‘Rocks are rocks, mountains are mountains’: Aboriginal values of mountains

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It is particularly appropriate that these celebrations have occurred in the Australian Alps. These mountains have enormous iconic significance for all Australians and of course are of particular significance to the Aboriginal people whose ancestors shaped and have been a part of this country since time immemorial.

A new approach

A new approach to Aboriginal heritage management is being developed in New South Wales, one which respects the notion that Aboriginal knowledge and culture is both traditional and contemporary, and that the physical heritage traces require the stories and traditions of people to give them context.1 It acknowledges the unbreakable ties between Aboriginal cultural heritage and nature, and it recognises that Aboriginal people are the owners and interpreters of their heritage.2

Increasing attention is being given to the way Aboriginal people have maintained and adapted their cultural identity since European invasion. By working with Aboriginal people, we gain an understanding of the way ‘links with the land continue to be expressed through story, descent, occupation and use’.3

Aboriginal heritage is made up of places, stories and knowledge which have as much value and relevance today as ever before. Continued use of wild resources for foods, medicines and materials, and aspirations for an active role in the management of protected areas, are testament to this. Ian Brown from the Yarrawarra Aboriginal Corporation on the mid north coast of NSW has said that having continued access to traditional lands ‘...is one way of getting back a bit of us, not just our heritage and culture, but we’ re getting back to ourselves and with our land our actual mother...our blood actually flows through the land. Every headland, every rocky outcrop, will be mystical or have a story to it’.4 This view challenges the common assumption that authentic cultural values have been lost in New South Wales.

Back to the future

In many ways this new approach is like going back to the future. For over a decade, from 1973, the NPWS and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies undertook a sacred sites survey program in NSW. The survey team was led not by an archaeologist, but by Anthropologist Howard Creamer and Aboriginal Sites Officer Ray Kelly, now a respected Dhungutti elder. According to Uncle Ray, many non-Aboriginal people at the time were of the opinion there were no Aboriginal sacred sites in NSW and that any that did exist would not be significant to the Aboriginal people of the day. The work of the survey team proved these views wrong. Many Aboriginal people, elders particularly, were concerned about the protection of their special places and agreed to share information about these and their associated stories and ceremonies. This has since been the experience of others, including the archaeologist Scott Cane who notes that many sacred sites are:

Locations of worship, the abode of ancestors, a place of learning, a source of identity and community coherence.

They are the store house of sacred materials and are valued in mythology, territoriality, identity, cultural transmission, security, economy, reciprocity, politics and education. The sites are real, relevant and reinforcing. If these places had significance in the past, their stature has grown in the present.5

Mountains are mountains

The Survey team recorded nearly 600 sites of spiritual or ceremonial significance to Aboriginal people across New South Wales, including many sites associated with mountains. They found that not only are the coastline and plains dotted with evidence of Aboriginal occupation, but that Aboriginal people moved across the landscape and into mountain areas for ceremonial purposes and to collect wild resources.

It is generally acknowledged that the Aboriginal significance of sites and places can only be determined by Aboriginal people. Mountains have always been the focal point of cultural landscapes. They often dominate a landscape and have importance for more than one cultural group. As such, mountains are often places where people gathered for ceremonies. All over New South Wales mountains contain important and often secret ceremonial sites, to which access is restricted to the initiated. Many older Aboriginal people can recall being told as children about the ceremonies that took place on mountains and how it was forbidden for them to go there without the permission of Elders.

The formation of mountains is usually linked to significant dreaming stories. The Anaiwan people of the NSW Northern Tablelands tell of two brothers who were always fighting over food, women and weapons. The brothers were eventually banished to the far ends of Anaiwan country and turned into mountains. The two brothers now protect their land and people.6 Mountains are often linked by family connections. One of the best known stories is that of the Three Sisters of the Blue Mountains, turned to stone by their witchdoctor father to save them from being harmed by an angry bunyip. However, in his own efforts to escape the bunyip, the witchdoctor lost his power and his daughters now stand silently on their mountain ledge, waiting to be brought back to life.

Legends such as these are an important means of transmitting intergenerational wisdom. They teach important life skills and provide a tangible link between people and the places they value.7 The telling of these stories is a ‘creative act’. Each time a story is told it may be varied depending on which lessons the teller wants to emphasise. In this way, stories remain relevant and responsive to people’s need.

Many mountains are gender specific. Gulaga (or Mt
Dromedary) on the far south coast of NSW is a woman's mountain and from certain viewpoints resembles the shape of a reclining woman. There is an expression used by Yuin people that when the old woman puts on her possum skin cloak the rain will set in (i.e. when the clouds cover the top of Gulaga, the rain will set in). However, some parts of Gulaga are also accessible to men. Often in Aboriginal cultures, the west is associated with women and the east with men. Accordingly, men's access to Gulaga is along the eastern ridge, while the western side is the women's side.

An important aspect of Aboriginal culture is the relationship between individual sites and the landscape within which they lie. It may be not only the mountain that is significant but the sites and places that can be seen from the mountain. Alternatively, mountains can provide a link between significant features or places, giving them a collective as well as an individual meaning. Only with an understanding of this wider context is it possible to assess true meaning. This is the case for the Australian Alps. Kosciuszko is the most famous of the peaks in the Alps and yet it is only one of many peaks with significance to Aboriginal people. Together, they form an important complex of initiation sites, trails, and sacred places which are all related. The cultural importance of Kosciuszko is therefore embedded in a much wider range of country than the peak itself.

When it comes to the Aboriginal significance of a mountain, size definitely does not matter. Pigeon House Mountain was so named by Captain Cook because of the way he perceived its distinctive shape and the way it dominates its immediate surroundings. However, Yuin people view Pigeon House from a different perspective. We call it Bulgaan. The mountain’s significance is associated with its resemblance to a woman’s breast, and also with its proximity to a traditional trading route between the coast and the tablelands. Although only rising to a humble 720 metres above sea level, Bulgaan is one of the most spectacular natural landmarks in New South Wales and of immense significance to Yuin people.

To Yuin people Mumbulla Mountain is Biarnanga, a sacred place associated with the initiation of young men. In Yuin legend, the landscape of the Dreamtime was featureless until superhuman beings formed headlands, lakes, rivers and mountains. These ancestors of current Yuin people had great power and young people had to be shown how to maintain good relations with them. The arrival of Europeans, to whom the importance of sacred Yuin places was invisible, prevented them being visited. They took gold from Gulaga in the 1890s and logged Biarnanga. However these places continued to be respected and kept alive by the old people. In 1978 Guboo Ted Thomas led the Wallaga Lake Aboriginal community in a campaign to stop logging on Biarnanga and protect their sacred sites associated with it. It was six months before logging was halted and the claims of the Yuin community investigated. To most people in the non-Aboriginal community there was nothing special about Mumbulla Mountain – as far as they could see ‘rocks are rocks, mountains are mountains’. But, according to Guboo Ted Thomas: ‘These are sacred matters which must be kept quiet...These are our laws which come to us from the mountain. We only talk about these things when we are forced to do so in order to protect our sacred places’.

Many claimed that this secret sacredness was invented and the then Minister for Conservation was reported as having said there would need to be more evidence than just someone ‘knocking two sticks together and chanting’ to justify the claim. But in 1979 the report of an anthropological and archaeological investigation by Brian Egloff was released, supporting the Yuin people’s claims. As a result, 7508 hectares of forest around Mumbulla Mountain was declared Biarnanga Aboriginal place under the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1974.9

Later, Biarnanga Aboriginal Place became part of Biarnanga National Park. In 1996, as part of the Eden Forest Agreement, Biarnanga was listed on Schedule 14 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act. Part 4A of the Act provides for lands so listed to be vested in a Local Aboriginal Land Council on behalf of their traditional owners. These lands are then leased back to NPWS and managed by a Board of Management comprising a majority of Aboriginal owners. Unfortunately Uncle Ted is no longer here to see the end of the fight for Biarnanga that started nearly 25 years ago.

It is significant that of the seven protected areas currently listed on Schedule 14 to be returned to their Aboriginal owners, four are associated with culturally significant mountains. These are Biarnanga NP, Gulaga NP, Mount Grenfell Historic Site (near Cobar) and Mount Yarrowyck NR (near Armidale).

Places may be declared Aboriginal places under s84 of the NPW Act that are or were of special significance with respect to Aboriginal culture. Aboriginal places may or may not contain physical evidence of Aboriginal occupation. What is important is that significance is determined by Aboriginal people and places that do not contain physical evidence can be afforded the protection of the NPW Act.

Over the past three years, NPWS has been revisiting the work of the Sacred Sites Survey team of the 1970s, with a view to completing the investigation of places nominated for declaration as Aboriginal places. Not surprisingly, many of the places nominated were mountains. Also, not surprisingly, given that NPWS now manages over 6.5% of NSW, many of the places nominated have since been incorporated into protected areas. Despite this fact, many Aboriginal communities have determined that their original nominations should continue to be pursued. As a result, Aboriginal places have recently been declared over a number of culturally significant mountains within protected areas. In these cases, declaration of an Aboriginal place is not so much about protection, but recognition of the cultural significance of a landscape reserved primarily for its nature conservation values. This is also a call from Aboriginal people for active participation in decision-making with respect to their special places within protected areas. Elders are traditionally recognised in Aboriginal society as having the right to determine access to sites in their area. They also have the right to speak on and determine questions of use in relation to those sites.

The declaration of an Aboriginal place within the Gibraltar Range National Park has prompted Aboriginal Elders in the Glen Innes area to commence negotiations with the NPWS to prevent access to their sacred site. The Elders have asked that the site not be promoted to park visitors, that signs be removed and a walking track in the vicinity of the site be closed. NPWS has been challenged with finding a solution which respects the Aboriginal significance of the area, while retaining a popular park visitor experience.

Although keen to have their sacred mountains protected and recognised as Aboriginal places, many Aboriginal people do not want their location or the details of their significance...
generally known. Many believe that the best protection for significant sites is to keep them secret. As we have seen in the case of Biamanga, it is often only when these sites are in immediate danger that people are prepared to talk about how significant they are. Others would prefer to let significant sites and information about them be destroyed than compromise their obligations to protect them by giving information to people who shouldn’t have it.

Of course many mountains have significance beyond their Aboriginal values. Many are regional icons, most have significant natural heritage values and are associated with recreational activities ranging from bushwalking to abseiling and even snow skiing. Unfortunately, these values sometimes compete with and are detrimental to Aboriginal values. An obvious example of this is Mt Warning, known to local Bundjalung people as Wollumbin (meaning ‘cloud maker’). Mount Warning is the main chamber of a 23 million-year old former volcano which dominates the World Heritage-listed landscape of the far north coast of New South Wales. As such, Mount Warning contributes significantly to the sense of place and identity of the people of the far north coast and is an integral part of the natural and cultural fabric of the region. Mount Warning is also associated with the European ‘discovery’ of Australia, being named by Captain Cook as a visible landmark to warn mariners of the Point Danger reefs near the mouth of the Tweed River.

In the mid-1800s, forestry in the region provided one of Australia’s earliest export industries and, in the 1980s, prompted one of the earliest forest preservation campaigns and arguably the beginning of the modern conservation movement. Parts of the current Mount Warning national park were reserved for recreation and conservation purposes in 1928. To the Bundjalung people, Wollumbin is a revered warrior who overlooks the entire Tweed valley. Wollumbin holds great cultural significance for all Bundjalung people from Yamba in the south to Brisbane in the North. Mount Warning is of course, also the first place on the Australian mainland to be touched by the morning sun. Largely for this reason, its summit receives 100,000 visits a year. NPWS previously supported visitation of Mount Warning, maintaining its walking tracks and installing a viewing platform on its summit. By the end of the last century, Mount Warning had become so popular as a destination to view the sunrise on New Year’s Day, that a ballot had to be conducted to restrict visitor numbers.

In 1999, local Bundjalung people sought an injunction to prevent year-2000 New Year celebrations taking place on Wollumbin, claiming that these activities were disrespectful of their cultural beliefs and were having an unacceptable impact on their sacred mountain. Although their efforts were unsuccessful, a direct consequence of this action has been that the NPWS now more fully understands and recognises the significance of Wollumbin to the Bundjalung people and has committed to cooperative management of the mountain with the Aboriginal community. This has involved the establishment of an Aboriginal management committee for the area.

As I said earlier, Aboriginal heritage values are not restricted to the pre-contact era. Mountains are also associated with events of great historical importance to Aboriginal people, not all of which are cause for celebration. Massacres of Aboriginal people are known to have occurred on mountains. This is because massacre sites are often associated with the camp sites at which their victims sleep or gather. Camp sites are likewise associated with ceremonial life and in the early days of invasion ceremonial gatherings left Aboriginal people particularly vulnerable to massacre.

In 1835, for instance, Aboriginal men, women and children were trapped on the edge of a large cliff in the Barrington Tops area by white settlers and either leapt to their death, or were thrown over the cliff edge, depending on which report of the incident you accept. This site is of great significance to Worimi people today and, although protected as part of Mt Mackenzie Nature Reserve, is currently the subject of an Aboriginal place nomination.

In the century following invasion, mountain country was also a refuge for Aboriginal people escaping European violence. In 1842, a letter to the editor of the Sydney Morning Herald recounted the retreat of Bungulgi people of the mid- Clarence area. In part the letter reported that:

Since the hostile encounters with the blacks which took place upon this river about a year ago… they have rarely shown themselves, but have kept among the mountains, and avoided all intercourse, always making off as fast as possible if accidentally seen…

More recently, at the time of the Darwin bombings, during the second world war, some Biripi people moved on to Middle Brother Mountain in fear of a Japanese invasion.

Aboriginal people’s knowledge of country and ability on horseback were critical to the development of pastoralism in NSW. Aboriginal people were very skilful at mustering stock through mountainous terrain, often utilising traditional pathways.

For Aboriginal people today, mountains are no less significant than they were to their grandparents and great-grandparents. Mountains are still important in defining connections to country and providing a community’s sense of purpose and belonging. Because of their prominence in the landscape, mountains are at the centre of territorial organisation and spirituality for Aboriginal people. They often form a natural border between neighbouring countries and give a distinct identity to people to whom they are important. An Aboriginal person’s ‘country’ is literally their place of origin, culturally and spiritually. It encompasses all the places, stories and cultural obligations with which people are associated.

Mountains are integral to country and culture. And for me, their significance is really summed up by Biripi elder Pat Preece speaking of the Three Brothers:

It brings me back to my Aboriginality. Everything my race has stood for. I stand in the shadow of them… Just to think how long they have stood there and my people lived in the shadows of those mountains. They fished, they hunted, they gathered and wherever they looked, wherever they were camping with a campfire of a night, they’d get great comfort from those places. And that’s what sticks in my memory today and it’s held men in good stead for many years knowing there’s something there like that.
Endnotes

8 Ibid, p. 55.