

Tasmania's Wilderness: Progress in the Face of Institutional Hostility

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(Geoff Law of the Wilderness Society presented a broad brush and well illustrated picture of the wilderness situation in southern Australia to the Conference. We have not been able to include all of his power point presentation on this website. However, we have been able to include the section of Geoff's paper dealing with Tasmania which should be of particular interest to wilderness enthusiasts.)

Tasmania has one of the world's great temperate wilderness areas. Most of the western part of the island is in a wild state. The wild and scenic areas that contain core wilderness cover an area of approximately 2.5 million hectares.

Tasmania has no Wilderness Act and there are no explicit provisions of the National Parks and Wildlife Act that protect wilderness. This seems extraordinary, especially given the profile that the Tasmanian wilderness has acquired through campaigns for Lake Pedder, the Franklin and lower Gordon Rivers, the Lemnathyme and Southern Forests, the Tarkine, and the Styx Valley.

Nevertheless, significant progress has been made in protecting wilderness in Tasmania. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) and adjoining national parks cover over 1.4 million hectares of wild country. National parks in other parts of the state cover an additional 149,372 ha. There is a National Parks and Wildlife Service with many staff members dedicated to protecting the wilderness areas under their care. Tasmania is renowned nationally and internationally for the beauty of its wilderness. There is a strong culture of conservation within the Tasmanian community which is expressed in evocative photographs, dynamic public events, daily media coverage and constantly evolving campaign strategies and tactics.

Yet Tasmania's wilderness is also under enormous threat. There is less wilderness left in Tasmania today than ever before. The bulldozers and chainsaws of the logging industry are still penetrating previously remote and natural valleys. Proposed tourism developments have been approved in inappropriate locations within national parks. Companies exploring for minerals in wilderness 'reserves' are talking up the prospects of new mines. The drivers of off-road vehicles are claiming mineral-exploration and hydro tracks as 'traditional' recreation areas. The Tasmanian Government has shunted the Parks and Wildlife Service into the Tourism Department, separating it from nature-conservation specialists.

At a 'big-picture' level, the issues affecting Tasmania's wilderness can be categorised accordingly:

- The future of important but comparatively small areas of wild country in eastern Tasmania.
- The management of the TWWHA and adjacent national-park land;
- The threats of mining, mineral exploration and inappropriate recreation in 'reserved' land to the west of the TWWHA (West Coast and Tarkine)
- The destruction of wilderness taking place almost every day – and that is scheduled for the future – in forested wilderness to the east and north of the TWWHA and Tarkine.

Eastern Tasmania

In 2005, significant areas of public land in Tasmania were handed back to the Tasmanian Aboriginal community. This included over 45,000 ha on Cape Barren Island in the Furneaux Group of islands in Bass Strait. Much of this land is very wild and very scenic. It contains important tracts of heathland, wetlands, mountain peaks over 500 metres tall, magnificent beaches and sand-dunes, and freshwater lakes. The determination of the island's tenure – after a long period of uncertainty – creates a new opportunity for the conservation movement. We can now open discussions about how best to manage the wild and uninhabited parts of this beautiful island with its Tasmanian Aboriginal owners.

On the eastern parts of mainland Tasmania, the positive developments since 1993 include the expansion of the Freycinet, Ben Lomond and Mt William National Parks, and the creation of new or expanded Forest Reserves at Mt Maurice, Mt Victoria and the Blue Tier as well as in the large basin that feeds Great Oyster Bay. These much-needed new reserves are counter-balanced by the rapid attrition of adjacent wild country by Australia's most severe logging. Some of this is occurring on precipitous slopes in what would otherwise be stunning mountain landscapes.

The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

Over 90% of the TWWHA consists of national parks or equivalent tenures; a tiny amount (730 ha) consists of Aboriginal land (covering places of immense spiritual and cultural value to the Tasmanian Aboriginals, such as Kuti Kina Cave); and about 7% consists of Conservation Area, within which certain exploitative activities such as mineral exploration or hunting are allowed to occur.

In 1999, 20,114 ha of wild country immediately adjacent to the TWWHA were added to the national-park system as part of the 1997 Regional Forest Agreement (RFA). These have yet to be nominated as an extension to the TWWHA, despite a provision in the RFA that committed the federal and state governments to a World Heritage assessment by 30 June 1998. Those 20,000 ha contain spectacular places that are an integral part of the Tasmanian wilderness. They include Blakes Opening in the South-West, Beech Creek, Nelson Falls, the Dove River and South-East Cape.

Management of the TWWHA is determined by the management plan for the area, which was prepared by the Tasmanian National Parks and Wildlife Service¹. It covers 1.384 million hectares of World Heritage Area plus 20,114 ha of adjacent national park or equivalent – a total of over 1.4 million hectares of wilderness and other wild country. The Plan was approved in March 1999 but amended in 2002 to allow a tourist resort to be developed at Planters Beach near Cockle Creek in the Southwest National Park.²

The management plan divides the TWWHA into four zones. The largest is the Wilderness Zone, which covers approximately one million hectares and has the following objectives:

- To allow natural processes to operate with minimal interference.

- To retain a challenging, unmodified natural setting that suitably experienced and equipped people can visit for wilderness recreation and scientific purposes.
- To use wilderness as a primary means of managing, protecting and conserving World Heritage and other natural and cultural values.

The size of this zone and its objectives constitute welcome formal recognition of the importance of wilderness in Tasmania.

Smaller but still large areas are managed as a 'Self-Reliant Recreation Zone'. In the South-West, these include iconic bushwalking destinations such as the Eastern and Western Arthur Ranges, the Southern Ranges, and the beaches, coves and headlands near South-West Cape. In the north, they include high country popular with anglers.

Significant areas are managed as 'Recreation Zones'. These areas contain heavily-used constructed walking tracks (such as the Overland Track and South Coast Track); huts; waterways popular for boating (such as the Macquarie Harbour, the Gordon River and the Pedder impoundment); areas on the Central Plateau where hunting is permitted; bitumen roads such as the Lyell Highway and the roads to the Pedder-Gordon hydro-impoundments; and two four-wheel-drive tracks (Patons Road in the Forth Valley and the Mt McCall Road to the Franklin River).

Finally, there are the relatively small 'Visitor Service Zone' and 'Visitor Service Sites' which apply to heavily-used tourist attractions at places such as Cradle Mountain, Lake St Clair, Sarah Island and Scotts Peak.

While the overall approach of this zoning system is sound, the protection of wilderness is undermined by the following applications of the system:

- Hunting parties are permitted to take dogs into those parts of the TWWHA where hunting is permitted (on the Central Plateau and at Farm Cove on Macquarie Harbour). This may be the source of wild dogs recently seen in part of the TWWHA, particularly in and around the Walls of Jerusalem National Park;
- The self-reliant recreation zone encourages walking in the spectacular ranges of the South-West although park managers have yet to come to grips with the impact that walkers have had and are still having on sensitive high-altitude environments;
- Wilderness in the Adamsfield area could potentially be destroyed by new mining operations if commercial ore bodies are discovered by those exploring this area for minerals (a permitted land-use in the 5400-ha Adamsfield Conservation Area);
- Building a tourist resort at Planters Beach will ruin the atmosphere of the immediate area (both within and immediately adjacent to the Southwest National Park), degrade the natural environment, destroy cultural values, form a blot on the landscape, and interfere with public access to the beach;
- The zoning of the Mt McCall Track for recreation prevents the rehabilitation of this road which was built by the Tasmanian Hydro-Electric Commission so that the Franklin River could be dammed. A provision of the 1992

Management Plan for the road to be closed and rehabilitated was overturned by the state and federal governments in 1997.

At a more fundamental level, wilderness is let down by attitudes of hostility or indifference by governments. Federal and state ministers have stepped in to override the wilderness-protection objectives of the Management Plan for the TWWHA by amending it to keep open the Mt McCall Road; to facilitate the Planters Beach tourist resort; and to water down provisions of the Walking Track Management Strategy aimed at controlling the impacts of bushwalkers.

Negative attitudes towards wilderness by government ministers have also weakened advice regarding the protection of wilderness. For example, membership on the World Heritage Area Consultative Committee, which advises government ministers, has been skewed towards exploitative interests. It has been very light-on for advocates of wilderness protection. The 16-member committee contains representatives from recreational and development interests such as tourism, freshwater angling, forestry, trade unions, local government and 'established practices'. In theory, there is a place on the committee for a member representing 'conservation advocacy'. That position has been left vacant for several years. This is an example of government censorship of debates within its advisory committees.

There are three major outstanding issues adversely affecting the integrity of the Tasmanian Wilderness within the World Heritage Area:

- The still unresolved issue of whether, and, if so, how much, to burn buttongrass plains that are adjacent to mountains whose high country holds fire-sensitive alpine and sub-alpine vegetation;
- The use of the Gordon Dam's power station to provide peak load to Victorian power consumers via Bass Link. This creates unnaturally high levels of flow on the Gordon River downstream of the dam for short but very frequent periods, thereby eroding the riverbanks and destroying rainforests;
- The likely impacts of global warming on high-altitude eco-systems that have no higher country to which to 'retreat'.

The West Coast and Tarkine

Immediately to the west of the TWWHA lie ranges of spectacular, glaciated mountain peaks, significant tracts of temperate rainforest, expansive moorlands, and wild beaches and headlands. Governments and industry have resisted attempts by conservationists to add these places to the TWWHA and national-park system. Industry argues that these areas are prospective for minerals such as gold, copper, lead and zinc. The wild country that forms the outer parts of this wilderness lies very close to West Coast mining towns such as Queenstown and Rosebery.

However, the RFA and subsequent government decisions have created a significant set of reserves covering these places.

Fifteen years ago, the Tarkine was 'the forgotten wilderness'. There were very few reserves there. The Tarkine now contains the 17,980-ha Savage River National Park plus an additional 275,000 ha of other Formal Reserves. These new and expansive

reserves cover superlative natural features such as the Norfolk Range and its adjacent heathlands and dune-systems, the Donaldson River, major parts of the rainforested catchment of the Keith River, the Meredith Range, and some magnificent stands of untouched tall forest west of the Huskisson River.³ While these reserves are off-limits to logging, they are, unfortunately, open to mineral exploration and potential mining. Some, such as the Arthur-Pieman Conservation Area, are also open to cattle-grazing and damaging recreational driving of off-road vehicles.

In January 2006, beautiful and ancient rock engravings on the Tarkine coast were badly vandalised. This was an expression of hostile attitudes to Aboriginal heritage in parts of the north-west community. The perpetrators of this outrage have yet to be caught or punished. The maximum penalty is, in any case, only \$1000.

To the south, the spectacular coastal scenery of the Mt Heemskirk Regional Reserve was threatened by a proposed wind farm until the scheme was cancelled.

South of the Tarkine are an additional 296,000 ha of reserves immediately adjacent to the TWWHA. These contain spectacular features such as the Tyndall Range and Lake Huntley; Reynolds Falls; Granite Tor; the West Coast Range; Mt Murchison; and the rainforests and moorlands south of Macquarie Harbour. All of these places are open to mineral exploration and potential mining. South of Macquarie Harbour, mineral-exploration tracks are being taken over – and engraved into the thin quartzite soils – by off-road vehicles.

All of these places suffer from a dearth of decent management. The ‘objectives of management’ for the Conservation Areas, Nature Recreation Areas and Regional Reserves that constitute the majority of areas described above do not mention the word ‘wilderness’. Yet the wilderness within these reserves is part of the same great tract partially protected by the TWWHA itself. It would therefore seem sensible that their management be compatible and coordinated with that of the TWWHA.

The forests

East and north of the TWWHA and around the fringes of the Tarkine are the world’s tallest hardwood forests. These contain trees often more than 400 years old and up to 20 metres in circumference. They blanket valleys such as the Weld, Huon, Styx, Florentine, upper Derwent, Picton, Huskisson, Rapid and Arthur. They are being destroyed at a sickening rate. At least 1000 ha of high-quality wilderness is destroyed by these operations each year.

When the Tasmanian Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) was signed in November 1997, its advocates disingenuously proclaimed that it protected 95% of Tasmania’s wilderness. This act of statistical creativity failed to acknowledge that approximately one third of Tasmania’s high-quality wilderness, as defined and mapped by the RFA, was (and remains) open to destructive activities such as mining, mineral exploration and off-road recreation.

Most of Tasmania’s pristine tall-eucalypt forests occur within the ‘5%’ of the wilderness still threatened by logging, or within wild country whose integrity is essential for maintaining wilderness within the TWWHA itself.

The proposed logging in valleys such as the Weld, Huon and upper Florentine would dissect pristine country that contains wild rivers, caves, other karst formations and significant examples of Aboriginal heritage. While Forestry Tasmania claims to have management prescriptions that cater for some of these features, they are applied in a reductionist, piecemeal fashion. As the valleys get carved up, small buffer-strips are left around sink-holes, caves, Aboriginal shelters or eagles' nests. The intervening forests are felled. The value of the valley as part of a great wilderness is lost.

In May 2005, the Tasmanian and Commonwealth Governments signed a supplement to the RFA entitled 'the Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement'. (No community representatives were signatories or involved in determining the agreement.) This was said to protect an additional '148,000 ha of public land, including 120,000 hectares of oldgrowth forest'.⁴ This claim was a sham.

The Agreement actually protected only 27,000 hectares of forest actually threatened by logging⁵. Some vitally important tracts of rainforest in the Tarkine were protected, as well as some superb stand of giant trees and intact tall forest in the Styx valley. Elsewhere, the Agreement was largely a cynical exercise in identifying forests that could not have been logged anyway due to practical, technical or legal reasons, and then declaring them to be 'new informal reserves'.

Because of this 'loss' of resource (the areas referred to above are all public land), the industry was provided with a package of \$235 million of taxpayers' funds. For the amount of forest protected, this was obscene. It is indicative of the anti-wilderness values of the state and federal governments that they feel compelled not just to compensate extractive industries, but to actually over-compensate them, for the protection of publicly-owned wilderness that they never owned.

Many of those taxpayer funds are now being spent on destroying wilderness. For example, millions are to be spent on new logging roads into the Styx, Weld and Upper Florentine valleys to enable the extraction of 'specialty timbers' from the mature rainforest understoreys in those forests. Ironically, and tragically, the areas being destroyed using taxpayers' funds in the Styx and Florentine are places that the Federal Government promised to protect in October 2004.⁶ In May 2005, it admitted that it had failed to achieve the promised 'target'.⁷

The Wilderness Society and small local groups such as the friends of the Blue Tier and the Huon Valley Environment Centre have fought against this destruction. Protests occurred in both the Weld and Florentine valleys in 2006.

Conservation groups have proposed new formal reserves – or extensions to existing ones – that would protect an additional 500,000 hectares of land in Tasmania. These areas contain approximately 240,000 hectares of State Forest that is threatened by logging.⁸

The future

Threats to wilderness in Tasmania are sufficiently enumerated above.

New opportunities for advancing wilderness conservation are as follows:

- Discussion with the Aboriginal owners of Cape Barren Island about protection of that beautiful island's wonderful scenery and biodiversity.
- Developing a World Heritage extension for the Tasmanian Wilderness that would incorporate the Tarkine, western reserved lands, the Great Western Tiers (adjacent to the existing TWWHA), and the largely intact forests stretching from Mt Rufus in the north to Cockle Creek in the south.
- Working with the Tasmanian Government to develop and implement Management Plans for new formal reserves so that wilderness protection is an objective of management.
- Using new images, new places and the governments' broken promises to continually rejuvenate the campaign to protect wilderness from logging.
- Educating the public and decision-makers about the role that natural vegetation – particularly forests that contain mature trees and oldgrowth – can play in sequestering carbon from the atmosphere, thereby reducing greenhouse emission.
- Educating the public and decision-makers about the role that forests play in protecting water-catchments and in regulating the flow of water from catchments to domestic and agricultural users.
- Continuing to promote the spiritual values of wilderness through new images and writing.

A Wilderness Act is required in Tasmania. This is possibly the only way of ensuring that cohesive management strategies that protect wilderness are implemented across reserve-boundaries. Substantial tracts of wilderness in Regional Reserves, Conservation Areas and Nature Recreation Areas abut the Wilderness Zone of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area – particularly along its western boundary. Similarly, management sympathetic with wilderness values is necessary in State Forest adjacent to the TWWHA and in associated Forest Reserves. There is no reason why a holistic approach to management of all of the above should not occur. In many of these places, the boundaries between areas of different tenure have no on-the-ground relevance. They are imaginary lines. The wilderness areas they cross, however, are intensely and beautifully real.

And that is the source of the conservation movement's strength and hope. Tasmania's wilderness has such a powerful beauty that it is constantly attracting new visitors from the mainland, from overseas and within Tasmania itself. In this way, the campaign to protect wilderness is constantly renewed.

¹ Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan 1999

² Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Management Plan alteration 2002

³ <http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/>

⁴ *A Way Forward for Tasmania's Forests, The Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement*, Australian and Tasmanian Governments

⁵ Question on notice, Peg Putt MHA to Premier Paul Lennon, No: HA06/9, 31 October 2006

⁶ The Howard Government 2004 Election Policy, A Sustainable Future for Tasmania

⁷ Tasmanian Community Forest Agreement, Fact Sheet No. 3

⁸ *Protecting Forests, Growing Jobs*, ACF, The Wilderness Society et al