concerns about the length of LTO permit extensions (3 months) in Summerday Valley as these do not align with their business models. Parks Victoria responded by confirming it will raise this issue with Traditional Owners. The LTO representative also requested a meeting with Parks Victoria and Outdoors Victoria to discuss booking systems for LTOs in the Grampians National Park. Parks Victoria agreed to arrange this meeting.

A participant asked what the process and timelines are for intangible cultural heritage assessment. Parks Victoria responded by stating that it has commenced this work with Traditional Owners to ensure this is covered in the management plan.

PV Parks Victoria update and response to questions:

Sites assessed as part of the plan process – covered in notes above.

Advice on Eastern Wall access request – covered in notes above.

Alternative options for LTOs and climbing groups – Parks Victoria is currently in discussions with Traditional Owners to allow access into Lookout Point Wall under permit.

Effect of fires on national parks and Parks Victoria – approximately 1.6 million hectares burnt, staff impacts on work and personal lives, loss of three government worker's lives, and significant loss to biodiversity and property. It was noted that these impacts have not reduced the priority of the rock climbing roundtable. It was also noted that as a result of these fires additional interest in fire and emergency management in the Grampians National Park will form part of the planning process and be considered as part of future management arrangements.

Communique, next steps?

It was agreed that the following will form the communique to the broader climbing community.

Parks Victoria gave an update on the environmental and cultural assessments in Gariwerd/Grampians. The information gathered to date will inform decision-making regarding management of the landscape, including rock climbing and bouldering access in the future.

No decisions have been made yet about access for climbing. The current management/protection regime remains unchanged. Any changes will be made through the preparation then approval of the Grampians Landscape Management Plan.

The results of the assessments will be released, as far as cultural sensitivities will allow, to help people understand the landscape and its unique qualities when considering future management strategies that will be proposed in the draft plan.

The draft plan will be released for public consultation, so all interested people can have their say, before the final plan is approved for implementation.

Climbing representatives suggested a climber-led volunteer Stewardship Program which was well received by all attendees. The proposal will be finalised by the climbing community and formally proposed to Parks Victoria for consideration, along with Traditional Owner partners.

A fifth and final roundtable meeting will occur in late May or early June at which more information about assessments can be shared, and agreement reached on how the climbing community and Parks Victoria will all work together on an ongoing basis.

Meeting Closed