

NEWS FROM THE ALPS

THE ALPS PROGRAM: WORKING TOGETHER BEYOND BORDERS



The Australian Alps, Mount Sentinel, Kosciuszko National Park.

IT'S MY BIRTHDAY!

STOP PRESS! This year the Australian Alps national parks Cooperative Management Program is celebrating its 40th birthday. It's heart-warming news for all of us who've been supported by the Program at some point during the last four decades – and there are a lot of us. For those who *don't* know how valuable the Program is, read on to hear what Elaine Thomas, the current Program Manager, has to say, with a catch in her voice and maybe even a hint of a tear...

“Back in 1992 I was a base-grade Ranger with the then Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands working out of Heyfield, heading off to my first Alps Program event. I spent a week across the border in Kosciuszko National Park, where I met other rangers (who became career-long colleagues), visitor centre staff and scientists. From memory we talked about cultural history, science, monitoring, managing facilities, everything. We were together, out in the field, with the experts. It was brilliant and it was all possible thanks to the Program.



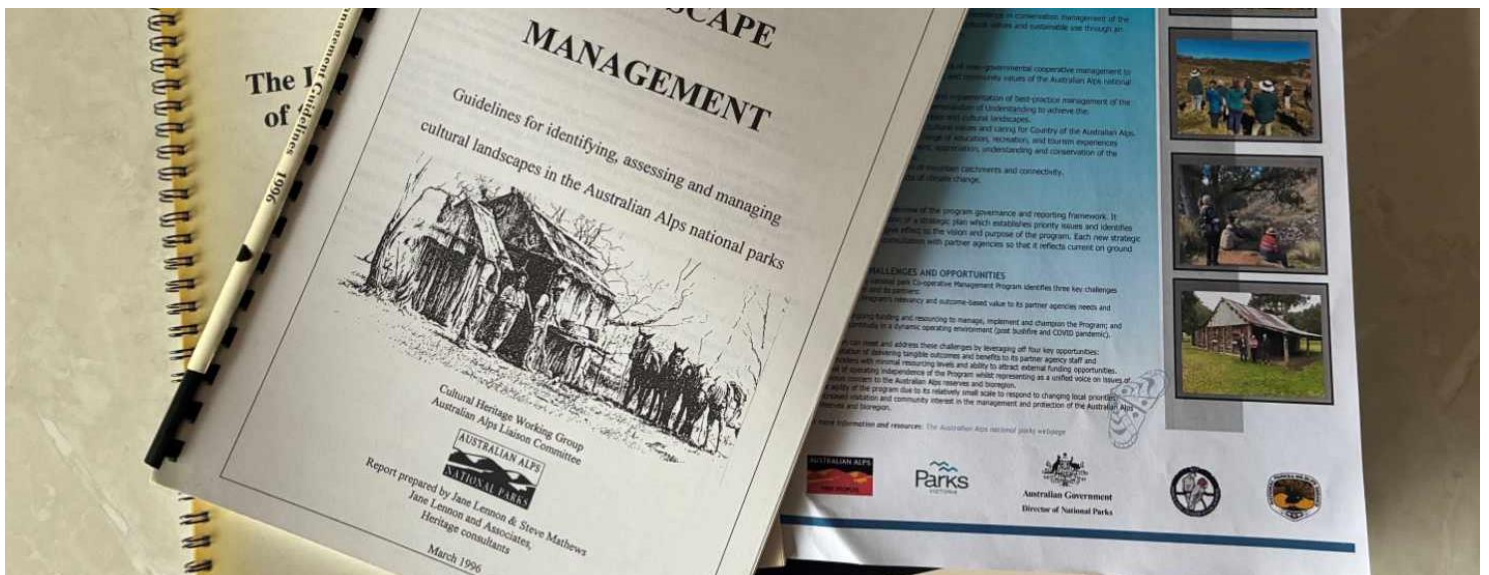
“This was only six years after the Program had started, around the time the Alpine Walking Track became the Australian Alps Walking Track (AAWT): I remember being out in the field and running into Nigel Watts, the Program-appointed Project Officer who was putting out the new AAWT totem markers.



Taken during a 2006 alpine huts workshop: getting people together is a cornerstone of the Australian Alps Program.

“In the many years since then and having worked in other locations outside of the Australian Alps, I understand how incredibly lucky we are to have the Program, to have the benefit of a long history of great people working in and around the Program: to have an ever-growing library of priceless materials on call and to have all the other resources the Program offers, the workshops, forums, working groups, projects, not to mention the ability to work with those across the border. I know because I have benefitted from them all.

“But don’t just take my word for it, read on or start asking around. In the meantime, I’ll wish the wonderful Australian Alps Program a Happy Birthday. May it continue to be as progressive, relevant and effective in the future as it was back then, and as it is today.”



A quick rummage produces a sample of random reference materials from Elaine’s personal stash, dating from as far back as 1996. Old school spiral bound to online pdfs – all are gold for anyone managing the Australian Alps.

THEY FEEL THE WAY YOU DO

Mark Elford enjoys his position as an ACT Parks and Conservation Ranger at Namadgi National Park. “It’s as simple as wanting to work out in the field and wanting to leave the landscape in better shape.” He’s somewhat of an old salt, having stepped into the role in 2011, which means he has also experienced the effect of the Alps Program over the years since. “The Program gave me the chance to see how connected Namadgi is to the entire Alps system. It helps you to challenge yourself and your understandings. It’s helped me be a better ranger.”

For Mark, this happened as part of the various workshops and forums organised and hosted by the Program. By his reckoning, he’s been part of six, covering topics ranging from how best to manage, protect and interpret European heritage sites; control feral deer and pigs; and work together to manage the Australian Alps Walking Track that runs through the length of the alps.

“You walk into the workshop and there’s a feeling. You realise that what’s brought us together is a shared striving for excellence. You’re in the room with others who feel the way you do, who are just as invested, who work at the same issues. These people are just as fascinated in what you’re talking about as you are. It’s a buoyant, positive, feedback loop.”



Note the number of interested people and the range of uniforms, at this Australian Alps Program’s Feral Pig Management Workshop (held at Namadgi National Park in 2024) where Mark Elford (at left) leads a discussion about the issues everyone faces.

Bringing people face to face produces results. For example, “at a pig control workshop we were describing using sodium nitrate. It’s not a perfect solution but here in the ACT we’d had some success with it. After our presentation, the Parks Victoria rangers followed us up for a chat: they were about to let it go and wondered whether it was worth pursuing. We were able to offer encouragement and support.

Thanks to the Alps Program, that conversation took place and the result is hopefully fewer pigs in the landscape.”

Of course, not all the information exchange and mutual support happen during Alps gatherings. The people who meet at these events form networks that are useful at any time. When looking to monitor and then control deer in the ACT, Mark contacted Elaine Thomas who’d been working to control deer in Victoria for years. “It was one of the best things we did, avoiding reinventing the wheel. We followed their method of monitoring, setting out 140 cameras, serviced every six months, over three years and had great results. We then trialled the Victorians’ ground shooting control program. We used their contractors who spent eight full days and shot 12 deer and decided that for us, it wasn’t effective.”

The Alps Program fosters a culture of networking and sharing, not only between the parks agencies but also other organisations and institutions, including some overseas. So, it’s not surprising to learn that Mark and the team found their ideal control method, Thermal Assisted Aerial Control (TAAC), in New Zealand. “When we went over the same test area with TAAC, we shot 75 deer. Six months later we shot 24, then four. In a follow up program a year later, we shot 15. We now have the ongoing TAAC program in place as our best means of detecting and maintaining deer control.” Again, thanks to the Program, there are fewer deer in the landscape, and just as importantly, a feeling of support and solidarity among the people to manage the Australian Alps wherever they hail from.

THE INTERNATIONAL VIEW



Being invited to share the philosophy and mechanics of the Australian Alps Program benefits two ways – the Alps Program learns from others and others learn from the Program. This is Gill Anderson, out in the field at Wrangell–St. Elias National Park Alaska in the early 2000s, getting a feel for her international colleagues’ experiences post a presentation.

Early in the Australian Alps Program’s history, the world recognised this as a fresh approach. In particular, the IUCN World Commission on Protected Areas learned that Australia had a new way of doing things, was doing it well, and that it was making a difference on the ground. **Gill Anderson**, Alps Program manager from 20 years ago, found herself invited to travel to places like Ecuador, Hawaii, Alaska and Canada, to describe a Program that was based on connectivity conservation, one that delivered results by working across borders. Gill explains.

“Because our Program was one of the early transboundary models, people were interested in the way it ran, from the ground up. They wanted to understand more about the Program’s working groups which brought together people from different agencies who faced common issues: about how the working groups let them share skills, knowledge and pain. The structure of the Program – and the gravitas of the MOU behind it – meant that the state ministers, park agencies, and the national parks were all compelled to co-operate and work together.” The Australian Alps Program had the whole package, hence the interest from overseas.

Following presentations, there were questions about the nitty gritty. How did it work? What were the mechanics behind it? In some of the most extreme scenarios, where people were working to protect landscapes in areas where there was armed conflict, the Australian Alps Program model gave hope that its structure and delivery could be effective.

The decades have since rolled along and other Alps people have travelled internationally to speak about the Program. The good news is that the early idea about trans-boundary connectivity conservation is now a widespread established best practice worldwide. The Alps Program was ahead of the thinking. It is a great legacy, designed by the inspired vision of individuals, and it is as effective and appreciated today as it was at its inception.

WHY EMMA’S A PROGRAM FAN

It wasn’t long after **Emma Mclnerney** joined the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service that she heard about the Program. “It happened pretty quickly – a mouse pad with the Australian Alps Program logo appeared on my desk, and with it an understanding that the Program was there to support connections between New South Wales, the ACT and Victoria.”

Initially working in a project management role within Parks, upgrading and renewing walking tracks, “then in ecological health, monitoring the health of Kosciuszko National Park”, Emma now works on endangered alpine skink species as part of the Saving our Species (SoS) and Assets of Intergenerational Significance (AIS) programs. When the Australian Alps Program-hosted Science Management Forum came up recently, it was an obvious choice to go.

“I went to hear about what everyone was doing across the Alps.” Coming from a science background – Emma’s PhD focused on Southern Corroboree Frog growth, development, behaviour and diet relating to antioxidants – she was looking forward to a bit of science talk. “Our endangered skinks occur across borders so I wanted to connect with other people like myself, to find out more about what they’re doing, and be able to share what we know.” To compare notes. To possibly plan cross border field trips. “Yes we may do things similarly but there could be little things that we do differently that would be good to know about.”

Thanks to the Program, that hosts moments of connection like this Science Management Forum, people working across the Australian Alps have a way to connect, something that is vital to what they do. As Emma points out, “it’s easy to forget that this wider network exists and is available”. For her, “the Program is a great way to come together across different disciplines and resources and avoid working in isolation”.

Below: This Alpine She-oak Skink (*Cyclodomorphus praealtus*) lives in grasslands and open woodland ecotones across NSW and Victoria in the Australian Alps. It is endangered and a focus of the SoS and AIS programs. The Australian Alps Program helps those working to support it connect and share knowledge across institutions and borders.



HOW WE BUILT THE PROGRAM

Forty years ago, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed which created the intelligent, sharing, Alps Co-operative Management Program that still exists today. The MOU underpins the Program, and the Program supports everyone who works towards a resilient, healthy alpine landscape. Many steps led to the signing of our precious MOU, and what follows is a quick sketch of who did what, and how together, these ordinary, yet extraordinary people, made a difference.

There is no question that by the early to mid-1940s, concern over the health and protection of the Australian Alps was popping up in different quarters. Baldor Byles, an early government research scientist, advocated for the protection of the Snowy Mountains and his report led to the establishment of the NSW Soil Conservation Authority. This was followed by similar efforts in Victoria, resulting in the formation of the Victorian Soil Conservation Authority in 1940.

Conservationist Myles Dunphy had proposed a vast interstate wilderness between the Cobberas mountains in Victoria and the Grey Mare Range north of Kosciusko. The proposal was revised in 1943, to include a proposal to manage the area, not by state, but as a jointly recognised area.

In 1942, the then Premier of NSW, Sir William McKell, took an eight-day horseback ride to get an overview of the Snowy Mountains, surely a sign of what was of popular concern. This was a trip reminiscent of those undertaken by John Muir and Theodore Roosevelt in the United States in the early part of the 20th century. There is no substitute for seeing something with your own eyes.



Worthy of protection, here just one small part of our priceless Australian Alps: The Ramshead Range in Kosciusko National Park.

In Victoria, Professor John Turner was working with ecologist Masie Fawcett to undertake a wide-ranging botanical survey on the Bogong High Plains, which involved setting up the famed grazing-exclusion plots in the mid 1940s. They, like many scientists since, aimed to provide data upon which good landscape management decisions could be made. Also at this time, Judge Leonard Stretton oversaw the Royal Commission into the condition of the mountain catchments. His report alerted the government and the public to the need for immediate strong action to protect them. And Baldor Byles and alpine ecologist Dr Alec Costin acted as the public's conscience during the early years of the Snowy Mountains Scheme in NSW.

Then in 1944, Kosciuszko State Park was established, grazing was eliminated from the park in the mid 1950s, and in 1963 the Kosciuszko Primitive Area was declared. This was also the year that the Commonwealth Government investigated the possibility of extending Kosciuszko into Victoria, though nothing came of this suggestion for a bi-state national park.

But the notion of a contiguous protected landscape persisted. In 1969, the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) developed its statements of national conservation concern, the first being 'The High Country'. They recommended the creation of national parks in the Victoria Alps, with the ultimate goal being a contiguous national park across the high country of Victoria, NSW, and the ACT. Ten years later, the Victorian Land Conservation Council recommended the formation of five major parks in the alpine region. Five years on, in 1984, Namadgi National Park in the ACT was formed. Then in 1989, the Victorian Alpine National Park was declared, created by extending and linking the separate parks established previously.

At this point much had been achieved. Large expanses of the Alps were now protected by national park status in two states and one territory, but there was still a fair way to go in establishing co-operative management between the government agencies that were each responsible for the day-to-day management of the parks. Enter the individuals who together effected a miracle – the preparation and signing of a Memorandum of Understanding for the Cooperative Management of the Australian Alps in 1986.

It began with Neville Gare the Superintendent of Kosciuszko National Park and Don Saunders the Director of the Victorian National Parks Authority, along with various district managers who could all see the benefits of joint patrols. Then came the Kosciuszko Group, an informal group of visionary alps managers, including Bruce Leaver, Roger Good, Alec Costin, Neville Gare, Ian Weir and Andy Turner as well as representatives from the Australian Conservation Foundation, who collectively aimed to do things better. Some of the actions that can be traced back to the Kosciuszko Group include co-ordinated management being included in the Kosciuszko National Park management plan (1982); the Australian Alps as the topic of the first Fenner Conference (instituted by the Australian Academy of Science, 1988); much lobbying of politicians; and soon-to-be Prime Minister Whitlam making a 1972 policy statement about establishing a national park across the Australian Alps.

With the elephant in the room, co-operative management, now named the pace picked up. In 1982, NSW Minister for Planning and Environment Eric Bedford supported the idea of contiguous national parks across the Australian Alps to form a major national asset, writing to his Victorian counterpart Minister Evan Walker seeking his support to explore the possibility of establishing a system to cooperatively manage the alpine national parks. Officers of each agency were nominated to draft a framework for co-operative management, and they met in February of 1983. This was followed in 1984 by a three-day inspection of Kosciuszko

National Park by 14 Victorian members of parliament, which led to an agreement to establish an inter-governmental working group to develop cooperative arrangements for managing adjoining parks in the mountainous region of southeastern Australia. In a perfect stroke of opportunism, the inclusion of ACT's Namadgi NP was also suggested.

NSW Minister Bob Carr and ACT Minister Gordon Scholes continued to promote the initiative during early 1985 and in July senior agency representatives gathered to decide the way forward - the how to - in establishing a formal cooperative program of management. By October park managers and senior agency reps were at the necessary workshops nutting out the detail, followed by more meetings in early 1986 with all the key players and long-established champions.

It all came together with the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding for the Cooperative Management of the Australian Alps on 4 July 1986, by ministers Gordon Scholes (Commonwealth Territories), Bob Carr (NSW), Joan Kirner (Victoria) and Barry Cohen (Commonwealth Arts, Heritage and Environment). With the MOU in place the development of a program to make real the goals of the MOU followed, including the establishment of Australian Alps Liaison Committee, recruiting a Program Manager and the development of an on-ground works program. And the rest, as they say, is history. The Alps are protected, and the Alps are managed co-operatively. And this is achieved day to day by people with passion and expertise who share the same aims. It's a brilliant outcome on every level.

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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