

Mount York Reserve Draft Plan of Management

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Prepared by Sydney Rockclimbing Club Inc
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Introduction:

This submission deals with recreational rockclimbing in the context of Mount York Reserve. That it concentrates largely on this single activity is due to the fact that the Club's main purpose and expertise reside in this field. However rockclimbers may also enjoy some of the other recreational activities available within the natural setting that the Reserve provides.

Sydney Rockclimbing Club (SRC) has been in existence for over 56 years. In that time there has been considerable growth in the numbers attracted to the sport. In recent years, aware of the increasing impacts, we have worked with Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC), and climber-initiated groups such as Blue Mountains Cliffcare, to address problems resulting from our activity and to educate climbers in best practice 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 in protected and natural areas.

By consulting and working with bodies such as BMCC we believe climbers can develop opportunities to engage in the recreation in a way that does not compromise the natural and cultural values of Mount York Reserve nor impinge on other users.

Comments:

We consider that Council's approach to the preparation of a Draft Plan of Management (DPoM) for Mount York Reserve has been balanced and informed, and should be to the satisfaction and benefit of the various stakeholders.

The Preliminary Draft Plan of Management prepared by Gondwana Consulting Pty Ltd provides an indication of this 'balanced and informed' approach in the earliest pages. From the Executive Summary:

"Mount York Reserve contains heritage values of State significance and significant natural values, including habitat for threatened species. The Reserve is also very popular recreationally, especially for appreciation of its heritage values and cliff recreation activities. The issues affecting the management of Mount York Reserve are multidimensional and overlapping. This plan of management seeks to preserve current uses of Mount York Reserve and allow improvements to facilities taking into account the heritage and natural values of the area.

The key issue for the planning and development of Mount York Reserve is to balance the protection of heritage and natural values with ongoing and increasing demand for recreational use." (page iv)

Issues:

1. Aboriginal Historical Values.

"Mount York Reserve lies in what is traditionally the land of the Gundungurra and Darug Aboriginal People. The Gundungurra would have been the primary occupiers of the area of land now encompassed in Mount York Reserve." (page 12)

We acknowledge the Gundungurra and Darug peoples as the traditional custodians of these lands.

2. European Historical Values.

"The section of Cox's Road at Mount York is considered one of the most intact and significant precincts remaining along the entire 1814 route.

Cox's Road is listed on the Register of the National Estate and as a heritage item in the Blue Mountains City Council Local Environmental Plan. It is considered to be of significance at the state level.

The Mount York precinct has social significance at the State level as one of the most popular outdoor historical tourist attractions in NSW.

Like many of the precincts of Cox's Road, the Mount York area has technical/research value at the State level for its archaeological potential and for the possibilities offered for the study of materials and road designs used in the early 19th century NSW." (pages 25, 26)

We accept the historical significance of Cox's road, particularly that portion which passes close to a section of the Sunny Side climbing area, but contend that climbing activity does not directly impact on the historical values of the road itself any more than bushwalking or tourism traffic.

3. Climbing Impacts.

"Cliff recreation activities are adversely impacting the Reserve's more heavily used locations, particularly the cliff top and bottom in the Exhibition Wall to Galactic Gully area." (page 67)

This is undeniable and climbers welcome Council's proposal to address these impacts in consultation with the climbing community. The now defunct Blue Mountains Cliffcare ably demonstrated in the past the willingness of climbers to address such issues and work to minimise their impacts. Volunteer labour could again be organised to assist with such projects.

4. Flora and Fauna.

"In their "Flora and Fauna Assessment for Commercial Cliff Recreation Activities at Mount York", Smith & Smith (2004) identified ten threatened flora species, seventeen rare flora species and seven species of regional conservation significance as having been recorded from within 10 km of Mount York Reserve.

None of these species were located within the Mount York study area during fieldwork for the plan of management. Similarly, Smith & Smith (2004) did not record any of the species within their smaller study area around the areas at Mount York utilised for commercial cliff recreation activities." (page 54)

This provides some comfort for climbers in that it suggests their activity is unlikely to harm any threatened or rare species of flora however the damage to vegetation evident around the cliff top and cliff base in areas receiving heavy climbing and abseiling traffic is a cause for some concern and the Plan proposes a way of minimizing this impact.

Climbing appears to be no more of a threat to fauna of the area than the other activities presently occurring within the Reserve.

5. Cliff Recreation and Safety.

"The Blue Mountains are today a very popular rock climbing precinct in NSW and the site of most commercial cliff recreation and rope sport activity. Over 5,000 thousand customers participated in a licensed cliff recreation activity in the Blue Mountains LGA

during the twelve months to October 2006, with 40% of this use being within Mount York Reserve.

The Elanus Word report (Blue Mountains Cliff Recreation Site Assessment, 2003) concluded that the Sunny Side area is receiving very high climbing use and very high commercial and group use. The area provides both traditional and “sport” cliff recreation across basic, intermediate and expert skill levels. The area has a “medium” level of bolting. The safety issues identified in this earlier report include walkers above and below the cliff face, tree fall, loose rock and walkers being misled into climbing areas.” (pages 76, 77)

The first and last of these identified safety issues is to be addressed by Council’s proposed cliff safety warning signage to alert users to the proximity of escarpment areas. Tree fall and loose rock can not be considered Council’s responsibility and climbers understand they must accept these risks as a normal component of the activity.

6. User conflicts.

“There is an opportunity to provide a short return walk between Mount York Day Use Area and Barden’s Lookout, incorporating the cliff top and cliff base environments. The loop walk would commence at Mount York Day Use Area, descend Cox’s Road, parallel the cliff base before ascending Bardens Gully and return via Cox’s Road on the ridge line – as shown on Figure 13. The walk would be approximately 2.5-3 kilometres long and 1-1.5 hours duration. Importantly, it would incorporate a sample of the historic features of the Reserve, its vegetation communities and provide visitors with the opportunity to observe climbing and abseiling. For safety purposes, and to reduce conflicts between walkers and climbers, the track would need to be located downslope from the cliff base.” (page 113)

Then later:

“If walking and other track-based recreation activities clash in a particular location, preference will generally be given to walking as the activity to accommodate.” (page 116)

Although this clause would apply specifically to ‘other track-based recreation activities’ we would argue that in the event of a walking track being retrospectively constructed anywhere within a recognised existing climbing area then climbing should be the activity to be accommodated if any user conflicts arise!

7. Camping at Mount York

“There is a reasonably level area east of Mount York Road that could accommodate a camping area. The area extends from approximately 100 metres south to 300 metres north of the Barden’s Lookout access road and is up to 80 metres wide. It is of sufficient size to develop a linear camping area and cater for group and individual camping. It is within walking distance of the popular Sunny Side cliff recreation site. This area is at present open understorey bushland with some scattered rock.” (page 122)

“In the long term, a primitive bush camping area will be provided at the site described above, opposite Barden’s Lookout. It will include a gravel access road, group camping sites, individual camping sites (some of which may be “walk-in” sites) and a centrally located toilet. An information shelter will be provided and explain the responsible use of campfires and identify an emergency evacuation point. Fireplaces will be provided, however water will not be provided.” (page 122)

“Camping at Mount York brings with it a bushfire risk from campfire escapes. In recent years there have been several such escapes, but no major incidents have resulted.”
(page 121)

The DPoM recognises the desirability of maintaining a primitive or basic camping option at Mount York and this is to be applauded. However, we would strongly recommend that Council consider making any camping area at Mount York a ‘Fuel Stove Only Area’, if not year-round then at least for the fire safety danger period from, say, November to March. At Mount Arapiles, a major climbing destination in Victoria’s Wimmera District, the camping area is a declared ‘Fuel Stove Only Area’ during the high fire danger period.

8. Climbers and Bolts

“The management of bolts and hold fast points on the cliff face and at the cliff top has not been regulated. The cliff faces at Mount York contain a variety of bolts, some dating back decades while others are recent additions. There appears to be differing opinions in the climbing community about the placement and management of bolts on climbs. A member of the climbing community is regularly rebolting some of the climbs at the site although no formal approval has been provided. This activity and the subsequent promotion of the rebolted climbs through websites and climbing community network has the potential to impact on cliff recreation use patterns. Climbs that have recently been receiving minimal use could quickly become popular, resulting in environmental impacts increasing at these sites, particularly if no visitor facilities such as walking tracks or top and bottom access are in place.” (page 78)

This would require a prohibition or restriction of new bolting activity in the Reserve that could be difficult to regulate. Alternatively it might require monitoring of changes in usage levels in the affected zones and implementation of the necessary impact reduction measures.

But it should be understood that climbers place and use bolts in different ways. Single placements at intervals up the climb provide intermediate protection points to hopefully prevent the lead climber being injured in the event of a fall.

At the top of the climb a double placement may be used as a ‘belay’ or anchor point to secure the lead climber who then manages the intake of rope to protect the next climber as they in turn ascend. In some situations this anchor point may consist of two or more bolts equipped with rings or short lengths of chain to facilitate a roped descent (abseil) directly back to the base of the climb. Apart from any convenience this may deliver it

also reduces wear and tear on the vegetation and soil of what would otherwise be the descent route.

On longer climbs an intermediate belay/anchor point may be installed and this might utilise two or more bolts if no natural anchors exist such as cracks for placement of removable protection, or solid trees that can be used for the purpose. Sometimes bolts are placed to avoid using a tree as an anchor where such use can cause damage to the tree.

The Draft Plan states *“There is a need to control the proliferation of recreational bolts in the Reserve and to remove those that have an unacceptable impact or which are no longer required.”* (page vi).

All reasonable climbers will understand the philosophical reasons underlying this proposal but we strongly recommend consultation with the climbing community on this issue **prior** to any removals occurring so that the key desired outcome will be understood and identified by all concerned.

In conclusion:

- The environmental impacts of climbing within Mount York Reserve can be managed to permit sustainable use.
- Reasonable climbers are prepared to accept sensible restrictions on their activities where it can be appropriately demonstrated that such controls are necessary or desirable.
- Climbers are aware of, understand, and accept the inherent dangers of the activity, including those associated with the use of fixed protection (bolts) and are best qualified to install, maintain and remove such fixed protection.
- “By using the authority of the resource, rather than difficult-to-enforce restrictions, land-management agencies may see increased compliance by concerned recreationists.”¹
- Sydney Rockclimbing Club Inc is always willing to engage in dialogue with land managers and other stakeholders to discuss identified problems, and can also act as a conduit to convey information to the wider climbing community.

¹ 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.

Acknowledgements:

We thank Council for providing us with the opportunity to comment on the Mount York Reserve Draft Plan of Management and hope that our submission will make a worthwhile contribution to the planning process.

We also acknowledge the valuable contribution of Elanus Word and Image along with that of Gondwana Consulting. Together, these studies have provided a comprehensive understanding of the present day values and usage of Mount York Reserve.

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