



Peace talks with climbers

Parks Victoria is scrambling to ­resolve its poisonous battle with the Australian rock climbing community.

EXCLUSIVE

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Parks Victoria is scrambling to resolve its poisonous battle with the Australian rock climbing community by calling in its chairman and a highly paid consultant to address the Grampians National Park debacle.

Parks Victoria chairman Jeff Floyd and Deloitte Australia consultant Mark Dingle have led confidential talks with rock climbers to break the impasse over one of the world's most - severe climbing bans.

It comes amid alarm in the Victorian government over the handling of the bans, which have had a cascading impact on businesses. In a further sign of compromise, Parks Victoria announced last night that four operators teaching climbing in the park's north could now operate there until at least March next year — a major development for the businesses.

Mr Dingle is acting as an independent arbitrator during discussions with climbers and other key stakeholders. His involvement, and the use of Mr Floyd in negotiations, highlights the sensitivities around the decision to ban climbing from large parts of the park while cultural heritage studies occur and a new management plan is put in place.

Parks Victoria still does not know the full extent of the bans across the best climbing areas in the Grampians. It said last night the presence of Mr Floyd and Mr Dingle underpinned the organisation's desire to consult.

"The role of the independent chair ... is to support respectful and constructive conversations about rock climbing matters," a spokesman said. "That appointment, and the attendance of Parks Victoria's chair, demonstrates our commitment to working meaningfully and productively with the rock climbing community."

Parks Victoria called a roundtable discussion with climbing groups on August 20 in a bid to limit the public relations fallout from effectively blocking most of the best climbing and teaching routes in the park.

Parks Victoria initially showed signs of holding firm in the face of a backlash from climbers, but the use of the organisation's chairman and a consultant to steer a path through the impasse suggests Parks Victoria, facing pressure from government and the opposition, is attempting to broker peace.

Liberal MP Bev McArthur recently called for the government to apologise for the demonisation of climbers in the Grampians, who were falsely accused of putting bolts through Aboriginal art.

Parks Victoria imposed bans at the start of the year, closing an estimated 500sq km to climbing. Climbers have been told penalties of up to \$1.6 million can apply to groups that fail to protect indigenous heritage, such as rock art.

Australian Climbing Association Victoria president Mike Tomkins said climbers were eager to talk to the government.