



CANBERRA CLIMBERS' ASSOCIATION

Director, Parks Planning and Policy
Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate
Natural Resources and Legislation
PO Box 158
CANBERRA ACT 2601

**SUBMISSION BY THE CANBERRA CLIMBERS' ASSOCIATION (CCA) ON
THE CANBERRA NATURE PARK DRAFT RESERVE MANAGEMENT
PLAN 2019**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan. The Canberra Climbers' Association (CCA) as the Peak body for climbing in the ACT has over the last 16 years had an open and collaborative relationship with Parks Managers in the ACT. The CCA is committed to promoting good rock-climbing practices, and towards the maintenance and management of rock-climbing areas within the Canberra Nature Park.

In our view, climbing and preserving environmental and cultural values are synonymous. All climbers share a deep love of the environment and are considerate in their impact. However, it is disappointing to see that the ban on climbing and abseiling in the Draft Plan Reserve Management Plan appears to be based on a misunderstanding of the sport of climbing.

The CCA urges Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) to adopt a more considered and appropriate strategy for rock climbers and abseillers. The Association would welcome further discussions on any contentious issues.

Yours faithfully,

Zac Zaharias, CSM
President
Canberra Climbers' Association
Zaharias@inet.net.au
0402-286257

15 December 2019

Enclosure:

1. Canberra Nature Park: Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019. Submission by the Canberra Climbers' Association



Canberra Nature Park

Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019

Submission by the Canberra Climbers' Association (CCA)

Summary and Key Recommendation

Rock-climbing (and abseiling) is a healthy, low-to-moderate risk activity undertaken by small but growing numbers of people, who have minimal impact on the environment, which should be encouraged rather than discouraged. The CCA recommends that Section 7.4.9 of the Draft Reserve Management Plan, instead of imposing a blanket ban on all climbing and abseiling without giving any reasons, should be amended to:

- Allow rock-climbing and abseiling in Canberra Nature Park in general, but
 - Ban climbing and abseiling in specific where there are sufficient grounds on environmental, cultural or safety concerns and only after consultation with the CCA.
-

Introduction

Rock climbing as an adventure pursuit is relatively new in Australia but has been practised world-wide, particularly in Europe and North America for hundreds of years. Rock climbing (including bouldering and abseiling which is a sub-set of mountaineering,) has evolved into highly technical activities that cater for all levels of ability and skill. Over recent decades, the sport has seen progressive improvements in techniques and equipment that have significantly enhanced safety and reduced the risk of injury or death.

A rich and spirit-filled rock-climbing history exists within the ACT. Rock climbers have been scaling these granite cliff faces, outcrops and boulders for over 50 years¹, and continue to do so today. Climbing in the ACT holds great cultural heritage for generations of climbers and future enthusiasts.

Many of the well-known areas, which are now very popular within the ACT community, were first visited and explored by rock climbers and current members of the CCA. These areas are highly regarded by generations of climbers, not only within the ACT, but Australia wide.

In the last 20 years there has been a significant growth in the popularity of rock climbing and associated activities as evidenced by the increase in facilities such as climbing and bouldering gyms in Canberra and elsewhere in the developed world.

Rock climbing is accessible to everyone of any age who is fit and enjoys an active lifestyle. Young people have discovered rock climbing is an excellent way to improve their mental and physical wellbeing and enrich their life. Experienced

¹ The first recorded climb in the ACT was at Mt Coree in the early 1960s.

climbers already know and enjoy the benefits of an active climbing lifestyle. In Australia, outdoor climbing facilities, such as large boulders and cliffs, are usually on public land. It's essential that access to these facilities are maintained and land managers should consult widely with the climbing community to maximise the benefits for both parties.

Section 7.4.9, page 85: Ban on Rock Climbing and Abseiling

7.4.9 In Canberra Nature Park reserves where cliffs exist, abseiling and rock climbing will not be permitted. Bouldering is permitted but should be avoided in Zone 1 areas.

Rock climbing, including bouldering, and abseiling is a nature-based experience that the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019 should encourage. The activities of rock climbing and abseiling satisfy two of the four principles for Healthy Parks Healthy People (Section 7.1, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019) namely:

- Contact with nature is essential for improving emotional, physical and spiritual health and well-being.
- Parks are fundamental to economic growth and to vibrant and healthy communities.

and the climbing community supports the remaining two principles namely:

- The well-being of all societies depends on healthy ecosystems.
- Parks nurture healthy ecosystems.

Furthermore, the Government promotes *“recreational activities in nature reserves as part of an active lifestyle and as a way of maintaining physical and social health”* (Section 7.1, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019).

Rock climbing and abseiling is essentially following a vertical trail on a hard surface and has many similarities to walking and running, an activity that is encouraged and accounts for around half of all visits to the Canberra Nature Park (Section 7.4.1, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019).

The blanket ban on climbing and abseiling, without any explanation or logic thread in the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019 is a complete surprise to the climbing community. Clearly there has been no consultation and no understanding by EPSDD as to the extent of climbing, the benefits to the community and the limited impact that climbing presents.

Unfortunately, such a blanket ban has the negative effect of marginalising climbers by treating the climbing community as a fringe activity. This ban comes on top of the already existing ban on climbing in all NSW National Parks (except where allowed by specific Plans of Management) as well as the recent imposition of bans by Parks Victoria to 50% of climbing area in the Grampians National Park.

The blanket ban also makes it difficult for the CCA to specifically address any concerns that EPSDD may have, whether they be related to environmental impacts, safety or cultural heritage.

Recommendation:

Section 7.4.9 should be amended to:

- Allow rock-climbing and abseiling in Canberra Nature Park in general, but:
- Ban climbing and abseiling in specific areas where there are sufficient grounds on environmental, cultural or safety concerns and only after consultation with the CCA.

Rock Climbing and Risk

The Draft Plan of Management makes no reference to risk as being a factor in the proposal to ban rock-climbing and abseiling. The CCA notes the following comment in Section 8.5.2 of the Namadgi National Park Plan of Management 2010.

There is some level of risk associated with all recreational activities. Some activities are generally considered riskier than others (e.g. rock climbing, rafting and white-water canoeing, caving), however risk is not an absolute in itself, as the competency of those undertaking the activity is a significant factor in mitigating the risk. Outdoor pursuits sometimes require critical judgements to be made, which are based on a combination of skills, knowledge and experience.

A qualitative and quantitative assessment of risk reveals that rock climbing is of low to moderate risk² and that many other common everyday activities have higher levels of injury and death such as driving motor vehicles, operating power tools, scuba diving and rock-fishing.

Recommendation:

- The treatment of risk in relation to rock-climbing and abseiling in Canberra Nature Park should be consistent with the risk management principles contained within the Namadgi National Park Plan of Management 2010.

Environmental Impact of Rock Climbing

The growth in the popularity of rock climbing has started from a very small base so that after 20 years rock climbers are still a minor user of the Canberra Nature Park. There are no detailed statistics about rock climbers in the Canberra Nature Park, but the number is expected to be less than 10 per week. To put this in context, a press release by the Minister for Roads dated 27th August 2018 stated 4,000 persons (walkers and runners) used the Mount Taylor Nature Reserve every month and this is but one of the thirty seven protected reserves (Section 1.1, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019) where unrestricted walking and running is allowed.

² There have been two deaths in the ACT due to rock-climbing in over 50 years, the first in 1971 and the second in the early 1990s.

It is interesting to compare how rock-climbers have been treated in the Draft Plan of Management compared to other users. An overview is as follows:

- Walkers and runners: Walkers and runners are the largest user group of the Canberra Nature Park accounting for around half of all visits (Section 7.4.1, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019). This group has unrestricted access to all reserves.
- Orienteering: Orienteering ACT states that the Canberra Nature Park are important for the continued development of orienteering, particularly since the 2003 bushfires reduced the number of suitable forested areas (Section 7.4.2, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019). While course planning can avoid 'sensitive areas' the Draft Plan of Management does not define 'sensitive areas. Section 7.4.7 Geocaching implies 'sensitive areas' are more than Zone 1 areas and if that definition is adopted it would make many orienteering areas in the Canberra Nature Park unavailable for orienteering and have a serious impact on the sport of Orienteering in the ACT. Assuming Orienteers have unrestricted access to all reserves and 'sensitive areas' are not as implied in Section 7.4.7 Geocaching, their impact on the terrain is far greater than anything done by the significantly smaller number of rock climbers that use Canberra Nature Park.
- Rogaining: Involves off-track travel through the bush to various check points (Section 7.4.3, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019). Even though the ACT Rogaining Association advise their expected use of the Canberra Nature Park is one to three times per year this is expected to be in excess of the use by rock climbers and yet there is no restriction on their activities in any of the reserves.
- Dog walking: There is unrestricted access for dog walking in 23 of the 37 Canberra Nature Park reserves (Section 7.4.4, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019) provided they are always on a leash and under control at all times.
- Cycling and mountain biking: Cycling is allowed in 31 of the 37 Canberra Nature Park reserves (Section 7.4.6, Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019) and its evident considerable resources have been deployed to create and maintain trails for this user group.

Deduction:

- The impact on the environment from rock climbing is insignificant compared to other user groups that have been granted unfettered access or have access with minor or unenforceable restrictions.

Preserving the environmental and cultural values of areas identified in Part 2 of the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019

The information given in the Draft Plan of Management is insufficient to allow users to determine:

- The boundary between Zone 1 and Zone 2 areas.
- The location of environmentally sensitive species.
- The position of culturally significant artefacts.

If not already done, the maps in the Canberra Nature Park Draft Reserve Management Plan 2019 should be available online. In addition to showing management zones and natural values the online maps must include more detail such as, management trails, walking tracks, multi-use tracks, cycle paths, equestrian paths, Areas listed in Table 2.2, 3.1, 4.1 and 5.1, an aerial photo background and a widely used co-ordinate system such as easting and northings so that Park users can locate or avoid important features using their mobile phone.

Rock climbers, and in fact all responsible park users, don't want to be placed in the position where inadvertent damage occurs to important assets because they were not clearly identified, or they lack the specialist skills needed to recognise their significance.

Recommendation:

- More work needs to be done to better identify important assets so that inadvertent damage does not take place.

Commercial Rock Climbing and Abseiling activities

In other parts of the world and in some parts of Australia rock climbing and abseiling has become an important contributor to the local economy. Presently there are no commercial operations being undertaken by climbing businesses in Canberra Nature Park but there may be tourism opportunities in the future and it's therefore counterproductive to arbitrarily ban rock climbing and abseiling.

Minister Mick Gentleman appears to recognise that Canberra Nature Parks have a role to play in contributing to the local economy and as part of the evolving tourism industry.

Recommendation:

- Arbitrarily banning rock climbing and abseiling is contrary to Minister Mick Gentleman's stated position. Accordingly, remove the ban.