

## A wilderness resurgence

by Peter Prineas

*This article is based on an opening address to the 'Wilderness Resurgence Seminar' held at the Blue Mountains Heritage Centre, Blackheath NSW, Sunday 28th March 2004.*

To speak of 'a wilderness resurgence' implies that the wilderness movement has seen better times and that we are hoping for a revival. Let's consider the situation over recent decades.

Perhaps the most important difference thirty years ago was the environment movement's strong belief in the wilderness idea. Campaigns were fought under the banner of wilderness throughout the 70s and 80s, leading in NSW to the enactment of the Wilderness Act in 1987. Some doubts were expressed during this period by naturalists and wildlife ecologists, notably by Allen Strom in NSW, but these were, I think, directed more at influencing conservation priorities than at discrediting the wilderness concept.

The main detractors of wilderness then, as now, were mining, forestry and farming interests and, from about the mid 1970s, four-wheel-drive vehicle recreationists. Attacks on wilderness from such groups were usually sparked by some land-use dispute and, if anything, confirmed the views of wilderness supporters. The important critique of wilderness from the Aboriginal perspective came later, after 1992 when the full High Court made its decision in the Mabo case [Mabo and Others v Queensland (No. 2) (1992) 175 CLR 1 F.C. 92/014]. I will say more about this later.

Australian society during the period I am describing was different in ways that may have helped the development of the wilderness concept. For the Australian-born white majority, at least, the four decades following the Second World War were relatively good times. Working hours were moderate. Economic pressures on the young and the less affluent were not as great as they are now (housing for instance was much cheaper). People had the leisure time to explore wilderness areas, to appreciate them, and to work towards their protection.

Society offered fewer distractions. Businesses and shops were closed for all or most of the weekend. There was only one film (not eight) showing at the cinema, television was abysmal and there was no internet. Overseas travel was not an option for most people until the mid 1970s and so the vast majority spent their holidays in Australia. Demographics also played a part. The post war baby boom meant there was a lot of youthful idealism in the 60s and 70s. Some took up the banner of nature and wilderness conservation. Some took the alternative lifestyle route via Nimbin. It is interesting how their paths later crossed at Terania Creek and in the campaign for rainforest wilderness. But this is not to overlook the importance of their parents - the generation that lived in the shadow of the Great Depression - who were used to simple pleasures like bushwalking and family camps, who joined the bushwalking clubs and the conservation societies, and who influenced the generation that followed.

And what about wilderness today?

Wilderness took a beating in the 1990s. The environment movement became ambivalent about wilderness which some people saw as a relic from the past. Wilderness was an embarrassment, a bit like one of those umbrella stands made out of an elephant's foot. This change in attitude arose from the linking of wilderness

areas with terra nullius and Aboriginal dispossession. A memorable indictment appeared in the Wilderness Society's magazine in 1995:

"The popular definition of wilderness excludes all human interaction within allegedly pristine natural areas even though they are and have been inhabited and used by indigenous people for thousands of years. Like the legal fiction of terra nullius which imagined us out of existence until the High Court decision in the Mabo case, popular culture also imagines us out of existence ... National parks can be understood as a part of the colonial repertoire when they are understood as the further delineation, naming and categorising of Terra Nullius Incognito. It is a further conquest."

[LANGTON, M. 1995. The European Construction of Wilderness. Wilderness Society Magazine, No. 143 Summer 95/96].

The force of this argument undermined the environment movement's consensus. The effects were not the same throughout the country and, in terms of what actually happened on the ground, they were not as significant in the southeastern states. In NSW, wilderness nominations, assessments and gazettals under the Wilderness Act continued, however the new mood may have contributed to the decision of the NPWS to close its head office wilderness unit. This did not bring the machinery of the Wilderness Act to a halt, but it may have exacerbated regional differences in the Act's administration.

Aboriginal ownership provisions were added to the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Act. These were controversial at the time, but to date they have directly affected only a small number of national parks, and one wilderness area at Mutawingee National Park in the far west of the state. Some years have elapsed since the hand-over and a few concerns have emerged. For example, the board of management for the park seems reluctant to do anything about the dams which are relics of the land's former use as pastoral station. These artificial water sources support kangaroos in great numbers, upsetting the ecological balance and causing damage to the park and the wilderness area.

The passage I quoted accuses wilderness proponents of being blind to the presence of indigenous people. However, the accusation is false as wilderness has never been defined as a place that "excludes all human interaction". Even the despised doctrine of terra nullius did not deny the presence of humans in wilderness; what it did was deny their claims to ownership of the land.

In the 1970s I spent a lot of time in wilderness areas. With others I explored them on foot and gained a strong sense of their history, including their past Aboriginal use. Unlike others at that time, conservationists acknowledged the past Aboriginal use of the lands in which they were interested. I was employed by the National Parks Association of NSW and worked with volunteers on national park proposals. If there was information available about Aboriginal use of the areas it was included in the proposals as this added to understanding of the area and to the case for reservation. I took this approach in the book *Colo Wilderness*, which I published with the photographer Henry Gold in 1977 as part of the campaign for the Wollemi National Park. The book devoted a chapter to past Aboriginal use of this wilderness area. Another book, *Wild Places: wilderness in eastern NSW* which Henry and I published in 1983, had a chapter entitled *Terra Nullius* which explored the Aboriginal relationship with wilderness before 1788. A further chapter *The Refuge* suggested that after settlement (or invasion) some wilderness areas may have provided a refuge for Aboriginal life and culture. The book's descriptions of wilderness areas included a great deal of information about their Aboriginal use and significance.

In any event, I don't accept that you can take the eighteenth century idea of wilderness, with all its imperial and colonial meanings, and dump it on present-day wilderness reserves. No-one today sees wilderness in eighteenth century terms. Wilderness areas in NSW have formed parts of national parks and nature reserves since the 1970s. They are a category of public land. Why should they be blamed for the wrong of Aboriginal dispossession any more than other categories of public land such as beaches, cricket pitches, football grounds and golf courses (to say nothing of freehold lands)?

Wilderness reservations have helped to preserve Aboriginal cultural features. I can illustrate this from my own experience. In the bush not far from Sydney there is a sandstone cave or overhang that I have visited now and then over many years. Along the back wall of the cave are well preserved Aboriginal hand stencils. Above the cave there is a wide terrace where pools of water lie in hollows after rain, a pleasant spot to take in the sun on a winter's day and enjoy the view. The place is in untracked bush and in nearly three decades I have not seen any deterioration in the art or the site generally. In contrast, near Glenbrook there is a similar cave named Red Hands Cave. This cave is not in a wilderness area and a road leads to it. It is protected by a steel structure as big as a house and the Aboriginal hand stencils are viewed through a panel of hardened glass.

I hope the gap between Aboriginal interests and the interests of wilderness conservation turns out to be more a matter of rhetoric than practical difference. I think there is a better understanding on both sides than was the case some years ago, and I believe there is a willingness on the part of the environment movement to accommodate Aboriginal cultural aspirations in national parks and wilderness areas, as long as the primary aims of these reserves are met. In NSW, co-management arrangements are anticipated in some national parks. The current plan of management review for Kosciuszko National Park is notable for the way it has sought to involve Aboriginal people. As mentioned, a few parks have been transferred to Aboriginal ownership subject to leaseback arrangements; these offer some assurance that the land will continue to be managed for its nature conservation and wilderness values. Wilderness has always had its detractors. In the past they were mainly vested interests. In the 1990s these were joined by a few intellectuals. At the first *Milo Dunphy Memorial Lecture*, prominent scientist and author Dr Tim Flannery told the audience there was no such thing as wilderness in Australia and that these 'empty' lands should be re-populated by Aboriginal people and 'managed' once more. Clearly, wilderness enthusiasts are not the only romantics in this debate. I wonder how many Aboriginal people (in NSW almost all urban dwellers) would be interested in residing in places like the Colo Gorge.

Of more concern are the writings of some post-modern theorists. Although their critiques of wilderness are shallow and rely on a faulty portrayal of the wilderness concept, theirs is the only view presented in many university courses and so they are influential.

Today's demographics are a challenge to the wilderness movement which, as a group, is aging. More young people are needed to bring enthusiasm and energy to wilderness conservation.

In the past not much attention was given to wilderness management. Wilderness areas were seen as places safely removed from the economy and commerce. Fire, pests and weeds were the main management issues. However, Commercial pressures are now testing national park management principles in ways that was not

contemplated thirty years ago. More attention needs to be given to the management of both national parks and wilderness areas.

Australian society in the past has supported wilderness conservation. I am confident the support will continue because Australia's wilderness areas are so much a part of the character of this country and of the people who live in it. Wilderness areas are the 'view' that sustains the tourist industry. They produce good quality water. They provide a wide range of environmental services. Long experience has shown that there is little advantage in trying to manage them as anything other than wilderness areas. Today's society is acutely aware of the frailty of natural systems and less likely than ever to accept inroads into wilderness areas. It is widely known that the environment is under pressure from population growth, urban, industrial and agricultural development, and climate change, and that a wave of extinctions may occur in the coming decades. Scientific opinion supports the view that large nature reserves (essentially what wilderness areas are) can help to maintain biological diversity. The familiar caveat that wilderness conservation "must form part of an integrated whole-of-landscape-approach" is no more than a statement of the obvious.

Protecting what remains of Australia's wilderness is not *the* answer to all the environmental problems that face us, but it is certainly part of the answer.

So, what is needed for a wilderness resurgence? I suggest these things for a start: more involvement by young people; a renewed confidence in the wilderness idea; a unity of purpose; and a principled stand on wilderness management.

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Peter Prineas has contributed to wilderness conservation since joining the Colong Committee (now Foundation) in 1971. As Executive Officer/Director of the National parks Assn. of NSW from 1974-82 he worked to protect and reserve wilderness areas including Wollemi, the Apsley Gorges, and the rainforest wilderness areas at Werrikimbe and Washpool. He was a member of the Wilderness Working Group advising Planning and Environment Minister Bob Carr in 1985/6 and participated in the campaign for Australia's first wilderness Act, passed in 1987. In 1996, as Chairman of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, he promoted the Dunphy Wilderness Fund, now established by the NSW Government to assist in the acquisition of lands for wilderness.

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