Buildings as landscape

Geoff Ashley

Mountain landscapes are characterised by remoteness, environmental extremes and seasonal variations. The historic uses and buildings in these landscapes are found there because of these characteristics or they are modified in some manner because of these characteristics.

After describing a range of the historic landscape types within Kosciuszko National Park (KNP), in the Snowy Mountains region of NSW, this paper discusses three case studies to highlight opportunities for a more integrated approach to the management of natural and cultural values in the alpine national parks; the concept being that the sum (the pay-off) is bigger than each of the (natural and cultural) parts.

The location of huts, and other similar building such as ski lodges, can be closely associated with the type of natural landscape they are located in, or with particular historic processes or events. While buildings provide an entry ‘doorway’ into landscape appreciation as markers of historic use, a substantive documentary and physical analysis, a broader landscape history will yield more meaningful results. A true appreciation of landscape thus achieved allows us to intellectually and emotionally access that landscape by providing a real sense of place.

This paper is published as it was presented at the Celebrating Mountains Conference in Jindabyne in November 2002. There is a postscript.

The title ‘Buildings as landscape’ is a short cut to the suggestion that models for the integration of natural and cultural values management are to be found most dynamically in the natural and cultural components of landscape. While conclusions of this paper are relevant to other types of landscapes, the particular aspects of remoteness and seasonal imperatives more sharply define human interaction with the mountain environment and the resultant physical and cultural imprints.

In positing the notion of using landscape as the way to integrate values this paper does not make light of professional perspectives, institutional cultures and practical challenges that stand in the way. However, an integrated approach to natural and cultural resource management is akin to the concept that the sum (the pay-off) is bigger than each of the parts.

This paper describes a range of historic landscape resources in the Kosciuszko National Park. Three case studies are presented to provide the basis for discussing opportunities and constraints for a more integrated landscape approach.

Historic landscape resources
in the Snowy Mountains

Pastoral landscapes

There are some 90 intact huts and a similar number of ruins or archaeological sites in Kosciuszko National Park. Over half of these huts are associated with pastoral activity. A number of these ‘huts’ were in fact permanent or semi-permanent outstation homestead complexes associated with Southern Tablelands and Monaro pastoral holdings, such as Old Currango, c.1873. From the 1890s until the 1950s timber vernacular huts were built in association with summer grazing ‘snow leases’. These landscapes contain much evidence of this pastoral activity including fences, yards, tracks and telephone lines.

Mining landscapes

Mining in this area started in the mid-nineteenth century with gold mining at Kiandra and the many kilometres of water races constructed by Chinese miners there are still visible in the landscape. Significant relics of mining remain in addition to Kiandra: gold mines at Lorna Doone and Grey Mare; silver mines at Lobbs Hole and Blue Creek and tin mines in the southern part of Kosciuszko National Park. Remains of settlements associated with mining include the chimney of the Chinese Yan’s Store and the Court House at Kiandra, the pise hotel remains at Lobbs Hole and isolated huts such as Tin Mines and the ruins of Pig Gully Hut. Historic mining landscapes include the water races and workings constructed around the hills at Kiandra by the Chinese, and the races at Lobbs Hole copper mine on the Yarrangobilly River.

Recreation landscapes

The first skiing in Australia had occurred at Kiandra in 1881 when snowbound miners from northern Europe took to skis for fun. In the latter part of the nineteenth century people started to visit the Snowy Mountains for recreation as part of the ‘discovery’ of nature that had become fashionable for urban dwellers. Following the first ascent of Kosciuszko on skis by photographer Charles Kerry in 1897, the government meteorologist Clement Wragge built an observatory right on its summit.

The Yarrangobilly Caves tourist complex constructed by the State Government from 1885, the Hotel Kosciuszko, 1920, and the Charlotte Pass Chalet, 1930 (and rebuilt in 1939 after a fire) are important evidence of the NSW Government’s involvement in providing the transport and accommodation infrastructure to assist this recreation development. It is likely that the elites of Sydney influenced leading Government officials to bankroll these investments in tourism and recreation in this region.

Postwar Kosciuszko State Park Trust (KSPT) involvement in the creation of ski lodge resorts at Thredbo, Smiggin Holes, Perisher and Guthega followed. More than a dozen huts were constructed for skiing and fishing recreation in Kosciuszko National Park, including Bullock’s Hut at the junction of Thredbo and Little Thredbo Rivers built by a keen angler, Dr Bullock. Seaman’s Hut constructed in 1929 as a memorial and shelter by the family of one of two young men lost in this area a year earlier is evidence of the ‘cultural imperative’ that reaching the summit of Mount Kosciuszko has long been.
Forestry landscapes
A number of places are associated with the timber industry apart from Sawpit Creek — other sawmills and logging artefacts are located in KNP at Rules Point, Cumberland Hill and Alpine Creek.

Water conservation and power landscapes
The conservation of water is an important part of the landscape history of the Snowy Mountains. The water races at Kiandra and the use of water in hydro-electric schemes at the Yarrangobilly Caves and the Kosciuszko Hotel are precursor examples to the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme for which evidence survives of the construction phase, in addition to the existing utilities themselves.

Social landscapes
With these uses came people of many different cultures who added another dimension to these various historic landscapes. First expressed in the naming of Kosciuszko by Polish explorer Strzelecki, after a famous countryman, it continued with the Chinese and European miners at Kiandra, then the northern European skiing enthusiasts early last century, and finally the "New Australian" workers for the Snowy Mountains Scheme. This cultural diversity has not only left physical reminders within the landscapes, but has altered the social landscape of Australia (and, thankfully, also the culinary landscape).

Ongoing landscapes
For over fifty years these landscapes have been the subject of changing and new uses as part of the NSW reserve system that started with the KSPT and then NPWS. This use now has its own living history and social value that needs to be understood and respected.

Cultural landscape Case Studies
Three case studies are presented here to show how cultural and natural values can be integrated to assist management, interpretation and tourism (see Figure 1).

Case Study 1: a landscape analysis of the huts in Kosciuszko National Park
This example draws on the NPWS Huts Study 1992, Part C: Kosciuszko National Park Huts Review prepared by the author. In addition to providing a thematic and typological analysis of huts (historic use associations and materials of construction) the study also compared this thematic analysis to landscape data (vegetation type and topographical data) to build a picture of the total landscape context of huts.

Figure 1 shows the distribution of intact huts within Kosciuszko National Park according to their primary historical association. There is a noticeable concentration of huts associated with pastoral activity are also associated with cold air drainage and herbfields vegetation areas. These natural grasslands are believed to have been formed by cold air drainage restricting growth of tree species. These grasslands were very attractive to graziers and were used particularly for sheep grazing. Comparison to the sheep movement diagram – Figure 2 – indicates that almost all the sheep movement was to these cold air drainage grass plains with almost no movement to the areas of alpine vegetation complexes. The cattle were generally moved into areas of alpine vegetation complexes.

Not only are huts shown strongly associated with the cold air drainage areas, but the huts almost invariably occur at the edges of these areas near the tree line. Supervision of stock, shelter from cold winds and the availability of shade would be some reasons for the location of huts at the edges of these plains.

Other topographic data were used to assemble comparative...
information on huts such as orientation, slope and height. For example, over half of the huts occur on slopes facing northeast to northwest or on flat land (no recorded orientation of slope) and occur on elevations between 1300 and 1700 metres. Other landscape associations can be identified by comparing environmental data layers with data on historical association or construction materials. For example, it appears that huts constructed of horizontal slabs which are often made from alpine ash (Eucalyptus delegatensis), mostly occur relatively close to vegetation shown as Tall Gum and Alpine Ash open forests.

Discussion

Huts act as a marker of, or door into, the history of a landscape. This is particularly the case in protected areas where huts provide evidence of land use no longer practised and/or permitted. Huts evoke other human responses: an emotional response based on the fragile/tenuous human interaction with the natural landscape; the emotive (visual and visceral) attraction of a hut as shelter and as something of human scale in an immense and potentially hostile environment.

Providing the above contextual information helps link huts to their landscape and can help the landscape stories come alive for visitors and it also fits within the current NSW NPWS 'whole of landscape' approach. However, while the ongoing conservation of huts is well deserved, the landscape history that gave birth to them is eroding away. A 'whole of landscape' approach means that adequate resources need to be made available to understand the landscape resource and to make sensible input decisions.

As discussed in this case study, historical and landscape data can be used effectively to link natural and cultural value management. Historical information is an under-used resource in relation to landscape history. It can reveal useful information regarding natural landscape change (for example, clearings) and it can be used to chart the important changes in Government land-management policy that is especially relevant to this alpine region as types of leases changed over time.

The subtle physical evidence of landscape use is also disappearing. Ruins (and in particular timber ones) are markers of history of the landscape that receive little attention as mostly they are not a management imperative. While archaeologists may be interested in collecting landscape archaeology data the financial imperative to employ them is seldom there. However, it does remain an area of research potential to institutions who train historians and archaeologists.

The problem is that the interface between natural and cultural values often falls between natural and cultural professional stools and methodologies for resolving issues at this interface in a collaborative manner are not strong. Having such methodologies would be useful in the following areas: natural re-growth in cultural precincts; restoration of natural landscape areas; cultural plantings and exotic re-growth in natural areas; fence lines, falling-down stock yards and mine dumps, and the conservation of ruin sites.

Conservation Plans for huts are also costly and although recent streamlined methodologies have been developed by the NSW NPWS as Heritage Action Statements, they focus on physical conservation. This probably results in even less historical landscape analysis being possible. Broader thematic studies may be a better way of understanding landscape history but such studies need the financial support of those people who think broadly.
The professional skills brought to bear on these matters are, typically, an architect for the hut (with historical research) and a ranger with natural science training. The issues identified above suggest a larger professional mix should get involved, such as archaeologists and historians experienced in landscape assessment, and an ecologist (or similar) who is trained in balancing natural and cultural values. This approach would immensely increase knowledge of these values for management, interpretation and tourism.

Figure 4 Three case studies of historic landscapes in Kosciuszko National Park. Constructed in 1873, Old Curraga Homestead (top) is one of the earliest pastoral structures in the Park. High Noon Ski Lodge (middle) was a re-used Snowy Mountains Scheme workers' barrack and one of the first lodges constructed in Thredbo. It was demolished in 1995. Illawong Ski Lodge (lower) began as Pounds Creek Hut (1927) and extended in 1956 (right) as Illawong Ski Lodge. This view looking west to the Main Range past the Snowy River. (Photos Geoff Ashley)

Case Study 2: ski resort landscapes in Kosciuszko National Park

This case study is drawn from the NPWS Kosciuszko National Park Ski Resorts Heritage Study, 1995.

The ski resorts are a fascinating example of the ever changing historic relationship between conservation and recreation in protected landscapes. Cultural attitudes towards the natural landscape of the Snowy Mountains prevalent in 1906 are evident in the first bill to protect the Snowy Mountains National Chase for 'public recreation and preservation of game'.

The NSW Government involvement in either directly constructing, assisting with, or controlling ski accommodation and infrastructure stretches from 1907 to the present and follows a decision by the Premier at the time to build a 51km road from Jindabyne to the summit of Mount Kosciuszko to open the area to tourism and to build the Kosciuszko Hotel, constructed in 1909. By 1920 ski-touring enthusiasts split from the Kosciusko Alpine Club that was centred around the more sedate Kosciusko Hotel to create the Ski Club of Australia by 1920. The SCA had a vision of a chain of ski huts and convinced the Government to build the Chalet at Charlotte Pass in 1930. With the establishment of the Kosciuszko State Park Trust (KSPT) in 1944, a balance of recreation and conservation was seen as appropriate and private ski clubs were encouraged as a way of limiting commercial interests. This dream went with the fire that destroyed the Kosciuszko Hotel in 1951.

Like the hut landscapes the five ski resort areas have specific historic reasons for being where they are located that is 'written' into their physical form.

- Perisher had its genesis in the decision by the KSPT in 1947 to build Rock Creek Hut where Rock Creek crossed the Summit Road and to allow private ski clubs to build in this area. The dispersed quality of the cultural landscape of Perisher reflects the KSPT granting of individual ski lodge leases and the central aggregation of larger buildings reflect the granting of larger leases to provide commercial infrastructure. In the 1960s the KSPT rationalised roads and further lodge locations to create a landscape of 'visual isolation'.

- By contrast, the location of Thredbo was prompted by the construction of the Alpine Way as part of the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. Thredbo's tight 'European' cultural landscape dating from 1957 reflects the fact that a head lease area was given to a private consortium following a KSPT decision to grant a commercial lease after the Hotel Kosciusko fire.

- The cultural landscape history of Smiggin Holes is similar to that of Perisher in that it grew as individual club leases in a location that was initially occupied by several pastoral huts. These huts were also used by skiers en route to the Chalet from the Kosciuszko Hotel.

- Guthega like Thredbo is strongly associated with the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme. It was established by Snowy scheme workers, initially without KSPT approval. At least two of the existing former workers accommodation barracks were used. The linear arrangement of lodges in the Guthega landscape reflects its history.

- Charlotte Pass can be thought of as the first and last resort. The Chalet is from a period when the Government provided tourist accommodation. The commercial lodges there
strongly contrast as a group having generally been constructed after 1974.

The 1995 NPWS Ski Resorts Heritage Study provided an analysis of the evolution of lodge design types, many of which show the influence of the materials guidelines adopted firstly by the KSPT and later by NPWS to ensure that the lodges responded to their natural setting. The influence of North American national parks models also found its way into the design language via the KSPT and NPWS. Some lodges show their European alpine stylistic influences and some are fine examples of contemporary modernist architecture.

The appropriately-named High Noon that was demolished at the end of 1995 is a good example of the culturally dynamic history of the ski resorts. This lodge (originally known as Roslyn) was associated with Charles Anton, a leading light in Australian ski history and with the Australian Alpine Club. It was a re-used Snowy scheme workers' hut that was brought from Norway by the firm Selmar for the Snowy scheme and is even rumoured to have been built or used by the German Army during the Second World War.

Discussion

The resorts in Kosciuszko National Park did not ‘fall from the sky’ into a national park landscape. Their development is closely associated with moves to create protected or controlled areas at the end of the nineteenth century and they provide evidence of the dynamic relationship in the provision of recreation facilities and of nature conservation in the alpine areas.

While there has been a general shift from public to private sector investment in the creation of accommodation and infrastructure development in Kosciuszko National Park, this has been set against a dynamic Government response to its potential conflicting responsibilities for both nature conservation and recreation. The landscape of the five resorts provide physical evidence of this dynamic relationship.

An example of a mid-point in this dynamic relationship between recreation and conservation was when the KSPT, knowing that it did not have the financial resources to provide facilities, initially allowed only private clubs to develop as a way of limiting (unsuccessfully as it turned out) full commercial development. The establishment of the NPWS swung the dynamic towards nature conservation. A lack of appreciation of the past and a lack of resources to control the future left the resort areas as under-resourced ‘blind spots’ in this new ideological landscape; thus probably ensuring more private control and even less integration into a managed landscape.

Recent changes in development consent within the resorts may in part result from this historic ambivalence on part to the NPWS towards the resorts. These changes that see the NSW Department of Planning Infrastructure and Natural Resources (DIPNR) as the consent authority for the resorts could lead to an even greater movement away from integration of recreation facilities with the management of the conservation landscape unless the resorts are understood as an important part of the history of Kosciuszko National Park. This history has shaped the resultant form of each resort and the lodges themselves, many of which reflect key themes in the history of the Park.

Case Study 3: Illawong Lodge

This case study draws on the Illawong Lodge Conservation Plan prepared by Godden Mackay Logan for Illawong Ski Tourers in consultation with NPWS.

Illawong Lodge is located 2.4 km south of Guthega Dam adjacent to the Snowy River near where Pounds Creek joins the Snowy and close to Mount Twynam and Mount Anton that are part of the Main Range. It is unique as the only ski lodge outside the main resort areas. Constructed as Pounds Creek Hut in 1928/29 and adapted as Illawong Ski Lodge in 1956/57 it links the huts and lodge case studies discussed above. Illawong Lodge provides evidence of two key stages in the history of back-country ski touring in the alpine area and the Government’s changing role in the provision of accommodation in the Park. Its location is very specifically linked to these two phases of use (which is ongoing) and is an important part of its significance.

Pounds Creek Hut was probably constructed with NSW Government Tourist Bureau assistance, and certainly with its approval, for use by (Sir) Herbert Schlink in his trip, known as The Crossing, with a party of five on skis from Koandra to Kosciusko in 1927. Schlink had formed the Ski Club of Australia, who were interested in ski touring, in its break from the Kosciusko Alpine Club in 1920.

This association with ski touring continued after the war when skiers who skied westward off the Main Ranges added to the original hut to form Illawong Lodge. These enthusiasts were members of the Ski Tourers Association established by Charles Anton in 1950. Illawong is the last remaining one of the back-country lodges/huts constructed by the Ski Tourers Association with KSPT approval.

Illawong Lodge has historical and social significance for its association with the history of ski touring in the Australian Alps. It has particular social significance for the members of Illawong Ski tourers, most of whom have a long and close association with the lodge for its particular sense of place (remoteness), its unique history and unusual aspects of its occupation and maintenance.

Discussion

Like the huts and resorts of Kosciuszko National Park, Illawong Lodge is an example of how the location of buildings can speak strongly of the use and history of the landscape. Illawong Lodge has a sense of place that is strongly connected to the history of remote back-country skiing in the alpine areas in two distinct phases before and after the Second World War.

The strength of the social significance of Illawong Lodge is such that if the building is destroyed, then its reconstruction is justified on heritage grounds and its association with location is such that this should be at or near its current location. Policy on reconstruction of huts and lodges in KNP is being considered in the current KNP Plan of Management review and this should take into consideration the nature of significance and the role that location has in this significance.

Conclusions

The historic places discussed in this paper show that buildings can be a "door" through which the broader landscape and a sense of place can be accessed; provided, however, that the historic relationship between the building and its landscape is fully appreciated.

The future conservation of historic resources will be best achieved by integrating their conservation with the broader landscape. The examples discussed here show that understanding these historic resources in their environmental context will help achieve this integration.
The hut landscapes in Kosciuszko National Park record in their fabric and their associations a transition from a resource to be exploited to one conserved and appreciated. The resort landscapes evolved from a time when the preservation of alpine landscapes was beginning and they continue to reveal the changing relationship between conservation and recreation in alpine landscapes. The landscape setting of Illawong Lodge provides evidence of the history of alpine ski touring, including downhill skiing off the western face of the Main Range.

The future management of the ski resorts and huts in the alpine areas of NSW is a matter of coming to terms with the history and associations that are embedded in the landscape. An integrated approach to assessment and management of the landscape based on the foundation stones of natural and cultural heritage allows the story of landscape to be told and thus a true sense of place to be appreciated by all.

Postscript

This paper was presented by the author, Senior Associate of Godden Mackay Logan Pty Ltd, heritage consultants, at the Celebrating Mountains Conference in Jindabyne, NSW, 26 November 2002. In January 2003 bushfires destroyed or badly damaged 19 huts in Kosciuszko National Park: one fifth of the huts resource in the Park. Following this tragedy and as an outcome of a review of the Plan of Management for Kosciuszko National Park, the NSW NPWS commissioned Godden Mackay Logan in association with Context Pty Ltd to prepare a Huts Conservation Strategy to update significance assessments (in particular undertake social values assessments), and to prepare conservation policy, including in relation to the huts lost during the fires.

Endnotes

4 ibid
5 Neville Gare pers comm to Geoff Ashley.