

21st Century Wilderness

Speaking notes for the Hon. Bob Carr
Patron of the Colong Foundation for Wilderness Ltd

The historic NSW Wilderness Act had its origins on the banks of the Kowmung River. Way back in 1984, shortly after being appointed Minister for the Environment and Planning in the Wran Government, Milo Dunphy persuaded me to join a party of bushwalkers on a walk through the Kanangra-Boyd National Park. Milo took me deep into the wilderness through the Bulga-Denis Canyon. I made many return visits to the Kowmung River, but it was on this first trip that the germ of an idea for a Wilderness Act had its birth.

Striding along the Kowmung River one afternoon with Pat Thompson of the Colong Foundation, Pat burst forth with the suggestion, "What we need Minister is a Wilderness Act!" As a keen student of American History, I was familiar with their 1964 Wilderness Act and the idea seemed a good one. I needed no convincing, after all I was in the heart of the Kanangra wilderness and could hear it calling!

On introducing the Wilderness Act into Parliament in 1987 I said "Australian history is a story of the interaction between immigrant peoples and a continent with unique landscapes, plants and animals. If we lose our feel for the grand old continent in its natural condition, then we lose something of our character as a people. The case for conservation is founded therefore on patriotism. Our commitment to protecting our wilderness is a measure of our maturity as a nation and pride in our identity." Saving these vast, wild places preserves our rich indigenous cultural heritage. They are reservoirs of scientific and cultural treasures, like the hundreds of drawings discovered at Eagles Reach in the Wollemi Wilderness. So on the 24th of November of that year the NSW Parliament passed a law to enable the protection of wilderness from exploitation by graziers, miners, loggers and high impact recreation.

Alex Colley has written that wilderness comprises the last substantial remnants of the ecologically complete environment that once covered the earth. None of these areas, he argues, are unaffected by some form of development, but they are the best we have left and often the last refuge of many endangered species. Their protection is of enormous significance in this arid continent. Australia's future relies on healthy soil, air and water systems and wilderness provides their best protection. It contains ancient forests that purify our air. Its pristine catchments yield water that does not require expensive treatment. Wilderness is where you find peace, solitude and the opportunity for reflection away from the pressures of modern living.

Our Wilderness Act offers hope that wild places will remain unspoilt. In wilderness we can be a step closer to nature and grasp that we are indeed part of the web of life. But can the

Wilderness Act protect native wild-life from all external influences, from population pressures, pest species, climate change and other all-pervasive agencies of radical change?

Can wilderness exist in the 21st Century or is it rapidly fading?

The good news is that the NSW Wilderness Act anticipated the pressures that would beset the fragile ecology of this continent. Perhaps it reflects some of the original forms of land management, and is a subconscious response to our wild continent and its vast outback?

The NSW Wilderness Act can be distinguished from the American Wilderness Act for it allows areas to be managed and '*restored*' to a state not substantially modified by humans and their works. This provision might well ensure that our wilderness areas become even more precious as we progress through this century of dramatic change.

Without a provision to restore wilderness, few wilderness areas would ever have been protected and management of those few could not be effective.

The Americans have been grappling with wilderness management since 1964. Their Act requires wilderness to remain '*untrammelled by man*'. Few areas are untrammelled, and climate change is rapidly reducing that number. South-west America has seen more than 60 mega-fires over 60,000 hectares in size in the last ten years. These fires are destroying wilderness forests that now have no resilience to wildfire because they have been subjected to decades of fire suppression. Exclusion of fire from these fire-prone forests has proven fatal.

In NSW wilderness is not managed as a landscape of static ecosystems, although much of it contains old growth forest with various fire histories that go back millennia.

What are the options for national park and wilderness management?

Rangers have lived with this question ever since the world's first National Park was established on the southern edge of Sydney in 1879. The response boils down to three choices:

- Management can drive ecosystems away from a pristine or otherwise historic condition through *transformation*, and this was exactly what the early acclimation and zoological societies did with (the Royal) National Park by introducing deer and creating a freshwater pond on Kangaroo Creek for English Perch and Trout;
- Today, conservation effort more usually seeks through the process of *restoration* to increase the historical fidelity of an area by mitigating environmental impacts that would otherwise reduce plant and animal diversity; or
- Natural environments are, purposely or not, left free of active management to either *recover* to an historic condition or *drift* towards a novel, more modified condition.

Slowly, the American ideal of wilderness management – the perpetuation of whole historical ecosystems through passive “untrammelling”, is seen as no longer tenable in the long run (Aplet and Gallo, 2012). The natural environment is dynamic and the IUCN now defines wilderness as areas that are ‘protected and managed so as to preserve their natural condition’.

According to the IUCN the primary objective or management purpose of wilderness is ‘To protect the long-term ecological integrity of natural areas that are undisturbed by significant human activity, free of modern infrastructure and where natural forces and processes predominate, so that current and future generations have the opportunity to experience such areas.’

Wilderness management at least in NSW has evolved to embrace combinations of passive *recovery* and active *restoration*. After a severe wildfire, for example, wilderness areas are closed to public visitation to allow for seedling germination and to let dangerous burnt-out trees fall. During closure, emergency containment lines bulldozed into wilderness are rehabilitated, and then, after about three months, left to their own devices. Sometimes active pest management strategies are applied to aid wildlife recovery through the suppression of foxes and cats, for at this time small marsupials are more prone to predation. These procedures are standard practice for wilderness areas in NSW.

Even the Kowmung Valley, part of one of the most pristine wilderness areas near Sydney, is managed to maintain its old growth forests and high levels of plant diversity. Volunteers have removed willows from its banks and rangers have shot out feral cattle. Removal of these *ecosystem change agents*, meant that the Kowmung’s iconic grassy river banks began to disappear. But nobody anticipated the devastation that would accompany the influx of feral pigs in the early 1990s. Rangers had assumed the area was unsuitable for feral pigs, until a large population became established. In one season the Kanangra Wilderness was changed forever. Every single grassy bank on the Kowmung was overturned and it took a decade of determined effort to bring these pests under control. The arrival of hundreds of feral goats in the area has presented similar challenges, requiring constant professional management and significant resources.

Blue Gum Forest is another example. Blue Gum has been closed to camping for several decades and over that time it has been restored to what it once was, a wet sclerophyll forest, with a rich understorey full of lawyer vine. Bush regenerators have worked tirelessly to exclude invasive weeds washed down from urban areas upstream and the forest would not exist at all if it were not for active fire management. A truly heroic back burn stopped the 2013 wildfire from impacting on the forest, but the rangers efforts hardly raised a mention in the media, as the tragic events of a related fire unfolded at Springwood.

Not all wilderness management in NSW is appropriate, current experiments with horse riding risk transforming wilderness environments. Australia’s flora evolved in the absence of

hard-hoofed grazing animals and is less resistant to trampling damage from horses. Our fragile soils are often very low in nutrients so that horse manure, weeds and introduced pathogens from horses are major threats. These factors, combined with grazing, can bring about significant changes to the natural environment.

The majority of Australian park managers, almost unconsciously, did not accept passive management of wilderness. Any ecosystem “drift” to altered states is usually the result of a lack of park resources, not deliberate intent. Bell minor dieback and lantana infestations which occur in certain hardwood forests, such as Richmond Range near Casino, and the influx of the cane toad to the North Coast are perhaps the saddest examples. These *change agents* are beyond the capacity of managers to tackle in an effective manner until new pest control methods can be developed.

So does wilderness matter?

Wilderness has been labelled a ‘state of mind’ in our high-tech world where it is under ever-increasing threat. Wild plants, animal communities and wilderness landscapes are, however, a scientific reality. They did not arise by farming, ‘adaptive management’ or conservation offsets, but through millions of years of natural selection and evolution in a landscape in which modern man was absent. Humanity is only a recent consideration in the evolutionary scheme of things and before man all creation was wilderness.

Dr Haydn Washington explains, ‘One can argue about the definition and boundaries, but large natural areas do exist, they are real places with real problems that need real protection to continue.’

Most attacks on wilderness are by those who either wish to exploit it or feel threatened by it. Such attacks can only increase with population growth, and this will put the idea of national parks at risk.

Our national parks are the cornerstone of conservation in NSW, vital biological islands in a sea of developed land. The richness of plants and animal diversity that can survive in our parks will continue to shrink unless they are kept intact and linked by conservation efforts across the entire landscape. Efforts for connectivity must push back against the extraction of natural resources which usually causes ongoing ecosystem fragmentation, degrades or destroys native vegetation and elevates extinction risk.

Wilderness maintains ecological integrity and is the best way to protect native flora and fauna over the long term. Protecting wilderness areas creates larger reserves, supports larger and better connected wildlife populations, reduces extinction risk, reduces ecosystem fragmentation, and possesses greater resilience.

A review of conservation theory suggests the following:

- large reserves are usually better than small reserves;

- large populations or connected populations are better than small populations;
- human actions elevate species' extinction risks;
- fragmentation reduces the amount of habitat, increases edge-effects, and subdivides and isolates populations;
- resilience requires maintenance of the evolved primary productivity in a landscape which is defined by the dominant plants, decomposers, and other wildlife that maintain a landscape's 'infrastructure' (Mackey, et. al. 1998).

Surely the above principles define wilderness and wilderness management?

A wilderness can survive decades of neglect because of its natural resilience and be subjected to a 'tyranny of small decisions', but it does not survive forever, and for many areas time is running out.

Our failure to see many of the adverse impacts on a natural environment is partly due to our perpetual immersion in modern materialistic society and partly denial. Yet the continued existence of wilderness is imperative to our perception (or at least the possibility of perception) of a broader reality beyond our cultural selves.

We live as if 'creation' belongs to us, not us to 'creation'. We forget that we live on an insignificant minor planet where we have modified most of the biosphere to our own ends. Our continued denial of our ongoing planetary modification will possibly result in our extinction.

Our grandchildren will manage this finite future world with a very different outlook to us. It will be a globe with an altered climate, compromised ecosystems, diminished biodiversity and over 8 billion people by 2030. There will be winners and many more losers, but soon there must emerge a new paradigm where the natural environment is not external to our economic outlook, but central to decision making. How will that thinking emerge? On what will it be based? How will our society become sustainable?

The greatest single benefit of retaining large intact natural areas is not the immediate values placed on these areas by contemporary society but their worth to future generations and to nature itself. The retention of wilderness where nature has a right to exist is essential for our survival. It allows us have a perspective other than ourselves.

Wilderness, not unsurprisingly can deliver nature conservation outcomes more cost efficiently than smaller or more fragmented protected areas. The smaller perimeter-to-area ratios and more intact biological communities of wilderness should enable better long-term conservation outcomes to be achieved. It is better and cheaper to keep a number of wilderness areas in good condition than to rehabilitate a larger number of fragmented landscapes with a lower total area.

With regard to accelerated climate change, large intact natural areas should be managed to ensure ecological integrity, not to maximise tourism opportunities through development of roads and wilderness lodges in core areas. Conservation planners must consider climate change scenarios in developing plans for the persistence of biodiversity. Major, climatically-driven biome changes cannot be accommodated by small isolated protected areas (Soule et al., 2005).

Although there are exceptions, such as our Alpine Ash forests, Australia's wilderness areas have a significant ability to bounce back from the impacts associated with accelerated climate change, for example wildfire. Interconnected habitats within wilderness are less likely to be subject to complete loss of one or several plant or animal species from more frequent wildlife or severe storms, than smaller more fragmented areas with less suitable habitat.

What has been achieved?

In 1986, the Wilderness Working Group that I established reported that about 4.4 per cent of New South Wales remained in a wilderness condition, although western NSW was not considered. Labor was swept from office before it was able to implement its recommendations, but in March 1995 Labor proposed sixteen wilderness areas for reservation, embracing the core old growth forest areas of eastern NSW, and of these fourteen were declared. In 1999 we made a further commitment to significantly expand wilderness protection and this led to 270,000 hectares being protected in 2002, and an additional 70,000 hectares of private land was acquired using the Dunphy Wilderness Fund.

In total, NSW Labor has added over 1.3 million hectares to the wilderness estate from 1995 to 2011 so that over 2 million hectares have been protected under the *Wilderness Act, 1987*.

Vast wilderness areas may exist in the Western Division but these have not been formally examined and only the Mootwingee Wilderness has been protected in this region which comprises two thirds of the state.

The Wilderness Act also places an obligation on the Director of National Parks to provide for scientific research and education with regard to wilderness. This duty has tended to be neglected, which feeds back to the general perception of wilderness in the community.

What's at risk and what can be done about it?

The Tarkine, Tasmania's largest unprotected wilderness which contains Australia's largest tract of rainforest wilderness was saved from logging, but is still threatened by mining. The Tarkine encompasses the Norfolk Range, Mt Bertha, the Savage River system, and the Meredith Range. But despite a 2010 Australian Heritage Commission recommendation for national heritage listing of 433,000 hectares of the Tarkine, the former Environment

Minister Mr Tony Burke only recognised a very limited coastal strip for its Aboriginal heritage.

The Tarkine Wilderness was not adequately protected and risks being degraded because of its extensive mineral potential. Ten new mines are proposed for the Tarkine over the next five years, and nine of these are large open-cut mines.

The chair of the Australian Heritage Council, Prof. Carmen Lawrence, said the Tarkine is of international significance and to damage it would be a global tragedy. To quote Prof. Lawrence "It has unique biodiversity and a history that is global in its import. That's why people have suggested that it should be World Heritage listed. The Kimberley has similar character." But it is one thing to decide not to list a heritage property, and quite another to destroy one already listed.

In March this year our Prime Minister declared at a timber industry dinner in Canberra that too many of Australia's forests were "locked up". Mr Abbott said "We have quite enough national parks. We have quite enough locked-up forests already. In fact, in an important respect, we have too much locked-up forest." His Government has asked UNESCO to remove 74,000 hectares of Tasmanian forest from the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area — an area that includes some of the country's oldest trees and important Aboriginal sites.

No Australian Government has ever before has proposed delisting World Heritage on this magnitude, in fact no first world democracy has made such a drastic delisting proposal. To give you an understanding of the scale, the area proposed for delisting is twice the combined size of Royal and Ku-ring-gai National Parks!

The Federal Government claims the area proposed for removal contains 117 patches of disturbed forest. Peter Hitchcock, a consultant who advised on last year's world heritage extension, said this forest disturbance claim "seriously misrepresents the proposed delistings because these elements are only a minor part of the lands proposed to be delisted" (*Herald*, 13 March 2014). This claim described as a minor boundary variation by Environment Minister, Greg Hunt, is an example of the 'purity argument', where wilderness is presented as pristine and any disturbance makes an area unsuitable for reservation. This ignores the fact that reserve management can restore such wilderness areas.

At the same time, the Abbott Government has sanctioned the destruction of 16,000 acres of the magnificent Bimblebox Nature Refuge on private land in the Galilee Basin for a coal mine and approved the dumping of three million of tonnes of dredge spoil from Abbott Point on the Great Barrier Reef. Less damaging options exist, such as diverting open-cut mining around the Bimblebox Reserve and in the case of Abbott Point, on-shore spoil disposal.

There has been a growing global response to this threat to the Reef. In a move to support the World Heritage Committee, Deutsche Bank will no longer finance the port expansion project unless it can be assured the Reef won't be harmed. On May 23, *The Guardian* reported that the bank had "bowed to public pressure after 180,000 Germans signed a petition urging them not to fund the expansion." Such action clearly indicates that the current government is eroding Australia's standing as a leader on environmental policy.

Given the pressures that natural areas are subject to, it is appropriate that wilderness becomes a criterion for inscription on the World Heritage list of properties. Areas like the Tarkine and the Kimberley would benefit from World Heritage recognition. Such listings would give these wilderness areas the recognition and protection they deserve through the bilateral federal-state government processes that regulate the nomination and management of World Heritage Areas in Australia.

Australia, through the World Heritage Committee should start the process for UNESCO to advance wilderness as one of the criteria in its World Heritage Operational Guidelines for the assessment of nominated natural properties. Such a criterion would reflect the true value and role of wilderness in this increasingly crowded world.

Under current Operational Guidelines, consideration of important wilderness values is relegated to being either a factor influencing the biophysical integrity of the nominated property or an element of the conservation of scenery criterion. These limited assessment opportunities do not give due recognition to the many enduring values of the last remaining pristine parts of the natural world.

The identification and promotion of wilderness that would follow the establishment of such a World Heritage criterion would provide more people with life changing experiences. A wilderness World Heritage criterion would help secure a higher priority for nature-focused management for the reserves listed under that criterion.

A wilderness listing criterion would also assist the protection of extensive wilderness in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, as well as Tasmania.

Time for a National Wilderness Act

In 1988 David Suzuki estimated that wilderness would no longer exist outside reserves within thirty years. It is imperative that we protect as much of Australia's wilderness and biodiversity as possible, including areas already in National Parks.

Wilderness protection within national parks should be something that all political parties are willing to progress. It should be a patriotic duty. Every state and territory, except for Tasmania, has wilderness legislation, but only the mainland states of Victoria, South Australia and New South Wales, as well as the ACT, have protected wilderness areas under their respective statutes.

Protected wilderness should be permanent, yet in the current political climate those who seek to ride, develop and log in wilderness within national parks need to be stopped again. Even in NSW there are moves afoot to log and graze our parks - it is happening on a trial basis in the river red gum parks and is mooted for the Pilliga.

The International Convention on Biological Diversity requires the Federal Government to protect wilderness. The Convention's definition of 'ecosystem and habitats' includes wilderness for the purposes of identification and monitoring - this should be stretched to include development control.

It is time that all national parks and the wilderness areas within them be permanently secured under Federal environmental law. A National Wilderness Act should be supported by all political parties and enable the following actions:

1. Federal Government review of its national wilderness inventory;
2. Protection of all wilderness within national parks under Federal Environmental law;
3. Allow the Federal Government to enter into an agreement with the states and territories to:
 - a. Manage those lands identified in existing reserves and considered suitable for inclusion in a national system of wilderness reserves;
 - b. Negotiate for inclusion in national parks, public lands in a wilderness condition; and
 - c. Enable negotiations for the purchase, lease or management of private lands identified as being suitable for inclusion in a national system of wilderness reserves.

National Wilderness legislation would also recognise the rights of the respective state or territory to nominate the authority responsible for the management of each individual unit in accordance with the intergovernmental agreement on wilderness. Citizens, community groups and the Federal Government should also have a right to prosecute the appointed authority in a Federal court for failure to comply with the provisions of the National Wilderness Act.

Conclusion

Australia is one of the few countries still lucky enough to have undeveloped land. We accept wilderness as an everyday but integral part of the landscape, while people from crowded countries are spellbound by it. Short-term economic thinking has returned to the political landscape – it never really went away. We need to rethink decision-making that has little or no regard for our common future and treat these precious places very carefully.

Who can deny the impact wilderness has had on political history? Wilderness has enriched many of our lives, whether it is the impact of the Peter Dombrovskis image of Rock Island Bend that marked the turning point in the Franklin Dam campaign, or when we enjoy the spellbinding views from the Blue Mountains lookouts . All these places exist through the efforts of visionary conservationists like Myles and Milo Dunphy, and behind the scenes stalwarts like Alex Colley.

We are so lucky to have such precious wilderness but it can vanish in a moment. We must value these areas passionately, veto all harmful projects that threaten them and restore them to an unmodified state, pushing back as best we can against changes that this century will bring to the Australian bush.

Our population is growing. As it does, pressure to exploit natural resources intensifies and our wilderness areas are coming under increasing threat.

Right now the Baird Government is considering proposals to turn the Nepean floodplain into real estate, renewing plans to raise the Warragamba Dam wall that would in turn inundate wilderness and smother it in sediment. A second Sydney airport at Badgerys Creek has been announced and will be less than five kilometres from the boundary of the Blue Mountains National Park. If this new airport is built, flight paths must not be diverted over wilderness, generating unacceptable noise pollution.

Sydney should be renowned worldwide as a large city surrounded by a belt of wilderness-quality national parks and reserves. These national parks, however, will remain at risk from the tyrannies of self-interest, short-sightedness and the damaging effects of population pressure, such as increased urban run-off.

There is hope, in the Blue Mountains, and elsewhere in NSW, that a new generation has developed a more caring relationship between the community and the natural world. The Blue Mountains towns now see themselves as a City within a World Heritage National Park. Its Council is prepared to fight to retain strong conservation planning laws, catchment protection and containment of urban expansion. The recent 11,000 hectare addition made by the Baird Government to Nattai Wilderness further enhances protection of Sydney's drinking water catchment and demonstrates continued bipartisan support for wilderness.

If wilderness is to survive into the 21st Century it needs to regain its status in conservation management.

Wildlife corridors cannot be effective without wilderness conservation and the core ecological integrity that wilderness provides.

Our survival and indeed the survival of all life, depend on us developing a more respectful relationship with the natural world. Until that time, wilderness will remain a talisman of hope for all life on the planet and our legacy for future generations to cherish. For the

words of Henry Thoreau are as true today as when they were first written in 1851, 'In wildness is the preservation of the World.'

Whether we see wilderness conservation as pragmatic resource management, whether we treat wilderness as a scientific storehouse of biodiversity or an object of beauty – and therefore a source of human creativity and spiritual peace – the future of Australian wilderness is inextricably bound up with the future of all life on this planet.

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