

## Cultural heritage 'vital to reconciliation'



Rock climbing instructor Tori Dunn, pictured at Captain Melville's Cave, Mount Arapiles, says access lockouts are harming her business. Picture: Aaron Francis

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The architect of the Victorian indigenous treaty process has warned that reconciliation will occur only when cultural heritage issues such as those in the Grampians National Park are prioritised in the wake of the lockout of thousands of climbers.

The chairman of the Victorian Federation of Traditional Owner Corporations, Jason Mifsud, has called for the parties to negotiate in good faith over the future of cultural heritage sites and park

# THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

access. He also wants a heavier emphasis on education to ensure park users know what they are doing when they use the facilities and natural assets.

Mr Mifsud, who designed the framework of the Victorian treaty process and is a leading member of the Eastern Maar indigenous group, said a way forward could be discussed but there would be no way that sacred sites would be compromised.

“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,” he said.

Mr Mifsud started the treaty process in Victoria, the first state to pursue the policy, designed to give indigenous residents a greater say in their lives and more independence.

Greater engagement with indigenous groups on cultural heritage has been a key aim of the Andrews government.

But there is growing alarm within government about the way Parks Victoria has handled the lockout of thousands of climbers across 500sq km of the national park, which lies about 250km west of Melbourne.

The Grampians has some of the world’s best climbing but Parks Victoria, threatening fines of up to \$1.6 million per offence, has stopped climbing in vast areas of the park, claiming damage to cultural heritage sites.

There is a mounting backlash against Parks Victoria and the government, amid fears of a drop in adventure tourism and potential business failures.

Climbers say the bans were imposed without proper consultation, and criticism of their community belied the fact it was heavily biased towards environmentalism. Parks Victoria falsely

# THE WEEKEND AUSTRALIAN

accused climbers of putting a bolt through ancient rock art but did pinpoint other areas where issues, such as chalk stains, are compromising the park.

Mr Mifsud said any resolution was unlikely to “appease all of the climbing community” but added: “The traditional owners are not anti-rock climbing, but we are anti-damaging cultural heritage.”

Tori Dunn, who runs the Grampians Mountain Adventure Company, shifted her operations to nearby Mount Arapiles because Parks Victoria has effectively imposed three-month access contracts in the Summerday Valley region in the Grampians’ north, depriving businesses of long-term security of income.

Ms Dunn has taught climbing there for two decades, but says the lockouts harm business because people thought they couldn’t climb anywhere in the park.

Parks Victoria is threatening to kick out climbing teachers if there is any breach of its rules, ending a decades-long tradition.

Victorian Environment Minister Lily D’Ambrosio would not submit to an interview this week. Aboriginal Victorians are in the process of electing candidates for the First Peoples’ Assembly.