

Management overview: Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park

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Picture courtesy: Douglas Hockley

Background

Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park is a special place – for the Traditional Owners of these lands and the many visitors who enjoy the park's nature and recreation.

Known as Dyurrite by the Wotjobaluk, Jaadwa, Jadawadjali, Wergaia and Jupagulk Peoples (collectively Wotjobaluk), Mount Arapiles has for thousands of years been an important cultural place. Deep spiritual and cultural connections to the area are still maintained and recognised. Barengi Gadjin Land Council (BGLC) is recognised by Federal and State Governments as having authority to speak for the Wotjobaluk Peoples, and has co-managed the state park with Parks Victoria since 2005.

The park was established in 1987 under the *National Parks Act 1975* and comprises 7,455 hectares in several discrete blocks.

The Victorian Government is currently in negotiations with the Wotjobaluk Peoples in relation to the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*, with a settlement expected within 18 months that will likely lead to a joint management arrangement.

Key park values

Aboriginal cultural heritage

Significant Aboriginal cultural heritage exists across the landscape, with the park a declared culturally sensitive area with more than 40 known registered Aboriginal Heritage Places. This is very likely to be an incomplete record of cultural heritage existing at the park.

Environmental

An island of nature in a sea of agriculture, the park is a haven for a diverse range of vegetation communities and provides critical habitat for a range of birds and fauna, including threatened species.

Community and recreation

Much loved by the community, the park sees many thousands of visitors annually. People come to the park for walking, running, cycling, nature study, picnicking, horse-riding and rock climbing.

Mount Arapiles is an internationally renowned rock climbing destination due to the quality of the rock, the quality of the natural protection for traditional climbing, and ease of access to more than 3,000 routes.

Park Management Plans

Management plans exist for the Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park covering the blocks of land that comprise the park. These are available on the Parks Victoria website.

In 2018, BGLC published the Growing What Is Good – Country Plan, which sets out their plans, priorities and goals for the park (see below, page 3).

Park rules and regulations

As Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park is managed under the *National Park Act 1975*, the National Park Regulations (2013) apply. There are also some specific regulations, called 'set-asides', in place to permit or restrict specific activities in specific locations.

In addition, many other Acts and Regulations apply to visitors and activities in the park including the *Aboriginal Heritage Act 2006*, the *Forests Act 1958*, the

Wildlife Act 1975 and the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988*. Together these Acts and Regulations protect the key values at the park from threats and damaging activities.

All Victorian government legislation and regulations are available at www.legislation.vic.gov.au

Example of regulations that apply at Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park to help protect park values:

No dogs, no firearms, no drones, no collection of firewood, no damage to vegetation, no interference or damage to rock, no interference with wildlife, no driving off road.

Current management priorities and programs

Visitor, recreation and community programs in the park include: maintaining and cleaning the campground and facilities; rubbish removal; maintaining roads and tracks; providing visitor information and education material; ranger patrols; facilitating and guiding volunteers; supporting and managing groups in the park such as schools, Licensed Tour Operators and Bush Kinder programs; managing events; military and police search-and-rescue training.

Aboriginal cultural heritage protection programs are guided by BGLC, as the Registered Aboriginal Party, with management of known cultural heritage guided by park management plans. Management practices include: education via signage and visitor guides; exclusion of sites such as at Plaque Rock Art Site; withholding the location of sites; ongoing monitoring of sites; and risk management to minimise the impact of works such as slashing, burning and road maintenance.

Environmental programs are guided by a Wimmera Conservation Action Plan (2018) that identifies five key threats for flora and fauna across the Wimmera park estate and strategies to address them. In the Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park, priority environmental programs include predator control targeting both foxes and cats, and weed control, using a biosecurity approach.

Fire management programs are guided by Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMVic) as the lead agency for management of bushfire risk on public land. Recently,

cultural burning was re-established by BGLC in partnership with FFMVic and Parks Victoria.

Emergency Response programs include bushfire and search-and-rescue responses. Search-and-rescue is guided by the Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park Search and Rescue Plan. Multiple agencies and volunteers contribute to search-and-rescue at the park including the Victoria Police Search and Rescue Squad, CFA, SES and Ambulance Victoria. Bushfire responses are led by FFMV and Parks Victoria staff, supported by the CFA.

Community groups

Volunteers and friends groups

There are four volunteer groups active at the park: Friends of Arapiles, Victorian Climbing Club – CliffCare, SES, and CFA Technical Cliff Rescue Groups. Volunteer efforts greatly contribute to the protection of the park and effective and timely emergency responses for rock climbing accidents.

Volunteer works include weed control; revegetation; monitoring of nesting peregrine falcons; litter removal; and hardening and protection of popular climbing sites and access tracks. The current focus for volunteer efforts is a Pick My Project-funded stone pitching of the Upper Central Gully Walking Track.

Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park Community Advisory Group

Reflecting strong ongoing community interest in the management of the state park, a community advisory group has been in place for many decades. Advisory groups are an established and effective mechanism for community involvement and engagement in park management. Following an EOI process in 2019 the Advisory Group for Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park is being renewed. Parks Victoria aims to have the renewal finalised by the end of February 2020.

Future Management of Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park

The Victorian Government is currently in negotiations with the Wotjobaluk Peoples in relation to the *Traditional Owner Settlement Act 2010*, with a settlement expected within 18 months that will likely lead to a joint management arrangement.

The starting point for joint management arrangements, which are in place for other parks in Victoria, is the development of a joint management plan.

Development of a such a plan would involve consultation and input from the community. Joint management plans have recently been completed with Dja Dja Wurrung Traditional Owners in Central Victoria and Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners in East Victoria.

Until then, Parks Victoria will continue to support Traditional Owners aspirations, including those listed in BGLC's **Growing What is Good – Country Plan (2018)**:

- Establish joint management arrangements
- Undertake a cultural survey
- Review the Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park Management Plan to ensure cultural values are incorporated and protected
- Carry out rock art restoration and protection
- Rekindle cultural burning practices
- Install signage that provides interpretation of sites that can be visited and steers people away from sensitive areas
- Offer tours, dance and ceremony through fee-paying cultural tourism.

Further reading:

- Mount Arapiles-Tooan State Park, Mt Arapiles Management Unit management plan (Department of Conservation and Environment 1991)
- Dergholm State Park and Mt Arapiles-Tooan State Park (Tooan Block) Management Plan (1998)
- Growing What Is Good – Country Plan (Barengi Gadjin Land Council 2018)
- Wimmera Conservation Action Plan (Parks Victoria 2018)