

Baldur Byles: a forester above the treeline

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Introduction: an advocate for a treeless place

For forty years, an important but little known protagonist in nature conservation in New South Wales was a forester, Baldur Byles (1904–1975). Although Byles was employed by the NSW Forestry Commission from 1932 to 1969 and served with distinction, his most enduring work was above the treeline, in what is now Kosciuszko National Park.¹ He was active in both the science and the administration of the snow country, particularly as a member of the Kosciusko State Park Trust from 1944 to 1970.² Byles's efforts contributed significantly to the preservation and protection of the natural values of the park as we know it today.

From youthful beginnings as a traditional 'wise use' forester, Byles had become a strong preservationist by the end of his working life. In 1973, he received an Honorary Doctorate of Laws from the Australian National University. In his address he reflected that he had been trained to the view '...that the prime purpose of a forest was to produce straight logs that could be economically converted to saleable timber' (Byles 1973). In the course of his life he distanced himself from this position, urging support for a more explicitly nature conservation ethic. He initially supported the continuing presence of grazing in the mountains, and was in favour of the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, but

his years of service to Kosciusko State and National Park developed and changed his views about ecology, nature conservation and resource use, to what today might be called a 'deep green' position. Byles appealed for stewardship of natural resources for intrinsic and spiritual as well as practical reasons. He now wanted parts of the mountains to be 'sacred places' that would exclude all human activity and allow ecological processes to proceed unimpeded.

How did this change come about? How did a forester become an advocate for a treeless place? This paper looks at the formation and growth of Byles's understanding of ecology and at how his forceful and committed personality made others pay attention to his developing concerns from the 1940s to the 1960s. In what were tumultuous times for the mountains, some powerful characters were making major political decisions: Clayton, Hudson, Barwick, and McKell are examples. In this context the assessments of Byles's role by his colleagues Gare, Costin and Good, and those of later commentators, Hancock and Breckwoldt, are striking as Byles worked from a relatively lowly position behind the scenes. To Good, Byles was 'the first alpine conservator' who inspired him with a research agenda (Good 1992). For Gare 'his was the vision... in early growth of organised park management at Kosciusko' (Gare 1975). For Breckwoldt, through 'tenacity and conviction'... 'he made an indelible imprint on Australia through his work to save the alpine catchments' (Breckwoldt 1988). For Hancock, Byles's contemplative view of the intrinsic value of nature became 'the credo' of park philosophy (Hancock 1972).

A forester in a forester's world

Early formation and training

Byles the forester was a complex character working in a complex field. He was of upper middle class origins, of English birth in a family descended from French Huguenots (Gare 1993a). We know from his older sister Marie's account of their upbringing that the Byles children engaged in free-ranging activities on the NSW coast and around their bush home at Beecroft, then on the northern edge of Sydney (Byles, M. n.d.). The family was encouraged to think outside the square politically and both Marie and Baldur seem to have been sceptical of received authority, to have valued adherence to strong personal principles, and to have shared

a commitment to public duty in applying those principles (Slattery 2009). The Byles siblings were keen and detailed observers of geology, plants and landscape, and were redoubtable walkers.

Byles graduated as a forester in 1925 from Adelaide University, then the only Forestry School in Australia.³ He was one of a small group who were expected to shape forestry practices and philosophy in south-eastern Australia in their generation (Carron 2000).

After a couple of years with the NSW and Victorian forestry commissions, in 1928 Byles won a Travelling Scholarship in Silviculture based at the Imperial Forestry School at Oxford, set up by his mentor, Charles Lane Poole (Dargavel 2008). He was instructed by Lane Poole, Inspector-General of Forests at the new Commonwealth Forestry Bureau, to ‘investigate species and districts that are of interest to Australian foresters from the point of the introduction of softwoods.’

The two-year fellowship took him to several Mediterranean countries, studying methods and conditions of forestry (Editorial 1976). His reports on this experience, seven Commonwealth Forestry Bulletins (Byles n.d. a–g), show a young man preparing himself for bigger things. They are comprehensive, meticulous, and blunt, describing the catastrophic state of trees and soils in forested mountain areas of southern France, Corsica, the Canary Islands, Lebanon, Cyprus and Anatolia. Unlike his colleague and friend Doug Lindsay, who was similarly engaged in America, Byles ranges widely over many concerns other than technical management

of trees, in what was to become his trademark style: organisation and management of forests; restoration programs; budgets; ecological observations, especially about erosion, fire and goats; local attitudes; and governance structures (Lindsay 1932). Byles was typically thorough, learning French for his field-work; he was unconcerned with diplomatic niceties; he was not just a technocrat, but a passionate and concerned participant. Of French fire protection procedures he says:



Figure 1: Byles examines Soil Conservation Service works near Mount Twynam in the early 1960s

The system is frightfully involved and calls into action the Army, Navy, Post Office, Fire Brigade, National Police, City Police, Communal Police and the Forest Service. It is typical of the French genius for utilizing existing facilities without spending any money creating new ones (Byles n.d. e).

Throughout the Mediterranean he observed the destructive processes resulting from uncontrolled fire, cutting and grazing: these impacts are a recurring theme in all the Reports. In Corsica for example, he observed the greatly reduced capacity for soil and water retention.

...drainage is not by rivers but by torrents overflowing with water in winter but almost dry in summer. The torrent beds are filled with boulders which every year are hurtled down from the mountain tops to the valleys and from the top of the valleys to the bottom. The surface of the island is in an extremely unstable condition: roads and tracks, unless constantly repaired, are washed away in a very short time. This instability is increased by the action of the goats and pigs which, grazing on the mountain slopes, continually send showers of stones and small boulders into the valleys below (Byles n.d. b).

Byles believed that land could and should be better managed; is there a sneaking sympathy for what total control by authority could aspire to achieve in his comment that not even the 'well organised Fascist Forest Service' could stop unauthorised burning by uneducated peasants in Calabria? The problems were man-made, and he was sceptical of the capacity of peasant cultures to look after their own landscapes. For example:

man has been the scourge of the forests in the Canary Islands. A forester could travel in many lands and still find some new method of forest abuse in the Canary Islands (Byles n.d. f).

He believed that stable, far-sighted Governments should intervene in such local situations, where 'every conceivable, and to us inconceivable, form of forest abuse was freely practised' (Byles n.d. b). He also observed the relationship between people's poverty and short-term wasteful destruction of natural resources, and that such communities were not susceptible to education.

Engagement with the Murray Catchment

In the summer of 1931–32, Lane Poole instructed Byles to make a study for the Commonwealth Forestry Bureau of Australia's most important catchment, the Snowy Mountains. Lane Poole was prompted by concern

about the supply of water to the Hume Dam and below it, an issue of specific focus by the Empire Forestry Conference of 1928 (Dargavel 2008). The outcome, Bulletin No. 13, *A Reconnaissance of the Mountainous Part of the River Murray Catchment in New South Wales* (Byles 1932), was a landmark report that laid the field research foundations of the question of the appropriate use of the mountains.

Byles had already become familiar with this area. In December 1930, after his return from Europe, he had explored the mountains with his sister Marie. Marie describes this trip as a turning point for Baldur. As he gazed at the treetops far below Mount Townsend:

Baldur knew he had come home. All his travels in Europe had never given him a view over such virgin bushlands as these; he told himself that this would be the land of his future labours (Byles, M. n.d.).

Byles's personal strengths were the right ones for this task: his love of vigorous 'roughing it' in the outdoors, his systematic and organised approach to his gear and methods, and the engagement of his alert, open-minded, energetic curiosity with the country he was probing came to the fore. From the Bago Plateau in the north to the Pilot in the south, he systematically explored the steep mountain catchments of the headwaters of the Murray, an area around 140 kilometres long and 25 kilometres wide, between 300 and 2,000 metres in altitude. He used a horse and packhorse, leaving them at base camps in the sub-alpine area to scramble through the thick scrub to steep slopes and deep gorges over 500 metres below, often working twelve hour days. This was a labour of love, at least in part. Byles later claimed that he could afford to live only with the aid of the money he made from his packhorse allowance (Costin 2007).

Byles's photographs record his observations from the treeless alpine zone through the steep alpine ash covered slopes to farming land below. They show the early stages of the far advanced processes he had observed in the Mediterranean forests, with catchment efficiency being decreased 'slowly but surely'. Erosive processes would accelerate if neglected, until 'whole hillsides are transported into the valley bottoms'.

His trained gaze focussed on the trees, especially the valuable alpine ash on deep soils on the steep middle slopes of the catchment. Much later, Alec Costin drew Byles's attention to his ecologically restricted gaze on one of their field trips. He told him '...stop looking at the trees, look at the ground. Understanding selectivity is the key to understanding the

impacts of grazing' (Costin 2007). But in 1931, no-one had yet observed and documented the detail of alpine and subalpine vegetation, and Byles's report was an important step in the right direction, as Costin also acknowledges.

The limitation of addressing conservation in relation to forestry issues was to persuade foresters that values and protection were about more than just timber. This would have been especially important in alpine-subalpine areas as there were no trees, or only snow gums that wouldn't have counted for much with foresters. This is where Byles' report is actually quite striking, as he has made powerful observations about the connections between these areas and the ash forests. In order to support such observations, he was broadening his observations to include the bogs and the shrubs and herb fields of the treeless zone of the mountains, as well as using his forester's eye to assess the state of the ash forests below these vegetation communities (Costin 2007).

This growing interest in ecological processes distinguishes Byles's approach. In the alpine and subalpine zones, he considers the effects of repeated fire on shrubs and shallow granitic soils, on stands of snow gum, on patterns of vegetation succession. He is concerned about change, using local graziers' oral history to establish that bogs and watercourses have dried out. But he also comments that the management of grazing on the mountain pastures is in a 'very primitive state', and that local knowledge has its limits; 'their stock of fundamental knowledge concerning the grasslands from which they get their living is practically nil' (Byles 1932).

Yet his conclusions were not against grazing. His recommendations, typical of a 'wise use' mode of conservation, looked at moderating existing behaviour and rules, and at technical adaptations, rather than removing the cause of the problem. He didn't envisage total exclusion of stock, because of their value to wool and meat industries, and accepted the graziers' common claim that grazing reduces blazing. He set a research agenda: to consider the role of herbs in grazing and vegetation health, and the nature of the impacts of grazing, including the use of fire, a focus that was later to be followed by Costin. He also suggested research into introduced species that could be more resilient than indigenous plants to grazing.

Surprisingly, considering his opinion of the ignorance of peasants in Europe, and his belief that the public interest would be best managed by governments, he envisaged local control of the grazing. His view that local people could be brought to use their resources wisely was unusual

and idealistic: in Australia, an adversarial situation has prevailed, where settlers claim the right to use land as they see fit, and governments try to limit or regulate that use (Frawley 1992). His view also went against the grain of the centralised, state-controlled traditions of colonial environmental management practice. Decisions about ‘rights’ to access public land resources have more commonly resulted in exclusion of users and uses than in accommodating them through education and local control. Byles’s conclusion sums up his emerging philosophy of land use:

...surely it is better to stop the process of forest destruction...than to leave to future generations the work of repairing damage that should never have been allowed to take place (Byles 1932).

But, over the next thirty years, as he struggled to make other users account for their impacts, Byles came to the conclusion that exclusion of the alpine area from exploitative use was the answer.

A district forester

There were budget cuts to the Commonwealth Forestry Bureau in 1931–32, so Byles’s work was not continued. He began work for the NSW Forestry Commission and rose to become Acting Inspector for southern NSW, based at Wagga Wagga (Gare 1993a). He was regarded very favourably by Commissioner E. H. F. Swain. In 1944, he was appointed as the Forestry Commission’s first and (as it eventuated) only representative to the new Kosciusko State Park Trust, one of many responsibilities.

He was known in forestry circles throughout the State as ‘King of the Riverina’. Colleagues from those times love to tell stories of a ‘Bylesian’ empire, ruled with energy, attention to detail, and idealistic commitment (Bell 1992; Davies 1992; Luke 1992). He was a striking figure, touring his domain in a large canvas-hooded brown tourer, dressed in battle dress jacket, jodhpurs, leggings and boots.

Byles inspired passion for forestry in young foresters, perhaps drawing from Lane Poole’s ideas about establishing an ‘officer class’ along French lines; a secure elite group within the public service who would manage forests for the long term (Dargavel 2008). His ‘personal philosophies were such as to generate either inspired awe or frustrated rancour’ (Davies 1992). He was both an idealist and a martinet, but he was always ready to listen to his subordinates, and was fiercely possessive of his staff members’ expertise, sometimes resisting their transfer in a ‘take no prisoners’ style (Bell 1992). ‘In multiple roles he had assembled

a formidable reputation for decisiveness, capacity for work, physical stamina and total intolerance of the lack of reciprocal virtues in others' (Davies 1992).

Although he 'developed and ran the most progressive District in the State at that time' (Bell 1992), his rule led him into conflicts with those who did not enjoy his pedantic and authoritative style, and perhaps resented his influence with Commissioner Swain.

After Swain's departure, in 1952 Byles's cavalier attitude to authority got him into trouble over an authority issue, and he was 'carpeted', stood down, then promoted to Resources Branch in Head Office. There he was frustrated in his career ambitions, and lacked the independence that he had had in the field. Davies sums up Byles's 'sidelining' as the loss of a possible future Commissioner. Davies sees that Byles would never be 'either very satisfied or highly successful as Resources Officer' as... 'his bent lay in other directions', namely practical work in the field. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Kosciusko State Park Trust became the centre of his energies and idealism for the rest of his working life.

The forester on the conservation battleground, 1944–1970

The Kosciusko State Park Trust

NSW Premier McKell's declaration of Kosciusko State Park in 1944 was visionary in its day, ensuring free access and support for development for recreation in the park. Its main purpose, however, was conservation; to impose more control on seasonal grazing and satisfy soil conservationists' concerns about catchment management (NSW Minister for Lands 1944–61; Merritt 2007).

The new management Trust was given wide but vaguely defined powers of 'the care, control and management' of the 541,600 hectare park. Representation on the Trust was from the Lands, Premier's and Railways Departments, the Forestry Commission, and the Soil Conservation Service, and included two government appointees (NSW Minister for Lands 1944–61). The Trust had the unenviable task of establishing a balance between local graziers, lower-catchment farmers and irrigators, scientists, and bushwalking, tourism and other recreational activity groups. Its members' involvement in one of these actual or potential conflicting interests made agreement or effective action on anything

important seem unlikely. The Trust lacked a specific scientific nominee, and there were only three mildly pro-conservation voices: Byles, Sam Clayton of the Soil Conservation Service, and Noel Roberts of the Royal Zoological Society (Costin 2007).

The Trust achieved little in its first ten years. It had few resources; financially it was dependent on the income from grazing and other commercial activities, a compromising position when these were in conflict with park aims. Parts of the park had been declared an 'erosion hazard' under the 1938 *Soil Conservation Act*, so conflict was present from the start. The inclusion of two extra members after 1947, representing the lessees and other local interests, gave the Trust a pro-grazing majority (Merritt 2007). To top off the mix, the Catchment Areas Protection Board had over-riding powers in matters related to soil erosion, and there was a push from 1944 to 1946 by bushwalkers and scientists for a 'primitive area' of at least ten per cent of the park, which the Act had empowered the Trust to declare. After a stalemate between the scientists and factions within the bushwalking movement, the Trust backed off any decision (Slattery 2009).

The park inherited former forestry land and resources, and initially Byles focused on forestry-related matters: the Jounama plantation, trees for beautification in the park, a nursery, and timber supplies for works. By the early 1950s, however, he was increasingly active in the Trust's activities. Most Trust members were busy men, whose commitment of time to Trust matters was minimal, and given the difficulties outlined above, it was easy for them to get bogged down in minor issues or pessimism about the park. But this was not Byles's style. He began to use his love of exploring and walking for his 'inspections', often week-long affairs to investigate everything from sewage to ecology. His lengthy typed reports and proposals are now interesting pieces of park history, recording the state of its ecology and infrastructure. At the time, they were tabled with the Trust, but rarely led to any engagement with their content. As he sadly confided years later, he doubted that the other trustees even read them (Gare 1993a), and he usually lost on any controversial issue.

The Costin factor: growing knowledge

Byles by now was in close contact with Alec Costin, a brilliant and enthusiastic young alpine ecologist employed by the Commonwealth

Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). Although Costin had initially learnt from Byles's 1932 report, by the mid-1950s Byles was learning from Costin (Costin 2007). Under Costin's training, he became acutely aware of differences between scientific knowledge and commonsense knowledge. He began to recognise in detail how ecological changes above the tree line initiated a chain of degrading processes, and to appreciate the irreplaceable value of mountain water production in catchment effectiveness.

Costin himself had only recently identified and described alpine plant communities and their typical plants (Costin 1954). His burgeoning research program enabled Byles to observe and understand the impacts of preferential grazing of herbs on alpine herbfields, which created inter-tussock spaces, compaction and erosion. Byles also observed Costin's research in quantifying the rainfall interception capacity of snow gums and heathlands, and examined the slow processes of intact sphagnum bogs in regulating and filtering runoff. As Byles's field notes show, he began to recognise more complex patterns and to reject simple answers as Costin and other scientists taught him to observe, hypothesise and test his understanding (Byles 1958a). Interestingly, like the graziers whom he criticised in 1932, Byles was still learning to recognise and name the small alpine plants that hold together sensitive spots, such as snow patches and feldmark. He observed these, as though for the first time, in places that he had already visited frequently (Byles 1958a).

In the early 1950s the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme was beginning to make major inroads into the park. Byles, Clayton and Roberts believed the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority (SMHEA) was not respecting its legal obligations to consult the Trust and to minimise and restore damage resulting from its massive works (NSW Minister for Lands 1944–61). Byles became an activist both for removing grazing and for holding the SMHEA to account. By 1955, the Murray-Murrumbidgee Development Committee of concerned farmers and irrigators commissioned an investigation by John Redrup into the impacts of grazing on the catchments and on the Snowy Scheme in particular. The Trust's response to the Redrup Report was typically conflicted and inconclusive. Vincent, who had been a member of the investigating team, dissented from the findings; Clayton argued that Soil Conservation could deal with it adequately if they had more money; Barry defended grazing and attacked the experts (who included Costin);

Roberts defended the Trust's role against establishment of any overriding authority; and he and Byles moved motions towards restricting grazing, regulating the use of fire, restricting new huts, and repairing damage done by existing huts on the Main Range (NSW Minister for Lands 1944–61).

By early 1957, renewal of the leases loomed and the grazing issue heated up. The Academy of Science published *A report on the condition of the high mountain catchments of NSW and Victoria* (Australian Academy of Science 1957) which immediately aroused huge interest in the infant conservation movement (Slattery 2010). Byles submitted a lengthy paper to a Trust meeting in August, attacking the graziers' knowledge and inability to control their stock. He argued that it was:

Impossible for the layman to see, appreciate or understand the change in vegetation and soil cover which presage the onset of erosion (Merritt 2007).

Although the Trust voted narrowly to extend the grazing leases, its decision was later overturned by Cabinet under pressure from the Academy of Science, lower-catchment interests and the Catchment Areas Protection Board, and with the cooperation of Hudson, Commissioner of the SMHEA, who was concerned about siltation of his dams.

Byles observed that Sir Garfield Barwick QC, an influential member of the Trust, 'still has something of an open mind' on erosion matters (Crocker 1957). In a typically pro-active response, he set up a field trip for early 1958 for himself, Costin and Barwick, preparing Barwick with ecological readings. (Barwick, also typically, demanded that these be to the point, with 'no generalities'.) The extent to which Barwick's keen mind and sceptical nature was influenced by what he saw is open to debate (Hancock 1972; Merritt 2007), and in any case the grazing issue was resolved politically later in 1958, rather than through any action by the Trust. There is no doubt, however, that Barwick, by then a Member of Parliament, went on to become an influential player in the Federal Cabinet and in nature conservation, both on the Trust and more widely.⁴

Byles and the National Park ideal

The rapid growth of skiing in the late 1950s highlighted the Trust's inability to deal with a range of issues: enforcing the grazing ban after 1958, the dramatic impacts of the Snowy Scheme, and a massive increase in ski lodges and infrastructure with their associated management problems. As well, a growing nature conservation movement, the beginnings of

formal park management, and international awareness of the value of parks for tourism were filtering into Australia. Byles was instrumental in the appointment of the park's first superintendent, former forester Neville Gare, in 1959, and rapidly became his mentor and friend. Gare treasures a six-page letter, written when Gare asked the Trustee for a briefing on the newly advertised job. Characteristically, Byles gave a detailed account of the Trust's responsibilities, budget, equipment, assets, staff and works. He outlined the challenges posed by the Snowy Scheme, the grazing issue and other interest group complexities, offering his ideas for appropriate responses. He described local living conditions, considering the well-being of a possible wife and family. Prophetically, he pointed out that the Trust:

... is at a parting of the ways, either it declines into virtual non-entity or it develops and takes on the job that it was established ... to take on and execute (Byles 1958b).

He warned that 'determination to dedicate his life to it' was essential for a job in which 'there is no shortage of bristling points...wired to dynamite'. A characteristic and rather sad postscript added:

Finally—for the right man—I cannot imagine a more satisfying worthwhile job, nor a more enjoyable one. My only regret is that it has turned up 20 years too late (Byles 1958b).

Gare worked vigorously with the local media and community, presenting the park as a natural treasure to be safeguarded, not just valuable drought relief or engineering marvel (Gare 1963). Acting as a friend and adviser to Gare, Byles continued his dogged pursuit of effective management. In his reports, typed up personally on foolscap sheets and a dozen pages long, he demanded recognition of conservation aims, and paid attention to matters of ecology, human resource management, maintenance and condition of facilities—every detail of the growing program of park management. On his field visits he made practical suggestions for improvement, carrying out small tasks on the spot himself, rather than hand-balling them. He initiated and pursued the Trust position on impounding stock, often spotting strayed or illegal animals. He kept in touch with his networks on these trips from Sydney, dropping in at Cooma, Tumut, Jindabyne, and Canberra.

Both men worked too hard and long, and experienced times of doubt. On one occasion Gare was hospitalised. Byles's practical advice was:

...if you ever had a liking for the Bible—that you read it for a quarter of an hour in bed every night. This will help you to attach yourself to something bigger than your daily work. The new English edition of the New Testament will cost you 14/3 (Byles 1961).

Byles did not share his own self doubt with Gare, asking Barwick in August 1961 whether he should give up his struggle to keep the Trust accountable to conservation, which he considered to be 'his major contribution'. Characteristically, by the time he was on page two of the four page letter, he had ceased to ask for advice and was freely listing the things that needed to be done. Barwick's kindly response reminded Byles that he should not think appreciation of his views was lacking, just because some of them were 'difficult coots to convince to the extent of 100%' (Barwick 1961).

Although to some people Baldur came across as arrogant, his widow Janet, in a note to Neville Gare, commented on the cost—his often fragile state resulting from 'the terrific tension' caused by his deafness (Byles 1973). Some 'Bylesian' stories are about how he 'used' his deafness to advantage, in not hearing what he didn't want to. But those close to him, such as his wife and Gare, saw that he was hurt and frustrated by the unfair use that others made of his deafness.

The SMHEA and the Primitive Area Dispute

Byles and Gare were not the only ones keen to influence the future of the park. As the full implications of the magnitude and working style of the SMHEA became apparent, debate about the long-delayed Primitive Area became dominant politically.

In early 1958, Byles attended the Sydney meeting of a coalition of scientists that subsequently produced a strong submission to the Federal Government that effectively censured the SMHEA's works. It also called for the cancellation of a dam at Spencer Creek, fed by aqueducts from the glacial lakes and the upper Snowy River, and of an aqueduct along the Geehi wall, a towering drop of over 1,000 metres from the Main Range to the Geehi River. The location and management of recreational huts on the Main Range was also of concern. By 1961, the Academy of Science had publicly adopted the scientists' position and led the long overdue case for protection of the Kosciusko area as a Primitive Area. Until the dispute's resolution in 1965, Byles acted as liaison between the Trust and the Academy,

usually through Costin, whose pioneering ecological work was at the core of the issue.

In this campaign, Byles and Gare also worked together behind the scenes, swapping slides for talks, sharing networking lists of 'friends' of the park, drafting a circular for the National Parks Association to use in lobbying Cabinet, and requesting Gare to supply 800 copies of it. The

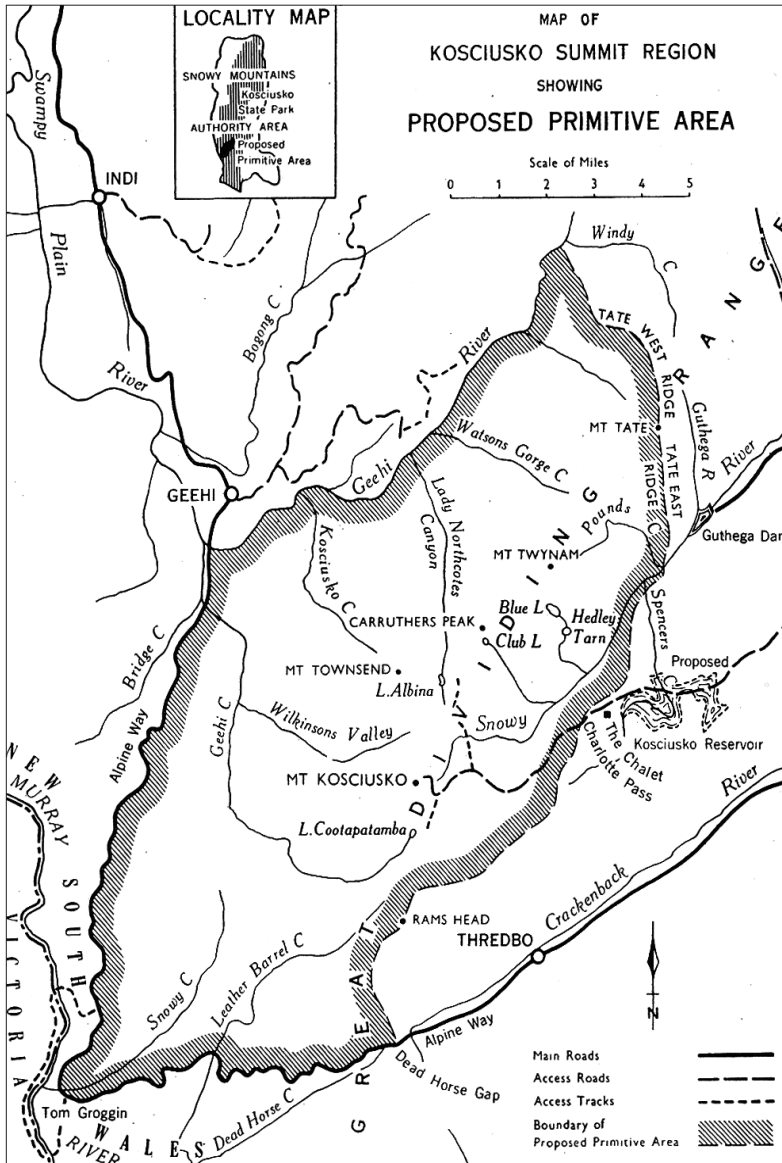


Figure 2: The Academy of Science's 1961 proposed Kosciusko Primitive Area

park's Gestetner machine must have run hot with these illicit campaign materials (Byles 1963a,b).

Byles was so successful that his role was noted for special attention by the SMHEA hierarchy, a rare distinction. In February 1960, he intervened at an on-site meeting of Academy scientists with the SMHEA, presenting a detailed 6-page assessment on erosion and siltation caused by SMHEA ineptitude (Byles 1960). This provoked SMHEA managers at a subsequent meeting (19 May 1960) to resolve to refute various aspects of the scientists' submission, including to 'nullify' Byles's reputation (Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority 1960). In their response to the Government and the Academy they did this by belittling Byles's expertise (Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Authority 1960), and ensuring that Byles was called to account through a letter to the Trust from the Premier (NSW Minister for Lands 1944–61, 23 February 1961).

But he continued to be a thorn in the side of the SMHEA. The Trust finally declared in favour of the Primitive Area in 1963, a move which brought out the full wrath of Commissioner Hudson. Most Trust members and several Academy scientists met Hudson and his senior staff at Mount Kosciusko for the celebrated 'Summit' gathering in April. As the *Sydney Morning Herald's* lead article reported, Byles in modern campaigning mode passed around photographs. These illustrated the impacts of the Geehi aqueducts and showed mountain plum pine clad slopes to be affected by dams and aqueducts.

Byles, who often hikes for miles in this area, looked the uncompromising naturalist in parka, walking boots and gaiters. 'Can we afford to destroy any *Podocarpus alpinus*?' (a twisted shrub, specimens of which are believed to be more than 500 years old). An obviously impatient Sir William [Hudson] showed slight but noticeable signs of annoyance during the talks (Anon. 1963).

The engineers' response was dismissive, but they were forced by public pressure to modify their plans.

The Master Plan 1959–67

Although 'the national interest' had in its day been invoked firstly for support for alpine grazing for drought relief and secondly for development through the Snowy Scheme, during these disputes the public idea of the mountains evolved into support for preservation. This concept of

conservation was accepted in the victory for the Primitive Area, but it could not be applied to the whole park. In 1959, Gare announced the development of a Master Plan. Noting that the Trust had responsibility to develop the park as well as to manage it, his concern was to control burgeoning commercial and recreational interest in the park, using processes modelled on the US National Park system. The central idea was to develop a zoning system for degrees and type of use within an overall protective framework (Gare 1959).

Since 1947, Byles had supported appropriate development for recreational use in the park, through Trust policy allowing ski club lodges for instance. Typically, however, his support was tempered with conditions concerning siting, architectural standards, workmanship, sanitation, water supply, garbage disposal, maintenance and supervision, and operation on a non-profit club basis (Gare 1993a). His aim was now to achieve nature conservation for catchment value whilst still allowing for recreational use, but he was well aware that 'we are trying to establish an entirely new principle which is quite unacceptable to a large number of people' (Gare 1958).

Although Gare led the way, Byles did the work. In characteristic frugal style, using recycled paper from the Forestry Commission and the backs of his own dentist's accounts, he and Gare exchanged drafts and ideas for the next five years. The correspondence with Gare, Costin and bushwalking leader Myles Dunphy opens up the classic Byles ingredients: careful, even picky attention to detail, wholehearted commitment, cynicism about the level and style of engagement of officialdom in the content of the plan, physical engagement with the place he was working for, and openness to ideas. He rejects, for instance the Americanism of terms like 'dude ranch' and 'trail' for a bridle track.

A major difference in the thinking of the three main architects of the plan arose over the Twynam area. Gare was under pressure to open it up for downhill skiing, the fall to Guthega Pondage being particularly attractive for this purpose. He wrote to Byles and Costin speaking favourably of 'a truly international class ski run'. Costin was adamant that Twynam contained the core of the natural values of the park, and should not be excluded from the proposed wilderness zone, and Byles supported him.

At the height of this argument, Byles wrote to Gare asking for use of the Trust's sleeping bags (which he will have cleaned after using them) for

a trip to White's River 'walking in unspoiled country in order to think about the need for undeveloped areas in the park.' On such questions his thinking emerges clearly.

I thought of those poor unfortunate creatures who, firmly wrapped and insulated in their carapace of metropolitan habits, pursue their habitual way of life in luxury hotels in the snow country.

How can we teach and persuade them to loosen the laces that bind the scales and let in some of those felt but invisible influences which constitute the National Park's greatest value to the human race? (Byles 1964)

The outcome: commercial interests were allowed into appropriate areas in the park as a service to the public, at a reasonable cost. Although Byles was passionate about wild or primitive areas, he was also a practical man, and accepted the need for visitor infrastructure: resorts and other facilities. He just wanted to make sure these works were done well and not on Mount Twynam.

A draft plan was released in 1965, and the zones determined by it remain the basis for those used today. The triumph of Byles's long and changing fight for better management of the mountains was the declaration shortly afterwards of Kosciuszko National Park in 1967. He retired from the Trust in 1970 and died in 1974.

Conclusion: thinking like a snowgum

In his environmental history, *Discovering Monaro* (1972), Keith Hancock clearly regards Byles as a hero of the mountains. He pays detailed tribute to Byles's philosophy about nature. One can see the thinking of Byles's Buddhist sister Marie about the intrinsic rights of all living things, but also his own approach to nature, and maybe to other people. Hancock quotes at length from Byles's unpublished article *Snow Gum—The Tree*, signed Podocarpus, his occasional pseudonym.

We cannot appreciate anything fully until we understand it, until we pick up its wave length so to speak, until we learn to think the way it thinks...So, if we wish to understand this particular Australian tree we must try to understand its point of view, realising that it is a living organism, like you and me...We must try to understand its manner of living, its philosophy of life, its place in the world of natural things and the spirit that keeps it going in spite of great adversity (Hancock 1972).

In reading this we can see the presence of Byles's evolving understanding and values about nature conservation. We can still

hear the voice of the forester; the tree does not seem to satisfy purely utilitarian needs, being a 'non-commercial timber'. But Byles, the scientist, has learned that even stunted and twisted trees do their job and have ecological function. He has learned that to dismiss the tree as valueless for this reason would be a mistake. 'The snow gum performs a very vital and important role in natural and human affairs'. It captures passing fog and mist, reduces wind velocity, protects the understorey and soil, and even shelters campers.

But it is Byles the philosopher and spiritual man who recognises the unquantifiable role of a snow gum: 'on sunny windy days, from grey to green to silver they dance and shimmer' on the hillsides, bringing joy to anyone who cares to look.

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Notes

- 1 Initially known as Kosciusko National Park, the name was changed in 1998 to the Polish spelling.
- 2 Following the declaration of the Kosciusko National Park in 1967, the Trust became an advisory committee.
- 3 L. T. Carron (2000) lists Byles as a graduate of 1928, but actually he graduated in 1925, as stated in his obituary (*Australian Forestry*, 39, 1, 1), and returned to Canberra as a Research Scholar in 1928.
- 4 Barwick became President of the Australian Conservation Foundation in 1966.

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