The cultural significance of Australian alpine areas

Here where red dust rose
To raddle sheep and men
And the kelpie tongued at noon,
Silence has come again.
The great-boled gumtrees bow
Beneath their load of snow.

The drover and his dray
Have gone; and on this hill
I find myself alone
And time standing still.
Printless the white road lies
Before my quiet skis.

But where my skis trace
Their transient snow furrow,
For generations both
Man and beast will follow.
Now in this winter passage
I cross the deserted stage.

In these lines from David Campbell's poem, Winter Stock Route, the falling snow blots out evidence of human use in the high country. Is this a metaphor for how we see cultural values in the Alps - recognised, then forgotten, buried or over lain?
The cultural values of our alpine environments are specialised and many are of national significance. These values may be seen in items, places and physical features, but can also be associated with intangible qualities such as people's associations with or feelings for an item or in other items such as cultural practices, knowledge songs and stories.

Existing knowledge about cultural values in the Australian Alps and Tasmania

Cultural heritage databases for places in the alpine national parks give some indication of site types, but the collection and analysis is not comparable between agencies. Cultural values can be organised by themes to allow comparisons. Nevertheless, pastoral sites, mining and pathways/routes predominate. Many of these pathways were based on prehistoric routes used by Aboriginal people in their seasonal occupation of the alpine country (Grinbergs, 1993; Cubit and Russell, 1999).

Zones of extensive historical activities, such as gold-mining, have been identified. Cultural landscape zones have not been formally delineated even though management guidelines have been prepared for them and some areas are obvious, such as Currango and Kandira in Kosciuszko National Park, Orrvalley in Namadgi National Park, the suite of Historic Areas gazetted in Victoria and Tasmania's Cradle valley and the Upper Mersey valley.

Lack of data about Aboriginal occupation and use of the alpine areas hinders building a picture of continuity and extent of use over the last 40,000 years and particularly over the last 200 years, although the Monaro study by Young and Mundy (2000) is a step towards addressing this.
The following table summarises identified cultural heritage sites/places in 1999 by each national parks agency, although historical place data has not been included for Mt Buffalo.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Aboriginal place</th>
<th>Historic place</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSW</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>1440</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACT</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>375</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania -WHA</td>
<td>746</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C'with -RNE*</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>109</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>1718</td>
<td>2474</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Note -RNE places are also identified in State/Territory listings

Historic themes and assessment of significance

The historic themes used as a way of grouping places with similar cultural values at the 1991 Jindabyne Symposium on the Cultural Heritage of the Australian Alps (Scougall 1992) were:

- Aboriginal occupation and interaction with the environment prior to European contact
- Exploration and survey
- Pastoralism
- Mining
- Logging and silviculture
- Water harvesting
- Recreation and tourism
- Communication and transport
- Conservation and park management

These have been revised in the recent review of the cultural values of Kosciuszko National Park (Sullivan and Lennon, 2002). 'Exploration and Survey' and 'Transport and Communication' have been subsumed into other themes, such as 'Pastoralism', or run right through all the themes, and the Aboriginal theme has been expanded. Assessments of cultural values have moved to a wider contextual consideration, in which the overarching value of all heritage items is their value to society and other attributes, such as aesthetic, scientific or historic value, are seen as subsets of this general social value (Byrne, Braysaw and Ireland, 2001).

The significance of some items and landscapes arise from more than one theme. One outstanding example relates to the group of Kosciusko Huts built for pastoral workers then used by miners, scientists, engineers, tourists, artists and bushwalkers, while another example is the continued association of related communities to the Alps, because of their
part in its history and their associated customs, knowledge and attachment to the mountains.

Cultural significance of the Australian Alps

The natural setting and alpine environment influenced the area's cultural heritage. It has the highest altitude in Australia, a large percentage of land above the snowline, characteristic vegetation and fauna, rugged terrain and a severe and unpredictable climate. The climate, remoteness and difficulty of access influenced Aboriginal and European occupation. Specific building and working adaptations, and seasonal use of the high country, characterised European use of the area. Topography had greatly influenced movement through the area. Natural resources — Bogong moths and upland food resources, pasture, and gold and other minerals, timber, water, and snow and scenery — have created waves of settlers and transient users who have combined to give the Alps a rich heritage. These attributes of occupation also apply to the Tasmanian high country.

Aboriginal values:

Aboriginal occupation in the Tasmanian Wilderness currently dates from 36,000 years and 21,000 years in the Alps. The mainland high country was the traditional gathering place for the Bogong moth festival, one of the most important Aboriginal cultural and social events in south-eastern Australia. Because of ethnographic evidence and continuing Aboriginal traditions about this event, the sites, routes and physical remains of the activities associated with it are of scientific, historic and social value at a State and possibly a national level.

The traditional European emphasis on scientific (archaeological) research and on the role of men in Aboriginal society has left a legacy of biased recording and analysis of Aboriginal cultural heritage. This has led to misunderstanding and downplaying of some aspects of Aboriginal culture in the national parks and an emphasis on places at the expense of landscapes. Aboriginal people and Aboriginal landscapes tend to be invisible to many Australians, and in particular contemporary Aboriginal connections in South Eastern Australia often go unrecognised or are actively denied. This situation constitutes a threat to the cultural significance of the Aboriginal heritage in alpine areas.

Pastoral values:

Pastoralists used Aboriginal land use patterns and every explorer and squatter in the alpine district was assisted by at least one Aboriginal guide (Lennon, 1992:145). By the early 1850s most of the Alps had been nominally occupied by pastoralists although the severe winters of the high country checked permanent occupation and grazing there (Lennon, 1999: 42).

The alpine pastoral theme represents a unique variation of a way of life and a period of economic and social development which is of historic significance at a national level. The huts, homesteads, transhumance routes and associated remains constitute physical evidence of pastoral life which is only found at these altitudes. They also represent the way of life of pastoral workers, a theme not well demonstrated elsewhere except for Tasmania's Upper Mersey valley. Currango is of national historic significance as the largest and most intact pastoral settlement above the snowline in Australia with 25 remaining buildings and ruins spanning 150 years of European occupancy.

The physical setting of pastoralism is of national aesthetic significance, having been used for over a century by Australian artists to create works of literature and art now nationally celebrated and forming part of the national psyche.

The pastoral theme has strong social value, demonstrated in the active continuation and celebration of its traditions and respect for its physical remains including its landscapes, wild horses, and stock routes. ‘The Man from Snowy River’ is known in many households around Australia. In this sense the social value of pastoralism is of national importance.

The most celebrated wild horses in the Australian pastoral tradition are those associated with Kosciuszko, which have become a national icon, as demonstrated in literature, film and the Man from Snowy River sequence which opened the 2000 Olympic Games. Conversely, the damage done and management problems created by horses in the high country is considerable and directly conflicts with other more significant conservation values. This is an area in which there is a clear conflict of cultural and natural values requiring careful management.

The darker side of the pastoral theme was also played out in the Alps — pastoralism contributed to the disappearance of the viable and uniquely adapted Aboriginal hunter-gatherer lifestyle, the decline in Aboriginal population and the abandonment of many traditional places in the Alps.

Mining values:

Mining rushes in the 1850s and 1860s had a major impact on the Alps, not so much because of the actual area mined, but because of the intensity of the operations. Mining brought large numbers of people into the sparsely settled unexplored Alps, and provided impetus to regional industries and the development of fledgling towns.

The Klondike gold field, being the most extensive and successful Australian field at this altitude demonstrates national historic significance most readily interpreted in the landscape in its combination of a range of mining associated cultural features rather than at individual sites. It also had one of the largest Chinese camps in the nineteenth century (LRGM Services, 2002: 53).

Logging and forestry values:

Logging of alpine and mountain ash forests required understanding the snowy climate and regeneration requirements for sustaining the industry. Timber production was of regional importance in supplying building materials for the miners and then for huts and later chalet buildings in the Alps.

The Alpine Creek sawmill sites are of state significance as they represent a range of techniques to process mountain ash timber from water wheel through to steam and diesel power. It has been argued that pining in Tasmania — the extraction of Huon Pine from the earliest convict occupation of the south west until the 1850s — was of national significance (Lennon, 2002).

Water harvesting:

Water harvesting is a theme of national historic and social significance in the Alps. The Snowy Mountains Scheme (1949-74) is the largest engineering scheme ever undertaken in Australia. It operated for a quarter of a century and directly recruited 60,000 Europeans; it has national significance as an engineering feat, as a symbol of Australian achievement, and a basis for Australia’s postwar multicultural society. The scheme
had a deep and lasting impact on its workers and is appropriately remembered by them and their descendants. Socially, the impact of many foreign male workers had a big effect on the life of the regional towns and their social mores.

Scientific research, conservation and park management values:
The achievement of Alpine science is also part of cultural heritage even though Australian historians have frequently neglected science in their narratives. Before 1940, most science in the Alps was incidental, unrepeatable and descriptive – the science of exploration by individuals. Since 1940, much has been experimental, problem-oriented and sustained over repeated visits. It has often been institutional in derivation, such as vegetation analysis studies which shaped the way the soil conservation agencies of Victoria and New South Wales undertook their work (Griffiths and Robin, 1994). The nineteenth-century botanical investigations of Von Mueller and Maiden were of international interest as were the geological studies of Edgeworth David, the anthropological work of A.W. Howitt and the meteorological studies of Clement Wragge (Lennon, 1999:54).

As the largest national park in Australia when established, Kosciuszko has played an important role in the evolution and development of the discipline of park management. Concentration on nature conservation has had its costs. Certainly the removal of stock from the high country had been well demonstrated to be an ecological necessity, but there was initially insufficient recognition of the loss of way of life, and treasured traditions and a breaking of strong emotional ties, which resulted from the cessation of grazing in the high country (Read, 1996).

In the same way zeal to restore a 'pristine' environment initially ignored the long Aboriginal heritage of the Park, and also led to the destruction or damaging neglect of valuable historic heritage fabric, most notoriously at Kiandra. This in turn has led to protest, lobbying and research by heritage conservationists, and a gradual revision of policies and procedures to protect cultural heritage.

Recreation values:
Gold-rush Kiandra was the birthplace of Australian skiing and claims international significance as the 1861 Kiandra Ski Club is the oldest in the world. Recreation has become an important aspect of Kosciuszko by 1898 when the first complaints of damage to the high country by grazing were made by Helms who complained that it interfered with 'the artist and tourist who seek the picturesque' (Gare, in Scougall, 1992: 320).

Mount Kosciuszko itself in its setting as Australia's highest mountain has national significance as a symbol, a source of inspiration, and a recreational attraction for visitors.

The ski fields and resorts have elements of state and regional significance for historic, aesthetic and social reasons because of the important social movement they reflect and represent, of elements of architecture and layout, which reflect developments in the history of postwar design and its adaptation to the high country, and their influence on visitor numbers, patterns and behaviour.

Many place names in the resorts commemorate pioneers in the Australian ski industry, such as Sponar's and Anton's T-bars in Thredbo and Zali's run at Perisher Blue. The ski tube and its associated engineering work have national historic and scientific significance as an innovative and excellent example of design, engineering and construction in a difficult and sensitive environment.

The Kosciuszko Huts, now a major recreational asset, represent a diverse history of transient land use and are important historical markers of different, often overlapping land use but do not necessarily reflect a balance of these phases, since most extant huts date from the 1920s to the 1950s. A characteristic of the huts is their continual adaptation and as a group the complex of huts, ruins and huts sites have national historic and social significance.

The foregoing illustrates that it is knowledge of associations with places which has become an important attribute of cultural values. While many of these cultural values may be of national and international significance, some have outstanding universal value, the requirement for World Heritage listing.

World Heritage significance of the Australian Alps

The cultural landscape category was introduced into World Heritage nominations in 1992 to integrate the natural and cultural attributes of places where there was a long history of human interaction with the landscape. Parts of the Alps can be regarded as cultural landscapes of designed, relict, evolving and associative categories. The area is criss-crossed by networks of tracks from various periods by Aboriginal, pastoral, mining, recreation users. There are layers of physical heritage, evidence of human occupation in the landscape, and there is the intangible heritage of stories, songs and music, poetry and art (Lennon, 1999: 36-63).

Whether these cultural landscapes have the time depth to illustrate outstanding universal value through human interaction for a hundred generations with their landscape is a debatable point – except for those areas in the Alps, above the tree line, where the continuity of human seasonal movement is possibly the longest and most ancient practised – for 21,000 years. The Tasmanian Wilderness WHA also offers an outstanding example of traditional hunter-gatherer use from 36,000 years. It is most likely the oldest occupation of any extreme climate mountain lands in the world and this would confirm its outstanding universal value as a place of continuous human seasonal use. And more particularly since rising sea levels separated Tasmania from the mainland about 12,000 years ago, Tasmanian Aboriginal culture has survived one of the longest known periods of geographic and cultural isolation affecting a society (Lennon, 2002).

Outstanding universal values have to be assessed as a regional expression of the World Heritage Committee's global strategy and as Australia is a continent, there is a case for considering our alpine cultural values in this context.

Conclusion

Despite the extensive identification and assessment of cultural values in Australian alpine areas and official listing of some on heritage registers, cultural heritage still has little legitimacy in heritage conservation in the mountains. It remains concerned with 'dots on the map' – the recording of mostly archaeological sites, and some restoration of historic fabric. It is time for managers to weave the evidence of long-term historical processes into their management planning to consider climate
change, fire histories, and impacts of previous occupation. These provide baseline data from which to measure change and provide frameworks in which to deliberate on the likely impacts of current landscape interventions.

Over the last 10 years much work has been undertaken on connections to the Alps by Indigenous people and their large attendance at the International Year of Mountains conference shows their interest. Parallel with this is the need for respect for contemporary Aboriginal people as they sort out their genealogies because of their dispossession from country and family. We are pressuring them to be equal partners in managing a shared heritage place, but they have asked for respect and support as they go through the process of recovering culture and connections to country. If we do this, new understanding and shared meanings will follow, resulting in a more sustainable heritage.

There is an undercurrent of an either/or approach to natural and cultural heritage. But it is time to share our advances in knowledge. We have learnt much over the last decade – Indigenous connections, identification of cultural heritage in a landscape and regional context, better understanding of historical processes, continuous monitoring of natural values, and some innovative partnerships. Whilst there are different levels of understanding, there should not be too much angst about ‘cultural’ or ‘natural’ but a coming together to strengthen the argument for conservation of our mountains.

We need to acknowledge that our continent is a cultural landscape and we should stop trying to pretend that humans did not have an influence. They have had a presence, varying levels of impact and given associative values to most of Australia. In the mountains the time depth of that presence from 40,000 years ago when Tasmania was linked to the mainland has left many associations.

We need to accommodate Aboriginal people and pastoralists with strong feelings towards the mountains and listen to their grief at losing connection to favourite places. Acknowledging their loss, listening to their histories and sharing their love of the place will result in stronger conservation which is our mutual objective.

We need to balance our work. Some approaches become fashionable but site protection and monitoring require constant budget. Loss of corporate knowledge and intellectual property rights need to be addressed, as well as follow up to projects in which much effort was invested, like the cultural landscapes management guidelines devised with field staff in the mid-1990s.

Mountains are seen as natural areas protected through legislation for all time. Yet they are dynamic and ‘cultural landscapes’ are a useful concept to apply in managing the various values layered in these landscapes and their tangible and intangible expressions. Pathways of meaning await those willing to look at the cultural values in our mountains.

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