

PARKS BOSS GOES, REVIEW ORDERED

The Allan government's destruction of the state's globally significant rock climbing industry over cultural heritage bans has cost the Parks Victoria boss his job and forced an independent review into the organisation's failures and future.

For five years Parks Victoria chief executive Matthew Jackson rubber-stamped a secretive process that destroyed Victoria's reputation as a world destination for rock climbing and pitted First Nations people against outdoors enthusiasts.

Facing an electoral backlash over access to public land, the government announced on Thursday that Mr Jackson would leave Parks Victoria "by mutual agreement" and that consultants KordaMentha would assist with a wide-ranging review. The review will focus on Parks Victoria's priorities, the legislation that oversees it, administration, finances and functions, in what promises to lead to a root-and-branch overhaul of the way it has functioned.

Environment Minister Steve Dimopoulos, who has been severely embarrassed by the crisis, said the review would be finished by March 2025, suggesting the government already has answers to many of the questionings hanging over the organisation.

The minister accepted Parks Victoria was failing its objectives.

"It's clear that Parks Victoria's current operations need to be improved to meet community expectations," he said.

"I have therefore ordered a comprehensive review of Parks Victoria, to advise how the organisation can better serve the needs of Victorians and help them enjoy the great outdoors.

"The review will focus on Parks Victoria's priorities, the delivery of its objectives under the Parks Victoria Act 2018, the organisation's administration, finances, functions and delivery model – to identify ways the organisation can reduce red-tape, improve customer service, and deliver better outcomes for Victorians. 'The review will be completed by March 2025, and will be overseen by the Victorian government with the support of Korda Mentha.

"As part of this process, Matthew Jackson, the CEO of Parks Victoria, has

departed his position by mutual agreement and I wish him well.”

The review has exposed tricky issues for the government, which is negotiating a treaty with First Nations groups and now an expectation that fairness will be injected into the process of analysing cultural heritage impacts.

Graeme Dear has been appointed interim CEO of Parks Victoria.

Australian Climbing Association Victoria treasurer Mike Tomkins said Parks Victoria had overseen a debacle.

“We are finally going to get some transparency over the debacle that has affected the Grampians and Arapiles,” he said.

“Parks Victoria has used the parks as their own private state.”

Climbing Victoria spokesman Mike Rockell said it had been poorly handled.

“It’s a very pleasing development and it didn’t need to come to this,” he said. “They’ve failed to consult, they’ve wilfully decided not to consult with us.”

Local MP Emma Kealy, the Nationals deputy leader, said Parks Victoria had wrongly accused climbers of heritage damage, including placing a bolt through rock art.

“Parks Victoria’s consultation process surrounding future access to the Grampians and Mount Arapiles has been completely botched,” she said.

The announcement was made after The Australian asked a series of questions to Parks Victoria about its broken relationship with Climbing Victoria, which was its chosen climbing group.

Climbing Victoria spokesman Mike Rockell said the group had recently rejected an approach from Parks Victoria for talks after the organisation had overseen a process that led to more than half of Mount Arapiles being shut down.

Mr Rockell said Climbing Victoria had met with Parks Victoria in the weeks before the bans were announced but were told by the government authority that an announcement may not come until 2025. Parks Victoria did not reveal to Climbing Victoria the extent of the bans being considered, he said.

Parks Victoria then soon after announced the bans, which have rocked the climbing world and sparked concerns they will destroy the economy of the small town of Natimuk, which services Arapiles, also known as Dyurrite.

Mr Rockell said: “They (Parks Victoria) have contacted us lately and we

rejected it.’

“We didn’t think the timing was right, we know what the nature of the meeting would be.”

Climbing Victoria is the umbrella organisation backed by Parks Victoria to negotiate over moves to gut the rock climbing industry in western Victoria.

Parks Victoria was unhappy with the backlash over bans at the Grampians National Park, largely made during the pandemic, and moved to cut adrift its most strident critics.

Before climbing took hold at Arapiles more than 50 years ago, the area was in a state of environmental disrepair, having been used as a rifle range and for grazing. Old photographs show the extent to which the area was degraded and then revitalised over the decades, under the watch of climbers.

Climbing Victoria has written to members, warning it does not believe the amended management plan at Arapiles is fit for use and says it is “deeply flawed”.

“The process to create the amended plan was deeply flawed as there was no consultation with key stakeholders and no economic impact assessment was carried out,” it said.

“Without input from all key stakeholders, the plan is deficient in solutions that can lead to better outcomes. Key stakeholders not consulted are the climbing community, and the local community.

“Failure to engage with key stakeholders is a failure of one of the core tenets of a democratic society. The amended plan is not fit for use. It contains large sections from the previous plan published in 1991 (33 years ago), which are now rendered irrelevant, obsolete, misleading and confusing.”

In 2019, the Victorian government began gutting climbing in the area, first with the Grampians National Park which has significant rock art cultural heritage.

But Parks Victoria used false, misleading or unverifiable evidence to claim harm was committed by rock climbers, including the incorrect claim that rock art had been damaged by a bolt inserted by climbers. Parks Victoria was contacted for comment.

Cultural heritage is collated on a database called the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Register and Information System, and is the online portal of the Victorian Aboriginal Heritage Register.

While there are restrictions on access, a wide group of people are still able

to see where heritage has been pinpointed. Climbers want to be sure that the bans have been placed legitimately but there is virtually no way of knowing because of the secrecy provisions.

In 2020, Parks Victoria announced it had rediscovered quarry sites, artefact scatters and rock art at Arapiles.

It claims there are dozens of motifs in charcoal and red ochre, including a decorated oval reminiscent of designs painted on Aboriginal shields.

Horsham Rural City Council is seeking a three-month extension to the consultation process over the new management plan at Mount Arapiles, which guts climbing and restricts access.