

## WILDERNESS AND THE FUTURE

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### INTRODUCTION

In April, 1851, giving a lecture in Concord, Massachusetts, the practical philosopher Henry David Thoreau put the case for 'Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness', crystallising his message near the end with these famous words – 'in Wildness is the preservation of the World' (R. Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*).

What Thoreau was talking about was the way he believed wildness could provide balance in the lives of a people whose environments were increasingly being affected by the unrelenting march of progress. By tapping the wildness which he believed was within us all, he said it could provide relief from the industrial civilisation and its urban and rural landscapes. Having vehemently argued how important wildness was to civilisation Thoreau urged its protection in parks and preserves for *inspiration and our true recreation*.

A century and a half later the need for the balancing role of wildness in our lives in the sense argued by Thoreau is greater than ever, and in wilderness, as he himself acknowledged, we can experience wildness in its fullest sense. But, in our current situation of a world where the process of environmental modification threatens to destroy our ecological life support systems, has wilderness even more to offer?

The burgeoning industrial society from which Thoreau suggested we should seek relief through visits to wilderness has reached a serious stage in terms of its impact on the physical environment, the impoverishment of the social environment of many and our prospects for survival. Can wilderness now play a wider role in preserving humanity by helping to fundamentally change its values and goals?

The matter is urgent because our dominant policies and institutions including trade are based on the premise of endless growth in population and consumption and because it is indisputable that the progressive deterioration of the environment is the product of this. Growth has been viewed as a means to the end of improved living conditions but it appears to have become an end in itself with there being zero consideration of the need for change by those in power and with the wider community being generally acquiescent about the broad directions being followed.

We now have little time in which to make an orderly transition to a society in which the aim of growth is replaced by the aim of achieving harmony with the Earth and with each other.

The responsibility for initiating a movement for change rests unequivocally with conservationists because they are the members of the community with the self chosen role of protecting our future. Much of the experience of conservationists to date has been in protecting wild places against the growth society's demands for land and materials by means of the types of reserves recommended by Thoreau. This essay examines how the values and lessons intrinsic to protected areas, and in particular to wilderness reserves, can play a part in the move to a non-growth, steady state society.

To see how this can be done we first need to examine in more detail the environmental crisis, the current position of the conservation movement, including that part of it that is concerned with protected areas, and what a steady state society could be like.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

The heart of the matter is the relationship which humans have with their environment. Far from it being one issue among many this relationship is the most fundamental factor in our future, essential to every aspect of our being. For many decades now, beginning with George Perkins Marsh and his seminal work, *Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action* (1864), people who care about the future have been warning about the progressive deterioration of the global environment and of the need to act sooner rather than later. The nature of the degradation in terms of the condition of oceans, seas, land cover, fresh water, soil, wildlife, climate and human health are widely known. It does not take much imagination to relate these to the ever-increasing demands being made by growing populations on a finite world and to recognise that if humans continue to demand more and more things can only get worse until a state of global environmental collapse is reached.

Society has been expansionist in nature for thousands of years but the last two to three hundred years of the industrial revolution have seen the process speeded up. The pace continued to quicken even after all new lands were settled and brought into the web of global trade. Continued acquisitive expansion, up to and including the present, was achieved through the intensification of the use of nearly all land and resources. In 1851, when Thoreau gave his Concord lecture, the World's population was about 1.3 billion. Some one hundred years later, in 1950, it had increased to 2.5 billion. Today, a mere 50 years further on, it has increased massively to over 6 billion (6.5 billion in 2006), half of whom live in urban areas. The UN medium forecast for 2050 is 8.9 billion.

As the population and the per capita consumption of resources continues to grow the load on the Earth's resources gets ever closer to breaking point.

Expansion of Empires and economic colonisation are of course not new things but it is important to realise that they have been facilitated not just by the superiority of technology enjoyed by some nations but by a superiority of attitude - the invader's self justification for his actions in terms of belief in his inherent superiority. Today, although not as commonly articulated, this attitude remains a salient factor in the behaviour of dominant nations, groups and individuals. We see it in moves aimed at securing access to dwindling resources and maintenance of dominance in terms of what is referred to as the 'national interest', as the reason behind attempts to impose cultural uniformity within nations, as justification for inequality of income between rich and poor and in the way self interest often acts as a barrier to sharing. As resources become scarcer, unless there is a major change in values which includes a re-evaluation of the importance of equity, we can expect this factor to play an even more important role.

The prognosis is bleak because there is no sign coming from the World's most powerful nations that they espouse anything other than the objective of continuing

economic growth. The commitment to growth is absolute. It is a vision not of growth for a few decades more until circumstances change but of endless growth, with no debate, only the occasional bald assertion that ending growth would spell dire consequences for living standards and the aim of abolishing poverty and that environmental protection needs growth.

The obstacles to a change in this obsession with growth are enormous, not least because of the iron grip of the institutions set up to achieve this goal. These include the overwhelming amount of power of the capitalist corporations, the arrangements for facilitating international trade and the backup arrangements for applying these goals in the form of massive military machines.

An insight into the policy position of major industrial nations and their absolute commitment to growth in early 2006 was provided by statements made at the Conference of the Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate (AP-6) which was held in Sydney in January, 2006. The six nations in the Conference (USA, Japan, China, India, South Korea and Australia) account for half the World's population, domestic product, energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. The group made it clear that there would be no reduction in their fossil fuel use because their goal, according to a Conference spokesperson, was *sustained development*. The Australian Prime Minister, John Howard told the Conference that 'the idea that we can address climate change matters successfully at the expense of economic growth is not only unrealistic but unacceptable'. The clear implication of this is that endless growth is considered realistic.

President George W. Bush's 2006 State of the Union Address provides a window on the current policy of the World's most powerful nation, whose population whilst constituting only 4.5 per cent of the World's total consumes 22.2 per cent of its energy resources. Echoing previous presidential calls in the 1970s and Bush's own addresses of the previous four years, the 2006 address called for a reduction in US reliance on oil from the Middle East and the development of alternative energy sources including ethanol. It criticised America's "addiction to oil" but made no reference to the root cause of this - its addiction to growth. Continued growth for the world's leading nations is non negotiable.

The mantra of the rapidly developing nations of China and India with a third of the world's population and rapidly growing consumption of energy is no different from that of the developed nations of USA, Japan and Europe - namely, we have to have growth for prosperity and for this we need an increased amount of energy even if it is from fossil fuels.

In Australia, as elsewhere, because of the international nature of trade, we also see stress placed on the need for continued growth to assure competitiveness, jobs and investment. Powerful business groups everywhere have growth as their primary concern and enjoy a close partnership relationship with government. They are united in their efforts to have the last remaining barriers to international trade removed. The Business Council of Australia for instance is part of an international group known as World Business Leaders for Growth which has this as a major objective.

The rapid expansion of the World's population of the last few hundred years has of course been made possible by the ever increasing exploitation of the fossil fuels of coal, oil, and gas. These are finite resources which once used up are effectively gone forever. The determination to keep on growing flies in the face of the fact that these resources are rapidly running out.

Faced with two major problems which can be largely ignored but not hidden - the depletion of the existing major energy resources and the adverse impacts of growth on the environment - it is instructive to examine what solutions are professed by the growth addicts. In both cases, where they do make an appearance in policy, the answers are sought in putting faith in human ingenuity in the form of technological innovation. Other energy sources can be found it is argued, usage can be made more efficient and the impacts can be reduced by such measures as the geosequestration of carbon dioxide emissions from power stations. Cutting back on growth never ever makes an appearance in the list of solutions.

While the expansionary society's preferred adjustments have the potential to limit certain impacts, such as the greenhouse effect of fossil fuel emissions, it seems unlikely that in the context of a policy of continuing growth of all energy sources they will do anything other than slow the rate of development of these impacts. Possibly even more important though are the downsides of such efforts. By extending the life of the growth society, these measures are likely on balance to have an overall negative effect. This is because most of the adverse environmental effects of increased populations and higher consumption rates will continue to escalate even if, for instance, the climate change threat is moderated. The other impacts even include adverse effects on climate resulting from changes in land use, particularly deforestation. Indeed the notion that the only major environmental problem is that of human induced climate change resulting from fossil fuel usage itself carries with it the danger of blinding people to the wider environmental problems caused by the obsession with growth.

The most important facts of our time are: first, that in a society dependant on endless growth we have a dead end way of life, and second, that no thought is being given by policy makers to any other way. This means that if there is to be any hope for the future there needs to be a progressive movement for a non growth or steady state society. For success it will require both leadership and popular support. What chance is there then that such leadership can be provided by our future protectors - the conservation movement?

## THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

The revolutionary nature of the changes required confronts the conservation movement with its greatest ever challenge. The first question to be asked then is how well equipped is it for this enormous task in terms of experience and philosophical orientation?

Analysing the broad history of the movement it is clear that most of it's efforts over the last 150 years have been concerned with defending the different parts of the environment against the pressures brought to bear by the expanding industrial and urban society. There have been two ways of doing this: first, by trying to limit an

effect when it threatens; and second, by endeavouring to anticipate and avoid problems, by gaining acceptance of a wide range of environmental standards, applied through regulation, planning and technological innovation. Faith in technology and science has long been a part of the hopeful attitude of conservationists as well as growth oriented governments.

These efforts, concerned with such things as protecting catchments, soil, water, air, fish populations and so on, have targeted the symptoms of our growth oriented way of life not the cause. The movement has also helped document the ongoing environmental deterioration and through education alerted the public to the changes, the threats and to the solutions they have developed in the form of individual measures. Today, the conservation movement, government and business, all tend to describe these as efforts to achieve sustainability.

There appears throughout to have been some underlying belief on the part of the conservation movement that if these symptom-oriented measures are of a high enough standard and win enough acceptance their combined effect will be to bring an end to environmental deterioration. If symptoms work can do little more than slow down growth, the small victories will prove temporary, mown down eventually by growth, after providing a period of false hope. In other words, it can be argued, that by increasing the lifespan of the growth society (and postponing fundamental change), most of the work of conservationists has been counterproductive; creating an illusion that the impossible is possible.

There has been one major exception to the movement's neglect of the causes of environmental degradation. This has been its concern with overpopulation. Although not very successful in their advocacy, groups like the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) have at times, strongly put the case for control and even reduction in national and global population. However, for over a decade the ACF has been largely silent on the matter in a situation where most federal and state Governments have supported rapid population growth. As the main voluntary conservation group in Australia operating at the national level and dealing with nearly all environmental issues and being well placed to provide group and community leadership, how the ACF is dealing with the broad role options is indicative of the state of the environment movement in Australia and elsewhere.

In its one other foray into tackling causation the ACF a decade ago decided to extend its role over the following 30 years to deal with causes as well as symptoms. What was envisaged was that the Foundation, acting as a catalyst, with the bulk of the work being done at the grass roots level, would try to bring about changes in the core values and behaviour of society, from a growth ideology to one which makes the maintenance and restoration of environmental quality the primary goal. The central premise of the move was that the effort would involve 'replacement of a belief in economic growth with one which sees virtue in stability' (*Role of ACF Over the Next 30 Years*, Report of Task Force 2025, August, 1996).

Ten years later the ACF has yet to act on this ground breaking role decision. A recent move to kick start the implementation of the policy by first developing for discussion with the Foundation's members an draft outline of what a steady state society could be like was decisively rejected by the ACF Council (the ACF's governing body). The

ACF Council like most conservation bodies, has little experience of anything other than symptoms work and the basic attitude of the majority of the Councillors about the prospect for change is defeatist, believing, somewhat in the manner of John Howard that such an approach is 'unrealistic'.

While the reasons for this vary with the individual there is little doubt that it involves a mix which includes belief in the ultimate success of symptom oriented work under the banner of achieving sustainability and a lack of confidence in the movement's ability to initiate the move in favour of a steady state society. It is likely that a substantial number would feel uncomfortable working outside the square of symptoms oriented work.

Since the endless growth way of life can only end in disaster and symptoms type work has the effect of extending its lifespan and hence the overall damage caused, there is no realistic option for regaining a healthy planet other than starting the journey down the path to a steady state society. While this history of prevarication is a gloomy one and indicates difficulties to be overcome at the heart of the movement there are fortunately some glimmers of hope in another important aspect of the work of environmentalists and here I return to the movement for protected areas initiated by Thoreau and others in the nineteenth century.

## THE PROTECTED AREAS MOVEMENT

There are many parts of the world that have to a considerable extent been quarantined from the direct environmental effects of the growth society. These are the parks, nature reserves, wilderness areas and other reserves in which the main objective is to conserve the natural state. Although the first of these (the state park in California's Yosemite Valley) was established only 142 years ago, by 2003 there were 9,914 reserves in the most highly protected categories totalling 6,462,552 square kilometres. They covered 4.4 per cent of the Earth's land surface, an area twice the size of India. 1,302 of these reserves were wilderness areas with a combined area of 1,015,512 square kilometres (*2003 United Nations List of Protected Areas*). If growth can be held at bay over substantial areas why should that not help conservationists to gain the nerve to tackle the task of replacing the growth ideology generally?

In Australia, as elsewhere, the part of the organised environment movement concerned with national parks, nature reserves and wilderness reserves is both the oldest and the most flourishing part. The first national park associations were formed at the beginning of the last century and in New South Wales the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council, formed in 1932, was the World's first voluntary group to lobby for wilderness protection.

Most of the reserves have been established on public land for the combined purpose of saving the land against other land uses and providing for healthy recreation in a natural setting. This was the origin of The National Park south of Sydney, the first conservation area in the World to be officially given the name of national park (set aside for this purpose in April, 1879, seven years after the establishment of Yellowstone Public Park and fifteen years after Yosemite). The land involved had earlier been reserved for possible use for the route of a railway running south to Wollongong. There was a threat of coal mining gradually moving northwards into the

area proposed for the Park. Above all though there was a view that this was a place, with railway access, that would be excellent for recreation in healthy surroundings at a time when disease was closely associated with the miasmatic conditions of inner city living.

The World's first protected wilderness area was established when the US Forest Service reserved a part of the Gila National Forest, in New Mexico for this purpose in 1924. Australia's first was the Tallowa Primitive Reserve in the Shoalhaven River area set aside in March, 1934.

Although there were a few places, such as in Tasmania, where in the early years alien activities such as logging were allowed in parks to raise funds for management and as in the Victorian Alps where grazing licences persisted until 2006, in general such reserves were protected against land uses concerned with commodity production. In one fell swoop, like churches and religion, national parks and similar reserves, had made tangible the belief that there are some values that were more important than production.

A continental scale example of putting limits to resource exploitation in the name of nature protection was the successful 1980s campaign to have Antarctica set aside as a reserve in which mineral activity of any kind (including prospecting and exploration) would be indefinitely banned. The notion of exploiting the continent's mineral resources had 'taken off' in the early 1970s as a result of a sudden concern about oil supplies running out (the OPEC Oil Scare of 1973). It was not until the 1991 Madrid Protocol (which came into force in 1998) that the proposal was defeated and then only because conservation groups had persuaded the Governments of Australia and France, as Antarctic Treaty Consultative Parties, to exercise a veto provision in the treaty. The argument which proved convincing was that Antarctica would be better preserved as wilderness, but this had to be forcefully expressed. As a result, giving it positive form, the continent received international recognition as a 'Natural Reserve – Devoted to Peace and Science' and a management regime to match.

A similar conflict exists today near the opposite polar region with on-going proposals to drill in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. These have so far been resisted. Access to such resources may have the potential to extend the supply for a short period but as they become scarcer and nations become more desperate the natural reaction of the growth society is to figuratively 'scrape the barrel' just to keep going. That is why 'saying no' is so important. Are these protective actions the potential seeds for the move to a steady state?

Further lessons to be learnt from protected areas can be derived from a study of the nature of the opposition to them once they have been established. Many may have been considered to be residual areas at the time of reservation but an ever expanding society tends to change its mind. An insight into the mindset of the opponents was provided in 2005 when the New South Wales Premier Bob Carr announced his retirement from politics.

Carr had presided over a strong policy of protected area extension in New South Wales first as Environment Minister (including the overseeing of the passage of the 1987 Wilderness Act) and later as Premier. In an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*

with the heading 'Carr's Green Legacy is a Black Mark', columnist Michael Duffy (*SMH* 30/7/05) set out the charges against him. The problem was, said Duffy, that this had locked up the land which needed people to manage it, and had caused immense suffering to country people. Ignoring the fact that fire is a natural part of the forest environment, and that the parks are relatively weed free, Duffy described them as 'a sort of toxic ecological volcano spewing out kangaroos, weeds, seeds and feral animals'.

To Duffy the existence of the parks is a moral affront to the values he holds and shares with big business and business oriented politicians. Carr's black mark was that he dared to see virtue in an aspect of conservation which went against the grain of making land and resources available for the ever expanding appetite of a growth society. We can expect a much greater opposition from these quarters to the promotion of a steady state society.

Of course, as with the other conservation activities which have sought to deal with the symptoms of the growth society, it could be argued that protected areas act as a kind of temporary safety valve, giving us a false sense that things are alright by making us feel good about a way of life which in the long run is fatally flawed and which we know in our hearts is unsustainable. However, it is clear that to a large extent the motives for establishing national parks have been more proactive than reactive. Perhaps, then we can learn the lessons inherent in the protected areas and use their special qualities as a bridge to a sustainable future.

The sense of pessimism which tends to act as a deterrent to fundamental action today is not new. In the late 1960s Sir Macfarlane Burnet voiced the opinion that as the World population explosion was uncontrollable we must expect every acre of land capable of producing food to be used, crowding out national parks, nature reserves and the enjoyment of wildlife (quoted by Francis Ratcliffe, in 'Conservation and Australia', *The Australian Quarterly*, March 1968). Not only has this not happened but around the World protected areas of all kinds have more than quadrupled in extent. This fact alone gives some hope that with a sufficiently positive outlook the conservationist can overcome major obstacles.

It is also comforting to know that the question of a wider role for protected areas has been the subject of previous scrutiny although it seems to have been at its most intense in the questioning era of the early 1970s. For instance in 1972 at the Second World Conference on National Parks, detecting what he saw as a move of public concern from parks to pollution and overpopulation, Max Nicholson of the British Nature Conservancy asked whether the national parks movement was destined to a subordinate role, saying 'the signs of this were plentiful unless a vigorous reappraisal was carried out'. (Nicholson, E.M (1972), 'What is Wrong with the National Park Movement', *Proceedings of Second World Conference on National Parks*, IUCN Switzerland).

Nicholson's main concern was for the future of the parks but in seeing an extended role for them he surely hit the nail squarely on the head. National parks, he said, 'must justify their existence not as ends in themselves but as essential elements in a new, much more environmentally conscious society'. The solution said Nicholson, was that if the national parks movement 'can play a leading part in this much more significant

movement to reconcile man with his environment, its future can be looked forward to with confidence’.

Other speakers at the Conference, including Nathaniel Reed of the Department of the Interior and Don Aldridge of the Scottish Countryside Commission, delivered a similar message and made practical suggestions about how the parks could contribute to an understanding of the World, the promotion of a diversity-based ethic and the explanation of man's global predicament. Over thirty years on, a renewal of the willingness to face up to the truth of the human predicament and examine fresh ideas, so evident in the early 1970s, is surely well overdue.

## THE GOAL OF A STEADY STATE SOCIETY

Since the days of the growth society, in the sense of its reliance on the ever expanding consumption of materials are numbered one way or another, it is imperative that we start giving some serious thought to the objective of a stable or steady state society, if only to help us work out what we would need to do to get there. This will inform and help coordinate the steps which need to be taken to move from a growth to a stable society.

If we are going to have any chance of achieving the transition it is important that a number of points are made crystal clear to the people of the world who will have the job of wresting their future from the deeply embedded institutions of growth. The most obvious need is to create in the community an understanding that society's 11,000 years of expansion will need to come to an end sooner or later because there are limits to the amount of net primary productivity available. For those who argue for hanging on a bit longer with the growth society, the answer is the sooner we make the change the better because the choice is between a more or less orderly transition versus an attempt to pick up the pieces in a situation of global collapse.

The third point worth stressing is that while the difficulties of overcoming all the obstacles facing those who work for change are enormous the rewards in terms of the new way of life, stressing intra and intergenerational equity and creativity over acquisition of material wealth and power and replacing force dependant security with environmental security, are enormous. It may be an end of growth in consumption but it will be the beginning of a far more creative period and a better way of life a point made by John Stuart Mill three years before Thoreau's 'wildness' statement. Mill wrote that in the steady state 'there would be much more likelihood of being improved when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on' (*Principles of Political Economy*, 1848).

It is crucial also that we have faith in ourselves, that we believe that a planned change (as distinct from waiting for the collapse) is possible. Comprehension of this and the optimistic outlook it needs to generate are the vital prerequisites for action by the conservation movement. Doubters will argue that even if we in Australia might look favourably on such a change what help will that be when the problem is clearly global in scope? The answer to this springs from the precondition I have mentioned of the need for a positive outlook. Once we have this we can see that Australia in terms of its potential to lead through ideas and resources is the best placed nation in the world to play a major role in helping to bring about this revolution. But, of course, it is a

movement which will need to develop and win majority community support in every nation.

US Senator Al Gore in his *Earth in Balance* called for a 'Global Marshall Plan' 'to right the balance of the earth'. Why should Australia not play a leading role in this? The challenge may be the greatest ever but our past achievements show that where there is a will a way can be found. Finally, there is a need for optimism to be coupled with greater imagination concerning the necessary changes. Instead of saying about any proposal 'I just cannot see that happening', 'It is too extreme', 'It is utopian', and, 'human nature can only change so much', we need to say 'how can that be done?' and recognise that the changes will be phased in as part of a much wider programme in which the various steps are linked and achieved over several decades. We need faith in our ability to overcome all the obstacles. Without it the growth way of life will continue to the detriment of all.

Turning to the question of what the steady state society will be like the best way of understanding the nature of the change is that in fundamental ways it will be very different to our current way of life. Instead of treating the physical environment primarily as an endless source of materials to be used up, the new relationship will see us living on the environment's natural flows. It will be a partnership arrangement in which we give the highest priority to maintaining harmony with the environment. As Al Gore put it 'the ecological perspective ....cannot treat the earth as something separate from human civilisation, we are part of the whole too and looking at it ultimately means looking at ourselves'. Since the environment will be seen to include the social environment it will include harmony with each other, with other living things and with the dynamic physical environment.

No longer relying on the using up of natural capital, in the steady state society we will obtain the materials for food, shelter and travel from 'the natural interest' in the form of natural processes in a manner which minimises disturbance and recognises the dependencies and linkages in natural ecosystems and the inevitability of natural change in climate, earth movements, erosion, and living things.

Our spiritual relationship with the other components of the environment will become very important in everyone's lives. There will be a reverence for life and a feeling of kinship with the earth as well as with other people, our ancestors and future generations. We will view the earth as something we belong to, not the other way round. We will see ourselves as having particularly close links with the places where we live and work. We will gain our sense of well being from the contribution we make to the environment including our communities and from creative activities. We will now measure progress in these terms not in the accumulation of material possessions and power over others.

One of the main features of the steady state society will be the need for communities to be in balance with the resources sustainably available in the places where they live (that is with the local carrying capacity). Once the steady state has been achieved international trade in commodities will largely disappear. Overall populations will be much smaller than the fossil fuel boosted six and a half billion people of today. A reduced proportion will live in urban areas and cities will be considerably smaller. Average journeys will be shorter.

As far as energy is concerned the steady state society will derive this from natural flows (notably those of the sun, wind, tides, waves, and thermal). Water plays a key role in life and in the steady state society it will be treated with the same respect as other parts of the environment. Any activities such as storage and withdrawal will be done in such a manner that the needs of the other parts of the environment including natural processes and other living things are not adversely affected.

## HOW WILDERNESS CAN HELP

There are a myriad of ways wilderness can help lead us to the goal of a stable environmental relationship. Here I can only outline them. They include contributions relating to inspiration, recreation, spiritual fulfilment, education, science and environmental stability. Although one can categorise them in this way the truth is that they are closely interwoven. That there are so many ways is not surprising given the fact that wilderness areas are completely unlike the rest of the world in terms of both land use and the experience gained by those who visit them. Originally the word 'wilderness' was used for wasteland in the sense of useless country. The gradual change in the way such country was regarded from negative to positive is itself an indication of a major change in how the people of the West view the environment, leading up to their current potential of being islands of hope for the future as a whole.

### Inspiration and Confidence Building

Wilderness areas are anti-growth. They are protected against being used as a source of commodities and visits and they are out of bounds to vehicular tourism. The wilderness movement was and is revolutionary. It said 'Stop, enough is enough, these areas have something distinctive to offer'. The move to a steady state society also requires a revolution to occur if we are to end expansion and settle down at last to enjoy what the environment has to offer.

Whereas in most of its other efforts the environment movement has been on the defensive, trying to limit damage to resources, living places and natural systems, in the case of wilderness conservation there was not just defensiveness but the new idea that here was something that could meet the non material needs of humans, providing both enjoyment and spiritual fulfilment. What is more the effort was successful. So what better example is there, what greater boost to confidence to those embarking on the journey of changing our relationship with the environment from one of using it up, to one of living with it than the achievement of wilderness protection?

If we examine the history of wilderness conservation we will see a number of ingredients relevant to the march to a steady state society. First, the initiators of the movement had a strong feeling that what that were doing was good for the whole community and environment. They also had confidence that they could achieve their goals. Then, with full understanding of the difficulties, they worked intelligently for their ideal and did not compromise it regardless of the pressure on them to do so. Finally, they never gave up! Summing up, their formula was one of VISION plus FAITH plus INTELLIGENT CAMPAIGNING plus PERSISTENCE, all relevant to the much bigger task which confronts the movement now.

Of course these lessons from the history of the wilderness movement will also need to help motivate the ongoing effort to expand the wilderness systems because, of course, the contribution wilderness can make to the drive to replace growth with a stable society will partly depend upon how dynamic these systems themselves are. We cannot afford to be satisfied with what we have today. The benefits will be mutual, in a steady state society wilderness will be appreciated more than ever, meaning also that it will be more secure than ever.

The fight for extended wilderness systems is therefore a part of the move to a steady state society. The contribution it can make will of course depend not only on its extent but on the number of people who, one way or another, are inspired by it.

Wilderness protection was one of the first blows to the myth of the benefits of endless growth. It teaches us that there are alternatives; that we can choose our destiny. It is also important to note that wilderness is a community asset resulting from community action of the type which is going to be vital in the struggle for the steady state society. We must never forget that wilderness protection has its beginnings in the hearts and minds of people who dared to stand against the tide; not the tide on the edge of the ocean but the tide of humanity pressing down a busy street - one inexorable, the other not.

#### Re-creation, Education and Spiritual Fulfilment

The move to a steady state society will require a very large change in values, from a desire to accumulate more and more to a satisfaction with being a part of the environment, from pursuit of individual interests to giving precedence to the community interest, to mention just two. The great contrast in values which wilderness already provides with the rest of the world can help prepare the way. In the steady state society we will respect the other parts of the environment, we fail to do this in wilderness at our peril. A visit to wilderness is a humbling experience. It already teaches respect for all parts of the environment and can help us move away from the feelings of superiority which affect so many of our current relationships.

Philosophers like Emerson and Thoreau and poets like Wordsworth long ago wrote about the spiritual truths to be found in nature. Let nature be your teacher.

One impulse from a vernal wood  
May teach you more of man,  
Of moral evil and of good,  
Than all the sages can.

counselled Wordsworth (*The Tables Turned*, 1798).

John Muir, the great publicist of the benefits of wilderness, wrote often about the capacity of wilderness to bring perspective into people's lives. His famous 'Climb the mountains and get their good tidings could well have been his lifelong motto'. The sentiment was echoed by historian Professor Manning Clark at a public meeting in Hobart in June, 1980. Speaking about the threats to the South West he urged Australians to:

keep this treasure and hand it on to prosperity so that those who come after will learn about beauty, about awe, about wonder, because it is in the southwest of Tasmania that you will have the chance to solve the mystery at the heart of things.

These benefits are of course most fully experienced by those who spend time in the wilderness. This is not surprising given the relatively short time which has elapsed since humans left the wild. As Thoreau said, when we go to the wilderness we are '*going home*'. In the wilderness, picking our way through trackless country, fully exposed to weather, the cycle of the seasons, the daily life of the other non human inhabitants, and unimpeded natural processes, we get a unique insight into the basic fabric of our Earth, or, as Thoreau described it into 'the raw materials of life'.

It is this reality-based perspective, away from the distractions of civilisation, which can also help us discard our superior attitude, not just to nature but to other human beings.

Part of the appeal of wilderness is the opportunities it offers for the enjoyment of solitude and this experience also has much to give to others. As John Stuart Mill put it:

solitude in the presence of natural beauty and grandeur is the cradle of thoughts and aspirations which are not only good for the individual, but which society could ill do without.

That most wilderness visits are made on foot underscores the effectiveness of our oldest mode of transport which must surely come into its own again in the steady state society and gives the lie to the belief that our future will require an ever increasing amount of travel.

In many ways the way in which wilderness acts as a source of spiritual fulfilment is reminiscent of how Aborigines related to the environment spiritually. They had a much closer bond with the environment than we do. As Josephine Flood put it 'the land is their cathedral and it is in creativity of spirit rather than material goods that Aboriginal society excelled' (*Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, 1983). In the wilderness we also feel a kinship with the natural world. The importance of this for the non growth future is obvious.

### Contribution to Science

Most wilderness areas are not pristine in the sense that they have never been affected by humans and they are not museum pieces where the aim of management is to either recreate or maintain a particular stage of development. Rather, and this is where the scientific value comes into the picture, they are areas where every effort is made to allow the environment to be the product of natural forces. The only exception to this in general is where intervention is needed to remove the legacy of previous human impacts in the form of such things as weeds and old roads. In most circumstances, changes which have resulted from past interventions such as deliberate burning, will eventually disappear as the plants and animals are free to respond to the physical environmental conditions of soil, slope, and climate.

An early Australian advocate of wilderness because of its scientific value was geomorphologist Professor Joe Jennings. At the ANZAAS Conference held in Hobart in 1965, Jennings argued strongly for the retention of whole river basins and stretches of coastline for the better understanding of natural environmental processes. He said geomorphology added:

a further category of reasons to the long array assembled by conservationists why everywhere adequate samples of surviving ecosystems should be preserved as near as possible to a wilderness state.

Such conditions Jennings argued would also ‘allow the effects of secular change, climate change on vegetation, slope and river processes and so on to be distinguishable’.

Perhaps the most important reason why wilderness is the best possible laboratory for these purposes is that by definition the natural systems in such areas benefit in integrity from being in relatively large reserves, remote from centres of human disturbance.

#### Contributions to Environmental Stability

Most wilderness areas have been established in areas which were considered wastelands because they seemed to be useless for farming. Most of them are located in high, dry, or coastal lands that are prone to erosion, such as the headwaters of rivers and streams. As a result they perform a valuable role in protecting settlements and farmlands in less remote areas. They also provide habitat for wildlife. In these ways wilderness areas make major contributions to the maintenance of overall environmental stability. Of course, every aspect of this function can be increased through the expansion of the wilderness systems.

#### IMPLEMENTATION

A detailed plan for incorporating wilderness into the march towards a steady state society is beyond the scope of this essay but some key points relevant to the development of a strategy for this purpose need to be mentioned. The first is that it must be geared to the opportunities for the optimisation of the wilderness system and must include sound plans to overcome the obstacles.

One of the problems has already been referred to, namely that the most intense effects of wilderness are felt by those who go deep into its heart and only a small proportion of the community ever do this. Images and words can never do true justice to such experiences but fortunately there is another widely acknowledged fact about how the public perceives wilderness and this is that many derive some of the inspiration and sense of satisfaction simply from knowing that it is there. In this sense, as a community asset, it maintains an important freedom. To peer into it from its edge enhances this last feeling. Such an activity should be encouraged wherever possible and graduated walks on tracks near urban areas and in parks should likewise be encouraged as a step leading to wilderness visits.

As for who is to spread the message I am not aware of any person who has gone into the wilderness who has not emerged as a convert. We need the stories from these people to inspire us to do more for wilderness and to help us better understand its messages, just as we heard in the past from deeply inspired people like Wordsworth, Thoreau, Muir, Bob Marshall, Aldo Leopold and Myles Dunphy.

It also needs to be remembered that in most cases the wilderness areas will be performing their role in the context of more extensive protected area systems, usually in association with national parks. In 2004, exploring how this could be done for a specific area containing two wilderness areas, the Great Sandy Region, I made the point that world heritage areas have the potential to be the greatest education and awareness raising centres in the world (see [www.fido.org.au](http://www.fido.org.au) for paper) but every protected area and the wilderness areas in particular have an important role to play in community education including preparation for deep changes in our value systems.

## CONCLUSION

In the one hundred and fifty five years which have elapsed since Thoreau made the first comprehensive statement about the importance of wilderness the need for it has increased enormously. This is because the types of development which troubled Thoreau have been magnified in their effect to the point where they threaten human existence. In Thoreau's time there were still new lands and resources to exploit. Today, in a period under double the normal Australian life span, the exploitation is rapidly closing in on the Earth's limits.

The opposition to these changes has been led by the conservation movement which has grappled with what has appeared to many to be an irresistible force. Views on what the movement has achieved overall vary. Certainly it has not brought the growth ideology to an end in spite of all the evidence of its unsustainability. One view goes so far as regarding the conservation movement's efforts as having been counter productive in that it has tended to blind us to the trends and given us false hope that it can make endless growth acceptable.

The matter is not yet over yet though and conservationists still have the potential to show the way to a stable and sustainable way of life. In this scenario the achievements to date, and particularly those in the protected area field, can be seen in an entirely different light. Regardless of whether or not they have previously helped make growth acceptable, if wisely used, they can be the staging posts of the move to a steady state.

But this bridging effect can only work if it is carefully planned and if each linked step has the deliberate aim of replacing the values and institutions of growth with those of a steady state society.

Of all the achievements of the conservation movement, wilderness protection offers us the greatest hope for change. If we come to it with an open mind and heart it can teach us balance, humility, the need for cooperation and give us confidence and the opportunity to experience true freedom. But wilderness people will need to make sure they put as much effort into making better known the lessons of wilderness as they do to fighting for the expansion of the wilderness systems. What they can be sure of is that this dual approach will provide the best possible chance of confounding the dire

prophesies of Sir Macfarlane Burnet and let us face the facts - if the conservation movement does not take up the challenge we have noone else to turn to!

Wilderness, a temporary antidote to the ills of our 'civilisation' since the time of Thoreau now has the potential to be part of its cure!