NEWS FROM THE ALPS
E-BLAST
THE ALPS PROGRAM. WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS.

The best of classrooms on a magical day: the group gathers at Mount Cope to examine changes in vegetation due to elevation.

THE BEST COURSE

Riddle: what have a mathematician, two federal government public servants and a smattering of ski resort staff have in common? Answer: they're graduates of the Alpine Ecology Course. To find out why they and others (park rangers, indigenous peoples' representatives, and anyone with an interest in the mountains) sign up, we've had a chat with John Morgan. Read on and you'll see why getting a seat at this field-taught, six-day experience is a brilliant way to learn not only about Australia's alpine and sub alpine landscapes, but also how to set yourself up to keep on teaching yourself more about them…

John is Associate Professor and Head of Department at La Trobe University's Department of Environment & Genetics. A bushwalker in his youth, he became seriously infected by the Australian Alps bug 25 years ago when he signed up under Warwick Papst to help with the long-term ecological monitoring of the famous Maisie's Plots. Fast forward to the early 2000s when John formally joins a perfectly formed research centre being created under the hosting umbrella of Latrobe University. Named the Research Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology, it formally drew together the ultimate collection of alpine ecology's who's-who-from-everywhere including partnering universities, the University of Melbourne and Australian National

University. The Centre is where scientists, researchers and post graduate students share, collaborate and ignore institutional barriers. It's also home base for the Alpine Ecology Course, which according to John is the longest running field-based professional teaching course in Australia* - think vintage, boffin-esque with a dash of celebrity and an estimated 1300 graduates** to date.

As John explains, a park ranger who's just starting their career in the Alps might sign up, or someone more seasoned but whose previous experience is of a completely different setting, like the Basalt Plains. "Our aim is to help those responsible for managing alpine landscapes gain the ecological knowledge they need", and over six days, a dream team of alpine specialists guide around 30 students through a series of sessions designed to help them read the landscape, understand how it got to be there and where it's going with all that's living in it."

"On day one we assume no base knowledge. We take the group out into the field and start with the question, "what's going on here?" This last March we were looking at a small catchment area at Cope Creek where we drew a line – a transect – across a landscape that rose 30 metres over a distance of about 200 metres. At the bottom was a sphagnum bog; next a grassland; then an open heathland with a mix of grasses and shrubs; higher up a closed heathland populated with dense shrubs; then snow gums at the top." Helping the group to look for patterns and armed with knowledge from course leaders, they began to see the forces at play: where slow water helps bogs to form; how cold air settling in hollows is tolerated by grasses but not shrubs which grow better higher where it's warmer; how the established root systems of shrubs are better able to cope where water is more scarce."

Dean Heinze, expert in Mountain Pygmy Possums, shows a smaller group of students how to check traps.

Over the next six days, a range of subjects is covered in detail, and progressively the participants pick up speed, building on their skills to break down and understand how a landscape gets to be the way it is, what's happening in it and why. Knowing that participants have individual reasons for joining the class, the course offers flexible learning via a series of elective field projects: how to test water quality; methods for monitoring insects or larger species like the Mountain Pygmy Possum; looking at damaged landscapes and working out which methods work best for their recovery.

Above: Stoneflies (*Thaumatoperla alpina*) reproducing, something few people witness. Below: up close with a Mountain Pygmy Possum (*Burramys parvus*), which was trapped near Mt McKay, weighed, examined and released as part of ongoing studies into their survival.

“On the final morning we have a reflection session where small groups use their existing and new knowledge. They work together to establish their shared view of the existing threats, how they may shift in future and how management could be organised to be most effective. The leave understanding the power of the individual in contributing to long term management strategies, and they leave with a ready-made network for the future.”

There are plans to hold the next course early next year (2025): if you’re interested, email alpine.ecology@latrobe.edu.au, check out the 2024 course flyer, or visit the Research Centre for Applied Alpine Ecology’s site.

*A precursor during the late nineties, held over three day courses were run for secondary school geography and biology teachers. **There is no formal assessment.

THE DREAM LINE-UP

John Morgan explains the significance and the legacy of the indomitable Masie (Fawcett) Carr and the test plots she established, which helped establish healthier management of the Australian Alps.

Check out who was up on the Bogong High Plains at the most recent course, sharing their expert knowledge…**Keith McDougall** is a plant ecologist who has studied the vegetation of the Bogong High Plains and its long-term responses to climate change. **Michael Nash** has studied a wide range of terrestrial invertebrates in the alps and their role in the ecology of plant communities. **Ian Mansergh's** enduring passion is the conservation of the endangered Mountain Pygmy-possum in the Victorian alps and restoration of its populations and habitat. **Dean Heinze** has an intimate knowledge of the breeding and behaviour of alpine fauna, gained from long-term field studies. **Neville Rosengren** is a renowned geomorphologist who has surveyed geoheritage sites throughout Victoria. **John Morgan** is a botanist who specializes in the rare plants, invasive species and plant communities of the Australian Alps. **Sam Grover** studies alpine soils and their response to a warming climate. **Ewen Silvester** is an aquatic geochemist who combines his extensive experience of alpine peatland hydrology and ecological studies.

Neville Rosengren (right) makes geology captivating (even at the base of the dry Rocky Valley dam wall, leading students to clamber over boulder streams to help build understanding on how landscapes come to be. Keith McDougall (second from right) describes the botany and unique features of the plants the geology supports.

TELL US YOUR STORY: We are always looking for stories to include in this newsletter. What's happening in your part of the Alps? If you've built a new bridge, cleared a track, managed pests, done vegetation restoration works or worked on threatened species recovery, why not send Dave Crea a photo and a quick line and he'll take care of the rest. Maybe you just went for a particularly fabulous walk and would like to share your experience. We're always happy to hear from agency staff members, volunteers and members of the general community.

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