

Namadgi National Park

Prepared by Sydney Rockclimbing Club Inc
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Introduction:

This submission deals with recreational rockclimbing in the context of Namadgi National Park. 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, many rockclimbers practise and enjoy some of the other recreational activities available within the unique setting that Namadgi provides. Included in this document is some material from our earlier submission commenting on the 2002 Discussion Paper.

Sydney Rockclimbing Club (SRC) has been in existence for 54 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 land managers, 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 areas.

By consulting and working with bodies such as Environment ACT we believe climbers can develop opportunities to engage in our recreation in a way that does not compromise the natural values of Namadgi National Park nor impinge on other users.

Scope:

This submission deals almost exclusively with just those issues affecting rockclimbers.

We consider this a valid approach because;

- i) we have no argument with the major intent of the Draft Plan, and
- ii) presumably others with a better knowledge and understanding of issues relevant to their interests will no doubt lodge submissions appropriate to that focus,

and so we have restricted our comments to the arena we consider our specialty -- rockclimbing.

A place of nature, a place for community wellbeing:

The Draft Management Plan (like the 2002 Discussion Paper which preceded it) identifies the important values that exist within the park and proposes management strategies to protect them.

We consider the Natural Values of Namadgi National Park to be key amongst all the important values mentioned because unless these are preserved the remainder of the listed values are lessened and/or threatened.

A deep-rooted, and indeed an intrinsic, element of “Natural Values” is the feeling of wellbeing that many (both aboriginal and non-indigenous people) discover and enjoy in the natural setting of Namadgi and similar places. For some this is akin to a spiritual experience, and it engenders a reverence for landscape generally, and certain locations in particular. This non-physical attribute can not be ranked relative to those other values that relate to things we can see, touch and measure yet it is possibly one of the strongest motivational forces affecting our ‘sense of place’.

For rockclimbers, the granite cliffs and outcrops of Namadgi have a **significant** sense of place.

The sloping and vertical surfaces of Booroomba Rocks can bring a realisation of one’s real place in the universe to climbers who venture onto these vast expanses. In contrast, the Orroral Ridge outcrops secrete a more intimate ambience. This is a place where the notion that spirituality can be embodied in landscape may find true believers. Then there is Bimberi Peak. Far off, distant Bimberi, where the eagles outnumber humans! A true wilderness setting, that amply rewards the few who visit and savour its remoteness.

Each year more people are attracted by the Natural Values of Namadgi, and this growth could place pressure on the park’s ecosystem. Appropriate management and controls can minimise user impacts and keep them at a sustainable level into the foreseeable future.

Rockclimbers are a small, but visible and readily identifiable subset of park users. We do not claim our recreation is devoid of impacts.* However, due to the relatively low number of participants, the impacts are little different from those associated with bushwalking. Overall, these impacts are restricted in extent as a direct consequence of the activity being contained to the steep and rocky places in the park.

* The Sydney Rockclimbing Club developed its “*Climbers’ Code of Conduct*” to assist members, and other climbers, to address and minimise the potential impacts of their activities.

A place for rockclimbers:

The Draft Plan states “*There is a growing rock climbing and abseiling community in Canberra and Namadgi provides the key focus for their activities*” and further advises that Park managers propose to work with rock climbers to address management issues. The SRC has consistently espoused the idea of cooperative management of the activity, especially in protected areas, and believes this is the most effective and productive way to deal with any issues or impacts that arise. We hold the view that if climbers cause a problem they should be a part of the solution!

Generally climbers are reasonable people, who are usually well informed, and have demonstrated their concern for the environment and its inhabitants by, for instance, observing seasonal closure of cliffs or climbing areas during peregrine nesting periods both here in Australia and overseas. Given sensible, plausible reasons for constraints on their behaviour climbers tend to be compliant but are usually quick to challenge any information tendered in support of bans or restrictions on climbing or related activities in cases where such ‘evidence’ is vague or open to interpretation.

The Draft Plan asserts (page 113) “*In recent years a particular issue has been impacts caused by climbers camping in the Booroomba Rocks area ...*” whereas our observations would suggest the opposite. During the last ten years or so, indeed ever since the large logs and other obstacles were positioned to restrict vehicles to a defined road area, the consequent ‘walk in’ camping area has progressively recovered. Clearly it has not reverted to its once undisturbed condition but we feel the process is moving in the right direction, contrary to the view advanced in the Draft Plan.

And this raises one of our major concerns, which is that all too often broad or speculative statements included as part of a Draft Plan, even when successfully contradicted, can still find their way into the final Plan as though ‘accepted fact’ and thus we feel a real need to argue for objectivity and transparency!

A place for all:

Until fairly recently, all visitors – including rockclimbers -- were able to camp in the immediate vicinity of the Booroomba Rocks car park. This relatively natural setting provided a wonderful bush camping experience, in a location seemingly remote from the intrusions of mankind. There were no manicured lawns and no man-made buildings. The site offered little more than the native flora, local fauna, and occasional hints of the underlying geology. For those with some empathy for the place, and who chose to camp there, it was perfect and needed nothing else.

In the period since the Honeysuckle Campground was opened (and the Booroomba car park area was closed to camping) members of the SRC have visited Namadgi on a number of occasions. Their experiences at the Honeysuckle Campground have been far less than satisfactory. In fact, they were disappointing and annoying!

Our members found themselves in close proximity to rowdy “urban cowboys”. Groups who, it seemed, were there so they could noisily ‘party on’ away from home (where they would likely annoy their neighbours) rather than to enjoy the natural environment. The suburban “very-much-like-home” appearance of the campground seems purpose-built to attract a ‘clientele’ that doesn’t readily relate to, or value, the natural and unmodified environment.

We concede that a national park should attempt to offer something for every kind of potential user, and we agree that there undoubtedly *are* people seeking the kind of outdoor camping experience offered by the Honeysuckle facility. But there is also another user type -- one who values the near-to-nature experience, and prefers to be enveloped in the sounds and ambience of the natural environment rather than cocooned in a man-made setting populated by portable radios, shiny 4WD vehicles that never leave the tarmac, and battery-powered refrigerators.

It may seem elitist, but we believe that those who eschew many of the modern “conveniences” when they choose to camp in the bush, also deserve some consideration. As a bonus for land managers, the more modest need of such users, in terms of facilities, requires a much smaller financial investment.

The membership of the SRC implores Environment ACT to reinstate basic bush camping, with any appropriate controls, in or near the Booroomba Rocks car park vicinity. We advocate that constructed fireplaces be removed, and the site designated a fuel stove only area. Concerns about faecal pollution have been suitably addressed by installation of the composting toilet, and campers could be advised to carry in their own supplies of drinking water.

If it is deemed appropriate or necessary, then a permit system could be put in place, paralleling the situation that presently exists for Honeysuckle Campground. Same booking system, just a different user group, preferring a different type of camping experience, in a different location!

Finally, if the issue of bushfire safety becomes a contention, this “problem” could be easily eliminated by seasonal closure of the bush camping option during periods of high fire danger.

We can see no real impediments to the reintroduction of bush camping at Booroomba Rocks car park, for small tents, limited numbers, and walk-in style campsites.

A place for consultation, a place for commonsense:

The manner in which the Draft Plan attempts to deal with the issue of “fixed bolts and anchors” would seem to indicate a poorly-informed view of the existing situation within Namadgi National Park, and maybe a complete misunderstanding of current climbing practices here and elsewhere. It is almost as though the wording has, without any proper consideration, simply been “cut and pasted” from some standard Draft Plan template document. Climbers do expect better than this! Otherwise they tend to first question the veracity of the document then dismiss it as irrelevant.

The installation of fixed protection (bolts) at Namadgi climbing areas has always engendered animated debate within the local and wider climbing community and the topic seems set to remain controversial. Despite the sometimes disparate views concerning the appropriateness of fixed anchors in Namadgi, the number of fixed anchors in place there, particularly at Booroomba, is actually quite small, reflecting the local consensus view concerning the practice and the long accepted nature of the adventure climbing style historically associated with the area.

Emerging attitudes to climbing could see some change to the current ‘fixed protection’ ethic that applies in Namadgi but even if this were the case the results would still remain low in terms of visual impact and cause less “*scarring or altering of rock faces*” than normal erosion and natural events such as the 2003 bushfires. The latter, we know, led to marked exfoliation of the rock surface, particularly at those lower levels that are more accessible and visible to non-climbers.

A place for convergence:

The Namadgi National Park Draft Management Plan recognises the many and varied stakeholders who have an ongoing interest in the protection of the area's values and proposes to encourage a cooperative approach to future management, both with the local Aboriginal community and with a number of user groups. We strongly applaud this approach.

As well, the proposal that "*A partnership approach will be developed with rock climbing groups to promote a code of practice for rock climbers aimed at low impact use of the park and participation in maintenance and management of rock climbing areas*" is extremely welcome.

The SRC is, of course, situated some distance from Namadgi, but the membership has an historic association with climbing in the ACT stretching back in time to before the existence of Namadgi National Park (to a period when Mount Coree was more the focus of climbing attention) and prior to climbers 'discovering' Booroomba Rocks. However, this "geographical separation" does not lessen our attachment to, and concern for the proper protection of, this significant natural area.

But recognising the fact that we are not 'on the doorstep' and thus cannot be as constantly up to date with happenings in the region as the local climbing community we therefore acknowledge the Canberra Climbers' Association as the "resident climbing caretakers" and offer our moral and physical support for their views and actions with respect to climbing in Namadgi National Park.

A place for the future:

1) Sydney Rockclimbing Club believes that in relation to the management of all natural and protected areas the Precautionary Principle should be invoked, namely

The Rio Declaration¹ - 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"²

¹ The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 1992.

² Worboys, G.; Lockwood, M and De Lacy, T. *et al.* 2001, **Protected Area Management - Principles and Practice**, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.

A place for reflection:

- The environmental impacts of climbing within Namadgi National Park can be (and should 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. Climbers are best qualified to install and maintain 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.”³
- Sydney Rockclimbing Club Inc 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.

We thank Environment ACT for providing us with the opportunity to comment on the Namadgi National Park Draft Management Plan and hope that this submission will constitute a worthwhile contribution to the planning process.

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³ 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.