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Australian Alps: Kosciuszko, Alpine and Namadgi National Parks (Second Edition)

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In this book, Deidre Slattery provides an introductory overview of the Australian Alps, addressing both the natural and the cultural heritage of an important and unique Australian landscape. It is worth noting that the first edition of this book was published 17 years ago as part of the former “National Park Field Guide Series” of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). The series may no longer exist, but the need for a comprehensive and up-to-date publication about the Alps still does, and, in this sense, the book is a welcome addition for teachers and members of the public interested in knowing more than a visit to a national park visitor center could provide. It presents an overview that covers many facts, issues, and competing values associated with Australia’s highest mountains.

The Alps represent an area which is small in relation to the continent (just 0.3% of its land mass), yet enormously important for many reasons. Australia is an urbanized continent whose southeastern settlements are fed by rivers, and the Alps determine where many of those run. The distinct alpine geology has led to the evolution of plants and animals found nowhere else. These mountains are important in the culture of Aboriginal traditional owners who, for hundreds of generations, have ascended them according to the rhythms of the seasons and tribal custom. The mountains are etched into colonial nation-building mythology, as a product of 19th-century poetry about

heroic stockmen, and as a product of 20th-century political postwar infrastructure building. Today 62% of the alpine area is designated as National Park, though the work to repair past damage, conserve its ecology in light of climate change, and provide access to tourists remains a serious challenge.

To explore this landscape in an accessible way, the majority of the book is structured in two parts, covering natural history and then cultural history. Chapters 1–5 describe the mountain ranges’ location and main features, weather and climate, geology, flora, and fauna, while chapters 6–11 deal with the ways in which humans have perceived, modified, and made use of the landscape as a resource. Like other mountain landscapes in Australia and elsewhere, such history encompasses indigenous as well as colonial values, numerous resource uses over time (pastoralism, water, and goldmining), scientific activity, and tourism (the latter being coupled with conservation). The final chapter, “Visiting the Parks,” is not a conclusion or summary of these issues, but a guidebook for potential visitors. While the structure is generally helpful, it leads to some repetition, as predictably so many of these themes overlap; in the words of John Muir, when it comes to understanding the wonder and complexity of mountains “when we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe” (Muir 1995: 248).

Providing a comprehensive landscape overview in a field guide format is not an easy task: too general and it will leave the reader wanting, too much detail and it is no longer practical as a portable or accessible “guide.” On the one hand, some things I expected from the book are absent: most notably, there are no topographical maps that illustrate the mountain ranges or specific peaks in detail. The suggested itineraries in the final chapter make little mention of seasonal variety. The history of

visual art, for example, the influential paintings of Eugene von Guerard, are not mentioned or illustrated.

Curiously, there are no photographs of the Snowy hydro scheme, despite much being said about its enormity and significance. Sobering statistics about climate change appear in this edition, though some data are already several years old and, given the importance of this issue, more detail on this topic could have been added. Similarly, the way in which Aboriginal life in the mountains is treated (Chapter 6) does recognize recent policy progress, but this fundamental aspect, which cuts across landscape meaning and management, appears somewhat isolated compared to other themes (for example, water) that are cross-referenced throughout. On the other hand, there are many vital messages, interesting stories, and enjoyable images of the Alps that can surprise and delight. The importance of conservation is foregrounded throughout. Tussocks of the largest grass found in the Alps, *Chionochloa frigida*, can live for more than a century. The explanation of the hydrological processes of alpine bogs (Chapter 10) is clear and concise, yet complete enough to give readers the ability to understand and recognize these processes on site. There are a couple of lovely photos, including an intriguing (almost W. G. Sebald-like) image from 1931 that illustrates erosion while also including the solitary hat of the forester Baldur Byles discarded on the exposed soil. I learned that “Bogong,” a name familiar to many Australians thanks to the moth species *Agrotis infusa* and the mountain bearing its name, is in fact the Aboriginal word for mountain.

In the preface, the author recounts one of her former roles that led to the book, namely, bringing the work of land managers and scientists into school curricula, and this is somewhat reflected in the textbook-type language, style, and production quality of the “guide.” However, Slattery also recounts her childhood

fascination with mountains, and it is perhaps a shame that the affection, poetics, and wonder of these Alps are not expressed as much as they could be. There is a slight sense of apology about these “plateaus instead of peaks” (p 64) that, in comparison to European or Himalayan altitudes and precipices, are low and flat.

Ultimately, I know more about the Australian Alps after reading this book than I did before reading it, thanks to Slattery’s holistic

knowledge and her experienced way of clearly explaining this knowledge to others. This may not capture the imagination or inspire in the way that the great mountain writers can, but the book certainly provides an invitation to go and discover the Australian Alps for ourselves.

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Muir J. 1995. *John Muir: The Eight Wilderness-Discovery Books*. Reprint (1st edition 1911). London, United Kingdom: Diadem.

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