



Broken Dam Hut

KOSCIUSKO HUTS THE COUNTDOWN HAS STARTED

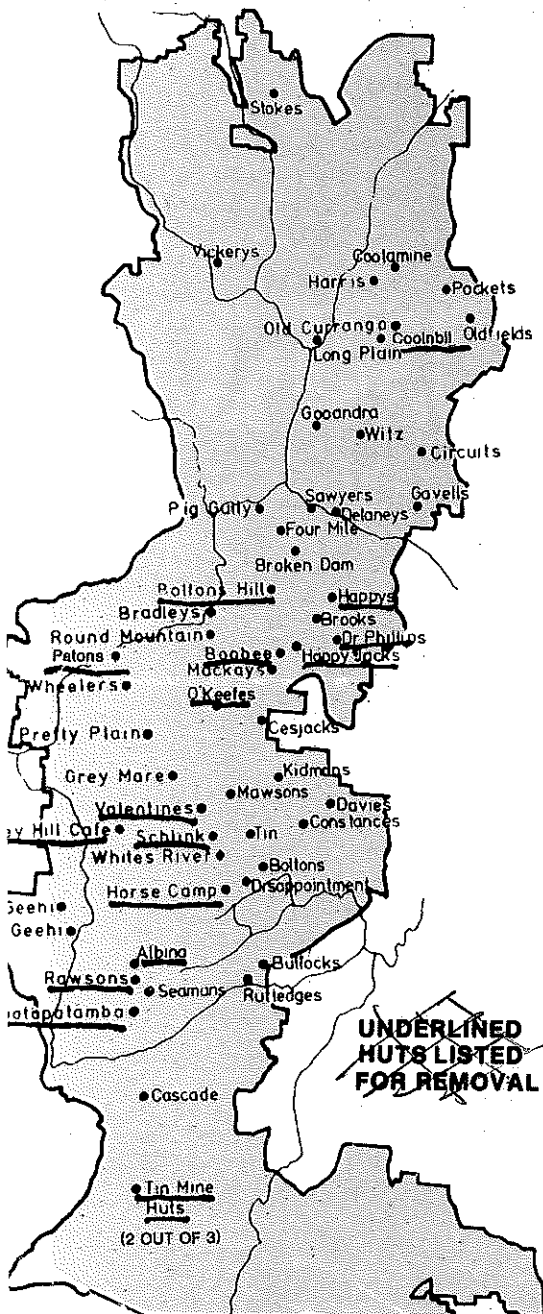
Allan Moulton discusses the controversial plan to eliminate shelter huts from the blizzard-prone high plains.



Whites River Hut: to be renovated (cleaned up and annex removed) and take the traffic using Horse Camp and Schlink.



Tin Mine Huts: undoubted historic value in at least one of the three huts at Tin Mine. Two are slated for removal.



Almost 100 huts of all shapes, sizes and states of repair dot the Kosciusko National Park — motley monuments to man's intrusion in this unique wilderness. They came to cater for grazing, mining and one of the world's major engineering feats, the Snowy Mountains Scheme. Only the southern areas around Byadbo Mountain and The Pilot escaped the jackboot of progress.

Today, the remaining huts — worn, weathered and welcome — provide a chain of safety, particularly on the main ski-touring routes. Each year they save lives by offering protection from the extreme weather that scours the Park, often with little warning.

Ten years ago the demolition of a number of the huts was first mooted by a management review plan for Kosciusko National Park (KNP) issued by the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS). More than 100 submissions against the plan were received, many of them from users with long first-hand knowledge of the Park in all seasons.

The protests saved the huts and prompted the formation of the Kosciusko Huts Association, which even today, is responsible for the upkeep of many of them. The then superintendent of the KNP, Mr Neville Gare, said he was "moved by the idealism implicit in these offers to do the work, and also by the recognition of the cultural value of the huts as something precious and irreplaceable which should be kept".

Now the huts are under threat again. A new management review proposes the demolition of 18 huts and carefully builds up a case for the eventual demolition of many more. It also suggests a policy of not replacing huts destroyed in accidents.

The NPWS does point out, however, that its proposals are not final — they have been released "to stimulate comment before final

decisions are made".

Why plan to get rid of the huts anyway? The Service says major problems, which call for new planning, have grown over recent years — the pressure of increasing numbers of visitors to the park, the problems associated with accommodation facilities and traffic, and the effects that all these and other pressures have on the park's natural features. And as the huts tend to concentrate people into specific areas, they are obviously playing a major role.

The Service recognises that some of the huts are valuable historic buildings, often incorporating unusual construction techniques or design details. It proposes to actively preserve some of these, to maintain other old huts as shelters and for their historic values, and remove "redundant and derelict huts".

"Another influence on policy has been the realisation that public health requirements place the Service under very significant constraints if it is to legitimise huts as having a significant function as accommodation facilities. Not only is it quite impractical to upgrade most huts to meet public health standards, but the Service believes that it is ultimately more appropriate to recognise huts as serving only a basic shelter function, as distinct from accommodation."

For the purposes of Service policy, a hut is a simple roofed and walled structure which is capable of providing shelter and serves one or more of the following functions: historic preservation, storage of management approved equipment, or day and overnight shelter. To be retained, a hut must effectively serve one or more of those functions, fit in with the management objectives of the particular area, and fit in with the priorities of Service management.

The proposals to remove the huts have again raised a storm, and although very little publicity was given to the planning issue



Valentines Hut: top survival and recreational ratings by KHA; NPWS says poor condition, no historic value, fragile siting. To go.



Spencers Hut: not on the demolition list, but on its last legs and will probably soon be gone anyway. Near Coolamine Caves.

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statement, the NPWS did invite public comment. When his issue went to press there was no indication of the response, or how the Service would react to the comments it had received. However, the main factor which has raised the ire of long-time users — particularly those familiar with winter conditions — has been the virtual dismissal by the Service of the idea that the huts provide a safety net for outdoorsmen caught by dangerously foul weather.

The planning issue statement argues: "In the climatically extreme environment of parts of Kosciusko National Park, huts are, in the final analysis, of little value to bushwalkers and skiers faced with true emergency situations, since such situations are characterised by disorientation or inability to proceed.

"Under such circumstances, even a system of many closely spaced huts cannot ensure the safety of all parties. Indeed, such huts can contribute to the hazard faced by some parties if, irresponsibly, they have set out for them ill-equipped for survival under extreme conditions. Huts cannot be a substitute for the proper equipment and the experience that is necessary to cope with the severe weather conditions which may be expected in the mountains at any time.

"Because no hut can ensure the safety of every party, however well or poorly equipped, the existence of a hut can never be essential for visitor safety."

That last statement has been likened to saying there is no need for surf lifesavers because they can't save everyone, or no need for fire brigades because they can't ensure that all properties aren't burnt.

The huts slated for removal are: Albina, Cootapatamba, Rawsons, Boltons Hill, Boobee, Coolinbil, Dr Phillips, Grey Hill Cafe, Happy Jacks No. 3, Happys, Harveys, Valentine, Horse Camp, O'Keefes, Patons, Schlink, SMA hut at Tin Mine, The Barn at

Tin Mine. The majority are listed by the Service as having no historical value, or historical and shelter value are duplicated elsewhere.

The Service certainly has a strong responsibility to manage the Park for future generations, but the huts proposal has alienated many normally solid supporters of the Park management team. Even people who rarely stay in the huts, but know how valuable they can be when conditions really deteriorate, are upset by the apparent dismissal of the shelter aspect of their role.

The KHA says the trend is for ski touring parties to be self-sufficient because the popularity of many huts now means there is a fair chance of having to camp outside.

Also, as most cross country ski tourers realise, the winter wilderness demands respect, and if we recall our own early days, it also demands the serving of an apprenticeship...

First, there's the introductory training sessions to learn the quirks of the long skinny boards, the little jaunts on the nursery slopes, the half-day and day-tours along well-established pole lines, the first overnight camp (either in a hut or in a tent nearby) the first storm (and lessons learned) and then the more ambitious longer treks into the more remote areas.

Not everyone, however, has followed this graduated path. Here lies the greatest threat to life — the innocent abroad.

You find them in every outdoor activity... the new canoeist who tackles a creek in flood, the novice bushwalker who thinks every blue line on his map depicts running water, the scuba diver who neglects to check his repetitive dive tables...

Likewise, you are going to get the ambitious cross country skier setting off ill-equipped to cope with the vagaries of weather.

And now as inflation bites further into the

pocket of the family man who enjoys downhill skiing, more family groups are taking to the high country — a trend particularly noticeable last season.

For them alone, the retention of the network of huts is critical — especially those in areas offering easy access and undulating terrain and those near the main ski resorts.

The KHA has compiled a classification system for the huts in the Park which rates them in terms of their survival, recreation and historical value.

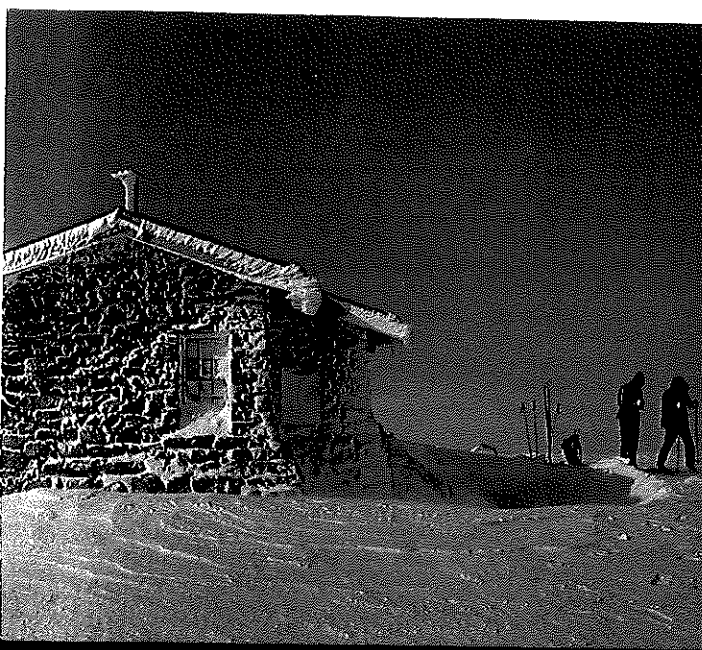
Seven of the threatened huts were rated as "essential" for safety, and a further two were given a high value. This is not an emotive valuation — the criterion was the role of a hut in survival its position must offer day time or overnight refuge from highly exposed areas of the Park.

The KHA suggests automatic approval for rebuilding on or near the original site should be granted for any hut in the "essential" class which is accidentally destroyed.

Huts with this classification under threat are Albina, Cootapatamba, Grey Hill Cafe, Happys (The Dip), O'Keefe's, Schlink Hilton and Valentine. High ratings are given to Boobee and Rawson.

The NPWS proposes that these huts receive no maintenance and be progressively removed as management priorities permit. Their argument for the removal of the Schlink Hilton, for example is: "The hut is an old SMA works camp and has no historic value. It has substantial visual impact. It is heavily used for shelter, but this use will be catered for by a renovated hut at Whites River."

The hut certainly has visual impact, but so do the giant power pylons that strut down the valley behind it. It is indeed heavily used — mainly by Boy Scouts, who travel in larger groups than most ski touring or bushwalking parties. For them to congregate instead at a



Seamans Hut: built as a life-saving shelter in memory of two who died in a blizzard. To be retained.



Coolamine Homestead: part of the National Heritage Register, and to be retained. Inset shows old papers lining the walls.

renovated Whites River hut will simply strain existing resources.

There are pros and cons for all the threatened huts, but it is worth looking at the situation from the point of view of the regular users — the bushwalkers and ski tourers — and those dedicated volunteer workers from the Kosciusko Huts Association.

At the 1980 annual meeting of the KHA, a paper — "Towards management of a rational huts system for the Kosciusko National Park" — was approved for submission to the NPWS. It is a concise and comprehensive document with much relevance for cross country ski tourers in the 80s.

The following extracts summarise their point of view.

"Prediction and control of the future numbers of visitors is one of the key questions of Park management. The increase of visitor pressures on the Kosciusko National Park will be eased by the recent creation of large new national parks elsewhere in New South Wales, while higher prices and shortages of motor fuels will encourage use of recreation areas closer to the main centres of population.

"The last few years have seen a boom in cross country skiing, brought on by the advent of waxless skis and perhaps also by the high cost of downhill skiing. While 1979 was a poor year for snow, a trend to steadier rates of back country usage is likely to continue.

"In the last 10 years, among the 40 huts maintained or valued by the KHA, some five have been destroyed by fire and storm. If this rate of accidental wastage continues and no new huts are built, the number of huts will be halved every 70 years. The KHA believes that the future number of huts in back country areas of the Park should be broadly related in some proportion to the total number of visitors and to their

preference for using huts, as evidenced by the logbooks.

"Policies of removing huts to reduce visitor pressures as the sole means of reducing numbers should be resisted as needlessly destroying freedom of choice, and unduly favouring or encouraging:

The very rich, able to afford costly lightweight gear. The very fit and strong able to carry heavy loads. The very foolish or plain ignorant, who will set off with insufficient equipment on very ambitious "day trips", regardless or oblivious of the consequences of failing to return on the same day.

"In winter, controls on vehicle access to points of entry into the snowfields and restrictions on overnight parking will profoundly influence where most parties will begin weekend or longer ski tours, and this in turn will affect the pattern of hut usage.

"Vehicle congestion at the commercial ski resorts will indirectly be eased if roads are cleared and overnight parking space is provided at alternative entry points for ski tourers, eg Dead Horse Gap."

The KHA is emphatic about the role played by the huts in saving lives. Documented instances abound.

In remote areas of the Park they see different problems, because parties reaching these areas will require greater fitness and adequate technical ability if travelling on skis.

They argue that while all parties should be self-sufficient for overnight camping, it is unreasonable and unrealistic to expect all visitors to have sufficient first hand knowledge of the full range of Snowy Mountains weather. Nor could they be expected to possess a complete outfit of the latest lightweight camping gear and clothing which may easily cost well over \$1000, obviously out of the reach of many students and the unemployed.

"The logistics of travel in bad weather and poor visibility will depend on the endurance of the party (related in part to their equipment) and on the time that will be needed to get out of the Park.

"Without recourse to huts (where the endurance of the party will be limited only by food supplies) simple contingencies such as equipment breakage, illness, injury or flooded rivers may assume critical proportions."

As an example, the overland distance from Valentine Hut to Grey Mare Hut is about 4km, but after 100mm of rain the distance becomes at least 20km over a much less easily navigable route, because Back Flat Creek, the Geehi and the Valentine River will be in high flood and dangerous to ford except near their headwaters.

The Service should avoid devising simplistic management policies which would space survival huts at arbitrary distances.

The KHA continues: "In the name of wilderness management, huts are sometimes said to be potentially dangerous to disoriented skiers or walkers, who it is claimed will exhaust themselves or their companions and risk death from hypothermia in an attempt to reach a hut. This flimsy representation of the survival role of huts (mischievously set up to facilitate public denigration of the survival value of huts) conveniently overlooks the very important preventative value of survival huts for day use, and ignores the commonsense decisions so often made by parties, who, recognising the onset of severe weather and their own limitations, are humble enough to stay at or near a hut or to return to a hut passed earlier in the day.

"In devising management policies, the Service should," says KHA, "give full weight to the opinion of those with long first-hand knowledge of winter conditions in the Snowy



Alpine Hut. Already gone. At least five huts have been destroyed by fire or storm in the last 10 years.



Schlink Hilton: Despite the transmission lines this doomed hut has "substantial visual impact and no historic value".

Mountains. Some seasons bring far more moderate weather than others, and recent years have brought a succession of mild winters compared with 1946 or 1964.

"It should be recognised that a proportion of Australian visitors will come from States such as Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and the Northern Territory, and while they may be fit and keen they will have little or no anticipation from personal experience of the full range of weather.

"Shelter huts should be spaced out on the main touring routes, not further apart than 8km, and closer spacing will be appropriate where natural barriers (swollen rivers, etc) can block the usual routes, or where special navigation difficulties can arise over relatively featureless terrain in dense fog — as at Happy Jacks Plain.

"In view of the valuable preventative role of huts for averting survival situations, it clearly will be illogical to attempt to restrict the use of 'survival huts' for contingent 'emergency situations'. Such restrictions would meet with resistance, if not contempt, whereas if huts are used and enjoyed for recreational purposes, their exact location and surroundings will become familiar to a greater number of Park visitors.

"Whatever else is said, huts have saved lives. If there is anything in the theory that huts endanger those depending on them, it must be added that no potential casualty is ever compelled to use any hut.

"Removal of huts on the other hand, where lives might have been saved, represents a serious deprivation of choice for those involved.

"The public will always subscribe to this commonsense point of view, and will be unimpressed by the sophistry of other theories."

The huts that are By Greg Powell

SPRINKLED THROUGHOUT the Australian Alps is a random network of shelter huts, their origins as diverse as the people who seek the protection of their walls. Some have great historical significance, others are new. Some are palatial and others are so small that two people overcrowd them. They may be made of iron, stone, rough-cut logs or planks, weather-board, and even mud, and are located in a variety of settings from high, wind-blown crags to peaceful sheltered valleys. And they all share a common attribute — they give shelter to those in need. Each has possibly been responsible for averting a tragedy at sometime in its life.

A study of the origins and backgrounds of the huts produces some fascinating information. The huts can be grouped into three categories, each a memorial to the three greatest influences that have shaped the region since the tremendous uplift of land that formed the mountains some 60 million years ago. The three human influences have been pioneer stockmen, the Snowy Mountains Scheme, and tourism. They are not, perhaps, as earth-shattering or long lasting as the geological uplift, but they have still left their marks on the land. And on the huts of the high country.

Pioneer stockmen

When, in the 1840s, James Spencer moved his cattle to the high country pastures for summer grazing, huts were constructed to shelter the stockmen on the lonely heights. Then, in 1859, gold was discovered at Kiandra and there was a second wave of shelter building as small settlements sprang up near each new gold discovery.

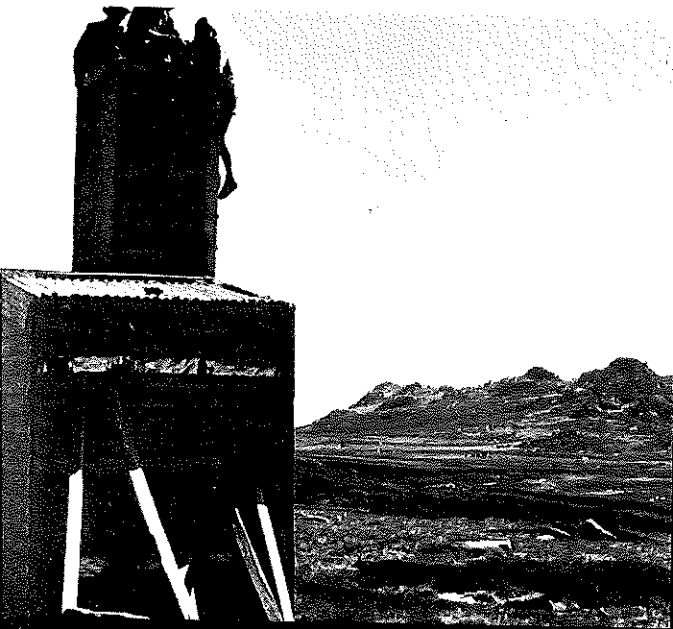
The surviving huts of the pioneer era are characterised by hand-cut boards, rough-sawn logs or planks, and shingled roofs. The walls are lined with calico or old newspapers, and, although most are built in sheltered locations, they all have large open fireplaces.

The Coolamine Homestead was built in the 1880s in the northern region of the mountains. Its three main buildings have high pitched roofs, it has an interlocking-log cheese house, and an unusual double-seater outhouse. What extravagance! The importance of these buildings has been acknowledged, as Coolamine is the only high country building to be registered with the National Estate. Unfortunately, some bushwalkers are destroying the buildings, and others like them, by using the original timbers for firewood — our heritage is going up in smoke!

In the far south, near the Victorian border, is the historic Tin Mine complex of huts, built by miners extracting tin from the nearby river gravels. Charlie Carter, a recluse, lived there until 1952 when, too old to travel out for supplies, he died. The hut has since been left to the ravages of nature, though receiving some care from the bushwalkers and horsemen who do basic maintenance.

The Snowy Mountain Scheme

The second important influence was the Snowy Mountains Scheme for which a number of buildings were erected during the 50s and 60s. Most were constructed to shelter service personnel, such as linesmen, hydrographers, and soil conservationists, and because they had to be close to outstanding



Cootapatamba Hut: in a fragile area, no historic value, substantial visual impact, and the only shelter in a dangerous weather area. To go.



Whites River Hut: Well, that's the site, but even with the huts, this is how most visitors prefer to spend the night in decent weather.

geographical features, they are often in exposed regions. Usually of faded red weather-board, they are often equipped with bunks and furniture, and have a pot-bellied stove rather than an open fireplace. Some, such as the Schlink "Hilton", are roomy and comfortable, while others, like Lake Cootapatamba, are so small that when two people are inside, conditions are cramped. An interesting feature of Lake Cootapatamba Hut is the two-metre-high entrance tower that rises above the roof, to be used when deep snow blocks the lower doorway.

Tourism

The memorials to tourism are the latest additions, and tend to be built around the Main Range where most skiers congregate. Included in this category is Seamans Hut, which was built as a memorial to two young men who died in a blizzard near the site. It is a basic survival shelter with bunks and a pot-bellied stove and, being near the Kosciusko Road, is the best-known of all huts.

Some of the huts in this group, like Illawong, are well appointed, and Albina Lodge is so relatively luxurious it is often overcrowded.

Perhaps the greatest memorial to the folly of tourism is the Stilwell Restaurant, perched high on a rocky crag above Charlotte's Pass. This impressive structure was built as a half-way house for the world's longest chairlift, which ran from the Crackenback River (Thredbo) to the Chalet. It has been abandoned for over 10 years now, as its operation repeatedly ran into trouble with bad weather. A publicity sheet of the time states, "On one memorable occasion a few seasons back, the snow on some of the alpine plateaus was nearly 50 feet deep, and three times that season many of the lift towers were completely buried, and much difficulty and work was entailed in

locating them and digging them out." It's a long time since skiers have experienced so much snow on the ranges.

The restaurant is all that remains now, the towers and platforms needed for the 75 minute (one way) trip have been dismantled. The building is slowly being ravaged by the elements and vandals. Half the roof has blown off and will allow the snow and rain in. The ceilings will collapse, and this once grand structure may go the way of so many of the huts in the past.

The future

But ruins can be found throughout the region. Spencers Hut near Coolamine Caves is on its last legs, Farm Ridge Hut is just a heap of rotting wood and a chimney, while the only remaining evidence of Formans Hut is the chimney. The once popular Alpine Hut was accidentally burnt down late in 1979, and the gold huts that once dotted the Nine Mile Diggings are no more.

What, then, is the future of the remaining huts? Will the work of bushfires, weather, and vandals return the region to its natural state? Will we gradually lose our high country shelters?

It seems not, for an organisation has emerged, just in time, that is dedicated to preserving and maintaining the huts. The Kosciusko Huts Association has a wide influence, and has enlisted dozens of bushwalking, scouting, skiing and outdoors groups to act as caretakers, each group taking responsibility for a particular hut.

If the huts are to have a safe future, some decisions may have to be made about who uses them, and for what purposes. They cannot now be booked, and if a hut is full when you arrive and the occupants cannot be persuaded to let you in, you'll have to camp outside. Travellers must be equipped to camp in all seasons, and cannot afford to venture into the mountains ill-prepared for camping, simply because they intend to stay

in a particular hut. If overcrowding becomes a regular problem, some booking procedures may have to be enforced.

Many bushwalkers shun the huts in good weather, as an open grassy campsite by a running creek has advantages the confines of a hut cannot provide. Yet when the clouds roll in from the west, and the chill air has a feeling of dread about it, the shelter of a hut is sought. Such weather can close in at any time of the year — only a few days before Christmas last year a summer blizzard confined many groups to the huts for two days, and 100 mm of snow was deposited on the Main Range. It was truly a white Christmas.

Huts can cause numerous problems apart from enticing ill-prepared parties to venture further than they should. Firewood soon becomes scarce around a hut, and if it's below the tree-line, living trees may often be chopped down. They also attract rubbish, such as empty tins and even packets of food left by well-intentioned people. Some have become so filthy with food scraps and rubbish they have been known to cause illness. While some people argue it is better to congregate rubbish at a few hut sites than to have it spread throughout the mountains, the best idea of all is to carry your rubbish out with you.

Huts can perform vital roles, especially as starting places and bases for search and rescues. Lost or overdue groups will often be found sheltering in a hut.

So there are points for and against the continued existence of high country huts. Evidence supporting both sides has been produced in many forms, but the most convincing evidence of all can only be experience.

A crackling fire, hot food and drink, good company, and the prospect of a warm and comfortable night's sleep as the icy darkness descends outside are pleasures that are difficult to describe.