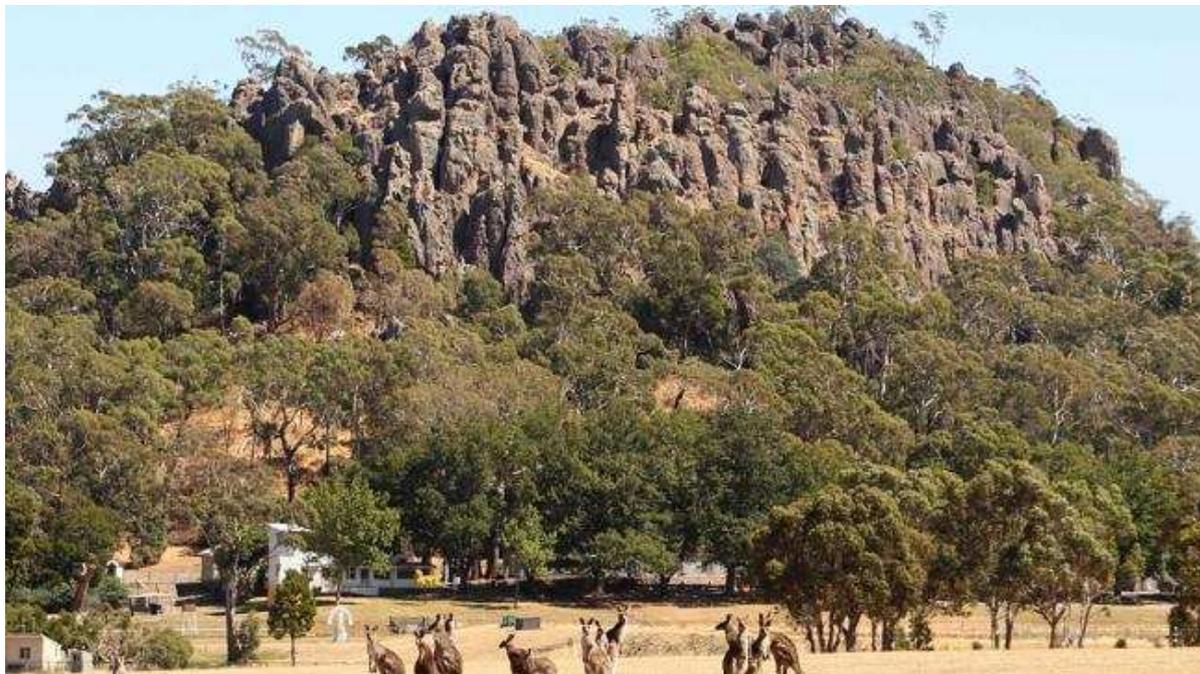

THE AUSTRALIAN

Developers picnic at Hanging Rock

PIA AKERMAN THE AUSTRALIAN MARCH 08, 2014 12:00AM



About 60,000 people visit Hanging Rock every year and there are plans for a resort to be built in a paddock beside the rock. Picture: Stuart McEvoy Source: News Corp Australia

STANDING among the ancient stones that form the peak of Hanging Rock, the unnerving eeriness that captured the world's imagination through film 40 years ago is palpable.

The raw beauty portrayed in Peter Weir's *Picnic at Hanging Rock* draws about 60,000 visitors to the Victorian landmark each year, but divisions as stark as the rock's famous silhouette are deepening amid the question of whether increased development at the site would help save Hanging Rock or ruin it.

Despite new cashflows from outdoor concerts, when the rock becomes a backdrop for stars such as Leonard Cohen and Bruce Springsteen, the local shire council is adamant that more funding must be found to preserve Hanging Rock for future generations.

It has submitted plans for a resort, conference centre and day spa to be built in a paddock beside the rock, triggering outrage from many who fear the development will mar the rock and destroy its character.

Noel Harvey, who chairs the Daylesford and Macedon Ranges tourism board, agrees the fight is likely to end up in court.

He firmly believes “low-rise” tourism development is the best way to fund significant environmental works at Hanging Rock, 80km north of Melbourne.

“There is absolutely no doubt the rock is under extreme pressure,” he said. “There are weeds everywhere, there are feral animals, we have a declining koala population.

“If this is done right, it can do some real good from the environmental perspective. Protecting the rock on its own is not enough - we need to repair the damage.”

Next year will mark the 40 anniversary of Weir’s film. The renowned director said that while he hadn’t followed news of the proposed development, he would be concerned if the wide “shot” of Hanging Rock were compromised. “Naturally anyone would be very disappointed to see any famous landmark scarred by buildings,” he said.

“It would be horrible to see it in any way disfigured.”

Members of the Hanging Rock Action Group argue the Macedon Ranges council has given its support to the development without community consultation or mandate. Spokeswoman Penny Roberts said land should be found elsewhere for the accommodation and other facilities.

“Nobody is anti-development as such, this is just really an inappropriate site,” she said.

“If you think about Uluru, Stonehenge, the visitor centres are well away and the tourist accommodation is well away so you don’t impact on the experience you get by being up close to such an amazing natural feature. One of the real pleasures of this place is that it is a natural environment.”

A small cafe and information centre are the main existing infrastructure at the rock base, with visitors who pay a \$10 entry fee per car also enjoying picnic table and barbecue facilities.

Shire mayor Roger Jukes said \$8 million was required to repair and improve Hanging Rock’s natural environment and current buildings but the development proposal was in its infancy and yet to receive any commercial input.

“If there is anything to be built, the community and council will be asking for something that’s world-class,” he said.

“Nothing nasty will ever grace the land around Hanging Rock.”

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