Mountain landmarks: the icon place, the sublime view, the place for prospect

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This paper presents an introduction to the multifaceted values of a special group of mountains in southeast Queensland, the Glass House Mountains. The Mountains are approximately 120 kilometres, about one and a half hours drive, north of Brisbane. Many Australians are familiar with them by image if not having seen them directly, for they have become synonymous with the region. Like the crags known as The Sisters in the Blue Mountains, and the Twelve Apostles on the Victorian coast, the distinctive forms of the Glass House Mountains have made them nationally recognizable. Aspects of the perception of mountains are briefly explored, the identification of landmarks, the identity of place, the scenic feature, the sublime experience, the place for prospect and the iconic status. The Glass House Mountains have these aspects at varying times.

Mountain as landmark and landscape framework

Many mountains have a strong visual presence in a scene through their landmark and elevation above the surrounding terrain. Through their location, their relationship to other mountains or a mountain range, and their landscape character, they can have great distinctiveness and landmark qualities.

To the European settlers in Australia, constrained by biogeography and their means of travel, the mountains, even Australia’s low ranges, were often a formidable presence. They were very much the physical framework of the setting of settlements and development. And today, the mountains we know around our towns can be landmarks, contributing to our aesthetic enjoyment of the landscape and identifiers of place, but still they are often remote or separate to our lives, signifying our landscape setting, but not the heart of our place. Some of Australia’s mountain areas have become World Heritage Areas, in part due to their isolation from our patterns of settlement and development on the landscape: the Blue Mountains, the Wet Tropics, the Scenic Rim. Mt Warning is a distinctive peak, a landmark in the Tweed and Byron Shires as the Glass Houses are to Caloundra Shire. The rugged Hinchinbrook Island range seen from the coast from Halifax region, like the Malbon Thomson Range east of the Cairns region, are unusual mountain frameworks in that they enclose the coastal landscape on the east. All these mountains are landmarks and the strong element in their regions’ landscape framework. They define the identity of each region, as we form our relationship with place and setting from our position on the busy coastal plain.

Mountains identify place

A view of a mountain can bring to the viewer a personality of their landscape setting. The mountain silhouette highlights the sky by contrast: the pattern of clouds moving near the mountain, the glow of a sunset. The mountain face displays the winds, the shadows of clouds, the rising blue of forest air, the mists from the gullies. The seasons are shown by the clear view of flowering trees in a forest, or the dry season revealing the grass hillside after the wet season forest closed it from view. The mountain enriches the character and identity of its landscape setting.

The visibility and prominence of the mountain landscape can dominate the landscape character of a locality or district. Where a range forms a landscape framework, local identity is signified by naming the distinctive features such as rock outcrops or jagged peaks. Mountains are known as holders of traditional stories. Aboriginal peoples identified places with their ancestors, clan figures, and the continuity of their relationship with place. Pyramid Mountain near Gordonvale holds a strong significance for the Indigenous community and was also a vital part of their knowledge of their place both as landmark and lookout. Similarly, the Glass House Mountains story and naming shows us their ties with the Indigenous community.

Mountains as scenery

For Australia with its ancient weathered landscape, relatively low mountains and rounded relief, a mountain with a rugged peak and a prominence above adjacent terrain gains a strong place in the regional or local identity. The distinctive mountain may be a landmark for its recognizable form but it also will generally become scenery. It is named; lookouts and viewpoints are established from which to view the feature, attachment to the mountain grows, and soon the locality is identified by the mountain. Postcards hold the scenery in memory and the image is used for promotional materials.

Viewing mountains can also be a contemplative or inspirational experience. The grandeur of the natural landscape, the contrast with the patterns of settlement, usually below the mountain proper, and the isolation and quietude of this distinctive place imbue a sense of calm and can evoke inspirational thoughts, poetry and prose.

Mountains as a place of prospect

The establishment of a lookout for viewing, high on a mountainside or on the summit, has been a strong element of western culture since at least the eighteenth century. The position of prospect gives the viewer knowledge of the wider landscape, not always understood from the plain, and a position of separateness from the everyday world and its mundane activities. One is ‘up with the gods’- apart and knowing. Or the viewer is finding a new depth of meaning in knowing a place, its character, and of the pattern of activities there.

The icon

Some mountains have such prominence in a region, a distinctive form, have many associations for the community, or are an aesthetic and spiritual inspiration, that they become
icons for that place. Castle Hill in Townsville seems to have iconic status for that town; similarly Mt Wellington is a very strong part of Hobart's identity and symbolises to the town the mountain wilderness inland.

The Glass House Mountains and their locality history

The Glass House Mountains are volcanic plugs of trachyte and rhyolite which rise above the coastal plain. They were seen by Captain Cook on his 1770 voyage and he noted they reminded him of the glass furnaces of Yorkshire.

There are sixteen Glass House Mountains. Eight of these are within the Glass House Mountains National Park (approximately 920 hectares). This is not a contiguous park. Its eight separate portions encompass only the steep-sided mountains. The exposed rock faces and mountain heath vegetation, and the open eucalypt woodland on the slopes have high environmental values and there are several endemic plant species. The remaining eight mountains and much of the immediate landscape surrounds are in State Forest Reserves. A major part of the cultural landscape setting is in freehold title. The Mountains and their landscape setting are within two local Government areas, predominantly in Caloundra Shire, and partly in Caboolture Shire.

The first settlers in this area were the Archers who settled at Durundur in 1839. In 1862, cotton came to the area to the south, near Caboolture, then in 1867 gold was discovered at Gympie to the north, and Old Gympie Road was born. Cobb & Co. ... started a coach run to the goldfields. (Horton 1988: 141)

Rest stages for coaches and settlements followed. Logging was one of the first activities in the area by European settlers from the early 1870s. A rail line was opened in 1890 and in 1902 the first state forest reserves were established around Beerwah. Pineapple and fruit farms were established in the early twentieth century and continue as major agricultural activity to today. In 1916 Crown Land near Beerburrum was surveyed for pineapple farms for returned servicemen. By 1921 the area was the largest soldier settlement in Australia. The Glass House Mountains became lookouts and recreation features from early in the period of European settlement. Ludwig Leichhardt, who stayed with the Archers for three months in 1843 before his journey to Port Essington, climbed Mt Beerwah.

The cultural landscape setting

The southeast Queensland region has a subtropical climate. The annual rainfall of 1000 to 1200 mm combined with the fertile volcanic soils on much of the generally flat or gently undulating lands between the mountain peaks brings a luxuriant vegetation and agricultural productivity.

The coastal plain landscape around the Glass House Mountains is predominantly rural and semi-rural, with forestry and agriculture of small cropping and orchards. There are quite a few villages along the main historical settlement routes. The newer Bruce Highway is to the east of most of the mountains and the rural landscape setting, running through extensive forestry plantations and eucalypt woodland areas. The old Bruce Highway here is now designated the Glass House Mountains highway and a scenic route. It presents to the visitor a highly scenic landscape of farms or natural landscapes with the dramatic presence of some of the Glass House Mountains close to the road. Further inland winds another through-road, the old Gympie Road, along which the awe-inspiring mountains and the picturesque farmlands unfold for the traveller and inspire the artist. The Glass House Mountains sit still and grand over the busy and productive landscape setting. Even the lower mountains without steep-sided peaks are massive forested mounds contrasting to the patterned and colourful crop land and rural residential developments.

The Glass House Mountains story

The Glass House Mountains have a high significance to the traditional owners of this region. Their understanding and value of the mountains is integrated with the meaning they assign to the whole of their landscape or place. The coastal land between Redcliffe and Maryborough is the land of the Gubbi Gubbi, (or Kubi) the Jagera, and others. There are quite a few Europeans recordings of the Indigenous peoples' story of the mountains. One of those tells of Tibrogargan and Beerwah, the mother, and their many children:

One day, Tibrogargan saw that the sea was rising. He called to his eldest child to go and help his mother ... But Coonowrin ran off by himself to play. ... Tibrogargan, was so filled with shame ... that ... his tears flowed out into the sea. Coonowrin went then to his mother but she also wept, as did the other children when he appealed to them in turn and there were many streams flowing across the plain to the sea, as there have been ever since. (Horton 1988: 141)

The full story has been reproduced in books and interpretative material, so has for a long time been quite well known by
southeast Queensland residents. It has become a part of the European Australians' understanding of the place and perhaps part of its symbolic and spiritual meaning. The Glass House Mountains are now seen as a family, likely as much because of this story as for the visual relationships in the scenery.

An experience of the Glass House Mountains

The Glass House Mountains can often present the sublime in the landscape. Mt Tibrogargan will suddenly loom over the road as one drives north up the highway from Brisbane. The apparent moods or character of the mountains vary considerably - each has a diverse personality. They change with the weather, in sunsets, and according to the season. The forestry practices can bring a dramatic change in one's knowledge of the Mountains and their inter-relationships. When a plantation next to the highway is clear felled, a whole new, distant landscape is opened to view and new mountains are revealed.

In the morning with the sun in the east or near overhead, the Mountains are detailed with their rock peaks or rich textured forest bases. For the majority of viewers, the many thousands each day on the two major north-south highways, the Mountains are seen to their west. The afternoon brings a backlight that makes Mt Tibrogargan darker and more brooding than ever, and Mt Coonowrin and Mt Beerwah silhouetted against a hot, golden late afternoon summer sky are amongst the most memorable and distinctive landscape features in the south-east Queensland region.

To the first-time visitor to the Sunshine Coast hinterland and the Glass House Mountains, the view from the highway or train is often striking due to those strangely shaped and isolated peaks jutting up from the pastoral plain. They would be both recognised landmarks from all the published images, and beautiful features for their awe-inspiring mass and forms and the scenic landscape setting. Following several visits as a traveller through the region, with stops at the small villages or roadside stalls, or on undertaking some bushwalks and climbs to the lookouts, or relaxed sightseeing driving tours, the Glass House Mountains and their stories, both geological and of legend, become more known and appreciated in many more ways.

The family group these Mountains form adds a depth of meaning to the landscape appreciation. Each mountain is rarely seen on its own. Even from very distant viewpoints close to the NSW border, two or three of the peaks will indicate where the family is sitting. Passing on the highway one still has time to see Tibrogargan appear over the trees and then to watch that brooding, thinking presence for some time. The mountains seem to have gathered here speaking to each other—of the beauty of the forests on their slopes—but surely wondering at the scramble and development around them.

Alan Smurdon, the pineapple and avocado grower who lives near the foot of Mt Coonowrin appears to give little notice to the awe and prominence of the mountain: 'they are just there'. Nevertheless, he was moved to recount his observation of the curious effect of the mountains on the weather. It appears they can break up the power of storms. Over the 25 years there he has virtually had no hail on his blocks, while neighbours a little way away can have an extremely damaging hail storm.

Lookouts and prospect

The Glass House Mountains are a drawcard for many daytrippers from Brisbane and wider parts of southeast Queensland. The mountains in their natural and cultural landscape setting would play a significant role in attracting visitors to the region for holidays and hinterland recreation. Bushwalking to the summits of Mts Tibrogargan, Beerwah, Ngunung and Coonowrin has been popular for decades. Rock climbing and abseiling are also popular pursuits. The tops of these peaks are a desirable destination. The panoramic outlooks encompass a very diverse landscape of forested foothills and reserves, agricultural land of pineapples, fruit trees and crops, forestry pine plantations, small villages, and the roads and highways and rail line traversing the plain and serving the rapidly growing coastal urban developments.
The established, readily accessible mountain lookouts are on Mt Beerburrum and Wild House Mountain (walking access only). Popular lookouts of the Glass House Mountains in their wider setting are from the Glass House Mountains lookout and Mary Cairncross Park. All these elevated viewpoints provide that desired prospect, and scenery that is sublime, awesome and also picturesque. From the lookouts the different mountains’ striking forms rising out of the plain can be fully appreciated. From here also, the family relationship of the mountains is revealed. The Gubbi Gubbi and Jagera peoples stories of this place add a distinct meaning; however, even without that knowledge, the visitor has hints at story with the mountain names, and appreciates a relationship between these strange, massive or jagged peaks beyond the geographical.

There is revealed also the pattern of settlement - of agriculture and forestry, recreation, industry and tourism - in the landscape spreading out below. This is a diverse natural and cultural landscape with flourishing urban areas. These mountains within that setting are valued as places of prospect to survey that changing landscape and its stories.

The icon of place

Images of the mountains are frequently used to identify the region: in local government logos, promotional tourist, recreation, and liveability publications, real estate advertising and product marketing. Images of the mountains have been so frequently used in recent years the Mountains are now one of the primary signifiers of the region. It appears only the beaches have more prominence. Other coastal regions have wonderful beaches so the Glass House Mountains are used as distinct symbols to indicate the uniqueness and naturalness of the Sunshine Coast.

The mountains as icon are presented sometimes with one mountain, usually Mt Tibrogargan or Mt Coonowrin for their distinctive outlines, but generally, a few of the mountains are shown in their setting. The landscape setting is selected as primarily a natural or picturesque agricultural landscape, or parts of both, or presented from a distance with a scenic foreground. The urban and suburban development, which is extensive in the region, is rarely included, unless it is the foreground at the beach. Both the coastal and hinterland districts appropriate the Glass House Mountains.

A nominated landscape

In February 2004 the Queensland Heritage Council nominated a part of the Glass House Mountains regional cultural landscape to the Queensland Heritage Register, namely, the National Park area. This nomination is in the process of development by EPA Cultural Heritage staff and discussions with traditional owners and local government.

In November 2004, the Queensland Heritage Council nominated the Glass House Mountains National Park for inclusion in the National Heritage list as an Inspirational Landscape. The reasons presented included:

- The Glass House Mountains are ancient landforms that illustrate the evolution of the landscape and geological history of volcanic activity in the area.
- The Glass House peaks are central to the creation myths of the region and have a high degree of cultural significance to Indigenous people.
- The mountains have been continuously depicted for 227 years since Cook first sketched and described them as ‘Glass houses’ in 1770. International artists such as Geoffrey Dutton, Thomas Shapcott and David Malouf have all written poetry inspired by the Glasshouses, and writers such as Judith Wright also drew inspiration from the mountains in her short story ‘The Mountains Played’.
• Innovative contemporary landscape painters such as Lawrence Daws have depicted the mountains in his famous series of works simply entitled 'Glasshouse Mountains'.

The Glass House Mountains National Park is a significant recreational resource.

The other Glass House mountains and the cultural setting which is a key part of the aesthetic landscape appreciation and cultural value of the Glass House mountains as a whole are not included in this nominated area. The complex issues of conservation and management of such a diverse cultural landscape, under many tenures and jurisdictions, and as part of so many communities' place and identity, remains to be addressed.

A conservation management guideline for these unique mountains and their whole landscape setting, needs to be prepared with the many communities which hold values, attachments, and inspiration from the mountains.

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