Landscapes and Policy Hub – the future of biodiversity in the Australian Alps

On 9 and 10 April 2013, Aboriginal Traditional Owners from across the Australian Alps met with researchers from the Landscape and Policy Hub’s Social and Institutional Futures Project (Michael Lockwood and Michael Mitchell) with support from the Landscape and Policy Hub’s knowledge broker (Gill Anderson) and parks agency staff involved in the Australian Alps Liaison Committee (Steve Horsley, Peter Jacobs, Odile Arman and Chris Smith).

Part of the discussion revolved around an Australian Alps Traditional Owner Reference Group (AATORG) project to develop a statement on Aboriginal Cultural and Spiritual Values of the Australian Alps (facilitated by Chris Johnson and Andrew Sneddon). Please see next article.

Michael Mitchell and Michael Lockwood then created a discussion specifically focused on the question of how Aboriginal cultural values, knowledge and wisdom could enhance biodiversity conservation in the Australian Alps. Notes taken at the meeting will be ‘validated’ by AATORG and other participants, but the extract below highlights a key message.

Belonging, not owning

“We belong to the land; we do not own the land ... no one can own what you belong to.”
“You share what you belong to, things that give life that everyone is entitled to.” And in terms of specific attachment to the Australian Alps “it’s our home ... coming back to country is always a healing experience for me.” “People sing to the land differently, but if you listen carefully, it is the same.”

From these statements, we appreciated that understanding how to manage the land should come from communicating with the land, not communicating about the land.

The landscape shouldn’t be seen as alien - knowing how to improve biodiversity conservation should come from within, be about who we are. It should be about understanding how everything is connected and how we humans are part of that system, and that we have responsibilities associated with this.

Where to from here?

A set of notes summarising key points that the Landscape and Policy Hub researchers took from their discussion with Traditional Owners were mailed out late April 2013.

For those who were present at the meeting: It is important that you validate these notes, by suggesting your comments in the forms of additions, deletions and/or modifications.

For others who were not present at the meeting: Michael would also value your input on these notes, if you are interested and have not seen the notes please contact Michael.

Please send your comments to Michael Mitchell (Michael.Mitchell@utas.edu.au or phone 02-60519819). Let him know if you would like him to call you.

The revised version can then be considered ready for final validation, and discussed the next time AATORG meets with the Landscape and Policy Hub.
Understanding Aboriginal cultural and spiritual values of the Australian Alps – a special AATORG Project

The Australian Alps are a place of great cultural significance for the Australian Alps First Peoples. This project is designed to look at why the Alps are important to Aboriginal people – today and in the past.

In summing up the AATORG discussion, Chris noted some of the points that had been raised that related to connection to country:

- the importance of welcoming people to country – a symbolic and deeply meaningful act – and the importance too of protocols for going onto other people’s country
- the importance of singing or talking to country – and that country listens – and of seeing and reading the signs that the land reveals to you, knowing that the land will look after you
- that people belong to country (and do not own country) and that this sense of belonging means being part of everything
- the importance of expressing and passing on what has been passed down to you
- the importance of recognition and respect for your connections, traditions, and for the land and all its creatures
- knowing the seasons, knowing where certain animals will be seasonally, the connections between plants flowering and animals, the right times to move to the mountains or the coast
- stories and how to keep yourself safe in country – and deeper meanings too
- connections through family to specific places, areas, stories, traditions, totems etc.
- home and what mountain country means as home
- the intricacies of caring for the land – knowing the needs of all creatures and their inter-relationships, how things get out of balance, the cultural protocols to be observed
- the links between Aboriginal and white history – with Aboriginal people showing the way into the Alps and white people occupying key Aboriginal places
- the revealing of the extent of Aboriginal places across the Alps after the bushfires

Where to from here?

The team will now work on a literature review, drawing on a wide range of sources: oral and written histories, archaeological surveys and studies, materials from previous workshops/consultations with Aboriginal people across the region etc. They will also attend meetings with Traditional Owner collective groups over the next month or two.

The main product is a draft statement of significance, and this will come back to AATORG for review later in the year. It will go onto the Australian Alps website and help increase awareness and understanding of the cultural and spiritual importance of the Alps – and this will help managers, politicians and the wider community act respectfully.

We would welcome further input from AATORG members.

The project team – Chris, Andrew and Maddy would welcome your thoughts on this topic, and they would also like to know about any local studies or books they should look at.

Contact Chris by email on: chris.johnston@contextpl.com.au
Recognizing the Traditional Owners of the Alps

Over the past 12 months some very special new signs have been appearing across the Australian Alps, from Baw Baw in southern Victoria to Tidbinbilla in the ACT. Watch out for them as you travel around...

The Badges...

at a meeting in 2012 AATORG requested that the Alps Program produce badges for Aboriginal rangers and staff. The reason behind this request was so that staff could proudly display their connection to the Alps, as well as increase public recognition of Aboriginal Peoples in the Alps.

These badges have been produced and are being distributed to Aboriginal rangers and other Aboriginal staff across the Alps.

We hope the design of the badges help meet the aim of increasing recognition of Aboriginal Peoples in the Alps. Whilst they are only a token they also carry a strong message for both staff and the public.

Australian Alps Display Banners...

flagging the significance of the Alps for Aboriginal People (pictured right)
Australian Alps Frontline workshop

Talbingo on the edge of Kosciuszko National Park was chosen earlier this year for Frontline - a workshop designed to enhance the knowledge and skills of ‘frontline’ staff in direct contact with park visitors.

The Tumut/Talbingo/Kiandra region has been identified as an Australian Alps National Landscape tourism ‘cluster’ and Frontline presented the perfect opportunity to showcase some key experiences to park and visitor centre staff – most significantly the Aboriginal Discovery Ranger activities.

Starting on day 1 with a Smoking Ceremony by Uncle Robert Bulger and Welcome to Country from Shane Herrington, followed on day 2 with a morning of cultural activities and finishing with a very tasty bush tucker lunch – Frontline was a big success with all 22 participants going away with a greater appreciation of the ongoing significance of the Alps for Aboriginal peoples.

For more information about the excellent NPWS Aboriginal Discovery Program please contact Shane Herrington or Talea Bulger – Aboriginal Discovery Rangers, Tumut Visitor Services Team, Office of Environment and Heritage. Ph: 02 6947 7023

Celebrating a great elder…Uncle Vince Bulger

At the recent AATORG gathering all the participants had the pleasure of helping Uncle Vince celebrate his 84th birthday (and eat the black forest cake)…Uncle Vince continues to be a very active leader in his community – his sense of humour, his humility and his compassion for all people is an inspiration for everyone that is lucky enough to meet him. Several years ago Uncle Vince received an OAM for his services to the community.

An AATORG reminder…

The Australian Alps Traditional Owners’ Reference Group (AATORG) was established as an outcome of the initial First Peoples’ Gathering in Dinner Plain in 2005. A second First Peoples’ Gathering was held in Jindabyne in 2010.

AATORG tries to meet at least twice a year, somewhere ‘on country’ in the Australian Alps.

AATORG is made up of 2 Traditional Owners from each of the following state-based representative groups - Victorian Alps East Gippsland Traditional Owner Reference Group (VAEGTORG), Kosciuszko National Park Working Groups (North and South) and the United Ngunnawal Elders Council or other mechanism identified by the ACT Government. Members are elected to the AATORG from each of these four groups every three years.

One of the main aims of the Australian Alps Liaison Committee (AALC) is to improve understanding of, and respect for Aboriginal cultural heritage as well as ensure that the Traditional Owners have the opportunity to celebrate the cultural and spiritual significance of the Alps across the whole landscape.