

# Meeting notes

**Meeting:** Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG) Meeting 4

**Date:** Wednesday 18 November 2020

**Location:** Online meeting due to health restrictions

**Independent Chair:** Mark Dingle (Deloitte)

**Parks Victoria staff:** Stuart Hughes (Director Park Planning and Policy), Josh Chikuse (Manager Park Management Planning), Jason Borg (Director Western Region), Koel Wrigley (Stakeholder Engagement Advisor)

**Parks Victoria observers:** John Pandazopoulos (Parks Victoria Board Chair), Annette Vickery (Parks Victoria Board)

## Participating organisations:

- Victorian National Parks Association
- Outdoors Victoria
- Grampians Tourism
- Bushwalking Victoria
- Rock-climbing Founding Council
- Four Wheel Drive Victoria
- Friends of Grampians Gariwerd
- Horsham Rural City Council
- Southern Grampians Shire Council
- Ararat Rural City Council
- Northern Grampians Shire Council
- Grampians Advisory Group representative
- Aboriginal Victoria

**Apologies:** DELWP FFR Grampians Region

The below meeting notes have been prepared to reflect the major themes of the discussion during the Stakeholder Reference Group (SRG) meeting for the Greater Gariwerd Landscape Draft Management Plan (the plan), and will be made publicly available from <https://engage.vic.gov.au/grampians-management-plan>. Organisations participating in the SRG are encouraged to share meeting notes with their community.

Due to the current health situation, this meeting was run online using Microsoft Teams meetings.

## Meeting purpose

- To provide members of the Stakeholder Reference Group with a detailed understanding of what is included in the Greater Gariwerd Landscape Draft Management Plan and encourage their organisations to make submissions.

### *Welcome and introductions*

- The group was welcomed by Mark Dingle, the independent chair (the chair), and the chair introduced each participant.
- The chair began the meeting by outlining the agenda and purpose of the days meeting. They then recapped the SRG process, where we are in the development of the draft plan and what has been presented/discussed in previous meetings.
- An overview of the activities that have happened since the last SRG meeting (in April) was provided by the Director of Park Planning and Policy, and members were given the opportunity to ask any questions.

### *Presentation outlining the draft Plan including; the vision, chapters, key themes and proposals, and process for public feedback.*

- The Director of Park Planning and Policy provided an overview presentation about the plan and key content. This presentation began by sharing the introduction video from the three Traditional Owners group representatives, and the Area Chief Ranger about the cultural landscape and what they hope for the plan. The video is available on YouTube - <https://youtu.be/8-zpnlAkcuc>
- SRG members were asked if there were any initial questions or comments they wanted to provide about the draft plan. Their comments and questions were:
  - It would be good to see more reference to science-based evidence in the plan alongside Traditional Owner knowledge. Parks Victoria acknowledged that this could be strengthened in the plan's language.
  - A SRG member expressed that they believe this is an exciting draft plan, a long way from 2003. They loved the use of language in the plan, emphasis of Aboriginal knowledge, and the acknowledgement of the long-term connection of people to nature. They believed the plan is quite ambitious in places and hopes it can be achieved. They asked the question - will the plan be adaptable over time, or will we have wait until 15 years to adjust the plan again? The response was that the onus on Parks Victoria is to articulate where we are brushing up on challenges and create a contract with the community that we can make changes through relevant processes.
  - Further clarification was sought about the approach for designating camping. The response was that the plan recognises dispersed camping is having an impact on the landscape. Parks Victoria have done a review of the popular dispersed camping, and they will be made designated (still for free use), but the proposal is that once the project is finalised that camping will have to occur in designated places.
  - A SRG member shared that would like to see some flexibility about adapting management approaches once the plan has changed. They were a little disappointed and would like to see considerations about proactive management of issues rather than reactive – particularly for track development. Would it not be better to do more planning for where the popular places are and make sure there are possible tracks to these places, rather than waiting for informal tracks to develop and then removing them. The response provided was that designating

camping is an example of how Parks Victoria is aiming to achieve proactive management. They also shared that they would like to see mechanisms for consultation included in the strategies to provide ongoing mechanisms for collaboration with representatives from groups. The response was that Parks Victoria have programs, meet with organizations regularly and are always looking for more opportunities to improve engagement. There is also a long-term Grampians Advisory Group and the plan includes strategies about this.

- Further support for ambitious environmental funding recently announced was reiterated by another member especially for the management of National Parks.

#### *Break out discussions.*

- SRG participants were guided to move into to break out groups, to go through the strategies in more detail and have more chance to ask questions in smaller groups. In these groups four topics were discussed:
  - Cultural landscape and Traditional Owner recognition
  - Healthy Environment and fire management
  - Designating camping and rock climbing areas
  - Visitor management and opportunities
- The breakout groups were facilitated by the Director of Park Planning and Policy, and the Manager of Park Policy respectively. The questions and comments from the discussions are shared below grouped by the theme (above) they correspond to.
- **Break out group one:**
  - Cultural landscape and Traditional Owner recognition
    - There is a little a bit of the shock to see the cultural landscape in the centre of the plan – we did not necessarily see that in the first round. Would also like to see the regional culture reflected, and how they work together. For some people a cultural landscape is not only Aboriginal culture.
    - There is a need to bring the community along on the journey with this plan. There will need to be regular dialogue with peak groups about preventing future harm and building more knowledge as we go. The response was that the plan is trying to build the understanding of the longevity of the Aboriginal connection to the landscape. Acknowledging that Gariwerd is probably the most significant cultural place in the state. A long-term vision on this helps to create economic development and tourism opportunities, as well as creating the environment for protection.
    - The plan and this consultation process need to take the community with us. Some of the headlines have immediately set some people off (in reference to Dingos), we need to be careful how we take the community with us on the journey from dispersed to designated camping. One of the things we are doing is putting the community offside straight away and it is upsetting that Parks Victoria and the Grampians are seen in not such a delightful light.
    - To keep the community with us we need to recognise the European heritage of the areas as well.

### Designated camping and rock climbing

- A few years ago the Advisory Group did work to identify all the key dispersed camping spots, approximately 250 of them. Has this detail been considered? In response, that work was used to inform the plan development, however there will be further work to look into that detail.
- The change to camping is a big change, the need to formalise these popular sites is understood, but it is a shame to lose some of the dispersed experience. There are concerns that this may not be the right way to go, especially for hiking, is this approach is too restrictive. The response was that people may not know that they are camping in protected area for example in rock shelters or habitat for an endangered animal. Directing people to designated sites is to make sure people know where they can go and make sure people are not inadvertently camping in places they should not be under zoning or for other protection reasons.
- There are a lot of climbing areas that are not in the current list of 281 areas. The climbing community is working to pull together a list of areas that are missing. There are concerns about the timeline for how Parks Victoria and Traditional Owners are going to get to all of the climbing areas that are not already assessed. Is there a process to identify low hanging fruit, or priorities? The response was that Parks Victoria used the Crag data to tell us where the popular sites were (via ticks) and this was how we determined which sites to assess first in this process. Parks Victoria encourages climbers to provide information about what areas are their priority to assess during this consultation period.
- Feedback was that the climbing areas are too broad, some would like to see smaller areas. The logic is understandable, but it would be good to break that into sectors and include buffers if needed. There is interest in supporting this process and being sympathetic to cultural values.
- Is permit the right term, it creates a sense of creating a barrier? Perhaps it should be more of an educative approach, rather than permit. The response was that the permit is an enabling process, instead of signs all over the landscape. It helps with education and keeping people up to date on what areas climbing can occur and informing them about the conditions that apply.
- Why is a permit proposed for climbers but not other users in the landscape? The response was that not every use has the same likelihood of impact, some activities are static for example, walking where a person walks on one track to and from a destination. Others such as climbing are more dynamic, they involve interacting with rock faces, exploring new routes, and the use of materials such as chalk and protections. For dynamic activities, conditions for use may apply for doing that activity in the landscape. Another example is fishing, where a permit is required. A permit helps us ensure people know about and can abide by these conditions.
- The mechanism of how things are protected, feedback is so far the approaches have been 'blanket'. There is acceptance that there needs to be protection but perhaps there are other mechanisms.

#### Visitor management and opportunities

- Clarification was sought about whether people could go off track when walking. The response was that the plan allows walking off track on the condition that no values are harmed. However, as this is hard for people to know, Parks Victoria encourages people to use established tracks.
- There was concern is that we are over curating the experience for people, being too risk focus. The response was that Parks Victoria want people to use established tracks, this does not mean people can never go off the track to see views etc, but we want to ensure that people do not inadvertently cause harm by going too far of track. The approach in the plan is about minimising harm and risk to values.
- It was shared that there is confusion about the different functions of Brambuk the National Park and Visitor centre, and the Visitor Centre in town. This was acknowledged by Parks Victoria. The intention is that new funding will allow us to adjust what facilities and services are provided in the future at Brambuk, so the functionality can be clearer.
- The Northern Grampians area has increased in use a lot in recent years, it is good to see this partially acknowledged in the plan, but it would be good to see more. For example, how economic development and increased visitation in that area can be supported. The response was that the draft does not get into lots of detail, but it does recognise the need for that planning.
- It was acknowledged, that with new technologies people do not go to Halls Gap for visitor information anymore they source it online from other websites. Therefore it is hard to ensure all visitors have important information about the park and their activities. Parks Victoria agreed with this observation and acknowledges it as a challenge.
- **Break out group two:**
  - Cultural landscape and Traditional Owner recognition
  - Clarification was sought about the proposals to renew Brambuk, as it is such a great building and place. The response was that the plan proposes that Brambuk is managed by Traditional Owners again in the future, Parks Victoria is currently helping with this transition for up to three years. Parks Victoria are about to commence a process of reimagining and redesign of Brambuk for the next 20 years with Traditional Owners. In a recent budget announcement, there has been \$5m designated to its redevelopment so that when it is handed over in three years, it is ready for the Traditional Owners to take ownership.
  - There has not been strong focus in the past on dispersal of information through the other visitor nodes in the Grampians region, other than Halls Gap. Is this an opportunity in the management plan, when strategies and communications are developed that all the nodes are kept in mind including Brambuk.
  - There was agreement that there was a lot of opportunity for Brambuk and renewed education programs in the complex.
  - Healthy Country and fire management
  - The questions were asked does Parks Victoria know where the cinnamon fungus is in the landscape, and should the community let Parks know when they see weeds. The response

- was yes, Parks Victoria have an indication about where these weeds and issues are, we also work with volunteer groups to get more information, and welcome community information.
- The fire management component and the reintroduction for fire stick burning with Traditional Owners needs a local resource. The response was that Parks Victoria agreed that the plan is only reinforcing the existing strategies for managing fire now and into the future. The plan recognises the DELWP fire strategy. One of the things is cultural burning is new to a lot of us. Cultural burning is different across the country and it needs to be managed differently depending on the landscape. These questions are more operational, we are working with DELWP on this, but the management plan is more strategic.
  - We liked the overall strategy but were unsure about the the on-ground implementation of it, which is hard to understanding in a management plan. In the past there has been large scale fire resources coming from all over the state which was cumbersome and did not always get the desired results. They believe management of fire by locals that is highly resourced is far more effective.
  - Feedback was given that it would be good to clearly specify the areas where firewood can be collected in a table in the plan.

#### Visitor management and opportunities

- The plan encourages walking on tracks and there were concerns about that. For example, this is very different to the Alpine National Park, and not allowing walking other than defined tracks tends to run into problems where there are vast areas of rocks where people do walks e.g. Hollow Mountain where you can stroll for long distances on solid rock. Does the plan need to more clearly articulate what planned tracks means. The response was yes it does encourage walking on planned tracks, we want to hear your concerns and thoughts on this as part of the feedback on the plan.
- The comment was made that the Alpine National Park is very different, and it is a matter of nuance and language, 10 years ago walking was allowed off track, but it was always recommended to walk on track. You can get positive results there is a need to nuance it a bit and encourage people to stay on tracks.
- Further support was given by other SRG members for recommending people walk on track when bushwalking.
- The response to bushwalking concerns was that Parks Victoria welcomes everyone's formal submission on the management plan. With walking off and on track, it is a delicate balance. The park is there primarily for the protection of fauna, flora and cultural heritage. With increased visitors, there needs to be some effort to protect these values. The main driver is to ensure the park is protected for the next 50 years. With Grampians Peaks Trail investment, there will be a couple of new day walks in the South. There is a lot investment in the central corridor, but significant work is happening across the entire landscape.
- There was discussion about the inclusion of the Rocklands and other areas that have experience increased visitation. They believed there was significant issues with visitor dispersal, however the the plan appears to be focussed on MacKenzie Falls and Halls Gap. They thought it would be good to have a North and South experience to help with visitor

dispersal. The response was that the plan does propose strategies for visitor experiences in the Northern and Southern Grampians including to work with councils to manage this.

#### Designated camping and rock climbing

- The plan suggests that six more campgrounds on the Grampians Peak Trail might have huts in the future. The concern was that one hand the plan discourages people from walking off the tracks, but then there could be clearing land for huts. The response was there are six huts going into two campsites for the Grampians Peaks Trail (three each). These huts are placed on a tent pad sized platform, so it is not an expansion of the footprint of the overall campsite. In the future there would be a lot of work to assess the suitability of any future huts.
- A member pointed out that two of the proposed designated camping areas are in open redgum areas and they believe these would be strong sites for cultural heritage. They will provide formal feedback about wanting to ensure that a further problem is not created by formalising these sites.
- There was discussion about designated climbing areas. Key points were:
  - Should new climbing areas be set up given other climbing areas are being closed.
  - Sites that are only accessible via Licensed Tour Operators, should other groups such as TAFE's and school groups be able to access these areas if they pass the same conditions.
  - There is a likelihood of hundreds of bolts in Gariwerd that will need to be cleared up and there is a need for a clear process around that.
  - There is only one all abilities climbing area in the Gariwerd which is in Summerday Valley which is designated LTO only. Should there be plans to find an alternative that does not require paying to use a guide.
  - The response was that Parks Victoria welcomes these suggestions in the feedback on the submissions, including ideas for processes to clean up bolts and alternative all access climbing routes.
- A question was asked about what 'possible climbing areas' meant and will these areas be assessed before the conclusion of the plan. The response was that possible climbing areas, are areas the plan acknowledges where climbing occurs, but have not yet been assessed. In the future following assessments and decisions they will become either a climbing area, no climbing area or LTO only climbing area. Before that assessment is completed climbing cannot occur. They will not be completed before the final plan, assessments will continue in the future as resources allow.
- Following the break out discussions participants returned to the main room for a wrap up.

#### *Wrap up and actions for next meeting*

- The next meeting is planned for March or April 2021. This will be once the feedback from submissions has been prepared and possible amendments are being considered.
- The chair thanked participants and closed the meeting.