Re-imagining wilderness: finding soul in a dystopian world
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I want to acknowledge that we meet here today on the country of the Darug people. And I further acknowledge that when I talk of wilderness this afternoon, I’m talking about the country of Aboriginal peoples across the land.

Well, happy 50th birthday Colong Foundation! The precise birthday was back in May, but 50th celebrations deserve to be carried on all year.

And, happy 86th birthday Blue Gum Forest! For it was on this very day—2 September 1932—that the forest in the Grose Valley was reserved after a campaign by bushwalkers. If I wasn’t giving this talk I’d have been down there today.

It was a seminal event in the history of conservation in this state. You might say it was the birthplace of all the national parks in the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. [Macqueen 2007]

But progress was slow. Thirty six years after Blue Gum, in 1968, when Colong was formed, much of the Blue Mountains National Park had been declared, but there was no Kanangra-Boyd, Wollemi or anything else – not in name, anyway.

And so it was that the Colong Committee was formed to save what eventually became the declared Kanangra-Boyd Wilderness from limestone mining. Soon after that I made my own first little foray into the conservation movement – when I joined the small crowd outside the AMP building protesting against the Portland Cement company.

As we know, ever since then the organisation has fought hard for wilderness, and conservation in general.

Of course, extensive wilderness existed back in 1968, but it wasn’t protected by strong legislation – legislation that the Colong Foundation is responsible for bringing about. Today, thanks to that legislation, 51 wilderness areas in the state have been declared, while lots of others have been formally identified. Which is all very well, until the next dam raising or the next feral animal becomes a cultural icon—OR—and I say this advisedly—there’s simply a failure of support for wilderness generally. More of that soon.

All this has happened thanks to the magnificent endeavours of a number people, and we’re here today to commemorate one of those, namely Alex Colley. Alex’s contribution to Colong spanned over forty of the organisation’s 50 years. It was in 1974, on his retirement at age 65, that he became a full-time warrior with Colong. Mind you, by then he’d already been actively fighting for the environment for some 35 years, in committee roles with the Sydney Bush Walkers and Federation of Bushwalking Clubs – and within the Liberal Party.
Perhaps the seed of his involvement was planted back in 1927, when he walked all the way up the Grose River to Blue Gum Forest, with a party from the Agricultural College here. He was only about 18, and the campaign to save the forest hadn’t even arisen. In fact the forest didn’t have its name then.

In my recent book on the Wollemi I relate how in 1963, when Alex was a whipper snapper of fifty-three, he accompanied Reg Meakins and Bill Cosgrove on an epic in the heart of the Wollemi. After walking for a few days in torrential rain, they descended to the Capertee River, which they had to cross in order to reach Glen Davis. It was in flood.

After much hesitation they stripped off and swam the river with their packs wrapped in groundsheets. As Meakins entered the water he

reflected how one’s nakedness seems very much emphasised by cold, clammy conditions and pouring rain … The worst part of the procedure is getting dressed again in the rain while trying to keep pack and contents reasonably dry. [Macqueen 2017, p182]

Well they made it across, but as they headed along the cattle track towards Glen Davis they were confronted by Freshwater Creek, in flood. By the time they’d negotiated that it was dark, they’d lost the track and only one torch still worked. Needless to say they were much relieved when they came on the road at today’s Coorongooba campsite. Now, I’m sure Meakins had Alex Colley’s wilderness advocacy in mind when he cheekily wrote:

Perhaps it should be recorded that this is probably the only occasion when Alex has welcomed the sight of a road with obvious relief.

That was 1963, just before people went crazy with bulldozers making firetrails, or, in the case of the Wollemi, army roads.

Wilderness is supposed to be road-free. Aside from anything else there are sound ecological reasons. We abhor the idea of new roads and firetrails penetrating wilderness. Yet, strangely, there is often resistance even from wilderness supporters to closing existing roads. Once we’re used to the idea that we can drive along this or that firetrail to get to our favourite bushwalk or canyon, we don’t like it being closed. It was a big issue during the debate over the Grose Wilderness.

Even more so with the Wollemi Wilderness. Understandably the four-wheel-drivers made much of it. But many canyoneers were upset by the closure of tracks in the Newnes Plateau area – tracks put in by coal explorers, no less. A prominent author of canyoning guides was particularly vocal – something I was never able to understand because that gentleman probably had more to do with getting me into wilderness walking as a teenager than any other person. Here’s the guidebook he published in about 1963, much pored over by yours truly. [Jamieson c1963] Yet here he was in the 1990s expecting to be able to do all his canyons straight after falling out of his car.
What’s my point here? That many outdoor types apparently have a rather selfish attitude to wilderness. We want it preserved, but on our terms. We take wilderness for granted; and we take for granted all the hard work of conservation activists who have thus far protected it. In doing so we’re no different to the horse riding or four-wheel-driving people. Rightly or wrongly of course, that accusation has been levelled at wilderness advocates since day one.

If it’s seen to be the case that the majority of wilderness defenders are really just people wanting their playground, then wilderness is in jeopardy – including currently declared wilderness.

What’s more, if when we think of wilderness we only think of adventure playgrounds, such as in the Blue Mountains or Southwest Tasmania, we overlook lots of other wilderness environments throughout the country.

By all means have adventures, but let’s imagine wilderness with a broader perspective.

And by the way: this afternoon I’m not going to get bogged down in wilderness definitions and semantics. When I refer to wilderness I’m talking about large natural areas, largely unimpacted by modern development—whether declared or not, and whether mountains, desert plains or anything else.

You know, wilderness campaigns in the past had it easy. Back when Alex Colley was pleased to find that road, and when I started bushwalking, and when Colong was formed, wilderness was simply a large roadless area, usually offering wonderful rugged scenery, and the baddies were just dam-builders, miners and loggers. It was easy to harness the support of the broader community.

Since the sixties it’s become more complicated. We’ve had the march of consumerism, the march of technology, and the march to recognition of Aboriginal people and their culture. Australia has become much more multi-cultural. We’ve also come to recognise that wilderness preservation is only part of the need for landscape-wide conservation, and that wilderness itself needs management: it doesn’t look after itself. Such factors have complicated the perceptions of wilderness, and fed into what Haydn Washington called “The Wilderness Knot”.

Wild places haven’t changed, but perceptions of them have.

Perhaps we need to re-adjust.

Of course, we can and should continue to argue the ecological case for wilderness. But that doesn’t seem to get much traction these days when politics and denialism overrule science. Certainly the political game needs to be played, and while we’re at it it would be a good idea to get some politicians out there.

But I also think we need to be more imaginative. We need to re-imbue wilderness with soul. To do that I think more people have to find their own soul in wilderness – in what appears to me to be an increasingly soulless world.
Before I go on. When I talk about soul, I’m talking about a whole bunch of intangible things: deep connection to country, sense of wonder, spirituality and mystery to name a few. Take your pick. It’s nothing to do with conventional religion, unless that’s your inclination.

People find their soul in nature in all sorts of ways. Pondering a view, or taking an interest in plants, or birds, or rocks. Photography or art. Perhaps a bit of meditation thrown in. But such things aren’t unique to wilderness. You might find your soul in your backyard – if the plants aren’t all dying from the drought.

Finding soul in wilderness is characterised by context. The sense of remoteness, a feeling of peace, the expenditure of physical effort in the journey to get there, the absence of crowds, a couple of good friends for companions, if any. Being at the mercy of the environment around you.

It’s often said that to get people to defend nature we have to get them out into nature, to appreciate it. Well, yes. But does that mean offering an ever-expanding network of huts and built tracks and guided experiences that impact on established wilderness – such as appears likely to happen in Tasmania?

Earlier this year Liz and I walked out to Cape Pillar—forty-five years since our previous visit. Back then there wasn’t much of a track and the few campsites consisted only of hideaways in wind-blown scrub. This time we still camped out, but we walked part of the now-famous Three Capes Track and came across many of the walkers doing that track. For about $500 a head, they were having a great time walking a superb track, staying in comfortable accommodation, and socialising with the rest of the forty-eight people doing their stage of the walk. They climbed to the lookouts and admired the views, and saw a variety of wildlife. Which is wonderful, and I don’t criticise it for a moment – as far as it goes. Great for kids and families and the less fit. I can see myself indulging in such an experience in some circumstances.

(As an aside, the Three Capes walk is soon to be offered as an even more luxurious experience – at about $3000. I notice that option is heavily booked next summer already.)

But what did those people we saw on the track really connect with? I’m sure they all went home and talked to their friends about the wonderful scenery, and the echidna they came across beside the boardwalk - and the interesting people they met and the luxury of the huts. But did they find their soul out there? Was their experience of sharing the architect designed accommodation with forty-seven other people anything more than a social one?

A couple of years ago, Blue Mountains conservation activist Sue Morrison told me of her experience in the heart of the Wollemi back in 1992. She was walking north-south through what has since become the Greater Blue Mountains World Heritage Area. She told me how she got a new sense about the country around her, and where she sat in it. To quote …
I just had such a different view of the landscape and where I sat in terms of the natural history of this area. It’s been here millions of years before me and it’ll be here millions of years after me. And I’m just this tiny little blip like one of these ants crawling around. I never did look at the bush in the same way after that, you know. I just had that real sense of—eternity. [Macqueen 2017, p299]

A tiny blip, like one of these ants crawling around. That’s the time machine view of wilderness – a view that strikes a strong chord with me too. Sue passed away a few weeks after she told me that. She was just a tiny blip, like all of us, but her story carries on.

Do any of the people on the Three Capes Track sit quietly alone on a rock, contemplating the ants?

Are luxury experiences in the bush turning people into defenders of nature, or feeding a tourist industry? Sure, some of those forty-eight people we met on the Track might be more motivated to donate to some conservation cause, but I suspect that the people who are the greatest active defenders of parks and wilderness and conservation in general are not the same people who spend their lives “doing” a bucket list of guided tracks around the world, emitting vast quantities of greenhouse gases getting to each one.

It worries me, this ever-growing trend of doing this track and doing that track, as if they were some commodity—like have you done that cruise or eaten in a particular restaurant—or taken that scenic flight. Bucket lists. How about a bucket list of conservation targets—for the sake of our grandchildren?

A few years ago we went walking in Purnululu – the Bungle Bungles of Western Australia. Yes, it was on our bucket list I guess. Once we got away from the crowds and up into Piccaninnie Gorge it would have been possible to have a very special wilderness experience. Except for the planes and helicopters. Literally every few minutes of the day one would fly overhead, full of tourists. There was no escape even for a private moment. All those people each paying hundreds of dollars to get an aerial view – yet when I later mentioned a weed problem to a ranger, she said the park had no resources to deal with such things. Those tourists might have been appreciating the landscape, but they weren’t defending it. They were part of the problem. The parks budget was almost fully deployed catering for the tourists, but most of the tourist dollars were going to the flight operators.

It’s no better closer to home, of course. How much do the millions of tourists who visit the Blue Mountains actually contribute to nature conservation?

A couple of years ago we ran into some young German walkers on the South Coast Track. At the time we were negotiating the appalling mud on the South Cape Range. I asked them what they thought about the push for commercial development of that track. After some thought, they said they liked it as it was. Oh, they said, south-west Tasmania wasn’t as spectacular as some parts of Europe, but it has a sense of wilderness that simply couldn’t be found there. It is raw nature, they said: devoid of roads, hotels and commercialisation.
But more and more people are wanting to go glam camping and glam walking. Money talks. Nature is being commodified, like everything else. It has no value unless it’s developed. Or, unless it offers some particular adrenalin experience. I wrote this way down the Wolgan valley a few years ago:

What really matters?
What really matters is the rock wallaby, the tiger snake, the boobook owl and the eagle that we have met today. The fig tree that clings to a massive boulder and drops its roots over ledges and into cracks. What matters, to me, is that I can connect at some humble level not only with those living things, but also with the old track and with the ancient rocks. That I can connect with and nurture this place, as can anyone else with respect for the natural world and a spirit of enquiry and appreciation. What matters is that this place is not subsumed into the wasteland of transient modern society. [Macqueen 2017, p37]

Far be it from me to claim some sort of superiority when it comes to matters of the soul. I’m probably as lost as the next person. But I venture to say that I tend to find my soul in wilderness in several ways.

One way has arisen from participation in remote area volunteering. In the last 18 years I’ve spend a year and a half in the Wollemi and south-west wilderness of Tasmania, dealing with invasive weeds with like-minded companions. Whether I’m pottering through the scrub on the banks of the Colo searching out elusive lantana plants, having surprise encounters with wildlife as I go, or pulling out sea spurge on a coastal sand dune with my back to a driving rain squall, I’ve found this sort of activity marvellous for my own soul.

Wilderness does need nurturing, and getting involved as a volunteer creates a great personal sense of custodianship, especially when the volunteer group you’re part of is essentially self-managing.

So, one suggestion for some re-imagining of wilderness is this: let’s see it as a place to care for, not just a playground. A less macho place, if you like. Caring for country equals caring for soul.

Furthermore, I think we somehow need to move on from the idea of alien landscapes and threatening “wilderness” that have tended to define Australian culture for the last two centuries.

Maybe all our accounts of outdoor heroics are reinforcing a myth that the Australian landscape in general, and wilderness in particular, is basically an unfriendly place that has to be challenged and overcome. In other words, there’s an element of the old Biblical idea of wilderness – the feared wasteland.

Why does this matter? Well, because most of the population, especially recent immigrants, have fallen for the idea that natural areas in Australia are alien – full of impenetrable terrain, snakes, drop-bears and undefined unseen dangers. It’s so threatening that all but the most hardy adventurers are locked out! Why on earth
would you protect such a place? Just because it looks wondrous from the safety of a lookout? That's not enough.

If we can get away from the idea that the bush is threatening, we might have more hope of getting a greater cultural diversity of people out into it. These days when I walk on the Blue Mountains tourist tracks I'm impressed by the high proportion of enthusiastic walkers of Middle Eastern and Asian descent. Perhaps if we changed the narrative, and gave them some appropriate directions, they might be encouraged to step off the track a bit.

I can hear the ridicule now. How irresponsible! But we have an extraordinary contradiction, don't we? On the one hand we now have amazing facility for emergency communication and rescue, whereas on the other hand our risk-averse society dictates that people should take less risk in the first place. This applies particularly to young people.

When I was nineteen I undertook a twenty-one day trip in south-west Tasmania with five mates. Of course, there were no phones or PLBs. Not even contour maps, and no track on the Western Arthurs either. Goodness knows what our parents thought about it. But we survived and I probably grew from the experience. Such a thing would be almost unthinkable now.

We must get young people into wilderness again. Last April, Liz and I walked down to the Kowmung for a weekend. It was school holidays. But we had the place to ourselves. Once we left the Kanangra Walls lookout and nearby plateau we saw no-one. The tracks that were well used twenty or forty years ago are now rarely travelled. This is partly because the place is now regarded as too remote for youth groups. Despite the pervasion of communication devices such as mobile phones and PLBs, Duke of Edinburgh Award parties and the like are being sent in large groups—rabbles sometimes—to "safe" places where they can have no wilderness experience whatsoever. So-called risk management and red tape are working against deep appreciation of nature.

And yes, back in the 90s I did trail along with small groups of D of E candidates to the Kowmung country, and I know that some of those young people did have a meaningful and lasting wilderness experience.

Part of the solution might be to encourage the NPWS to take wilderness seriously — I challenge anyone to find on the NPWS website a useful map of any given declared wilderness, and a proper account of how the visitor might experience it, even just a little.

Bushwalking clubs already play an important role. The more experienced walkers leading the less experienced on wilderness trips. However, let's face it, clubs are a bit of a dying breed these days—like most of their members. I think there's more space for the private sector, providing of course client groups are small and all conduct is appropriate to the wilderness environment. I know that might be anathema to many wilderness supporters, but I happen to think that a sensitively-guided group is preferable to a group of unled novices charging out there relying only on what they've gleaned from the internet.
Bushwalkers need to find more common ground with other groups too – kayakers, fishermen, maybe even horse riders and four-wheel-drivers. Let’s face it, most of us are four-wheel-drivers at some stage. My Wollemi book contains the stories of various cattlemen and other people of the huntin’-shootin’-fishin’ variety, who certainly would have ridiculed the idea of wilderness—yet in reality they loved and valued the remote wilderness of the place as much as any bushwalker.

One of my extremely dedicated friends in the Friends of the Colo came to conservation as a kayaker, not a bushwalker or wilderness advocate. Indeed, he didn’t like wilderness because, as he saw it, it locked him out. I’m not sure he’s totally converted even now, but nonetheless his voluntary conservation work has contributed enormously to the values of wild rivers.

In short—and I’m not sure how achievable this is—it would be good if we could change the idea of wilderness in the public’s imagination, to a more accessible, less confronting place. And while we’re at it, get more people on side.

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OK, so let’s suppose we can overcome the challenges I’ve mentioned so far. There’s still the issue of how people get to have a low key experience, where they find their soul while just sitting on a rock in the wilderness. And that brings me to what I see as possibly greatest challenge. Technology.

Back in 1995, before smartphones were thought of and portable GPSs were in their infancy, I wrote an article in “The Bushwalker” magazine entitled “Wanking with Wilderness Wizardry”. I forecast the invasion of electronic devices in the bush, and ranted about it. I finished up suggesting that techno freaks stay away from real wilderness and get their wilderness experience in a virtual reality machine.

For those who can’t afford such a machine [I said], there would be cheaper alternatives. To experience Tasmania, for instance, they could just stand for a week in a bath full of mud under a cold shower, surrounded by prickly pot-plants, electric fans and Wilderness Society posters. [Macqueen 1995]

Jokes aside, I have to say I was pretty right about the coming invasion. More recently—it’s in my book—I ranted again on the subject:

Today, navigation by map and compass is regarded as an eccentric activity indulged in by orienteers and rogainers. I often find myself in the bush with companions who seem to study their GPS more than the country around them. This is offensive. Do they doubt their leader’s navigational ability? Or are they simply unable to detach themselves from the technology? Their own bushwalks seem to progress from digital waypoint to digital waypoint instead of from place to place. How can they possibly be connecting with country? They live in a digital construct. The intrusion of technology, whether GPS, phone or beacon, is surely a degradation of wilderness experience. A degrading, a shrinking, of wilderness itself. And perhaps of one’s own self. This will only get worse, as now-unimagined technologies, both actual and virtual, invade more and more. Ultimately everything will be defined by digits alone, in a world made and
managed by robots. No mystery, no wonder, nothing unknowable. [Macqueen 2017, p170]

Consider smartphones and social media. I've noticed an increasing tendency for people to post on Facebook even when they’re out in the bush. I for one have just about given up looking at the thousands of pretty photos that people post. Somehow they've become meaningless, devoid of depth. If I've got the time to look at them all properly, I should really be out there myself.

More things are coming. Now we have drones, for god’s sake. Back in 1861 Henry Thoreau said:

Thank God men cannot fly, and lay waste the sky as well as the earth. [Thoreau 1861]

I think Henry's turning in his grave right now. And Alex Colley too.

This trend will surely continue as new technologies provide for communication in the most far-flung parts of any wilderness. Social media addicts (and aren’t most of us becoming one?) will be unable to resist trying to record and share every little moment of their experience, as if the whole world cares about every trivial detail. Where is the soul in that? When your mind is more on your so-called “friends” than the reality in front of you? Where is the depth and the mystery? Where is the wilderness?

If you’ve used a GPS-based navigation system in a car, you'll know that it results in a different experience to the one you had using the UBD or the Gregory's. Basically you don’t have a proper sense of where you are—you're just following instructions. Likewise, I'm sure sophisticated navigation systems will soon be available for the bushwalker.

At the creek bend take the second re-entrant gully. In 10 metres, keep right to avoid the protruding rock. Naked swimmers ahead. Cross the creek and go back. You haven’t tweeted anything for 10 minutes. Why are you sitting on a rock watching the ants? Return to the route.

I have to say, I find my own soul in wilderness through being self-reliant and comfortable in the bush without digital technology.

We need to embrace wilderness as a technology-free place. In keeping with the established concept of remoteness from modern technology, leave the smartphone behind. And maybe the GPS too. Feel comfortable just being out in country without the need for those props. Walk the country rather than a digital construct.

I think wilderness should actually be promoted as a digital-free zone. A place to be celebrated as a sanctuary from what I fear will be an increasingly dystopian world.

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For me, another important means of finding soul is through story. I find intense connection to country by following the tracks of people of the past, and, with the aid of their recorded stories, trying to get inside their heads. Seeing wild country through their eyes, and sharing their experiences. It’s the time-machine thing. It’s what led me to write about Francis Barrallier in the Kanangra-Boyd, George Caley and others in the Grose, and my ancestor Frederick D’Arcy and a bunch of other people in the Wollemi.

Stories. They’re so important. They give meaning to lives, and to places. I don’t mean bland accounts of undertakings, reams of photos, GoPro videos, waypoints, digital tracks and all that rubbish. I mean stories from the heart. Positive stories which can rise about the mire of all the appalling environmental news. Whether written or oral or performed. Stories that enrich both your life and the wilderness. Write them or sing them or perform them. Tell them to your kids and grandkids, over and over.

You don’t have to pour your heart, though. When Wyn Duncomb walked the Wolgan and Colo Rivers in 1934 she wrote a most entertaining account. She endured considerable hardship and discomfort, was almost killed by a falling rock and nearly starved, yet her account underplays all that. It’s the little things she describes in delightful and humorous detail. It’s a heartfelt story. Perhaps a feminine touch in what is usually imagined as a macho place.

Yet, there’s no more meaningful story in wilderness than Aboriginal story.

For at least 65,000 years people have walked, lived in and looked after their country. Think about that: 65,000 years. That’s longer than humans have been in Europe. A dozen times older than Stone Henge or the Pyramids.

Their’s has been a deep, complex culture. They’ve been part of the environment, and the environment has been part of them. Is there no greater cultural tradition? It puts to absolute shame the claims of tradition relating to horse riding and four-wheel-driving and—dare I say—canyoning, rockclimbing and bushwalking.

Until the sixties, it was thought that Aboriginal people had only been in Australia for a couple of thousand years, and most of the general population had poor understanding of their culture. Nor did they care. In the words of anthropologist Bill Stanner, there was “a mass of solid indifference” regarding Aboriginal Australia. [Stanner 1938]

That was the state of affairs when I first started bushwalking. The indifference was only just starting to be rectified when Colong was formed in 1968. As related by historian Billy Griffiths in his wonderful recent book “Deep Time Dreaming”, a seismic shift in Australian historical consciousness was just beginning.

To mention just a few of the many events involved in that shift: In the early sixties archaeology and science had established that people had been around much longer than previously thought. In 1967 Aboriginal people were first properly recognised as Australians. In 1968 the remains of Mungo Lady were discovered and found to be
more than 40,000 years old. In 1969 Rhys Jones introduced the term “fire-stick farming” in recognition that Aboriginal people managed country with fire. [Griffiths 2018 p74]

In the early 80s the discovery that Aboriginal people once inhabited the Franklin River Gorge was pivotal in stopping the dam, and in the subsequent saving of the South West wilderness.

And of course there was the seismic explosion in 1992 when the Mabo decision threw out Terra Nullius, thereby opening the way for land claims, as well as joint management of national parks and so forth.

Through all that time Aboriginal people have become increasingly engaged with their own history, instead of being the hapless so-called hunter-gatherers who previously had no say in anything, they’ve moved towards self determination.

In recent years Bill Gammage has suggested that “virtually every inch” of Australia was managed by Aboriginal people by the systematic and scientific use of fire. Now I hasten to say that I have difficulty with some of his work—as have many others—and I have written on that subject. Nevertheless I agree that the Australian landscape is as much cultural landscape as a “natural” one. And I use the word cultural in both the physical and spiritual sense. As Billy Griffiths observed in the desert,

> every feature of the landscape is imprinted with meaning and law. The earth, rock, sky and scrub pulse with the life force of the Dreaming. [Griffiths 2018 p92]

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You know I was so pleased to hear Taylor Clarke’s gracious acknowledgement of country at the start of Colong’s 50th anniversary dinner.

Yet at that very same dinner I heard someone refer to “untouched wilderness”. Now I know what he meant – or I hope I do – he meant an area untouched by modern developments. But the expression is appalling. An insult to traditional owners, and, I would like to think, to every thinking Australian. No wilderness in Australia is untouched now, or ever was. To suggest otherwise denies a whole world that once existed.

Wilderness has been, and continues to be, criticised as denying the Aboriginal past and present – an expression of terra nullius. Macia Langton is a noted exponent of that viewpoint – and you can read all about that in Haydn’s “Wilderness Knot” thesis. I actually have some sympathy with the argument, especially when I hear of “untouched wilderness”.

As far as I know, no thinking wilderness advocate has ever denied the Aboriginal past in a NSW wilderness area. The 1978 Colo Wilderness book, written by Peter Prineus, has a whole chapter concerning the Aboriginal past—though it’s a bit awkward that in the “John Laws World” documentary promoting that same wilderness, the Golden Tonsils himself described the area as “a vast area where man has barely set foot”.

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In 1993, the Wilderness Society acknowledged that

As with the whole of Australia, areas which are now considered as wilderness are the traditional lands of Aboriginal people. Over tens of thousands of years, Aboriginal culture and land management have been part of the Australian landscape.

Bob Carr, in the first Alex Colley lecture four years ago, said that

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.

Both excellent statements. But I have a feeling there’s been something missing.

Perhaps it’s time for some of my own story, for it somewhat parallels the seismic shift I mentioned before.

Shortly after the Colong committee was formed I was studying a unit on philosophy. I wrote a mini thesis in defence of national parks and wilderness. When I came across that work a few years ago I threw it out in disgust. It contained no mention of Aboriginal people—where it should have.

As a young graduate I spent much of 1972 working at Uluru—Ayers Rock as I only knew it then. I was looking for water. On my days off I’d climb the Rock, trying to establish some sort of speed record. In my work in the area we trampled the country with four-wheel-drives and drilling rigs, unbothered about cultural sensitivities.

Since then, various circumstances and events in both my working and volunteer lives have changed my outlook entirely. Changed my whole life, actually. I am now the first to defend the right of Uluru’s owners to stop the climbers.

As a bushwalker I’ve always been interested in Aboriginal art sites, but a few years ago I joined with other walkers and archaeologists in the discovery and survey of hundreds of sites deep within the Wollemi, in a project led by Professor Paul Tacon. In that and in many other contexts I’ve found myself alongside Aboriginal people.

All this has led me to a great deal of thinking – especially when I’m out there in wilderness. Just last month we undertook an extended walk in Kakadu. It was a wilderness experience in the country of the Mirrar people. What impressed me more than the interesting rock art we came across was the evidence that those people are still connected with that country, and are caring for it. And their spirits are still there. In my own way, I could feel them.

The “rich indigenous cultural heritage” Bob Carr acknowledged is not just a thing of the past. Aboriginal culture is alive and well. Yes, much of the original culture was lost in the invasion. But the people of that culture are variously either still connected or re-connecting with country. Wilderness isn’t just a museum of old Aboriginal art and artefacts. It still contains the spiritual landscape, albeit sometimes latent, waiting
to be rekindled not only by its traditional owners but, in some way and at some level, by Australians in general.

Of course, it’s easier in country where the Aboriginal story, and stories, have survived. In the southern Blue Mountains the traditional owners are fortunate to know much of their story. They know the principle creation story. Indeed, the Gundungurra Aboriginal Heritage Association has just proposed that the extensive tracks of their ancestors Gurrungatch and Mirrigan be formally protected as an Aboriginal Place. That’s mostly in declared wilderness, of course. Do you feel threatened by that? You shouldn’t be. We should rejoice.

On the other hand, in the Wollemi there appears to be nothing. Nothing. No traditional story to sustain people’s connection as it is passes to successive generations. That’s tragic indeed.

There is a Wollemi first contact story: Two hundred years ago Benjamin Singleton had an alarming encounter with over two hundred people at Mount Monundilla. It was the night of a new moon.

Now if you’ve been to Monundilla you’ll agree that that was extraordinary indeed. What were all those people doing there? We assume it was some sort of cultural business, but we don’t really know. If only we knew the story from their side. But it’s lost, and so is their world. Or is it? You can read in my book how I was quite affected by the massive collapse of an art and occupation shelter near Monundilla after I came across it. I wrote:

The spirits of Monundilla did not want to be discovered. I wonder, am I just as unwelcome here as Singleton was? [Macqueen 2017, p21]

When we go adventuring in the Wollemi we tend see only a place devoid of human presence and human story (except of course for a mere two centuries of white-fella story, the story I mostly write about, which is trivial by comparison).

The place needs to be reimagined, by traditional owners and Australians in general. To bring the spirits back.

Getting a better appreciation of the Aboriginal view might be a good place to start. Indeed, we all need to spend more time talking with traditional owners in the bush. To thereby find some common ground in our respective world views, to challenge our own ingrained perceptions, and to enhance our own sense of connection.

In 1997 Pat Dodson, then chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, said this:

Concepts such as wilderness, indigenous ownership and joint management of national parks, and the need to ensure the survival of species have led to differences between the two groups. These differences are not irreconcilable if we sit down in the bush together, let the land speak to us and give ourselves time to understand each other. [Dodson 1997]
I agree. Perhaps only in that way can wilderness once again become a meaningful, living cultural place, full of story – rather than a place to go adventuring amongst old cultural sites.

Even in the middle of the Wollemi, where the traditional stories are lost, we can still sit on a rock, with humility, and acknowledge—and re-imagine in our own way—the cultural landscape that lies dormant there. The eagle still flies.

Time to wind up.

When too many people lose the ability to connect simply and in depth with wilderness, to find meaning and humility, to see themselves in perspective, there’ll be no-one left to defend it. At the cultural level there’ll be no wilderness. In NSW, the Wilderness Act might be repealed overnight. More unlikely things are happening in this world, let’s face it. Then the resorts and the roads will invade and there’ll be no wilderness in actuality.

Let’s not imagine wilderness as a place to be played in, conquered, understood and measured using every piece of technology available. Imagine it as a place to be visited on its own terms, that cannot and should not be fully quantified and understood. A place to be cared for and nurtured. A place not of threats and monsters, but of mystery and story and soul—derived from 65 thousand years of cultural heritage—and still counting forwards. A place that can be valued, in their own way, by all Australians.

So that, in a hundred years, in a thousand years, people may still have large natural areas and value them deeply—in sharp contrast to the rest of a world ruled by robots.

References


Jamieson, Rick (c1963) “Bushwalking and Canyoning Handbook for Senior Scouts”.


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