

23 October, 2020

Dear Mr Walsh,

Thank you for your recent visit to Natimuk and for taking the time to talk to locals about the issue of climbing bans at nearby Mount Arapiles and, in particular, the potential for more bans and their likely impacts on the town.

No doubt you are aware of the announcements by Park Victoria yesterday of the recent 're-discoveries' of cultural heritage at Mt Arapiles. I note, parenthetically, that the major rediscovery at Tiger Wall is not a rediscovery at all – this site has been known about and looked after by climbers for decades, and known about by Aboriginal Victoria for 25 years. The citation is here:

https://scholar.google.com.au/scholar?cluster=7855280084381533243&hl=en&as_sdt=2005&sciodt=0,5

Indeed, climbers have an intimate knowledge of the mountain, as you would expect, and have known about many such sites at the mountain for many decades. They have treated them with respect and ensured the integrity of such sites has been maintained.

You are no doubt also aware of Parks Victoria's intentions to carry out more archaeological surveys over the next 6 months (with potentially more bans) and then create a new Set-aside Determination that, they believe, will make these exclusions legally enforceable.

I bring to your attention that in the 60 year history of climbers at Mt Arapiles, there has never been any climber charged with damaging cultural heritage. Not one. Ever. And tens of thousands of climbers from all over Victoria, from interstate and from all over the planet have been flocking there to enjoy the incomparable climbing opportunities it offers. Given that the area is geographically quite small, and the concentration of climbers therefore quite considerable during peak times, this legacy is remarkable and should be applauded.

I also bring to your attention that there already exists adequate protections for the cultural heritage that exist at the Mount. It is an offence, according to the National Parks Act 1975 to damage archaeological objects. It is also an offence under the Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006 to cause harm to cultural heritage. Why then the need to declare a Set-aside Determination to exclude climbers and the general public from multiple sections of the park where no damage has been occurring?

Local climbers are aware that the Set-aside Determinations in nearby Gariwerd (the Grampians) have resulted in the number of international and interstate climbing visitors to that area drop alarmingly. That drop was evident before the world had Covid-19 to contend with. Local Natimuk residents fear what will happen if another sweeping Set-aside Determination is declared for multiple sites across Mount Arapiles.

Local Natimuk residents include a significant proportion of the population who have moved themselves and their families to the town primarily because of the climbing opportunities. They have brought significant skills to the town and the region. The influx of their children into the small local primary school have kept that school from closing. Residents include doctors and other medical professionals (hard to attract to most small regional hamlets), teachers, IT professionals, small- business owners and entrepreneurs, trades-people, artists, rock-climbing guides, and so on. They are involved in various town committees, the CFA, and indeed all aspects of the fabric of town life. The loss of even a significant fraction of such people would be disastrous for Natimuk.

I would implore you to advocate in Parliament, on behalf of the people of Natimuk, that the Minister of Energy, Environment and Climate Change, Lily D'Ambrosio, takes all necessary steps to ensure that Parks Victoria does not sound the death knell of this town by formulating and enacting an unnecessary and over-reaching Set-Aside Determination in relation to Mount Arapiles.

The townspeople, climbers and non-climbers alike, are very supportive of the protection of cultural heritage. Their legacy of looking after the Mount speaks for itself. They are aware that there already exists what lawyers call a "mandatory consideration" when further protection measures are contemplated – that is, there are existing protections to cultural heritage afforded by both the National Parks Act and the Aboriginal Heritage Act to deter any harm to cultural heritage. These deterrents have been more than sufficient to ensure cultural heritage has been protected for many decades. They are alarmed at the prospect at unnecessary and more draconian measures such as Set-Aside Determinations and the probable impacts of such ill-considered approaches on the viability of the town.

Yours Sincerely,

Kevin Lindorff,

President of the Victorian Climbing Club and Natimuk resident