

## **Action for Wilderness Conservation in NSW**

by Keith Muir

We have at most ten years to protect the remaining areas of wilderness in NSW and to establish effective management for these areas. In ten years wilderness will either be forever in the hearts and minds of the public or wilderness will begin to be revoked, developed, mined, logged, sold, trampled, roaded, poisoned and burnt into oblivion.

Despite what its detractors say, wilderness cannot just be unplugged by ridiculing its tenets. Wilderness is not like communism or all the other 'isms' that one bright sunny day can be washed away by the tide of history. Wilderness can only be destroyed by human action or indifference, but not wished or argued out of existence.

The struggle to preserve wilderness is then first and foremost a campaign of public education about its enduring and spellbinding values. If conservation efforts do not include this key point, public support will decline.

### **Re-establishment of the Wilderness Unit**

If public education is the first task, then a second consequence of any wilderness campaign should be to boost bureaucratic action. In NSW this includes seeking the establishment of a Wilderness Unit to push for wilderness programs in the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC), including education and management programs.

In September 2003, Bob Debus announced that creation of DEC, amalgamating the Environment Protection Authority, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, the Botanic Gardens and Resource NSW (formerly the Waste Management Authority). The new bureaucratic juggernaut is a one stop shop for environmental approvals and regulation. It also will handle portfolio co-ordination previously handled by the Ministers Office.

As things stand, the Environment Protection and Regulation Division (a creature built up from the EPA) will handle proposals for new wilderness areas, not the Parks Services Division (a creature made from the park management hindquarters of the NPWS). The Parks Division has also lost its fight to hold onto assessment of controversial proposed activities in declared wilderness areas. Various planners in both these divisions, and the DEC's Policy and Science Division, are responsible for aspects of wilderness management but these people are constantly being sniped at by park area managers and field officers who see it as their duty to reduce, water down and if possible eliminate wilderness so as to keep the local farmers, commercial interests and user lobbies off their backs. A counter-balancing bureaucratic force is needed in the form of a Wilderness Unit.

After three years without a permanent wilderness officer, DEC now has Thomas Williams. He has the task of progressing protection of wild rivers, wilderness education and several long-delayed wilderness proposals. A Wilderness Unit, however, is necessary to provide influential determination advice on controversial proposals. For example, whether or not the proposed filming of the closing scenes of the 'Stealth', an adventure movie should be located in the Grose Wilderness, near Mt Hay. This proposal will set a precedent that defines what the management principle in the *Wilderness Act* means by "protecting the unmodified state of an area". There is a real risk the Regulation Division will decide this principle accommodates major commercial films with its electric generators, structures, equipment, and a large production team.

Without a Wilderness Unit to carefully consider the consequences for wilderness protection of a proposed activity, the two Departmental arms will have a less informed debate. One that competes for the Government's favour and seeks to establish a controlling influence over the other Division by making precedents agreeable to the Government.

The re-establishment of a Wilderness Unit would help refocus efforts on wilderness action, but DEC must also have effective community relationships that build programs to maintain the natural values of our parks. A Wilderness Unit can assist in this task by advancing the case within DEC for wilderness management as the key plank for nature-based park management. Not as a statistic, like "we already have 50 per cent of the parks in this region are wilderness and that's enough", but as of coherent understanding of what wilderness management is for and how it works to preserve and enhance a Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative Reserve system.

It should be noted that Bob Debus is an Environment Minister who has progressed and supported many wilderness proposals. Despite elements of DEC becoming increasingly baffled by wilderness critics and faltering to maintain the nature-focussed park management culture amongst its ever broadening Departmental agenda with much greater emphasis on cultural heritage and visitor use, progress on wilderness protection can be made.

### **Wilderness due for decision**

Perhaps the easiest campaign task to achieve is reserving those wilderness areas that are sitting the Environment Minister's desk for decision and moving along those that are in the assessment pipeline.

Yengo (75 kilometres north west of Sydney), Chaelundi (40 kilometres west of Dorrigo) and Mummel Gulf (125 kilometres north of Newcastle) are due for decision. To ensure these areas are protected there needs to be a flood of supporting letters to Premier Bob Carr and Environment Minister Bob Debus. In addition, you should also thank them for the *Dunphy Wilderness Fund* that has done so much to protect wilderness particularly in northern NSW, including the recent purchase of the 13,000 hectare Green Gully Wilderness addition.

Further areas of private wilderness, such as the large parcel of bushland that almost links two portions of Bald Rock National Park and soon to go up auction, should also be purchased as a priority by DEC.

The bureaucratic and political pipeline needs a little more vigorous shoving to progress the wilderness assessment reports for an expanded Murruin Wilderness in the southern Blue Mountains and Tuggolo Wilderness on the Barnard River, about 100 kilometres north of Newcastle.

The Murruin Wilderness has been identified and a wilderness assessment report will be placed on exhibition for public comment shortly, provided there is a political will to do so. We need to lobby for the exhibition of the Murruin wilderness and then work through its protection using the public exhibition process to educate the community about the positive values of wilderness.

### **Revisit the southern wilderness decision**

Southern wilderness decision of March 2003 should be revisited to protect wilderness areas of the first rank - the Deua west of Moruya, the western flank of the Shoalhaven Gorge, Mongarlowe River headwaters west of Batemans Bay, Tabletop and the Main Range extension to the Jagungal Wilderness in Kosciuszko National Park, and Brindabella west of Canberra in the national park of the same name.

An access management report is being developed by DEC for the core areas of the Deua Wilderness and Buckenbowra Wilderness directly to the north, which will promote the fragmentation these areas through the park plan of management process for the benefit of motorised transport. Over 18000 submissions called for these wilderness areas to be protected, but the boundary recommendations supported by these submissions were not considered, while 26 submissions calling for an access management plan were acted upon by DEC. Such action alienates DEC from conservation groups and panders to groups who never fought for the protection of any natural area and these organisations mainly pursue self-interested park use objectives or oppose conservation objectives altogether.

### **Interstate wilderness management**

The NSW government needs to reach an agreement with the Beattie Government of Queensland in regard to the wilderness management of those parts of Girraween National Park adjacent to Bald Rock National Park and Wilderness. Similarly the Sundown National Park and the Donnybrook West Wilderness; Mt Barney National Park and Mt Barlow Wilderness; and the Lamington National Park and the Levers Wilderness. This is one way to advance further conservation of wilderness protection in Queensland through the NSW Government. A similar wilderness agreement should be developed for the Bimberi Wilderness that straddles the ACT-NSW border.

### **Advancing wilderness identification and restoration**

Wilderness assessment must accept that any wilderness has been to some extent affected by European occupation and, as a result of this past use, the presence of cultural heritage should not be a reason to exclude areas from protection. Roads, bridle trails and tumbled-down tin shacks, old gold fields, selectively logged areas should be included in protection plans, and even powerlines, if there is a possibility that these can be relocated over time. We should always accept some modified areas into the wilderness estate to avoid the 'purity trap' whereby only hypothetical, pristine areas are considered suitable for protection.

In the South East Forests, Tantawangalo is an area high integrity that should be protected as a wilderness, small though it is. Trail bike riders, claim they are bush lovers, and are seeking permanent access to the Postmans Track that bisects the heart of the Tantawangalo Creek catchment by representations through the plan of management process. Wilderness management can protect this area from long term degradation and rekindle concern for this pristine area and its beautiful granite bolder gardens.

We need to lobby for the restoration of the Coolangubra Wilderness. In 1983 the Washpool Wilderness was protected and many kilometres of the Viper Scrub Road, including its concrete culverts, were pulled out. It is hard to find that road now. Wog Way cuts an ugly swathe through the Coolangubra. The road is a symbol of wilderness abuse that should be removed, and the road easement rehabilitated. This much-loved park is on the brink of being turned into a playground by a vehicle -focussed plan of management that will provide 450

kilometres of public roads in the South East Forest National Park, competing with adjoining state forest areas for vehicle-based recreation which has 700 kilometres of roads.

If you think the days of making a park in the image of Royal National Park are over, think again. We have to fight for the preservation of nature-based management of national parks, and remember that it was the wilderness that saved the core of the Coolangubra, against the wishes of the NPWS who wished to pursue a number of much smaller conservation reserves that in the long term would be devoid of biological integrity.

You may say the "Coolangubra is gone" but if an area can illustrate wilderness management, then this area best illustrates the different alternative management fates. One management strategy leads to a 'Royal National Park conclusion' with facilities and roads, a playground for those in a hurry, a 'scenic drive' through and a death trap for wildlife. The other maximises nature-based management with limited access. Sadly DEC has not waited to do a plan of management, but the newly established lookouts, such as the one on Pheasants Peak, could be removed by a plan of management. The park management in the United States has accepted the process of re-wilding areas and correcting development mistakes.

'Lest we Forget' those thousands of arrests, the years of direct action in difficult conditions and the decades of campaigning for Coolangubra were about saving this mega-diverse forest area. Environment groups must not allow a vehicle-focussed park development vision to destroy the very reason why this area was protected. So once more we must campaign for the Coolangubra.

### **Wilderness and nature-based park management**

The NPWS, now DEC, has been highly politicised. There is an increasing tendency to avoid confrontation and present Government with soft options; to focus on impediments, not opportunities; and worse, to greatly underestimate the resolve of the community to protect the last bastions of nature. Such a strategy overlooks to its peril that an organisation or policy that seeks to make itself a small target is on the way to oblivion.

The wilderness assessments that focus on exclusion of areas, regardless of the impact on the protection of wilderness values, are worthless documents. To only recommend the dedication of economically and biologically useless areas, unwanted by park user groups, while productive areas near population centres go unprotected is a waste of time. A handful of objections (e.g. 0.7 % of submissions in 2002) should not lead to whole wilderness areas being deleted. In dropping the Tabletop, Brindabella and the Central Deua Valley from its March 2003 wilderness decision, the Parks Service and the Government treated the *Wilderness Act, 1987* with contempt.

DEC is beginning to see park visitor use as needing large scale development projects, such as extensive road networks, lookouts and facilities. Such structures and facilities are contrary to the long-held principles of park management advanced by the environment movement. The only solution to dumping wilderness is to make abundantly clear to DEC that once road maintenance and facilities fragment remote wilderness by being imposed through bad plans of management and pre-emptive capital works projects, visitor use literally comes at the expense of nature conservation and its support among the conservation movement. Too much money is being wasted on unplanned and unwanted capital works.

Strengthening wilderness management of core park areas, on the other hand, reduces edge effects that fray ecosystems and damage ecological integrity and reduce visitor management

costs. Such a vision is being achieved in northern NSW, where the wilderness is being advanced, where leasehold land in state forest is being purchased, where park integrity is being improved through the creation of large wilderness national parks of an order that is on quite a different scale from the risk averse approach taken in the southern part of the state.

When a campaign for a new reserve is won, it is increasingly important for conservation groups to campaign again for appropriate management of these high quality wilderness areas. This requires more than just writing the occasional submission. Each new park needs a group of dedicated carers to ensure its core areas are protected for all time. Park plans must be drawn up that present the detailed case for wilderness management. It means more conservationists must seek nomination to park advisory committees and be actively involved in park management.

Strong conservation partnerships need to be built up, such as those exemplified by the Great Grose Gorse Walk this weekend, and the successful Willows out of Wollemi campaign. The Parks Service Division must not make do with high impact user groups re-badged as conservation carers that provide a gate or two so these same groups can control park access and thereby boost its membership, lobbying power and perhaps winch out the occasional dumped car. That is not conservation; that is park development by Memorandum of Understanding, rather than by plan of management.

Proper harnessing of public sympathy is essential to nature conservation, more so than securing the sympathies of government agencies and politicians, although this too is important. Think back to the saving of the Colo, Kanangra, Kakadu and the Franklin River, and it will be recalled that public sympathy for parks and wilderness coincided with these campaigns. We need to help make the Tarkine Wilderness a symbol for a national wilderness resurgence.

### **The future**

In less than three years the Outdoor Recreation Party will be swept from office and, even if the Coalition wins office in 2007, it seems possible that the wilderness estate can be held in NSW. Holding onto wilderness is not a certainty, it is a strong possibility contingent on demonstrated public support for wilderness protection through progressing the campaigns described above.

For the other parts of Australia, it is necessary for The Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation to develop and implement a national wilderness protection campaign. A 'Save the Tarkine Wilderness' campaign is a start, but behind the scenes wilderness policy development with all parties is necessary in all states. In Queensland, the Beattie Government is in a strong position to progress wilderness protection, and it is very disappointing that a wilderness agenda was not advanced before this year's election. It probably would have been adopted.

In the last ten years wilderness estate in NSW has jumped from 0.65 to 1.8 million hectares. This magnificent estate can keep growing. The Colong Foundation lists 52 wilderness areas of the coast and tablelands of NSW that total about 3 million hectares. Of these 23 are mostly declared, 11 are partly declared and 18 are not declared.

The 14 of the areas not declared and 4 of the partly areas declared lie north of Sydney. Ten of these areas are subject to Integrated Forestry Operation Approvals that provide security of supply to the logging industry and prevents state forests being reserves in parks. A

considerable body of wilderness in the northern part of NSW, however, can be reserved even though it is in state forests because leasehold lands in state forests were specifically excluded from logging. These lands can be added to the wilderness estate if the leasehold parts can be acquired. Over 100,000 hectares of wilderness can be protected in the Chaelundi, Washpool, Guy Fawkes, Cathedral Rocks, Stockyard Creek, Timbarra, Cataract, and Tuggolo, the latter places are perhaps unfamiliar to many. These campaigns will be a hard slog. Much needs to be done to understand how these areas can be protected and what are the key issues to achieve protection.

Two of the 14 areas not declared are Western Woodlands wilderness areas that will be exhibited following decision on reserves this year. These areas, along with additions to the Mt Kaputar Wilderness will then need vigorous campaigns for protection. If previous experience is any guide, those key locals involved in the western woodland campaign will need extra help in this wilderness management campaign after five years of hard work securing the reserves. Understandably, the woodland campaigners will want to get on with their lives after such a sustained effort to protect the woodlands of the north western slopes of NSW.

The *Dunphy Wilderness Fund* has been a significant boost to protecting core wilderness areas. The Fund has acquired 50 properties for \$9.5 million, protecting about 70,000 hectares including critical parts of Mummel Gulf, Guy Fawkes, Washpool and Tuggolo wilderness areas. The program requires active support through public bequests and donations, as well as pushing for core government funding to secure threatened wilderness in public ownership. If the private wilderness lands are not acquired, these enclaves create opportunities for exclusive hideaways and 'wilderness resorts' that can compromise the protection of an entire wilderness. It is essential to lobby for continued support of this Fund as it is critical to the successful management of the wilderness estate in NSW.

All wilderness declarations are affected by concessions for access. For example, horseriding easements in the Northern part of the State occur through the heart of the declared Guy Fawkes, Macleay Gorges and Washpool wilderness areas and should be removed.

Feral animals and weeds are major problems, and in the case of feral horses the Minister's veto on aerial shooting has meant that this problem is rapidly increasing. Feral horses are a major problem in the Guy Fawkes, Macleay Gorges and Kosciuszko National Parks and an increasing problem in other parks with an open grassy understorey. For this reason you should support the NPWS Feral Horse Management Plan that would see these pests removed from the Guy Fawkes wilderness in five years. The Colong Foundation submission guide can be found on our website:

<http://www.colongwilderness.org.au/FeralHorses/FeralHorses2.htm>

Even more disturbing is the hunting fraternity, who are releasing deer and pigs into all parks for shooting sprees, often with hunting dogs. This has a two-fold impact of dispersing ferals and accelerating the demise of dingo populations. Legislation is needed to ban pig dogging in national parks and gaol for those who cause or permit the release feral animals.

### **Turning the wilderness knot into a wilderness celebration**

The main game is to protect as much as we can, as soon as we can and to ensure it is effectively managed and to construct wilderness campaigns that strengthen support within the public service, in government and with the public through effective education. We need to undo the wilderness knot and bring forth a wilderness celebration.