

Australian Alps Aboriginal Cultural & Spiritual Values

The Australian Alps are a place of great cultural significance for the Australian Alps First Peoples.

This project was designed to look at why the Alps are important to Aboriginal people – today and in the past. This summary describes the project aims and tasks, the consultations undertaken and the outcomes.



Background

This project was initiated by the Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) and the Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC).

They were concerned that the National Heritage List (NHL) for the Australian Alps did not represent the range of values held by Aboriginal people who have traditional owner and historical associations with the Australian Alps.

In summary the National Heritage List focuses on “the Indigenous history of moth feasting as the basis for large-scale gatherings of different Aboriginal groups for ceremonies”.

Project aims

The project aimed to:

- 1 - Draw together existing research and the knowledge of Aboriginal communities to identify the Aboriginal cultural and spiritual values of the Australian Alps
- 2 - Analyse this information in relation to the criteria for the National Heritage List and make recommendations about the next steps.

Scope

The Australian Alps NHL area is vast. Many different Aboriginal peoples have a connection to the Alps.

This project had a small budget, and so it was clear from the beginning that it couldn't cover everything. The aim was to provide a good foundation so that knowledge and understandings can be built on over time and through further consultation.

Key components

Literature review

The first task was a literature review. This provided a summary of what has been recorded on the Aboriginal history of the Alps.

The project scope did not enable the project team to analyse site records across the Alps; this is recommended as one of the next steps.

Consultation

The project team met with AATORG in May 2013 to start the project and plan the consultations, and again in May 2014 to present the project report.

The project team also met with members of Northern KAWG (Northern Kosciuszko Aboriginal Working Group), VAEGTORG (Victorian Alps & East Gippsland Traditional Owner Reference Group) Southern KAWG (Southern Kosciuszko Aboriginal Working Group), and with a number of the ACT traditional owner groups and Registered Aboriginal Organisations. Some meetings were with groups and others with individual representatives. The budget limited the amount of consultation that was possible.

As well the project team read reports from the First Nations Gatherings, previous studies of cultural and spiritual values, and reports arising from Alps-wide Aboriginal consultations.

Analysis

Once we had gathered as much information as we could, we analysed it in relation to the nine NHL criteria (see page 4). Our aim was to identify specific Aboriginal cultural and spiritual values that exist across all or a large part of the Alps that could meet the threshold of ‘outstanding heritage value to the nation’.

Draft Statement of Significance

The Australian Alps are of cultural significance to Aboriginal people:

Aboriginal people who recognise themselves as having a 'living, spiritual connection with the mountains'¹ value the Australian Alps as a place that is significant to their past and present:

- As the place of their ancestors from time immemorial
- As land to which they belong and where they feel at home – a place that forms part of people's personal and collective identity
- As country interconnected by dreaming stories and ceremonial paths, and where there are places of spiritual significance, including places where evidence of creation ancestors is revealed²
- As a place containing an extensive and diverse range of sites and localities associated with their ancestors, demonstrating the duration of Aboriginal association with this land and aspects of their cultural traditions
- As a living landscape where the land itself, the mountains and all creatures are respected and form part of an interconnected web, and where each is essential to the whole
- As land that gives life – to people, to all creatures and to the wider lands of south-eastern Australia through the waters that come from the mountains³
- As country to which Aboriginal people have cultural rights and responsibilities, including those connected to totemic species, to land management, to rites of passage and to lore/law
- As a totemic and symbolic environment alive with meanings able to be interpreted by Aboriginal people
- As an important meeting place for Aboriginal clans from many nations within and beyond the mountains where cultural exchanges, ceremonies and other activities occurred, probably over millennia
- As a place for learning and teaching, where Aboriginal people can reveal and demonstrate their continuing knowledge, can reconnect to the land and the lives of their ancestors, and where knowledge that has been passed down through generations can be passed on
- As a place where traditional practices have been and should continue to be carried out
- As a landscape made up of many distinctive places, each with particular connections for individuals, families, local Aboriginal people and clan groups.



¹ This phrase 'living, spiritual connection with the mountains' is taken from the Kosciuszko National Park Plan of Management statement developed by the Kosciuszko Aboriginal Working Group – reproduced in full in Section 4.

² Note: some dreaming stories and places associated with creation ancestors have been recorded but more appears to be known within the Aboriginal community or by particular people.

³ This connection has recently been celebrated in the Murra Bidgee Mullangari River Ceremony that was held on 30 September 2013 at the Uriarra East picnic area, Murrumbidgee River, Stromlo, ACT. "For the first time in more than 200 years, Traditional Custodians from the mouth of the Murray River in South Australia will perform ceremony with Traditional Custodians in Canberra on the banks of the Murrumbidgee River, to reawaken an ancient pathway that connected their nations for more than 25,000 years." Source: <http://www.canberra100.com.au/news-and-media/image-galleries/?albumID=88>

Potential national heritage values associated with Aboriginal history & culture

The course and pattern of history [Criterion a]

Aboriginal occupation and lifeways in the Australian Alps represent a unique and distinctive response to the nature and challenges of this alpine landscape.

The wide cultural influence created through ceremonial gatherings in the mountains, supported by or linked to the practice of gathering and eating the bogong moth, appears likely to have been important in the course and pattern of Aboriginal history across a large part of south-eastern Australia. The ceremonial gatherings are already recognised as a National Heritage value because the 'moth feasting' sets apart these 'annual gatherings of different Aboriginal groups for ceremonies' from other Aboriginal ceremonial gatherings in Australia.

The network of Aboriginal pathways into and through the alpine area, used for ceremonial and travel purposes, appears likely to be of some antiquity, linking Aboriginal clans and nations and supporting cultural exchanges and trade. The use and development of the network of traditional Aboriginal pathways by the colonial settlers, often guided by Aboriginal people, has been important in the early establishment of pastoral activities in the alpine area and the development of a practice of transhumance grazing, an attribute already recognised as of National Heritage value.

The adoption of these Aboriginal cultural routes and the continuity of use of some routes through to today is also an aspect of their significance as it has influenced the pattern of travel into and through the mountains for over 200 years. It also represents an early and important intersection between Aboriginal and colonial settler histories.

Creative or technical achievement [criterion f]

The development of techniques and tools for harvesting, processing and preserving the seasonal bogong moth resource is a potential aspect of outstanding heritage value to the nation, representing a technical achievement in food preservation technology by Aboriginal people of which there are very few examples nationally. Given the richness of the moths as a food resource, preserved moth 'cake' could have been a valuable trade item. Further research is required.

Strong or special associations for social, cultural or spiritual reasons [criterion g]

The Australian Alps are of outstanding heritage value to the nation for the strong and enduring social and spiritual association of the Alps with more than 18 Aboriginal clan groups from across south-eastern Australia for whom the Alps were part of their traditional country or as an area over which they had other rights.

Aboriginal occupation of the Alps and the associated cultural expressions are represented in a network of pathways, ceremonial practices and sites, and in combination with moth hunting demonstrating a uniquely Australian cultural activity.

Importance as a part of Indigenous tradition: criterion (i)

This may be an aspect of outstanding heritage value to the nation, however more research is needed. The aspects of potential significance could be the extent of ceremonial pathways and sites linked to key high points, and knowledge about the ways in which ancestral creation beings are revealed in the landscape or have guided spiritual and traditional practices.

Full report:

Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Values of the Australian Alps: Project Report, June 2014, prepared by Chris Johnston (Context Pty Ltd), Andrew Sneddon (University of Queensland, and Maddy Maitri (Maitri Archaeology) for the Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) and the Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC).

What are the National Heritage list criteria?

The place has outstanding heritage value to the nation because of a place's:

- a. importance in the course, or pattern, of Australia's natural or cultural history
- b. possession of uncommon, rare or endangered aspects of Australia's natural or cultural history
- c. potential to yield information that will contribute to an understanding of Australia's natural or cultural history
- d. importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of:
 - i. a class of Australia's natural or cultural places; or
 - ii. a class of Australia's natural or cultural environments;
- e. importance in exhibiting particular aesthetic characteristics valued by a community or cultural group
- f. importance in demonstrating a high degree of creative or technical achievement at a particular period
- g. strong or special association with a particular community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons
- h. special association with the life or works of a person, or group of persons, of importance in Australia's natural or cultural history
- i. importance as part of Indigenous tradition.



Project Recommendations

In seeking a better recognition of the Aboriginal spiritual and cultural values of the Australian Alps, it will be very important to put real effort into more consultation, research and recording.

The project recommends:

1. A research agenda or program be established by AALC and AATORG to continue to document and draw together information that will help build a broader understanding of the Aboriginal history of the vast area of country covered by the Australian Alps.

For the National Heritage List, the priorities are to better understand:

- The connections between ceremonial sites, pathways and the spiritual meaning of high points
- Knowledge of ancestral creation beings and any associated lore/law in relation to ceremonies or cultural practices
- The technologies, tools, knowledge and lore associated with moth gathering and processing.

2. Establish a GIS-enabled database to hold important information (subject to cultural protocols established by Aboriginal people).

3. Record more oral histories and make existing ones more available, subject to cultural protocols.

4. Recognise the Australian Alps as an Aboriginal cultural landscape and apply the national heritage management principles to all Aboriginal heritage – tangible and intangible.

5. Consult widely with Aboriginal people with traditional and historical connections to the Alps to share the results of this project and discuss the next steps.

6. Consider an approach to the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment and the department in relation to seeking an expansion of the National Heritage List values.

For more information about this project

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