



Crag Stewards Victoria Submission in response to the Greater Gariwerd Landscape Draft Management Plan November 2020



14th January 2021

Issued By

Board Chair, Crag Stewards Victoria

Acknowledgement of Country Statement

"Crag Stewards Victoria" acknowledges the five traditional owner groups of this land; the Wotjobaluk, Wergaia, Jupagulk, Jaadwa and Jadawadjali people.

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Introduction

The Greater Gariwerd Landscape Draft Management Plan (GGLDMP) is based on poor evidence and poor understanding of the current impact of climbing on the environment and cultural heritage. Assumptions about the extent of ongoing damage has led to an overly restrictive plan that severely curtails climbing in Gariwerd at great cost to the health and well-being of the Victorian Climbing Community.

Gariwerd has long been at the heart of Victorian climbing; no other area provides the volume, diversity, quality and grandeur of climbing. Parks Victoria has an obligation to consider how climbing can continue substantively with adequate controls to protect cultural and environmental values. It also has an obligation to connect with the climbing community and facilitate connection between Traditional Owners and the climbing community, as per its Healthy Parks Healthy People Framework

Healthy Parks Healthy People is a global movement which is helping communities around the world realise the health and wellbeing benefits of spending time in parks and nature. Our aim is to unlock the power of nature and parks for their preventative and restorative health and wellbeing benefits, while conserving biodiversity.

Healthy Parks Healthy People describes the fundamental connection between the health of our environment and the health and wellbeing benefits of spending time in nature. Parks Victoria has developed a new Healthy Parks Healthy People Framework to guide how we maximise the benefits of parks for community health and wellbeing.

The framework is driven by Victorian Government policy and outlines the critical role that Victoria's parks can play in encouraging healthier, more liveable, and more connected communities.

The framework describes key priorities that will benefit Victorians across all life stages:

- *Healthy places and settings for all*
- *Mutually beneficial program partnerships*
- *Quality information and evidence*
- *Leadership and advocacy*
- *Workplaces that promote wellbeing*

The plan closes the majority of climbing areas to climbing for an indeterminate period. This includes much of the very best and most popular climbing areas that attract visitors from overseas and interstate and sustains the sport in Victoria.

Instead of locking climbers out of the majority of climbing areas in Gariwerd, CSV proposes a mutually beneficial partnership program whereby the climbing community provides

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knowledge, resources and peer influence to support Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria in implementing a genuine management plan that:

- Monitors and maintains the condition of climbing areas and their access
- Promotes and protects cultural heritage in or near climbing areas
- Sustains meaningful and effective communication
- Adapts to changes in the park environment, cultural understanding and climbing practices

This submission introduces Crag Stewards Victoria and provides an outline of how the climbing community can provide the support proposed above.



Introduction to Crag Stewards Victoria

Crag Stewards Victoria (CSV) is an organisation that has been recently established by rock-climbers to care for and maintain rock-climbing and bouldering sites in Victoria. We strongly believe that recreational rock climbing can exist in an environmentally and culturally sustainable manner and that, with a coordinated and structured approach, the best care-takers for Victoria's most loved climbing sites (crag), are the climbers themselves.

CSV was formed in response to a number of significant changes to crags in Victoria:

- Increased visitation due to a rise in the popularity of the sport
- A swing away from clubs introducing and mentoring climbers to climb in the outdoors as a result of many more climbers introducing themselves to outdoor climbing after starting in indoor gyms
- Increased recognition and rediscovery of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage.
- Joint management of parks by Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria

These changes called for a group from within the climbing community to take the lead on a structured approach to managing our environmental impact, supporting the understanding and protection of cultural heritage and fostering relationships with Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria.

CSV has been established with the following aims:

1. **Educate** crag users in low-impact climbing practices, etiquette and behaviour.
2. **Monitor and record** the impact of crag use by conducting structured assessments of existing climbing sites.
3. Coordinate with the approval of Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners, **cleaning, care** and **maintenance** projects
4. Actively support understanding and respect for traditional cultural heritage and reconciliation.

CSV's formation has been broadly supported by the climbing community; clubs, individuals and commercial operators. Although we are still in a formative stage, we have:

- Established a state-wide network of crag stewards.
- Developed an Operating Plan outlining our methods of working
- Incorporated

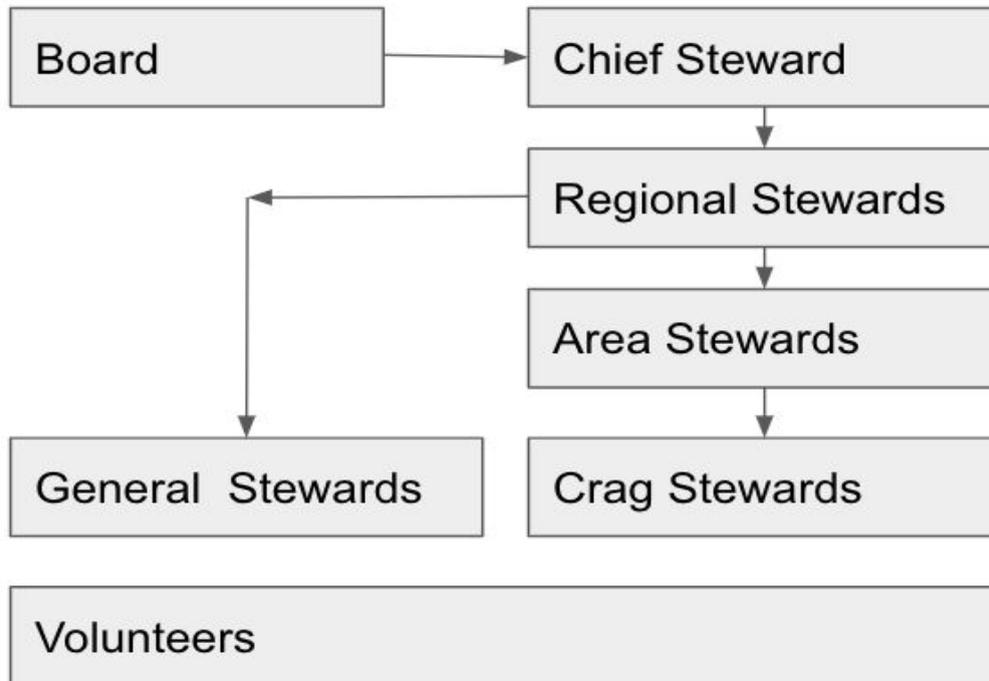
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- Registered a Reconciliation Action Plan with Reconciliation Australia
- Commenced a Pilot Program at Camels Hump, Mt Macedon

CSV Organisational Structure

CSV has established the following stewardship structure for Victoria



Crag Steward Roles and Actions

Each Crag Steward has the following responsibilities:

- Research and document the Cultural and Environmental considerations that apply to their crag, using park Management Plans, Cultural Heritage Surveys and consultation with Traditional Owners as resources.
- Conduct and document an annual Crag Assessments that highlights existing or potential issues associated with climbing activity and recommends actions for remediation or prevention
- Monitor climbing activity, behaviours and the condition of the crag and its approach throughout the year, documenting significant changes and raising urgent issues via the Area Steward

Documents and recommendations are discussed and approved by Regional Stewards before being provided to Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria for discussion and feedback (proposed). This limits the number of stewards interacting with TO's and PV to a small number of experienced and familiar people.

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Approved assessments will be posted on our website, effectively providing the climbing community with a climbing management plan for each crag, providing up-to-date information on:

- Cultural Heritage protection measures
- Flora, Fauna and Weed protection measures
- Erosion controls
- Chalk and fixed protection restrictions
- Interaction with other park users

Further to these processes of assessment and communication, CSV also offers a pool of volunteers and resources to support:

- approved works for protection, stabilisation, maintenance
- weed control
- understanding of local cultural heritage and values
- communications

We believe that the application of this model of care to Greater Gariwerd would significantly support Gariwerd Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria in the monitoring and management of climbing areas



CSV Operation in Gariwerd

CSV has divided Gariwerd into two Regions, each assigned a Regional Steward: Eastern Gariwerd, Western Gariwerd. These regions have then been further divided into the following Areas, as below, each with a nominated Area Steward. Individual Crag (Climbing and Bouldering Areas) are then allocated to each Area.

Eastern Gariwerd	Western Gariwerd
Mt Zero Range	Black Range
Mt Difficult Range	Victoria Range North
Wonderland Range	Victoria Range Central
Boronia Range	Victoria Range South
Mt William Range	Serra Range (South)
Serra Range (North)	

With this model of care and stewardship structure in mind, we make the following proposals in relation to the GGLMP.

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CSV Proposal on Designated Climbing Areas

CSV recognises the need for Traditional Owners and Parks Victoria to determine which areas are suitable for climbing at any time. Parks Victoria have introduced temporary and permanent closures for reasons of fire, flood and cultural heritage over the years and we believe there has always been good, cooperative compliance by climbers with these closures. However, this determination should not be fixed in a management plan at a single point of time; it needs to be more flexible than that to respond to changes in the environment, rediscovery, cultural understanding, climbing practices and management effectiveness.

Even trying to list and categorise all of the climbing areas in order to classify them is fraught with difficulties. The list provided in the draft management plan contains many omissions and errors. The list does not recognise the large variation in climbing “value” to the climbing community, nor visitation rates to each of the areas. It implies that the same level of impact, management and structure is required at each site and this is a long way from being realistic.

Areas of high value to the climbing community are often the most visited. It is appropriate that cultural assessments and management plans are prioritised for these areas for the mutual benefits of cultural and environment protection as well as climbing access. The climbing community is prepared to contribute significantly more resources to identify protective measures that would allow climbing to continue in the area, or part of the area, and to monitor and maintain them accordingly.

Areas with low visitation rates are not all of low climbing value. Broadly speaking, there are three categories of climbing areas with low visitation:

- Poor climbing quality. Many cliffs have seen routes recorded after a single visit to determine if valuable climbing existed, or at least valuable enough to warrant the walk in. These areas have often received no further visits and are unlikely to receive many or any more. Examples of these: Diving Board Rocks, Tombstone Rocks, Lower Epacris Cliffs
- Moderate quality climbing with difficult access. These cliffs have sufficiently interesting climbing to warrant a difficult walk in for an experienced and adventurous climber. A single visit per year is a typical visitation rate for these cliffs. Example: Liomin’s Castle, Seven Dials
- Expedition-style cliffs - large cliffs with difficult access. These cliffs provide a rare opportunity within Australia to venture into a remote area and scale a significant cliff. The availability of this type of opportunity, while attempted by very few highly-experienced adventurers, is an essential part of our community fabric. These areas may see less than a handful of visits in a decade . Example: Mt Frederick, Mt Lang, Green Gap Pinnacle, Castle Rock

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Climbing at all these cliffs is almost entirely in the traditional style with no fixed anchors. This, combined with the low visitation rates means that **the climbing impact to these areas is the same, or less than off-track walking.** Many of these cliffs could in fact see more off-track walker visits than climbing visits.

CSV proposes an alternative management structure for climbing areas that concentrates resources on high-visitation areas:

- Prohibited Climbing Areas
- Managed Climbing Areas
- Wild Climbing Areas

Prohibited Climbing Areas

Areas where climbing is not appropriate due to cultural or environmental sensitivity.

Managed Climbing Areas

Areas with sufficient visitation to require assessment, monitoring and management to protect cultural and environmental values. These areas may include prohibited areas within them or adjacent to them that require some monitoring and management.

CSV proposes that these areas are agreed between the Land Managers and the climbing community and publicly listed. CSV will assign a Crag Steward to each area to implement the Crag Stewardship program and keep the Land Managers informed on the condition of the area as detailed in the description of the program earlier in this document. Where significant changes in sensitivity occur (eg fire, rediscovery), the Land Manager may close a Managed Climbing Area temporarily or change it to a Prohibited Climbing Area if the changes are unable to be mitigated with a reasonable management plan.

Wild Climbing Areas

Wild Climbing Areas encompass all other areas that are accessible to other recreational activities. These areas have such low visitation rates that any climbing impact is similar in nature to off-track walking and should be permitted wherever off-track walking is permitted. To keep track of climbing activity in these areas, we suggest that climbers should be required to register their visits with the Land Manager. Addition of fixed anchors should not be permitted in these areas.

If there is an increase in visitation for any of these areas, or cultural or environmental sensitivities change, the area could be put forward as a Managed Climbing Area.

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CSV Input on the Archeological Field Survey of Climbing Areas

CSV acknowledges that damage has been done by climbing activity and access over the years. However, the list of damage reported in the Archeological Field Survey of Climbing Areas needs to be contextualised to better understand the likelihood and severity of ongoing damage.

Painted climbing markers

Though rock-climbing began in Gariwerd in the 1900's, and saw spasmodic visits in the first half of that century, development of significant climbing areas really only started in the 1960's. In the early years, climbs were so far apart that marks were made at the base of some of the landmark climbs, typically painted squares with the climb's initials, to help people find them and unmarked climbs adjacent to them. This practice largely phased out towards the end of the 70's, and is certainly not done today. Most of these markers have faded, but some have been well protected from weathering and remain surprisingly clear. It should be understood that Gariwerd was not a National Park at the time that these marks were made. There was little to no understanding that these marks may have interfered with cultural heritage and heritage protection laws were not in place.

In summary, this is a long-outdated practice and presents no risk of damage in the future.

Graffiti

The worst examples of graffiti provided are clearly in areas that are also visited by non-climbers (Mackay's Peak, The Chimney Pots, Venus Baths, Socrophiliac Buttress, Giants Staircase). The field survey has included several areas where there is substantial non-climber visitation in addition to climber visitation. The vast majority of climbing areas in Gariwerd are visited by climbers only and inspection of these climbing areas reveals a complete absence of graffiti.

There are some examples of markings on rock and trees noted in the survey that are likely to have been made by climbing parties. This is not an accepted practice and is small in scale when compared to similar damage on walking trails. This can be eliminated with better communication and peer support.

Vegetation

Vegetation in Gariwerd is in a constant state of flux. Short life cycles, high wind events, natural erosion are a few of the reasons that vegetation regularly falls across access trails and the base of climbs. Natural regeneration and regrowth also lead to encroachment of live vegetation. Climbers, in general, understand that vegetation, live or dead should not be cut or removed within the park without permission, but strict compliance with this regulation varies significantly with individuals, as it does with many other users of the park. The situation for climbers is exacerbated where an informal trail has been established to a climbing area and

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climbers try to keep one trail clear in order to avoid multiple branches around obstacles which create more widespread impact.

Climbers also understand that PV does not have the resources to be able to manage the issues that arise on these trails and there is not a clear understanding of the process by which they could be notified of the need for work, nor if this would be supported by PV.

CSV has established a process by which the status of trails and access to climbs is openly communicated between climbers and Land Managers. They have also suggested a notification process for work where this is appropriate and provide direct communication with climbers to be able to convey regulations and expectations around vegetation management in Managed Climbing Areas.

Vegetation in Wild Climbing Areas should remain untouched beyond the normal impact of off-track walking. Making the distinction between Managed Climbing Areas and Wild Climbing Areas will help with a broader understanding and compliance.

Trails

Trails in Managed Climbing Areas need to be monitored and maintained to minimise erosion, vegetation damage and aligned to avoid impacts on cultural heritage. Heavy use trails may require hardening or support works. Light use trails may only require a marker system for a clear definition of alignment. Again, CSV offers to monitor and report on the condition of trails, then propose remediation or improvement works to the Land Managers and supply resources to support the works.

No trail management is required for Wild Climbing Areas given the low visitation rates. When climbers do access these areas they need to be prepared for off-track walking with general directions provided by walking and climbing guidebooks and forums.

Base of Climbs

As for Trails, the condition of the base of climbs is captured in the CSV program of Crag Assessments

Fixed Anchors

Fixed anchors are an essential part of modern climbing around the world, but in Victoria they are only used where no removable anchors can be placed. They should not be placed where they can create harm to cultural heritage or flora and fauna and should not detract from the visual experience of other park users enjoying views or rock architecture.

The survey identified anchors “placed in the ceiling of larger caves and rock shelters that are now registered Aboriginal places”. It does not recognise that these anchors were placed before the places were registered nor that registration of Aboriginal places has not been readily available information to climbers. Such inadvertent damage is completely avoidable under the management plan proposed above.

Fixed anchors installed for descending from the top of climbs can greatly reduce erosion and vegetation wear and tear at the top of climbs and on descent trails and should be considered as an option within a Managed Climbing Area.

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Chalk

It is recognised that a build-up of chalk can create an eyesore and this is included in the CSV Crag Assessment program for monitoring, maintenance and education.

Conclusion

The survey presents damage that has occurred “in a cumulative fashion over the long term”. It has not recognised the historical context of the damage and the absence of knowledge of cultural heritage. It does not properly recognise the damage done by non-climbing visitors.

The severe restrictions to climbing proposed in the GGLDMP appear to have been formulated on the basis of extending all of this damage to all climbing areas in Gariwerd. The reality is that, in a large number of climbing areas, climbing has no more impact than any other recreation, and often less. In more popular areas, all damage can be eliminated or managed to an acceptable level with a simple management and education framework.



CSV Input on Permit System

CSV believes that collaborative approach to cultural training and self-regulation of climber actions and behaviour will provide more effective outcomes with significantly less Land Manager resources than a mandatory permit system.

We understand that the permit system provides the Land Managers with the reassurance that climbers have been exposed to an induction that could include cultural information as well as rules and expectations around climbing in GG. However, there is a high risk of low-engagement with a mandatory system and it threatens to become a tick-box exercise, particularly when completed annually. Land Managers do not have the resources to effectively police individual climber behaviour and so the use of the permit as a control mechanism for inappropriate actions is not realistic.

CSV supports the use of an on-line induction training module for climbers planning to climb in GG. We would be happy to contribute content that demonstrates our support for cultural awareness, park guidelines and best climbing practices. We would promote this induction via our own membership and more broadly through supporting climbing organisations. We believe that this would lead to significantly better engagement and ownership within the climbing community.

Via its extended network of stewards, volunteers and supporters, CSV is in a much better position than the Land Managers to monitor the actions of climbers, or non-climbers, in Managed Climbing Areas and to address them, if required. The climbing community understands that it is ultimately accountable for the treatment and condition of each climbing area and the Land managers have the ability to prohibit climbing in any area if they are not satisfied. Self- regulation of our community's activities will be much more effective than the threat of losing a permit or the risk of being fined.

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Conclusion

The management of climbing activity in Gariwerd should be based on a fair evaluation of the risk of that activity to cultural and environmental values. It should recognise historical impacts that are unlikely to recur and current impacts that can be reduced or eliminated with education and proper engagement with the climbing community. Most importantly, it should recognise that there are marked differences in impact between popular climbing areas and the large number of lesser-visited climbing locations. It should not discriminate against climbing where the risks and impacts are similar to other permitted activities.

CSV recognises that popular climbing areas require good management to properly protect cultural and environmental values. We offer a proposal to create individual management plans for each popular climbing area, resourced by the climbing community, to allow the risks and impacts of climbing to be managed appropriately for each area.

The GGLMP needs to have the flexibility to allow climbing to continue in areas where management is effective in protecting cultural and environmental values and to stop climbing in areas where it is not. It should recognise that the risks and impacts associated with climbing can change slowly or suddenly over time with the advent of fire, flood, rediscovery and visitation rates. Rather than make a point-in-time classification of all climbing areas, the plan should have the flexibility to adjust to these changes.

Gariwerd is greatly valued by the climbing community, not only for its climbing value, but also for the cultural and environmental values that the GGLMP seeks to protect. CSV encourages Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners of Gariwerd to consider a partnership program with the climbing community that provides a healthy outcome for all.

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