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Everyone left hanging over climbing ban

The Grampians National Park decision must be seen through the prism of reconciliation.

By JOHN FERGUSON

Climber John Fischer on Castle Crag at Mt Arapiles. Picture: David Geraghty

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Fire is the Grampians National Park's great contradiction. In one breath a ruthless environmental vandal; in another an opportunity for a reawakening. As the park becomes the focus of a protracted indigenous rights battle in western Victoria, it's no coincidence that fire has helped fuel the debate.

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Thousands have now been locked out of one of the world's great rock-climbing theatres as government and traditional owners combine in the name of cultural heritage.

This is a story of national and global significance. Critics argue the debate has been manipulated by the government to create a simplistic and misleading impression of wrongdoing by climbers generally, who have been accused of harming sacred sites.

There is, however, a much deeper story that goes beyond the superficial damning of a sport for political advantage.

Instead, this battle needs to be seen through the prism of reconciliation and the first steps towards a treaty between Victoria and its first people and the desire by the Andrews government to achieve that reform.

To do this, it must be seen to be providing traditional owners with much greater say over their heritage and to act to protect it, or face potentially millions of dollars worth of fines under Victorian legislation.

This desire to ensure Victoria becomes the first state to enter into a treaty has led, in part, to the government effectively blowing up the reputation of a climbing community that insists it overwhelmingly does the right thing in the national park or would do the right thing if educated properly.

Treaty precursor

Central to the lead-up to any formal ratification of a treaty is the government's legislative and policy agenda that seeks to give much greater rights over cultural heritage to first owners, particularly in the context of state-owned land such as national and state parks.

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Other states, such as NSW, have gone down the path of co-managing parks with traditional owners but Victoria, despite having a relatively low indigenous population, is leading the national reconciliation charge. The policy of greater engagement and indigenous control and access has implications across the state, depending on the aggressiveness and determination of traditional owners in other areas who have been handed sweeping control over cultural heritage.

No one sensible is arguing against the drive to protect sacred artwork or other evidence of life over thousands of years at the Grampians. But questions are being asked by rock climbers and related tourism businesses about the motivation for the ban on climbing in eight so-called special protection areas covering 500sq km. Climbers see these bans as the equivalent of stopping play at the Sydney cricket Test or football finals at the MCG. In 2014, the northern end of the Grampians was subject to intense fires that burned so hot that rocks broke apart with the dramatic change of temperature. The fire scorched vegetation, leaving behind sand and black twigs but also exposing even more Aboriginal artefacts, including quarries and, as much as experts can tell, probably rock art that had been hidden in the bush.

The Grampians are the home of rock art in Victoria, holding the largest number of sites in southern Australia, but indigenous leaders try to keep secret the locations of many of the sites to protect them from damage and preserve the sanctity of the location.

But the northern Grampians also happen to provide some of the world’s best rock climbing, where athletes travel each year to take on thousands of routes, the most enthusiastic arriving from around the globe for the experience.

In February, the Andrews government, without any proper notice or warning, announced it would ban climbing in nearly a third of the park, claiming repeated abuses of indigenous cultural heritage, disrespect of the bush and camping in unauthorised areas.

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While there has been a dramatic increase in “bouldering” — climbing on large rocks on the ground rather than cliff faces, fuelled by the increase in rock walls in suburban gyms — and some loose behaviour by newcomers to the sport, climbers insist the campaign against them by Parks Victoria is confected and has an ulterior motive.

Parks Victoria’s pictorial evidence of climber damage is laced with hearsay and guesswork about basic detail such as who had, in fact, compromised the heritage and undergrowth. In one powerful example, Parks Victoria was entirely wrong; climbers had not drilled into Aboriginal artwork. It was in fact former officials from decades earlier.

The one area where some climbers are at fault on some rock faces is the overuse of chalk, a practice that could be stopped overnight and steps taken to repair the damage. There also has been criticism of the overuse of bolts and some drilling but, again, the climbing industry sees this as an education issue rather than an urgent need for punitive action.

Uluru comparison

It doesn’t take much to draw comparisons between the Grampians and the looming ban on climbing of Uluru, where for decades local traditional owners have bemoaned the habit of (mainly white) tourists climbing the sacred rock. But the circumstances are quite different, in part because the Grampians cover 1600sq km and many of its secrets are buried deep in the bush and tightly held by Aboriginal elders. It’s physically much harder to hide a sacred truth in dead flat central Australia. In late 2014, as Parks Victoria was rebuilding the Grampians, the reformist Andrews government was elected with an at-times radical social reform agenda.

Rather than heavily promote its treaty process, the parameters of which may take years to resolve, it has embarked on a softly, softly strategy of building relationships and trust with indigenous groups. No one seems to be criticising this relationship building.

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At the same time, the government has toughened internal policies significantly and acted on legislation that puts at the heart of Parks Victoria and other departments the requirement to protect indigenous cultural heritage, such as rock art and canoe and birthing trees. With fines of up to $1.6 million for each offence of failing to protect first people's heritage, the stakes are high.

"There are no conditions that we will compromise to protect our cultural heritage," Victorian Federation of Traditional Owner Corporations chairman Jason Mifsud told The Weekend Australian. "However, that is not to suggest for a moment that we won't find resolutions and compromise in other areas. I think people need to take a deep breath and acknowledge that if we can't reconcile the preservation of cultural heritage, the path to reconciliation is not where many, many of us would want it to be."

Mifsud's words will count among his people and in the parliament. He is the original architect of the treaty framework and a man with a deep interest in the Grampians as a proud member of the Eastern Maar people of the Gunditjmara nation in Victoria's southwest. In western Victoria, it is estimated that thousands of indigenous people were killed on the white man's arrival in the 1800s. This is recent history in the context of the 400-million-year-old Grampians.

None in the government, opposition or climbing world opposes the protection of indigenous heritage but the chief lament from climbers and businesses in the broad Grampians community is the way the government has tried to crash through without properly engaging all the stakeholders.
Climber and photographer Simon Carter, who wrote the guidebook Grampians Climbing, neatly encapsulated the angst of his community.

"It's outrageous that Parks Victoria has not consulted climbers and involved them in the process here; instead parks have demonised climbers, and some at parks have maliciously misled the public about the impact that climbers have had,'' he says.

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It’s also true that the government has, in its way, left the indigenous groups and climbers hanging, refusing to detail in full its motivations for the bans or the precise detail around what is happening at the Grampians.

The government doesn’t seem to know how to end this dispute or prosecute a sensible political narrative. This week The Weekend Australian was refused an interview with Environment Minister Lily D’Ambrosio.

Previously the government has not responded to questions about the dispute, which will likely end up in the courts.

The minister says in a statement: “We are aware of the concerns being raised by climbers, tour operators and traditional owners on this issue. I have instructed Parks Victoria to ensure that there is full and proper consultation to work through these concerns while protecting heritage.”

Crippling tourism

While Parks Victoria has engineered some limited sympathetic coverage, the reality is the bans are starting to really hurt the sector. More than anywhere else in Australia, the Grampians are the sport’s nursery, its rock formations near perfect for teaching children the art of the sport.

Climbing instructor Tori Dunn, who runs Grampians Mountain Adventure Company, has taken her business to nearby Mount Arapiles. She argues that Parks Victoria’s restrictions on teaching there are punitive and without merit, and that a three-month extension allowing her to teach climbing in an area called Summerday Valley is insufficient for her work.

“I am boycotting the three-month extension,” she says. “I didn’t think it would come to the set of conditions that it does. It’s (Summerday Valley) a site that I hold very dear. I’ve seen (pupils’) lives changed in there. It’s an experience of personal growth for the people.”

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Emma Kealy, the Nationals MP for the state seat of Lowan, says Labor is refusing to engage with the local community, exacerbating concerns of business.

“Locally I’m seeing traditional owners and the rock climbing community working together for a positive solution, but the government has failed to step up and work with them to find a solution,” she says. “The uncertainty Labor’s created is driving rock climbers away from the Grampians and crippling our local tourism businesses to the point some are considering leaving the region.”

Indeed, anyone with knowledge of the Grampians understands that Parks Victoria is vastly under-resourced, with rangers often struggling to keep up, particularly in holiday periods. Basic tourist facilities in the less accessible parts of the park can be hit and miss and rangers rarely seen. Uncle Ron Marks, a Wotjobaluk elder with a long history with the Grampians and Mount Arapiles, says a common ground can be reached between indigenous leaders and climbers. Most climbers, he says, know how to behave.

“But then there are the dills that don’t give a rat’s clacker. And that’s like everywhere,’’ he told The Weekend Australian last week.

Parks Victoria, meanwhile, is pushing ahead with the 160km Grampians Peak Trail, which will run from end to end of the national park, mirroring Tasmania’s Overland Track and the Northern Territory’s Larapinta Trail.

It is being made possible with the help of local traditional owners, who have been advising on cultural heritage issues as the courts have been examining a native title claim on the Grampians. The Federal Court recently dismissed a native title determination claim by the Gariwerd Native Title Claim Group over the Grampians at the group’s request.

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The walking track has raised the inevitable question about what damage the dramatic increase in patronage will do to the park, particularly in the sparsely visited southern third of the Grampians. The answer to this is likely to be pretty simple. Committed bushwalkers, like traditional climbers, aim to tread lightly.

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