

President's Report

Dave Reeve 15th July 2013

The year past

At last we are getting traction.

It was just five years ago that QPWS fined the four main developers of the Flinders Secret Cave for their efforts in creating a new sport climbing, super crag - a singular act of bureaucratic overreach that got the attention of the climbing community, and led to the incorporation of ACAQ some twelve months later.

In the subsequent years, we talked with DERM about the issue of bolting. We emphasised its central importance to the development of modern climbing. We argued that those installing bolts took their responsibilities seriously and were exercising due care in what they did. We showed DERM that the materials we used were compliant with European standards and entirely fit for purpose. In short, we argued that to deny the European and North American experience was to mismanage a major component of the recreational value of our parks through wilful blindness to the facts. Finally, we burnt hours in helping DERM with a cliff-based activities document that was to guide their policy.

Only a matter of weeks following our AGM last year, the Acting Deputy Director-General of QPWS signed-off the first ever Operational Policy for Rock climbing on QPWS managed areas - a document that amongst other things a) recognises rock climbing as a valid activity within the protected estates, and b) recognises bolts as an essential infrastructural element of modern climbing.

Progress in public affairs is ever glacial, so I'm delighted to move from the situation we had at Flinders, to the release of the rock climbing OP in the matter of a few years. I suspect the new NPRSR is equally happy to have thus clarified the murky waters.

Releasing the Operational Policy is just the start of the game. Now it is up to QPWS officers on the ground to make it work. There are areas that are not clear, and there are areas which will be inoperable until such time as a formal process for interaction with the climbing community is thrashed out. One such is the formal process for the approval of a bolted routes. Right now we have draft documentation lodged with Glasshouse NP as the first step in working out how to get this process operating as freely and effectively as possible without burdening either the rangers or the climbing community. In other parts of the world, they get this process to work, so there is no reason why we can't do likewise.

An important feature of the rock climbing OP is the possibility of managing access to a specific crag under a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). I believe MOUs are important, at least for our major, high traffic crags because they allow local issues to be dealt with locally, without the risk of setting a precedent that could harm access in other areas. Furthermore, they act to 'flush out' ambiguities long before misunderstandings can cause mischief. We currently have a draft MOU for Mt Coolum under discussion. And yes, we are struggling to clarify an area of uncertainty.

I tend to lock onto the big ticket items, and thus don't always give credit to those folks doing the nitty-gritty tasks that make a difference to our climbing community. I will amend that now, without naming names for fear of leaving someone out.

After much attending of meetings, nagging, protesting, and ultimately tackling the Lord Mayor as he was walking out of the super market with his groceries, we have awesome metal halide lamps installed down at KP. A big thank you to all who helped push the boat out from where the floods stranded it. A big thank you to those folks in Council who appreciate the importance of climbing in the outdoor recreational spectrum and support us when they can.

Thanks to all who helped reduce the missile count at the top of KP in the December heat. Thanks to those that helped de-urbanise the beautiful Tibro caves for other to enjoy. And finally, thanks to those that bent their backs to improve the track at Frog. We salute you.

Thanks to our crag reps who kept a finger or two on the pulse.

Finally, this year has closed with three new affiliations. The University of Queensland Mountain Club and the Rockclimbing Association of North Queensland have both voted to affiliate with ACAQ. We anticipate that the University of the Sunshine Coast outdoor club, Activate, will vote to affiliate next month with the start of the new semester. This brings our membership to about 320.

We estimate that several hundred thousand individuals have experienced rock climbing - mainly indoors - at some stage. Of these, we estimate that between three and four thousand climb at least several times a year. Thus it appears that as an organisation we are taking in some ten percent of the active climbers. If this sounds low, then consider that the large and successful Access Fund in the United States estimates its reach as one to two percent. And this after twenty years in operation. Policy development is undeniably alien to the free-wheeling spirit of the majority of climbers, but, as the Access Fund have demonstrated, as long as we engage the small, policy-oriented sub-group, then big things will grow from small beginnings. I'm happy with this.

Where do we go from here?

Because progress is ever glacial, next year, if it is successful, will look like the last. However, there is one important difference. Now that we have the rock climbing OP in place, we are in a position to tackle issues that previously were too tricky to discuss with QPWS. Already we see an improvement in our relationship with QPWS at Glasshouse, and anticipate rapidly going forward with a number of projects. Hopefully the processes we develop there will serve as templates for what can be done in other parks.

As we go forward, I know that some folks are going to be perplexed by the way we do things. To see why we approach problems the way we do, you need to think of the whole landscape, both human and physical. If we start from the basis that the parks cannot be maintained as an exclusive playground for a bunch of mates to enjoy - playing dog-in-the-manger is never a good look - it should become clear why we frame issues as we do. To get a seat at the table where policy decisions are made, we need to substitute production for consumption. Thus appropriate questions are - What can we do through our activities to add to the recreational value of the park recognising it as an asset of the people of Queensland? What can we do to through our activities to ensure its conservation values are not compromised? How can we work with the other stake-holders?

Following on from the above, let's look at a specific example. The development of sport climbing at Coolum Cave certainly means that you and your mates can pump yourselves silly on 'Screaming Insanity', but, in contrast, ACAQ would say that the development of sport climbing at Coolum Cave has added a recreational component yielding \$100K p.a. to an under-utilised public asset. This, for absolutely no degradation of the park's conservation values. Further to that, we have added a significant number of users who have a direct engagement with this tiny park. As I walk across the old quarry to the Cave, it crosses my mind that not many years ago, recreation was not the only value of a rock like Mt Coolum. If we don't engage in the public conversation that places a value on outdoor recreation within the tiny fragments of landscape that remain suitable, then we shouldn't be surprised when other possible uses of such land win the day.

It is entirely up to the climbing community, and other outdoor recreational groups, to make the case at the political interface that our parks have value - not only the directly measureable value alluded to above, but the far greater one of the value to society that comes from a healthy, outdoor-active population.