

Opening Address for the Fifth National Wilderness Conference

presented by Graham West, MP
Parliamentary Secretary,
representing the Minister for the Environment,
the Hon Bob Debus MP

Thank you for the opportunity to address this historic conference because next year, 2007, the NSW Wilderness Act will turn 20. I'm sure that some of you in this room were involved in getting that initial Act off the ground and been involved in making sure it continues to operate. It was Bob Carr, who was Minister for Environment and Planning, who introduced the legislation to the NSW Parliament on the 12 of November, 1987.

He said, "Today I offer this Parliament, this community, an historic choice. Will we as a nation, on the eve of the 200th year of European settlement, continue to destroy, piece by piece, the great natural areas of this country? Will we continue to be unmoved by the fact that many of this nation's plants and animals are threatened with oblivion? Or do we resolve that the very fibre of this continent should be treated with greater respect, that our much diminished wilderness should be protected, and that our country should earn a reputation for excellence in its approach to conservation?"

I think it's timely here tonight that we reflect on what's been achieved since Bob Carr raised those questions with his fellow members some 20 years ago. It is entirely appropriate that we should celebrate the vast areas of wild country that this legislation has protected forever. Like everyone here when I think of wilderness, I think of some of the State's most spectacular unspoiled areas, and for me one that's etched into my mind is the Ettrema region. I can picture in my mind descending Bullfrog Creek into the Ettrema Gorge and some of the cleanest waters I've ever seen and similarly the Nattai which is close to where I grew up.

It's fair to say that wilderness has not always been seen in such a positive light. There is, of course, the old meaning of untamed places of beasts that we have to get in there and civilise it. I think that some members of the NSW Parliament still think that way. I can assure you that on my side of politics we remain committed to protecting vast areas of wilderness. Since March 1995 the Carr and Iemma Governments have worked hard just to do that, we've more than tripled the area under wilderness protection from just over 652,000 hectares adding a further 1.2 million hectares. The proportion of the national park estate declared as wilderness has increased dramatically. In 1995, just 16 per cent of the reserve system was wilderness; today it's closer to 30 per cent. In other words close to one third of our State's great national park system is protected as wilderness.

This is an achievement of those of you who have fought long and hard, and indeed continue to fight long and hard, and you should be especially proud of that achievement. But of course wilderness is not just about numbers and statistics, despite the fact that we in Government try to use them. Wilderness plays a vital role in conserving our wild landscapes, our unique plants and animals, and allows natural evolutionary processes to continue unmolested.

Wilderness also provides unique opportunities for relaxation and solitude, although I think that is lost on a lot of the trail bike riders in the Nattai, but you will convince

them eventually. The benefits that wilderness provide are as diverse as the areas' themselves and these benefits are now highly valued.

The first formal recognition of wilderness was the Gazettal in 1934 of the Tallowa Primitive Reserve, later incorporated into Morton National Park, one of the State's great parks. At that time there was no comprehensive legislation to protect those areas, it was a dedicated group of people who ensured their protection.

The significant growth of wilderness came about by the enactment of the Wilderness Act in 1987. It is also appropriate here today that I acknowledge the growth of wilderness over the past eleven years was in large measure made possible by the Dunphy Wilderness Fund, set up in 1996 to honour the outstanding contribution made by the Dunphy family to conserve some of the State's most important natural areas. Up on the wall in my office I have one of Myles Dunphy's sketch maps and its great that we are getting involved in helping the Dunphy fund.

Back in 1934, Myles Dunphy wrote, in the Katoomba Daily Special Supplement, 'Now when mankind begins to envisage the complete urbanisation and subjugation of the remaining wild parks of this country, this prospect is wearisome and a worrying one. For where else can man go to escape civilisation?' The thought that the country can never go wild again is positively appalling and it sounds like it could have been said last week.

Now more than seventy years later that vision still resonates. That is why the NSW Government has contributed more than \$10.6 million to the Dunphy Fund to acquire land with wilderness values. So far more than 75,000 hectares of land has been acquired and protected and a total of 56 private properties have been purchased.

Our new Premier, Morris Iemma, is responsible for our most recent wilderness decision when he announced the protection of almost 11,000 hectares of wilderness in the heart of Chaelundi National Park. The Chaelundi Wilderness in northern NSW supports significant populations of some of Australia's best known tree dependant mammals, such as the Greater Glider and the Yellow-bellied Glider. It also secures the habitat of the Rufus Bettong, Koala and dozens of other rare and endangered species including the New Holland Mouse, the Glossy Black Cockatoo and the Stephens Banded Snake. All find sanctuary in this pocket of wilderness.

At least some here tonight would know from personal experience that Chaelundi contains 7,500 hectares of iconic old growth forests, including stands of Spotted Gum, Grassy New England Blackbutt Forest, Tallowood and Blue Gum Forests.

It is also expected that the Mummel Gulf Wilderness, 10,790 hectares in the Mummel Gulf National Park south-east of Walcha, will be declared in the near future. Another significant area marked for wilderness declaration is the area known as Green Gully in the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park. This 13,000 hectare property was acquired by the Government in 2003, following a significant fund raising campaign by the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife. Green Gully will consolidate the magnificent Macleay Gorges Wilderness, which includes over half of the Oxley Wild Rivers National Park.

Today we have the Greater Blue Mountains National Parks because of the vision and inspiration of the great Myles Dunphy. We all know that his ideas of the 1930s are today a reality. The wilderness areas of the Wollemi, Grose, Kanangra-Boyd and Nattai now cover more than half the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. These areas are made of an amazing array of clifflines, pagoda rock formations and spectacular waterfalls. They contain some of the most pristine catchments in the State, such as the Wollemi Creek and the Kowmung River. They are home to 440 different animal species, including 34 frog species, 281 bird species, 65 mammal species and 59 reptile species, that have been discovered in these wilderness areas, which are on Sydney's doorstep.

The vast wilderness also boasts an incredible 1400 native plants species and the perhaps the highest diversity of Eucalypt plant species in the World with 75 recorded in the area. I add that my uncle, who is a botanist and who I bushwalk with, discovered a Hakea in the Kowmung area, and I'm not sure if they have named it yet but it will have 'Dohertii' at the end of it I imagine.

I commend you, the organisers and participants of the Fifth National Wilderness Conference, for your dedication to carry on the work of Dunphy and others, and wish you all the best for this important conference.

Thank you.