

## Action towards wilderness protection in Northern Australia

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### Abstract

*The determination of those who live in Northern Australia to exploit and populate that half of the continent, at whatever the cost, has frustrated all efforts to protect wilderness in the region over the last ten years. This paradigm is being to a large extent adopted by the first Australians in order to embrace the benefits of western lifestyles. The infrastructure being installed to service both remote communities and mining operations is threatening some of the best wilderness in Northern Australia. Without further measures to protect wilderness within, and outside, protected areas, the relatively sparse population of Northern Australia will have a disproportionate impact on wilderness.*

### Introduction

In 1993 the paper **“Wilderness Threats and Progress in Northern Australia”**<sup>1</sup> began by stating *“The north of Australia presents the greatest challenge for wilderness preservation in Australia and probably the world since it contains the most significant unprotected pristine wilderness outside Antarctica”*. Since then there have been a number of inroads into the identified areas of wilderness across the northern half of Australia. In 2006 the challenges to retain the remaining wilderness in the north are even greater and more daunting.

The challenges arise, in part, from the need to counter the ‘frontier’ mindset that ignores the concept of wilderness. Their advocates possessed with an almost evangelical fervour to “tame” the wilderness by planting developments across it.

The other great challenge is the increasing aspiration of Aboriginal communities, who must live in this political environment. Aboriginal communities are of course spread right across northern Australia and quite naturally have developed a wide range of infrastructure and modern amenities in the last decade.

Remote communities of northern Australia have growing ecological footprints that are impacting on wilderness areas, particularly in Arnhemland. For example, every community must have telephone communication and associated infrastructure. All are linked to the major townships of the area through an ever-expanding network of roads and growing fleets of motor vehicles. Most communities also have a remote area power supply and the spread of mains power is seeing more powerlines strung across what were previously remote landscapes, often of high wilderness quality. These facilities, naturally enough, are provided to facilitate economic development of the region.

Like everyone else subjected to the mass media and the insatiable demands of the ‘global economy’, Aborigines crave as much for Nike apparel, fast food and electronic entertainments as do other Australians. Four wheel drive vehicles and high-powered boats are being acquired to overcome the vast distances between communities. While spiritual and ethical values sustain difference, the material values of Aborigines, under this pressure, are almost identical with the overwhelming majority

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of other Australians. Consumerism and the drive for economic growth, in the remotest parts of Northern Australia, are now contributing to the erosion of wilderness at ever increasing rates. These are the realities of Northern Australia.

As one flies across the Kimberley region, Arnhemland or Cape York Peninsula, the spreading ecological footprints of these once almost invisible communities are now disproportionate to the population of the region.

An overlay of remote communities and associated infrastructure draped over a map showing the areas of potential identified wilderness in Northern Australia would indicate the significance of this issue. Remote communities are eroding wilderness areas. The challenge for wilderness supporters is how to address these issues.

In addition a 'frontier' mentality is the other widespread threat to wilderness that has seen the politicians welcoming almost any idea for economic exploitation in northern Australia. A mentality that translates into another widespread threat to wilderness. This attitude applies to politicians of almost every political persuasion and generates largely uncritical support for almost any development venture proposed in the region. This booster mentality may be tempered a little in Western Australia, however, following the defeat of a proposal to feed water from the Fitzroy River in the Kimberley to Perth, which resulted in an electoral backlash against the proponents. Northern Australia's water supplies were covetously-eyed by politicians from southern population centres who were oblivious to the reality that, for most of the region, evaporation rate exceeds rainfall, and that their constituents want to see this wild river protected. This water transfer scheme was the second serious proposal to dam the Fitzroy, Western Australia's largest river in the last decade. The first detailed proposal to create a mega-dam was to irrigate cotton and was thwarted in 1996 by the efforts of an Aboriginal led group supported by conservationists, including Bob Brown and John Sinclair.

## **Northern Territory**

The Northern Territory, perhaps, has more wilderness than anywhere else in Australia. The Territory has no formally protected wilderness areas, except for an area of Kakadu National Park; a park managed by the Commonwealth Government. Even here there is a proposal to remove the wilderness status previously allotted to the "stone country" of the Arnhemland escarpment within the park<sup>2</sup>. Fortunately the indefatigable Geoff Mosley has stepped in to defend the wilderness, but his efforts need to be reinforced if the status of the only protected wilderness in the whole of the Northern Territory is not to be lost.

Arnhemland not only contains the most important wilderness in the Territory's Top End, it is also a stronghold of Aboriginal culture<sup>3</sup> that is also under siege from the demands of our modern, unhealthy, consumerist lifestyle.

There are many threats to Arnhemland and one of the most recent is a uranium exploration site for the Canadian-based mining giant Cameco. Currently, arguments between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people about the Arnhem Wilderness are unhelpful. Those concerned with environmental justice should close ranks with those who support social justice and use their collective talents to fight for the Earth. This isn't a dress rehearsal - where we can split hairs over the meaning of wilderness while bulldozers push exploration roads into remote river catchments. Those concerned with social and environmental justice may learn respect for the different perceptions of wilderness most quickly when joined in a common struggle. As the world's resources run out, these beautiful, precious, undamaged areas will be

on the front line for those environmental issues climbing to the top of the political agenda: energy and greenhouse policy.

The passage of a gas pipeline running parallel to the Stuart Highway from Palm Valley in Central Australia to Darwin, for example, wasn't initially seen as a significant inroad into northern Australia's wilderness. This project became, however, a spine for a major gas pipeline network and therefore facilitating the establishment of other industries in the wilderness. Bringing offshore natural gas from the Timor Shelf will run a pipeline through the wilderness adjacent to Joseph Bonaparte Gulf to join another pipeline at Matarranka. It is proposed to extend this pipeline diagonally through the Arnhemland wilderness to fuel a refinery at the Gove bauxite mine. The Territory Government's support for mining may also result in a greatly expanded Macarthur River mine, which already impacts on the once pristine Nicholson River Wilderness on the eastern side of the Gulf of Carpentaria.

In addition to these mining schemes, the Territory has many long-cherished schemes to expand agricultural development in the Top End. If the exploitation of the Daly River Catchment proceeds, the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf wilderness will be eroded. Only economic viability acts as an impediment to the further expansion of the Ord River irrigation scheme in the Northern Territory and Western Australia. This project would significantly reduce the Kimberley Wilderness.

So why has the Territory disregarded its duty toward wilderness preservation? A commonly held opinion is that there is lots of wilderness and few Territorians, so there is no urgency. In 1995 the National Wilderness Inventory<sup>4</sup> indicated that more than half the Territory was in a high wilderness condition. This positive assessment of condition needs to be treated with care. The impacts of pest species, particularly cane toads, horses and camels, have already caused serious impacts, including local extinctions of native fauna, loss of native vegetation and massive soil erosion. Unless backed by reliable scientific assessment and data, a regional-scale wilderness assessment, like the National Wilderness Inventory, can produce misleading results.

If, however, the National Wilderness Inventory is maintained and had its biophysical and disturbance data updated, it would certainly help to identify where there is an urgent need for management action. The application of this map-based technique can effectively identify the threats posed by development to wilderness areas<sup>5</sup>. The areas vulnerable to environmental degradation, inappropriate use and development would be identified. The growing ecological footprints of remote area development would be hard to hide.

There is another important reason for concern in relation to the Territory's wilderness. The Territory is working to develop a more comprehensive reserve system without adequate regard to protection of wilderness values. The national parks estate in the Northern Territory has increased from two million hectares in 1992 to five million hectares in 2005. Nine national parks larger than 100,000 hectares contain considerable wilderness areas. The management plans for several of these large parks have either a 'limited use' or 'natural' zone to regulate development and high impact use. There was even a proposal for a Spirit Hills Wilderness Conservation Area<sup>6</sup>. But this area, like all wilderness-like zones in the Northern Territory, may be open to mining activities and some national parks are being actively explored. The draft plan of management for Barranyi National Park describes the need to preserve the unique wilderness character of the island, which has only one species of feral animal and few weeds. The draft plan of management unfortunately fails to live up to its stated intentions toward wilderness by leaving the way open for future 'wilderness lodge' development.

The Territory Government may have an unsympathetic attitude toward wilderness but it is notably progressive in its attitude toward joint management of national parks with indigenous people. The Gurig National Park became Northern Territory's first jointly managed park in 1981. In 2004 the Government decided that Aboriginal traditional owners would jointly manage all of the Territory's reserves in co-operation with the Parks and Wildlife Commission. However, worryingly, this arrangement hasn't brought about any demonstrable moves towards protecting the wilderness values within the reserves. With the erosion of wilderness values outside the reserve system in the Northern Territory it is becoming increasingly urgent to secure the wilderness within the reserves.

An open assessment of the issues and problems of preserving naturalness is essential as Territorians continue to develop their land, on-park as well as off-park. I fear that what I call 'wilderness' and Indigenous people may call 'our country' is all too often available for someone else's plans for wilderness lodges, four-wheel-drive vehicle-based recreation, development of roads, mining activities, clearing, grazing, safari hunts and other forms of commercial tourism.

### **Western Australia**

In Western Australia, a 'super-department', the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), managed the state's national parks, state forests and other Crown Land (i.e. lands owned by the state government) for decades. CALM, for so long gatekeeper for the future use of the state's public lands, has now merged with the Department of Environment to become the Department of Environment and Conservation. In such large bureaucracies wilderness protection struggles to have a voice. Wilderness concerns are represented by a handful of people, in a small branch of a departmental division - a long distance from the source of political power.

Apart from the battles to save the Fitzroy River, the wilderness in the north of Western Australia has been remote from the centre of bureaucracy in Perth, as demonstrated by the neglect of these areas. The Western Australian Government has balked for almost two decades in proceeding to reserve its proposed parks in the Kimberley, and it can hardly proceed to protect wilderness in the region if it is unwilling to reserve the land it has publicly identified as deserving National Park status. A network of mega National Parks covering the King Leopold and Napier Ranges, as well the Durack River, Drysdale River and Prince Regent River areas would be a useful start.

Significant parts of the vast wilderness of the Kimberley region are located closer to the coast. The inroads made by celebrated pioneering Kimberley graziers, who established their "grass castles", have eliminated much of the wilderness in the interior. The earliest attempts at coastal settlement, on the other hand, were dismal failures and, except for the Benedictine established mission at Kalumbaru, the rugged lands around the Kimberley coast have remained unsettled.

Despite its remoteness, protecting the Kimberley wilderness coast is going to be a challenging fight. In the last decade or so this magnificent coastline has been 'discovered' by tourists and exploited by a number of tour operators who use ships to convey their rich clients along the coastline. The boats and associated increases in helicopter joy flights are degrading the area's most scenic wilderness attractions. One also has to question how compatible are the huge pearl farms, which spread along this spectacular coast, with the objects of wilderness preservation. Another aquaculture industry threatening the region is a huge prawn farm proposed for Cambridge Gulf near Wyndham.

Further development of cattle grazing areas in the Kimberly has slowed in recent years. Unfortunately, there is a proliferation of proposed mining ventures throughout the Kimberley that threatens the remaining areas of wilderness. At least two new diamond mines are moving to replace the Argyll diamond mine in the East Kimberley that is close to the end of its life. The bauxite deposits on the Mitchell Plateau continues to present a potential threat to one of the parts of the Kimberley with the greatest wilderness value.

In the northern part of Western Australia only the Kurijini National Park<sup>7</sup> has several wilderness zones separated by roads within it, totalling about 125,000 hectares. However these zones were never afforded the statutory protection available under the Conservation and Land Management Act, 1984.

The other major wilderness areas in northern Western Australia are the Pilbara and the Tanami Desert, and the Central Australian Ranges. These areas are subject to Aboriginal aspirations and the impacts of mining exploration. Relatively little of these vast areas are reserved.

For the areas that are in national parks, examination of options for the protection of wilderness values is now part of a plan of management review process. The results of this process may prove more fruitful. However, so far, the Department of Environment and Conservation has only proposed 21,000 hectares of wilderness for protection, none in the northern part of the state. Placing wilderness protection last in a long chain of land use decision-making creates difficulties as competing activities, such as tourist operations and the pervasive off road vehicle user, become established and then tend to dictate park management. In these circumstances some form of interim protection is necessary, even if this measure is initially only a negotiated moratorium on road making and upgrading, park facilities development and commercial use until the wilderness assessment processes are completed.

## **Queensland**

National park reservation had a very slow start in Queensland and many parks remain pitifully small. The Queensland Hansard from the 1970s records the man who became Mines Minister in the Bjelke-Petersen Government, Ron Camm saying that large National Parks were not necessary as you could see just as much standing in the centre of 2 hectares of rainforest as 2000 hectares. With such attitudes prevailing it is unsurprising that the concept of wilderness has little acceptance in Queensland.

The Beattie Government sought to change these old ways of political thinking and has established the goal of securing five per cent of the State's total land area in national parks. The recent forest policy has facilitated the conversion of state forests into National Parks so that the state is just short of achieving that target. Under the forest policy transition program is underway to phase commercial logging out of many areas, including the Wet Tropics.

Queensland has presented major opportunities for wilderness protection over the last decade but first the setbacks created by a previous right-wing government, who used national park reservation as a tool to block indigenous land rights, had to be overcome. The Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation undertook a strategy of placing land rights on an equal footing with park reservation. They agreed to work with the Indigenous traditional owners. Then when the progressive Beattie Government was swept into office over a million hectares of land were reserved as national parks or handed back to the region's traditional owners.

Queensland now has 7.2 million hectares of protected areas, including 6.7 million hectares of national parks<sup>8</sup>.

The National Parks estate can, however, never be big enough to carry all Aboriginal and Islander aspirations forward. A regional land use agreement approach, such as that developed for Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, provides a cogent solution to ensure an economic base for Indigenous people. Providing for claims over lands with a broad range of productive resources can greatly assist with self-determination and economic independence. This approach could help to ensure that wilderness within national parks are not developed to meet economic and social objectives.

For the new national parks in Cape York the current challenge, being taken up by The Wilderness Society, is to obtain adequate funds for the management of feral animals, particularly cattle and horses, and weeds, which are a huge problem in the tropics. You cannot separate people from wilderness because wilderness needs management.

There are no wilderness areas formally protected under the Nature Conservation Act, 1992 in Queensland because conservation groups have dropped formal wilderness reservation from their campaign priorities. Wilderness is protected 'de facto' in national parks, such as Mount Barney, Hinchinbrook Island, Currawinya and Carnarvon. In the case of Carnarvon and Hinchinbrook Island, national parks with high wilderness values, their plans of management designate remote-natural zones over most of the park with minimal or no visitor facilities and no motor vehicle access, except for management purposes. For the other parks, the plans of management have tended to make the remote-natural zones much smaller. For example, at the northern end of Fraser Island, in the Great Sandy Region National Park, a 53,000 ha remote area zone has been established, but is trisected by major 4WD tourism roads that link with access along the Eastern Beach and associated informal car-camping<sup>9</sup>.

The significant expansion in size of the protected area estate over the last decade, however, has had only limited benefit for wilderness preservation. Fraser Island, which is one of the state's larger National Parks, recently suffered when the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service unleashed a bulldozer to carve kilometres of fire breaks up to 20 metres wide through this World Heritage National Park. Many of the other national parks with wilderness values don't even have a management plan and no national park in Queensland has a statutory Management Plan. There is very little to prevent the recurrence of incidents like the Fraser Island firebreaks unless park management is legally binding on park managers and users alike.

The wilderness areas of Queensland, like elsewhere in northern Australia, suffer from the ravages of the mining industry. The major mining operation on Cape York Peninsula at Weipa, where Comalco has been mining bauxite for four decades, may soon be dwarfed by a Chinese aluminium company. This proposed mining operation at Arakuun on the south-eastern corner of the Gulf of Carpentaria, is in an area that has, up until now, suffered little development.

As one surveys North Queensland there are many mines impacting on wilderness, with more being touted. There is the huge Century mine immediately adjacent to the Riversleigh World Heritage site, the Lawn Hill National Park and the Nicholson River wilderness area. A new copper proposal near Cloncurry recently made national news. These mineral developments are just examples of the many mines being developed in what have previously been very remote sites. In taking this path, all of them will require infrastructure in the forms of roads and other developments which are inimical to wilderness.

The wilderness areas of Cape York Peninsula are further threatened by the proposal to establish a pipeline corridor to convey natural gas from Papua New Guinea right through it from north to south. This is proposed to supply Eastern Australia's insatiable energy demand, and its impact on Cape York Peninsula's wilderness will be very significant. The environmental assessment for the pipeline identifies that an area of high wilderness quality, known locally as 'The Wilderness', will be bisected. The pipeline cuts a 200 metre swath through the bush. Post-construction bush regeneration will be prevented within 50 metres either side of the pipeline. It is possible, however, for the proposed pipeline route to be relocated away from centres of biological integrity and wilderness, if conservation groups remain vigilant.

Conservation has succeeded against mining interests, most notably within the Shelburne Bay Wilderness where in 2003 existing mining leases over its pure white dunes lapsed on expiry.

Australia's first wild rivers legislation was passed by the progressive Queensland Government in September 2005, following yet another vigorous campaign by The Wilderness Society. The Wild Rivers Act, 2005 places strict limitations on development of river reaches that are identified as high preservation areas. The legislation will help to protect the wilderness characteristics of selected catchments of reserved rivers.

The growing Aboriginal aspirations for economic development in Cape York Peninsula resulted in the Cape York Peninsula Land Council aggressively opposing the Queensland Government's proposed Wild Rivers declarations in Cape York Peninsula and the Gulf Country. They believe that attempts to preserve the wild qualities of previously largely unmodified river catchments will impede future exploitation. In the end the pragmatic Queensland Government acquiesced to the wishes of the Aboriginal interests and announced on the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2006<sup>10</sup> that it would proceed with only six of the nineteen wild river proposals. These were where there was no strong indigenous opposition. The grazing lobby also had expressed strong opposition to the wild rivers these objections carried negligible political weight.

The Aboriginal opposition is by no means universal. Murundoo Yanner, an Aboriginal leader from the southern Gulf Country, publicly supports the protection of the as yet undeclared rivers in his area, in opposition to the Cape York Peninsula Land Council.

In addition to Hinchinbrook and Fraser Island, only four catchments in the Gulf Region were announced for protection under the Wild River Act because they were less contentious and not threatening any mining or other anticipated exploitive activities.

### ***Two wilderness dreamings***

Indigenous people own almost half of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn and many desert areas. There should be a place for wilderness in the Indigenous landscape, and the management value of wilderness protection should not be compromised by a trend emerging in some quarters to have the definition of wilderness altered to accommodate modern technology, such as 4WD vehicles and permanent settlements.

The political debate regarding national parks must surely turn on what we can do for the land, not what nature and national parks can do for us. Aboriginal and Islander leaders should address the preservation of nature within their land base, particularly

within their national parks. Not all areas should be developed, have road networks or permanent settlements within them.

Wilderness for non-Indigenous Australians is seen as a place where the last remnants of the natural world are safe from the spoiling forces of modern technology. Outside wilderness, any economically useful land is generally dedicated to production for our urban-based society (although The Wilderness Society's *Wild Country* project and new land clearing laws are attempting to change that paradigm by promoting integrated conservation management across the landscape). Wilderness offers respite for the increasingly stressed urbanites and their feedlot society, where food and services are brought to them and their wastes are carried away. In wilderness we can connect with life that still evolves by natural processes.

The wilderness of Aboriginal and Islander Australians is a living story based on up to 40-60,000 years of belonging to the country – a land of spirits, dreaming paths, myths and ceremony that create a framework of Indigenous responsibilities for country. The impacts and influences of Indigenous societies in wilderness are recognised, as are the opportunities for Indigenous people to retain links with the landscape. While some Australian wilderness critics like Tim Flannery claim Aboriginal land use precludes wilderness, the issue of impact from Indigenous land use is one of degree, particularly when compared to recent use of modern technologies.

The harmonisation of these two cultural dreamings is imperative to the survival of wilderness in Australia, as much unprotected wilderness is located on Aboriginal land. The belief that Indigenous land use treads more lightly on the land underpins the Malimup communiqué, developed by the former Australian Heritage Commission<sup>11</sup>. The communiqué acknowledges and respects the right of Indigenous people to maintain and strengthen their spiritual and cultural relationships within wilderness, and has built goodwill in that the preservation of wilderness does not exclude people or Indigenous rights. Indigenous wilderness as described by the Malimup communiqué allows for Indigenous hunting using firearms, the gathering of bush foods, the use four-wheel-drive vehicles and the establishment of permanent accommodation. The agreement has, in effect, inadvertently defined the distance between these two dreamings.

This distance between the two dreamings will increase as Indigenous communities living in a wilderness area use modern technology more intensely and extensively over time. While the occasional use of management roads by Indigenous people in four-wheel-drive vehicles would perhaps pose a low level of threat, it does set a precedent for further public use of motor vehicles that would be incompatible with wilderness values and the maintenance of biological diversity. Further, the establishment of permanent settlements clearly contradicts the wilderness management principles currently adopted in most Australian states and the World Conservation Union (IUCN) wilderness definition. The IUCN defines wilderness as a:

*“...large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition”.*

Intensive use of modern technology and permanent or significant habitation is not consistent with accepted wilderness management practice. Things that are true and just, desirable and worthwhile, are not always compatible or mutually reinforcing<sup>12</sup>. There will be times and places when the social justice for Indigenous people and environmental justice for wilderness do not coincide. In a mature relationship

between conservation groups and Indigenous communities there is space for acceptance of difference.

The efforts made to redefine wilderness, to allow modern technology into wilderness as a special case, can only erode the potential for understanding the management purposes of wilderness. Either the redefined wilderness becomes further fragmented by the expansion of permanent Aboriginal settlements and increased use of four-wheel-drive vehicles in these reserves, or indigenous communities are alienated and infuriated by conservation groups who supported the granting of Indigenous wilderness areas but then oppose any increase in the use of modern technology or the expansion of settlements into what they believe should be strictly protected reserves.

The two wilderness dreamings must be married so as to avoid potential confusion in wilderness reserve management during public awareness programs about wilderness, and particularly in campaigns to save wilderness areas. This resolution should be achieved through the development of detailed wilderness proposals in consultation with Indigenous communities.

The Indigenous wilderness concept as found in the Malimup communiqué has not seen wilderness protection extended across northern Australia. Here, non-Indigenous wilderness concepts could sit within Indigenous wilderness, between the low density of existing roads and settlements. This solution has been developed for Kakadu National Park in a process evolving over the last twenty years and that will go on evolving. Kakadu National Park, a Federally managed park within the Northern Territory, contains a wilderness area (designated 'Zone 4' in the plan of management) which covers about 475,300 hectares of the 2 million hectare park<sup>13</sup>. However, such an approach contains the risk of repeating the lessons learnt in the more settled districts where much wilderness has been compromised by development that should have been avoided. And the removal of the wilderness zone from Kakadu National Park proposed by the recent draft management plan is a worrying sign in that direction.

The degree to which the Malimup communiqué creates conflict with wilderness management principles can be moderated through the *Wild Country* approach developed by The Wilderness Society. Wild Country management can partly accommodate ideological inconsistencies by retaining important bushland links around development areas and linking potential wilderness reserves areas.

Now is the time to preserve wilderness, not when the last options are being played out; when every national park is an outdoor amusement park for tourists on package tour deals and the four-wheel-drive vehicle enthusiast. Now is the time to save wilderness in Cape York Peninsula in Queensland, Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and the Kimberley in Western Australia. Aboriginal communities have four-wheel-drive vehicles, and should have modern settlements and the best that modern society can offer. Yet motor vehicles form a barrier between wilderness and the human soul. You must 'walk the land' to fully relate and belong to the land. Surely the most sacred, most biodiverse places should be visited on their own terms?

Wilderness is, in administrative reality, a park management system that successfully defends nature from the spoiling forces of modern technology. Wilderness is also a powerful belief that respects the rights of nature and those of Indigenous people, and in politics such beliefs can become reality. Wilderness has done much to protect nature. There is much more to be done. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians can effectively act together when the bulldozers, miners, loggers and resort developers arrive to despoil the wilderness. The efforts toward wilderness protection

will be most effective when detailed wilderness protection proposals are advanced that can then be assessed in an open and transparent manner.

One of the more interesting aspects of wilderness protection in Northern Australia in the last decade has been the role played by two private foundations — the Australian Wildlife Conservancy and the Bush Heritage Trust. Both have been very active in acquiring key properties in Northern Australia. The Australian Wildlife Conservancy's acquisition of Mornington Station in the Kimberley covers some wonderful wilderness along the mighty Fitzroy River and King Leopold and Phillips Ranges. Other acquisitions abutting the Queensland's Wet Tropics are most significant. Likewise the land acquisitions of the Bush Heritage Trust in Queensland's Central Highlands wilderness area and the Simpson Desert wilderness are augmenting the efforts of the Queensland Government and extending the protected areas in both wilderness areas.

Although wilderness protection is not a primary objective of either Foundation their role in helping to protect wilderness needs to be better appreciated, especially as the aggregate size of their respective estates grows in significance.

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