

Grampians climbing ban came soon after complaint

EXCLUSIVEBy **JOHN FERGUSON**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR12:00AM SEPTEMBER 14, 2019 •  45 COMMENTS

Traditional owners complained about rock climbing in the Grampians National Park just weeks before the Victorian government imposed sweeping bans that have attracted global criticism.

Gunditj Mirring Traditional Owners Aboriginal Corporation demanded an end to climbing in large parts of the park and sought fines for climbers who failed to follow Parks Victoria orders.

The demands are contained in Freedom of Information documents provided to climbers and are the first evidence that Parks Victoria acted after a direct complaint by an indigenous group.

Gunditj Mirring chief executive Damein Bell wrote to Parks Victoria on December 14 last year also recommending a consultation process with rock climbers, which the industry claims never happened in any meaningful way.

Mr Bell called for the government to make an interim protection order over rock-art sites and then opt for a more severe ban.

“First Nations recommends Parks Victoria to restrict access of rock climbers to sites of significance and suggest that users of the area undertake their activity in other appropriate areas within Gariwerd,” he said.

“It is proposed that greater communication between the traditional owner group, Parks Victoria and the rock climbing organisations is required to address this matter holistically.”

Mr Bell’s letter also raised state legislation covering cultural heritage, which carries fines of up to \$1.6m for people or entities responsible for damaging sacred sites.

The government is in turmoil over the handling of the Grampians bans, which were made across an estimated 500sq km without Parks Victoria knowing exactly where climbing was occurring. Parks Victoria is also unsure of where all the cultural heritage sites are in the park.

Another significant issue is that much of the rock art is not visible to the naked eye because it has been severely weathered, neglected, or both. Climbers have offered to work closely with indigenous groups and have vowed that protecting cultural heritage is crucial to their group but claim that Parks Victoria has imposed the huge bans without knowing exactly what it was trying to protect.

Mr Bell urged Parks Victoria to engage with traditional owners throughout the process.

A pioneering Australian climber and photographer, Simon Carter, has accused Parks Victoria of vilifying climbers. “The response to the Freedom of Information request shows that the Gunditj Mirrin wanted to talk with climbing representatives in a constructive way,” he said. Parks Victoria ignored the request and put the bans in place without the consultation requested. Attempts by climbers to set up avenues for constructive dialogue with traditional owners have been continually stymied by Parks Victoria.

“We’ve looked into this extensively and in the 110-plus year history of climbing in the Grampians National Park, we can’t find a single incidence where climbers have damaged visible rock art.”

A Parks Victoria spokeswoman said rock climbing restrictions had been implemented following what she said was increasing incidences of bolting and chalking in cultural heritage places. She said there also had been damage to vegetation near climbing sites.

“There were clear instances of breach of national park regulations and legislation as a result of changes in climbing techniques,” the spokeswoman said.