

The Planner,  
Lord Howe Island Board  
PO Box 5  
Lord Howe Island NSW 2898

**SUBMISSION BY THE CANBERRA CLIMBERS ASSOCIATION ON  
THE LORD HOWE ISLAND PERMANENT PARK PRESERVE  
DRAFT PLAN OF MANAGEMENT, JANUARY 2009**

Dear Sir,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Lord Howe Island Permanent Park Preserve Draft Plan of Management.

The Canberra Climbers Association (CCA) represents recreational rock climbers generally based in the ACT. As most rock climbing areas in Australia are located within National Parks, State Forests and Nature Reserves the CCA has a particular interest in the Management of these resources. The CCA has endeavoured to develop open and collaborative relationships with all Land Managers to further the interests of recreational rock climbers as well as providing a venue for Land Managers to raise their concerns about management issues within their jurisdiction. Recently CCA members have assisted Namadgi National Park staff by undertaking risk assessments of climbing areas (cliffs) affected by the Canberra bushfires and by participating in working bees to upgrade and improve access tracks to some of the climbing areas. We have also made written submissions on Draft Plans of Management for the Kosciuszko National Park, Namadgi National Park and Mount Scabby Nature Reserve.

The CCA knows that rock climbers have a deep love and understanding of the aesthetic, environmental and cultural values that underpin the fundamental reasons for establishing a Park or Preserve. Climbers particularly appreciate the adventure and wild beauty that mountains and cliffs evoke and the wonderful pleasure and personal satisfaction that comes from travelling through vertical terrain.

Please find enclosed our submission.

Yours faithfully,

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26 June 2009  
Enclosure:

1. Lord Howe Island Permanent Park Preserve Draft Plan of Management.  
Submission by the Canberra Climbers' Association

# **Lord Howe Island Permanent Park Preserve Draft Plan of Management Submission by the Canberra Climbers Association**

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## **Introduction**

Rock climbing as an adventure pursuit is relatively new in Australia but has been practised world wide, particularly in Europe and North America for hundreds of years. Rock climbing and abseiling, derivatives of mountaineering, have evolved into highly technical activities that cater for all levels of ability and skill. Over recent decades, the sport has seen progressive improvements in techniques and equipment that have significantly enhanced safety and reduced the risk of injury or death.

Balls Pyramid is the tallest sea stack in the world (Section 4.1, paragraph 2, page 9). It is also an icon for Australian rock climbing and recognised by rock climbers around the world. It is an obvious challenge for adventurous rock climbers involving difficult access, multi-pitch climbing, self-sufficiency, competence, physical fitness, stamina and endurance. Our increasingly sedentary lifestyle means society needs to embrace and encourage these types of challenges and many National Parks urge visitors to undertake recreational activities that present and develop these highly regarded personnel attributes.

## **Brief History of Rock Climbing on Balls Pyramid**

After a number of failed attempts by various teams from Sydney, a party of rock climbers from the Sydney Rockclimbing Club eventually reached the summit of Balls Pyramid in 1965. Their ascent was along the south ridge. A few years later another party of rock climbers, also from the Sydney Rockclimbing Club, reached the summit via the north ridge. Members of the Sydney Rockclimbing Club again organised trips to climb the east and west faces, with mixed success. It is the ridge climbs that are now regarded as the best routes on Balls Pyramid providing striking lines, fabulous exposure (the feeling of height above the ground), spectacular climbing and stunning scenery. Balls Pyramid has received a number of repeat ascents since those initial exploratory climbs including a traverse (up the south ridge and down the north ridge) by a small party of two climbers and a solo ascent. However in the mid 80's access to Balls Pyramid was abruptly banned and all climbing ceased.

It was during one of the earlier failed climbing attempts that Dr Dave Roots discovered a dead Lord Howe Island phasmid and reported the find to the relevant authorities. Up until then the phasmid was thought to be extinct following the introduction of rats to the other islands in the Lord Howe Island group.

## **Comments on the Draft Plan of Management**

### **Section 4.5 CULTURAL HERITAGE**

#### **Cultural Significance of Rock Climbing on Balls Pyramid**

Rock climbing on Balls Pyramid occurred over a twenty-year period and as such is a significant activity in relation to other forms of human activity in the Lord Howe

Island Group. However the climber's impact was negligible compared to other human activities. They didn't release pests, introduce exotic plants or trees or leave permanent structures. Rock climbing is a low impact activity. During this period the climbers developed relationships with local residents and received advice, support and assistance in undertaking expeditions to Balls Pyramid.

### Recommendation

Rock climbing activity on Balls Pyramid should be acknowledged as a legitimate low impact cultural activity. Recognition can be provided by way of an exhibit at the Museum to which climbers would be happy to contribute material.

### **Section 6.3 RECREATION OPPORTUNITIES**

(Paragraph 6, page 34)

**“Recreational rock climbing is prohibited on Balls Pyramid and on areas above walking tracks (e.g. on the cliff above the Lower Road). Elsewhere on the island it requires permission from the Board or the services of a licensed guide.”**

The CCA is of the view that there is no reason to ban rock climbing on Balls Pyramid. In other National Parks throughout Australia recreational rock climbing is a legitimate adventure activity that is consistent with the values of the Park. Balls Pyramid is different to other climbing areas in that access is difficult and a trip there requires significant organization, which is expected to act as a deterrent for many climbers. Nevertheless this style of climbing, of passing through a vertical wilderness discovering its richness and diversity along the way and leaving no sign of your presence, is the very essence of adventure climbing that Balls Pyramid offers.

Although climbing as a recreational activity is enjoying increased participation there is only a small sub-group within the climbing community that would have the necessary specialist equipment and skills for such an undertaking. The numbers in this sub-group, known as 'traditional' or 'adventure' climbers, are static or reducing and the main growth in recreational climbing is confined to 'sport' climbing as practiced at indoor climbing walls and roadside, single pitch cliffs. Balls Pyramid is an adventure climber's destination where all anchors are temporarily placed then removed on completion of the climb with no damage to the rock or vegetation. This style of climbing is very attuned to preserving and maintaining the environment in its natural state. The CCA does not expect a flood of applications if and when the ban on climbing Balls Pyramid is lifted.

Climbing ethics dictate that if a party is on a climbing route, then the party that was first there has the 'right' to climb the route alone. In essence, this means that climbers appreciate the need to minimise traffic on a route at any particular time. This is done to not only respect that the group climbing is able to enjoy the isolation and beauty unencumbered by other parties, but also from a practical perspective so that roped parties do not impede each other.

Accordingly, the CCA believes that it is not necessary to have a permit system, as climbers by convention will not climb on a route that has another party on it. However, the CCA is also comfortable with the introduction of a permit system as a

means of ensuring that there is no more than one party on a single route at any one time.

### Recommendations.

- The climbing ban on Balls Pyramid be lifted.
- If necessary, a permit system can be introduced to reduce the potential of multiple parties being on a single route at any time.

The CCA believes the use of a licensed guide from Lord Howe Island would not be beneficial. Technical rock climbing requires specialist knowledge and skills that the average tourist guide, no matter how well intentioned, does not possess. Furthermore a climbing team needs to be familiar with the equipment and other member's abilities so that the climbing process is accomplished safely, smoothly and as effortlessly as possible. A stranger in the team would be unable to contribute to the team and could become a liability that threatens the success of the venture.

### Recommendation

A licensed guide is not required for technical rock climbing

**“No applications for rock climbing have been received in recent times and it is generally believed that the geology of most cliff faces are too unstable to permit safe climbing”.**

The statement is misleading and wrong. It is misleading to suggest that rock climbers are not interested in climbing Balls Pyramid. It is widely known within rock climbing circles that climbing on Balls Pyramid is banned and any application to climb there will be refused. As a result no applications were made.

It is also wrong to suggest the cliffs are too unstable to permit “safe” climbing. The cited references (Section 10) indicate that no such study has been carried to support the claim. As well, the Draft Plan of Management does not define what is “safe” or “unsafe”. It implies that there is a defined threshold between the two. Accordingly, it would appear that the statement is merely an opinion, not a fact. The evidence from experienced climbers who have climbed there is to the contrary.

Interestingly, studies done by the UK Government Health and Safety Executive<sup>1</sup> have identified that the risk of death in rock climbing is 1: 320,000 climbs. The risk of death in Scuba diving is 1:200,000 dives. Based on these statistics, it would appear that scuba diving, a recreational activity permitted in the Lord Howe Region, is a far riskier activity than rock climbing, but it is not banned.

The CCA acknowledges that some cliffs on Lord Howe Island may be unsuitable for rock climbing but an encompassing statement that most cliffs in the Lord Howe Island group are believed unstable is unsubstantiated.

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<sup>1</sup> UK Health and Safety Executive, Reducing Risks Protecting People, 2001 p71

(Paragraph 7, page 34)

In the discussion about adventure activities it is stated “...**the Board and island residents have limited capacity to rescue injured visitors in the remoter sections of the preserve, and therefore restrictions are required on these activities**”.

There has never been a rock climbing accident on Balls Pyramid. In the extremely unlikely event that a rock climber was injured the responsibility for rescue would initially fall on other members of the climbing team, who incidentally have the equipment and skills to bring an injured climber down to water level. It is standard procedure for adventure rock climbers to initiate self-rescue as rescue-skills are a critical and underpinning skill for those that venture into remote localities.

If outside assistance was required, the standard procedure is followed, namely to notify police who have responsibility to coordinate rescue. It would be envisaged that in most situations, climbers would lower the injured climber to sea –level where a vessel could be brought into evacuate the injured climber back to Lord Howe Island. This is normal practice and no different to what occurs in many other National Parks. For example, a rescue in the Warrambungles National Park, which has large cliffs and is a similar distance from Sydney as Lord Howe Island would attract similar logistical and coordination issues as Lord Howe Island.

A reasonable risk control measure that could be instigated for Balls Pyramid would be to recommend that party sizes should be between 4-6 climbers. This would enable a critical mass to self-rescue with a lower chance of recourse for outside help.

#### Recommendations.

- Lord Howe Island residents are not expected to have the capacity to rescue injured rock climbers on Balls Pyramid and a lack of capacity is no reason to ban climbing there, as other established rescue options are available.
- One prudent risk control measure could be to recommend that the party size be between 4-6 climbers.

#### **Section 6.4 CAMPING**

Rock climbers understand and respect the reasons for a ban on camping on Lord Howe Island. However, climbing Balls Pyramid will usually take two days and require a bivouac somewhere on the climb. A bivouac is nothing more than stopping on a ledge when it gets dark, putting on some warm clothes and moving on when the sun comes up. A shelter, such as a tent, and elaborate camping equipment, such as tables and chairs, would not be used. It is simply too heavy and cumbersome to carry. Climbers normal modus operandi is to travel with only what is necessary and if a overnight is required, it is done by establishing a bivouacs with minimal impact on the environment.

#### Recommendation

Bivouacs on Balls Pyramid are permitted.

## Section 4.4.2 Invertebrate Fauna

It was a rock climber who first discovered an exoskeleton of the endemic Lord Howe Island phasmid and alerted the scientific community to the possibility that a colony of this previously thought extinct stick insect lived on Balls Pyramid. It is widely believed that the climbing ban was placed to protect the phasmid. Since then much has been learned about the phasmid and its habitat.

Priddel et al. 2003 reports that the phasmid occupies a micro-habit measuring 30m x 6m on the east face of Balls Pyramid and has been observed feeding at night on one species, *Melaleuca howeana*. Knowing that Balls Pyramid is largely bare rock the microhabitat for the phasmid is extremely unusual being a combination of damp conditions, a large shrub and lush vegetation. Careful examination of air photos has not revealed any other likely patches of habitat. There is only one known location of the Lord Howe Island phasmid on Balls Pyramid.

The identified habitat of the phasmid is nowhere near the rock climbing routes on Balls Pyramid. Therefore rock climbers cannot accidentally or unknowingly disturb or damage the habitat of the phasmid while climbing Balls Pyramid.

Recently a captive breeding programme has been undertaken at Melbourne Zoo and we understand insect numbers have now increased to over 800. These measures have been successful in securing the immediate survival of the species and providing numbers for re-introduction back to the Lord Howe Island group. However preparing suitable sites for re-introduction needs to be given a higher priority than currently indicated in Section 9-Plan Implementation. It appears inconsistent to list **“Implement recovery action and threat abatement works consistent with the Lord Howe Island Biodiversity Management Plan”** as high priority yet give low priority to **“Investigate the feasibility of using Blackburn Island as a release site of the Lord Howe Island phasmid”**.

### Recommendation

The success of the captive breeding programme and the identification of the only known habitat away from rock climbing routes means that it is unreasonable to cite preservation of the phasmid as the reason to ban rock climbing on Balls Pyramid. Establishment of suitable release sites on Lord Howe Island and its outer islands must be given the highest priority.

## Section 6.1 ACCESS

(Page 30, Strategies)

**“Investigate the feasibility of cost recovery for search and rescue operations where access restrictions have not been followed”**

Nowhere in Australia are search and rescue operations the responsibility of the National Park Service and the CCA’s view that it is not in the Boards interest to take on this added responsibility when satisfactory procedures are already in place. Whether an incident occurs on land, at sea or in the air the responsibility for initiating

a search or rescue operation begins with the police, the State Emergency Services and/or the Australian Search and Rescue. These organizations have developed action plans, methodologies and contacts to rapidly respond to any type of incident.

Additionally, climbers who undertake adventure climbing in remote areas are experienced climbers with the all round skills to manage an emergency. Undertaking such an adventure is self-selecting in that only climbers with the resources and the experience will take on a higher level of risk.

Seeking recovery action for search and rescue is punitive and discriminatory against one set of Park users and is a blunt instrument if it is intended to deter climbers. The CCA believes that a better approach is to establish guidelines that lay the foundation for each party to adopt prudent risk management measures. The CCA is happy to work with Parks in developing these. As an example, some common means used in some Parks overseas include:

- Party sizes between 4-6 to allow sufficient personnel to effect self rescue.
- Party to have effective communication between Balls Pyramid and support boat on Lord Howe Island.
- Party to have rescue insurance (noting that this is not customary in Australia but does occur in parts of the USA eg Mt Hood in Oregon).

#### Recommendation.

- The Board does not become involved with the responsibility for Search and Rescue operations within the Preserve in which case this strategy can be deleted.
- If required, the Board in consultation with climbers should consider other risk management strategies.

#### **A New Era**

Organising a climbing trip to Balls Pyramid is a big undertaking but the rewards and the experience are equally big. This is why Balls Pyramid is such an icon for adventurous Australian rock climbers.

The CCA is also aware of the responsibilities the Board has in relation to its World Heritage Listing and the need to conserve the natural environment. Rock climbers understand and appreciate the natural environment in all its diversity but obtain a particular joy from the vertical world. The Board will find that rock climbers are very sympathetic to the goals and aspirations of the Board as generally outlined in the Draft Plan of Management.

The CCA would support the introduction of a permit system for climbing Balls Pyramid. Such a system would allow the Board to monitor the impact of climbers on the environment, provide accurate data on visitations and level of interest and allow feed back from rock climbers about their experience and other issues that could impact on the amenity and long term conservation of Balls Pyramid.

The CCA supports lightweight low impact traditional style climbing on Balls Pyramid. We believe party size should be limited to a maximum of six persons. Climbing Balls Pyramid is expected to take 2-3 days however we believe each team should be allowed seven days in case heavy seas or wet weather mean access either on or off Balls Pyramid is not possible on some days.

The CCA believes commercial tour operators should not be issued with permits to climb Balls Pyramid. Commercial tour operators by their very nature cater to inexperienced clients and our view is that Balls Pyramid is not a place for inexperienced climbers.

**References:**

Priddel D., N Carlile, M Humphrey, S Fellenberg & D Hiscox (2003). Rediscovery of the 'extinct' Lord Howe Island stick-insect (*Dryococelus australis* (Montrouzier))(plasmatoidea) and recommendations for its conservation. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 12(7):1391-1403.

UK Health and Safety Executive, Reducing Risks Protecting People, 2001