

Statement on Wilderness

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This is a reworking of a view I put early in the discussion process, which has led to the seminar. It is not an academic paper but my own views. It is not an official position of the Foundation.

I have been involved in the wilderness issue for 25 years. I entered the environment movement through my membership of the Colo Committee in 1977 fighting with Hayden and others for the Wollemi wilderness. My commitment to wild nature over this time has been intellectual, scientific, aesthetic and ethical. Such was my interest in wilderness that I wrote my Honours thesis on *The Politics of Wilderness Conservation in Australia: The Movement and the Issue*. I was fully engaged in the battle for the rainforests in NSW when I was appointed the national lobbyist of the ACF in 1982. During my years in Canberra the primary issue was the great battle for South West Tasmania and the Franklin.

However, following my marriage and move to Alice Springs in 1985 I became more conscious of the perception of indigenous people that we environmentalists were drawing lines and designating wilderness areas over lands which they knew were their ancestral lands and spiritual 'country'. In addition there was definitely an emerging theme among some environmentalists that indigenous people were acceptable as long as they stuck to traditional ways of life, but a potential threat to nature if they adopted modern hunting and living styles. In 1985 I wrote one of the earliest comprehensive papers on Conservation and Indigenous lands where I examined these issues. The paper argued for an attempt at reconciliation.

A further reason why conservationists should reconcile their aims with Aboriginal rights is that Aboriginal people have a sorry history of being moved on, or simply eliminated, whenever they have stood in the way of non-Aboriginal aspirations. In Central Australia the pastoralists and settlers have been followed by miners and tourists who have frequently pushed aside inconvenient black Australians. If conservationists, in their pursuit of pristine wilderness and national parks, which conform to pure definitions, insist that Aboriginal wishes should yet again go unheeded, they will be joining the forces of oppression and social dislocation. Given that Aboriginal Australians remain probably the poorest and most socially problem-wracked group in Australia I believe it is incumbent on conservationists, to assist rather than add to Aboriginal problems. Although rights to their traditional lands will not solve the accumulated social ills which have flowed from colonisation and dispossession it is the *sine qua non* of Aboriginal advancement and cultural revival.

I have been trying to reconcile these issues since that time. I was very involved in ACF's *Wilderness and Indigenous Landscapes Policy* and my 1999 monograph *Australia's National Parks and Protected Areas: Future Directions* gives considerable coverage of the issue.

My first point is therefore to urge participants to avoid any suggestion that people who care about wilderness do not acknowledge and respect human rights – particularly those of indigenous people.

Like several of your participants I too attended the World Parks Congress in Durban and agree that the traditional foes of nature are still there and knocking hard at the door. However, the people who raise human rights issues are not in this camp. They are simply reflecting a fearful reality that such forums must discuss and confront, which is that parks and wildlife will not survive when resident or neighbouring people are starving and or deeply hostile to the park because their livelihood or cultural attachment has been lost. It is simplistic to say that any discussion of parks and human rights means that nature loses out. At Durban we heard many examples of where people are working together for both goals and where enhanced human rights had led to conservation outcomes.

On this global level it is simply pragmatic sense as well as morally sound to discuss human rights and conservation. To use language which can be interpreted as not sensitive to these issues will make the group sound 'out of touch' at the very least, or worse guilty of the kind of neo colonialist attitudes identified in Hayden's paper.

You may argue well that this human imperative is not the situation in Australia and certainly not the Blue Mountains. While it is certainly true that we do not have large communities who rely on the wilderness for 'survival' in the narrowest sense, there are many areas of Australia where indigenous people regard the land as absolutely the essence of their existence and survival and inseparable from themselves. The outcome we all want - substantial areas of Australia managed to protect naturalness will not occur in for example, Central Australia, Cape York, Arnhem Land and the Kimberley in any way except in cooperation with indigenous people.

As for the argument that nature existed for countless millions of years before any human occupation – it is one that I acknowledge and respect and have drafted in to ACF's philosophy and *Wilderness and Indigenous Landscapes Policy*. However, I don't think one can easily dismiss the claims of the oldest continuous culture on earth. ACF had a very difficult and agonising process to try to reconcile our love and defence of nature at its most wild and unmodified and our respect for indigenous people. I believe we made a reasonable fist of it and would recommend it as reading. A term we used was 'convergence' meaning that while different people may be coming from different sources of feelings towards the land there is a common area.

The policy reads:

3.5 The Foundation believes that the desire to protect areas of the planet, such as wilderness, free from industrialisation and urban exploitation can be a point of convergence for different cultures and values and can be the source of cooperation and unity between indigenous and non indigenous people.

My second point comes from my experience as a political strategist. I believe the defenders of wilderness risk marginalising the issue and confirming existing prejudices if they appear to be antagonistic to indigenous rights. Indigenous people and their supporters are potential allies and conservation will not be served by ignoring and dismissing their interests. Younger conservationists in particular are profoundly committed to indigenous rights and will dismiss any counter lobby as out of touch. If forced to 'choose' I believe wilderness may well lose. This is certainly true of the current ACF Council and I suspect most other major conservation organisations. I am not a naïve, 'noble savage' true believer that all indigenous people are automatically conservationists and I have had considerable first hand experience of the difficult realities but I believe reconciliation is a road we must travel for both ethical and practical reasons.

However, the benefits of respect and cooperation are already evident. By mid 2003, 17 Indigenous Protected Areas have been declared over Aboriginal land, covering more than

13.8 million hectares and adding significantly to the National Reserve System. I would ask readers to focus on that figure – is this not a magnificent and dramatic gain for conservation?

Many people will be thinking but indigenous interests are not respectful of our concerns! Yes there is truth in this and some individuals have been both inflammatory and inaccurate. However, we will not end the unnecessary conflict by engaging in similarly antagonistic approaches. I believe what we need to do is articulate the profound arguments for wild nature with inspiring ethical, spiritual, scientific and economic arguments. However most importantly we need to make clear that our respect and love of nature can converge with the critical importance of healthy land in the indigenous world view to create a shared goal.

Any statement which comes out of the meeting needs to make absolutely clear that our passion for the wild natural world *does* recognise both the past habitation by indigenous people and the modifications they made. This needs in my view to be explicit, rather than 'assumed'.

The harder area is to encompass modern indigenous aspirations. I believe this may require compromise of our demanding definitions, especially in northern Australia where an adamant position against settlements and roads defies a current reality and denies the rights of traditional owners to aspire beyond a strictly traditional life. If you continue to use the IUCN definition I think it needs a starred caveat which says "It is acknowledged that indigenous people live or may wish to live on their own lands".

Where ecologically unsound proposals are being made by indigenous people we must articulate our opposition in a clear manner but we are far more likely to be heard as friends.

I have spent a lifetime championing the importance of nature to have sanctuaries where the intrinsic rights of other creatures have predominance. I also acknowledge that there will be incidences where indigenous aspirations or attitudes clash outright with the goal of full protection, but I truly feel we will only achieve the critical goals of conservation if we build relationships based on proper acknowledgment.

Best wishes for the seminar

Penny Figgis
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