Introduction – History of Wilderness Loss

The greatest threat to wilderness in Tasmania from the 1950s to the late 1980s was hydro-electric development. The controversy over the inundation of Lake Pedder in the early 1970s was a milestone in the development of environmental awareness in Tasmania and Australia as a whole. It set the scene for the successful campaign against the Franklin Dam a decade later. The halting of the Franklin Dam in 1983 and the related (1982) World Heritage listing of much of the highest wilderness quality parts of western Tasmania probably marked the highpoint for wilderness conservation in Tasmania although further gains have been made since (particularly the 1989 expansion of the WHA to its present boundaries). Despite the high profile of “wilderness” and the overuse of the word in tourism industry advertising, no state government has ever seen fit to actively protect wilderness values and a major legacy of these successes is the antagonism towards “Greenies” that still divides the Tasmania community and polarises public debate on any environmental issue.

The threat to wilderness from hydro-electric development ceased with the completion of the Henty-Anthony scheme in the late 1980s. By this time most of the highest quality wilderness areas were reserved in national parks and the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA). The early days of the WHA saw some wilderness restoration in the form of some closures of 4 WD tracks, mostly in the more remote parts of the Central Plateau.

However wilderness values outside these areas have been further eroded:

- **Forestry** has been ongoing since European settlement but was transformed into modern industry by the introduction of export wood-chipping in 1970. Talks to resolve the future of the industry are ongoing but until a resolution is reached, forestry remains the major threat to wilderness quality in some parts of Tasmania.

- **Mining** too has been ongoing since European settlement. Many areas of Tasmania are littered with remains of old abandoned mines. Some are being reclaimed by nature and have little impact on wilderness quality but others are major scars still responsible for acid drainage which will last for centuries. The industry has been largely successful in ensuring that areas of known mineral potential have been excluded from reservation which would preclude mining, so the potential remains for new mines which impact significantly on wilderness quality.

- **Land clearing** for agriculture and housing development continues. Some of this may pose a threat to biodiversity but is most unlikely to threaten wilderness values.

- **Road construction** does not often impact of wilderness values but two stand out:
  - The Cradle Link Road was constructed in the early 1980s to facilitate tourism. It made Cradle Mountain far more accessible but isolated the Vale of Belvoir and Black Bluff Range from the Cradle Mountain area.
  - The Western Explorer was constructed in the late 1980s, early 1990s. Its role was ostensibly to facilitate tourism in north-west Tasmania but the main rationale appeared to be to bisect the largest remaining area of wilderness in the Tarkine.

The major threat to wilderness values within reserved areas is now **tourist operations and developments**. In comparison to the impacts listed above, the impact of tourism on wilderness values is usually both minor and potentially reversible but it does have great potential to impact on the wilderness experience of visitors to reserved areas.

The Management Authority

The National Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) was created by legislation in 1970 (somewhat later than in many other states) as an independent government agency with responsibility for the development and management of an ecologically representative system
of reserved lands and for conservation of flora and fauna, with education, recreation and visitation being conditional on not impacting on these values.

Over the intervening years it has suffered more cutbacks than most other agencies while its responsibilities have increased (see graph below). It has been subsumed into larger agencies and undergone multiple internal restructures including the removal of the natural scientists to a separate branch within the overarching department (which appears to have led to a reduction of scientific influence on PWS management decisions).

Some of this experience was shared by other Tasmanian government agencies as multiple small agencies were consolidated into a few “super departments” but underlying many of the changes appeared to be a systematic attempt to change the role of the PWS. The consequences of a decade of restructure and reorganisation on the PWS can be summarised as “mission creep”: from a focus on environmental values and habitat conservation, to embracing more anthropocentric values, to promoting commercial opportunities, to being the basis of the tourism industry (Crossley 2009). Visitor facilities now absorb the majority of PWS resources.

Management of reserved areas

Thanks largely to many years of relatively generous federal government funding (now mostly ceased) management of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA), which includes Tasmania’s three largest national parks and most of its major natural attractions, was much better resourced than the non-WHA reserves for which there is still a substantial backlog of management planning. So the management plan for the TWWHA provides a good indication of PWS (and state government) thinking. The 1992 Management Plan for the TWWHA probably represented the pinnacle of pro-conservation management planning. It essentially assumed that tourism operations would not expand beyond those already in existence; only a very limited range of new proposals could be considered and little guidance was provided on the approval process. In contrast, the 1999 Management Plan included a “New Proposals and Impact Assessment Process” with relatively few constraints on the type of proposals that could be considered. Proposals considered under this process included commercial helicopter/floatplane landings (rejected following an overwhelming number of public submissions opposing the proposals – this provided the impetus for the formation of the TNPA) and “wilderness lodges” at Cockle Creek (approved but never constructed) and Pumphouse Point (currently under construction).
Key Challenges for Protected Area Management in Tasmania

**Big Picture**

- There is increasing pressure from the State Government for parks to provide facilities for tourism and to earn money from tourism. This leads to compromise on protection of natural values and weakening of management control (e.g., new Wellington Park Management Plan includes a change to make a cable car discretionary – previously not allowed). This also leads to even more pressure from the industry for relaxation of perceived restrictions on development within parks. e.g., The Mercury, 30-08-2012: Tasmania risks losing its grip on the wilderness tourism sector if it doesn't make it easier to develop in national parks, says the Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania. This is apparently based on the need to “provide continually updated and new experiences in our national parks” and the examples of Victoria and Queensland in opening their parks to private tourism development.

- The COAG proposal to delegate many of the Federal government’s responsibilities under the EPBC Act to state governments. Tasmania has a history of major issues where conservation has only been achieved through the application of federal powers. e.g., saving the Franklin River, saving Recherche Bay from logging.

- The opportunities for raising pro-conservation arguments in decision making forums are limited. There are still many dedicated, well-informed and well-intentioned staff within PWS but their influence on senior management and government is limited. The National Parks and Wildlife Advisory Council includes conservation representatives but it is an advisory council, not a decision making body. Groups such as the TNPA lobby the PWS and government and use the media to “keep the bastards honest” but there are limits to what such groups can achieve from outside government.

**Specific Tasmanian Issues**

Poorly considered (government backed) schemes for development – e.g., Three Capes Track. There has been opportunity for public comment on aspects of the proposal but the underlying concept has remained unchallenged because it has never been explicitly subject to public review or scrutiny.

Walking track hardening – this protects the environment from additional impact at the cost of introducing structures into remote areas. Track work in remote areas has essentially stopped in recent years due to funding cuts but overdevelopment (e.g., unnecessarily high standard of the new Cape Hauy Track and excessively large and intrusive public huts on the Overland Track) remains a concern.

Off road vehicles – a major problem on the Tarkine coast despite some commendable recent attempts at control, and on the coast between Cape Sorell and Low Rocky Point.

**Conclusion**

Underlying all of these concerns is the failure of senior PWS management and the state government to recognise the importance of preserving the intrinsic wildness of Tasmania’s unique reserved lands.