

FIFTH NATIONAL WILDERNESS CONFERENCE SUMMATION AND RECOMMENDATIONS (A WILDERNESS PLAN OF ACTION)

by GEOFF MOSLEY (CONFERENCE DIRECTOR)
and IAN BROWN (WORKSHOP COORDINATOR)

The Fifth National Wilderness Conference, held at the University of Technology Sydney on 8th to 10th September, 2006, was a worthwhile achievement in its own right because it brought together national defenders of wilderness for the first time in many years. Even more important was what came out of the conference in the form of the informative and inspirational papers of the speakers and the results of the lengthy workshop sessions and the plenary in terms of practical suggestions for future action.

The overarching aim of the wilderness movement remains the securing of a national wilderness system and the meeting demonstrated that the support for this is as strong as ever. The delegates, discussing how to achieve this as part of the move to a sustainable society, and, taking a multi-faceted approach, came forward with a wealth of closely connected ideas which in sum form a 'wilderness plan of action'.

Instead of setting up a group to do further work on the conference suggestions, as happened at the fourth national wilderness conference, there was general agreement that it was up to all with an interest in wilderness conservation to work on and promote the action plan. To facilitate this and obtain a wider audience the papers have been placed on the Colong Foundation website. A companion to the conference is the book *Celebrating Wilderness* published by Envirobook to coincide with it.

SUMMATION

In Conference Session Four **Geoff Mosley** presented the following summation of the papers which had been given after which a report on the workshop recommendations was given.

On Friday evening, after acknowledging the traditional owners, the Gadigal Clan, and the sponsorship of the conference by Paddy Pallin, **Pat Thompson** (Chair of the Colong board) said the prime aim of the conference was to set the agenda for future action and that he sincerely hoped that it would not be another 13 years between this conference and the next. He then read a prepared statement from indigenous representative **David King** who wished the conference well and exhorted the delegates to help with the preservation of his beloved Blue Mountains homeland before it became a barren wasteland.

Pat then introduced **Graham West** (Parliamentary Secretary to NSW Premier Morris Iemma) to open the conference. Saying he spoke from a personal experience of wilderness, Graham recalled the overall wilderness reservation achievements in the state, the success of the Dunphy Fund, and recent and forthcoming wilderness declarations. All this went to show, he said, that wilderness was alive and well in its place of origin in Australia.

Keynote speaker **Helen Gee** began her address on the Friday evening by declaring her belief that wilderness is a resource for the human spirit which has so much to offer for those who make the connection. “You cannot spend too much time in the wild”, she said. Helen then provided the audience with an insight into the Nuytsland Reserve in Western Australia where she had recently stayed. To illustrate that ecological attachment to country is essential she stressed the value of Aboriginal understanding. Helen then turned to speak about the threat of mass tourism. She said she had two main messages. First, we should value wilderness for its intrinsic values (for instance for the way it allows speciation rather than for mass tourism). Second, we should preserve wilderness for the fact that, as Manning Clark had said speaking of South West Tasmania, it was in wilderness that we could solve ‘the mystery at the heart of things’. Helen concluded her address by encouraging all true believers to hold on to their dreams. An essay by Helen on the defence of Tasmania’s tall trees can be found in *Celebrating Wilderness*.

On Saturday morning, at the beginning of Conference Session One on ‘The Values of Wilderness’, **Pat Thompson** and **Geoff Mosley** explained the conference organisation and aims, saying that ‘Celebrating Wilderness’ had been chosen as the conference title to underline the positive approach but that the main aim was to develop a plan of action for enabling wilderness to make a bigger contribution to the necessary move to an environmentally conscious society. A large amount of the conference time had deliberately been allocated to workshops in order to make the maximum use of delegates’ ideas.

Speaking on ‘Wilderness and Inspiration’, **Bob Brown** began by saying that what we need is wilderness inspiration not wilderness expiration because a healthy expanding wilderness was essential. Wilderness, Bob said, was an invaluable reference point for all of human activities. He then spoke of some worrying trends which were putting pressure on the survival of the pristine, remoteness and silence. The increasing use of headphones by the young, he said, was cutting people off from both silence and the sounds of nature. He worried also that, as good as they were, TV nature programmes (such as ‘Planet Earth’ shown on ABC which featured mainly areas that are wilderness) have the downside of creating the illusion that all is well whereas the reality is, as suggested by Stephen Hawking, that the world and humanity are close to a ‘tipping point’. To illustrate the power of vested interests Bob told a number of stories concerning the forces affecting the conservation of forests in Tasmania. One of them concerned how Mark Latham’s visit to the Styx Valley to see the tall trees before the 2004 federal election was compromised by a prior breakfast he had with development interests in Hobart. The reality, said Bob, is that the planet is a battleground between marauders and defenders, with wilderness clearly being on the side of the latter.

Next, **Jamie Kirkpatrick**, began the presentation of his paper on ‘The Value of Wilderness for Nature Conservation’ by pointing out that wilderness is the antithesis of economic growth. As an overall term he preferred ‘nature conservation’ to ‘biodiversity conservation’, the latter being prolix and dysfunctional. Jamie then spelled out the benefits of remoteness and size inherent in wilderness (including resilience in the face of climate change), the problems for wilderness of streams flowing down from higher non wilderness areas, coastal plant invasions, mobile exotic animals and recreational

pressures. He outlined the need for some management interventions. Continuing with some remarks about the value of wilderness for science he said that while wilderness imposed some costs on science the benefits were the unmodified benchmarks for the study of environmental change and for the understanding of ecological processes. Finally, discussing the conflict between scientific investigation and the maintenance of mystery, Jamie pointed out that research results were never more than provisional and that there was a good case for putting some places out of bounds to scientific investigation. Jamie's written paper appears both on the website and in *Celebrating Wilderness*.

After lunch **Keith Muir** (on behalf of himself and **John Sinclair**) and **Geoff Law** presented regional reports on the wilderness situation and wilderness developments in 'Northern Australia' and 'Southern Australia' since the last national wilderness conference.

For 'Northern Australia' **Keith Muir** presented a picture of 'progress' in terms of many types of development, including mines, proposed pipelines and advances in Aboriginal ownership and contrasted this with the minimal progress in wilderness conservation. The approach to wilderness of some in the Northern Territory bureaucracy was illustrated with a spiteful response he had received to a request for comment on a wilderness paper. He then asked his audience why they thought there was this lack of wilderness progress. Taking up one suggestion, namely that national parks are considered adequate for all kinds of nature conservation, Keith spelled out his views on the consequences of acceptance of a multiple use concept for parks, which he said involved the loss of wilderness and biodiversity. He characterised the end product of such an approach as "passive acceptance of global environmental decline". A paper by Keith Muir on the Australia-wide situation which was originally presented at the World Wilderness Congress in Alaska appears in *Celebrating Wilderness*.

In his presentation on 'Southern Australia' **Geoff Law** began by giving the delegates a nation wide view of naturalness and wilderness. He then spoke about the threats posed by land clearing and mining in the southern region before reporting on useful wilderness developments in Western Australia and South Australia and the earlier solid achievements in New South Wales and Victoria. Geoff then turned to providing a more detailed account of the situation in Tasmania where alone amongst the Australian states there is no reference to wilderness in legislation. He said there were many ongoing losses. One was the fact that 1,000 hectares of high grade wilderness was being lost each year through logging operations, some of it in previously untouched valleys. Geoff illustrated how clear felling is being phased out but is being replaced by another destructive approach known as 'aggregated retention'. This was affecting such prime wilderness places as the Upper Florentine (which could well become a new rallying point for the movement). Concluding, Geoff said we should let wilderness speak out to us; renewing both our spirit and our determination to save wilderness.

The Sunday morning conference session 'Going Forward 1' began with a presentation by **Virginia Young** on 'Keeping the Wild in Wilderness'. After showing a revised version of a TWS film on Australian wilderness originally shown at the Wilderness Congress in Alaska, Virginia provided the delegates with a well illustrated talk on the work of the

TWS 'Wild Country Program'. She said this project addresses two basic challenges: 1) keeping intact country intact; and 2) protecting wild nature in fragmented country. Salient matters being addressed by the program are connectivity processes and biological regionalisation. Virginia then illustrated the application of the connectivity approach with details of the mega-linkage in the south west of WA before moving on to explain cooperative efforts on Cape York Peninsula. The latter program, said Virginia, involved in parallel the three components of land justice, indigenous rights (social justice) and conservation. Amongst the measures being furthered were conservation agreements and indigenous protected areas (IPAs). A problem with this type of IPA is that there is no provision for it in Queensland legislation. Finally, Virginia raised the question of whether there was a need to revise wilderness legislation to accommodate indigenous interests.

In the second part of the morning session ('Going Forward 1') **Haydn Washington**, on the subject of 'Untying Any Wilderness Knots', said he believed there was a knot with many strands – philosophical, cultural, justice and exploitation. After outlining the eight key criticisms of wilderness he explained the methodology of his PhD research on the topic which, he said, had revealed the nature of the problems resulting from anthropocentrism and miscommunication. Telling the conference about his views on the way forward he said it would require persistence and better explanation of the meaning of wilderness. Haydn then recommended the use of the concept of 'lanais' standing for 'large natural intact areas'. On wilderness management he said the ideal was 'minimum intervention management'. Concluding, he said there was no backing away from the term wilderness. It was a good word but it needed to be explained better. A full copy of Haydn's paper can be found in *Celebrating Wilderness*.

In his Sunday afternoon address ('Going Forward 2'), **Peter Prineas** concluded the addresses with his paper on 'A National Wilderness System'. In an analysis of developments relevant to this goal since the fourth wilderness conference he revisited the proposals of that conference and the task group it appointed, reviewed some of the criticisms of wilderness and their motivation, and then examined the main government and NGO actions on wilderness since 1993. Peter restated the need for a national wilderness network based on the existing wilderness reserves and suggested that the conference seek a number of actions by the Commonwealth, including wilderness inventorying, national wilderness standards and a code of management for wilderness areas and, perhaps, appropriate listings on the National Heritage List. Finally, he stressed the need to: maintain relevance; cooperate better; build bridges; and last, but not least, 'take a stand'.

CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

After the summation of the speaker's papers **Geoff Mosley** (Conference Director) and **Ian Brown** (Workshops Coordinator) presented their report on the recommendations of the workshop groups. Eight groups had spent a total of six hours in three sessions developing proposals for action. They said it was inevitable that there had been some duplication of ideas. In the conference plenary chair **Peter Thompson** provided the delegates with a further opportunity for input by leading a participatory exercise

involving an analytic strategic triangle framework with the three components of ‘public purpose’, ‘capability’ and ‘authorising environment’.

Geoff Mosley and Ian Brown have combined the recommendations of the workshops and plenary to produce the following plan of action aimed at enabling a healthy wilderness system make an increased contribution to the move towards an environmentally conscious society. It is up to every person and group with an interest to see that the recommendations are acted on.

Plan of action

While the groups dealt with different questions in each of the three workshop sessions a number of broad thrusts became apparent. They were:

- a) Moves to increase the involvement of the young with nature and its conservation;
- b) More youth education in relation to wilderness;
- c) Enhanced public promotion of wilderness including the use of charismatic persons;
- d) Improve the linkage of wilderness with the other streams of conservation, growing public interest in the environment, with peoples’ daily lives and with the achievement of sustainability;
- e) Support for the WildCountry initiatives as part of a landscape wide strategy;
- f) More engagement with indigenous people and programs;
- g) Overcoming political and bureaucratic shortcomings in campaigns to achieve expanded wilderness systems and better management; and
- h) More recruitment of wilderness activists to take advantage of latent public support.

1. WORKSHOP SESSION ONE - BETTER PROMOTION OF WILDERNESS

1A) REACHING THE YOUNG

- a) Encourage research into the following: young attitudes and the media young people use; barriers to children experiencing nature, and successful examples of children venturing out into wilderness;
- b) Improve opportunities for the young to experience and appreciate wilderness through the following actions: training in bushwalking skills; arranging exhibitions for young wilderness photographers; celebrate the achievements of young people in the environmental field; encourage the production of more childrens’ books, cartoons, films and poems (such as the one created by Dierk at the conference) on the wilderness theme; develop more wilderness and nature storylines to appeal to children (such as that

demonstrated by Wyn at the conference); work for more wilderness in general literature (media students should note this need and should be given specific design briefs).

c) On the subject of expanding the opportunities for children to make contact with nature a wide range of suggestions were made including: graduated moves towards wilderness via backyard tents, involvement in gardening, visits to natural remnants on the urban fringe, involvement of the young in conservation issues, school based visits to natural areas and wilderness (eg sport and recreation camps and other school based nature experience programmes (such as 'Earth Journeys' being trialled in the Blue Mountains). Other suggestions included: subsidies for family nature holidays; the possible development of a new organisation for youth – 'the Green Guides' (similar to the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides but with a greater emphasis on contact with the wild); and influencing the school curriculum by giving wilderness a better presence in it (in a way which shows the connection between wilderness and sustainability).

1B) WINNING THE MASSES (THE MAINSTREAM COMMUNITY) – “the authorising authority is the whole community”

a) Developing means by which people can take the first step in becoming closer to nature such as: greater development of community gardens; encouragement of the growing of backyard fruit and vegetables; visits to the edge of wilderness areas (larger groups can visit such areas compared with the size of groups going into wilderness).

b) Pay more attention to explaining the link between wilderness, the wider environment and peoples' daily lives. Suggestions included: greater use of established institutions such as World Environment Day and Clean Up Australia Day (eg cleaning up areas on the edge of wilderness); more effort put into making the connection between such globally important environmental matters as climate change and the health and sustainability agendas and human survival, show what is involved, ie 'Fresh water begins in wilderness'; better use of media opportunities and political agendas including: workshops for activists (training in relation to media, political processes, and public relations/marketing); promotion of nature conservation writing (one possibility-a joint seminar between wilderness groups and the Association for Literature on the Environment); new TV programs (eg Wilderness Survival), more wilderness presentations, greater use of small time slots similar to Petty cartoons, utilising the particular enthusiasms of the time; make the bush as attractive as saving the whales; use wilderness photographs more (eg those of Henry Gold)); find and encourage new charismatic 'ambassadors for wilderness' as mentors; revitalise the term wilderness (establishing its position in the broad conservation spectrum); harness the resources of the baby boomer generation (retirees); and talk to as many people as possible about wilderness (friends/relatives, etc) using the stories which brought us into the movement to illustrate the possibilities and the needs.

1C) INFLUENCING THE INFLUENTIAL

a) Engage politicians with an approach involving focus, discipline, repetition and persistence. Organise to take them into wilderness (preferably overnight). Do not preach

– let the wilderness tell its story. In New South Wales celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the Wilderness Act, 1987.

b) As with other sectors link wilderness to the wider environmental issues bearing in mind that ‘wilderness’ is a strong and positive term in the Australian mind. We should not underestimate the problem but should be positive. We should stress the economic benefits (‘ecosystem services’) and establish the link with wilderness and iconic species.

c) Organise meetings for business leaders (breakfasts, lunches and dinners) similar to the Total Environment Centre’s ‘Green Capital. This could be a source of funds for the other wilderness initiatives.

d) Organise major special annual events involving influential people comparable with the Great Australian Bushwalk, Art Exhibitions and Photographic Exhibitions. Try to include spectacular displays to attract attention (the example given was the state wide tour of a giant tree stump to illustrate the logging of old growth forests).

2. WORKSHOP SESSION TWO - BREAKING DOWN THE BARRIERS

(obstacles to/and opportunities for better wilderness protection)

2A) The conference identified the following OBSTACLES:

- lack of government/political will, government inaction;
- language/semantics around the term, negative perceptions;
- inadequate resources for hands on management on Aboriginal lands;
- climate change;
- limited land acquisition funds;
- increasing demand for natural resources (eg coal under Blue Mountains wilderness);
- poor attitude in agencies (both regionally and at HQ) – not seeing wilderness as a priority;
- ignorance amongst politicians;
- not enough activists;
- not enough young people involved;
- some negative rural attitudes;
- inadequate inclusion of wilderness and nature conservation in educational programmes/curricula (not targeted);
- lack of adequate media sympathy/awareness; and
- leaseback/joint management not always working well for wilderness.

2B) the conference identified the following OPPORTUNITIES:

- better working with traditional owners, Aboriginal co-management;
- elections;
- issues of climate change and peak oil – wilderness providing bench marks (image opportunity);
- large areas still available for wilderness protection in northern and central Australia;

- opportunity for more wilderness protection in national parks;
- scope for more media efforts to penetrate the media run blockade on wilderness;
- opportunity to link wilderness to hope;
- better coordination of green groups including web communication, wilderness networks can be created;
- scope to develop more effective NGO recruitment programmes to bolster campaigns; and
- interest the Green Party in wilderness.

2C) RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AT REGIONAL/STATE LEVEL

- a) Run an iconic campaign in each State and Territory with an influential figurehead which both celebrates what we have and outlines future needs;
- b) Review wilderness legislation to include acknowledgement of Aboriginal connections and interests. This action to involve dialogue with the indigenous community;
- c) Praise politicians and business leaders who do the right thing;
- d) Develop a programme for taking politicians into wilderness;
- e) Obtain grants for wilderness conservation and persuade prominent persons to bankroll campaigns. In New South Wales replenish the Dunphy Fund; and
- f) Carry out recruitment programmes for wilderness groups to avoid loss of strength through ageing. As part of this, interest non wilderness community groups in wilderness by means of presentations.

2D) RECOMMENDED ACTIONS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

- a) Organise a national wilderness publicity campaign to include: 'myth busting', and the taking of heart from our achievements to date in a 'David and Goliath battle' (Note the Wilderness Conference demonstrated the amount of interest there was to build on). The campaign to include lobbying of individual MPs. Have an influential person as leader of the campaign with NGO coordination;
- b) Develop NGO support for the WildCountry program (get behind it and expand the support base);
- c) Engage the Aboriginal community in effective dialogue concerning wilderness;
- d) Update the Red Index and the National Wilderness Inventory;
- e) Encourage the better identification of land for agricultural purposes;
- f) Lobby more strongly for feral animal control;

g) Adopt as national priorities the Cape and the Kimberley in the north and the 'sea to snow' world heritage proposal in the south east.

3 WORKSHOP SESSION THREE – THOUGHT WORD AND DEED

The conference delegates identified the following management and philosophical issues:

3A) MANAGEMENT ISSUES

- a) wilderness boundaries need to be well placed;
- b) wilderness policy narrows potential wilderness (eg narrow application to Crown lands in New South Wales);
- c) lack of rigour and consistency in wilderness management;
- d) ferals/weeds/fire/ catchment/roads/recreational uses (eg horse riding)/dingos are major issues – better understanding to articulate problems;
- e) 'Ecotourism';
- f) Aboriginal living areas in wilderness;
- g) strongest possible protection for wilderness;
- h) short term focus;
- i) commodification of wilderness;
- j) lack of management resources.

3B PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES

- a) priorities – local v national;
- b) some negatives attitudes in Aboriginal community – especially northern Australia;
- c) risk of compromises in alliances;
- d) fear of bush;
- e) opposition to wilderness from forestry and rural interests;
- f) fitting wilderness into livelihoods;
- g) human access;
- h) greenwashing via ineffective environmental programmes.

3C RECOMMENDED PRIORITY ACTIONS

a) Recognise that there are some negative connotations in the term 'wilderness' and deal with them to make it even stronger. Focus on what we want, avoiding semantics and overglossing. Suggestions: retain the use of the IUCN definition of the wilderness category; use personalities as part of these efforts; have better communication with educationists; and explain the notion of wilderness as 'large, intact, natural areas'.

b) Increase the connections/linkage of the community to wilderness in a variety of ways such as; links with artists (importance of place, telling of stories (tell the stories of the places where you belong/hold dear); greater involvement with the Aboriginal community (reconciliation and traditional knowledge); promotion of wilderness as part of a broad land use spectrum and the landscape-wide conservation programme;

c) Deliberate efforts to achieve better communication with kindred groups and organisations including with bodies concerned with sustainability/opposition to the growth agenda; develop imaginative new initiatives, eg wilderness research forum, promotion of native gardens and 'backyard buddies' for wilderness neighbours;

d) Update wilderness legislation across the country; and

e) Put more pressure on politicians.