

LCC SW, District 2 – 1979 comment on base report

SUBMISSION FOR THE FUTURE MANAGEMENT OF MT. ARAPILES.

INTRODUCTION AND HISTORY

Our recommendations for the future management of Mount Arapiles are based on the changes in the intensity of the use for recreation and also the management of this area over the past fifteen years.

The increase in popularity of this area since 1963 has been due almost entirely to the sport of rockclimbing. The first climbs were done in 1963, and in those days Mount Arapiles was occasionally visited by small parties of climbers, and also by local people who came for picnics. Facilities for the use of visitors were minimal, but adequate for day trippers. There was no camping in the area by local people, but the climbers came from Melbourne, and they came for the whole weekend. After a year or two, the numbers of climbers visiting the area had increased a great deal. The fenced plantation and the area under the pine trees immediately to the east of this were used as sites for tents. It soon became obvious that a greater input of management was necessary in order to look after the area.

The Management of Mount Arapiles was taken over by the Forests Commission of Victoria (FCV), who designated it as a Forest Park. An early move in the management of the park was to remove sheep from this area. The old shelter shed with its rainwater tank was replaced with a new shed, a large concrete water tank and an elaborate toilet block with septic sewerage. The area thus became attractive to a wider range of people interested in camping. The fence surrounding the pine plantation was removed, and several rows of trees within this area were cut down, thus permitting access into this plantation by cars.

In 1963 there was a very rough track that gave vehicular access to the area north of the entrance to Centenary Park as far as the rifle butts of the Natimuk rifle range. This track was often used by visitors who wished to inspect the area from their cars. It was impassable in wet weather due to the soft soil. Climbers who preferred to drive to the base of the cliffs also made a few tracks, both uphill from the track to the rifle range and also up to the rock formation known as the Organ Pipes immediately west of the pine plantation. Both these tracks were re-graded in 1970, and a large drain was constructed on the west side of the track to the rifle butts. This drain concentrated water that flowed from the slopes above and resulted in considerable erosion. Because of the rocky terrain, run-off is very rapid following rain, and the sandy soil is prone to erosion. The access road, from the Natimuk-Edenhope road and also the road to the summit were sealed. There has also been an extension of access tracks on the western side of the area, beyond the golf course.

The vegetation on the lower slopes of the area was in a poor condition when the Forests Commission took over management of the park. The area was continuously grazed by sheep, and plant cover consisted mainly of sparse annual grasses, trefoil, capeweed and erodium.

There has been a steady improvement in the vegetative cover on the scree slopes east of the main cliffs since grazing ceased. The annual species are gradually being replaced with native perennial grasses, herbs and shrubs, the increase in abundance of Themeda Australis being most marked. Shrubs such as emu heath and cranberry heath are also now in evidence.

The absence of grazing has also permitted the remarkable recovery of this area following the devastating fire in December 1972. The thick stands of young wattles and gum trees would never have developed to the same extent if grazing animals had been present. Clearly, grazing by sheep presented the greatest hazard to the area from an aesthetic point of view, which is of significance in an area so obviously suited to recreation, and it is to the credit of the Forests Commission that they realized this and revoked the grazing licences. The recovery of the ground flora is almost certain to also have resulted in a similar change in the fauna of the area.

The FCV also sensibly realized that campers would soon burn firewood quicker than the area could provide in the form of dead timber, and have done a good job in providing an adequate supply of firewood for campers.

Other inputs by the FCV have been the planting of wattles on the slope west of the pines, and the signposting of two or three walking tracks, and the closing of the rifle range.

PRESENT CONDITION AND MANAGEMENT

a) Flora and Fauna.

The general condition of the flora at Mount Arapiles is probably better than it has been since grazing by sheep severely changed the nature of the ground vegetation. Checking with people who remembered the now grassy eastern slopes as a slope with shrubs and trees confirms this. Since the last fire, once rare plants have been found in relative abundance for example, Anthoceris frondosa and Howittia trilocularis. Recovery of some plants, since the fire, however, has not been as satisfactory, for example Eriostemon verrucosus and the various Callitris species. The flora at this area is also interesting many rare and endangered species are to be found. A list produced for the FCV by Dr. J. Willis includes Anthoceris frondosa, Eucalyptus odorata, Prostanthera spinosa, Psilotum nudum, Quinetia urvillei, Scirpus congruus, Senecio hypoleucus and Stipa macalpinei.

Vegetation on the cliffs has also recovered well since the fire. Plants here include Goodenia ovata, Prostanthera rotundifolia, and Epacris impressa which are common and widespread. Of outstanding importance, however, are the tree ferns growing in south-facing clefts in the large gully to the north west of the present camping area. These are of significance because they probably are the driest habitat for Dicksonia antarctica in the state, and perhaps Australia. These ferns receive no mention in the L.C.C. report. Their presence is due to the microenvironment provided by the steep south-facing clefts which channel in moisture and protect the ferns from the sun. These plants could well be relics of a vegetation that has survived since the climate became more arid.

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Although large fauna, for example the grey kangaroo, red necked wallaby and potaroo have been reported, these animals are now rarely seen. The increase in the number of visitors during the past fifteen years has probably been responsible for this.

b) The impact of visitors.

Because of its dry climate, sound rock and easy access, Mount Arapiles will continue to be a popular area for climbers. Rock climbing does not have much impact on the environment, as the activity is confined to bare rock which is in any case inaccessible to all but climbers and some of the fauna. Concern has been expressed about climbers disturbing peregrine falcons by climbing near their nesting sites. Members of this club have also witnessed the thoughtless interference with the nests of rainbow bee eaters which used to nest in the sandy creek bank immediately north of the camping area. The holes leading to the nesting chambers were filled with sticks some years ago, and this site has now been abandoned. Problems such as these are symptomatic of a lack of adequate supervision of the area.

A significant threat to the area is the motor-car and off-road type vehicle, as despite laws to the contrary, many people cannot resist the "challenge" of driving up steep slopes as far and as fast as possible. Some sightseers and climbers will continue to use their cars to gain access to the cliffs in order to avoid walking from the camping area. The Australian Army use the area for training Commandos and soldiers are driven right up to the Organ Pipes in heavy trucks, with a military ambulance in attendance.

To cater for a demand of vehicular access to these areas will require a continual maintenance of tracks and perhaps even an up-grading of the present system of access tracks. This we feel to be totally unacceptable; indeed, the present tracks already present an erosion hazard because of their drains and also because of the wheel tracks themselves. The track on the west of the plantation goes straight up a steep hill! The increased development of tracks in the area north of the golf course also presents an unnecessary threat to the vegetation here by encouraging the over-use of cars. It should be remembered that the 1972 fire was caused by a vehicle with a faulty exhaust.

The proposed observatory should increase all the problems associated with increased visitors, and also introduce new ones such as an increase in picnicing in the summit area. There could well be problems associated with waste-disposal and run off. This will almost certainly lead to more favourable environment for the growth of exotic weeds. An inspection of the effluent soakage area of the new toilet block at the camping site confirms this. The observatory, however, will be in the centre of the park, a highly undesirable place for a developing weed colony. It seems curious that Mount Arapiles should still be considered for this purpose after it was rejected in favour of the site in the Warrumbungle Mountains.

c) Management.

The present input of management is barely adequate to cope with the number of visitors using the area. A ranger visits the area once a week. This is sufficient to remove rubbish and supply firewood, but little else. The extent of vermin control appears to be poorer than it was some years ago, and a few thriving warrens of rabbits are to be found beneath the cliffs south of the camping area. These are of course a potential threat to the flora and also to the sandy slopes where they are situated, due to the likelihood of erosion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

a) Roads.

It is our opinion that the future managers, whoever they may be, have a responsibility to preserve this fragile but steadily improving area by taking the obvious step of closing completely all vehicular tracks that allow access by cars to all areas north, south and west of the present camping area. Drains should be filled in, and the area allowed to revegetate completely. It seems strange that the FCV lost sight of the fact that once the rifle range was closed there was no longer any need for vehicular access at all. Similarly, access to the area beyond the present golf course should be restricted by closing some of the new tracks that have been made in recent years. Access here should be provided by a single track located just inside the western boundary of the park. This should be upgraded to permit easy access for fire fighting vehicles should they be needed.

b) Camping.

The camping area at Centenary Park should be fenced with either a wire or log fence so as to restrict cars to a definite parking area. Cars should also be excluded from the pine plantation, as there is increasing damage to surface vegetation, and the potential for erosion in the wheel marks (the plantation is on a moderate slope) is increasing all the time. No further camping sites should be permitted, in any case it would be expensive to provide water, but the main reasons are the additional risks of fire, difficulty in supervision and damage to soil and vegetation due to traffic. Picnic sites on the road to the summit should be closed. These areas simply create an unnecessary litter problem which is offensive to visitors and also there is a fire-risk. The eventual provision of full-time supervision at the camping area during weekends is highly desirable.

c) The proposed telescope.

We are not in favour of this, mainly because we feel that it is simply not necessary. A perfectly adequate telescope exists for Australian astronomers at Siding Springs Mountain. We also feel that the observatory could result in considerable disturbance to vegetation.

If the observatory attracts many more visitors, it would place an unreasonable burden on the managing authority, which would have to direct most of its resources to cope with problems generated by these extra visitors instead of managing the rest of the area. Day trippers who come to visit the

observatory are not as likely to treat this rather fragile area as sympathetically as those who come in order to walk on the tracks, climb on the cliffs, or to explore the wide range of plants and animals that abound.

d) The preservation of fauna and flora should continue. Fencing off the camping area and permitting access into the area beyond by means of a stile (as in National Parks in Wales) could mean that large fauna such as grey kangaroo, the red necked wallaby and the emu could be managed in the park. The problem of conflict between climbing and the nesting of birds on the cliffs should be a simple one to resolve, provided that there is communication between the managing authority and the various climbing clubs. It would be a simple matter to put various climbs out of bounds during the appropriate seasons. An increased feed-back of information between naturalists climbers and the future managers would be of benefit to all concerned.

e) Legislation should be passed to make it impossible for any mining, gravel extraction or quarrying to be carried out. We feel that Mount Arapiles could equally well be reserved as a state park or Fauna and Flora Reserve managed by either the FCV or the National Parks Service, but that the managing authority whoever it is should be urged to implement the suggestions outlined above. This will ensure that the area will continue in its present state as a place of outstanding beauty, both of its natural features and also its wildlife and plants.

We think that Mount Arapiles is too small to be a National Park. The damage to the camping area by climbers alone during the recent years has demonstrated that the area will not support a huge increase in visitors satisfactorily.

f) Elevating the area to the status of a National Park may not be a good idea, as it will almost certainly cause a new large increase in visitors. Most of these people's requirements would be better met in the larger areas of National Parks in the Little Desert or the Grampians (See our submission here also). It would be better for the future of Mount Arapiles if the increase in visitors associated with National Parks (c.f. the Mt. Eccles park) did not happen, as this would seriously increase the problems outlined above, the management of this area would be very difficult, and the opportunity that at present exists for the area to return to something resembling its pristine condition would be lost forever.