



The proposed Mt Wellington cable car and environmental contrast

Paul E. Smith

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A fundamental part of the case against cable cars on kunanyi/Mt Wellington has been overlooked. Or perhaps some of those opposing this development have the idea in their minds, but have not clearly expressed it. If that is the case, it is a pity, because as well as being basic to the case against the cable car, the same idea is also crucial in arguments for wilderness, for national parks, for wildlife, for protecting endemic vegetation, for the future of tourism and for protecting and enhancing our lifestyle and culture.

Martin Hawes, Grant Dixon and Chris Bell mention this idea in their beautifully produced book, [*Refining the Definition of Wilderness*](#). It is that contrast in our environment stimulate us and do much for our quality of life. As wilderness makes a striking contrast with the developed places we spend most of our lives in, then its existence makes powerful contributions to our lives. In my view however, Hawes, Dixon and Bell underplay its significance, as they only mention it in passing (on their page 12). If a large part of the value of wilderness to people comes from the contrast it makes with more or less developed regions, then the stronger that contrast the more valuable it will be. As very large wildernesses are wilder than smaller ones they will make stronger contrasts, so the idea that contrast is important explains the emphasis that environmentalists place on protecting as much wilderness as possible. It means that rather than being greedy they are just trying to do a good job.

Applied to kunanyi, which is not wild enough to be real wilderness, this idea is that the mountain's appeal to people is largely created by the contrast its wild character makes with the humanity-dominated character of the city below. If this concept is substantially true, then any erosion of the wild character of the mountain, such as constructing more buildings, roads and other infrastructure such as a cable car, would lessen the remnant wild contrast it still manages to make with the city and suburbs, making it seem less special. Looking to the distant future, if Hobart and its suburbs expanded all over the mountain and across its summit, complete with penthouses and elevators bolted onto the Organ Pipes, nobody could make an aesthetic objection to a cable car. There would be no contrast for it to destroy.

This line of thought raises the question: Do we want to make the mountain less special or more special? As noted, installing a cable car would make it less special, whereas doing the opposite and removing the towers and buildings from its summit would make it wilder and thus more special by increasing its contrast with the city and suburbs. We could further enhance this

contrast by blocking and re-vegetating the Pinnacle Road from, say the Springs upwards, to make it even wilder.

Without getting into the obvious arguments about access for those who can't or don't want to walk up the mountain, let's consider the contrast issue a little further. During the Great Depression, when Premier Ogilvy had the Pinnacle Road constructed (partly to provide employment) it was reviled by some, who called it 'Ogilvy's Scar'. Even without considering its visual disruption, the easy access provided by the road reduced the wild character of the mountain, making it seem less mysterious, less pristine and less special in its now muted contrast with the town below. So the road made subsequent developments on the mountain seem less jarring to aesthetic sensibilities than its construction had been. Television towers, associated buildings and visitor facilities were added with little fuss. With the wild character of the mountain now virtually demolished, what's so special about it that a cable car will damage? This process of environmental degradation, a process of eroding contrast, is a *real* slippery slope: The further one goes, the more difficult it is to see why we should stop; and it is even more obscure that we should restore the contrast that has been lost and forgotten.

This idea of the importance of contrast to people is not new. It has long been observed that 'variety is the spice of life'. But around the beginning of this century, the eminent Israeli psychologist Professor Shalom Schwartz identified it as prominent among human 'motivational values'. His surveys of these values have now been carried out in more than 60 countries and they show that, irrespective of culture, ethnicity, gender, economic class and other differences, all humans have the same motivating values. These arise in opposing pairs and a major one of these is the human need for *change* versus the need for *stability*. Different individuals need a different balance between change and stability, but everyone needs some of both. Our need for change means that contrasts fascinate and stimulate us, although too much can be confusing, ugly or frightening. What is 'too much' for one person may be rather 'ho hum' for another. The idea that *some* contrast is vital for everyone indicates that we should cultivate an environment for humanity that gives each person the freedom to easily find the strengths and types of contrast they want.

Applying this to the cable car controversy, we might suppose that among those with no vested interests, the people in favour of this development need less contrast than the (possibly more romantic) people who oppose it. So should the contrast in our world be dumbed down to suit those who don't need much of it?

Of course there is another aspect of this controversy that is probably just as fundamental as the need for contrast: Some people are really keen on economic growth, while others aren't. But the question of who is right here is another story, one that shows that the desire for growth is driven by a shortsighted view of what it does for us. To read that one, search for my article '[The Missing Argument...](#)' in the *Tasmanian Times* (9 July, 2018).

Paul E. Smith is a University Associate at the University of Tasmania, in the School of Technology, Environments and Design (Discipline of Geography and Spatial Sciences), where he researches wilderness and political science. He published [Rescuing Democracy](#) in 2016. He is the ex-forester former Greens leader Bob Brown mentions as persuading him to come on a trip down the Franklin River in 1976. They rafted it again in 1977 with three others to make a movie of the river to help the campaign to save it.