Short-sleeved shirts and shorts were once part of the uniform: Odile Arman at Bendora Dam in 1992.

what’s different now?

Living or working in the Australian Alps, there’s often little time spare for reflection. Heads down, we get on with life while the days, weeks, months and even years race by. But if you’re reading this, you’re in luck because we’ve rounded up a few people and asked them to do just that – to reflect – to think about what’s important in caring for the Alps. What’s valuable here is that these people have been around a while so they’re able to comment on the present and the past. Take a look to see if you agree with their take on things...

First up is Dave Foster who’d clocked up 40 years with Parks Victoria before retiring. He’s in a good position to comment given his career has spanned various landscapes and eras. “When I joined the then National Parks, rangers had to be 25. The Service was looking for people with a bit of life and hands’ on experience: like the ability to drive a range of vehicles, be able to build a bush toilet. I started at Warrandyte State Park, moved up to Mount Buffalo, then moved around as a relief ranger filling in where I was needed around
the state. Hattah Lakes, Wilson’s Prom, winters back at Mount Buffalo, the Snowy River National Park at Deddick. Then there were 10 years at Port Campbell, followed by 14 years as Ranger in Charge of the East Alps before taking up my final role as the region’s Fire & Emergency Program Co-ordinator.”

The landscapes Dave helped manage were distinct, yet the tools in everyone’s standard kit were similar. This kit has changed over time. When he first joined, he’d have hand tools in the back of the ute, “…an old-school drill you turned by hand, a hand saw and always a chainsaw and a shovel.” In later years he’d still have a shovel and chainsaw to hand… “you never know when there’ll be a tree across the road, but I also now had battery-powered tools and a smart phone. If you’ve got a signal and you’re not sure how to put something together, you can find what you need on YouTube.”

When Dave Foster joined Parks Victoria, rangers staffed the ski patrol at a time when Parks managed the ski fields up at Mount Buffalo. During his career he also saw indigenous cultural heritage gain appreciation so that management of the landscapes now benefits from Traditional Owner knowledge. (Left, Dave standing at far left in the patrol group; and at right, Dave flanked by ACT Parks’ Sharon Lane and Christian Hampson from NSW NP&WS, colleagues from neighbouring states, brought together by the Alps Program.

There are clearly benefits with the technology we all take as a given. Apart from from making the job easier, rangers are also being helped to be more efficient and consistent with key tasks like controlling pest species. “Monitoring weed infestations is as easy as taking a photo and GPS position with your phone. Together with your computer, we’ve come a long way from the time I remember putting in a request for my first computer and being told by the business manager that rangers don’t need them.”

Tools and tech aside, Dave also thinks there’s been another shift due to the fact staff are asked to do more and they have less time to do it in. “We’re losing the art of building close relationships with the local communities we live and work in. For me, this was one of the special parts fo the job, to get to know people, to understand their hopes and concerns, to be able to see what the National Park meant to them. It was an important part of the job, but now a ranger is so loaded with work they simply don’t have the time to sit in a local farmer’s kitchen and share a cuppa and a chat.”

The value of connections between people is something Dave experienced first-hand through the Australian Alps Program. “As rangers we could be a bit parochial, a bit precious about our own park, so it was wonderful to have something like the Alps Program which brought us together. There was a sharing of knowledge and it was great to have that
fellowship and connection with people from the other parks agencies – people you could share your ideas and knowledge with.”

When asked, what advice would the current Dave Foster give his rookie ranger self? “Throttle back and spend time listening to the landscape and the stakeholders. The relationships you build are important because it’s through these that you’ll adapt and be more effective.”

Originally a carpenter by trade, Bernie Heath’s future was sealed when he landed his first job with NSW Parks at Botany Bay, where he also met his wife, Pam O’Brien (now Manager, Snowy River Area). Together they moved to the Kosciuszko National Park where Bernie would work for the next 30 years, retiring just recently. Based firstly in Tumut, then Jindabyne, he was part of works crews, then foreman, eventually becoming Senior Field Supervisor. Houses, heritage huts, toilets and tracks: anything and everything in the parks that needs building, restoring or maintaining is tackled by the works crews and it’s been, in Bernie’s words, “…the best job.” And like Dave Foster, he’s been around long enough to see the shifts and changes over time. The first thing that springs to mind is safety.

“There’s a short window to work on the walking tracks on the main range, maybe only three or four months before the snow arrives. When I first moved to Jindabyne in the mid-90s we had two crews which we ran one week on and one week off to get as much done as possible in the short time frame. We’d helicopter the gear in, repair the erosion and fix the drains, all while working long days.” Fast-forward to the present day and work practices have changed. It might be harder to try to get the work done in the same window of opportunity – the ten-hour days are gone – but people are better cared for. “Where we once lifted heavy boulders ourselves, we now use small excavators. During fires, we’d grab a sleeping bag and expect to be on duty until the fire was out. Now we’re rotated three days on with one day home to rest and be with family.”

Talking about fire, Bernie gives a few examples of changes in the equipment used for controlled burns. “In the early years we fired special bullets out of a shotgun that caught fire: now we use ping pong igniters either from a launcher towed along the ground or dropped from the air.” Helicopters today also make use of thermal imaging cameras to
sweep over the landscape and pick up hot spots. “These are plotted on a map which is sent to the ground crew with a grid reference to find and deal with it.”

The strange thing is, as much as high-tech is now standard in everyone’s working life – all rangers have smart phones and supervisors an iPad as standard issue – it’s irrelevant when it comes to historic hut restoration. Of course, they’ll take a solar panel and truck battery up to a remote hut they’ll be working on for a few days. This little set-up will comfortably run the camp’s lights at night, the fridges and recharge their 21st century power hand tools, but that doesn’t mean that much of the actual work being done on the hut won’t still be done with appropriately old technology: the adze, maul and froe. And sometimes it’s a bit of the-best-of-both-worlds approach, like when… “We had to get up to one of the huts this winter to plane a sticking door. These huts act as emergency shelters so it had to be done. We grabbed our tools and hopped on the ski doo.”

But the best bit of kit might just be the Asset Management System. Thanks to the AMS and all the data on works and materials that’s entered into the system, budgets and resources no longer involve guesswork from seasoned hands. And from an operations view-point, “If there’s a tree down and someone’s taken a picture and entered it into the system, you can take a look and know what size chain saw to take with you.”

Bernie notes two other major shifts in his time, these relating to people. One is the increase in the number of women who’ve joined the team. “It’s moved away from being very blokey and changed the culture for the better.” The second change came a few decades back when he first took part in some of the Alps Program workshops. “It was a fantastic opportunity which we hadn’t had before, to meet with our ACT and Victorian counterparts. Together we were nutting out solutions to our shared problems. I remember being warned by them that deer were becoming a huge problem and while we didn’t have an issue at the time, they were dead right - both about the deer and also about English Broom. We took advice from the other agencies to move quickly while we had an opportunity, and put a lot of time and effort into our own programs.”

One woman who spent her working life in the Alps is Odile Arman. She began her career in 1984 as an ACT Parks ranger following her studies in natural resources. “Working at Namadgi National Park was fantastic, partly because of its size but also because I had the opportunity to live in a remote area of the park, Bendora Dam. My eldest daughter took her first steps there.”

“The role demanded self-reliance and it taught me to be independent. There was always assistance from other staff when I needed it, but day to day I’d have to work out how to get things done and I gained a lot of practical skills.” At that time two-way radio reception across the park was limited. Fast forward to the time Odile retired in 2016, and communications were very different. “Everyone now had access to a computer and a mobile phone and we were bombarded with emails and phone calls. Improved radio and mobile networks have made it very hard to escape from it. Improvements in technology has also has its advantages with the use of drones, infra-red cameras, GPS - these are fantastic monitoring tools.”

And not just the technology that has shifted since the 1980s. “What visitors want to do in parks has also changed. For example, I can’t recall seeing anyone on a mountain bike in the early days. It has become a challenge to manage an increased level of recreation activity and provide opportunities for both walkers and bikers. Recreation users value the landscape and our growing focus is to make areas more accessible for everyone, from all walks of life, so they can use and enjoy the park.” It’s all about well-planned track systems and the quality of interpretive signage that adds depth to people’s experiences. And as it’s always been, it’s also about managing the growing stresses on the landscape and finding ways to manage these.
“But one of the biggest changes I’ve noticed in the parks across the Alps is the growth in Indigenous engagement. When I started, non-Indigenous rangers often led guided walks to Aboriginal sites. Now it is accepted practice that only Indigenous staff can do that. And while Indigenous engagement is still a work in progress, it’s good to see more Aboriginal staff employed, especially in helping to interpret their culture and connecting to country.”

Odile became a ranger a couple of years before the Australian Alps Program began. She took advantage of the knowledge-sharing and networking which the program made possible, actively contributing and making connections and friendships that endure today. It was through the program that the first Traditional Owners gatherings were held, bringing Aboriginal representatives of people with a centuries-long connection to the Alps together again. These gatherings were in part the catalyst behind many of the positive outcomes which have followed in the years since.

One thing Odile believes has not changed is probably the best: the passion and enthusiasm park staff have for the Alps. “There are so many exciting projects and never enough time to get things done and yet staff always put in extra time and effort. They also know how valuable the Alps program is which is why they support it.”

snippets

GOODBYE AND HELLO: Pretty much everything that the Australian Alps Program delivers is handled by the Program’s own manager and each of these managers is given three years in the role to work their magic. And then it’s time to give someone else a turn, and now is the moment of hand over: from John McRae (ACT Parks) to Rob Gibbs (NSW Parks). As they depart, John and Program Support Officer Gayle Garrett (also ACT Parks) have been roundly thanked by the Program’s Liaison Committee for all that was achieved during their time, as well as for handing a refreshed and efficient Program on to Rob.

The baton – the Alps thermos – has been handed across from John McRae to Rob Gibbs. An era ends and a new one begins...

For those who may not have worked with Rob Gibbs, here’s a bit of an introduction. No doubt many of us will get to know him well over the course of the next three years...
"I'm excited about taking on the Alps Program Manager role but also a little nervous knowing that I've got a lot to live up to given the standard of previous managers. However, John and Gayle have set me up for a good start, so a big thank you to them and great to know that both of them will continue to play prominent roles in the Alps Program’s reference groups.

My start with parks was as a summer seasonal ranger and walking track crew field officer in Kosciuszko back in 1990. I've worked for the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service for over 28 years in a range of positions including field officer, ranger, area manager and project officer. After gaining a Bachelor of Applied Science Degree in Park Management from Charles Sturt in the mid 90s I've been involved in both the planning aspects of conservation land management and implementing day-to-day operational park management programs.

I've had over 16 years working experience within Kosciuszko National Park and over 40 years of walking, driving, riding, cross country skiing, paddling, skidooing and flying over much of the mountains for both work and pleasure, with many more areas of the park and the Alps still yet to be explored.

As for the Alps Program, I was first exposed to it back in 1993 when I worked as a Technical Officer for the first Alps Program Manager, Janet Mackay, preparing the Alps Recreational Horse-Riding Strategy and Alps Tour Operators Manual and training package. Right from those early days I could appreciate the extraordinary benefits of the Program through bringing staff together across the jurisdictions to address common issues and often unique challenges faced in managing the Alps parks.”

The current controversial feral/wild horse management issues facing the Alps national parks is a great case in point regarding the benefits of co-operative management. In my former role as senior Project Officer tasked with reviewing and developing a new wild horse management plan for Kosciuszko National Park being part of the Australian Alps Feral Horse Working Group was and continues to be invaluable. This provides a forum for those dealing with the issue across the Alps to come together, compare notes and experiences as well as coordinate important research and monitoring to inform future management approaches in each of the jurisdictions.

The Alps Program has a unique role in helping to facilitate and in connecting day to day park managers, rangers and field staff with researchers, scientists, subject specialists, Traditional Owners, communities learning from and supporting each other in our common
love for the Alps and the desire to protect its unique landscapes and its values. I hope to continue to make the Alps Program useful and relevant to as many staff at the coalface as possible, highlighting that while we're a diverse bunch with differing roles and responsibilities, together we’re crucial members of a team – ‘People Working Together’ – toward a common goal of protecting the important natural, cultural and community values of the Australian Alps national parks.

THERE’S BEEN MOVEMENT AT THE STATION: Making decisions about how best to manage feral horses in the Australian Alps is a challenge on many levels. More straightforward is the gathering of information about this pest species which has been happening via aerial surveys (supported by the Alps program) for almost two decades. The autumn 2019 survey is the latest and like the previous surveys, its aim is to produce an updated estimate of horse populations in the survey blocks, along with an estimate of change.

Each of the Australian Alps partner agencies manages their horse populations differently, and together we have a strong shared interest in knowing the overall numbers and the population trends across this bioregion. These large-scale aerial surveys complement our growing body of knowledge about the relationship between horse density and impact and the calibre of the data will inform objective, evidence-based decisions across the Australian Alps.

The physical survey flying and counting was completed by Park agency staff in early May 2019. The data analysis, report write-up and peer review process are still underway, with expected public release of the report and summary of results later in the year. Stay tuned for further updates.

L to R: Scott Seymour (ACT Parks – Flight Specialist), Tom Lowry (Pilot HeliSurveys), Dave Bearup (NSW NPWS – Flight Specialist) and Mika Saunders (NSW NPWS – Flight Specialist) conduct a operational and safety briefing before one of the aerial surveys flights.

WORKING WITH WATER: Water was the focus of the biennial Operations Workshop (2019) run by the Alps Program. These two days deliberately covered a lot of ground, the aim being: to improve staff awareness of aquatic ecosystems, improve the environmental outcomes of projects when working in and around water, and to provide an opportunity for staff from the Alps park agencies to share their experiences, successes, failures and lessons learned in this area.
Those who signed up were exposed to theory and practical sessions from guest presenters and experts. Topics included mountain stream hydrology and ecology 101, as well as soil science and relevant legislation. This was followed by examining a series of case studies including walking track construction in wetlands, peatland restoration, fish barriers and pathways and then field trips to Namadgi National Park and Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve to check out track, trail, road and bridge construction projects around wetland and riparian ecosystems. The take-home message: if you get the planning right regarding environmental and biosecurity considerations, good outcomes will follow.

Interest and demand for this workshop was high with the 30 available spots quickly filling with staff from across the Alps agencies whose day-to-day work involves just these challenges. It was deemed to be a huge success with the call for similar workshops to be held in the future. Move fast to grab your spot when you see the next Alps Program workshop advertised.

A (seriously) wrapt audience listened as guest presenter Liz McPhee stressed the importance of soils and how best to manage water in order to protect them. Then the theory was explored with visits to examples in the field.

THE PLAN BEHIND THE PROGRAM: Given the age and effectiveness of the Australian Alps Program, it's not surprising to discover that sitting behind it is a strategic plan. The
latest version of this was endorsed by the Australian Alps Liaison Committee at its June meeting at Namadgi National Park. This new plan sets the framework for the Alps Program for the next three years, stating its vision and mission, and describing the current on-ground priorities for the Alps within the four key areas: Environment, Cultural Heritage, Connecting People and Program Management. Take a look in more detail here.

Staying informed, members of the Australian Alps Liaison Committee (the guardians of the Alps Program) take a break from their June meeting (where they endorsed the latest Strategic Plan) to visit the Honeysuckle Tracking Station and Orroral Homestead, both at Namadgi.

It's from this strategic plan that the Program’s annual to-do list is developed. For example, the work of the Reference Groups with their experts from across the Alps; or the series of workshops and forums run especially for agency staff and relevant stakeholders; or support for the funded projects (see list below). This financial year there will be an Alps Frontline Forum for staff involved in Visitor Centres and face to face interpretive programs across the Alps, and a Science Management Forum connecting researchers and scientists with day to days Alps park managers and staff. Stay tuned for further details and how you can be involved in these workshops in upcoming newsletters.

The Alps Program is funding these projects…

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THE MOON CLIP: Fifty years ago, an extraordinary eight-minute live stream was relayed from the moon to television screens around the world. An astonishing feat at the time, we were able to watch as man stepped onto the moon thanks to the team who were working at the former Honeysuckle Creek Tracking Station in the Australian Aps at Namadgi. It was this tracking dish that received the quality, dependable feed for the worldwide broadcast. Fifty years on, 300 guests gathered at the former Tracking Station to celebrate: former team members, scientists, politicians and VIP's including the US ambassador Arthur B. (A.B.) Culvahouse Jr. and Australian-born NASA astronaut Andy Thomas. A hushed, emotional crowd watched ‘the’ footage play across an installation of big screens before a group of young Australian astronomers unveiled the commemorative word sculpture that now sits nearby to remind us of what once happened in this place: one small step, one giant leap. The celebrations then moved on to The Canberra Deep Space Communication Complex at Tidbinbilla where much of the original fabric of the now decommissioned Honeysuckle Creek facility was repurposed. At the foot of the dish that received those images and sound half a century ago, former colleagues caught up with each other as they enjoyed lunch in the brilliant late-July sunshine.
Thanks again to Program supporter Darcy Blair for compiling the crossword featured in our previous issue. Here’s the solution, and if you missed it the first time around, and you’d like to have a go, here’s the link...

down  
1 wind blown (7) Aeolian  
3 mythical creature at Murray’s source (8) Cowombat  
4 latest addition to the Australian Alps MoU (4,8) Lake Mountain  
9 too cold for trees to grow (6) Alpine  
11 Australia’s biggest climb (7,4) Hannels Spur  
13 stunted, deformed vegetation type (9) Krummholz  
16 a ramsar wetland in the Alps (6) Ginini  
17 second largest reservoir in the Alps (9) Dartmouth  
19 so good they named it twice (5,5) Mitta Mitta  
21 a frog and a mountain (3,3) Baw Baw

across  
2 ice type that causes erosion & frost heave (6) Needle  
5 the Alpine NP’s highest peak (6) Bogong  
6 chalet destroyed in the 2003 fires (5,8) Mount Franklin  
7 black & gold frog (10) Corroboree  
8 high country snake (10) Copperhead  
10 one of two murdered at Wonnangatta (7) Barclay  
12 insect with bright coloured abdomen (8,7) Mountain Katydidd  
14 high plains seasonal cattle grazing (11) Transhumant  
15 pioneering alpine ecologist (6,4) Maisie Carr  
18 summer dormancy (11) Aestivation  
20 the Alps’ highest peak (10) Kosciuszko  
22 the Alps have two of these wetlands (6) Ramsar

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, or cleared a track or installed some new signs, why not send me a photo and a few words. Maybe you just went for a particularly fabulous walk and would like to share your experience. We accept stories from staff members, volunteers and members of the general community.

News from the Alps is published by the Australian Alps national parks. Program Manager and Editor is Rob Gibbs, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service, Rob.Gibbs@environment.nsw.gov.au. For more information about the Alps, including information about the Parks, other publications and news, visit the Australian web page, https://theaustralianalps.wordpress.com/. You can also catch up and stay connected on current Alps related happenings and issues on the Australian Alps National Parks Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/australianalpsnationalparks/. And many thanks to those people who have made the time to be interviewed, and to the photographers for their images. Without this support, News from the Alps wouldn’t be possible.