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Rock Climbing at Blue Lake: Comment from the Canberra Climbers Association on the recommendations in the draft plan of management of the Kosciuszko National Park.

**1. Introduction**

Blue Lake is a long established climbing venue in the Kosciuszko National Park (KNP) with written records going back 40 years. Climbers there follow 'traditional' climbing practices, using no fixed bolts or pitons, as the rock structure is particularly suitable for modern, non-destructive methods of climbing protection. Current fashions in climbing are seeing a movement away from the traditional style of climbing practised at Blue Lake and present indications are that this drift will continue. Combined with the relatively long walk to Blue Lake, this is almost certainly responsible for a reduction in the number of climbers using the cliffs over the last decade. The effects of this are seen most clearly in the revegetation of popular climbs and the return of access paths to a wild state.

These facts contradict the assumptions that seem to underlie measures suggested in the Draft Management Plan (DMP) to restrict climbing at Blue Lake and elsewhere in the KNP. These assumptions are that climbing is an activity that is inherently damaging to the natural values that the KNP must maintain and that it is a sport of a quite different class to long-recognized backcountry activities such as walking and cross-country skiing and consequently deserves stringent regulation. In fact, climbers are a relatively small group of Park users and cause significantly less impact even than walkers as their main activity is conducted on hard rock rather than the fragile alpine groundcover of the Main Range. We believe that the assumptions that inform the suggested climbing control measures result from a misunderstanding of modern climbing style and practice.

A particular concern, relating only to Blue Lake, derives from its listing in the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The criteria for Ramsar listing are not very stringent, much less so than World Heritage listing, for example, but there is no doubt that Blue Lake fits those criteria. The Convention states that recreational use should be managed so as to be compatible with conservation objectives and that formulation of a work plan should be done 'in collaboration with all users and interested parties'. This is the process we are now going through. We would assert strongly that the particular practice of rock climbing at the Lake does not itself conflict with the Ramsar objectives and that the relevance of Ramsar to climbing there is restricted only to the question of whether the number of climbers attracted to Blue Lake is significant compared to the number of walkers. We believe it is not for reasons spelled out below.

Finally we address the question of whether rock climbing at Blue Lake and elsewhere in the Snowy should be regarded as an exceptional usage to be regulated more stringently than other foot powered activities. We present below the long history of climbing in the KNP and show that it predates the rapid expansion in the number of walkers on the Main Range that occurred in the 1970's and 80's. Moreover, over the forty years that climbing has been recorded at Blue Lake,

permanent changes to the rocks, fixed protection and climb labelling has simply not happened. As a result we believe there is no pressing reason to adopt draconian control measures for climbing at Blue Lake.

Nevertheless, the CCA is very anxious that the pristine state of the Blue Lake cliffs be maintained, not least because it is this as much as any other factor that gives climbing there its unique character. Hence, we are keen to collaborate with the KNP management in reasonable and practical measures to ensure continued access to the Lake.

## **2. Context: Rock Climbing at Blue Lake.**

### *2.1 History*

Although earlier scrambles undoubtedly took place, the first recorded rock climbing at Blue Lake involved members of the ANU Mountaineering Club (ANUMC) in 1963 with actual route descriptions being recorded from 1966. A short guidebook, written by Tony Wood of the ANUMC, appeared in 1968 in the now defunct climbing magazine, 'Thrutch'. An updated version of the Thrutch article was published by the ANUMC in 1971 and formed the first generally available guidebook. Warwick Williams and the University of New South Wales Mountaineering Club (UNSWMC) released updates and revisions to this guide in 1973 and 1977 and the 1973 UNSMC guide went on to become the standard reference to climbing in the Snowy Mountains. It listed thirty climbs at Blue Lake.

Its appearance seemed to spark new route activity for the next few years with eight new climbs being recorded by members of the ANUMC and others between 1974 and 1976. A second burst of activity occurred in the nineteen eighties and an updated guidebook was compiled by Craig Kentwell and published as a supplement in the Spring 1989 edition of 'Australian Rock Climber' magazine. The 1989 guide contained fifty one climbs in all so less than two dozen new climbs had been added to the cliffs between 1973 and 1989. Since that time, two or three more climbs have been recorded on the Blue Lake cliffs but they have not been compiled in any generally available guidebook. This very low level of new climb activity on what is otherwise an attractive climbing venue is a clear reflection of the several factors that limit climbing activity above the Lake as we discuss next.

### *2.2 Changing fashions in Climbing*

Rock climbing is said to be one of today's fastest growing 'extreme' sports. This growth, however, reflects a distinct split in the main directions of the sport over the last two decades. One branch, generally known as traditional or 'adventure' climbing involves climbing using only non-destructive means of 'protection'<sup>1</sup> (no pitons, no bolts). Climbs are led from the ground up and the control of risk is in the hands of the leader, who must balance his/her ability against the difficulty of proceeding and the possibility of protecting this progress by running belays<sup>1</sup>, using natural features of the cliff such as cracks and flakes. Over the last thirty years,

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<sup>1</sup> Climbs are 'protected' by running belays or 'runners'. These are temporary attachments of a short loop of rope to the cliff. The climbing rope, which is belayed at the ground, is clipped to the runner with a karabiner or snap link and the leader can then only fall twice the distance that he is above the runner. The 'adventure' in adventure climbing comes from judging the possibility of falling against the distance to the last runner and its security.. Since pitons and bolts are not used, both these factors are determined by the natural features of the rock face to which the runner is fastened.

temporary, non-destructive devices like cams and chocks that leave no marks or scars on the rock face have been universally adopted in the climbing community to provide runners on traditional climbs.

The other branch of rock climbing today is known as 'sport climbing'. In effect, this is the translation to the outdoors of the ethics and practice of indoor climbing gymnasiums. Protection bolts are permanently placed in pre-drilled holes in the rock and are spaced closely enough that a falling leader is usually in no danger of injury, provided that he clips his rope into each bolt. Although there is some crossover, the 'ethics' sanctioned by the climbing community on a given crag are usually well understood and placing bolts on a traditional or adventure climbing crag is widely condemned. Of course the climbing community has no mandate to apply sanctions so that other measures may be necessary where bolting is seen as a problem. In the USA there is a concerted move to ban and remove bolts in many climbing areas, especially in National Parks, whereas in the UK, the somewhat older traditions of climbing there seem to provide a sufficiently effective deterrent.

It is sport climbing that is responsible for essentially all the recent growth in the sport. Anecdotally, there is even evidence that the absolute as well as the relative number of adventure climbers is reducing. Once popular, traditionally protected climbs at cliffs like Booroomba Rocks near Canberra are now reverting to the vegetated state that they were in when first pioneered thirty years ago. In contrast there is enormous activity at 'sport climbing cliffs' like those at Nowra and Point Perpendicular. Blue Lake falls squarely in the traditional classification. None of the climbs at Blue Lake involve fixed bolts or pitons and, indeed the character of the rock lends itself particularly to non-destructive means of protection. Furthermore, the opportunities for sport climbs at Blue Lake are not attractive as the nature of the rock there is such that in large measure, where a climb is possible, natural protection is also available. This, together with the relatively long access walk (compared with more popular 'roadside' sport climbing cliffs) suggests that the number of rock climbing visitors to Blue Lake will reduce in line with the shifting emphasis of the sport away from traditional climbing.

### *2.3 Significance of Climbing at Blue Lake*

Climbing at Blue Lake is unique within continental Australia. At an altitude of almost 1900m it is the highest major climbing area in Australia and the only one above the alpine tree line. Nowhere else is it obligatory to belay 5m above ground level atop a bergschrund in December! Many climbers regard Blue Lake as the finest granite climbing in NSW, boasting elegant lines on clean rock with secure placements for natural protection gear. However, it is above all the incomparable position and aspect of the Blue Lake cliffs that makes climbing there so special. Belayed at the top of Elephant Buttress on a September day in 1998, we saw a veritable fireworks display on the lake as the glancing rays of a low sun sparked rainbows in the willi-willis whipped from the water by the winds howling over Mt Twynam. We could have been climbing at the head of a Norwegian fiord or in the High Sierras of California. One thing is certain. We could have been climbing nowhere else in Australia than Blue Lake in the Snowies.

Although summer rock climbing takes place across the Main Range from Watson's Crags to Mt Townsend and from Mt Clarke to the Sentinel, the special

character of Blue Lake provides a recreational activity that for mountaineers is one of the unsurpassed attractions of the high Snowy Mountains.

Climbing in the Snowy is also interwoven with the history of Australian mountaineering in the greater ranges. In the last thirty years, summer and winter climbing at Blue Lake, Watson's crags and other venues has played a significant part in the training and preparation of some of the first Australian expeditions to the Himalayas. Indeed, winter climbing at Blue Lake figured prominently in a film presentation on alternative Park activities that played for many years at the National Park Centre at Sawpit Creek. That section of the film was made at a training weekend for the 1978 Australian expedition to Dunagiri in the Indian Himalaya. Rock and ice climbing is a well-established non-destructive activity in the Main Range that has happily coexisted with other Park activities for at least four decades and there is no reason why this situation should not continue.

### **3. Current Activity at Blue Lake**

There are no meaningful statistics for the number of climbers who visit the Blue Lake cliffs each year and we must rely on anecdotal evidence. I have made at least one visit to climb there almost every summer since 1972. To my best recollection, on only three occasions did we encounter another party and those occasions were all in the early 1980s. For the last decade at least, one could expect to have the crag to oneself. Conversations with other Canberra climbers reveal similar experiences.

Perhaps more telling and certainly more quantitative evidence for low use rates is the steady revegetation of popular climbs like Dihedral Corner, Pad-Nag or Reprieve. On recent ascents of these climbs we have been struck by the amount of vegetation in cracks and on holds and ledges, a sure signal of reducing use. A similar story is revealed by the fact that there is now only the faintest path extending towards the cliffs beyond the access point reached by most walkers to the Lake. Ten years ago, this path, together with the routes down Stag and Glissade gullies were more clearly marked, signalling that the number of climbers now visiting the cliffs is small. In fact, the abrupt change in the character of the path, once one proceeds past the preferred walkers' picnic spot, indicates clearly that climbers are a very small fraction of the visitors to the Lake.

One area, that climbers alone access, is the top of the cliff. Here too there is no evidence for regular use as there are no discernable paths from the tops of even the most popular climbs back to the foot of the cliffs. Neither have climbers installed any permanent belay anchors at the tops of the climbs. This is despite the fact that care must be taken to rig safe anchors at the top of all the Blue Lake buttresses, using non-destructive means.

### **4. Recommendations for management to Avoid Future damage.**

The CCA recognizes the sensitive nature of the habitat of Blue Lake and the need to ensure its protection, not least because of its Ramsar listing. The unique ambience of Blue Lake is one of the major attractions to those who do climb there. In the draft plan of management, several possibilities have been mooted as control measures including a climbing ban, a permit system and (we presume) the status quo. As we noted in our introduction, we believe that a confusion between traditional climbing

practice and the use of permanent bolts (as are widely used at sport climbing venues) has led to an apprehension of likely damage in those framing the draft plan. However, as we have discussed above, it is highly unlikely that bolts would ever be widely used at Blue Lake while marking or labelling of climbs and the installation of fixed anchors has never occurred. There seems no reason to expect that this would occur in the future. We would like to comment, therefore on the following measures:

- *A ban on climbing at Blue Lake:*  
For all the reasons listed above, we think this is unnecessary and would argue strongly against it.
- *A permit system:*  
Similarly, there seems no evidence that the numbers that currently use Blue Lake for climbing need to be controlled by a permit process.
- *Code of Practice*  
An approach taken in some overseas national parks is for the establishment of a code of practice for climbers in mountain areas. One was recently agreed upon by the UIAA<sup>2</sup> as a guideline for balancing the use of mountain areas by climbers versus the need to preserve and conserve. Such a code of practice could be considered for KNP rather than blanket prohibition. Ultimately awareness and education is far more effective than regulations and enforcement.
- *Climbing Record Book:*  
The KNP might consider installing a climbers' record book at the cliffs. This would serve to record visitor numbers and also could serve as a means of noting new climbs, dangerous conditions (eg. loose blocks on climbs) or areas to avoid for reasons like birds nesting.
- *Climber Education:*  
The three major population centres of Sydney, Canberra and Melbourne that would be the primary users of the Blue Lake cliffs, have large active climbing communities. These centres through their respective Climbing Clubs (eg Canberra Climbers Association) are able to communicate and educate their members on topical issues as they affect climbers including access issues and code of practice breaches.
- *A Baseline for Monitoring:*  
A survey of the environmental state of the Blue Lake Cliffs should be undertaken to assess the current conditions as an agreed baseline against which to monitor changes. The CCA would be very happy to assist in this and to provide rope access to the cliffs. It would be also useful for the KNP, the CCA and other interested climbers' organisations such as the ANUMC and the SRC to be part of such a survey party so that an agreed state of the cliff could be accepted as a basis for any future discussions.

Yours faithfully,  
John Finnigan  
Canberra Climbers Association.      26 July 2004

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<sup>2</sup> [UIAA is the international body governing climbing and alpine activities throughout the world.](#)