

Parks Victoria Volunteer Manual Loads More Work On Friends Groups

VEFN CONCERNS

Since 2019 VEFN has been involved in discussions with Parks Victoria to try and negotiate workable procedures to be included in the Volunteer Manual. We achieved some improvements but not everything we wanted.

We have achieved some improvement in the manual with respect to language, and some additional information (such as an actual statement of the insurance cover – showing it to be minimal, but at least we can see where we stand).

Implementation of the document will require extra bureaucratic work for Friends Groups. Parks has provided no evidence of activities in Friends Groups that require the proposed level of heavy management (for example, how many claims against their insurance have been made, and how many paid out?).

It is also riddled with elements that will be impractical to implement. This includes the imposition of a Working with Children Check (WWCC) for all volunteers, whatever their role or however casual their involvement and where children are not involved or are supervised by their parents. While Parks Victoria presents this as a commitment to child welfare, we believe a more practical and balanced approach, as set out in the recent Worker Screening Act, is appropriate. In clause 7 of the latter, a clear definition of what is considered child-related work is made, ie “*work is not child-related work by reason only of occasional direct contact with children that is incidental to the work*”. Our Friends groups are committed to the safety of children but believe it is discriminatory to exclude adult volunteers when children are excluded from the volunteering activity or supervised by accompanying adults. This imposition will result in reduced volunteering, particularly those who engage sporadically.

Friends Groups often undertake activities such as Guided Walks for the public. Are all the participants to be treated as “volunteers” and required to have a WWCC and comply with all the other bureaucratic requirements? What is the difference in this compared with any non- Friends groups organising a walk?

Many of the imposed procedures suggest that Parks’ Management and the Board have little idea of what actually happens on the ground.

In introducing the document, it was stated (several times) that Parks does not wish to increase the administrative burden and paperwork for Volunteer Groups, but then this document does so in several ways:

- Agreement and signing a “Letter of Collaboration”
- Annual Activity Plan
- Annual Group Leader Induction
- Volunteer Registration on Park Connect (incl. Working with Children Check)
- Volunteer Screening on joining (in addition to Working with Children Check)
- Volunteer Site Checklist
- Volunteer Induction
- Activity pre-approvals
- Activity reports

This is not a comprehensive list. Some of these activities are already undertaken by groups with various degrees of formality, often with very variable involvement of Park Staff. Some are however considerably more onerous, with no benefit to the work being done by volunteers for the community, or to support the Group to do the work. Many Groups organisers have already expressed their unwillingness to take on this additional management and policing role. Overall, we are concerned that the Manual requirements will make recruitment, planning and managing projects and applying for grants, more bureaucratic, time consuming and less effective.

New groups are to apply through Park Connect, and the Volunteer Coordinator and Area Chief Ranger will “decide if the group is needed...”. Friends groups often only start when a need is identified by community members. There needs to be a fair and transparent assessment process to avoid local staff taking the formation of a group as some sort of criticism.

Many of the proposed structures will need a more substantial commitment of (at least) staff time. There is no indication that this will occur. What resort do groups have when Parks does not provide the promised resources? In particular, such activities as supervision (3.8.6 and following) assumes a level of staff availability not currently delivered (or in some regions not deliverable on current staff numbers). How is this to be addressed? On the ground staff have not been involved in the development of the manual, and feedback already indicates that they don’t know how it is to be implemented, or indeed can be implementable.

What if it is found simply not possible to comply with all of the requirements? Do Rangers stand at gates barring the way of Friends Groups?

At its core, the document still does not reflect a true partnership between Friends groups and Parks Victoria.

We will continue working collaboratively to try and improve the guidelines, and seek a mutually respectful partnership, though the top-down culture of the organisation will make this a continuing struggle. **The alternative is to just walk away and stop volunteering in parks.** Obviously, we prefer not to do that. We are doing the volunteering we do because we love these special places and want to see them protected, and if the job is left to Parks alone it will simply not be done. However, VEFN members are expressing the need for strong action to address the unrealistic, unproductive, and unfair burdens Parks Victoria Management is seeking to impose.

We are seeking your concerns and proposals to address them.

PROPOSED MEETING TO DISCUSS: THURSDAY 10 JUNE BY ZOOM. Please email your expression of interest to attend to paul_strickland@hotmail.com