

Meeting notes

Meeting: Grampians/Gariwerd National Park: Rock Climbing
Roundtable #3

Date: Tuesday 3 December 2019

Time: 3.00pm – 6.00pm

Location: 535 Bourke Street Melbourne, Parks Victoria Office Halls Gap

Roundtable Chair: Mark Dingle, Deloitte

Attendees:

Group
Alpenverein Melbourne
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

Parks Victoria representation

- Jeff Floyd, Board Chair (by dial in phone)
- Matthew Jackson, CEO
- Supporting Parks Victoria staff
- Ben Gunn, Andrew Thorne – consultants on behalf of Parks Victoria

Attachments

- Attachment 1: Grampians Environmental Impact
- Attachment 2: PV Climbing and Aboriginal Heritage sites
- Attachment 3: Climbing 101
- Attachment 4: Victorian Climbing Management Guidelines
- Attachment 5-8: Video files. Available on request (excessive in size).
- Attachment 9: Map of Taylors Rock
- Attachment 10: Taylors Rock advice

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.

Experts including Parks Victoria staff have been participating in cultural and environmental surveys in Gariwerd over the past few weeks. It is important to note that this work is still ongoing.

Opening remarks from Parks Victoria's CEO

Provided a brief update on the progress to date for environmental and cultural surveys – 96 sites assessed to date, at least 126 in total will be completed by March 2020. All SPAs have now been reviewed.

The roundtable's input is appreciated to assist Parks Victoria to prioritise sites to be assessed. Initial observations will be presented today but it is important to note that there is no change to access, at this stage.

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

Mark presented on the environmental surveys undertaken to date in Gariwerd. Refer Attachment 1.

Surveys have been completed at eight sites in and outside SPAs. No flora and fauna studies have been undertaken as part of these surveys, and they were undertaken at ground level only (not on rock faces). He emphasised that the surveys were documenting evidence of direct human impacts from all activities on the sites.

The area of environmental disturbance calculated over the eight sites has been measured at 7.425 hectares. Observed impacts include evidence of artificial fires, human waste, smoke impacts on rock, stored climbing gear, semi-permanent camps, chalking on rock faces, vegetation clearing/ damage and weeds in cleared areas.

There are no interpretations or recommendations regarding these observations. More sites are still to be investigated. All sites assessed will be graded on a scale from minimal to significant impact. Parks Victoria will then determine a response, for example, revegetation.

It is also important to note that this data will intersect with the Grampians Landscape Management Plan planning process and will inform future activities and their location in the park. Parks Victoria needs to include in this process detailed discussions with Traditional Owners about management of the landscape.

A participant mentioned the importance of engaging with Traditional Owners now. The Parks Victoria CEO advised that Traditional Owners are partners in all projects in the Gariwerd landscape, including reviewing and endorsing reports, and working in partnership to reach solutions. He used Summerday Valley as an example, where Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners worked together to reach a positive solution for LTOs.

Presentation from Ben Gunn and commentary from Andrew Thorne- Archaeologists specialising in Conservation of cultural materials with a special interest in mural paintings, rock paintings, sculpture and monuments. Environmental monitoring and deterioration assessments. Collection surveying and management. Passive environmental control systems. Paint analysis including archaeological

investigations of painted monuments. Archaeological conservation. Technical imaging including 3D modelling.

Ben presented on the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage in Gariwerd and the surrounding landscape. Refer Attachment 2. Some important points to note included that rock art is sometimes not visible to the naked eye, some rock art (charcoal) is often mistaken for graffiti, some floor deposits in shelters 45 centimetres in depth have been dated to at least 22,000 years old, and that scratchings have recently been identified in Gariwerd. He explained quarrying and that there is no clear understanding of why rock was removed – theories include for tools or that it may even have been the actual act of bashing the rock as the significance.

Ben presented on the impacts of recreational activities on cultural sites including chalking, camping, bolt holes, artificial disintegration of rock ledges and posed a question to the group on options on how these sites could be best protected from human interference?

Ben has assessed rock art sites within SPAs and has established initial findings inform protection of these sites and future access. The next steps are to work with Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria on appropriate responses to the Aboriginal cultural heritage survey findings.

Discussion followed around chalking and the impact on cultural heritage and aesthetically. It was generally agreed that use of chalk is not a 'good look' and this an area the rock climbing community could improve. Andrew mentioned that a methodology to clean up chalk is being prepared and will be presented to Parks Victoria. It was also suggested that rock climbers explore alternatives to using chalk.

Parks Victoria CEO acknowledged that PV could have managed the impacts from rock climbing more proactively and reaffirmed that was in the past, we need to acknowledge this and now proactively work together on new ways of managing the landscape in partnership with Traditional Owners.

Presentation from Mike Rockell (ACAV) on Climbing 101

Mike presented to the group about the different types of rock climbing, associated equipment, the physical and mental challenges it provides, along with the emotions this activity produces. Refer to Attachment 3.

Subjects discussed included free climbing, bouldering, trad climbing, sport climbing, mixed climbing, abseiling, climbing mechanics, chalking and the use of bolts. He also mentioned that with the rise in popularity of indoor climbing centres it has given rise to a group of climbers who may not understand their impacts and etiquette of climbing in the outdoors. Education of these climbers is required in the gym before they climb outdoors.

Mike provided information on the *Climbing Management Guidelines* currently being prepared by ACAV which aims for best practice, minimal impact climbing, protection of environmental and cultural values, a climber's code of conduct, defined roles and responsibilities of the land manager and rock climbers, and stewardship. It also focuses on a 6-zone concept - the approach, staging areas (base of cliffs/ boulders), climb, summit, descent, and camping. For this best practice approach to be applied the Traditional Owners will need to be engaged and their support provided. The guidelines will be owned by the climbing community, living best practice, but it needs input from Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria for this document to be of good quality and integrity. Mike believes this is an opportunity to work together to create better management arrangements in the future.

A participant mentioned that Cliffcare is already working with in this space, having a stewardship focus and working with Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners to protect the environmental and cultural values of the places they love to recreate in.

Mike posed the question to Parks Victoria as to whether it will support this guideline. Parks Victoria CEO advised that Parks Victoria sees these types of documents as an input into the preparation of the forthcoming management plan and these documents do not become any formal planning document or used

in a final management or master plan for Parks Victoria

The question was asked how far can the climbing community take the preparation of these guidelines before Parks Victoria will be prepared to discuss the guidelines – for example what are the environmental and cultural thresholds? Parks Victoria CEO suggested that they continue with preparing the guidelines and then the opportunity to discuss the guidelines in more detail with Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners in the future once the full impacts of climbing have been assessed for the Grampians and expectations and thresholds from Traditional Owners have been considered and understood. It was also suggested that Sport and Recreation Victoria could get involved in preparing the guidelines.

A participant stated that climbers should be part of these environmental and cultural surveys, and part of the conversation to find alternatives where alternatives are possible, also stating that they understand some sites won't be accessible in the future. The Parks Victoria Chair responded by stating he will take this request on notice and he will come back to group, adding that the future access isn't just about climbing. He reiterated that future access will be determined through the management plan process.

Parks Victoria CEO added that once the proposed assessments are completed early 2020 and finalised data in March, it can then clearly define the next steps, noting that the plan is due for completion by June 2020. This may be a conversation outside the roundtable - as part of the management plan process.

Parks Victoria CEO said all decisions where possible will be evidence-based, that Parks Victoria is not out to stop rock climbing overall but the need to get the balance right between protecting environmental and cultural values and allowing people to access parks for recreation is critical. Parks Victoria has a legal obligation towards protecting environmental and cultural values. He also mentioned that Traditional Owners also value intangible heritage and that this form of cultural asset is also protected under the same legislation as tangible cultural heritage.

A participant asked if Parks Victoria would enter a MOU with the climbing community. The CEO confirmed that this was a good idea in the future and Parks Victoria does this with other established peak bodies - the example used was between Parks Victoria and 4WD Victoria - as an example of how the MOU has strengthened the relationship. He noted that we need to resolve rock climbing issues in Gariwerd landscape first, and that Parks Victoria only enters MOUs with relevant peak bodies, noting that there is no single rock climbing peak body at this stage.

A participant suggested the next step is to demonstrate that parties can work together before we progress to a MOU. Another participant suggested that the rock climbing community also needs to sort itself out first, whilst another suggested that other models should be looked at around the world.

A discussion then followed regarding the importance of involving Traditional Owners and, the Parks Victoria CEO reiterated they are always welcome at the roundtable discussions, however, they have not accepted the invitation to participate at this stage. Traditional Owners are working with the Gariwerd Wimmera Reconciliation Network to reach a mutual understanding with the rock climbing community. That is why Traditional Owners asked Parks Victoria to invite the Gariwerd Wimmera Reconciliation Network to join the roundtable. A participant sees reconciliation as a core to these discussions and that the rock climbing community needs to acknowledge the harm caused in the past and ensure that no further harm occurs. Another participant added that the roundtable is the most important forum to listen and understand this harm, to understand Aboriginal people and their connection to the landscape – which will require rock climbers need to change their practices.

PV response to questions

Ruined Castle interaction between climbers and PV authorised officers. Parks Victoria conducted a compliance operation on Melbourne Cup weekend, which also involved Authorised Officers from other parts of the state. Moving staff around for these type of operations is common. Authorised Officers' standard

uniform / equipment requires them to wear vests and carry handcuffs. The officers spoke to climbers on Harrop's Track which is a closed track and advised them that the track was closed. They also advised that they were close to a SPA and reminded them that climbing wasn't permitted in the SPA. The next day the team encountered another group of climbers on Waterworks Track which is a Management Vehicle Only Track. They were asked to remove their vehicle from the area and reminded that they were close to a SPA.

Authorised Officers reported back to PV management after the operation that they had been involved in these two interactions and that there were no problems encountered.

One participant noted that there is some confusion in the climbing community about the information provided and language used by PV Authorised Officers. It was suggested that for any future operations Authorised Officers use the same language and messages that PV communications team is using, to avoid misinterpretation and/ or communication breakdown.

Quarry site protection. Traditional Owners place both tangible and intangible values on quarry sites and how these sit within the landscape. PV will work with Traditional Owners to determine how these values are protected. Traditional Owners will determine what activities they will allow in these locations. Again, both tangible and intangible values are protected under legislation.

General business

A participant requested a conversation with Parks Victoria around access to non-SPAs and that there are opportunities to improve access to these sites – for example, Eastern Wall which currently has an adjacent road closure in place due to it being close to rock wallaby release site. The participant requested a conversation about reopening the track and improving access to the popular climbing site. A Parks Victoria representative advised that these decisions will be made in the management plan process and their submissions should address issues such as this one. Parks Victoria CEO encouraged these recommendations and submissions and committed to adding this site onto the list for future environmental and cultural assessments.

Declaration Crag/Taylor's Rock

Noting the conclusion to discussions on Gariwerd/Grampians, the Parks Victoria CEO tabled the rediscovery of new rock art and other cultural values at Taylor's Rock in Arapiles. These values have been registered and Parks Victoria is required by law to ensure their immediate protection. Barengi Gadjin Land Council (BGLC) has asked Parks Victoria to raise this at the roundtable before public announcements and to also put in place emergency protection of these sites whilst legislation triggers are being developed.

From tomorrow (Tuesday 4 December) BGLC and Parks Victoria will be asking climbers and other visitors to stay out of the identified area (Refer Attachments 9 and 10) until BGLC has a full understanding of what can happen in the restricted area. The Parks Victoria CEO asked the rock climbing community to support the integrity of this process. There will be a media response and stakeholder notifications tomorrow, along with a proposed respectful and transparent on-site education process conducted by Parks Victoria and BGLC rangers. Legal triggers including set asides are not yet in place but are being prepared and BGLC wants to work with the climbing community prior to decisions regarding long term protection of these sites. It was also noted that Parks Victoria and BGLC have brought this issue to the roundtable in good faith prior to any formal external communications.

It was reiterated that this is exciting news which BGLC want to share, celebrate and work with climbers and others to determine protection of these sites.

A participant noted that this site is popular with LTOs but not so much with other climbers.

Another participant noted that how the rock climbing community responds will be critical to all parties moving forward, and this is an opportunity for the climbing community to demonstrate respect.

Another participant suggested that whilst there may be negative comments in social media that these do not reflect his organisation's views.

Questions asked by a participant.

Is this the first of many site restrictions at Arapiles BGLC has previously made public statements that they intend to undertake more surveys at Arapiles next year with Parks Victoria and as co-managers. BGLC and Parks Victoria want to work with the community including the climbing community once the surveys have been completed, dates have not been set and climbing and all other activities in Arapiles remains the same other than at Taylors Rock as previously discussed.

Can PV provide additional information/ fact sheet? Parks Victoria agreed.

Closing

Representative from Outdoors Victoria mentioned that funding has been made available from Sport and Recreation Victoria to support establishment of a rock climbing Founding Council.

Facilitator acknowledged work of volunteers to represent their groups at this meeting. The group may not meet for a few months and thanks for all your work, highlighting an evident positive shift in mood at today's meeting.