NEWS FROM THE ALPS

THE ALPS PROGRAM: WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS

The entrance of cave site Y259, which is located close by to Deep Creek, is already known to have been used by ancestral Walgalu in the past. This cave looks very similar to sites in southwest Tasmania which contain dense archaeological deposits dated back to at least 35,000 years.

THE SEARCH FOR ICE AGE, COLD CLIMATE LIVING

A collaborative team of Traditional Owners and archaeologists is tackling an Australian Alps mystery. Back in the last ice age, the rich Tasmanian archaeological record tells us that ancestral Palawa communities were highly adapted to living in subantarctic cold-climate landscapes. At this time, Aboriginal communities could walk between Tasmania and the mainland, connected by a land bridge where Bass Strait is today, and it is likely that cold-climate adaptive knowledge and technologies were being shared. Given this, why does the archaeological record in the Australian Alps seem to begin after the ice age ended?

A collaborative project between the Brungle-Tumut Local Aboriginal Land Council and Dr Georgia Stannard of La Trobe University is aiming to investigate this question. Georgia's PhD research focussed

on ancestral Palawa communities living in south-west Tasmania at a time when they were the most southerly people on the planet. “The world at this time was in the grips of a global ice age, and we’d assumed that living in this landscape would have come with significant physiological stresses.” The well-preserved Tasmanian sites offered a high-resolution snapshot of how people were coping. “The archaeological record suggests that these communities were highly adapted to this climate and landscape, using varied landscape management strategies and technologies throughout this period. This evidence is significant for the Alps because the existing (limited) archaeological narrative suggests that people were not regularly using the High Country until around 6,000 years ago, after the last ice age had ended.”

The obvious question now is, why couldn’t people be living in mainland cold climate landscapes, such as the Australian Alps, in similar conditions, at the same time as their Tasmanian contemporaries? Could it also be that there were people living either side of Bass Strait, crossing it on foot to share knowledge, technology and adaptive tips up until about 8,000 years ago when rising sea levels caused the Bassian Plain to transform into Bass Strait?

As it stands, not much is known about people potentially living in the Australian Alps during the last Ice Age, mainly because of the limited deep time archaeological research that has been undertaken. The most extensive study undertaken before the recent Snowy 2.0 works is now over fifty years old, and was completed when archaeology was practiced with a dominance on Western scientific analyses. Interpretations were also dominated by a Western lens and relied heavily on ethnohistorical records including diaries and letters.

Shane Herrington is a proud Wolgalu and Wiradjuri man and a dedicated Traditional Owner and Cultural Knowledge-holder for his people. He is also a member of the team working on this project. Shane notes that “recent archaeological results on Country have been coming as no surprise to the Walgalu community – we've always known that our people have occupied Country for a very, very long time. This new project has lots of different opportunities to expand this knowledge for the Wolgalu community. The investigations in the caves will open windows into the history of our people through understanding the cultural values of the area, understanding what our people were doing and when.”

Modern best practice methods are being used for this latest project which is based on co-design principles through a collaboration between archaeologists and the Land Council. As Georgia explains, “It’s not a project designed by outside specialists, but one designed between equal partners. The project is a discussion, where we identify what the Walgalu research priorities are and how the project can address them. In this way, the research carried out is more meaningful and valuable to the Alps community.”

“We are excited about the opportunity to be able to share our knowledge on Country” says Shane. “This collaboration with La Trobe University has given us the opportunity to work collaboratively with archaeologists on our history; I don't think there's been a lot of that in the past. I really think that that's an important part of piecing this all together, because a scientific lens is different to a cultural lens: similar, but different. For me, when I'm walking on Country, I'm looking at it through a cultural lens. I think that combining that cultural and scientific knowledge is the right path for us to be taking in opening that window to our history.”

Together, the archaeologists and Traditional Owners have identified the need to carry out high resolution investigations in closed sites: caves and rockshelters where the preservation potential of archaeological deposits are highest. It’s hoped that the data gathered from these sites will show evidence of occupation and will teach us about when and how ancestral Wolgalu communities lived on Country. “I am hoping that we can do residue analysis on some of the artefacts to get much more detailed information about manufacturing and use” says Shane. It could also provide a record of local environmental and climatic change. The study will also give land managers working in the Alps information to help them best protect any significant sites that are revealed.

At this stage of the project, a survey has just been carried out, assessing cave and rock shelter sites for the potential preservation of deep-time human occupation evidence. In Tasmania, finds were made in limestone karst landscapes, where alkaline sediments are better for preserving organic artefacts, like bone, shell and teeth. For the Alps project, the plan is to explore around half a dozen of the Yarrangobilly caves which are also limestone Karst formations. “The project team were recently out on Country to survey several caves and rock shelters. We were looking for medium to large sites with level floors where sediment had been retained. All the caves we looked at were along permanent water sources, such as the Yarrangobilly River, which we know is a really good predictor of site location.”

Many caves and rockshelters used by ancestral Aboriginal communities are located close to permanent waterways. This view northwest from cave Y13 is a great example, with the Yarrangobilly River just at the bottom of the slope.

It’s now a case of submitting permits to excavate, with the team aiming to start excavations next year. Who knows, this project and team might be about to contribute to re-writing the Australian Alps Aboriginal narrative.

ARCHAEOLOGY – THE HOW TO

Archaeology isn’t limited to digging up bits and pieces left behind by past peoples and testing them to see how old they are. Current best-practice archaeology is a blend of several areas of expertise. One of these is the archaeologists’ trowels, brushes, cameras and buckets where evidence is found and data gathered. Paleoecology – the study of past landscapes, ecologies and climates – is a discipline that is increasingly being used to support archaeological interpretations. Not only do these data help us to understand how ecologies have changed through time, but also how people have intersected with those landscapes. Ethnohistorical data is also added into the mix where appropriate: diaries, letters and previous studies make their contribution.

Underpinning all these sources are Traditional Knowledge Holders, who not only set research agendas, but also shape the analysis and interpretation of archaeological and palaeoecological data.

Part of the project has been to identify caves and rockshelters with potential archaeological deposits –areas suspected to contain buried cultural materials such as artefacts. Sediments like these in cave Y14, which are being held back within the cave by rocks and grasses at the entrance, seem very suitable for archaeological investigation.

For this project, the team will tackle each cave or rockshelter one at a time. Using hand trowels, they'll excavate sediments from the floor of the sites, bagging and tagging the sediment before transporting it back to a lab for analysis in more detail. Photos and records will document the dig at every stage so that any materials of interest that are discovered will have a location context. The plan is to also use photogrammetry to produce 3D virtual reconstructions, an enduring tool for future studies of these sites given that archaeology, of necessity, is a destructive science. At the end of the analysis, all the sediment will be returned to the site. All of the cultural materials excavated from the site will remain in under the control of the Traditional Owners.

What is discovered will be analysed at various levels, including under the microscope. For example, grooves in stone cutting artefacts may contain residues which can be sampled to give us an indication of their use. The aim of having everyone – archaeologists, students and Traditional Owners - involved at the dig and in the lab, is to produce richer data.

Dense layers of microfaunal bone are seen in many of the limestone caves and rockshelters along the Yarrangobilly River. These deposits, along with the alkaline sediments, suggest that there is good preservation potential for organic artefacts and charcoal left behind by ancestral Walgalu communities.

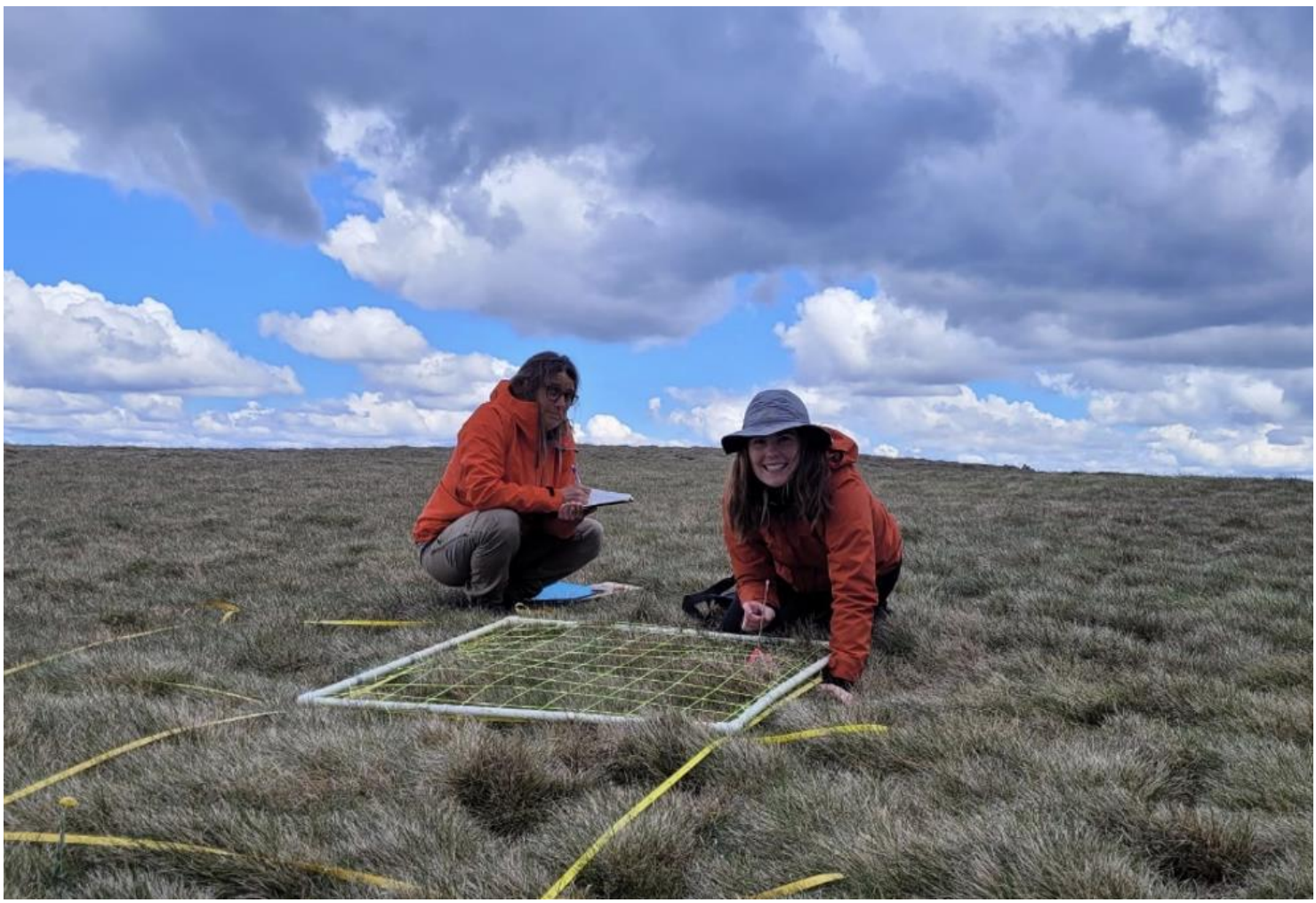
BETHANY EXPERIENCES THE GLORY OF GLORIA

Thanks to the Alps Program, Bethany Dunne, a fire ecologist from the ACT Parks and Conservation Service was able to take part in the (GLORIA*) monitoring mission for 2026 in Kosciuszko National Park. GLORIA is an international program which began in Austria in the early 2000s and now stretches over all of Earth's continents (bar Antarctica). Research teams head out at regular intervals to collect priceless survey data from high elevation sites – one of which is in Kosciuszko National Park. Regardless of where or who in the world is collecting the information, strict protocols and standardised methods produce information on vegetation, soils and climate for comparison purposes locally and world-wide. Ultimately GLORIA aims to detect and track the impacts of climate change on biodiversity.

"A highlight for me was day one, on which we hiked (scrambled) from Charlotte Pass to the top (highest) site for the GLORIA monitoring: Mt Clarke at 2101m. Twelve of us were rewarded with incredible 360 degree views of the alps and spectacular alpine vegetation, notwithstanding some threatening dark thunderclouds which kept us alert. It was a privilege to work alongside some wonderful botanists, researchers and park staff, notably Swiss alpine plant ecologist Sonja Wipf and Australian alpine legends Dr Suzanna Venn and Dr Ken Green.

"Laughs, rain, hard yakka, Swiss chocolate and complete plant-nerd excitement to see and record the diversity of alpine plants on offer. The Australian Alps is one of the most marginal true alpine landscapes, so Australia may act as an indicator for climate related trends in alpine vegetation across the globe. It was a fantastic week, and very valuable to be able to bring all that knowledge back to the ACT. Thank you so much for the opportunity to participate in this important monitoring and research."

* Global Observation Research Initiative in Alpine Environments



This is what monitoring looks like: Swiss alpine plant ecologist Sonja Wipf and Alex Martin an honours student at Deakin University and member of the Extreme Plant Ecology research team (School of Life and Environmental Sciences).

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 Elaine Thomas a photo and a quick line and she'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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