

Custom, Conflict and the Construction of Heritage: European Huts on the Tasmanian Central Plateau.

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Abstract

Since the 1990s cultural heritage managers have become increasingly interested in the intangible as the way that local communities create value for cultural heritage places. The present paper uses historical and ethnographic information on the practices of people living below the Great Western Tiers in Tasmania to examine the way these people turned the huts on the Central Plateau into heritage. Increased environmental regulation in the late 1980s and early 1990s resulting from the inclusion of the Central Plateau in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area disrupted a range of practices that maintained communal attachment to and 'ownership' of the land. Some of the people living below the Great Western Tiers responded by using the huts on the plateau to memorialise their attachments to the mountain. But this created a new status for huts as heritage, and both the regulator and the regulated agreed that this category of buildings now needed managing. This fundamentally altered the nature of the communal attachment to parts of the Central Plateau because it required an acceptance of the regulatory framework that had disrupted the practices that were the basis of the original 'communal' ownership of land.

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The legal protection of cultural heritage assumes that it comprises physical remnants from the past. Experts in the bureaucracies that administer such laws have often adopted an objective and scientific approach to the identification and conservation of heritage (Smith 2006; Sullivan 2004: 52). But this has created a sense of unease in some practitioners. For example, in her 1992 paper on social value, Chris Johnston points out that this approach ignores the sentiments that inspire community love of place, and therefore action for its protection. This has led some cultural heritage managers to focus on the way the habitual practices and everyday experiences of a social group, its intangible heritage, establish the symbolic and social value of local heritage places (Johnston 1992; Byrne *et al.* 2003: 56-58; Bendix 2009).

The focus on symbolic and social value recognises that heritage places are an expression of community identity and, as David Lowenthal and others (Lowenthal 1998; Deacon 2004; Bendix 2009; Byrne 2009) have pointed out, they are therefore socially exclusionary and political. In an attempt to avoid privileging the attachment of a particular social group to a heritage place, managers often try to acknowledge and conserve all its heritage values (Johnston 1992; Clarke and Johnston 2003; Sullivan 2004; Deacon 2006). While appealing, this approach seems simplistic. Because the value of a place to one group may conflict with the value that it has for another group, management may require that the social attachments to a place have to be modified. This implies that heritage decisions may ultimately privilege one interpretation or attachment over another. So heritage managers cannot necessarily recognise and conserve all the heritage values at a place. Rather, following de Certeau (1984: 34-39), we suggest that local values, including local heritage values, are created and modified through the interplay between a regulator's controlling strategies – its laws and management plans - which provide it with a position to defend, and the local community's changing practices.

SLIDE 1 – MAP

In this paper we use information collected between 1992 and 1996 to identify the activities and practices that created cultural attachments to the Tasmanian Central Plateau in the communities below the Great Western Tiers (Collett 1993; Knowles 1996a, 1996b, 1996c). We then consider how increased environmental regulation impacted on these practices and how it framed the negotiation of meanings ascribed to huts on the Central Plateau.

Communal attachment to the Central Plateau

The steeply forested slopes and dolerite bluffs of the Great Western Tiers provide an abrupt boundary between the 'natural' landscape of the Central Plateau with its myriad glacial lakes, bogs and heaths, and the ordered landscape of towns and farms below. Early on in our work a Caveside farmer told us that a part of the plateau 'belonged' to each of the communities living in the towns below the Great Western Tiers. A community's portion of the mountain was defined in part by the tracks it used to access the plateau and roughly coincided with the distance a person from a community could travel on foot or on a horse in a day.

SLIDE 3 – MAP TRACKS

The attachment that people form to their part of the mountain was based on past and present uses (Collett 1993; Knowles 1996a, 1996b). Among the repertoire of stories about the Central Plateau are accounts of the way people used the mountain as summer pasture for stock, and how families supplemented their income by snaring native animals and selling their pelts. There are also stories about augmenting the family's diet with trout taken from mountain lakes and streams. For older people, these stories describe activities that were often essential for a family's survival, particularly in times of hardship. We consider each of these practices and how they created a sense of communal property.

The grazing leases taken up by small scale farmers living below the Great Western Tiers generally fitted the pattern of ownership of parts of the mountain by the communities they belonged to. The runs were used and managed communally and not as an individual's property. The leaseholder's stock along with stock from a number of other farms shared the run and all the members of a syndicate were involved in checking the animals and mustering stock at the end of summer (Collett 1993; Knowles 1996a).

Changes in the labour market and a decrease in demand for animal pelts after the Second World War led to a decline in the economic importance of snaring, hunting and fishing (Jetson 1989: 135-136). But for the communities below the Great Western Tiers, hunting and fishing on the mountain were still important activities. The son of a Western Creek farmer described how, after milking the cows on a summer evening, he walks up Higgs Track and either watches the sunset from the bluff or fishes for trout for an hour before walking home in the dark. Hunting and fishing on the mountain also helps people deal with social problems like unemployment and a lack of things to do.

Accounts of trout fishing show how practices define communities. Nearly everyone we talked to in the communities below the Great Western Tiers described fishing with a rod and line, as well as a range of illegal practices that they have used to catch fish. The latter have a long history that includes the use of deadlines, tickling fish, spotlighting and taking trout out of season. It is through the social acquisition of knowledge about different ways of catching fish and learning where they can be caught that aspects of community identity and membership are forged.

These data indicate that, after the Second World War people, living in the communities below the Great Western tiers formed attachments to their part of the mountain through the small scale consumptive practices of grazing livestock, hunting and fishing (cf Certau 1984: xiv-xv; 30-31). These customary practices embodied the values that created a sense of communal 'ownership' expressed metaphorically by statements such as 'the mountain is my backyard'.

Unlike their descriptions of the land, people living below the Great Western Tiers didn't talk about communal ownership of huts. They did, however, recognise a distinction between huts for private use and huts open to the public. The former are more common on the eastern side of the plateau and tend to be built with purchased materials while the latter are built from bush materials and tend to be on the western side of the plateau. This distinction has a long history. The simple bush huts built by snarers and graziers on the western side of the plateau in the first half of the twentieth century were advertised and used as free shelter accommodation for people walking from the Western Lakes to Lake Saint Clair (Collett 1993: 56-57).

The east-west distinction in the types of huts found on the Central Plateau was reinforced after the Second World War when there was an upsurge in the construction of private recreational huts. By the 1970s, the south-eastern area had a 'developed' appearance with the shacks on the western edge of Great Lake and on the eastern side of Lake Augusta looking like small villages rather than a remote 'natural' wilderness. By contrast, huts on the western side of the plateau were often built in remote, 'natural' settings.

There were three early tourist huts –Sandy Beach Lake Hut, Lady Lake Hut and the Lake Nameless Hut - built on the northwest side of the plateau in the first half of the twentieth century. They were built by the communities living below the Great Western Tiers. Although the Northern Tasmanian Fisheries Association and others (1909: 9, 1917: 8, 1923: 37; Spurling 1902: 37) promoted their use to tourists and anglers who visited High Country (Fig.

3), they fell into disrepair when alternative trout fishing at Great Lake became available to northern Tasmanians in the 1920s. By the 1960s the huts were ruins or had been destroyed by bushfires Church 1956; Collett 1995: 57; Mountain Huts Preservation Society nd a).

Environmental regulation and the disruption of attachments to the mountain

In 1961, a massive bushfire devastated the plateau and created considerable concern about the effect of increased erosion on the hydro-electric storage dams at Great Lake and Lake Augusta (Cullen 1995: 19). The Tasmanian Government appointed the Lands Department to prepare a management plan. The Central Plateau was declared a protected area in 1978 and in 1981 the Walls of Jerusalem on the western side of the plateau was declared a National Park (Buckman 2008: 200-201; Department of Primary Industries and Water 2010). The resultant new regulations affected the way that the communities living below the Great Western Tiers could use the mountain. Grazing ceased in the Walls of Jerusalem and grazing leases were replaced by annual licenses on the rest of the plateau. The licences specified the maximum stocking rates and a requirement for secure fencing of runs

The greatest impact on customary practices, however, occurred in the mid 1980s as a result of protests by environmentalists against forestry operations in the Lemonthyme Forest and Jackey's Marsh areas to the north and west of the Great Western Tiers. The Commonwealth Government intervened and, following negotiations with the Greens and environmental NGOs, the Central Plateau was included in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (Australia 1989; World Heritage Centre 1989: 12; Richardson 1994: 235-236; Hutton and Connors 1999: 187; Marr 2001: 237).

The first management plan for the World Heritage Area emphasised the need to conserve wilderness values (Department of Parks Wildlife and Heritage 1991, 1992). It also regulated many of the customary practices of the people living below the Great Western Tiers. This included banning summer grazing by stock and restrictions on hunting and camp fires. A permit was now required to hunt for rabbits and wallabies which specified the number of dogs that could be taken into the relatively small hunting zones and that only one shotgun could be used (Fig. 2).

These restrictions affected the traditional practices that created an attachment to the mountain. Farmers could no longer graze stock and people living in the towns below the plateau turned away from hunting on the mountain because they were worried that they could

lose their guns, their gun licenses and have their dogs shot by the Park Rangers if they did anything wrong in the World Heritage Area. Some people either gave up hunting or started hunting elsewhere in Tasmania. Many older people living below the Great Western Tiers felt the 'mountain' was being taken away from them and that young people were no longer as attached to the mountain as they were.

The changing meaning of huts

Interest in huts on the mountain changed in 1988 when the Parks and Wildlife Service decided to move the palatial Tiger Hut, which was built in 1984, from its remote location near Lake Adelaide to the Parks base at Liawenee. At the time of its removal, Tiger Hut wasn't described as heritage but was seen as a useful resource that could accommodate up to twenty people. Initially people living below the Great Western Tiers were incensed that they hadn't been consulted about the removal and it was this anger that led to the establishment of the Mountain Huts Preservation Society.

By 1990 all High Country Huts appeared to be threatened with removal unless they had heritage value. Of the 100 submissions received on management issues in the World Heritage Area, 62 wanted some or all of the huts removed with 18 of these wanting all huts removed rubbish (Department of Parks Wildlife and Heritage nd, 1990: 29-30). As one might expect, the terminology of the Mountain Huts Preservation Society changed in response to the preparation of the draft World Heritage Management Plan. This marked the first step in a process of negotiating meaning and values that accords with de Certau's (1984: 34-39) emphasis on the importance of timing in the tactical response of people to the strategies of government agencies. In this case, the communities living below the Great Western Tiers brought their language into line with the draft Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan - they describing High Country Huts as heritage. The Mountain Huts Preservation Society also asked Parks to assess the significance of these buildings.

The tactics of the communities living below the Great Western Tiers were not confined to changes in language. By 1990, Parks had received twenty one requests from twelve groups and individuals to restore the ruined hut at Lake Nameless. Most of these requests argued that it would provide emergency shelter and only three submissions mentioned its heritage value including one from the Mountain Huts Preservation Society. When it was suggested in 1992 that the Lake Nameless Hut should be managed as a ruin, the Society wrote to the World

Heritage Area Consultative Committee rejecting the proposal. It focused instead on peoples' attachment to the land and their traditions. It stated that:

'They were reclaiming the land. They were responding to years of anger and frustration deriving from the ignorance and contempt 'city' planners and bureaucrats have shown to their traditions, their sensitivities and their relationship to what is the World Heritage Area.'

The World Heritage Consultative Committee and Parks recognised the social significance of the ruin at Lake Nameless and agreed that it could be rebuilt. The Mountain Huts Preservation Society (nd b) started rebuilding the replica hut in 1993 and it was opened in 1996. Most locals described the rebuilding as a huge success pointing out that 270 people attended the Lake Nameless opening. A member of Rural Youth took pride in describing how twelve of its members went up and worked on the hut for first part of a long weekend with the older generation working on the building for the second half of the weekend.

Some of the younger men and women who worked at Lake Nameless now wanted to help rebuild more huts. The participation in working bees of younger people suggests that rebuilding these huts creates memorials through which they will continue to forge an attachment to the mountain. But the links that were being established were no longer the links of specific communities to their part of the mountain, because youth from Meander worked on the Lake Nameless hut which was in the area customarily used by people from Chudleigh and Western Creek.

To summarise, the suggestion that High Country Huts should be removed from the World Heritage Area privileged a particular view of the Central Plateau as natural heritage. This was not accepted by people living below the Great Western Tiers who saw their part of the mountain as their backyard. Some heritage practitioners might suggest that this could have been avoided by recognising all the heritage values on the Central Plateau. However, High Country Huts on the Central Plateau have never been places with a set of pre-existing heritage values that can be acknowledged and managed. Rather, these buildings have been the locus of an active negotiation between people in the communities below the Great Western Tiers and the Parks and Wildlife Service about communal attachment to the mountain. We would suggest that the construction of replica huts as monuments for future memories is central to the new value of this type of building.

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Figures

Fig. 1 Towns, tracks and communal ownership of the Central Plateau

Fig. 2 Areas of the Central Plateau zoned for hunting in the 1992 Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan.

Fig. 3 The location of 'public' huts and early tourist huts.