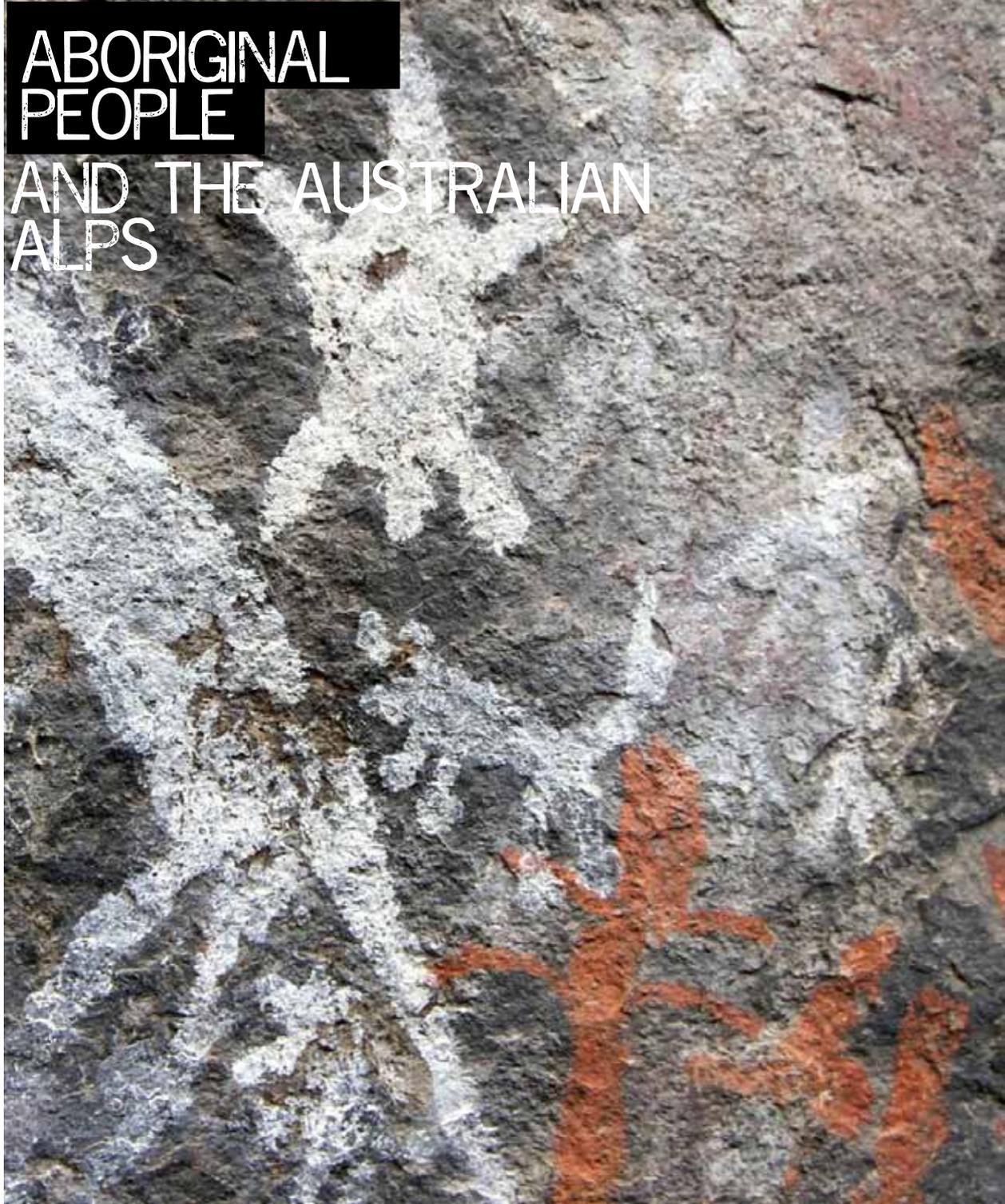


# ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THE AUSTRALIAN ALPS



All illustrations: Jim Williams

*The Mountains are very old and an ongoing life force that strengthens the ancestral link of our people. We have a living, spiritual connection with the mountains. We retain family stories and memories of the mountains, which makes them spiritually and culturally significant to us. Our traditional knowledge and cultural practices still exist and need to be maintained...*

*Our people travelled from many directions over long distances to gather peacefully on the mountains for trade, ceremony, marriages, social events and to settle differences. The cycle of life and many seasons influence the movement of our people through the mountains to the sea and the desert. The stars, clouds, sun and the moon guided people to and from places of importance. These travel routes continue to be used and spoken about today...*

*Let us not forget the past while we look forward to the future. Past and present practices make us strong and we are committed to making this a better country for all.*

*Extracts from: Kosciuszko National Park 2006, Plan of Management', A Statement from the Kosciuszko Aboriginal Working Group, p. xi.*

# ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Aboriginal people have cultural and spiritual associations with the Australian Alps that go back many thousands of years. Physical evidence of this presence comes from the many archaeological and historic sites that remain, while the cultural evidence takes the form of the stories passed on through generations of Aboriginal people.

The physical sites are important to Aboriginal people for social, spiritual, historical, and commemorative reasons. They include:

- occupation sites that are represented in the Australian Alps by rock shelters and open camps;
- stone scatters that are the result of tool making, use and discard activities in the past. The distribution pattern of different stone colour and types can explain not only the raw material sources but might also tell us about the associated Aboriginal language groups who brought the stone artefacts with them, the technology of tool manufacture and sometimes, through residue and use-wear analysis, about how stone tools were used;
- intangible sites such as significant landscape features or whole landscapes. These places might have spiritual, natural resource usage, historical, social, educational or other significance;
- culturally marked trees that demonstrate intricate patterns and designs that have been carved into trees to mark burial places of very significant members of an Aboriginal group. Other scarred trees were made through the removal of bark for numerous different purposes, such as, to provide bark for the roofing of huts, to make canoes or carrying utensils, for shields, to cut toe-holds for climbing trees, to cut holes into trees for the extraction of animals or honey, or sometimes bark was removed in order to practice bark removal techniques; and
- stone arrangements which were used for ceremonial and initiation purposes. There are many lines of stone arrangements found on the top of the higher mountains in the Australian Alps.



Other sites, such as ceremonial grounds, burial locations and art sites, are known but the first-hand knowledge of these places has been lost. Other Aboriginal sites include built fences and stockyards from many recent historical times.

## ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITES

The tablelands and highlands of south eastern Australia show evidence of Aboriginal occupation from as far back as 21,000 years ago (Flood 1996, p. 3). One of the oldest Aboriginal sites found is Birrigai Rock Shelter. Located within Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, this rock shelter contains evidence of ancient campfires and stone tools from as far back as 21,000 years. At this time, temperatures in the Australian Capital Territory would have been eight to 10°C cooler than temperatures experienced today. Carbon dating of the deposits tell us that the Birrigai Rock Shelter remained in use by Aboriginal people until the middle of the 19th century.

Stone artefacts found in Cloggs Cave, Gippsland, Victoria, also demonstrate the presence of Aboriginal people 17,000 years ago (Flood 1992).

Aboriginal sites have also been found within the valleys of the Snowy Mountains and along the upper Snowy River. Camp sites and workshops for making stone tools, known as 'knapping floors', are recognised by the presence of stone artefacts, raw material chunks or cores and other tool debris. Small stone artefact scatters are present in alpine and sub-alpine environments, with the highest found near the saddle of Perisher Gap, NSW. Some artefacts are examples of blade-making that was undertaken in eastern Australia about 4,500 to 5,000 year ago. Prehistoric burial sites are also found in the Snowy Mountains (Kamminga 1992, p. 103-104). Many more Aboriginal sites are present at lower altitudes.

*Oral tradition and physical evidence indicate that prior to European settlement the Aboriginal people of the Australian Alps maintained a thriving society that incorporated sophisticated exchange patterns and rich social and ceremonial lives.*

Kosciuszko National Park, 2006, p. 81

## **Fire reveals more sites**

Although some evidence of Aboriginal occupation of the Alps was lost in the 2003 fires that affected much of the Australian Alps, the fires also uncovered further evidence of Aboriginal people's association with the Australian Alps. Since the fires, many previously unknown Aboriginal sites throughout the Alps have been discovered and recorded. In the ACT the fires revealed what could be the region's most significant Aboriginal heritage area. An area known as Jedbinbilla, near the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, west of Canberra, was a pine plantation until the fires stripped away the impenetrable vegetation to expose thousands of individual stone artefacts and rock shelters.

## **FOLLOWING THE ARRIVAL OF NON- ABORIGINAL PEOPLE**

The lifestyle of the Aboriginal people was catastrophically disrupted when non-Aboriginal people arrived in the Alps in the 1820s. The nomadic lifestyle of Aboriginal people conflicted with the European notion of land ownership. From this time on, there were reports of diminishing access to water, fish and native animals, which were so important to the Aboriginal diet and lifestyle (HO and DUAP 1996). In addition diseases, to which Aboriginal people had little or no immunity, such as influenza, small pox, tuberculosis, measles and sexually transmitted diseases, devastated many populations of people. Some people remained on the land and continued hunting, others responded to the change by working as guides, trackers or pastoral workers for the new settlers but most moved away or were removed from their traditional lands. Many people lived on government reserves.

*This upheaval included the separation of family members, the forced abandonment of traditional practices and a great loss of cultural knowledge. Despite this, Aboriginal people of the region have retained important strands of their culture, including a sense of identity and belonging.*

Kosciuszko National Park, 2006, p. 81

*The Sydney Morning Herald* reported in 1856 that the Aboriginal people in the south of the Australian Alps were extinct, but more recent Census reports indicated otherwise. There were 166 Aboriginal people, likely to have been Ngarigo people, around Cooma and 319 near Bombala, who were most probably Bidawal people. The well-known Bony Jack and his son Biggenhook were surviving members of the Ngarigo people. Biggenhook died in 1914 at the age of 62. Today there are many people living either in south-eastern Australia or in other places who have traditional connections to the Australian Alps.

Many place names in the Alps have been derived from local Aboriginal languages and these names are culturally significant to Aboriginal people to this day. These names include Canberra, Namadgi, Tidbinbilla, Piallago, Michelago, Bredbo, Tumut, Cabramurra, Tinderry, Jagungal, Dicky Cooper Bogong, Cooma, Jindabyne, Talbingo, Yarrangobilly, Suggan Buggan, Buchan, Mitta Mitta, Tambo, Youngal, Mount Bogong, Benambra and Numeralla.



Aboriginal people made a significant contribution to the early exploration, pastoral, timber-getting, tanning, road and building construction industries of the Australian Alps. More recently, Aboriginal people have been employed in many industries in the Alps including national park management, forestry operations, local council operations, construction and operation of hydro-electricity infrastructure, ski resort operation and retail industries.

Aboriginal sites and objects in the Alps are valued by all and are protected by legislation by state and federal legislation. It is illegal to disturb, damage or destroy an object or Aboriginal place without consent from the relevant authority. However, Aboriginal culture is greater than just these physical sites.

*Entire landscapes also hold significant cultural values. From an Aboriginal perspective land and people are inseparable. The mountains provided Aboriginal people with food, shelter, clothing, tools, utensils and medicine. Beyond this the messages underlying the stories of ancestral beings, who shaped the plant and animal communities and the landscapes themselves, governed all aspects of traditional Aboriginal society. These story lines link people and features of the mountains with those of other distant places to this day.*  
Kosciuszko National Park, 2006, p. 83

Aboriginal people have used their traditional laws, knowledge and skills to manage the Australian Alps for thousands of years and this management has influenced alpine ecosystems.

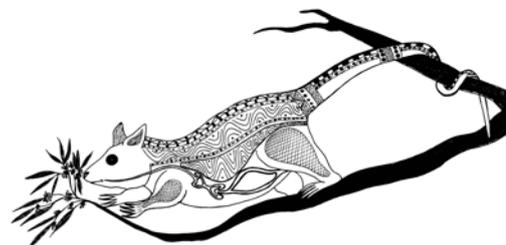
National park agencies in the Australian Alps are working with Aboriginal people with traditional connections with the Alps to manage not only the physical sites but also intangible values. Aboriginal culture is a living culture and to maintain this culture Aboriginal people need access to land and natural resources so that they can practice and pass on their traditional knowledge and skills. They also have strong feelings of attachment to their traditional land and are keen to work closely with land managers so that they can be involved in decision making concerning their heritage – their Country.

To support this, the Australian Alps National Parks sponsored a gathering of Aboriginal traditional owners, that is, Aboriginal people with traditional connections to the Alps, at Dinner Plain in 2005. Dinner Plain was one of the places where Aboriginal people gathered for talks in the days before European settlement.

At this meeting the traditional owners present, proposed that the Australian Alps First Peoples develop an agreement amongst themselves so that they can establish ways for this group to work more effectively together as one group.

Some of their other recommendations included:

- recognition from land management agencies that Traditional Owners are the only legitimate Indigenous speakers for Country;
- identification of area of crown land in the Alps as an area for traditional owners to meet and continue traditions, practices and customs;
- establishment of an Australian Alps First Peoples Keeping Place;
- access for Traditional Owners to cultural resources, for example, fishing, hunting, collecting and gathering rights without a license;
- provision by land management agencies for adequate financial resources to ensure equity of involvement of traditional owners in all aspects and levels of land and waterways management; and
- increased employment opportunities for traditional owners through the support of land management agencies.



It was agreed by traditional owners and national park staff present that it was important to maintain the momentum of goodwill and understanding and to pursue the recommendations tabled. The second First Peoples' Gathering was held in Jindabyne in May 2010. As Paul McCleod explained: "We are here as a unified collective group to work and give direction to park management for the betterment of the whole lot of us mob." The Australian Alps Traditional Owners Reference Group, which consists of representatives from each of the state and territory based indigenous advisory groups, met for the first time in 2008.

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