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# Mountain Journal

THE MOUNTAINS ARE CHANGING – ARE WE READY?

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The Australian Alps covers the traditional Country of the Bidawal, Monero-Ngarigo, Gunaikurnai, Jaithmathang, Taungurung, Mitambuta, Ngarigu-Currawong, Dhudhuroa, Waywurru, Wurundjeri and other peoples. We use dual naming (Indigenous and European) of features like mountains or rivers where possible. All of Australia is indigenous land, and Mountain Journal acknowledges this fact.



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Image: Mike Edmonson

# Introduction

## The mountains are changing – are we ready?

Change is everywhere. As the snow line slowly but steadily climbs higher up the mountains, climate change is impacting on winter as we know it. Erratic weather, boom and bust snow cycles, the borderline rain that should be falling as snow. Businesses and mountain staff feel the brunt of these more unpredictable days. Winter ice skating and regular snow on the lower peaks is already fading into the distance as we move into an uncertain century of unprecedented warming. In summer we often face the challenges that come with longer and more intense fire seasons.

Since the covid lockdown years, two new generations have found themselves in the mountains, both bringing opportunity and risk. As has often been said “everybody discovered the backcountry since Covid.” While you can still find open slopes, silence and untracked snow, the backcountry is busier than ever before. Social media gives us a one dimensional view of mountains that look gorgeous but which can prove deadly. Mt Bogong, the Main Range, Stanley Bowl and the trails of the Bogong High Plains are often crowded and many of the people who are out there lack the experience to be there safely, and don't know

the culture of good manners and mountain etiquette. The death of three people on mountains in the past winter and a large number of rescues demonstrates the sometimes devastating flip side of backcountry adventure.

At the same time, new groups are making their way to the resorts. The snow play crowds fill the roads and carparks, and bring new pressures to the resorts. Both these waves of new people need to be welcomed and supported as they find their place in the mountains.

At the same time, a growing number of First Nations groups are re-asserting their rights to manage their Country.

These profound changes bring us to a new point in the human story of the mountains. These are times that are exciting and daunting in equal measure. How do we manage these pressures, while creating space for the new arrivals, demonstrate respect for the old cultures, and leave space for wild nature?

These are the questions we have tried to delve into in this edition of mountain journal.



## Threats and change

Our mountains are old. While recent ice ages have left their mark on the rockier peaks of lutruwita/ Tasmania, on the mainland the mountains are mostly rounded, the rough edges worn away by time and natural processes. As the old Gondwana super continent stretched apart about 160 million years ago, the Earth's crust became thinner and weaker. This allowed hot magma from deep below to rise up. The magma heated the crust and added new lighter rocks, so the crust expanded upwards to form a plateau nearly two kilometres high. This new highland area was the beginning of the

Australian Alps, and evidence suggests that these mountains rose up approximately 90 million years ago when the Tasman Sea between Australia and New Zealand opened up.

Over the next 60 million years, frost, wind and water carved deep valleys out of the plateau, gradually moulding it into the Australian Alps.

Our mountains are special, and unique among the ranges of the world. The land itself transforms slowly. But many changes are already underway:



Alpine Daisies amongst  
the Snow Gums.  
Image: Mike Edmonson

## Changes in the Alps

- The alpine region of south eastern Australia and the mountains of lutruwita/ Tasmania are already experiencing the impacts of climate change, particularly through warmer temperatures and less rainfall. Without concerted action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, these impacts will continue.
- Snow pack has been in decline since at least 1957. This is being felt especially at lower elevations. The Australian snowpack is now at a 2,000-year low. Snow cover between 1954 and 2012 has reduced by 30% and the length of the ski season has already contracted by between 17 and 28% across most Australian alpine resorts.
- Without sustained action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, in the future we expect to see less reliable snow cover and a shorter or irregular winter, with long-lasting snow retreating to only the highest mountains.
- Fire weather is projected to increase in winter and spring. In Tasmania, the ancient relic vegetation communities from the time of the Gondwana super continent are especially vulnerable to more frequent and intense fires. In western Tasmania, 'dry lightning' storms are becoming more common. Fire behaviour at night is becoming more extreme.
- Alpine flora and fauna have adapted to fit a small window of ecological conditions, making them sensitive to changes in the climate. Continued changes in climate will affect key alpine habitats such as grassy woodlands and montane lakes, bogs and fens. Changing conditions will place more stress on already threatened species.
- Projections show that the alpine region is likely to experience a reduction in surface-water runoff in the future.

### Sources

<https://www.climatechange.environment.nsw.gov.au/impacts-climate-change/natural-environment/alpine>

<https://theaustralialpsnationalparks.org/the-alps-partnership/nature-and-biodiversity/climate-change/>

<https://protectourwinters.org.au/our-changing-snowscapes/>

## Some icons of the mountains

### Bogong moths

The bogong moth (*Agrotis infusa*) is a night-flying moth, known for its biannual long-distance migration in spring from inland areas to the Australian Alps, where they gather to aestivate (a form of dormancy) until they return to their breeding grounds again in the autumn. They can migrate up to 1,000 kilometres, using the Milky Way and specific star patterns as a directional compass, combined with the Earth's magnetic field for calibration. They are the first insects that are known to use true celestial navigation. These small moths possess astronomical awareness rivalling that of ancient human navigators.

*'The moths can compensate for the Earth's rotation, which causes stars to move across the sky throughout the night, and maintain accurate headings even when clouds temporarily obscure portions of the stellar map. Each moth makes this journey only once in its lifetime, meaning this navigational knowledge is innate rather than learned. The discovery suggests that for millions of years, these insects have been looking up at the same stars humans used to explore the world, finding their way across continents by reading the galaxy itself as their map.'*

The moths have been of great significance to First Nations people in the south east, who would travel to the mountains to feed on the moths during summer, and they are also a key food source for the mountain pygmy-possum.

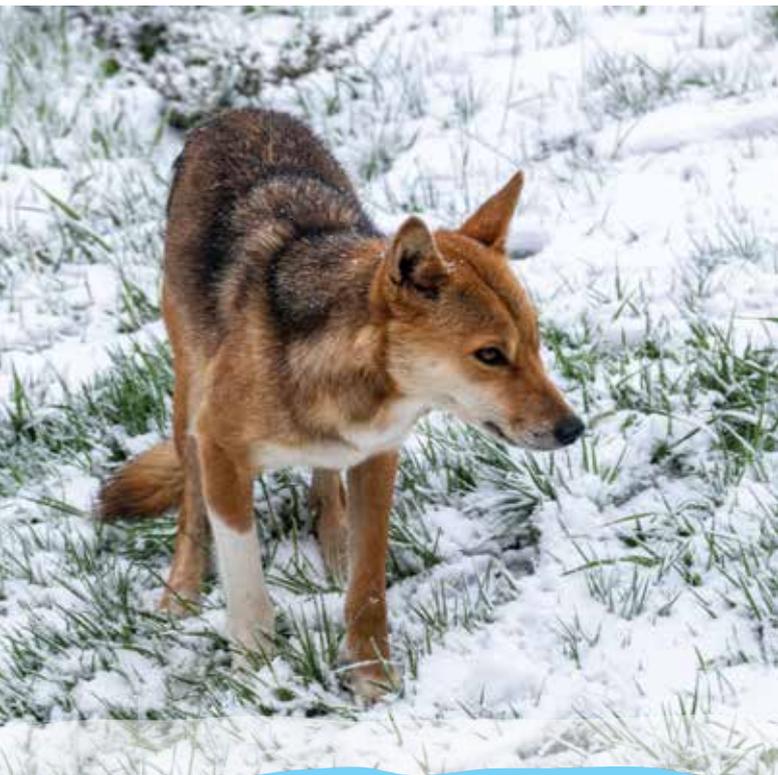


### Mountain Pygmy-possum

This tiny possum (*Burramys parvus*) is Australia's only hibernating marsupial. It hibernates under the snow for up to seven months a year. It is listed as being Critically Endangered.

There are three populations of the possums. They live in the alpine and subalpine boulders found across the Bogong High Plains and Mt Buller in Victoria and around Mt Kosciuszko in New South Wales. There are fewer than 2,000 Mountain Pygmy-possums left in the wild.

They rely on bogong moths for their food. Efforts to protect the endangered species from the threats of climate change and feral animals continue.



### The Alpine dingo

Victoria is home to two distinct and genetically pure dingo populations: the Alpine and Mallee dingoes. The Alpine dingo ranges from Mt Buller to the NSW border and into eastern Gippsland, and unlike the classic desert dingo, appears in colours from near-white to almost black. Once thought to be hybrids or feral "wild dogs," recent genetic research confirms these animals are largely pure, with true hybrids now rare in the wild.

Alpine dingoes are heavier, thick-set and well adapted to cold mountain conditions, and are genetically distinct from other dingo populations. Fewer than 3,000 remain in Victoria, yet many are still legally trapped, shot or poisoned, with 500 – 1,000 killed each year.

As apex predators, dingoes play a vital ecological role by suppressing foxes, cats, deer, goats and pigs. Where dingoes persist, these pests decline – helping protect threatened species such as the Mountain Pygmy Possum, identified by Zoos Victoria as highly vulnerable to fox and cat predation.

### The Pencil Pine

The pencil pine (*Athrotaxis cupressoides*) is a much loved and wonderfully charismatic tree of the Tasmanian mountains where it is largely restricted to sub-alpine areas above 800 metres. It is one of the Gondwanan species - dating back to the times of the Gondwana super continent - and often grows around tarns, streams and lakes because of its intolerance to fire. Pencil pines can reach ages in excess of 1,200 years, but have little chance of recovery after a fire.

It is hard to imagine the mountains of lutruwita without these wonderful trees.

Image: Mark G Photography

## Feral horses

*Horses are beautiful animals. But wild populations do not belong on public land in the mountains. One of the longest running campaigns in the high country has revolved around the efforts to have sheep, cattle, and then horses, removed from the mountains. This is one of the good news stories of the high country: governments are acting to reduce numbers of animals roaming our national parks. **Linda Groom** explains some of the story behind this long campaign in NSW.*



### **Feral horses in Kosciuszko – a political change in direction**

Our mountains exist in a changing political landscape. There are recent signs from NSW that some of those changes are for the better. In December 2025, the NSW Parliament passed a bill to repeal the *Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act* (NSW, 2018). The repeal bill received support from both sides of NSW politics. It means that Kosciuszko's feral horses, also known as brumbies, can now be managed like any other damaging feral animal, without any special protection.

That excellent decision was part of a pattern of improved protection for Kosciuszko's native plants and animals from feral horse impacts. In 2024 the NSW government responded to spiraling feral horse numbers in Kosciuszko by recommencing aerial shooting. The government also published a new management plan for feral horses in Barrington Tops National Park. That plan has a target population of as close to zero horses as is practicable.

### **How was that victory achieved?**

What follows is my personal view of the steps to victory, based on my experience as a Volunteer Co-ordinator with the lead organisation of the campaign, the Invasive Species Council (ISC).

### **Start with science**

When an environmental campaign is place-based, it is a great advantage to have an extensive body of scientific studies relating to that particular place. In 2018, the NSW Threatened Species Scientific Committee determined that feral horses were a key process threatening Australia's native plants and animals, consolidating decades of scientific evidence.

### **Provide a platform for Indigenous voices**

In 2018, Aboriginal elders from East and West of the Great Divide organised the Narjong Water Healing Ceremony at the birthplace of the Murrumbidgee River in northern Kosciuszko. They described it as a 'place that should be protected within Kosciuszko National Park, but is being desecrated by hard-hooved feral animals and empty promises of protection and preservation'.

Wiradjuri man Richard Swain attended the Narjong ceremony. He works as Indigenous Ambassador for the ISC and has been a powerful voice for protecting the high country from all feral animals.

### **Talk to strangers**

In any environmental campaign, an early step is to talk to friends. We certainly did that. We gave presentations and sent newsy updates to bushwalking clubs and environmental groups. The Conservation Council of NSW and the National Parks Associations of the ACT and NSW were particularly helpful in spreading the word.

Talking to friends is an important first step. Some of the friends we spoke to turned into volunteers, and many became donors to the campaign.

Talking to strangers is even more important. As in many campaigns, we spoke to strangers via the media. In this campaign, however, we used an additional channel. We ran tables at markets, on footpaths in spots approved by local councils, in national parks, and in paid-for spots in shopping centres. At the tables, volunteers asked passers-by – complete strangers – to sign petitions and submissions. Each signature involved a one-to-one conversation. Over three petitions and one round of encouraging submissions to a government inquiry, our volunteers engaged in at least 26,000 conversations with strangers between 2018 and 2025.

It takes a bit of nerve to set up a petition table in a town that is a day or two's drive from wherever you live. We started with locations that were near to where volunteers lived, then encouraged the volunteers to try petition-tabling in more distant places. The volunteers had to cover all their own costs, but had the satisfaction of seeing the signatures steadily increase.

### **Talk to politicians**

To convince the politicians, we used a combination of the scientific evidence, and evidence of the social license for change from the petitions and letters from constituents.

The salaried staff at the ISC undertook most of the work of lobbying politicians. It needs evidence conveyed with courtesy and patience. It needs clarity about what you want, rather than vague requests to 'do more'. And it needs the ability to be able to switch modes and talk to the donors who will fund your ability to continue to talk to politicians. The ISC staff have those abilities in spades and I stand in total awe of their skills.

## And some luck

The campaign to protect Kosciuszko from feral horse damage also benefitted from luck. Luck in the form of divisions and distractions among the groups that opposed us. The re-homers – those who generously accept feral horses from national parks and care for them on their properties – disagreed with those who thought re-homing was a cop-out and who vandalised the trap yards used by the NSW Parks Service to gather feral horses for re-homing. There was an even broader division between brumby supporters who discussed strategies around campfires while the sausages were sizzling, and supporters who discussed animal sentience and regarded sausages as an abomination.

One group of feral horse supporters raised funds to pay Airborne Logic, a professional air survey company, to take air images of parts of northern Kosciuszko with the aim of showing that there were far fewer horses than the official counts. Airborne Logic produced images of stunning clarity and used a combination of AI and human checking to count the horses. The results confirmed, rather than contradicted, the official estimates. The media pounced on the air images which showed, in new and impressive detail, the extent of the feral horse tracks criss-crossing northern Kosciuszko.

Many environmental campaigns face opposition from well-funded developers or large companies. We were lucky enough to avoid that.



## What next?

There is still some work to be done in translating the NSW Parliament's decision to repeal the Kosciuszko Wild Horse Heritage Act into formal plans and operations. Under the repeal bill's transition provisions, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service has until late 2027 to produce a new plan. Until then, the old plan, with its aim of retaining 3000 horses in the Park, remains in place. Three thousand horses are still causing damage and threatening native species. We'll be working towards a target of 'as close to zero as practicable'.

*Linda Groom is a volunteer co-ordinator with the Invasive Species Council.*





## Mountain huts

If you have ever been to Craig's hut on the Clear Hills in the Victorian high country, you will have seen the waves of people who drive in to pay homage to this structure. It was built as a film set in the 1980s and is located in a spectacular spot, with expansive views of the surrounding mountains. The volume of visitors speaks to the deep love many people feel for mountain huts. Each hut comes with its own history and story. Climate change driven fires are increasingly posing a threat to this legacy.

### **Kosciuszko Huts Association (KHA)**

*KHA is a voluntary association that conserves, manages and reconstructs huts and homesteads within Kosciuszko National Park NSW and Namadgi National Park ACT Canberra since 1970. KHA Newsletter Editor **Pauline Downing** explains some of the back story.*

In 1965 an informal network of caretakers existed to ensure the existing mountain huts were preserved to provide emergency shelter. In 1970, Neville Gare, Superintendent of Kosciuszko State Park, called a meeting and a motion was passed, "that an Association tentatively to be named the Kosciusko Huts Association be formed and an interim committee be elected".

The Association formed in that year celebrated its 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in November 2021.

Kosciuszko National Park is one of the best known and most loved national parks in Australia, attracting around three million visitors each year. KHA is a voluntary association that conserves and reconstructs huts and homesteads within Kosciuszko under the primary authority of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Huts were originally built (mostly between the 1870s to the 1990s) by cattle families, miners, prospectors, loggers, brumby runners, Snowy Mountains Scheme workers and early bushwalkers and ski groups. There were originally over 170 huts. Many have been destroyed by fire and lost to the severe mountain weather conditions.

In its first year KHA agreed to maintain the huts by using the existing caretakers and to encourage new caretaker groups. The Huts Maintenance Officer (HMO) was seen as an essential position to this end and the huts maintenance newsletter was circulated to all members. This resulted in further caretaker groups being formed, clearing the way for the allocation of other huts to receive ongoing maintenance. There were different styles and structures that were built in the early days in Kosciuszko National Park (NSW) and Namadgi National Park (NNP, located in the ACT).

KHA conserves the huts and homesteads in KNP and NNP for future generations. KHA is guided by a committee, HMO and a History Officer. Membership is open to everyone interested in preserving the huts and their history.

For more than fifty years KHA has carried out maintenance activities on most of the 90 or so remaining huts and homesteads in KNP and NNP. A network of caretakers, both groups and individuals, make at least an annual inspection visit to their allocated hut or huts to document the material state of these structures and to develop work plans. Several were lost in the past and in the bushfires of 2003 and 2019-2020. During the 2019-20 bushfires, ten huts were destroyed and an 11th was damaged. Since then, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has teamed up with descendants of the hut builders and volunteers from the KHA and others to restore the buildings. Four Mile Hut in KNP was rebuilt in 2024 after being destroyed in the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires, with its official reopening ceremony held on April 20, 2024. The reconstruction was part of a larger project to restore 11 heritage huts, preserving the iconic structure's features as a replica on a nearby site.

**Huts in Namadgi National Park, ACT.** Canberra came under the care of KHA in 1988. Conservation and survey work is carried out by KHA on all huts in the NNP. There were originally over 40 huts.

The ACT Government has reversed their promise of rebuilding two heritage huts deep in NNP, years after they were destroyed by bushfire. The surviving family of the people who built them a century ago is not giving up on them yet. Demanding Hut and Max and Bert Oldfields Hut are two of only 15 surviving huts and homesteads. They were key to the region's sheep farming industry and both are included on the ACTs Heritage Register as a "significant



*cultural resource to the community*". Demanding Hut was constructed by Bill Cotter and Jack Simpson in 1860 on land owned by Jack's great-grandfather, Garrett Cotter, after whom the Cotter region is named. It was used by graziers for decades when moving sheep through to Tantangara in today's Kosciuszko National Park.

*To read more about the history of the Kosciuszko Huts Association visit the KHA website [www.khuts.org](http://www.khuts.org).*

In lutruwita / Tasmania, check the Mountain Huts Preservation Society. <https://www.mountainhuts.com.au/>

In Victoria: the Victorian High Country Huts Association. <https://hutsvictoria.org.au/>





Image: Kelly Van Den Berg

# Connection

## Thoughts from the Backcountry

*Kelly van den Berg is well known among outdoors and backcountry enthusiasts. Together with her partner she established Gippsland Adventure Tours, which helps people to gain the skills and experience they need to have adventures in the mountains safely. Kelly reflects on the cover theme of this year's magazine: **The Mountains are Changing.***

I've spent most of my adult life in and around the Victorian high country, learning to read its seasons. The mountains keep time differently and you learn to move with them.

Lately, something feels different up here.

The winters are shorter. The snowline creeps higher each decade. Ski seasons start with doubt and end with

apologies. In trails and over hut fireplaces you hear the same quiet comments:

*"It didn't used to melt this fast."*

*"I remember when this was waist-deep in August."*

*"Next year might be better."*

The mountains are changing. In climate, in culture and in how we interact with them.

The question is are we ready for what comes next?

### **The Climate Shift We're Already Living Through**

When I was a kid late spring still held winter in its grip. Now whole seasons swing between boom and bust. A metre one week, grass the next. Rain falls where snow once did. I've watched mountain businesses scramble to adapt, staff burn out and long held traditions wobble under the weight of unpredictability.

And as winter shrinks the summer grows teeth: longer fire seasons, lightning, heat and a new background hum of risk planning and escape routes.

### **And Then Came the Cultural Shift**

Post COVID people poured into the backcountry. I loved watching it. The new families skinning up for their first turns, young people discovering our beautiful outdoors and all it has to offer, and seasoned adventurers sharing trails with absolute beginners. There's something beautiful about seeing people fall in love with the places that shaped you.

But enthusiasm, as I've seen again and again, is not the same as preparation.

### **What Social Media Doesn't Show**

Our feeds show the dream: summit selfies, powder shots, campfires beneath the stars. What they don't show is the map reading, swollen river crossings, weather calls, hut etiquette, avalanche discussion, wrong turns, whiteouts and rescue consequences

The real heart of backcountry travel is in the decisions you don't see.

### **The Instagram Effect and the Danger of Highlight Reels Without Context**

Short form content has brought the backcountry into the mainstream with reels of perfect powder turns, steep lines, ridge walks, creek crossings and sunrise camps. On the surface it's inspiring. It gets people curious, motivated and sometimes even brave enough to try something new.

But here's the missing piece-

*The reel shows the outcome, not the judgement behind the outcome.*



The slow part is the planning, risk assessments, skill building and decision making which almost never makes it onto the screen. Without that context it can unintentionally belittle or erase the very skills that make those adventures possible. What looks effortless online is usually the product of training, preparation, mentorship, and time in the mountains.

When a steep descent or icy traverse is shown in ten seconds, it doesn't show the hours of discussion about weather windows, avalanche hazard, runouts, exit strategies or the very basic question: "Should we be here today?"

I'm not against people capturing or sharing their adventures. It's beautiful to see the high country celebrated. If we're going to inspire, we should also empower.

What I'd love to see more of and what I try to model is sharing the learning as much as the aesthetic. The decision making as much as the descent. The navigation error as much as the summit photo.

In recent seasons I've watched rescues unfold across both the Victorian and NSW Alps and I've felt a sadness when something preventable turns serious. Wilderness doesn't care if you're experienced or new. Nature asks for respect from all of us.

### **Stewardship & Belonging**

One of the things I love most about the mountains is their unwritten etiquette - step aside for the uphill skier, leave huts better than you found them. The lessons that used to be learned by osmosis. Someone older, slower, wiser would show you. Nowadays many arrive without that mentoring not through fault but through timing. They just weren't exposed to it.



*I hope this becomes the decade where experience is something shared rather than hoarded. Where success is measured not just in summits or selfies but in how we care for one another and for Country along the way.*

And here's where I believe the experienced have a duty:

Teach, don't gatekeep. This is especially important on online forums where newbies are asking questions. Invite, don't exclude. Share, don't show off.

A map read together, a weather pattern explained, a hut etiquette shared gently are small things that turn visitors into guardians instead of consumers.

Stewardship isn't innate. It's taught. And it's our responsibility to pass it on.

### **Education as a Pathway In - Not a Barrier**

Across Victoria I'm seeing more people actively seek skills: navigation, mountain safety, weather, river travel and emergency response. It gives me hope. Not everyone needs to be an expert but everyone stepping out should understand the basics that keep adventures from becoming incidents.

### **Respecting Country**

A shift that matters deeply to me is seeing First Nations groups reclaim stewardship of alpine Country. Their knowledge is deep, place based and grounded in thousands of seasons. As guests, we're being asked to walk with humility and to listen as well as travel and to support management that prioritises ecological health over convenience.

The mountains are not playgrounds. They are living systems.

### **So Where To From Here?**

If we want these places to survive us and for us to keep moving safely within them consider -

Curiosity over complacency

Education over arrogance

Inclusion over gatekeeping

Stewardship over consumption

I hope this becomes the decade where experience is something shared rather than hoarded. Where success is measured not just in summits or selfies but in how we care for one another and for Country along the way.

Because the mountains are changing.

And we have to change with them.

May we do so with open minds, good judgement and an understanding that the backcountry and remote places are not just a space for adventure. It's a space for community, sharing and stewardship that can be handed down to each generation just as it has been a home for the stories that came long before us.

*Kelly van den Berg and Paddy Howlett run Gippsland Adventure Tours, a small guiding and education business based on Gunai Kurnai Country. Their work focuses on navigation, river travel, backcountry skills and preparedness with an emphasis on building confidence and competence in wild places. Both believe deeply in stewardship and that outdoor culture is healthiest when experience is shared, newcomers are welcomed and Country is respected. Their hope is that people leave the mountains not only safer but more connected to the landscapes that holds them.*

<https://gippslandadventuretours.com>

## First Nations and changing management of Country

European occupation of the high country happened early, partly because there was so much good open grazing country across the higher plateaus. Massacres and displacement meant that First Nations people are largely absent from the mainstream stories we hear about the Australian mountains.

But in recent decades, many First Nations people and communities have been re-asserting their right to manage their Country. A number of groups now have Native Title recognition in mountain areas. These include the Gunaikurnai of East Gippsland and the southern side of the Victorian alps, and Taungurung, on the northern and north western side of the Victorian high country.

Dhudhuroa, Waywurru and Ngurai Illum People have made an application for recognition.

No claims have been resolved as yet in the Snowy Mountains, nor in lutruwita/ Tasmania.

Native Title recognition means that traditional owner groups can start to once again manage Country.

### **Gunaikurnai**

The Gunaikurnai people's strong and continuing connection with Country was legally recognised in 2010. As part of the package of agreements in the Traditional Owner Recognition and Settlement Agreement, Gunaikurnai now hold Aboriginal Title over 14 national parks and reserves. These parks are jointly managed by Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) and Parks Victoria and include the Avon Wilderness Park, Baw Baw National Park, and the section of the Alpine National Park on Gunaikurnai Country.

GLaWAC say 'Joint management is a partnership between Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners and the state, allowing both to bring their knowledge and skills to the management of protected areas. Country is vital to contemporary Aboriginal culture and an important part of the cultural identity of Gunaikurnai Traditional Owners'.

Gunaikurnai have a 'Whole of Country Plan', which outlines how they wish to manage the reserves. GLaWAC are currently developing individual Joint Management Plans for each of the parks.

<https://gunaikurnai.org/our-country/joint-management/>



*The concept of a cultural landscape bridges the differences between Aboriginal and 'western' world views; between natural resource management and caring for Country.*

Image: Mike Edmonson

## Taungurung

Taungurung Land and Waters Council (TLaWC) wish to manage their Country on public land through the lens of Cultural Parks. After the release of the *Great Outdoors Taskforce Report*, which had been established following the end of native timber harvesting in the state, one of the taskforce's key recommendations called for updating Victoria's public land management framework to support Traditional Owner-led governance, planning, and management across public forests.

The state government said: "we will pilot a Cultural Reserve with Traditional Owner-led management in the Strathbogie Ranges with TLaWC, facilitating Traditional Owner-led management of public land for all Victorians."

The TLaWC said the taskforce's recommendations on the future management and use of state forests in eastern Victoria aligned with existing public policy frameworks, including *Pupangarli Marnmarnepu*, the *Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy*, and the forthcoming *Public Land Bill*.

TLaWC has been actively engaged in biocultural assessments of the Zoned State Forests since the announcement to cease logging of all native timber in Victoria," TLaWC CEO Matthew Burns said.

TLaWC said it had recommended establishing a well-resourced cultural landscape program pilot in the Strathbogies. The pilot would include - but not be limited to - developing a vision for cultural landscape management, creating a collaborative governance body and plan, and developing two pilot sites within the Stone Country Cultural Landscape to develop a "both worlds" approach to land management.

As noted by TLaWC, "forests are places for people and are important due to their natural, cultural and recreational values."

The concept of a cultural landscape bridges the differences between Aboriginal and 'western' world views; between natural resource management and caring for Country.

The Victorian Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Strategy is a landmark document with a progressive vision for restoring Traditional Owner approaches to land management. It sets out a framework to systematically enable and empower Victorian Traditional Owners to activate cultural knowledge and practices to effectively restore and manage Country.

The strategy was developed by Traditional Owners in a process facilitated by the Federation of Victorian Traditional Owner Corporations and funded by the Victorian government, and was launched in 2020.

There are 5 components of the strategy:

- Restoring the Knowledge System
- Strengthening Traditional Owner Nation Resilience
- Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Planning
- Embedding Traditional Owner Knowledge and Practice
- Traditional Owner Cultural Landscapes Management

<https://fvto.com.au/sections/landscapes/>

[https://fvto.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/1258\\_FVTOC\\_CulturalStrategy\\_web.pdf](https://fvto.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/1258_FVTOC_CulturalStrategy_web.pdf)



Image: Blue Peaks and Middle Lake, Central Lutruwita / Tasmania

## When Wilderness Becomes a Product to Consume

*After decades of community campaigning, the public lands that form the heart of the Australian mountain country are now mostly protected in national parks or World Heritage Areas. As we know, gaining protection through establishment of a park is not the end of the story. We still need funds to manage the impacts of human visitors and the spread of invasive animal plant species. And, of course, climate change is also coming for the places we love.*

*Sadly, commercialisation of wild public lands also remains a problem. **Darren Edwards** delves into the current threats of commercial development.*

I've spent much of my life in the Australian bush, places where the reward was never bought, but earned through preparation, effort, and a willingness to meet the landscape on its own terms. For generations of mountain users, these unmediated landscapes shaped our understanding of risk and responsibility. They were not curated experiences. They were shared, public heritages that asked something of us in return.

A quieter, more permanent change is now taking hold. Across Australia's national parks and high country, wilderness is increasingly being reframed as a setting for luxury

accommodation, exclusive guided walks, and premium eco-tourism packages. The language surrounding these developments is familiar and reassuring. 'Low impact. World class. Inclusive. Nature positive'. Yet on the ground, they signal a profound shift in how protected land is understood and used.

The concern is not tourism itself. National parks exist for people as well as for nature, and regional communities benefit from visitors who value these places. Many guided experiences build skills, improve safety, and deepen appreciation for the landscape. There is also important work being led by First Nations groups, where tourism and land management are grounded in cultural knowledge and long-term stewardship.

The concern lies in the creeping commercialisation of public space. Increasingly, protected landscapes are being viewed through an investment lens, valued for their capacity to host high end experiences rather than for their intrinsic ecological and cultural worth. When a luxury lodge or exclusive accommodation is embedded in a sensitive environment, it brings more than visitors. It introduces permanence. Building footprints, access corridors, service roads, and supply chains all become part of the landscape.

What is presented as a minimal footprint can quickly become a new baseline. Once infrastructure is established, expansion becomes easier to justify. Over time, the character of a place shifts, often subtly, from wild and shared to managed, marketed and consumed. Ecological impacts are not always obvious. Habitat fragmentation,

increased noise and light, and the introduction of weeds or pathogens can occur gradually, beyond the notice of most visitors. What was once protected primarily for its wildness becomes something else entirely.

There is also the question of who these places are for. National parks are among the few remaining spaces explicitly set aside for everyone, regardless of income or background. When the most immersive experiences in a park are tied to high price points, access becomes stratified. Wilderness shifts from shared heritage to something consumed by those who can afford it. The relationship between people and place becomes transactional. Self-reliance, a defining feature of mountain culture, is replaced by service. Presence is replaced by a purchase.

This cultural shift has consequences. Social media and commercial marketing often present the mountains as beautiful and benign backdrops for premium experiences. In doing so, they can erode the humility and judgement traditionally required for travel in wild places. When landscapes are framed as products designed for comfort and certainty, it becomes easier to forget that mountains are indifferent to our presence. They still demand respect, preparation, and restraint.

Climate change is frequently used to justify this intensification. We are told that businesses must adapt, that snow reliability is declining, and that visitors now expect higher levels of comfort in an uncertain world. Adaptation is necessary. But adaptation does not have to mean commercialisation. Experience from similar landscapes around the world suggests that without strict limits, development framed as sustainable can still result in long term environmental and cultural loss.

First Nations leadership adds an essential and hopeful dimension to this conversation. Across Australia, Traditional Owners are reasserting authority over Country, offering

models of care that prioritise continuity, responsibility, and connection. These approaches stand in contrast to short term, profit driven development. As Indigenous voices take a central role in land management, it is worth asking who ultimately holds decision making power in large scale commercial partnerships. Who carries the ecological risk, and who benefits financially over time.

These questions are not unique to Australia. They are being asked wherever wild places become scarce and valuable. As pressure on protected areas grows, so too does the temptation to monetise them. The danger lies in normalising the idea that every landscape must pay its way through development, rather than recognising that restraint is itself a form of stewardship.

National parks were not created to be maximised for economic return. They were created to protect something that cannot be replaced once lost. As we move deeper into a century defined by environmental uncertainty, the choices we make about land use will shape not only ecosystems, but culture.

The challenge ahead is not whether development can be branded as sustainable. It is whether we have the discipline to leave our wilderness alone. If wild landscapes matter for reasons beyond profit, then we must continue to defend the simple gift they offer. Not comfort or exclusivity, but the demanding and beautiful reality of being there on the land's own terms.

*Darren Edwards is the founder of Trail Hiking Australia and Keep It Wild Australia and has spent decades exploring and advocating for Australia's mountains and wild places. His work focuses on responsible access, outdoor safety, and protecting the cultural and ecological values that make wilderness meaningful.*

*"As an outdoor enthusiast, I believe it's my duty to take an active stance on issues affecting our natural world."*



Image: Mike Edmonson



## Volunteers re-invigorate a program to find and eliminate a pest daisy in the Alps

*One of the most insidious 'invaders' which is changing our Alpine areas for the worse is the generically named 'Hawkweed'. In fact, there are three species in this family of European daisies, spreading on the Victorian Bogong High Plains and also in Kosciuszko National Park in NSW.*

**Mick Webster** explains the recent resurgence of volunteer programs aimed at assisting in the removal of Hawkweed in Victoria's high country.

All three species have hairy rosette leaves, bright daisy-like flowers over summer (two bright yellow (King Devil and Mouse Ear Hawkweed) and one orange (Orange Hawkweed), and are the 'perfect' weed, spreading by releasing thousands of seeds into the winds and also creeping along with above-ground stolons (horizontal stems) like strawberries, and springing up with new plants from sub-surface roots. It also spreads chemicals that inhibit native competitors. If any, or all of these pests escape from the High Plains to settled areas we will have a major weed problem in farming and grazing lands, as has happened in New Zealand and North America.

In the past there was a major volunteer effort to find and eliminate this pest – Parks Victoria (PV) has run week-long residential programs from Falls Creek for volunteers to conduct line-searches of pre-planned hectare grids, and this has been a major source of new discoveries. It was volunteers who by sheer chance discovered we had the third species here, Mouse-ear Hawkweed, at Pretty Valley, in 2011.

During Covid, and with continuing state government cuts to PV budgets, the volunteer program has become more of a token effort, with people doing one or two days searching every year, and no accommodation offered at Falls Creek. A contract crew of professionals has still been employed over summer, but they were mainly checking sites where Hawkweed were known to have been in the past (seeds can persist for many years in the soil).

Last year a group of experienced searcher volunteers were determined to change this situation, and we, with support of local PV staff, developed a program to test the interest in getting week-long residential programs up and running again.

For me, as a North-East local, I was struck by the thought that there might be a reservoir of possible weed-searchers in local bushwalking and ecological groups to come to the High Plains to spend a day or a weekend searching in a defined area, without needing accommodation.

And now it's happened this year! After many discussions and much planning and effort, plans put up and abandoned, by the time we have finished searching this season we will have run two week-long programs, and we will have line-searched 15 hectare grids where Hawkweed was predicted to be (by Agriculture Victoria's computer program). And over twenty newbie volunteer Hawkweed-hunters will have been inducted into the fold!

The best news this year so far is that volunteers have discovered two new infestations of Mouse-ear Hawkweed at Pretty Valley, in previously unknown locations. (These were reported to PV and the contractors for immediate destruction). And we have hopes that the recent discovery of Orange Hawkweed at Buckety Plain (10 kilometres from any other find) will be proved to be a complete anomaly.

We are now planning to expand this program to offer more week-long residential programs in 2026, with free accommodation. And we will continue to offer day programs for North-East/Riverina locals. It's a great opportunity to get up somewhere much cooler over summer, do a (rather slow) bushwalk in beautiful alpine countryside, accomplish something very valuable for the environment, and meet lots of like-minded people from all over!

For more information and to indicate your possible interest in the program here are some links

- More on identifying the weed - <https://agriculture.vic.gov.au/biosecurity/weeds/state-prohibited-weeds/hawkweed>
- check Parks Victoria's website Parkconnect for any Hawkweed programs being offered
- contact Andrew Hunter-Graham for week-long programs (andhuntgrah@hotmail.com )
- contact me for local North-East programs (websterm@netc.net.au)
- Join '[Hawkweed Hunters of the High Plains](#)' on Facebook
- and keep your eyes open when walking in the Alps and report any Hawkweed you think you come across! (please don't try to remove it yourself)



## Learning to Belong in the Mountains

*Kyle Boys is the owner and operator of alpine education provider, Blizzard Academy, operating in the alpine regions of NSW and Victoria. Here he reflects on the rise of a new generation of backcountry adventurers.*

I and other leaders in the industry have seen a clear trend emerge in recent years. Australia's alpine regions are seeing a surge in backcountry *Frothers*, the newly backcountry curious, drawn to self-empowered winter activities. Alpine sports - like ski touring, splitboarding, snowshoeing, and ski mountaineering have all grown in popularity. More people than ever are seeking quieter, meaningful experiences beyond resort boundaries. With this increased attraction to the crisp mountain air, vast scenic views, and rugged terrain has come an important question: what does it actually mean to belong in the mountains?

For those of us already in the mountaineering communities of Australia and abroad, belonging here is not just about confidence, equipment or ticking off objectives. It grows from our shared experiences with the friends we travel with, the new acquaintances along the way and how we respect and relate to the environments we move through. The skills and judgement we acquire sit alongside a respect for nature and the communities we visit.

Belonging also means understanding the mountains as places with deep Aboriginal history and ongoing cultural significance. Aboriginal communities, culture and leaders remind us that our time here is brief and that our responsibility to care for these places is shared. In alpine

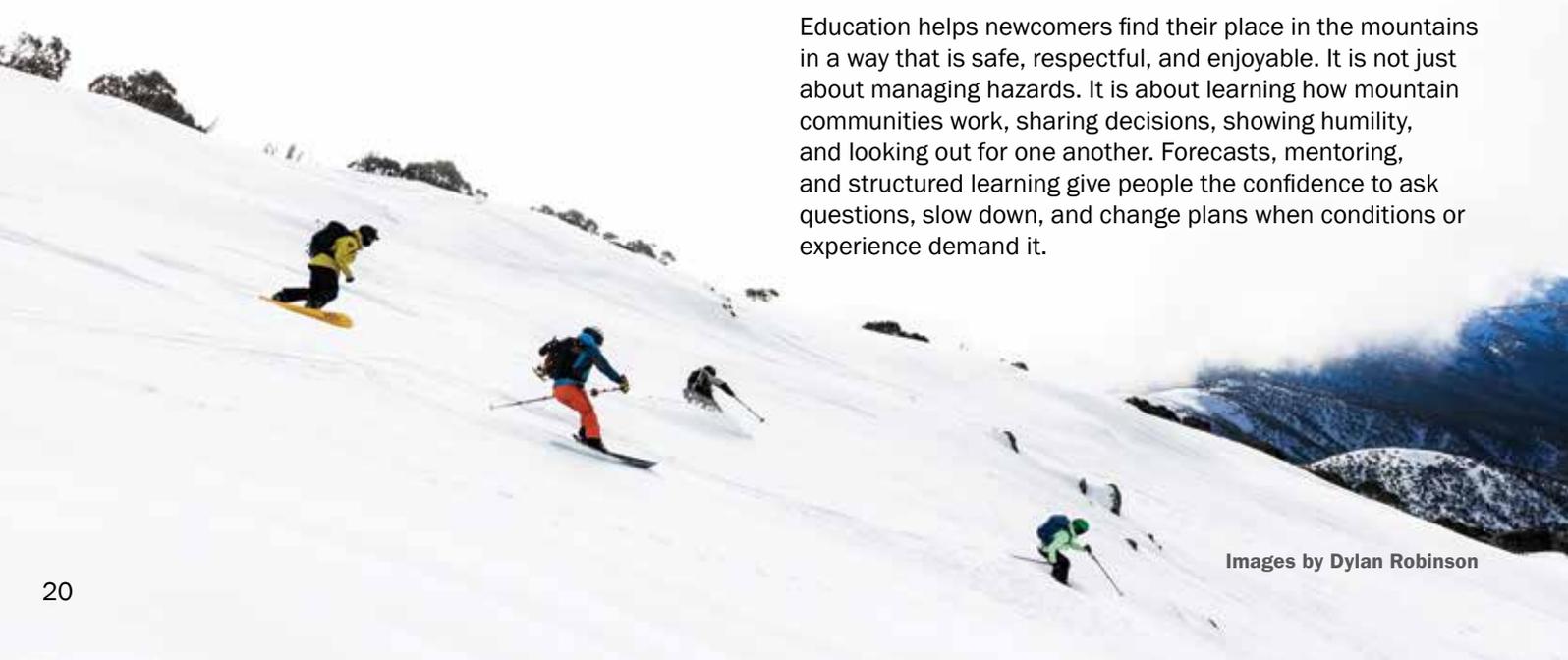


environments where the geography is shaped over eons but the climate is changing rapidly, there is now more than ever a collective responsibility that is just as important as technical competence. It is an understanding that our choices and actions shape the environment and experiences of everyone around us - just as the glaciers and winds shape the mountains we love.

Through my work with Blizzard Academy and the Mountain Safety Collective, one theme emerges consistently: incidents rarely stem from a single dramatic mistake. More often, they result from small gaps in understanding layered over changing conditions. In Australia's mountains, three hazards dominate winter travel: visibility, ice, and avalanche risk. Each affects a wide range of activities, from touring and snowshoeing to climbing and winter bushwalking.

Whiteout conditions can quickly erase terrain features, turning familiar routes into complex navigational challenges. Thin and wind-affected snowpacks frequently produce hard ice, where a minor slip can carry serious consequences. Avalanche hazards, while often subtle compared to larger mountain ranges, are highly variable and require careful interpretation of weather, snowpack, and terrain. These risks cannot be managed through equipment alone, regardless of the activity.

Education helps newcomers find their place in the mountains in a way that is safe, respectful, and enjoyable. It is not just about managing hazards. It is about learning how mountain communities work, sharing decisions, showing humility, and looking out for one another. Forecasts, mentoring, and structured learning give people the confidence to ask questions, slow down, and change plans when conditions or experience demand it.





*“Incidents rarely stem from a single dramatic mistake. More often, they result from small gaps in understanding layered over changing conditions. In Australia’s mountains, three hazards dominate winter travel: visibility, ice, and avalanche risk”.*

### Resources

You can find our guide to backcountry safety and skills via this QR Code.



When this grounding is missing, the effects ripple outward. Incidents become more common, rescue services feel the strain, and the experience of the mountains changes for everyone. Newcomers are more likely to have stressful or frightening experiences, while long-standing community members carry increased risk and responsibility. Education helps bring people in well, supporting safer learning, positive experiences, and a mountain culture that benefits us all.

Belonging is built through education, connection, and the reinforcement of values shared across Alpine communities. Tools like Blizzard Academy’s Blizzard Link app are emerging to help connect people across experience levels, support shared planning, and pass on context, judgment, and culture. These spaces work best when they are not limited to newcomers or those in formal training, but when experienced riders, guides, and long-time community members are active participants as well.

When knowledge flows both ways, newcomers learn more safely and confidently, and experienced users help shape the tone and standards of the community. This kind of engagement strengthens a culture of looking out for one another, caring for the environment, and moving responsibly through shared spaces. Bringing new participants into these values benefits not just Blizzard Academy, but the wider alpine community, reminding us that we are safer, stronger, and better off when we move through the mountains together, and never in isolation.

As climate change continues to compress seasons and increase unpredictability, the need for instilling thoughtful community-mindedness into the growing interest in mountaineering has never been greater. Learning to belong is not a barrier to adventure; it is an invitation into deeper connection, shared responsibility, and long-term stewardship of the places that draw us into the mountains in the first place.



## When Nature Calls

### Sanitation, Climate and the Hidden Environmental Cost of Recreation in the Alps

*Human waste is not a popular topic in environmental conversations - but in alpine and remote protected areas, it is one of the most consequential. Here **Jean-François Rupp** discusses some lower impact ways to deal with human waste in the high country.*

Across the Australian Alps, visitor numbers continue to rise. This is often framed as a success story for nature connection and outdoor recreation. Yet beneath the surface lies a growing, largely invisible problem: how human waste is managed in fragile, climate-exposed ecosystems that were never designed for this level of use.

Sanitation infrastructure quietly shapes environmental outcomes. When it fails—or is poorly suited to place—it can contaminate waterways, increase emissions, drain public budgets, and undermine conservation goals.

#### A Growing Environmental Pressure

Many alpine toilets still rely on long-drop pits, septic tanks, or holding tanks that must be pumped out regularly. Many of these systems were installed decades ago, when visitation was lower, winters more predictable, and climate extremes less common.

Today, they are increasingly unfit for purpose.

In alpine soils, biological activity is slow. Waste decomposes poorly, persisting for decades. During heavy rainfall or snowmelt events, pits can flood or leach, allowing nutrients and pathogens to enter groundwater and downstream catchments.

Research into backcountry sanitation - such as work by environmental planners studying protected areas in North America - shows that popular sites can generate several tonnes of human waste per year. In many US National Parks, this accumulation forced a rethink: pit toilets were not just unpleasant, they were a long-term pollution risk.

Australia is facing the same trajectory, but often without the same level of public discussion.

#### The Cost of “Business as Usual”

For park agencies, sanitation is also a climate and budget issue.

Remote toilets are frequently serviced by truck or helicopter. Each pump-out requires fuel, labour, and disposal at wastewater facilities - sometimes hundreds of kilometres away. These repeated operations generate emissions, disturb wildlife, and absorb funds that could otherwise be directed toward conservation, track maintenance, or ranger presence.



In some alpine parks, servicing a single toilet can cost tens of thousands of dollars per year once access constraints are factored in. Multiplied across a park network, sanitation becomes a significant but rarely scrutinised line item in public spending.

This raises a fundamental question:

Why are we still investing in systems that *create* waste transport problems, rather than eliminating them at the source?

#### Learning from Europe’s Protected Areas

In many European protected areas—particularly in France, Switzerland, and Scandinavia —this question was asked decades ago.

The response was a shift toward **autonomous, waterless sanitation systems** designed to function in cold, high-use, and remote environments without relying on constant servicing or external inputs.

One such system is Sanisphere, now distributed in Australia by Alpiloo. Alpiloo is the first organisation to have this type of autonomous system certified for Australian conditions, partnering with Sanisphere, the European leader in ecological sanitation for protected areas.

This matters because certification is not a formality — it is what allows public land managers to legally adopt alternatives to pits and pump-outs.

#### Imagining a Lower-Impact Alternative

Imagine a toilet that uses no water, does not smell, has no deep pit, requires minimal maintenance, and doesn’t need to be emptied for up to 20 years!

No chemicals.

No pump-out trucks.

No helicopter flights.

The Alpiloo / Sanisphere system achieves this through an autonomous biological process using a urine diversion system, worms and naturally occurring microorganisms. Waste is treated continuously on site, reducing volume by up to 90% and stabilising material rather than storing raw sewage underground.

This is not a traditional composting toilet. There is no manual turning, no additives, and no reliance on user behaviour. The system self-regulates, even under fluctuating visitor loads and harsh alpine conditions.

From an environmental perspective, the implications are significant.

### **Fewer Emissions, Less Risk, More Funding for Nature**

By eliminating regular waste removal, these systems can prevent several tonnes of untreated human waste per site per year from being transported long distances. That means fewer emissions, less noise and disturbance, and lower risk of spills or failures during extreme weather events.

European park agencies report operational savings in the tens of thousands of dollars per installation per year — money that can be redirected toward habitat restoration, climate adaptation works, or education programs rather than fossil-fuel-intensive waste logistics.

Equally important is contamination risk. Removing deep pits and holding tanks reduces the likelihood of nutrient and pathogen leakage into alpine catchments—systems that supply water far beyond park boundaries.

### **Why This Matters Now**

As climate change accelerates, infrastructure choices matter more than ever. Sanitation systems designed for yesterday's conditions are becoming liabilities under today's extremes.

Alpiloo is only beginning to install these systems in Victoria. Many rangers, land managers, and decision-makers are simply unaware that certified alternatives now exist. That lack of awareness is one of the biggest barriers to change.

If you encounter a struggling toilet in a park — overflowing pits, constant servicing, or obvious environmental risk — raising the question of alternatives is a meaningful act of environmental advocacy.

### **A Quiet but Necessary Shift**

Environmental protection is often framed around big, visible battles: forests, species, climate targets. But sometimes it is the unglamorous systems—like toilets—that quietly determine whether our relationship with protected landscapes is sustainable or extractive.

Rethinking sanitation is not about comfort or convenience. It is about emissions, water protection, public spending, and respect for Country.

Sometimes, caring for the mountains starts in the least talked-about place.

### **More information:**

W: [www.alpiloo.com.au](http://www.alpiloo.com.au)

E: Jean-François Rupp — [info@alpiloo.com.au](mailto:info@alpiloo.com.au)

## **Let's talk about poo**

*Here in Australia, we have normally had an 'out of sight, out of mind' approach to human waste, with a standard practise of digging a pit well away from a stream and about 20 cm deep. Cover back over when you're done, and keep walking. But the growing numbers of people out walking, skiing and riding makes this problematic in many heavily visited areas, especially treeless alpine zones.*

*We are now at the point where carrying out our waste is the responsible option in many areas.*

**Rolf Schonfeld** explains a system that works when travelling by water.

All my life when I have been hiking and camping in the wilderness, from early Boy Scout days to ski touring and climbing, I used to find a spot with a view, dig a hole, and do my business.

A pack raft trip down the Franklin River changed all that. Seeing so many pictures and posts about appropriate waste management set ups, we came up with our own system. I ordered compostable dog poo bags (you can use Council provided organic waste bags) and we found the perfect vessel, a repurposed container reinforced with tape. This contains your toilet paper, the poop bags and sanitiser as well as the repurposed tough zip lock bag (old petfood bags). I didn't like the idea of a poo tube as it is always the same size and things can get sloshed around at the beginning.

On this 8 day trip I doubled the compostable poo bags for the first 3 days as I wasn't sure how fast they would disintegrate. Once you've done your business they are tied up and deposited in the zip lock bag, small at first but growing every day. I also placed any organic waste (teabags, coffee grounds, apple cores) in there. Ideally we would dump contents into our waste water worm farm at home. Perhaps deposit bins should be set up at the start and stop points of any wilderness areas.

Why carry on with this practice even though you are not travelling along a river? Simple - Leave No Trace! Think of the animal world that roams the area you have just visited and their sensitive noses...

Every bit counts and thanks for becoming a convert!





## I WISH I DIDN'T HAVE TO KEEP DOING THIS

### Reflections on 23 years as a search & rescue volunteer

*Caro Ryan*

There's a special wardrobe inside my house that is chock-a-block full of orange.

I can't predict when I'll have to open it or for how many days I'll repeat the move, but the frosted glass front permanently shadows the looming carrot that I live with.

Every time I open it, I feel a small part of my spirit slump.

I'm not the only one with a cupboard like this. There are thousands of people like me, some with an M&M packet of different colours inside, representing the various volunteer rescue services: SES (State Emergency Service), RFS/CFA (Rural Fire Service/Country Fire Authority), SLSA (Surf Life Saving Australia), VRA (Volunteer Rescue Association) or Marine Rescue.

The story of how each one of us came to have an orange/yellow/green/red or blue wardrobe is different, and while I can't speak of the motivations for anyone else, for me, it's the fundamental call to help someone having the worst day of their life.

I currently wear the uniform of Deputy Unit Commander Bush Search and Rescue (BSAR), a state-wide specialty unit of the NSW SES. Although I wrangle the 60+ members in the Blue Mountains group and west to the SA border, we can be sent anywhere around the state.

Like our sister unit ASAR (Alpine Search & Rescue), based in the Snowy Mountains, our focus isn't chainsaws or tarpaulins. We can't help you chop a tree, sandbag a rising tide, or cover

the hole in your roof. Our focus is searching for missing people in the most remote and rugged terrain in NSW.

As much as I love being able to help out, I'd really prefer it if we didn't have to do this; if we didn't have to exist.

From the moment I connected with the bush during my first multi-day hike in 1994 at age 22, I've been learning about the immense and sometimes intangible benefits of spending time in nature. The science is vocal on the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual rewards we can experience in wild places. It can be a place of healing, community, discovery, challenge, growth and deep joy.

The slump in my spirit that I feel when opening the orange cupboard means a person, family, friend group, or community is in trauma, held captive in an anxious liminal space of the unknown. It means a gaping schism has separated them from the wonder and life-affirming place that the bush can be.

That somewhere 'out there', a hiker (statistically venturing solo), a person living with dementia or someone who has lost the will to live, is without the knowledge, skills, support and care to be safe.

But something happens when I (and the whole team) pull the orange on. A quiet, steely determination—a deep, measured curiosity to know what happened, what choices they made, where they are and figure out how to bring them home.

Contrary to what keyboard warriors may sometimes think, there is science, statistics and evidence-based planning in what the NSW Police (the agency legislated in charge of land search - LandSAR - in NSW) and emergency services do during a search.

Feeling the hard-wearing, outdoorsy orange fabric slide up my arm, there's a warmth in knowing I'm about to reconnect with my tight-knit, disparate family that can communicate a tome with the raise of an eyebrow.

We mark the passing of time with the language of single names: David, AJ, Betty, Sevak or (for the Snowies) Prabh and Hadi. Just a handful of names amongst many more, of which we forget none.

For me, it's the tortured faces of the families, who ask the same questions as us, but without the experience, training and lost person behaviour data to help answer them.

Since I fell in love with bushwalking and got involved in LandSAR 23 years ago, I've seen massive changes to the ways we access and experience wild places.

The Australian population has grown 35% from 20 to 27 million.

Until the pandemic, interest in visiting national parks was steady and predictable.

The constraints of lockdowns awakened the dormant desire for nature-connectedness, fuelled by the explosion of social media and easy access to location information such as GPS data, shareable .gpx tracks, trip notes and myriad subjective track reviews. A fire stoked by dopamine dealers peddling visual crack, without reality checks on the skills, fitness, experience or equipment needed to reach such places.

If knowledge is power, then *Spiderman wisdom* must prevail: **"with great power comes great responsibility."**

This kind of knowledge was previously unlocked through unofficial wilderness mentorship programs provided by outdoorsy families, a society where free or nature play was the norm or organisations like Scouts/Guides, Duke of Ed or one of the nearly 200 bushwalking clubs across Australia\*.



These communities taught us not only how to look after ourselves and our mates, but to care for the precious environments and places we sought out.

These changes are obvious, but I wonder if there are more nuanced shifts at play. Has our instant swipe-n-see, tap-n-go, call-an-Uber digital world instilled a sense of experiential entitlement? A blindness that masks the necessary prep work and planning needed to experience certain things? And importantly, have our increasingly urbanised lives altered our ability to judge effort for reward?

*\*I didn't grow up in an outdoorsy/camping family. I'm a member of Sydney Bush Walkers Club ([sbw.org.au](http://sbw.org.au)), which I joined soon after that first life-changing multiday hike.*

*Writer, producer, director by trade, bushwalker and search & rescue volunteer by passion, Caro Ryan started [LotsaFreshAir.com](http://LotsaFreshAir.com) to inspire, teach and encourage people to get into hiking and the outdoors safely. She teaches wilderness navigation, authored the book, 'How to Navigate - the art of traditional map & compass navigation in an Australian context' and hosts, 'Rescued - an Outdoor Podcast for Hikers and Adventurers.'*





## Drones and rescues

New technologies are often sold as being the panacea to all our problems. It's always wise to consider both the costs and benefits of the uptake of new tech. In the case of remote area search and rescue operations it does seem like drones offer some good possibilities.

In December 2025, a fire department in Arizona, USA (Phoenix Fire Department or PFD) used a weight-bearing drone to deliver essential supplies to a hiker who'd climbed to the top of a mountain, got into difficulty, and been unable to evacuate themselves. This was the first time that the department has used the technology to rescue a hiker in the hills.

Like other authorities that are responsible for local search and rescue, Phoenix Fire have traditionally relied on helicopter support and on rescuers on foot to evacuate hikers who ended up off-route or injured. But according to reporting in *Backpacker* magazine, the department's drones are starting to change the way that emergency responses take place.

Kenneth Overton, the program coordinator for PFD's drones, told *Backpacker* that the department's drone program began

in 2022 to help monitor wildfires. The department's drones come with thermal imaging, which helps crews maintain awareness surrounding the fire's direction and make more calculated decisions about their next steps.

After a hiker ended up on the top of a nearby mountain called Camel's Head, the fire department used a drone to deliver a mobile phone, food, water, and blanket to keep him comfortable until dawn.

The department currently uses DJI M 30T drones whose payload system can accommodate about six pounds of weight. "We've tested flying flotation devices, helmets, blankets, all those different things," Overton explained.

Drone pilots were able to fly multiple missions to the hiker throughout the night, quickly flying up and down the mountain on a route that would take rescuers a significant amount of time to navigate on foot.

The hiker was safely recovered the next day.

<https://www.backpacker.com/news-and-events/news/delivery-drone-comes-to-arizona-hikers-rescue-in-first-of-its-kind-mission>



Image: Anthony Drysdale

## Emergency communications for backcountry trips

*Staying safe in the backcountry involves multiple, interconnected considerations: the right gear, the right information, and sufficient experience to manage the terrain you're crossing. Good communication, within your group and, as needed, with the external world is another important component. Long time Search and Rescue member **Peter Campbell** describes some of the details you need to know to stay safe.*

### Importance

When visiting the backcountry it is important to ensure you can communicate in an emergency or if you are delayed.

Communications could include:

- Regular checkins with emergency contacts advising all is OK and your location
- An injured or sick party member requiring a rescue
- If you are lost and require a rescue
- If you are overdue and don't need a rescue

When preparing a trip intentions document with your trip itinerary, to be left with your designated emergency contacts, be sure to include:

- Emergency contact names and contact details
- Description of vehicles left at roadheads
- Details on communication devices carried

It is important to carry one or more communication devices that can be used in remote areas.

A **mobile phone** can provide voice and SMS communications while they are in range of their network. Some mobile phones are now capable of SMS messaging via satellites depending on the network provider.

- Reserve at least one mobile phone for emergency use
- Keep it switched off to preserve the battery charge

- Use a provider that has the best network coverage for remote areas
- Carry a power bank for recharging
- Choose a mobile phone that is waterproof or keep it in a waterproof cover

A **Personal Locator Beacon** (PLB) can be used to send out a distress message via satellite that includes the GPS location. The message is routed to the local emergency services agency. PLBs should be registered with the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) via <https://www.beacons.amsa.gov.au/>

- Trip, vehicle and emergency contact information can be included.
- The battery condition before the trip can be checked using test mode.
- No subscription fee is required

A **satellite communicator** can send text messages and live tracking information, these include:

- Spot
- Bivvy Stick
- Zoho
- Garmin InReach - also provides mapping information in conjunction with a mobile phone.

A monthly subscription is required for these units and offer a range of services including:

- Tracking - regular messages are sent with current location.
- Sending checkin message with location (all OK)

### Satellite phone

Satellite phones provide voice and SMS capability. However satphone plans tend to be expensive.

Before your trip make sure that all features are working, including any mobile phones apps that work with your particular device.



## The downside of Social media

As was noted by Kelly van den Berg earlier in the magazine, 'short form content has brought the backcountry into the mainstream. On the surface it's inspiring. It gets people curious, motivated and sometimes even brave enough to try something new. But the reel shows the outcome, not the judgement behind the outcome'.

With more inexperienced people being influenced by what they see on social media, there are more demands for rescues. To take an example, there were 369 land-based search and rescue incidents in Tasmania in the 2024-25 financial year.

With a number of deaths in the mountains during 2025, we have to ask if the allure created by those perfect Instagram shots are leading people into danger. There are a growing number of media reports that raise concerns that social media may be creating a false representation of outdoor adventures, masking the struggles and dangers present in wild places. People get inspired by seeing posts, then venture out without the right gear or an understanding of how harsh the weather can be. Sadly, a number of people have died over the past year after under estimating the conditions they would be walking in.

Key strategies to avoid getting into trouble are:

- Be prepared to cancel your walk or tour if the weather gets bad
- Don't rely just on social media to research your trip
- Don't rely on artificial intelligence to plan your trip! In January 2026, it was reported that an AI-generated article on a travel booking website was sending tourists to a remote location in Tasmania's north-east, looking for hot springs that do not exist
- Travel with a guiding company, experienced friends, or a club until you build experience
- Be aware that traveling on your own increases your chances of a bad outcome if you are injured
- Have gear suited to our wet and cold conditions (good raincoats and woollen or synthetic materials, rather than down insulation)
- Make sure someone knows where you are going and when you are expected back, who has clear directions on what to do if you don't arrive home
- In remote areas, make sure your communication device will have access to service. In many places you cannot rely on having phone coverage
- If you're an experienced backcountry person and see people under prepared, be willing to talk with them to make sure they are ok and able to go on

## Search and rescue

Many people who venture out into the backcountry will carry a PLB (Personal locator Beacon) or an EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicating Radio Beacon), which are satellite-based distress beacons. When activated, beacons transmit a signal that can be detected worldwide by the international satellite system. The signal is detected by a Rescue Coordination Centre to coordinate a response.

Why do people trigger their beacon? Some recent work published by *Outside Online* looks at how frequently rescues are triggered through the use of a beacon, and the reasons why they need help.

According to the research (which uses data from Garmin, one of the brands that make beacons), the most common reasons in 2024 were:

- Injuries topped the list for highest cause for an emergency call by a large margin
- there was also an increase in fire official responses (where people were threatened by wild fire)
- the third most common reason was medical issues: This year showed an increase in medical emergencies like gastrointestinal distress, cardiovascular issues, and altitude sickness. Severe interactions with wildlife, such as snakes, also resulted in more SOS message triggers this year than in years past.

Significantly, in 2024, there were record-breaking natural disasters around many parts of the world which led to a significant portion of SOS triggers, even close to roads and settlements. Between multiple hurricanes, an intense wildfire season in North America, and multiple flash floods, there were more weather-related SOS message triggers in 2024 than in recent years.

<https://www.backpacker.com/survival/garmin-inreach-data-2024-sos-calls/>

<https://australianhiker.com.au/advice/technology-on-the-trail-personal-locator-beacons/>



## Fire and wild places

Mt Franklin, ACT

Fire is reshaping the mountains as we currently know them. With climate change making fire seasons longer and more intense, the mountains we love are being transformed before our eyes. Endless valleys and plains of dead alpine ash and snow gum, crowded out by thick flammable regrowth are the New Normal. We need to build our will and capacity to protect the remaining enclaves of the old fire sensitive vegetation communities.

Here are two recent developments in fire fighting and wild places.

### AI and fire

Whether it is in a national park or other public land, a paddock or a house fire, one of the most important aspects of stopping fires is to get on to them quickly. The sooner that firefighters arrive, the smaller the fire will be and the easier it is to contain.

There are multiple ways to try to get onto fires quickly. These include deploying remote area firefighters onto new start fires, inserting rappel crews from helicopters, and sending multiple vehicles at the same time to ensure there are enough resources to tackle the fire. We use real time analysis of satellite images and on some days put aircraft up for surveillance purposes. There is lots of chatter about using drones that could carry water or fire retardant that could be sent to put out small new start fires. And of course, we have traditionally relied on staffed fire lookout towers to spot fires while they are small.

In recent years Artificial Intelligence (AI) has been billed as being a new option for spotting new start fires quickly.

As with any new technology, there is the profit imperative, which can influence the development and use of the technology, and people involved in the industry will tend to boost it and it can sometimes be difficult to see through the hype.

However AI is already in use to identify new start fires in a growing number of places across Australia, including the mountain and wild areas of Victoria, NSW and Tasmania, especially since the Black Summer of 2019/20.

The premise behind the deployment of AI cameras either on staffed lookout towers or stand alone structures is to use advanced technology to spot smoke early and send real-time alerts straight to fire authorities, who can then send crews to respond. According to Forest Fire Management Victoria (FFMV), the cameras 'give us a GPS location as to where that smoke may be and it's at that stage then we will deploy an aircraft or confirm the sighting from other fire towers or other opportunities'. That is, it acts as an early warning system (as a human lookout in a tower does) and then allows resources to be mobilised to get to the fire and put it out once it has been verified.

FFMV say "it doesn't make decisions for us. It gives us information to help guide the decisions that we as human beings make."

The results of these trials are very promising: in Tasmania, cameras detected more than 500 fires across the state during the 2024/25 bushfire season. They then alert incident rooms, who can assess the information and allocate teams and aircraft.

Check here for a longer story about AI and firefighting. <https://themountainjournal.com/2025/12/24/ai-and-fire-fighting-whats-going-on/>

## Protecting the vulnerable

As climate change drives our fire seasons, making fires harder to contain and fight, the pockets of fire sensitive vegetation – the Gondwanic trees in Tasmania and the old snow gums and alpine ash in the high country – become more important. Fire fighting continues to evolve and we need to allocate more resources to intervene and protect these forests. A story from the Blue Mountains illustrates the way ahead.

The Wollemi pine, a conifer that grows to 40 metres and has unusually arranged, dark green foliage and bubbly bark, once flourished across the ancient supercontinent of Gondwana, providing shade and sustenance for the dinosaurs.

But over the eons, the range of this “living fossil” has contracted until just 100 or so mature trees remain, spread over four small groves in the Wollemi National Park in the Blue Mountains of NSW. The majority are wedged into one sheltered gully, deep in the park. Here, the oldest and largest of the pines, dubbed King Billy, is thought to be around 1,000 years old.

If burnt, we could lose these ancient remnants. So firefighters have intervened to physically protect these trees during bad fires in recent years.

*At the Gosper’s Mountain 2020 fire in the World Heritage Wollemi National Park, Steve Cathcart, a Kosciuszko National Park senior ranger, was deployed to help control the outbreak. On a surveillance helicopter flight over the park, Cathcart saw fires burning within the ancient Wollemi Pine Grove. Cathcart was winched from the helicopter to the valley floor. On the ground, he repaired and started a sprinkler system previously established in the grove. The sprinklers worked but Cathcart also had to physically beat out the fire. Meanwhile burning cliff-top eucalypts were breaking up and crashing to*

*the valley floor near him. Despite the grove being unsafe, his actions and bravery saved the famous pines. It was a courageous effort and critically important for saving this rare world heritage ecosystem.*

During that fire, an extraordinary operation to protect the Wollemi Pines involved dropping fire retardant from air tankers and helicoptering in specialist firefighters each day, who were winched down into the canyon. From there, they pumped water into an irrigation system to increase the level of moisture in the environment. This daring plan was like nothing ever attempted before on a fire ground.

Fire had scorched trunks and killed many smaller, juvenile trees, but the canopy of the mature pines escaped unscathed. If it had burnt, the results would have been catastrophic.

This direct intervention is being used more and more to protect fire sensitive communities. Where these communities exist in remote areas, specialist crews need to be inserted by helicopter to then physically protect them. For instance, sprinkler systems were installed by remote area firefighters to protect the alpine plateau near Lake Rhona in south western lutruwita / Tasmania. The intervention sought to protect fire sensitive pencil pines, cushion plants, and alpine vegetation types from the Gell River fire in 2019.

The question of fire in the mountains is covered in detail on the Mountain Journal website.

<https://themountainjournal.com/tag/fire/>



The beach area at Lake Rhona, SW lutruwita / TAS, protected by remote area firefighters.

Photo: NPWS.

Image: James at Mt Carruthers,  
his favourite place



### Many lessons on a long walk

As the all-too-often desk-bound editor of Wild Magazine, I don't get to go away on big trips anymore. But back in the day, I once had the opportunity to forgo a slew of smaller trips and instead to head out on a 50+day solo hike through the Canadian Rockies. It was perhaps the best decision I ever made. The experience was truly life-changing, an absolutely pivotal event in my understanding of both the world and myself. The scenery was breathtaking from the outset, but I think it took at least until the 30-day mark until I really began to feel in the flow, to fully sink into the world around me, and (pardon the hippy-ish cliché, but it was absolutely true) to become one with nature.

I learnt lots of things the hard way on that trip. I dealt with sickness (giardia); broken equipment (the frame on my pack snapped clean in two); a foot injury meant I couldn't wear shoes for more than a week; an unexpected 60cm snowstorm had me wading through snow for days on end. But in retrospect, I am honestly glad all these happened, even the sickness. And I am glad I dealt with them on my own. I learnt to trust myself, that I could deal with whatever was thrown at me. I have since travelled the world on loads of other trips, including another 50+day one in the Japan Alps, but nothing has come close to being quite as influential as that one through the Rockies.

*James McCormack is the editor of Wild Magazine. His favourite place in the world is Mt Carruthers in either winter or summer.*

## The Avalanche Training Centre

*An Avalanche Training Centre (ATC) may seem like a strange thing here in Australia. But with more and more people venturing onto steep terrain outside the resorts, the need for avalanche awareness continues to grow. **Rolf Schönfeld** describes the story behind the first ATC.*

The Mountain Safety Collective (MSC) was in its infancy after the Coroner's recommendations on the 2014 Bogong Tragedy came out in 2016. Snowboarders Daniel Kerr and Martin Buckland had died in an avalanche on Eskdale Spur on Mt Bogong. In a conversation with a mountain guide, who had just returned from his winter stint working in Switzerland, he told me of helping the local Ski Patrol setting up an Avalanche Training Centre (ATC) in preparation for the upcoming ski season. I was hooked.

Yes, you can practice Avy Beacon search on the beach or in leaf litter but in the snow with added practice of the probe

search, over and over again?? My Vision was that in the unfortunate situation of an avalanche burial an Australian skier or rider will one day be able to confidentially put up their hand and say: 'I've got this' and supervise the search.

After a bit of detective work, I talked to Marcel at Girsberger Elektronik, a family business in rural Switzerland that builds and puts everything together inhouse. In a recent conversation he said that after our chat he told his partner Felicie 'I just talked to a guy in Australia....he wants to set up ATC's there...he must be crazy'.

Fast forward to the 2021 Covid winter and the first ATC in the southern Hemisphere was set up at Mt Hotham. Funded by the generosity of the manufacturer Girsberger, crowdfunding by MSC members, with contributions by Marmut, Alpine Access Australia and a Bushfire Recovery Grant.

The data collected speaks for itself, with 100's of exercises every winter.

Thredbo saw the benefits of having an ATC at a gateway point to the backcountry and a second ATC was established there.

**Bridie Rawson**, founder of Tough Tits Co., Backcountry Guide, Arc'teryx Ambassador

“Oh man, when I first stepped into the Backcountry I had no clue what I was doing but had SO much drive to be out there. I’m talking ski boots IN snowshoes up Dead Horse Gap to watch the sunset and ride down in the dark. A cool idea but terribly executed. We were lost, skiing down in the pitch black, using google maps to try and lead us back to the car park.

We got back okay, and laugh about it now, but it inspired me to really get the knowledge and experience so I wouldn’t end up in that kind of situation again.

As integral as it is to know how to use your gear, you have to know your routes, you need to be able to read the snow, the weather, the mountains. That’s what will keep you safe.”



### **Nick Russell**

*Nick is everyone’s favourite backcountry snowboarder from North America.*

Safety training is something we work on at the start of each year. It’s essential that we all learn from the best, refreshing and refining our skills to stay as safe as possible in a volatile environment.

At the start of winter, please gather your crew, practice rescue scenarios, attend courses and take it seriously if you plan to spend time in the backcountry.

Wishing everyone a safe and healthy winter ahead.

*For some good advice, check Nick Russell’s Guide to Total Immersion in the Natural World.*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SvH40EJAH1I>



**Dean Witherspoon** is a highly experienced search and rescue officer in Tasmania

Having run many rescues over many years, Dean says that would-be hikers should to “do an apprenticeship” before embarking on more challenging journeys. “Build up to the task that you want to do. You can’t have realistically never done an overnight walk and then turn up to do the Overland Track in Tasmania. Know your equipment and how to use it ... have you tried to put up your tent in 40-kilometre winds when you can’t feel your fingers?”

Cradle Mountain ranger **Brendan Moodie**

“I am concerned by the number of visitors — particularly day hikers — who were ill-prepared for the fickle weather to be found in places like Cradle Mountain.

“They’ll see nice photos online of some of the high points ... and that’s where they’re heading.

They’ve set sail for these areas, and they’re just not kitted up”.



Image: Mike Edmonson



## A reflection

*Dave Herring was lucky enough to have a childhood where the the Snowy Mountains were just up the road. From his early discovery of the magic of snow, Dave has pursued a lifetime of skiing and touring in mountains around the world.*

Growing up in the high country around Batlow on the north end of the Main Range in the 1960s and '70s was an absolute privilege. Riding horses wherever we wanted, fishing in mountain streams and learning to ski on a rope tow at Kiandra, run at that time by the Myer family from Tumut. We travelled in convoy up Talbingo Mountain, helping each other around the steep switchbacks through the slushy mud on unsealed roads just to ski on a 100m rope tow at Kiandra. When the weather dictated, we camped on the floor of what was originally the Kiandra Hotel with staff and others trapped by the elements. My dad put the skinniest tyres he could buy on our old Cortina as it helped with traction when 4x4 was not yet a thing.

At an elevation of only 775m we had snow around our house in Batlow a few times a year. Talbingo Mountain tops out at about 1,300m and the high plains around Long Plain and Yarrangobilly rise slowly to Kiandra at 1,400m. Snow used to be consistent at this elevation and my parents told stories of skiing down Bullocks Hill near Long Plain and being ferried in turn back up the road by car.

Yes, there were still good and bad seasons in terms of snow depth, but consistent enough to convince the Myers there was merit in developing Mt Selwyn ski resort in the late 70s with an elevation of only 1,480m.

Yep wooden skis, leather boots, woollen clothes and gloves that were wet in half an hour and worn out on the rope tow in days. Cold, wet and tired. It did not matter.

At the turn of 20th century records show that there were permanent snow drifts on the south side of Kosciuszko. Yet today except for during mid winter storm cycles Kiandra does not hold snow and Selwyn relies on snow making to

stay open. Selwyn is still a great resource for families to avoid the maxed out larger resorts of Perisher and Thredbo. With Thredbo's base elevation the same as Kiandra it too is heavily reliant on snow making during poor seasons.

After a couple of lean snow years, 2025 saw a return to average snow amounts recorded at Spencers Creek by Snowy Hydro. What was concerning however was the elevation of the snow line, which remained high resulting in good snow up high on the range and a lack of snow at lower elevations like Thredbo base. These changes in snow levels have been driven home to me over the past few years, dismantling my attempts to do the iconic K to K (Kosciuszko to Kiandra) tour, with the northern end of the traverse rarely holding enough snow except during or immediately after a storm. My solo effort to reach Mt Jagungal via Cessjacks Hut in September 2025 also failed due to lack of snow. I could have got there by staying high from Munyang, but work commitments limited my time and bush bashing was not what I was after.

Rising snow levels and the corresponding rise in average temperatures has fuelled many changes. Not being able to ski everywhere I want is a first world problem. But more importantly the increase in fewer but more dramatic storm events interspersed with significant warmings, compromises our safety in the backcountry and puts pressure on business and resources. Besides how climate change affects our business and our time in the mountains personally, the drain on nature, the plight of snow gums, the changing ecology of the high country and the impact on the livelihood of those that choose to live in the mountains is at a critical point. The fact that on my watch the changes have been so dramatic haunts me. I fear we have passed the tipping point and we are facing the reality that rising temperatures and snow levels do not go well with sustaining a ski industry in Australia. Let's hope I am wrong.

*With his partner Pieta, Dave trains people in backcountry and avalanche safety through their business Alpine Access Australia.*

<https://www.alpineaccess.com.au/>



## Deep Time and Change in the Tasmanian mountains

*Grant Dixon*

Tasmania is Australia's most mountainous state. Its highland mountains have been shaped by ice, and winter offers a reminder of this. My geological training has given me some capacity to 'see' ancient landscapes, and memories from travel in overseas mountain landscapes, with active glaciers, also provide insights into the geologically recent past here. I have often sat atop Tasmania's glaciated peaks and dreamed of what the land might have looked like when it was truly ice-bound more than 10,000 years ago.

Much of the state's highland areas, and its highest peaks, are composed of distinctive dolerite rock. With its molten origins 180 million years ago, at the onset of the breakup of Gondwana, dolerite forms columnar cliffs and plateau-like mountains with sufficient altitude for persistent snow cover and classically wintry conditions, at least some of the time.

The mountain country of Tasmania's west and southwest is dominated by more ancient quartzite bedrock. Its sedimentary origins date back 1.4 billion years but its metamorphic nature and structure, and hence the form of the mountains it comprises today, derive from deep crustal burial almost 600 million years ago and region-wide folding 150 million years later. The quartzite mountains can be notoriously rugged but their more coastal location and relatively lower elevation, compared to the dolerite highlands, means that snow cover is far more ephemeral and less persistent, with winter precipitation comprising more rain than snow. The isolated and elevated edifice of Frenchmans Cap is a notable exception.

Above: Thawing snow during winter, with minimal buildup of any seasonal snowpack, is an increasingly common sight at the Walls of Jerusalem during recent decades. Photo: July 2019.

In the modern era, given Tasmania's maritime climate, cold wintry conditions can be fleeting, even in the mountains, and the ephemeral nature of the resultant scenery can be both an attraction and a challenge for the photographer seeking such settings. Given the relatively low altitude of the island's summits, the presence of thick or extensive snow cover can often be down to a single weather event, and how long it lasts depends on the timing, amount and duration of subsequent rain. Snowy 'winter' scenes can be fleeting events that may occur over only a few days, during two or three months each year.

Studies on mainland Australia have identified a trend involving reduced annual winter snow accumulation and earlier spring thaws since the mid-twentieth century. There have been no such studies in Tasmania, where the marginal maritime winters display great variability anyway, but many long-time recreational users feel a similar trend is under way here, too.

Tasmanian mountains lack a hard or well-defined tree line, and their mosaics of alpine plant communities are as often woody shrubberies as open moor, heath, bog or grassland. This has a fundamental influence on the winter landscape in terms of both its appearance and the ease of travel. In shrubby country in both the alpine and subalpine zone, the snow cover (or the lack thereof) and its consistency is highly relevant to whether getting to a destination is enjoyable or even possible, even on snowshoes or skis.



Above: The Tasmanian highlands blanketed with a serious snow cover is increasingly rare, and doesn't occur every year. Barn Bluff, Cradle Mountain-Lk St Clair National Park, July 2011.

Below: In years long past, the Ben Lomond plateau was high enough to be blanketed with snow sufficient that a 20km return cross-country ski tour from end to end was possible. I completed it my one and only time in the early 1990s. These days, apart from around the small ski village which is higher and where snow making occurs, ice rime on the escarpment cliffs may be the sole extent of winter white stuff. Photo: August 2017.





Above: Tasmania's highest mountains can still offer spectacular travel and views during winter but conditions have to be just right. In August 2018, a week of cold southerlies were followed by several days of stable, clear and sub-zero weather. Du Cane Range, Cradle Mountain Lk St Clair National Park.

Below: The Walls of Jerusalem are high enough to receive some snow lie most winters, but it is becoming increasingly ephemeral. This June 2024 snowfall lasted just 2 days between blizzard and thaw, enough time for a wintery trip if one is ready and quick.





The origin of aspects of Tasmania's alpine biota hark back to Gondwana, and even the modern species have survived ice ages and intervening warmer periods. Despite this longevity and its seeming toughness, the mountain realm is fragile. There is real potential for the Tasmanian alpine environment as we now know it, its ecological communities and its ephemeral snow cover, to disappear under the onslaught of human-induced climate change.

The wildness of Tasmania's mountain country is one of its most precious assets. And the feeling of wildness is enhanced in winter. But that wildness requires the protection and appropriate management of both the alpine country and the areas that surround it. Most of Tasmania's higher country and peaks lie within national parks or similar reserves. While scenery played a part in such designation, it is no great secret that the lack of exploitable resources was often also relevant. National park designations have partly followed from successful community conservation campaigns, but can't be considered secure. Tasmania has a sorry history of park revocations, and more recently private tourism development proposals, aided by the state government's aggressively pro-development approach, are facilitating what academic the late Jamie Kirkpatrick has termed 'scenery mining' and 'place piracy'. Eternal vigilance is required.

[www.grantdixonphotography.com.au](http://www.grantdixonphotography.com.au)

Above: The Tasmanian highlands can be spectacular in winter but ski touring in the typically bouldery and shrubby terrain above tree line requires a heavy snowfall followed by a clear spell, both increasingly ephemeral, and the capacity to head for the mountains at short notice. Du Cane Range, Cradle Mountain Lk St Clair National Park, August 2020.

## Friends of Mountain Journal

Many thanks to the people who provided financial support to produce the 2026 magazine.

Andrew Stanger, Ben Courtice, C Russ, Claire Edmanson, Colleen Adams, David Herring, Emma Baxter, Georgia McKay, Gus Goswell, Huw Kingston, J Mitchell, John Terrell, Jules Hill, Justin Egan, Keith Brettargh, Kylie Croucher, Meredith Quick, Michael Alexander, Michael Rosenbrock, Mick Webster, Patrick Howie, Pieta Herring, Rosie Wositzky-Jones, Stephen Whiteside, Tilly Hiscock, Tony Tang.

<https://themountainjournal.com/2025/05/11/become-a-friend-of-mountain-journal/>

## A Wet Walk from Mountain Creek (Mt Bogong then and now)

*Mt Bogong (Warkwoolowler in the Waywurru and Dhudhuroa languages), is Victoria's highest mountain. It is a long walk to get to the treeless summit area and you feel wonderfully remote and above the distant green valleys below. Here, **Stephen Whiteside** reflects on 50 years of connection with the mountain.*

I plunged into the ankle-deep waters of Mountain Creek for the fifth time, as it crossed back and forth across the walking track. My boots and socks, and the bottom of my trousers, were soaking wet. How many more times would I have to do this before we reached the bottom of the Staircase Spur and started the climb up Mt Bogong? How would my feet fare once we reached the snow?

The year was 1976, the month October - ideal for spring skiing, or so we had been told. The weather actually turned out to be dreadful! Earlier in the year, in summer, the same group - six friends, all male, aged about 20 - 23 (together with one other young man) - had climbed the Eskdale Spur to the summit of Mt Bogong, and on to Cleve Cole Memorial Hut, starting at Camp Gap. A few of us had met at the home of Mt Bogong Club member Ian Parfitt the previous year for instruction on how to safely ski Mt Bogong. He had suggested the Camp Gap starting point as the easiest way to climb the mountain. He had pointed out, however, that we would need to hire the services of a cattleman to take us there in his 4WD from Mountain Creek. (Cars were not as good back then, and nor was the road.) We had taken his advice for the walk in February, but this time it didn't feel worth the hassle. We would just climb the Staircase and take our chances.

We had decided early on that we really needed to stay near the foot of the mountain the night before the climb if we were to reach the hut by sundown. Somehow, we managed to track down the owner of a lone caravan that sat in a paddock on the far side of the Kiewa River. It was ours for the night for a modest fee. We were always able to squeeze in there - half of us sleeping on the floor - and it served us well for many years.

The evening before the first climb we had retired to the Bogong Hotel in Tawonga for a few beers. Sitting at the bar looking out over the mountain, we felt no less than Everest pioneers! (Alas, the hotel was burnt down in 2011.)

For this October trip, we were asked if we could transfer a large gas bottle from Michell Refuge to the Cleve Cole Hut.

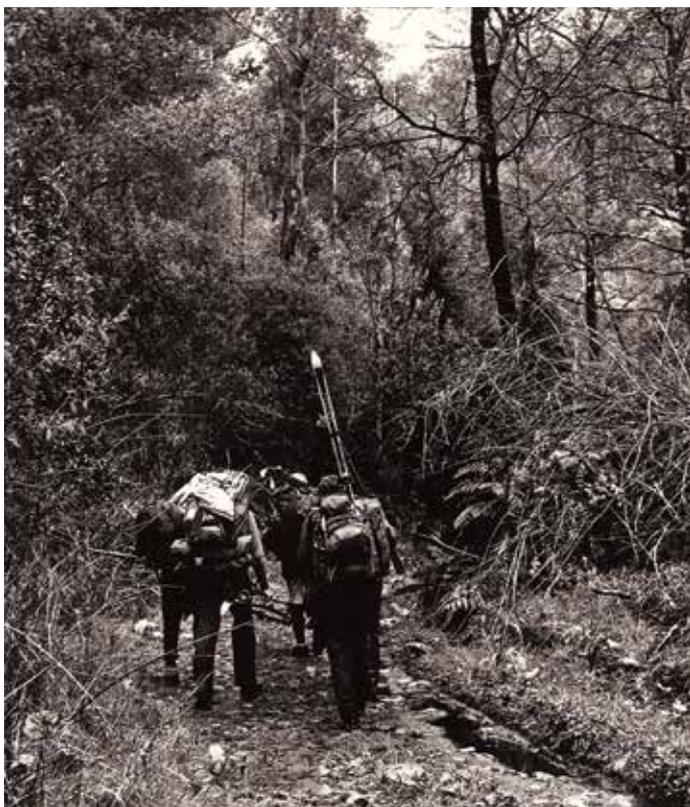


Upper image: Stephen and Brian

Lower image: Going home

We were told this would qualify us for membership of the Mt Bogong Club. Everything was word of mouth. There was no membership fee, no paperwork. I do not recall having ever been told about an AGM or a work party, though they may have existed. There was certainly no internet, no website, no social media and no mobile phones. For that matter, there was not even any Alpine National Park. Mt Bogong was just Mt Bogong. When the National Park was declared in 1989, many people expressed concerns that it would lull people into a false sense of security in regard to Mt Bogong.

Three of us headed off from Cleve Cole in fog and sleet, with an empty pack in which to place the gas bottle. It proved an awkward beast! We took it in turns wrestling it up the Eskdale, and eventually delivered it safely to its new home. We were duly given the key to the 'inner sanctum' but, after a season, elected not to continue with our membership, and returned the key.



The truth is, we were not sufficiently skilled, strong or enthusiastic skiers to take full advantage of club membership. The gear didn't help. Looking back, I think we were starting out at a difficult time. The lace-up leather boots and cable bindings that had served the skiing pioneers so well had long gone, but the sophisticated new backcountry and hybrid gear had not yet arrived. We had gone down to the local cross-country ski hire shop in Melbourne and been given skinny lightweight skis (without steel edges) and low-slung lightweight boots that barely reached the ankle. Skiing in this gear along the top of the Eskdale Spur and the summit ridge, with a 20kg pack on your back, was a nightmare, really. I edged forward gingerly, feeling that at any moment I was going to lose my grip, and slide down 500 feet of ice.

My two adult kids, to my great delight, are now members of the Mt Bogong Club, and visit regularly. They talk glowingly of the autumn work parties, and regularly attend the AGM at a trendy pub in Melbourne. I recently visited the mountain with them myself late in the year. We stayed, of course, at Cleve Cole. It was good to be back. The hut had changed little, though a small wooden stove had replaced the open fireplace, and the storeroom was new to me. The new toilets are obviously a huge improvement on the old 'Clochemerle Rose' (as the old toilet was called). The drive from Mountain Creek to Camp Gap in a Subaru Forester was not particularly difficult. We certainly didn't need to track down a local cattleman - not that we could have even if we had wanted to, I suspect. I was struck by the luxuriant growth of grass around the hut. I felt sure this was a new development. Likewise, the vast numbers of hares dancing around the hut.

It is great to see so many people enjoying the hut and the mountain, but the question cannot be avoided. How many



people is too many? At what point does backcountry (a term that did not exist fifty years ago, by the way) become front country? How will Mount Bogong look in another fifty years' time? How do we want it to look?

By the way, my soaking feet fared remarkably well as I trudged through the deep snow on the higher reaches of the Staircase Spur in October 1976. They didn't feel cold at all!

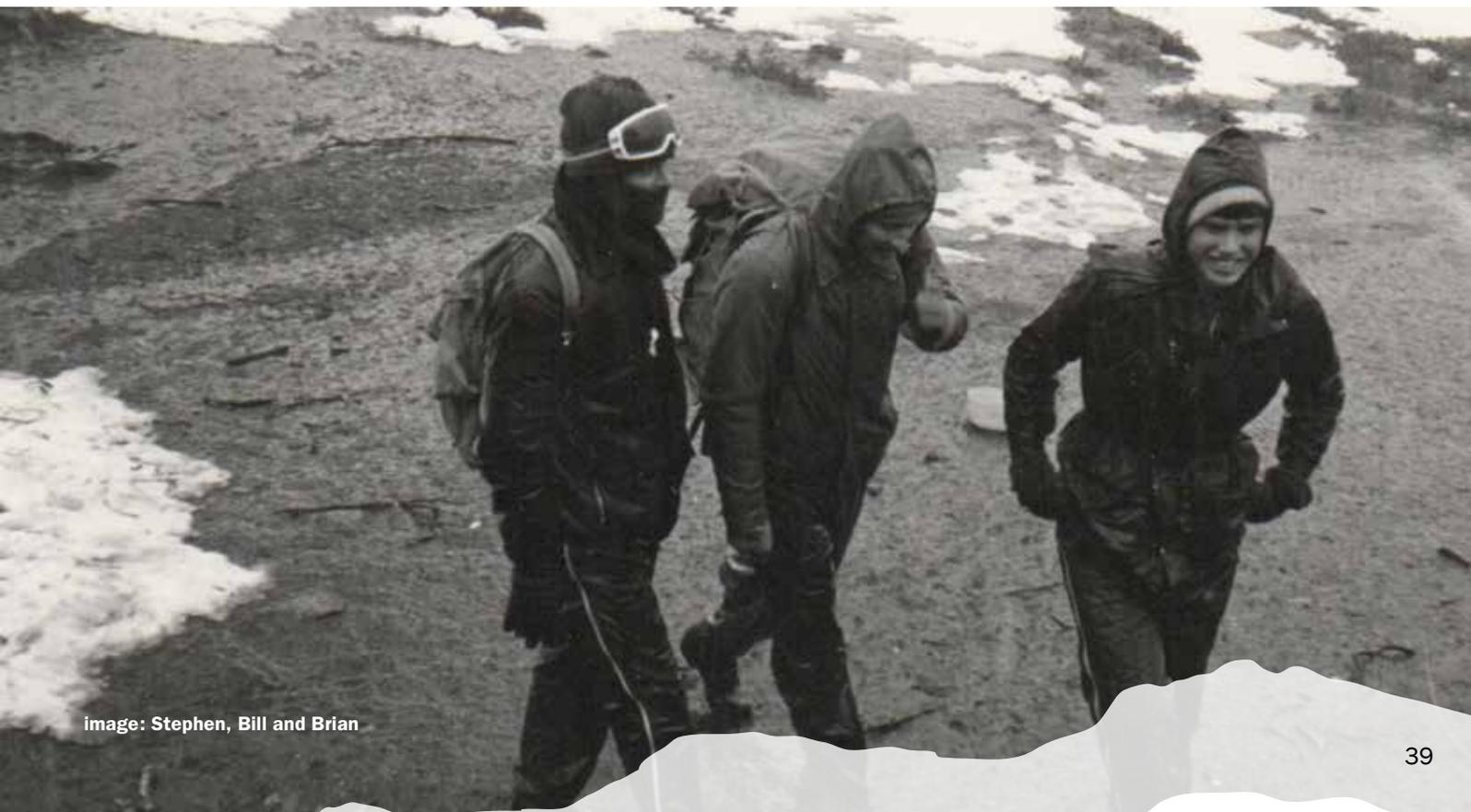


image: Stephen, Bill and Brian



# The future

## Are We Ready to Build the Alpine Future We Want?

*Elyse Kochman and Sam Beaver,  
Protect Our Winters Australia*

### **The Mountains Are Changing**

The mountains are changing. Anyone who spends time in Australia's alpine regions can feel it – the shortening seasons, snow turning to rain, and the growing uncertainty that shapes every family booking their winter trip or every business owner in the Alps come June.

Our alpine regions are a climate frontline akin to the Great Barrier Reef. The changes in our mountains are the canary in a coal mine moment for Australia, an early warning sign of what is to come if we continue down this path. The question is no longer whether change is coming, but whether we are brave enough to imagine a better future and what we are going to do to build it together.

It is indisputable that climate change is primarily caused by the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas. Australia

is one of the world's largest producers and exporters of fossil fuels – often ranking in the top 2 largest exporters of coal and gas – marking a significant contribution to the climate crisis ([Climate Analytics 2024](#)). For a country that's 0.3% of the global population and accounts for almost 5% of global emissions, we hold a large share of responsibility.

As global emissions continue to climb, the science of climate change paints a confronting picture. Data trends in the Australian Alps show a 1.4°C increase in annual average temperature and ~140mm decrease in average annual precipitation since 1950 – resulting in less snowfall, more snowmelt and rising snowlines ([CSIRO 2024](#)). The Australian snowpack is at a 2,000-year low, and these metrics are only predicted to worsen further in the coming decades. In a mid emission scenario, the average snow season will be 44 days shorter by 2050 ([OCS 2024](#)). But what does this mean for the communities and visitors of the Alps? For the fragile, unique and ecologically important ecosystems that call it home?

As shown in the POW x Australian National University's report, [Our Changing Snowscapes](#), the Australian Alps is an enormous and highly interconnected human-ecological system. What does that mean? So many of us are connected to the Alps in many different ways. What we do impacts the

# POW



## PROTECT OUR WINTERS

Alps, and what the Alps does impacts us. Whether you're drinking from your tap in Canberra or Melbourne, using hydropower from Snowy Hydro, enjoying a snow trip with your family or eating produce grown in the Murray Darling Basin – the Alps are deeply connected to our way of life.

Despite being some of the most vulnerable to climate change, alpine regions remain an afterthought in national planning. Federal environmental laws don't take climate pollution, one of the biggest risks to the Alps, into account when making development decisions. Our national climate risk assessment acknowledges that "the future may no longer support systems such as alpine ecosystems", yet largely overlook the specific vulnerabilities of alpine environments ([Australia's National Climate Risk Assessment 2025](#)). We have no plan to deal with Australia's largest contribution to what's changing our Alps – Australia's fossil fuel exports. And lastly, there is no coherent national adaptation plan for the Alps, which means no serious strategy for snow-dependent ecosystems, water catchments, mountain towns and workers or winter industries.

In a warming world where our mountains are changing before our eyes, this absence is not neutral. It is an intentional decision to let unchecked change happen to us, despite the stakes, rather than allow communities to have a say in building an alpine future that impacts us all.

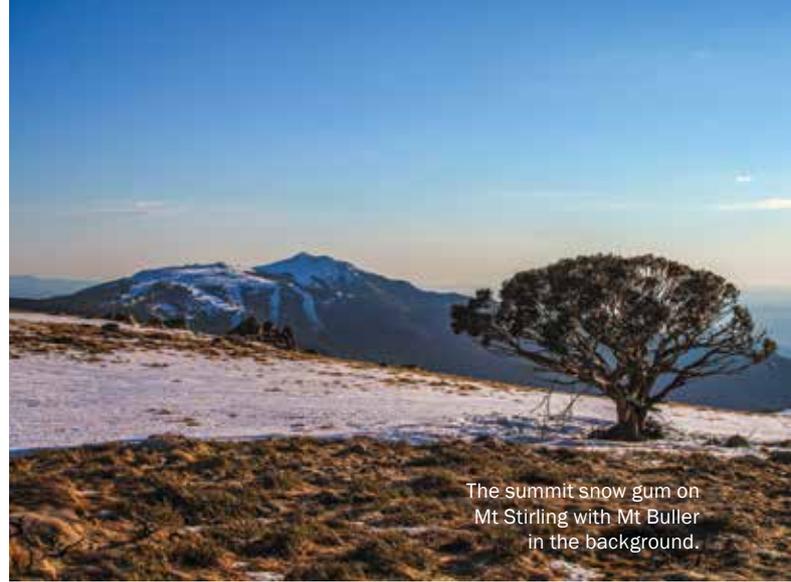
### Are We Ready to Envision a Different Future?

At Protect Our Winters Australia (POW), the belief in a different future sits at the heart of our [Protect our Alpine Future](#) campaign. Rather than focusing only on what we stand to lose, we ask a different question: what do we want our alpine future to look like and what do we need to do to get there?

**POW's vision is an alpine future where our communities are resilient and thriving, and where our environment is snowy, healthy and protected.** This future requires the government to deliver a safe, timely and just transition away from fossil fuels, including exports, and implement a comprehensive alpine adaptation plan. We demand a say in our future – one where change is designed with and by alpine communities.

Our vision is grounded in science, community and lived experience. We imagine alpine regions with reliable winter seasons, thriving mountain towns built on sustainable, diversified economies, protected and restored ecosystems and access to the mountains that is inclusive, respectful and safe.

We're speaking with alpine community members to reimagine this future in deeply personal ways. For some, it is about preserving the snow they grew up with. For others, it is about ensuring the next generation can safely learn mountain skills, or that cultural connections to Country are respected and strengthened. These visions differ, but they share a common thread: a refusal to accept decline as inevitable.



The summit snow gum on Mt Stirling with Mt Buller in the background.

"I want the future generations to feel the magic that we grew up with. The long snow days, the longer seasons, the healthy snowpacks, and a thriving ski community where our winters are not just beautiful, but resilient."

– Miff Rennie

*POW Athlete Alliance, Freeskier & Channel 9 Commentator*

### Building the Alpine Future We Want

Our mountains are changing, but we have the opportunity to determine what that change looks like. Why choose a future of loss – from snowpack to culture to ecosystems – when we have the opportunity to build a better future for our mountains, communities and the next generation of snowlovers.

Across Australia and globally, momentum is building. Renewable energy is accelerating and communities are stepping up leadership where governments fall short. In alpine regions, people are adapting – from businesses diversifying beyond snow-dependent models, to land managers restoring ecosystems and improving resilience, to educators teaching mountain skills, safety and stewardship.

But if we want to save our mountains, we must tackle the root cause of decline. Phasing out fossil fuels, with a focus on Australia's coal and gas exports, is not an abstract policy debate – it is directly linked to whether Australia, and the world, will have viable alpine regions in decades to come. We need comprehensive, alpine-specific adaptation planning that accounts for changing snow patterns, fire risk, biodiversity, tourism and community wellbeing. Finally, we need a cultural shift – one that embraces change while holding on to what makes the mountains special to each of us.

The mountains have always demanded respect. They teach humility, preparedness and connection. They are a lifeline for so many Australians, a deeply integral part of our way of life. As the mountains change, they ask something more of us: to take back our collective alpine future.

This is our alpine future. What is yours?

*Protect Our Winters Australia (POW) is a passionate crew of snow enthusiasts, community members, professional athletes and industry partners working to protect Australia's alpine regions through community-focused, science-based advocacy.*

To learn more, sign our statement and share your vision for our alpine future visit [protectourwinters.org.au](https://protectourwinters.org.au).

<https://protectourwinters.org.au/alpine-future-statement/>



## Inside the world of Mittagundi

*Mittagundi is a famous outdoor education centre located under the eastern edge of the Bogong High Plains. It provides young people with often transformative and life changing experiences on a working farm in an inspiring environment. Lily Begg describes her experience of working at Mittagundi in 2025.*

There is a pocket of the valley just down from Falls Creek where time appears to have stood still. Smoke rises from cast-iron wood stoves and the clanging of an anvil rings out from a leather-bellowed forge. Among the eucalypts nestles a farmstead made up of log cabins, stables, and a joinery full of hand-powered tools – electricity hasn't found its way here yet.

It's a place known as Mittagundi: the legendary outdoor education centre that has called the Victorian Alps its home for nearly fifty years.

Mittagundi's founder, Ian Stapleton, believed that young people and mountains were natural partners. He set out to build a camp that allowed teenagers in the most formative years of their life to escape the conveniences and distractions of the modern world and come back to basics. In 1978, the first Mittagundi participants trekked down from the high plains and camped out in old buses, helping to build the log cabins that make up the farmstead today.

Since those early days, Mittagundi has grown into a tight-knit, multigenerational, and ever-expanding community. A generous network of neighbours, friends, and families have kept it alive, sharing their knowledge and time.



The programs follow a ten day pattern. A group of young people are dropped off at the top of Falls Creek where they embark on a two-day hike to get to the farm. The route takes them through windswept high plains and twisting snow gums, down a steep descent along Track 107 where the trees grow taller and straighter until meeting up, at last, with the rushing Mitta Mitta River that borders Mittagundi. The group then spends four days on the farm helping in the garden and tending the animals, going abseiling and rafting, before it's time to hike back out again.

For many young people, Mittagundi becomes a core experience of their teenage years, providing community, belonging, and an opportunity to be a part of something bigger than themselves. Minnah, 17, has returned to Mittagundi for seven follow-up programs since first participating in a ten day program several years ago.

*"Coming to Mittagundi definitely changed me. It gave me a bigger sense of the importance of community. Particularly now with technology being so relied on in our everyday lives, it has really made me value forming relationships without it... This place has provided me with a space to find myself and explore who I am as a person." (Minnah)*

Returning for multiple programs is not uncommon. Jarvis participated in two programs as a young person and his experiences inspired him to join the staff team as a Program Leader in 2026. For him, it was the unique environment to be yourself that made Mittagundi special.

*"I think the most important thing Mittagundi offers to young people is a sense of community and the ability to truly be yourself. I believe that young people nowadays can become too concerned about trying to fit in with their peers and aren't given the opportunity to truly flourish into their own person and make relationships with new people like they can at Mittagundi." (Jarvis)*

There is something about being knee-deep in mud chasing cows, or cooking dinner around a campfire under the stars that allows teenagers to make connections with each other that might have remained out of reach in their normal lives. By sharing a unique experience, the young people learn to support each other and are able to turn the program's physical and mental challenges into an adventure, or at least

a good story afterwards. Sometimes it's "Type 2 Fun" – a valuable experience in the age of instant gratification.

I came to Mittagundi as a Program Leader in 2025 looking for a way to explore minimal impact living and share sustainable values with young people. After living without electricity, phones, flushing toilets, and instant hot water I'm convinced that we're a little too wedded to the idea that these things are 'the necessities', and – after some initial incredulity and horror (*You guys actually live like this?!*) – I've seen young people consider this too.

As I write this piece, smoke hangs heavy in the January sky. We have evacuated Mittagundi to shelter in Mt Beauty while bushfires rage across the state. Harsher summers and shorter winters have felt consequences for a place that lives so closely with the land, and, as climate change threatens the future of our alpine regions, some of Mittagundi's most important work is in building a community of people who care for its mountain home.

Taking young people careening down a river by raft, showing them the stars from a high-plains campsite, or letting them navigate by map and compass through the high-country scrub doesn't just give them an adventure to remember, it addresses a critical need to develop relationship with our natural world.

The mountains are as integral to the spirit of Mittagundi as its people and activities, and when young people benefit from being in nature, nature gains a generation of advocates. It's a happy symbiotic relationship.

The world Mittagundi inhabits now is in many ways different from the one in which it was first built. I'm sure Ian could never have imagined the labyrinth of techno-social pressures that teenagers face today. But Mittagundi's founding values of resilience, humility, cooperation, and hard work remain relevant as ever.

I particularly liked Minnah's description of my mountain home, which I'm sure resonates with anyone who has been involved with it over the years: *"Mittagundi is the eddy in the fast flowing river of life that young people are constantly struggling to navigate; a calm spot."*



Life outside the valley may move fast, but Mittagundi will continue to show young people a simple way of being, with the things that really matter – connection, community, and environment – ten days at a time.

Lily Begg is a musician and writer. She worked at Mittagundi in 2025 after following a calling to the mountains. This year she is exploring the Himalayas.

<https://www.mittagundi.org.au/>

Images: Lily Begg / Mittagundi



