

## Keeping the Wild in Wilderness

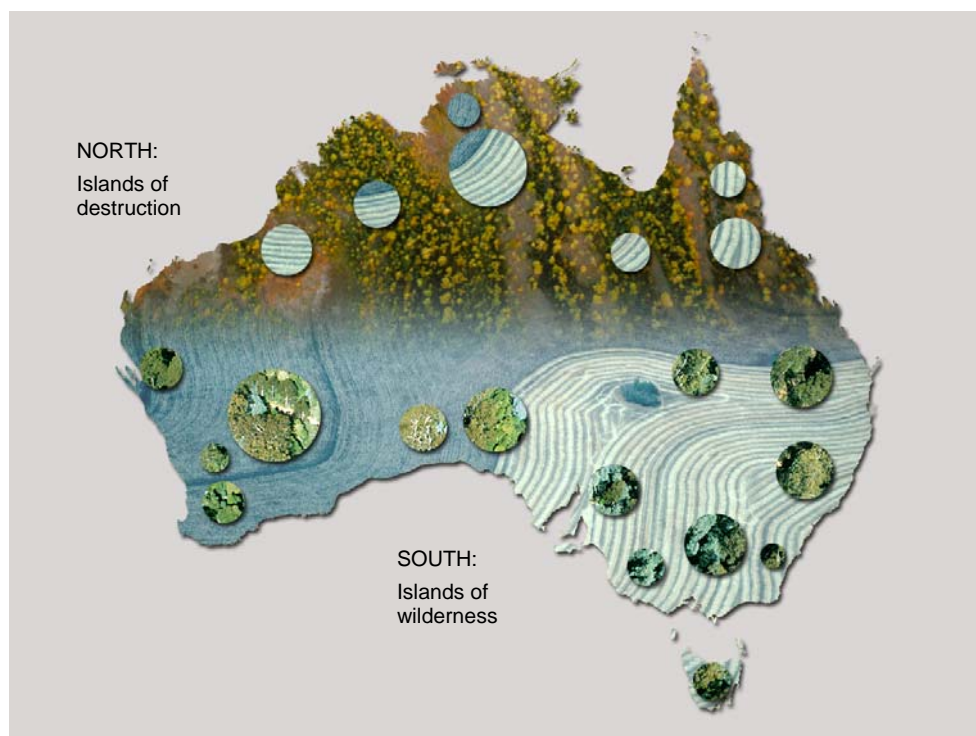
(Notes of Virginia Young's talk, along with her Power Point presentation, have been used by the Conference organisers to prepare this paper for these proceedings. We apologise for any inadvertent errors of interpretation.)

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The primary objectives of the Wilderness Society have evolved in recent years from protect, preserve and promote wilderness to 'protect, promote and restore wilderness and natural processes across Australia for the survival and ongoing evolution of life on Earth'. Our new purpose has been developed to face new challenges and permits us to better embrace relationships with Indigenous culture in harmony with the natural world.

The remaining areas of large intact landscapes are the deserts, high latitude boreal forests and tundra grasslands, the Amazon and Northern Australia. It is of great concern that the footprint of human activities is expanding into these formerly remote parts of the globe.

The Australian continent can be divided along the Tropic of Capricorn for the purpose of considering appropriate methods of natural area management. In northern Australia, islands of destruction threaten the integrity of vast areas of tropical wilderness. In southern Australia, relatively small islands of fragmented, temperate wilderness exist in a sea of disturbed land. The challenges of "keeping the wild in wilderness" differ in the **intact** and **fragmented** landscapes.



In tropical Australia, the challenge is to contain the threats from impinging on wild lands, whereas in temperate Australia the challenge is to ensure the protection of remaining wilderness islands, for example by linking these areas with corridors of natural bushland.

The threats of wilderness in both northern and southern Australia include:

- Population and urban expansion;
- Tourism and recreational use;
- Agriculture and grazing;
- Dams and diversions;
- Climate change;
- Roads and infrastructure;
- Ferals and weeds;
- Clearing;
- Logging;
- Salinity;
- Inappropriate fire management

**WildCountry** is a science-based, continent-wide approach to nature conservation that will give nature its best possible chance of survival in the future.

**WildCountry** has been developed to meet the challenge of:

- Keeping the wild country intact wherever it may be and to protect wild nature in a fragmented landscape to provide country-wide conservation of nature for the long term; and
- Promoting the need for understanding how nature works, ensuring that the natural ecological processes which sustain wildlife can continue to do so.

**The WildCountry Science Council** has described seven “connectivity” processes necessary for the healthy functioning of natural ecosystems (Mackey *et al.* 2005, Soulé *et al.* 2004):

1. **Critical species interactions** involve keystone species (eg, tiger quolls, and birds and insects pollinators) that strongly interact with other species and require free movement through the natural environment to function effectively.
2. **Long distance movement of native mammals and insects** is necessary to allow them to cope with seasonal and year-to-year variation in habitat and food resources.
3. **Rapid climate change and climate variability** makes the need for connectivity between natural environments through the landscape essential, as

climate change forces alterations in the distribution and interactions of native plants and animals.

4. **Ecological fire regimes** are necessary for the maintenance of connectivity at the landscape level.
5. **Natural evolution** is dependent on connectivity, as plants and animals need to be able to retreat into refugia in times of extended drought, and also to allow plants and animals within refugia and that are adapted to new conditions to move out into the landscape.
6. **Hydroecology** is maintained in catchment areas by native plant cover that help regulate water flows through ecosystems and can ensure natural productivity and pure water supplies, through, for example, the protection of wild rivers.
7. **Coastal zone fluxes** - healthy catchments ensure healthy and productive coastal zones, as catchments transport water and nutrients from the inland.

### **Protecting biodiversity in an ecosystem and evolutionary context is the new paradigm for wilderness conservation**

This approach has three key elements:

1. It recognises that the *evolved characteristic biodiversity* of biomes/ecosystems that have evolved in any one place:
  - represents all forms of native plants and animals and their life history strategies that are best adapted to natural selective forces; and
  - the biodiversity that is optimal given the environmental and natural disturbance regimes.
2. It seeks to protect and restore the natural processes that sustain system dynamics and evolutionary potential, that is, processes that:
  - constitute evolutionary selective forces (eg fire regimes); and
  - generate and sustain system dynamics and habitat resources (eg productivity).
3. It defines “connectivity” with regard to integrity of the natural environment in terms of ecosystem functioning and the condition of natural processes as well as the arrangement of ecosystems.

**WildCountry science** is developing principles (and associated methods) for large-scale, long-term conservation. It is developing conservation processes that are multi-scaled looking at the spatial (local–regional–continental–global) and temporal (years–decades–centuries–millennia scales). This new approach to wilderness conservation is about understanding how nature works including the fundamental level (ecological processes), and the holistic picture that nature operates over large scales and long time frames, not just in the “here and now”.

Ironically, this is also the oldest approach to working with nature – Australia’s Indigenous citizens have been using this approach for at least 40,000 years. Indigenous Australians have lived on the continent for between 40,000 – 50,000 years. In many places traditional links to land and sea remain strong. Many Indigenous communities still rely on “bush tucker” such as those who depend on the Aurukun wetlands.

### **Nature conservation in northern Australia has different management imperatives:**

Much of our big natural and extensive landscapes in the north and centre are degrading due to feral animals, weeds and changed fire regimes, which is in marked contrast to the level of wilderness protection and management in the south. Australia’s drier and tropical habitats are in dire need of *active* labour-intensive management. There is a need for more people living on the country and for them to be supported to look after the land. Cape York, for example, covers almost 14 million hectares and has just 18,000 residents (and, excluding town-based people, this represents only one person for every 200 sq km<sup>2</sup>).

### **Wild Rivers Rangers**

The promised employment of 100 Wild rivers rangers is one initiative to ensure that wild country is better managed in north. In September 2006 Anne Bligh, Deputy Premier of Queensland, said that “If re-elected the Beattie Labor Government will enlist the traditional skills of Indigenous people to manage its Wild Rivers...The [rangers] will be drawn from local areas and will represent the traditional owners.

They will work on weed and feral animal management, controlling stream bank erosion, maintaining water quality, re-vegetating riverine areas and educating the public generally about the worth of keeping our rivers in a wild state.”**WildCountry Indigenous Conservation Strategies**

We are developing a program in which land justice, Indigenous rights and conservation are resolved for the protection and maintenance of the Australian environment. The *WildCountry* approach contains the following features:

- **Developing knowledge, research and policy** through combining Indigenous ecological knowledge with conservation science.
- **Engagement and communications** – The Wilderness Society is focusing on:
  - Indigenous people in general, with appropriate communications and membership engagement strategies; and
  - regarding particular environmental outcomes, we are focusing on key land owners and communities.
- **Allies and cooperation agreements** – The central tenet of our program is to develop alliances and agreements with Indigenous traditional owners, and other Indigenous land and sea interests.

- ***In situ* conservation and homelands development** – Real support and engagement on conservation and homeland development, including enterprise opportunities, on Country.

### **Indigenous Protected Areas – legislative and policy requirements**

The Wilderness Society has identified the following principles necessary for the development of a comprehensive, representative and adequate system of Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs):

1. Legal frameworks for protected areas must be adequate in dealing with, and accommodating, the rights and interests of Indigenous Traditional Owners, and the positive contributions to be made by them in environmental protection and natural resource management;
2. Development of the Indigenous aspects of all protected areas within the IUCN reserve categories (including category 1a and 1b which are conventionally assumed to preclude compatibility with Indigenous environmental, cultural, social and economic interests);
3. Protected area status using IUCN reserve categories I through IV should be the preferred status for IPAs, and that the application of these categories should not affect the ownership and management rights by Indigenous Traditional Owners. This may require legislative reform;
4. Facilitation of a comprehensive, graduated system of Indigenous land management, from natural resource management and multi-use homelands through to strict protected areas, through legislative and administrative supports, and backed by a sliding scale of public investment, with higher investments resulting in line with higher conservation outcomes.

### **Cape York Peninsula some key facts:**

Queensland is one of the most biodiverse locations on planet Earth. Its “core residual areas” of nature, which are largely undamaged by human activity, mainly lie in the far north, in one of the world’s great biological treasures: Cape York Peninsula.

The Cape embraces:

- 13.6 million hectares
- One of the world’s 37 great wild domains
- 40 endemic fauna species
- 397 rare, threatened or endangered plants
- Globally rare old growth rainforests
- Australia’s largest & most diverse wetlands
- 21 pristine wild rivers
- the healthiest section of the world’s greatest barrier reef system

Protecting the extraordinary natural values of the Cape requires a fundamentally new approach which would deal with threats to the whole landscape.

The Wilderness Society has been involved with the Cape for many years. We fought to protect the pristine dune fields of Shelburne Bay from sand mining in 1987 and secured protection for the Starcke wilderness in 1994. Last year, however, two enormously significant conservation victories were achieved on an entirely different plane:

- legislation banning broad scale land clearing across most of Queensland; and
- the introduction in Queensland of Australia's first Wild Rivers legislation, providing a legislative mechanism for protecting wild rivers.

### **Co-operation agreements between TWS and Indigenous communities**

Dialogue with Indigenous communities is resolving tenure and conservation issues over land acquired by government to meet the dual objectives of Indigenous land rights and nature conservation.

Seventeen properties have been acquired and, provided there is traditional owner consent, a protected area network with World Heritage listing covering about 10 million acres and 750 miles of the east coast should be possible in the near future.

Members of the *WildCountry* Science Council and others provide the scientific basis for The Wilderness Society's work on the Cape. Their comprehensive assessment will continue to help us keep Cape York intact.

This conservation work would not have been possible without working cooperatively with Indigenous owners. Cooperative work with the traditional owners of Cape York goes back more than 20 years. For example, the successful joint campaign with the Wuthathi people – traditional owners of the white sand dune country of Shelburne Bay, to cancel sand mining leases. A current cooperative agreement with the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation aims at delivering a 300,000 acre IPA in the near future.

The cooperation agreement between The Wilderness Society and the Traditional Owners of Kaanju homelands (Cape York) aims, among other things, to ensure that Kaanju Ngaachi (homelands):

are managed and maintained at the highest level of ecological and cultural integrity, and that there is public, community and philanthropic support for this environmental goal; and

form an important part in the mosaic of Protected Areas and Conservation Agreements that are or will be established to achieve high-level protection of the diverse and magnificent environments of Cape York Peninsula.

The Wilderness Society in conjunction with the Australian National University and the Chuulangun Aboriginal Corporation have developed an approach to Indigenous environmental assessment of a candidate property or landscape.

The Indigenous environmental approach applies the following **key identification criteria**:

#### 1. Context

- What are the main environmental characteristics of the property?
- What kinds of landscape ecosystems does the property represent?
- Where else are there similar landscapes?
- What Indigenous cultural sites and groupings of sites are, or were, present in the area?

#### 2. Composition

- What species and ecological communities are present on the property?
- Are there any threatened species or ecological communities present or likely to be present on the property?
- Are there ecological communities or ecosystems on the property that are particularly important for traditional human-nature relations?

#### 3. Condition

- To what extent has the vegetation cover of the property been degraded by modern land use activity?
- Has the soil been eroded or contaminated, or the water polluted?
- Are feral animals or invasive plants a problem?
- Is Indigenous natural and cultural management continuous or discontinuous?

#### 4. Connectivity

- Can the property enhance the viability of an existing protected area (eg, by buffering the boundary or linking two currently unconnected areas)?
- Does the property have habitat resources that are important for migratory animals (eg wetlands) or ecologically important species (eg, seed dispersing birds)?
- Does the property play an important role in hydrological processes (eg, encompasses a ground water recharge zone)?
- Is the property part of connected Indigenous estates and homelands?

## 5. Restoration Potential

- If the ecosystems or ecological communities on the property are in poor condition, are there good prospects for ecological and eco-cultural restoration?

### **We are applying the following practical steps to protect the Cape:**

- Scientific assessment using *WildCountry* principles
- Prevent key threats, such as land clearing, inappropriate mining and regulation of rivers
- A conservation plan based on large connected networks of protected areas
- Funding to buy strategically important land
- Develop co-operative relationships with Indigenous communities
- Resolution of land tenure issues
- Securing political support for a conservation-based future
- Development of a “conservation economy”

Of all the steps taken to date, the most important outstanding issues is the development of economic opportunities for Indigenous communities who wish to conserve their land. With better funding opportunities, much more could be done to secure powerful protection and conservation management outcomes on the Cape.

### **Gondwana Link – a Western Australian case study**

The south-west of Western Australia is internationally renowned as a global biodiversity hot spot and for being one of the world’s great botanic provinces. Gondwana Link is a new vision for the south-west. It aims to restore plants and animals and ecological connectivity from Kalgoorlie to Margaret River, a distance spanning almost a thousand kilometres and divided into eight planning regions.

Gondwana Link is enabling the community to tackle ecological restoration on a scale never before attempted in Australia and seeking to protect our last great temperate woodland wilderness using the same *WildCountry* principles. Most of this region has been heavily fragmented by intensive agriculture or logging, however, groups and individuals inspired by Gondwana Link are turning the tide through bush purchase, conservancy agreements and revegetation.

The contributors to Gondwana Link include The Wilderness Society, the Friends of Fitzgerald River National Park, Greening Australia, Australian Bush Heritage Fund, Mallee Fowl Preservation Group, and the Fitzgerald Biosphere Group. Each of these organisations contribute their knowledge and existing expertise to the project, guided by the conservation principles of Gondwana Link. The conservation efforts include broad-scale ecological restoration between the Stirling Range and the Fitzgerald River National Parks, which are two of the biologically richest wilderness areas in Australia. There is also the critical Ravensthorpe bush connection that represents the very last link between the globally recognised Fitzgerald River National Park and the drier inland, yet this link remains at risk through neglect and destructive activities.

The Gondwana Link vision encompasses several superlative wilderness areas, from the tall forests of the Walpole Wilderness, to the amazing heathlands and mallee of the Fitzgerald River National Park and the forests of the Stirling Ranges National Park.

The ecological principles developed by Gondwana Link are for any landholder or NGO stakeholder to use and work towards the vision of a protected, restored and reconnected landscape. Changes to land use are already occurring through the work of inspired individuals and groups.

### **The Great Western Woodlands**

At 16.1 million hectares, the Great Western Woodlands of southern Western Australia possibly contains both the largest remaining areas of temperate woodlands and temperate heathlands in the world. These woodlands support 17% of Australia's vascular plant species in 2% of Australia's land area. Data from National Land and Water Audit, Australian Native Vegetation Assessment states that the region contains one third of Australia's major vegetation groups. Gondwana Link vision is facilitating positive action to reduce damage from irresponsible mining, frequent fires and other threats.

Scientific assessment of the extraordinary Great Western Woodlands is being undertaken in co-operation with the local Indigenous communities and the Australian National University. Already it seems likely to be another World Heritage area in waiting, but achieving comprehensive protection for the area will be a major challenge. While it is all public land, few people know of its existence; it has no conservation history; negligible community capacity; disparate Indigenous interests; and in the medium to long-term is highly threatened by open cut mining. Community education and capacity-building is needed if this area is to receive secure protection.

### **The Current Challenges being addressed by The Wilderness Society**

To sum up, The Wilderness Society is working with the community to develop:

- A scientifically based continent-wide planning framework for nature conservation;
- A large-scale system of connected protected areas, with wilderness at its core;
- Measures to remove serious threats and improve management of land for conservation outside the formal reserve system;
- Strategies for the establishment of conservation economies;
- Capacity in local communities to maximise conservation effectiveness.

In conclusion The Wilderness Society wonders whether it is now appropriate to seek amendment of current wilderness legislation to accommodate Aboriginal rights and interests? And should we set up a working group to develop a dialogue around this question as an outcome of the conference?