

Draft Nature Based Recreation Strategy

Reference: C05880

Prepared by Sydney Rockclimbing Club Inc
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Introduction:

This submission deals with recreational rockclimbing in the context of The City of Blue Mountains. It concentrates on this single activity due to the fact that the Club's main purpose and expertise reside in this field. However, many rockclimbers practise and enjoy a number of the other recreational activities available within the unique natural setting of the City.

Sydney Rockclimbing Club had its infancy in the Blue Mountains and has now been in existence for 53 years. In that time there has been significant growth in the numbers attracted to the sport. In recent years, aware of the increasing impacts, we have worked with land managers, and climber-initiated groups such as Blue Mountains Cliffcare, to address problems resulting from our activity and to educate climbers in best practise procedures.

Rockclimbing is a legitimate recreational activity and is undertaken in many countries around the world. Consequently there is a considerable body of knowledge dealing with the management of rockclimbing on protected lands and other natural areas.

By consulting and working with bodies such as Blue Mountains City Council, and other land managers, we believe climbers can develop opportunities to engage in the recreation in a way that does not compromise natural values nor impinge on the safety or enjoyment of other users.

Executive Summary:

- We believe rockclimbing is an appropriate activity in the natural setting of The City of Blue Mountains, and compatible with the management objectives of Council.
- Any measurable rockclimbing impacts can be addressed by appropriate management controls, introduction of a 'Minimal Impact Code of Conduct', and consultation with user groups.
- In our view, conflict between rockclimbers and other users is generally minimal and could be ameliorated by commonsense on both sides.

Comments:

From a climber's point of view, the Draft Strategy contains nothing of a seriously contentious nature. Nor does it offer pre-emptive conclusions or decisions, these being appropriately the content of the presaged final Strategy to follow after further studies and consideration of submissions from the wider community.

However, there are some matters deserving of our attention. We imagine they will be dealt with more fully in the final Strategy, so we offer our thoughts here to hopefully help inform the discussion.

Impacts of climbing:

Generally, climbers are aware their recreation has impacts and Sydney Rockclimbing Club prepared its *Climbers Code of Conduct*¹ to educate and help climbers understand how they can reduce their impact.

Similarly, Blue Mountains Cliffcare² promoted the idea of responsible climbing, worked with relevant authorities to manage the activity, and organised Climbers' Work Days to rehabilitate affected areas.

We believe that if climbers cause a problem then climbers can be, and should be, a part of the solution!

Management, commonsense, and goodwill, are needed to balance the seemingly competing demands for conservation of the environment and access to a recreational resource. Despite some notions to the contrary, a large number of climbers believe the scales are weighted in favour of the environment, because they find the natural surroundings of climbing areas an important aspect of their chosen recreation.

Where a real problem is identified, climbers are willing to listen to sensible arguments that their activities should be curtailed, or restricted. This is seen for instance, in various parts of Australia and overseas, where climbers regularly observe closure of some climbs or cliff areas during bird nesting seasons.

Sydney Rockclimbing Club would be happy to discuss any environmental impact problems associated with the activity of climbing in The City of Blue Mountains and will work towards finding a solution.

Risk Management and Liability:

We contend that people undertaking rockclimbing accept a degree of risk to be associated with the activity. The risk is potential, rather than inevitable. Modern climbing equipment and techniques have evolved to a point where the dangers are understood and safety is mostly assured where standard precautions are taken. But, just like life in general, the occasional departure from accepted practise can lead to an unplanned outcome.

Consequently, Sydney Rockclimbing Club takes issue with land managers who, perhaps worried about possible litigation and concerns for the safety of participants and spectators, simply take the easy way out and prohibit activities they believe *might* attract people to place themselves in 'hazardous' locations.

In the 1998 High Court decision in *Romeo v Conservation Commission*, Justice Kirby found that where a person had normal concern for their safety, land managers had no obligation to signpost or fence an area that posed a danger. And now, recently introduced State legislation supports and reinforces this notion.

¹ **SRC Climbers Code of Conduct**, URL: <http://www.sydneyrockies.org.au/pdfs/srccode.pdf>

² Sadly, Cliffcare fell victim to Australia's Public Liability Insurance problems and is currently inactive.

We find it particularly encouraging that the Draft Strategy adopts an enlightened latter-day approach to the issues of risk management and liability. The present approach differs importantly from Council's position on these matters in 1994. In May of that year, a 'Rock Sports Survey'³ was sent to 46 Councils in the wider Sydney/Cumberland Basin area. The survey sought attitudinal responses to a number of questions relating to rock sports activities within the Council's jurisdiction. Responding to the final question "*Using a word or short phrase what is your single greatest area of interest/concern about the undertaking of rock sport activity on LGA community lands?*" the BMCC succinct answer was "*Liability*".

Acknowledging today's changed legal environment, the Draft Strategy simply, and sensibly, recommends: "*That Council adopts use of consistent standards for planning, construction and management of recreation activity sites as a means to minimize risk to the public and manage Council's risk liability.*"

Sydney Rockclimbing Club would gladly discuss any such issues associated with the activity of climbing in The City of Blue Mountains.

Conflicts with other users:

We are aware there have been complaints from members of the public about climbers' impacts and that some of these have been highlighted by local media. We also understand the subject has been raised at least once in meetings of Council.

Not surprisingly, the complaints seem to have focussed on the impacts connected with climbing activities at places that are more accessible to the public, such as Centennial Glen and Walls Ledge (Upper Shipley).

*"However, perhaps we should consider for a moment that often those who are affronted by the impacts of climbing view those results from a man-made walking track positioned beneath a cliff. This path may have been carved through sensitive vegetation on a ledge part way down the precipice, be replete with a safety fence of steel posts and railings, and perhaps even include steps hewn in the rock."*⁴

The SRC contends that regardless of where climbing impacts occur, in the public view or not, they need to be addressed by the final Strategy and they must also be recognised and understood by the wider climbing community if the activity is to achieve environmental sustainability.

As for social conflict between rockclimbers and other users, we suggest this is generally minimal (apart, perhaps, from one particularly 'noisy' example) and could be ameliorated by commonsense on both sides.

The previously mentioned "SRC Climbers Code of Conduct", recognises the potential for such social conflict between climbers and other users and suggests "*Climbers are not the only users of some areas. Respect the rights of these other users*" and later, with considerable emphasis, "*Remember that we do not have exclusive rights to cliff faces*".

As with the other issues, Sydney Rockclimbing Club is prepared to engage in discourse on this topic, and to work with climbers to improve our recreation's level of social acceptability.

³ Eckstein, D. (1994) **When Adventure Recreation Comes to Town**, M Env Stud Thesis, Department of Safety Science, University of New South Wales, Australia. (private copy, SRC Library)

⁴ Westren, K. (2002) **At the Interface: Perceptions of bias in assessments of the impacts of rockclimbing**. URL: <http://www.adventurepro.com.au/news/index.pl?action=search&cat=OPIN>

Guiding Principles:

1) Sydney Rockclimbing Club believes that in relation to the management of all natural areas on public lands within The City of Blue Mountains, the Precautionary Principle should be invoked, namely

The Rio Declaration⁵ - Principle 15:

“In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by states according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.”

2) Present users of recreational resources have an inter-generational responsibility to ensure that the natural places they use and enjoy today are protected in a sustainable way for the benefit of future users.

“Protected area managers should not be intimidated by an argument that the values we place on nature are changeable. Today, almost all cultures possess and value some concept of natural beauty; and the simple fact that people want an area conserved is sufficient reason for taking steps to do so. The idea that such decisions create opportunities for choices for future generations is also compelling”⁶

In Conclusion:

- The environmental impacts of climbing can be (and should be) managed to permit sustainable use.
- All reasonable climbers are prepared to accept sensible restrictions on their activities where necessary.
- Climbers are aware of, understand, and accept, the inherent dangers of the activity.
- “By using the authority of the resource, rather than difficult-to-enforce restrictions, land-management agencies may see increased compliance by concerned recreationists.”⁷
- Where a danger is perceived, the extent of a land manager’s Duty of Care has been redefined by recent court decisions, and greater protection exists as a consequence of new State legislation.
- Sydney Rockclimbing Club is willing to engage in dialog with land managers to discuss identified problems, and can also act as a conduit to convey information to the wider climbing community.

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⁵ The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992.

⁶ Worboys, G.; Lockwood, M and De Lacy, T. *et al.* 2001, **Protected Area Management - Principles and Practice**, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

⁷ Camp, R. J. and Knight, R. L. (1998) **Effects of Rock Climbing on Cliff Plant Communities at Joshua Tree National Park, California**. Conservation Biology, Volume 12 Number 6.