

# of *rock* ages

For more than 50 years, farmers, climbers and artists have blended into the tiny little success story that is Natimuk, a small farming town near the rock-climbing mecca of Mount Arapiles in Victoria's Wimmera. But now, as climbing areas are closed to protect First Nations heritage, the community needs to find a way to balance its commitments to town and reconciliation.

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If you live in Natimuk—population 500—you’re likely to be a rock climber, farmer or artist. The first and last of these are unusual in rural towns of this size, but most towns don’t have one of the world’s best climbing destinations on their doorstep. The huge sandstone monolith of Mount Arapiles (Dyurrite) rises from the flat fertile fields just outside Nati. It’s the middle of nowhere—30 minutes from Horsham, four hours from Melbourne—and for almost 60 years climbers have been coming, staying for weeks, years or life, and this eclectic changing population has gradually transformed the town. Around half the town’s residents are climbers, injecting energy, opportunity, creativity, professional diversity and a bunch of cash into this traditional farming area. From the outside the town seems ordinary: Main Street has a pub, a corner shop and nice old buildings; wheat silos rise behind town. The climbing shop, art gallery and fences swarming with crocheted bees point to differences, as does the roadside park boasting a skate ramp, woodfired pizza oven and an interactive creature made from reclaimed machinery. Look deeper and you’ll find enough action to keep anyone and everyone busy, with groups focused on everything from solar energy to films, beekeeping to history. Events, from regular farmers’ markets to one-off national music festivals, have graced the Showgrounds, and there’s the biennial Nati Frinj, an arts festival that starts with a ‘Hay & Thespian Mardi Gras’ and culminates in a showstopping spectacular of abseiling dancers, projection and puppets on the 30 metre-high silos.

This thriving community has bucked the trend of slow population decline experienced by so many small rural Australian towns, instead experiencing a 20 per cent population growth between the 2011 and 2016 censuses. Natimuk is a poster child of small-town success.

But since 2019, there have been tensions in town. Vast areas in the nearby Grampians National Park (Gariwerd) were closed to climbers as part of the Greater Gariwerd Landscape Management Plan designed to protect cultural heritage, and some areas at Mount Arapiles are currently closed for cultural heritage surveys. Only around 20 per cent of the cliff is affected, but the future is uncertain. Those who have built their lives here are worried: what will happen to a community centred around climbing if the cliff is closed? The Natimuk community prides itself on inclusivity, optimism and collaboration but, as local artist and Manager of Arts, Culture and

Recreation for Horsham Rural City Council Carolynne Hamdorf says, ‘It’s when it impacts your life that your commitment to reconciliation is absolutely tested.’ While the need to protect First Nations cultural heritage is strongly supported by the Nati community, the tension is in working out the details.



*‘On this prehistoric coast lies Mt Arapiles, a beached whale on an ancient shore.’*  
Keith (Noddy) Lockwood—fourth-generation Natimukian, climber and guide—in his book Arapiles: a million mountains.

Around 20 million years ago, Mount Arapiles was an island, its rock stacks poking out of the Southern Ocean. It is the westernmost outcrop of both the Grampians and the Great Dividing Range, standing on the edge of the outback.

As with every part of the continent, the area has deep First Nations heritage going back tens of thousands of years, with western Victoria said to contain almost 90 per cent of south-eastern Australia’s rock art. In 2005 Victoria’s first successful Native Title claim determined the area’s traditional owners, with the Wotjobaluk peoples centred around Dyurrite, now represented by Barengi Gadjin Land Council (BGLC).

Aunty Nancy Harrison narrates the story of Dyurrite in an audio tour on the Nati Frinj website. It’s a rather gruesome tale involving Jardwadjali sisters Tjatji and Kutuk, and the lawmaker Mitjiin (the moon), in charge of educating people and punishing transgressions. When Tjatji disobeyed the law and became pregnant, she confesses all to a furious Mitjiin, and punishment duly follows. Mitjiin cuts her open and removes her womb, laying her body on the ground to form Dyurrite, her womb becoming the Mitre Rock outcrop.

Dyurrite was used for hunting, food gathering and ceremonies. The same hard sandstone that now draws climbers was ideal for tool making, and the cliffs are dotted with quarries, as well as a couple of known rock art sites; however, according to Uncle Ron Marks, a Wotjobaluk elder and cultural educator with strong ties to the area, details of Dyurrite’s cultural heritage have not been widely known.

This is now changing, and it follows on from the development of the new management plans. For decades historians and archaeologists have been calling for protection of the cultural heritage >

*This thriving community has bucked the trend of slow population decline.*



**Clockwise from top left** Silos overlook the small town; Noddy Lockwood, climber and publisher; Carolynne Hamdorf; Natimuk’s Main Street; Bill Lovell serves a beer at the National Hotel.



contained in this expanse of wilderness and craggy ranges, a push that's been broadly supported by climbers, walkers and other park users. In 2019 discussions began between traditional owners, Parks Victoria and user groups to try to protect cultural heritage. Climbing and access were restricted while assessments were done, and in 2020 Parks Victoria released a draft management plan. Climbing did not fare well in this, with only about 20 per cent of roped climbing and six per cent of bouldering in the area remaining open.

In 2019 cultural heritage assessments began in Mount Arapiles. Around 20 per cent of the cliff is now closed, a temporary measure while surveys are conducted and a more permanent plan established.



*'It's been a long time since the days of climbers and farmers scuffling on the pavement. Now all our children are marrying each other.'*

*John Uebergang: farmer and lifelong Natimukian*

Climbing culture is often compared to surfing, following a similar route from the fringe sport of oddballs to the mainstream of school holiday programs. It has its own stories, legends, language and history, varying by country and state. It's also got its iconic, globally recognised locations, and one of these lies just outside Nati.

The early, exploratory era of climbing at Mount Arapiles began in 1963, developing over the decades into one of the world's best crags. Glenn Tempest, climber and owner of outdoor leisure publisher Open Spaces, sums up why: 'You can have grade 32s running up a wall next to a grade 14, and so it's friendly; it means you can have groups of friends at the bottom of the cliff. And the rock's unlikely to break, it's so perfect. I don't think there's anything better I've ever climbed on in my life.' (Australian grades follow the open-ended Ewbank climbing grade system, starting at 1 and continuing up to grade 35, with the hardest grade at Mount Arapiles a 33.)

Glenn made his first trip to Mount Arapiles in 1974 when he was 15, and once lived at The Pines camping area for an entire year. Around six years ago Glenn and his wife Karen moved to Nati from Melbourne, plonking their gorgeous, self-sufficient prefab house down in a flat paddock. Now it's surrounded by trees, a huge deck and pool and a market garden of vegies.

Glenn was one of the 1970s new wave of climbers who moved in after the early pioneers. This revolving



**Above** Former climbing guide Louise Shepherd.

**Right** Glenn Tempest was one of the early climbers who later moved to the town.



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and melding. Climbers snapped up cheap houses, starting in 1983 with outdoor magazine publisher Chris Baxter. Driving home after a wet weekend, Chris peered through the window of a house for sale on Main Street, phoning up the next day to buy it, putting the \$5000 purchase on his credit card. Others soon followed: buying houses, renting out rooms. In 1988 climbers joined the Natimuk business world when Louise and three others opened The Climbing Company guiding business and the Arapiles Mountain Shop, both still running under two of the original owners.

The climbers didn't just infiltrate the town's houses and businesses. Over the next decade they worked on the farms, joined (and started) organisations; their kids sat beside fourth-generation locals at the primary school. And then they intruded on the last stronghold: the footy side.

As in many Victorian towns, AFL is the traditional sporting heart of Natimuk. Bill Lovell, publican of the National Hotel, first came to town to coach the footy team, and there's a whole corner in the pub devoted to the mighty Natimuk United Rams. Framed AFL jerseys face climbing posters near the pool table, a reminder of the distinct groups that Bill remembers: the shearers, the farmers, the townspeople and 'the goats' [climbers].

After 12 years visiting Natimuk and seven living there, climber Simon Mentz made his debut for the Rams in 1998, aged 30. There followed some lean times: wooden spoons, whole seasons without wins, 340-point floggings. Simon's brutal and funny 2003 short film *Rams to the Slaughter* captures the years spent struggling to keep the team alive, recruiting overseas climbers who had never even seen a game so that the reserves could field a team. Says Simon, 'That was amusing to watch, but certainly didn't help us win games.'

In the glorious season of 2017, the Rams went from wooden spooners to the finals, and the oval now >

'By the time the local boys came in from the fields, we'd not only commandeered the pool table, but we were also chatting up the girls. It didn't go down well because they saw climbers quite rightly as being dole bludgers who were just hanging out at the mountain smoking pot.' (It turns out there are many legendary stories of parties, pranks and hallucinogens to back up these assumptions.)

Louise Shepherd is a Natimuk climbing guide and legend, once one of the world's boldest and best female climbers, who first started coming to Mount Arapiles in the late seventies. She remembers an early trip when she watched one of the few other female climbers attempting one of the country's first grade 26 climbs, topless. 'My eyes were bulging. There was this topless woman with breasts flying, harem pants and long blonde hair, just going for these monster swings.'

Louise recalls the business people—owners of the pub, post office and milk bar—liking the climbers from the get-go, although in the early days there was a 'tiny bit of friction'. She recounts the story of a trip to the pub by climbing legend Kim Carrigan and his friend Tony. The two men set up a game of chess, Kim sipping a pink beer (he didn't like the taste so masked it with cordial). They were asked outside by local farmers but chose to leave quietly, Tony's black-belt skills unused.

In the 1980s the number of climbing households grew from zero to 20 and Natimuk began merging

community of climbers didn't just come for weekends: they lived in tents in the hot dusty Pines campsite, enjoying the facilities—basic toilets (no showers), bins for scrounging, a picnic shelter and a phone box. There were many ways to spend the days: bonding around the campfire; warming up for hangovers; testing acceptable boundaries both on and off the rock. A lot of climbing was also done, with obvious results: there were 540 climbs in the 1978 guidebook and 1300 five years later, with grades jumping from 23 to 32 between 1976 and 1985.

Natimuk was a conservative farming community and locals initially thought climbing was weird and done by oddballs. Glenn remembers some tension in the early days.

has a gleaming white fence and a schmick function centre, lively with footballers, netballers, kids and random volunteers. Simon still plays for the team and, as he introduces me around, he shows me another side of the community and highlights something I've already noticed.

While people take pride in their roles—from netball captain to council manager, climbing guide to farmer—they're more interested in sharing the credit than taking it. Simon's a case in point, calling himself selfish, contrasting what he does to the hordes of harder-working volunteers. It's undoubtedly true that the work is shared by many, yet it was Simon who secured a redevelopment of the oval facilities in 2004, when he won \$20,000 kickstarter funding from *The Footy Show* by sending in his film showing the decrepit change rooms. He and Steve Bell opened The Natimuk Café in 2010 because they thought the town needed one: Simon's aims were not to hate it or lose too much money.

People here just get in and do stuff, whether it's opening a café or starting a festival. In 2000, climber and artist Greg Pritchard started the Nati Frinj as an adjunct to Horsham's arts festival, beginning it as a dare. The first Frinj closing-night extravaganza happened two years later when a troupe of aerial dancers dressed as angels performed on the side of the wheat silos, suspended by ropes. This was a trial run and training ground for Nati-based artist Jillian Pearce, with the performance later moving to the Melbourne Arts Centre Spire, where the angels lived for a week.

A core of artists has been involved in the Frinj since, including Dave Jones. When I arrive in his yard, Dave has just finished fitting a two metre-wide screen into a header, creating one of three harvest-themed games for the Natimuk Show. It's parked outside his shed—one end of which is a climbing wall—near a giant installation of cartoonish, solar-powered metal eels soon to be flashing in Melbourne's Taylors Lakes. In his career he has produced animation for everyone from Cadbury to the ABC, around solid stints of climbing, before moving to Nati when the internet allowed. His two kids have gone all the way through Natimuk Primary School.

He says of the town: 'There are always things happening and people with projects. If someone's got a crazy idea, there's a bunch of people willing to help make it happen.' We talk of building 15 metre-high marionettes; of teaching primary schoolers to animate; of shadow puppets and collaborations.

One of the kids holding puppets in the early days was Hannah French, now director of the Nati Frinj.

She says, 'I was so lucky to have extraordinary arts experiences in my own town,' crediting this with giving her the freedom, opportunities and possibilities to make a career in the arts seem feasible. Aged 14, she was involved in the winning bid to host Triple J's One Night Stand festival in 2004, with the submission encased in a papier-mâché 'rock' and delivered to the ABC studios by abseilers. Around 9000 people came to the Showgrounds to watch, with Grinspoon's performance broadcast live around the nation.

Hannah dots her conversation with words like lucky, grateful, freedom, support and collaboration, and she's not the only one. Similar words are spread liberally through every Nati conversation, along with praise, appreciation and credit. Hannah also talks of the possibilities that come from living more simply, echoing others' comments about priorities, time and lifestyle. Of the joys of having people around to play and create with; being able to walk everywhere and drop in on friends; of having the time to experiment and give back.

Carolynne Hamdorf has spent a lot of time thinking about community and culture, and highlights the constant refreshing of ideas and inhabitants in Natimuk caused by people following their passions, spending chunks of time elsewhere, doing other things: climbing, working or travelling.

'Geography is our commonality, and place ... even the artmaking and Frinj is very steeped in location, and that's a purposeful, conscious decision. It's an interesting place to be, this little town. It's a very small population, it's a long way from anywhere, but people are committed to making it work.'

*'It's when it impacts your life that your commitment to reconciliation is absolutely tested.'*

*Carolynne Hamdorf*

These twin commitments—to the town and to reconciliation—are being tested by the uncertainties at Mount Arapiles. Glenn describes climbers as generally 'left-leaning and natural allies to the Aboriginal community' and this sentiment is widely echoed. It's also felt that in the Grampians National Park climbers were made scapegoats by Parks Victoria to justify lazy parks management: climbing bans over large areas being much easier to set up and manage than a more targeted, nuanced approach.

Similar disputes over access to public land have resulted in measures that protect cultural heritage



**Left** Simon Mentz came to climb and stayed to play AFL. **Below** Local Heather Chapman raises real goats at Nati, though some use the term as a nickname for the climbing community. **Far left** Artist Dave Jones.

and the environment while allowing climbing to continue. One example is in the culturally significant area of Hueco Tanks State Park and Historic Site in the US: some climbing areas were shut, some made accessible only with a guide, while others remained open. This nuanced approach allows environmental and cultural heritage protection while creating jobs and revenue.

There is also widespread dismay about the lack of communication, understanding and consultation between climbers, traditional owners and Parks Victoria. The process in the Grampians National Park got messy, resulting in bad blood, ill will and mudslinging in the media, with people on all sides left wary. (Despite dozens of attempts over three months, no one at the BGLC responded to my requests for comments for this article, and many climbers were also unwilling to comment.) To help establish respectful relationships with traditional owners, climbers set up the Gariwerd Wimmera Reconciliation Network (GWRN) in June 2019, with the broader aim of promoting a deeper understanding of First Nations culture and reconciliation. The Reconciliation Network is now working with the BGLC to increase

the understanding of climbing at Mount Arapiles—where it is done, the flow of climbers around the cliffs, any possible impacts and how they can be reduced or removed—so that the Land Council has the information and understanding they need.

Uncle Ron explains that even the idea of cultural heritage is not understood. 'It's our spirit, it's our history, our condition, our being. It's within the soul—you're born with it and you die with it. It's both tangible and intangible.' He goes on to say that before there can be real understanding, there first needs to be education. 'If climbers were educated about culture, they'd think: "I know the stories and I know how that art was done, I don't really want to wreck anything. I've got to be careful."' He follows that up by asking, 'If one per cent of climbers are dill brains, do you kick the rest off? The thing that I'm trying to get through to our people is to give them a lesson, but through our eyes.'

The cultural heritage assessment process is slow, with Parks Victoria expecting the future management of Mount Arapiles to be decided by mid-2022. The outcome is uncertain. When asked about the possibility of cultural heritage and climbers coexisting, Ron is cautiously optimistic. 'I can see that one day the people will have an understanding of what, where, when and how people can do when it comes to land use at Dyurrite. I can see it occurring, but when, I don't know.'

There is no doubt that the Natimuk community is hurting: there are new divisions, angst and frustrations. Some people have already left and others are considering it. A recent economic survey calculated that climbing at Mount Arapiles brings in around \$12 million to the area annually, as well as diverse professional skills to the Wimmera. It's no wonder the locals are edgy.

The spectrum of attitudes in Natimuk ranges from anger to optimism, the latter grounded in the hope there is a way to protect both this quirky little success story of a town and the cultural heritage, with the solution found in community. As Carolynne put it, sitting in her homely kitchen, 'I am really hopeful that we'll be able to navigate through this and actually become far stronger, far more committed to openness and reconciliation, and be true leaders in this space. So that people will say, "You should see what Natimuk do with their relationship building with the Aboriginal community and all the enterprises they have spurred because of their commitment to the acknowledgement of heritage at Arapiles and other places." That would be amazing.' ■