

Mt Kosciuszko Inc
69 Cardington Way
HUNTINDALE WA 6110

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Heritage Inquiry
Productivity Commission

Conservation of Historic Heritage Places

Introduction

As our name implies, we have a particular interest in Mt Kosciuszko, Australia's highest peak. We are aware that this inquiry is not concerned with matters of natural heritage, or the merits of conserving particular historic heritage places. However we will endeavour to illustrate a number of issues regarding the conservation of historic heritage places that we believe are within the Inquiry's terms of reference.

Mt Kosciuszko is located in the Kosciuszko National Park ("*the KNP*"), in the State of New South Wales. Although the KNP is on the Register of the National Estate, primarily for its natural heritage, we are concerned with the historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko. Although the natural heritage of the mountain, and the surrounding area is very significant, and is given a great deal of attention, the historical and cultural heritage of Mt Kosciuszko to this nation is given considerably less prominence.

This is an example of a place which can simultaneously hold a number of heritage values, that are natural heritage as well as historical heritage. In fact it is the historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko that enhances the natural heritage values of the area. However, we consider that the conservation of the historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko is slowly being eroded, by the much greater emphasis being placed on the conservation of the natural and/or indigenous values of the KNP, and Mt Kosciuszko in particular.

Management of Historical Heritage Places

Using some examples, of how the conservation of the historical and European cultural heritage of Mt Kosciuszko is being adversely affected and undermined by the current management of the area, we will highlight some of the problems that we see with present management systems that are in place for the conservation of places of significant national historical heritage.

As a starting point, we wish to emphasise that a place which has significant natural heritage values, can also have equally significant historical heritage and cultural values, and that these different values can in fact be closely interlinked, as is the case with Mt Kosciuszko. This close relationship between the natural and historical

heritage of a place means that the natural heritage values of the place could be used to support, and enhance, the conservation of the historical heritage of that area.

However, when one looks at the Draft Plan of Management for the KNP, although there are some references in that Draft Plan to the cultural and historical significance of areas within the KNP, consideration of these issues occupies only a very small part of the Draft Plan. The main focus of the Draft Plan is on issues associated with the conservation of the natural environment, and the historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko to this nation does not appear to rate much more than a brief comment.

This lack of recognition of the significant historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko in the proposed Plan of Management suggests that there is a problem in either the regulatory framework within which the Plan of Management is made, the methodology employed in the preparation of the Plan, or both. In relation to the regulatory framework, the problem appears to be that although Mt Kosciuszko is a “*national monument*”, it comes under the jurisdiction of the State of New South Wales. Also, the regulatory framework and the methodology for the preparation of the Plan of Management appear to adopt a rather narrow definition of “stakeholders”, and/or groups that may have a strong cultural link or association with the area.

Stakeholders

The “stakeholders” that were consulted in the preparation of the Draft Plan of Management included people with an obvious local connection, including an economic link to the area, indigenous groups, and the scientific community. However, Mt Kosciuszko has a wider group of stakeholders, for example the Polish community in Australia. The close ties that Poles have with Mt Kosciuszko are a result of the mountain being measured and found to be the highest peak in the country by a Polish explorer, and scientist, Edmund Strzelecki, who made a significant contribution to exploration of Eastern Australia. Further, Strzelecki named the mountain after a Pole who was a significant figure in Polish, European, and American history, and a champion of freedom, for all people regardless of nationality, race or colour.

Unless the definition of who are the stakeholders in relation to historical heritage places is wide enough to encompass all groups who have a recognised historical and cultural link to a place of historical heritage, then it is likely that the conservation of the historical heritage place is likely to suffer. An example of this is the removal of the historical plaques that were erected near the summit of Mt Kosciuszko in 1940 by the Consul General of the Republic of Poland. These plaques recognised Strzelecki’s role in mapping the country, and reinforced the contribution by Poles to the early history of Australia.

These plaques – objects of historical value - were removed around 1999 by the Park management, apparently on the grounds that they had been damaged by vandals and also, to some extent by the elements. However, rather than being restored, these historical plaques were placed in a storage area within the KNP, and replaced by new commemorative plaques, containing comments which were considered to be more “politically correct”, and which are highly controversial.

Names of Historical Places

We identify with historical places through the name of the place, for example the Eureka Stockade and Port Arthur, and the name of the place itself is in theory an integral part of the historical heritage of that place. Mt Kosciuszko is a name that has

also been around for a very long time, over 160 years, and is well known to all Australians.

However, there is a concerted campaign to change the name of the KNP and also Mt Kosciuszko itself to an Aboriginal name, or at least to dual-name both the mountain and the National Park. This is notwithstanding that there would appear to be no evidence that Mt Kosciuszko held any particular importance to the local indigenous people, or that there is any aboriginal name for the mountain.

This is an example of change that is being sought for the sake of change itself, when there is no sound scientific or archaeological basis for such a change, however such a change would forever wipe away the significant historical heritage of Mt Kosciuszko.

Policy Issues

We consider that the problems that we have highlighted above, with Mt Kosciuszko, which is Australia's highest mountain, show that the management of places of significant national historical heritage cannot be left in the hands of a single State or Territory. The management of places of significant historical heritage to this nation needs to provide means for an input from and participation of all Australians, and we suggest that such management should therefore be coordinated at the Federal level.

Dr Anna Habryn
President