



Managing mixed sites and cultural landscapes: Challenges and opportunities in Alpine National Park

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■ Abstract

There are many natural and cultural layers that make Alpine National Park significant, and there are strong linkages between many of these values. This mixed site, including various cultural landscapes, is afforded heritage protection through state and national legislation and is noted for both its natural and cultural attributes, including rare flora and fauna, tangible and intangible Aboriginal heritage, and over sixty Alpine Huts constructed after European settlement. Balancing the dual natural and cultural imperatives in this mixed environment is complex and challenging, particularly in relation to enabling access for over one million visitors each year, sustainably managing the dynamic ecosystems and broad-ranging values, and directing rehabilitation efforts following extreme weather events. However, there are also opportunities to embrace the synergies and narratives that connect some of these values, particularly in relation to celebrating 'shared heritage,' and acknowledging the lessons learned and impacts of past land management practices.

KEY WORDS: Alpine National Park, Mixed site, Cultural landscape, Nature-culture linkages, Natural and cultural heritage

■ 1. Introduction

In a World Heritage context, mixed sites are areas recognised as having elements of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of both natural and cultural heritage (UNESCO 2019). Some mixed sites that demonstrate the 'combined works of nature and of man' may be described as 'cultural landscapes', however others may only meet the OUV threshold under cultural criteria while its natural attributes do not (Larsen and Wijesuriya 2015). In an Australian context, the natural and cultural values of nationally heritage listed places are similarly considered in a single integrated system. Alpine National Park (ANP) is recognised as being of outstanding heritage value to the nation for many natural and cultural reasons (Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy 2008), and could be described as a large mixed site that includes various cultural landscapes.

Located in north-east Victoria, ANP is one of eleven (11) inter-state national parks and reserves that collectively make up the larger 'Australian Alps National Parks and Reserves' (AANP) environment, which is included on the Australian National Heritage List. There is general consensus among experts that AANP could meet both natural and cultural OUV thresholds in a World Heritage context (Lennon 1999). There have been previous efforts to progress potential World Heritage listing for this mixed site, however the complexities around exploring and articulating the full spectrum of and relationships between those mixed values, in addition to other political pressures, has created significant challenges. Natural values have previously tended to be more fully understood and have generally taken precedence, while there has historically been a lesser emphasis on recognising the various cultural values, which has resulted in a somewhat unbalanced proposition. In more recent years, however, there has been far greater

exploration and documentation of the various cultural values (Lennon 1999, Truscott et al. 2006).

The undulating mountains of ANP comprises 6,460 square kilometres of land (2,494 square miles), including Victoria’s highest peak, Mount Bogong (1,986 metres above sea level), and some of the highest areas of the Great Dividing Range (‘high country’). The tableland, montane, sub-alpine, and alpine altitudinal zones enable a diverse range of flora and fauna to thrive. During the warmer months, wildflowers bloom and long sunny days attract hikers, cyclists, and campers; while in winter, the mountain peaks and iconic native trees are blanketed in snow as the Alpine Resorts and larger region transforms into snowfields for skiers into snowfields for skiers [Fig. 1].



Figure 1: An alpine ski resort during winter (Source: Author 2019)

Aboriginal people have had cultural associations with the Australian Alps for tens of thousands of years. Many tangible remnants and archaeological sites remain scattered throughout the high country, including material

expressions of an artistic and religious nature, and evidence of the ways in which Aboriginal people adapted to changing climates and a wide range of environmental conditions. Intangible stories, practices, expressions, knowledge, and skills also provide information about this cultural heritage, and include accounts of Aboriginal ‘dreaming’ narratives that highlight sacred traditional associations and mythological significance (Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) and Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC) 2014, Lennon 1999). European settlers began arriving in the larger Alps region from the 1820s, and took ownership of land shortly thereafter primarily for seasonal cattle grazing. The cattlemen continued their agricultural practices in the summer months for over one hundred and fifty years, and constructed hundreds of Alpine Huts throughout the landscape to use as shelter. In later years, additional Alpine Huts were also built as temporary shelters for gold miners, foresters, government workers, skiers, and bushwalkers (Butler 2005) [Fig. 2].

In the latter half of the 20th Century, grazing was progressively withdrawn from the more sensitive higher areas of the Alps due to mounting scientific evidence of the resulting environmental impacts (Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology 2001). In 1989, after extended community campaigning, several parks were amalgamated to form the large contiguous ANP. Almost twenty years later, in 2008, the larger AANP area was included on the Australian National Heritage List (Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy 2008).



Figure 2: Visitors at ‘Wallaces Hut’ (Source: Author 2019)

■ 2. Significance

The larger AANP has both natural and cultural heritage values, and is recognised as a nationally significant site that is afforded protection under national heritage legislation – the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act (1999) (Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy 2008). Further state-level legislation provides additional protection for some specific cultural heritage within this landscape (including Aboriginal cultural heritage, built heritage, archaeological sites) that are of significance to the more localised Victorian community (Victorian State Government, Department Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) 2019). Both of these values-based heritage designations highlight the various natural and cultural values that make the place significant, and identify the specific attributes through which those values are expressed (Australia ICOMOS 2013).

The high altitudes of ANP provide refuge for a unique and broad range of cold-climate plant and animal species, including the Bogong daisy-bush (*Olearia frostii*) which can be found only in this region. Alpine Ash (*Eucalyptus delegatensis*) and Snow Gums (*Eucalyptus pauciflora*) are prominent, while the rare Alpine Sphagnum Bogs are especially important in maintaining the hydrography of the landscape, and providing habitat for a number of endemic and threatened animal species including the Corroboree Frog. Only found in a few scattered alpine and sub-alpine areas, the rare ground-dwelling Mountain Pygmy-Possum (*Burrhamys parvus*) feeds on Bogong Moths (*Agrotis infusa*), and is the only exclusively alpine marsupial that stores food and hibernates during winter. Bogong Moths migrate long distances from the lowlands in neighbouring states where they breed and feed, to the high alpine country in early summer where they cluster and remain dormant in rock crevices and caves (Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy 2008).

Prior to the displacement of Aboriginal people caused by European settlement, various Aboriginal clans gathered seasonally on the high peaks for intertribal meetings, trade, ceremonies, and feasting on these Bogong Moths. While these traditional moth feasting activities are specifically acknowledged in the Australian National Heritage Listing, no other Aboriginal cultural heritage values are formally recognised, and this is widely considered by Traditional Owners and heritage experts to be a limitation of the heritage listing

(Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) and Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC) 2014, Lennon 1999).

Many of the documented cultural heritage values are related to the land use of European settlers, and include transhumant grazing (Alpine Huts, former grazing areas, stock yards and routes), scientific research (botanical, soil, karst, fauna, fire, and glacial research sites), water harvesting (tunnels, aqueducts, power stations, and former settlements associated with the Kiewa Valley Hydro-electric Scheme), and recreation (snow sports). The associative social significance of the area to some community groups is also acknowledged (mountain cattlemen, skiers, and bushwalkers), as are the associations with a number of well-known artists (including Eugene von Guérard) and writers (including 'Banjo' Paterson) who have immortalised this area in contemporary popular culture (Australian Government, Department of the Environment and Energy 2008).

■ 3. Management

All five (5) of the National Parks in Victoria that are included in the larger nationally heritage listed Australian Alps area, including ANP, are directly managed by Parks Victoria. A Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the responsible authorities across adjoining States – Victoria, New South Wales, and Australian Capital Territory – is in place and formalizes a cooperative approach to managing the larger AANP as a single biogeographic entity. An inter-governmental 'Australian Alps Liaison Committee' (AALC), and associated Reference Groups, include members from each responsible authority and collaboratively advises on strategic management issues (Australian Alps National Parks 2016).

Day-to-day management priorities include protecting the natural environment, fire management, preserving cultural heritage, nurturing community partnerships, enabling access for people, and supporting research and monitoring. A range of community groups contribute to managing this mixed site, including volunteer hunters who assist in the delivery of pest control programs, and other volunteer groups who assist in the maintenance of the various Alpine Huts (Parks Victoria 2016).

Alpine National Park is noted as an area of Aboriginal cultural heritage sensitivity, and the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act (2006) requires

that consideration is given to the potential impact on cultural heritage of any proposed activity in such areas. If proposed activities are considered to have a 'high impact,' the preparation of a Cultural Heritage Management Plan (CHMP) and approval by Traditional Owners is required to mitigate any risks (Victorian State Government, Department Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) 2019). This process enables Traditional Owners to consider and more holistically safeguard all significant Aboriginal cultural heritage, above and beyond the limited range described within the formal heritage listing.

One (1) specific Alpine Hut and various gold-mining remnants and sites within ANP are also noted of being of particular significance to the people of Victoria and are therefore also included on the state-level Victorian Heritage Register, which provides additional protection under the Heritage Act (2017). If any works are proposed to these structures or on the immediate surrounding land, consideration must be given to whether the heritage significance would be affected, and subsequent approval by the expert administrators of the legislation is required. All known and unknown archaeological sites over 50 years old are also automatically afforded protection under this legislation (Victorian State Government, Department Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) 2019).

■ 4. Current State of Conservation and Challenges for Continuity

Maintaining all of the natural and cultural values that make this mixed site significant is a careful balance – particularly in light of increasingly severe weather events which continue to impact the alpine landscape and ecosystems. Although bushfires often destroy built heritage (Alpine Huts), and severely impact the natural environment (drought and drier conditions are increasing fuel for larger fires); they also enable the natural regeneration cycles of some vegetation (including slow-growing snow gums over



Figure 3: Snow Gums slowly regenerating after bushfires many years ago (Source: Author 2019)

long time periods), and sometimes reveal tangible archaeology related to Aboriginal cultural heritage (including rock shelters, stone tools) [Fig. 3]. The scale and intensity of extensive bushfires in 2019-2020 resulted in widespread and severe impacts to the larger South-Eastern Australian landscape, including a large proportion of AANP, and surveying and recovery efforts are underway.

Ongoing research shows that introduced animals and plant species, and climate change are causing changes to vegetation (feral foxes, cats, deer, and horses are understood to be trampling the alpine environment; and other plant species are considered to be encroaching on water sources), and are threatening biodiversity (including inhibiting Bogong Moth breeding which results in food scarcity for the threatened Mountain Pygmy Possum) (Parks Victoria 2016). A recent Australian Federal Court case on the proposed trapping and removal of feral horses from two areas of the Alps highlighted some of the tensions within the EPBC legislation, and resultant competing priorities around protecting natural and cultural values in this multi-layered AANP environment. Some community groups consider these feral horses (also referred to as 'brumbies') to be of cultural value, and as contributing to the heritage significance of AANP. The Federal Court of Australia, however, found that in this case, actions taken to protect natural values (meeting Australia's obligations under the Convention on Biological Diversity) took precedence over the consideration of assessing possible impacts on national heritage values (Australian Brumby Alliance Inc v Parks Victoria Inc 2020).

■ 5. Recommendations

It is widely acknowledged that the conservation of the natural environment (including 'restoring' the landscape by re-establishing native vegetation) has traditionally been the primary interest of agencies managing National Parks, and that cultural heritage matters (such as conserving evidence of previous land use) are subsequently a secondary concern (Brown 2012, Lockwood and Spennemann 2001). AANP is a heritage place with both natural and cultural values, and while there are important environmental challenges to address, efforts to modify the landscape and replicate earlier environmental conditions must be tempered with regard for the ways humans have shaped those same areas over time. The Management Plan (Parks Victoria 2016) acknowledges that evidence of previous land-use can be an important part of the heritage of a park, and both the natural and cultural

values of such places should be considered before intervening and reshaping the landscape to meet what pre-European settlement conditions were presumed to be.

There are many opportunities to strengthen nature-culture linkages by expanding narratives to highlight both the natural and cultural impacts associated with the previous and current land use at specific sites, regardless of perceptions around the success or failure of such practices. Such intertwined and authentic heritage storytelling will enable us to view these cultural landscapes as socioecological systems, and better balance the conservation of both the natural and cultural values of our heritage places.

With a particular focus on cultural landscapes within ANP, there is potential for further innovative interpretation around 'shared heritage' narratives (the collective memory of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities) – in particular, further acknowledging the network of Aboriginal cultural routes throughout the area, and the later use of those same traditional paths by European settlers (who were often guided by Aboriginal people). Many such trails remain in use today (including parts of the Australian Alps Walking Track), however interpretation exploring the overlapping historical use of these routes by both Aboriginal people and European settlers is limited. The Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) and Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC) (2014) note that further research should be prioritized to better understand the

connections between ceremonial sites, pathways and the spiritual meaning of high points within the Australian Alps.

Another specific opportunity for a further expansion of narratives in relation to cultural landscapes is around a number of fenced land enclosures, 'Maisie's Plots', which were set aside in 1945 for research purposes by a pioneering female plant ecologist, Maisie Carr (nee Fawcett) [Fig. 4]. This longitudinal study is one of Australia's longest continuous vegetation monitoring programs and is still actively visited and studied by ecologists. The data captured demonstrated the significant impacts on important alpine vegetation that cattle grazing had, and subsequently led to the withdrawal of cattle grazing in the Alpine area – representing a significant change in land use. The locations and background of these plots are not widely known, nor are they specifically heritage protected in their own right (Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology 2001).

It is imperative that mixed sites and cultural landscapes are managed in such a way that both natural and cultural values are afforded equal consideration. Authenticity in heritage storytelling enables us to reflect on the past, and articulate the lessons learned. Regardless of whether human interventions (such as land use) have resulted in positive or negative environmental outcomes, the linkages and indeed interdependencies between nature and culture should be drawn out and acknowledged. Our mixed sites and cultural landscapes can tell us so much about the human journey in nature.



Figure 4: Maisie's Plots (Source: Author 2019)

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