



New Betts Camp, Australian Ski Yearbook 1928

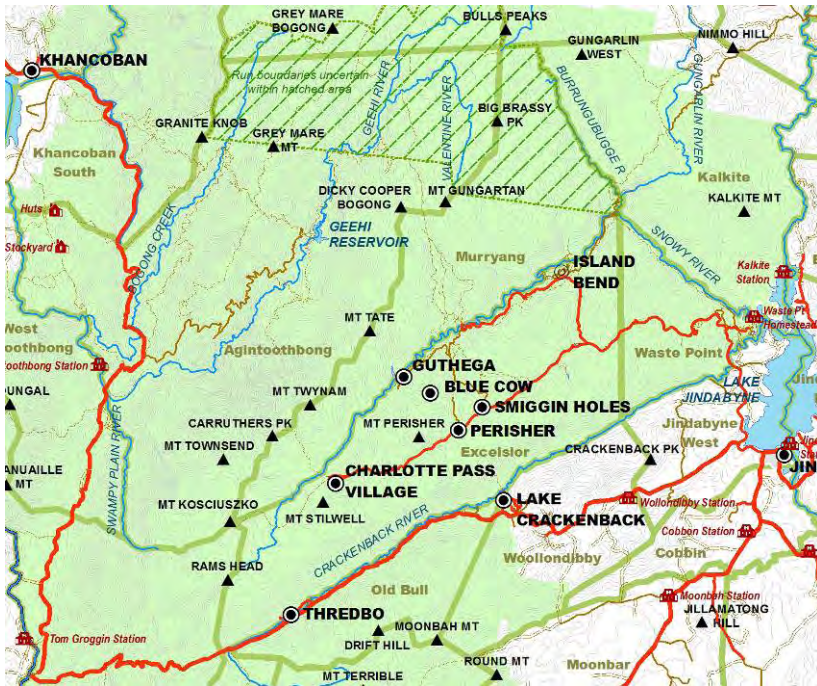
Building for the Heroic Age

**An Overview of Recreational Development on the Main Range of
the Snowy Mountains 1890-1960**

**David Scott, (rev) July 2011
For the Kosciuszko Huts Association**



Building for the Heroic Age - Recreational Development on the Main Range 1890-1960



1885 Boundaries of the Agintoothbong, Murryang & Excelsior Runs (©DScott 2009)

Beginnings - prior to 1914

Through the nineteenth century the summit area of the main range was home only to graziers, barring a brief interlude in the 1860s when miners from the Crackenback Rush worked the creek lines around Pipers and Diggers Creeks. The range was divided into three squatting runs; Agintoothbong Run occupying the Geehi Valley side of the range from Mt Kosciuszko to Dicky Cooper Peak and including Lake Albina, the Murryang Run on the north side of the Snowy River valley between Mt Kosciuszko and the Burrungubugge River, and the Excelsior Run on the south bank of the Snowy extending from Mt Kosciuszko to the Gungarlin and south to the Crackenback River. These were the highest grazing lands in Australia, although James Spencer, long-time grazier at Waste Point and mountain guide, criticised these runs as only being viable for 3-4 months per year due to extent and duration of the snow cover.

By the 1870s a track and stockroute had been established up the range from Jindabyne to the location of (Old) Betts Camp - running the crest of the Ramshead Range past Pretty Point and Porcupine Rocks. A few bridle tracks led off the main track to grazing areas along the Snowy River and one track ascended the high ground to Mt Kosciuszko and thence proceeded via Dead Horse Gap to Tom Groggin. It appears likely that during the early years of grazing, activity was mainly concentrated in the lower elevations at the eastern end of the range, certainly below Charlottes Pass. The stockmen appeared to have used tent camps or bark lean-tos constructed each season, or adapted natural shelter such as the boulder formation near

Seaman's Hut that was used as a cookhouse by the Willis family from the 1890s to 1930s.

Recreational interest in the main range began to grow following the first ascent of Mt Kosciuszko on skis in August 1897 and media coverage of the establishment of Wragge's Meteorological Observatory on the summit in 1897, at which time the NSW Government committed the first funds to develop a road to the summit - albeit the £400 would barely delivered a cleared track.

In 1902 the NSW Government built a shelter hut for summer tourists that was known as (Old) Betts Camp, and upgraded the Kosciuszko 'Road'. Along the road there were campsites on Diggers Ck (Harvey's) and Prussian Plain (Wragge's Camp) with huts at Betts Camp and Boggy Plain.

Within a few years, the NSW Tourist Department was promoting a 3-day horse tres from Jindabyne to the summit, costing £1 per day all inclusive with James Spencer as guide. The tour was supposedly 'first class', however the dray with the supplies couldn't always get through the bogs on the road and the hut had limited furnishing - a floor covered in gumleaves served as the ladies' bed whilst the gentlemen got to tent-it or doss down on the grass outside!

In response to demand for improved access and accommodation, and to tap into the rapidly growing public interest in winter sports, in the period 1906-09 the NSW Tourist Department constructed the existing Kosciuszko Road from Jindabyne to the summit of Mt Kosciuszko, built



Site of Willis Camp c1988 (©GScully flickr)



Old Betts Camp Postcard (©KHA collection at NLA)



Rawsons Pass Shelter 1926 (@Bill Strong flickr)

The *Creel* accommodation house at the base of the range in 1907 and the Kosciuszko Hospice (later 'hotel') just above the snowline at Diggers Creek in 1909. For summer tourists, in 1907 a new hut was built beside the road up at Spencers Creek (New Betts Camp) and a bridle track was constructed from Rawsons Pass, past Lake Albina and Blue Lake to Charlottes Pass - now known as the Lakes Walk. The following year three huts were constructed as day shelters along the bridle track - at Rawsons Pass, Moraine Pass above Lake Albina, and Blue Lake. These were small one-roomed huts with stone walls, small glazed windows, iron roofs and dirt floors. The hut at Rawsons Pass survived to the late 1920s; the hut at Blue Lake was supposedly struck by lightning in 1913 but was repaired into a shelter by stockmen and remained shown on maps as late as 1937, whilst little is recorded of the Moraine Pass Hut – it appears unlikely to have survived more than a few years and the stones from it may have been recycled in the foundations of Albina Lodge.

The Interwar Years

The interwar period marked the peak of the 'heroic age' of skiing, when the focus was on ski-touring into remote areas to access deep snow and steeper slopes, in epic journeys across the mountains, or in racing from the Hotel Kosciuszko to Mt Kosciuszko and back in a day as an attempt on the Summit Record. The NSW Government progressively extended the Hotel Kosciuszko and developed a number of facilities for tourers - a series of shelter huts along the Kosciuszko Road at Smiggins (c1924), Perisher Gap (1938), and the Red Hut at Charlottes Pass (c1920); and for backcountry skiing Tin Hut No1 ('Pounds Creek Hut', 1926) and – in partnership with the Ski Club of Australia - Tin Hut No2 ('Tin Hut', 1926).



The first Chalet c1930s (@State Library of NSW)

The two Tin Huts opened up the main range north to Mt Jagungal, and led to a number of well-publicised tours that captured the imagination - such as the 1927 crossing of the range from Kiandra and Kosciuszko by Dr Herbert Schlink and party. Backcountry skiers increasingly began to explore the area north of the Snowy, staying in old stockmen's or miners' huts – the locations and facilities of each being promoted by Gilder in the 1934 Ski Yearbook article '53 Ski Huts of NSW'.

Pressure for access to better snow than that offered by the Hotel Kosciuszko led to the Government development of the first Chalet at Charlottes Pass in 1930 and the Smiggin Holes Cafe in 1939. Smiggins became immediately popular as a day-use area for skiers from the Hotel or day-trippers motoring up from Jindabyne, whilst the terrain around the Chalet immediately became the venue for state and national skiing competitions.



First ski tow at the Chalet 1941 (@Fleyden, AAC website)

From the 1930s private interests began to feature in the development of recreational facilities. In 1934, the Kosciuszko Alpine Club (KAC) negotiated with grazier Ray Adams to upgrade his hut at Whites River for winter accommodation. This was followed by the more substantial development of the Alpine Hut in 1939 by a breakaway group from the KAC – providing catered accommodation and access to the Mt Jagungal area on day trips.



Smiggin Holes Hut with Cafe to rear (@Petersen, NAA)

The tragic deaths of Seaman and Hayes in 1928 led to the development of a further shelter hut in the most exposed area between Charlottes Pass and Mt Kosciuszko, the Seaman Memorial Hut was built with financial support from Seaman's Family in 1929. In the wake of this event, a communications network was developed for safety and search and rescue coordination. By 1930, a telephone line connected all huts between Seaman's and the Hotel, plus Pounds Creek, and by the mid 1930s radios had been installed at Whites River Hut and the Alpine Hut, linked to Betts and the Hotel. The system proved useful in tracking overdue parties and responding to missing skiers, but the radios were notoriously fickle and subject to vandalism.

When the original Chalet burnt down in 1938, it was replaced the following year by the more substantial structure of the current hotel and in a portend of what was to come, the first ski-tow on the main range was erected nearby. This is believed to have been the second ski-tow

developed in Australia, a year after the Cresta rope tow was installed on Mt Buffalo in Victoria.

Grazing continued over the main range each summer. Recorded evidence of pastoral activity over the same period includes the ongoing use of the Willis' Camp (1890) and of Bill Dainer's Camp (c1900) just south of Daner's Gap, and the construction of Adam's Hut (1929) and Sturgeon's Hut (c1930) beside Spencer's Creek, Merritt's Hut (c1930) above Thredbo, Foreman's Hut (c1924) at the junction of Club Lake Creek and the Snowy River, the stone-walled and tarpaulin-roofed Mason Moraine Shelter between Charlottes Pass and Seaman's, and a hut on the east side of Mt Twynam c1930s.

The Fifties

Post World War 2, the Government constructed another shelter hut at Rock Creek (1947) and spent the latter 1950s embroiled in stop-start development of the Smiggin Holes Hotel, erstwhile the emphasis on development shifted to the private sector. Prior to 1950, private ski clubs had undertaken block bookings at the Hotel Kosciusko and The Chalet, with sitting rooms and facilities being set aside for their exclusive use. In 1941 the Ski Club of Australia had a small extension constructed on the Chalet that contained club rooms and storage facilities – the first private ski club facility in a resort.

Times were changing. ski-tows were in use in NSW, Victoria and Tasmania, environmental concerns over grazing impacts on the range had seen the 'Summit Area' above Charlottes Pass closed to grazing in 1943, and the Snowy Scheme was about to bring a lot of infrastructure and Europeans interested in winter recreation to the mountains. But there was one chapter of the 'heroic age' of skiing yet to run.



Albina Lodge under construction 1951 (©AAC website)



Kunama Huettes & Northcote Tow c1955 (©AAC website)

In October 1949 a group led by Charles Anton met with the Kosciusko State Park Trust and the NSW Tourist Department to put forward a proposal for a private club lodge at Lake Albina. Attracted to the prospect of the lodge being available as an emergency shelter for parties skiing the summit area and western faces of the main range, the Trust quickly granted a site and provided transport and trades staff to assist in the construction. The group formed itself into the Ski Tourer's Association, and Albina Lodge was completed in April 1951. The Trust installed a snow pole line from Albina to Seamans, where it connected with the line from Rawsons Pass to Charlottes Pass.

Over the 1951/52 New Year weekend, the Association held the first of many summer skiing competitions in Australia on the slopes of Northcote and Townsend. Membership boomed and plans progressed to construct another lodge. Initially proposed to be sited at Blue Lake, it was decided to shift the site to the base of Mt Clarke and use a rope tow to provide ready access between the two lodges. Kunama Huettes was completed with the assistance of the Trust over the summer of 1952/53. The Northcote Ski Tow was completed for the 1953 winter; however the poorly-sited head frame was buried by snow so the tow would not become operational until it was resited 50m up the slope for the 1954 season.

Tony Sponar opened the famous *Golden Eagle Run* in the Kunama basin in 1953. This was the steepest ski run serviced by a tow in NSW at the time and proved a huge attraction for day-trippers from the Chalet. Electronically-timed speeds of up to 113kmh were achieved on the run over the next three years – believed to be the fastest in Australia at the time.

In 1955, the Northcote Tow House was adapted to include a bunkroom for 4 skiers. The Ski Tourers' Association now had itself a mini backcountry village of three buildings providing 30 beds to an accommodation standard not previously seen outside of the Hotel and Chalet - mattresses, hot and cold running water, shower, toilet, gas cooking and kerosene heating. A snowpole line had been installed between Kunama and the Chalet, with a steel suspension bridge over the Snowy River beside Foreman's Hut.

In 1956 a breakaway faction of the Ski Tourers Association under John Turner formed the Illawong Ski Tourers and commenced a 3-year project restoring the derelict Pounds Creek Hut, upstream from Guthega, which re-opened in 1958 as Illawong Lodge.

The tragic loss of Roslyn Wesche and destruction of Kunama Hutte in an avalanche on 12 July 1956, followed by the destruction of the Northcote Tow House in a fire only 3 weeks later, symbolised the end of the age, a turning point in the fortunes of the Ski Tourers Association and the evolution of skiing in Australia.



Kosciusko Alpine Club Lodge, Charlottes Pass c1953(©KAC)



First Sundeck Hotel 1959 (©Sun Deck Hotel website)

The move toward change had commenced a few years earlier, when the most significant building in the history of the main range and the main accommodation house, the Kosciusko Hotel, was burnt down in 1951. Planning for a number of private lodges in the current resort areas was underway at the time, and construction was hurried through on the Kosciusko Alpine Club Lodge at Charlottes Pass (1952), the Telemark Lodge (1952) and Snow Reveller's Hut (1953) at Perisher. Commercial demand for skiing was already shifting toward lift-assisted downhill skiing based out of comfortable lodges that were accessible by car or mechanised transport for long stays or just weekend use. Waning demand for the old-style ski touring saw the Alpine Hut Pty Ltd being wound up and its lease surrendered to the Trust in 1954, and a decline in demand for accommodation at Betts Camp through the late 1950s - which in the face of deterioration and due to plans to flood the area to form the Kosciusko Reservoir - was demolished in 1963.

From 1957 ski-tows were installed in all the current resort areas and major hotels providing new accommodation options for the general public soon followed at Perisher (Sundeck 1959 and the Man from Snowy River 1959), Smiggin Holes (Alpine Gate 1960) and Thredbo (Coach House Inn 1960).

Facing an escalating demand for lodge sites and soil conservation issues in the alpine area, the Trust had declined to allow Kunama to be rebuilt, and encouraged the Ski Tourers' Association to shift its growing operations to one of the newly-planned resort areas. The Association built its replacement in Thredbo (named Roslyn Lodge in commemoration) using an old barracks

from the Guthega dam site, and quickly followed with the building of Kareela Huetette at Thredbo (1959) and Perisher Huetette at Perisher Valley (1963).

The summit area was being subject to many other changes through the 1950s. The greatest influence was the Snowy Mountains Authority, constructing track networks and Rawsons Hut as a base for investigations including stream gauging at Lake Albina (2), Club Lake Ck, Wilkinson's Ck, Lake Cootapatamba and Cootapatamba Ck. As part of the proposed Kosciusko Reservoir on Spencers Creek, the streams along the west side of Mt Kosciusko were to be channelled through an aqueduct to Wilkinson's Creek and thence fed through a tunnel into the Snowy River downstream of Rawson's Hut. The other new player was the NSW Soil Conservation Service, who undertook revegetation trials in 1957. In 1959-60 the Service upgraded the track past Blue Lake into a road (and extended it over Mt Twynam), built the Soil Conservation Hut and commencing a major revegetation program upon erosion caused by grazing on Carruthers Peak. The last and not least significant change to the main range was the end of all grazing above 1370m elevation in 1958.

Two major recreational developments define the close of the heroic age and commencement of the next era in Australian skiing. The first is the Crackenback Chairlift, built as far as Kareela Huetette in 1958 and extended to the current Eagles Nest

site in 1962 - which created an entirely new access option for ski touring and walking in the summit area and continues to be an outstanding success in this role. The second is the glorious failure of the chairlift from the Crackenback River to the Chalet via Mt Stilwell, a visionary engineering concept built in 1964 that was plagued by design issues and operational difficulties that led to its closure and dismantling within just 2 years.

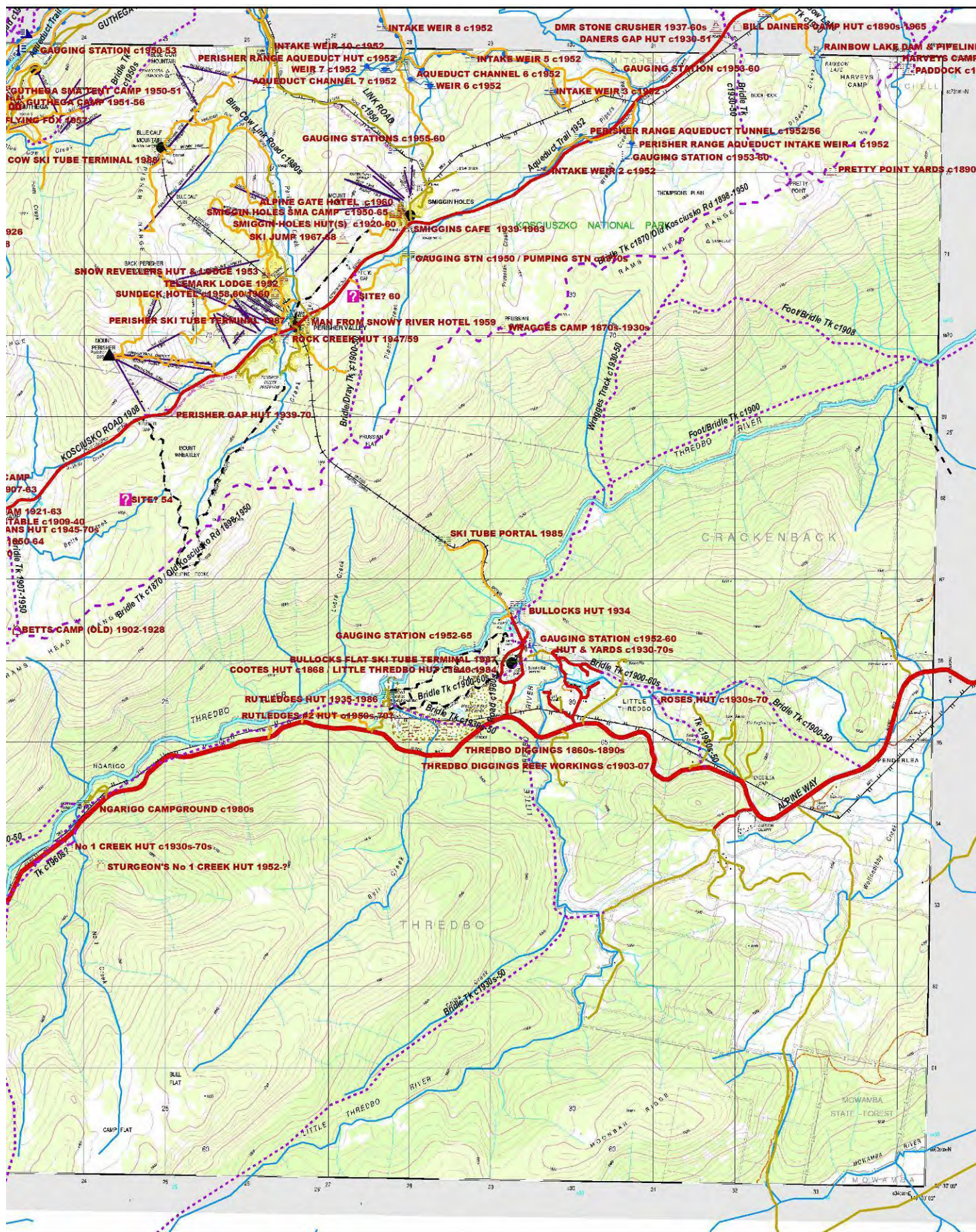
Beyond 1960 the recreational history of the main range becomes engrossed in the development boom of resort areas at Charlottes Pass, Smiggin Holes, Guthega, Perisher and Thredbo, with over 100 lodges and a multitude of ski tows erected by the close of the decade as alpine skiing rose to pre-eminence in Australia.



Mt Stilwell top station 1965 (©R Jacobsen NLA)



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KOSCIUSKO NATIONAL PARK

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