

Bulletin 222

THE COLONG FOUNDATION FOR WILDERNESS LTD

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PROTECTING WILDERNESS AND NATIONAL PARKS

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CONNECT TO PROTECT Eastern Links

by John Macris
(Colong's new wilderness officer)

GOVERNMENTS at the state level are beginning to develop concepts for large scale conservation linkages through areas with high concentrations of existing protected lands, such as National Parks. Within the environment movement, our own aspirations for this scale of conservation go back some decades.

The late 1970s saw the establishment of several large National Parks from vacant Crown land. All were areas advocated by environmentalists of the day, notably including the campaigns for park creations over Wollemi, southern Morton additions, Budawang, Deua, Wadbilliga and Guy Fawkes River, plus, subsequently, the rainforest parks. All these areas lie along a major landscape feature of southeastern Australia.

The Great Eastern Escarpment

This name may conjure up mental images of an extended line of cliffs, such as that rising behind the Illawarra plain between Stanwell Tops and just north of Nowra. Certainly the Illawarra

Escarpment does represent one segment of the eastern escarpment. However, you might also note an important absence within that region – major rivers. The relatively straight alignment along the Illawarra Escarpment lasts as far south as the Shoalhaven River system, from which point major ‘embayments’ like the Kangaroo Valley become the norm. This pattern is repeated to varying degrees along the entirety of the highlands of eastern Australia.

So whilst the eastern escarpment is overall oriented north-south, it is by no means a straight line. Dissection by the major rivers of each catchment along the eastern seaboard makes for a highly diverse interface between our coastal lowlands and elevated tablelands. Such interface topography also houses generally the most viable clusters of intact natural areas in NSW’s heavily populated east, and of course significant tracts of wilderness are a key attribute of this.

Development of Concepts

People who have campaigned for

In this issue...

Connect to protect	1
Can wilderness survive climate change?	2
Vale: Charles Culberg, Anna Dybka	4
Crisis? What Crisis?	5
Positive negotiation outcome for Emirates Resort	6
Book Review: Sustainability	6
Wilderness on Cape York Peninsula	7
Greenhouse emissions subsidised	8
Meeting dates	8
Bushfire in a Heating World	9
New plan removes Kakadu's Wilderness protection	10

protected areas in their respective back country/hinterlands have also been working toward securing a larger entity along the highlands and its offshoots. The Commonwealth’s regional forest agreement process came into force in New South Wales in the late 1990s. There were disappointments about the entrenchment of wood chipping, and doubt over resource forecasts, but there was yet some good news in the form of several significant reserve system linkages being achieved. This gave a

continued on page 2

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Connect to Protect

continued from page 1

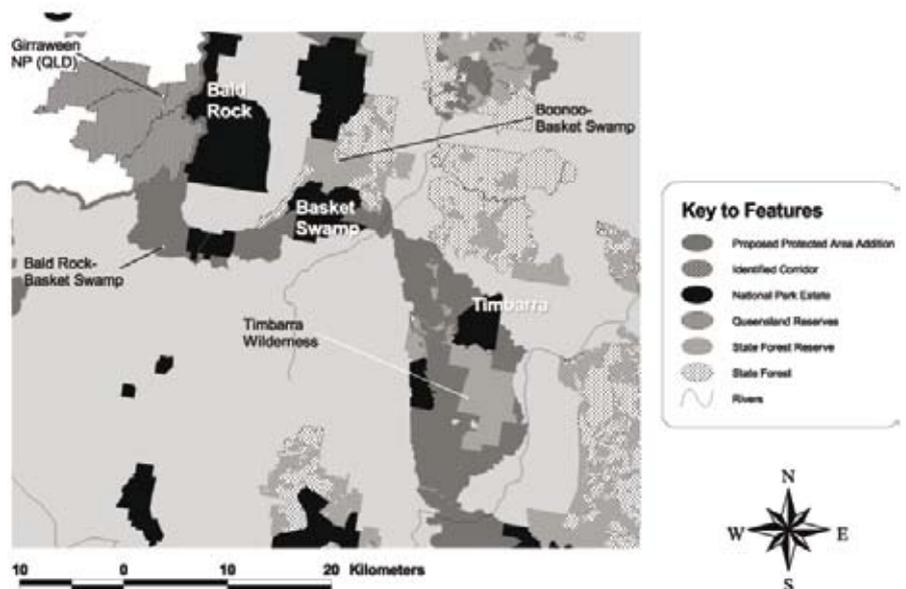
framework for future advocacy of long distance connectivity and regional movement corridors that span a range of altitudes and environments. This concept is essential for the preservation of ecosystems and habitats in the face of climate change and human impacts. The concept is essentially one of resilience against all of the various human impacts that prevail on ecological integrity and habitat quality. Climate change of course figures highly in such considerations, but there is no shortage of other threatening processes that necessitate refuge areas for the persistence of nature to have primacy.

This concept was becoming an accepted part of the global conservation agenda at much the same time. The term Macro Corridor had come into use within organisations like the World Conservation Union. Proposals on a national and even continental scale were being formulated for macro corridors in the Americas, Europe and Asia. Australia too has these projects, such as the GondwanaLink project in the south of Western Australia and others now underway in the semi-arid zones.

NPA Proposal

In its report *Connect to Protect – Eastern Links*, NPA has focused on the achievement of a macro corridor along the well vegetated lands of the eastern escarpment and adjacent highlands and flanking slopes, linking to the coastal or interior lowlands. This is done by breaking down the challenge into discreet sections, where future land management and tenure decisions can contribute to the long term goals.

We recognise an existing relatively secure central section of corridor along the Greater Blue Mountains and adjoining sandstone bushland reserves around Sydney. The southern ranges extending from the Illawarra into Victoria's Gippsland are also well advanced to provide north-south connectivity. Significant challenges remain in providing adequate links to the coast and to the Australian Alps through this southern section. The larger blocks of wilderness-quality land could be made more secure through declaration proposals advanced by environment groups. The substantive part of a northern



The wildlife corridors of the north east Granite Belt, near Tenterfield NSW.

NSW protected corridor section is now in place, spanning the upper Clarence, Macleay and Hastings catchments. Several further formal connections are highly desirable to bring in the upper Manning catchment/Barrington Tops, the Granite belt around Tenterfield, the Richmond Ranges/Border rainforest caldera and several coastal links.

Linking between those three key sections is a further challenge. The Southern Highlands isolate the central and southern sections, although thanks to thin linear stretches of preserved steep forested country some tenuous links do remain. By far our most important gap is the floor of the Hunter Valley. Advances have recently been made in protecting corridors between the Hunter estuary and it's hinterland. In the headwaters however, grazing and open cut mining threats remain to be overcome. The vestiges of a low sandstone escarpment flanking a basalt plateau west of Scone were found to provide the least depleted link between existing sandstone reserves around Denman and the parks of the Liverpool Range. This could form the basis of a future corridor to join the northern forest parks, through the use of covenanting and regeneration efforts.

We are heartened that former NSW Environment Minister Bob Debus gave the macro corridor concept a push along in his last months in office, and that work is to commence on conservation initiatives for a larger Alps to Atherton corridor, spanning Victoria, New South Wales and Queensland. It is likely that the *Connect to Protect* report will be

useful in outreach to potential supporters of the broader concept who may wish to dedicate their energies to a particular local patch.

NZ shows the way

New Zealand's Prime Minister, Helen Clarke, has announced that NZ aims to be carbon neutral by 2020. Climate Change Minister, David Parker, says government agencies will take the lead through energy efficient building design, use of low energy appliances, turning off lights and other measures when not in use and other measures. When emissions have been reduced as much as is practicable, forestry offsets will be purchased to cover remaining emissions. A major NZ power company, Meridian Energy had been certified as carbon neutral. Another energy supplier, Carbon Energy, will invest NZ\$2 billion in wind and geothermal power products.

Redgums before concrete

Railway sleepers used to be cut from Ironbark trees. When these had been cut down, concrete sleepers were used. Now River Red Gum timber is to be used. Although none of the Red Gums along the Murray River are preserved in NSW national parks, 100,000 more red gums are to be used for sleepers.

The logging approvals will be challenged by the National Parks Association in the Land and Environment Court.

Can wilderness survive climate change?

by Keith Muir

RECENTLY a new geological epoch was identified, the Anthropocene. The epoch started with the industrial revolution in 1750, when humanity started to punch above its weight, using machines. Since we started burning hydrocarbons in large quantities we have been turning the atmosphere back to a condition not seen since the Carboniferous Period, when CO₂ concentrations were much higher.

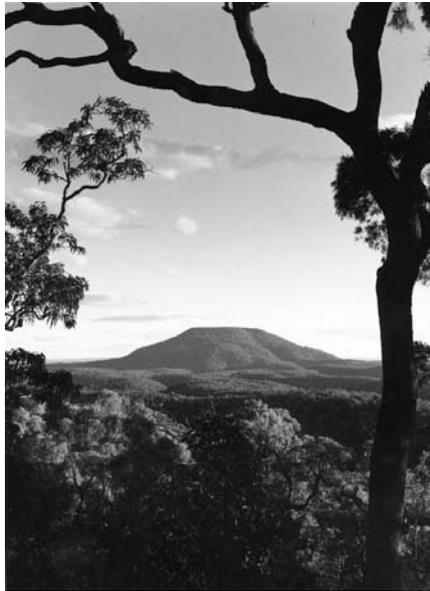
Human-accelerated climate change is upon us now and, as a bump on effect, all natural environments must also rapidly change. So does that mean that wilderness no longer exists? Perhaps if you're a narcissistic purist, with a vision of a static arcadia, or a resource developer, then your answer would be yes.

Sure, the climate change demon challenges our understanding of wilderness being a large, substantially unmodified, area but wilderness areas are dynamic landscapes.

Wilderness defines one end of the spectrum of land uses, while city landscapes define the other, and rural land is found somewhere in the middle. This land use spectrum moves through time and into a climate changing world. Wilderness is still there, at one end of the land use spectrum, defining the most intact parts of the natural environment we have left.

I believe that as environmental change increases, wilderness will become an even more important tool for park management. Now, more than ever, it is necessary to study, understand and manage the natural world to enable it to maintain its plant and animal diversity. Wilderness provides opportunities to study responses to climate change in environments where other types of disturbance are minimal.

Humanity through its three million or so years of development has only influenced the evolution of a handful of plants and animals. We are the new kid on the block biologically speaking, but



Reserving the Yengo Wilderness would buffer wildlife against the stresses of climate change PHOTO: H. GOLD

like ancient astronomers, we think we are the centre of the universe. Wilderness puts all life into perspective.

Yes, we are now demonstrating our intelligence by inducing the Anthropocene and perhaps our own demise. Wilderness management will help to stave off mass extinctions during this epoch and offers hope to the next generation.

Apart from native animals that have adapted to human altered landscapes, wilderness is where most of our *non*-threatened wildlife exists. Wilderness areas are not little life boats in a sea of disturbed lands, they are whopping great big wild-life sustaining arks. We should be securing as many as possible, the bigger the better. For example, by making Antarctica a wilderness sanctuary and reserving wilderness on Cape York and in the rest of the Top End.

The role of fire in a warming world

One of the most noticeable and immediate effects of climate change on Australian environments will be increased wildfire. Ian

continued on page 4

*A reminder to
Join Us!*

The Colong
Foundation
for Wilderness
celebrates
**Twenty
Years
of the
Wilderness
Act**
and its role
in an age of
climate change

Speaker:

**The Hon
Bob Carr**
and

**Wilderness
Retrospective:
Places and people**

An audio-visual presentation by
Henry Gold OAM
accompanied by a musical quartet

**Tuesday July 24th,
6.30pm
'The Station' at
Jackson's Landing**

Bowman Street,
opposite Jones Street,
Pymont*

Entry by donation,
payable at door.
Drinks and supper provided.

**RSVP: 9261 2400; or
email: foundation@
colongwilderness.org.au**

* Public transport directions:
443 bus from QVB to Bowman St;
or light rail from
Central to John St Square.

Can wilderness survive climate change?

continued from page 3

Brown, in this *Bulletin*, explains how the risks of wildfire will increase as climate change ramps up (see page 9). Some plants will be vulnerable to more frequent fire. Woody plants that regenerate from seed, including some eucalypt trees are vulnerable. Gloomy projections of large areas of the Blue Mountains becoming a shrubland were discussed at the Nature Conservation Council's 'Bushfire in a Heating World Conference' last May.

Wilderness areas provide native plants and animals with the best available opportunities to adjust to changes in climate and fire behaviour. The rare and isolated plant populations of today are often survivors of previous climatic environments. They may become the common plants of tomorrow. Wilderness areas, being topographically diverse, offer a range of refuge areas from climate change, as the Wollemi pines and coachwoods deep within the Blue Mountains canyons demonstrate. Fire behaviour in wilderness is patchy. In a large wilderness some gullies, peaks, swamps and forest tracts survive a wildfire unscathed. The significant variations in altitude, soil and terrain in the wilderness areas on Australia's eastern seaboard may provide the essential opportunities for wildlife to relocate in response to climate change.

Wilderness areas will offer opportunities that at least some areas may not suffer severe repeated burning. While some animal and bird populations can relocate under the duress of climate change, most native plants are far less mobile, being able to move only short distances over centuries. These plants must rely on genetic diversity of their dispersed populations to survive. Large intact areas of wilderness can increase the chances of maintaining diversity, and may permit some plant populations to creep around certain hill slopes over the centuries without being totally wiped out.

Ancient plant life, be it old growth forest or heathland, will be most at risk from climate change. Fire managers must resist burning old growth, just because it is old. There is little point to stopping old growth logging, if

these 500 year old forest giants are not protected from fire.

Fighting fire with fire must become smarter and a one size fits all ridgetop burning approach could increase the risk of plant and animal extinctions. Management of fire risk was a hard job, and climate change will make it more difficult.

Now consider the alternative of conservation strategies focused upon small, isolated reserves and other reserve networks connected by wildlife corridors. These areas have little or no buffer capacity. The centres of these reserves are exposed to direct attack by weeds and feral animals. Even healthy small reserve areas can not resist exotic pest incursions for long.

Small reserves may survive wildfire through a form of roulette, if there are enough replicate areas, but wildfire will strike sooner, rather than later. Three strikes in ten years and the reserve loses many species.

The conservation strategies focused upon wildlife corridors, smaller linked reserve networks and isolated reserves have another big disadvantage. All these areas are surrounded by greatly modified landscapes and are subjected to more fire escapes and arson, and sometimes to a total absence of fire, which can be just as bad from an ecological viewpoint. Except for rapidly migrating species, such as birds, these areas may not continue to offer suitable habitat for their existing range of fauna unless very actively managed.

Repeated wildfire has more chance to remove plant and animal populations from a small park as there are few refuge areas and limited opportunities for effective wildlife recruitment. Wilderness, being bigger, can absorb harder climate change punches.

As conservation resources are limited, we must determine the triage decisions necessary to ensure the greatest survival changes for the greatest number of plants and animals. How do you tag the reserve estate to ensure the best chance of survival under climate change?

If I were the national parks and wildlife service I would be looking for management techniques to maximise the resilience of wilderness and encourage the community to apply those lessons on the more fragmented reserves. We can't afford to do anything else. ■

VALE

Charles Culberg

1913 – 2006

Charles Culberg was the Colong Foundation's diligent honorary treasurer from 1970 to 1985. He was attracted to the position as a result of a protest action (called a cave-in) conducted at the Church Creek caves in September 1969 by his son Tony Culberg, who led the nine day action.

Charles was an outstanding treasurer. He ensured that the Colong Committee, as it then was, remained financial, even though it had no government funds and operated hand-to-mouth on donations. Under Charles supervision the Committee slowly built a small financial buffer that ensured more efficient campaign operation.

Charles persuaded Graham Paton to become the Auditor of the Colong Foundation while working in the Accountants Association. Graham Paton then resigned in favor of Arthur Anderson and Co., the firm of public accountants of which he is a partner. Arthur Anderson and Co., then became Ernst and Young and our records have remained in the best of hands ever since.

Charles Culberg was also well remembered for negotiating the relocation of the Moomba gas pipeline, while he worked for the Australian Gas Light Company (AGL). If it were not for his convincing financial argument to relocate the pipeline via Goulburn and the Southern Highlands, the pipeline would have cut the Wollangambe Wilderness in two.

VALE

Anna Dybka

1921 – 2007

Anna Dybka was a celebrated glass engraver of international standing, but I remember her as a key supporter of Total Environment Centre's Canopy Native Forest Committee. Canopy has been active in forest campaigning since the rainforest campaign, and since the early 1980s its meetings were convened at Anna's home in the Rocks. I have attended countless meetings there and she always made everyone feel welcome. Anna provided many of her engraved works for fundraising activities.

Keith Muir

Crisis, What Crisis?

by David Lockwood

IN 1989 American author Bill McKibben wrote a book called *The End of Nature*. This was the first book to bring the subject of global warming into the public domain. The central theme of this book was that human settlement had spread to all corners of the world and that the influence of the settlement had become so ubiquitous that nature no longer existed as an independent entity. In other words, there were no longer any parts of the earth that had not been influenced or substantially changed by the expansion of human settlements. Since this book was written, the science and evidence to support the theory have mounted. It is now clear that the expansion of human settlements have placed us on a collision course with the natural world and its capacity to buffer the output of our industrial civilization.

At the same time, the Australian Government has run a campaign to prevent the public finding out the true nature of global warming and to prevent measures to reduce the carbon emissions that cause the warming. This has happened largely because the Government has believed that global warming is a hoax. This has been based on a profound ignorance of the underlying science and a desire to protect the industries most threatened by emission reductions. This campaign has continued until it became electorally untenable.

The Al Gore documentary, the publication of the Stern Report and the longest drought in living memory finally caught up with Government and caused voters to question whether the Government had been taking the issue seriously.

The Federal Government has now unveiled its carbon policy. It is noteworthy in that it doesn't set a target for emission reductions, it delays the introduction of carbon trading until 2012, it doesn't ratify the international treaty

designed to tackle global warming and it abolishes the mandatory renewable energy targets (which may force the state governments to shutdown their renewable energy programs).

One wonders what the Government hopes to achieve with this policy? Given that the Government doesn't really believe climate change is an important issue for the 21st century, you'd have to conclude that the policy is designed to shelter the coal industry from "profit change" and convince voters that the Government is leading on this issue. In fact they are running a scare campaign to convince voters that the ALP cannot be trusted to handle this issue because they will wreck the economy. This isn't a campaign to inform voters about global warming, it is a campaign of wedge politics.

If the Government was serious about climate change it would join the international treaty to curb carbon emissions, introduce carbon trading in 2008, increase mandatory renewable energy targets (not abolish them) and restructure the timber industry to prevent further clearing of old growth forests and land clearing in Tasmania, Gippsland and in South East NSW.

In a speech given in London on November 28 2006, James Lovelock explained that climate change would render much of the earth unfit for human habitation through droughts, storms and floods. The intolerable hot world of tomorrow will only support remnants of today's human communities and much of the fertile land we now depend upon for agriculture will become hot, barren and inhospitable.

If we want to avoid this future we need a policy to tackle climate change that is more than scaremongering and wedge politics. If the Federal Government can't deliver such a policy perhaps the time has come for new leadership. The 2007 election will present a chance to make this choice and decide what kind of future we want. ■

No action on climate change

by Alex Colley

The Commonwealth Government is sending us, at a cost of \$ millions, an eight page colour booklet on climate change, but, as Peter Garrett points out, doing nothing about it. While David Mills, our leading authority on thermal energy is supervising a thermal power plant in California, the Victorian Government is building a brown coal power plant (subsidised by the Commonwealth), the NSW Government is considering another coal fired plant and has authorised a new mine on the upper Hunter River, and Whitehaven Coal has raised \$1.9 billion to finance a mine near Gunnedah. The *SMH* quotes Mills as believing that: There will have to be a dramatic re-rating of the real costs of energy production, which will make existing coal and nuclear technologies much more expensive relative to some alternative fuels being developed: 'By 2010 the fossil fuel crash will begin in earnest in the Western nations, and a few years later in China. Who will want to build conventional power plants when you can build solar plants as cheaply? We used to joke that the only way to change Australia is to change the USA. It is now no joke.'

Inholdings menace parklands

International Luxury Travel Market, which promotes the top end of the travel market, says the luxury sector is growing at more than 10% per annum. No doubt The Emirates were aware of this trend when they acquired the inholding on the Wolgan River, which will be seen from much of the surrounding parkland. Though serviced by road, it will be served by helicopters. There are many other inholdings in national parks which would be suitable for luxury resorts. It is to be hoped that the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife, the Dunphy Wilderness Fund and other purchasers of additions to parklands will bear this in mind.

Positive negotiation outcome for Emirates Resort

by Keith Muir

In June the leases for the Emirates Wolgan Valley Resort were issued by Environment Minister, Phil Koperberg following a vigorous round of negotiations between Emirates, National Parks and environment groups. The leases give the Emirates tenure over Wollemi National Park and enables part of the 6-star resort to be constructed.

The leases follow earlier approvals by the Federal Environment Minister, Malcolm Turnbull covering World Heritage matters and a planning approval under the controversial Part 3A planning laws, by Planning Minister Frank Sartor.

The World Heritage approval, the conditions imposed by the lease and undertakings by the Emirates greatly improve on the planning approvals. The Emirates are to be congratulated for their willingness to ensure good environmental outcomes.

The Emirates will now purchase the Webb family's property in the Wolgan Valley that consists of large tracts of Crown lands, as well as 1,600 hectares of freehold land. The configuration

of the surrounding national parks will mean that the resort's wildlife sanctuary will also operate on about 1,000 hectares of the World Heritage listed parks. The prior planning approval did not address how these park areas would be managed and the land swap deliberations failed to pick up on the opportunities presented by the Crown lands to improve conservation outcomes.

Andrew Cox, executive officer with the National Parks Association, and I presented a set of issues regarding governance, environment protection and the Gardens of Stone proposal to see if these could be addressed during the final round of negotiations.

Our representations were successful partly because of the willingness of Emirates to provide copies of the draft lease agreements. The Emirates then met with Minister Koperberg and during these discussions the Emirates indicated a willingness to establish a formal conservation agreement over the Nature Conservancy precinct. Significantly they decided to establish a separate agreement for the Crown lands within the Wolgan Valley. Ultimately this will lead to gazettal of these lands as national

park, subject to various conditions.

The Emirates also gave assurances regarding:

- Public access to the Glow Worm Tunnel walking track and anonymous public access to scenic Donkey Mountain.

- Guaranteed base flows for the Wolgan River;

- An expert panel chaired by National Parks to advise on wildlife and pest management; and an

- Independent monitoring of approval conditions by the World Heritage Advisory Committee.

In addition, National Parks agreed to examine whether leasing and licensing procedures within national parks generally could improve transparency and accountability.

The Parks Service described that outcome as 'an extraordinary circumstance which is unlikely to be repeated in other national parks in NSW.' We hope so. Partly relocating a resort onto a national park after a previous approval on private land is not something that should happen again, even if this time it led to some outstanding conservation undertakings. ■

BOOK REVIEW

Sustainability

By Alex Colley Published by Envirobook RRP \$20

by Samantha Van

OUR society's obsession with growth is detrimental to the planet and all its inhabitants. It's 'business as usual' – where profits come before people and the environment – with governments, businesses and individuals.

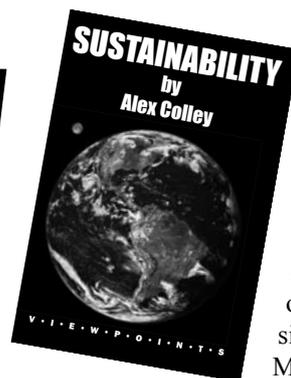
Alex Colley's new book *Sustainability* details the problems of continued economic growth. He offers a plain speaking, step-by-step description of our problems – some of which, if not most, are self inflicted – starting with the growth obsession and including consideration of water, air, waste and

transport.

Sustainability should be required reading, not just for anyone wanting to learn more about global environmental issues, but anyone.

Colley offers much wisdom. He uses many sources yet he enlightens the reader with only necessary facts and figures. The only 'burden' he assertively places upon readers is knowledge, and with that, an impetus to take action.

While Colley describes our problems, he also provides solutions. Public opinion seems to prefer the government to assume responsibility for the environment.



That is, by legislating and providing incentives, such as providing rebates for rainwater tanks.

However, governments often act in their own perceived interests, like other bodies and individuals. Australia and the US are the only countries that failed to sign the Kyoto agreement. Prime Minister John Howard says that he won't commit to anything that would hurt the economy.

This line of argument simply illustrates that individuals must pressure governments to act beyond economics. Colley argues that Australia, which is the world's leading emitter of greenhouse gases per capita, needs to set an example in order to influence world opinion.

Copies of Alex's new book are available from the Colong Foundation for \$20.00, incl. postage.

WILDERNESS ON CAPE YORK PENINSULA

by Ian Brown

YOU can stand on the crest of the unnamed sandstone ranges north-west of Cooktown and see nothing at all. Nothing of human origin that is. The view takes in the Coral Sea coast some 30 km to the east, and hills and plains for at least 70 km in all other directions, fading into the blue. Wilderness?

Looking more closely, amongst the woodland and heath of the plateau top, you can find no mines, no logging, no roads, no buildings, no rubbish, not even any walking tracks. Not a single direct sign of people. But there are more subtle changes. A cow turd, would you believe, dropped right there beside you, and a little further away, the ground has been gouged by a feral pig. Then you notice a plume of smoke rising from the valley, and a trail of dust from a distant 4WD track. Tucked away in overhangs below the snaking ochre clifflines, there are multi-coloured paintings of people, animals, tracks and spirit figures.

Similar scenes can be repeated in many parts of Cape York Peninsula, a region that has been described as pristine and intact. The Wilderness Society headlines the Peninsula as 'one of the last great wild places on Earth'. As indeed it is. With less than one per cent of its native vegetation cleared, it has more environmental integrity than any other comparable chunk of eastern Australia. Every bit of it is also storied country, the traditional homeland of Aboriginal people since they first arrived from the north.

As might be expected for a region nearly the size of Victoria, Cape York Peninsula ranges over a huge diversity of landscapes and ecosystems. Reaching to within eleven degrees of the Equator, it is the most tropical part of Australia. In the wet-dry monsoonal climate, savanna woodlands of eucalypts and melaleucas dominate the vast plains,



Sandstone tablelands of 'Jack River wilderness' (undeclared), Cape Melville National Park PHOTO: I. BROWN

laced with dozens of undammed and unpolluted rivers.

The rivers rise in the highland spine that runs close to the east coast. This dwindling tail of the Great Divide reaches its peak at just 824 metres (on the McIlwraith Range), but most of the hills and dissected plateaus of granite and sandstone are much more humble. Where they are high enough to intercept the prevailing south-easterly winds of the dry season, tropical rainforest flourishes, and follows the rivers onto the plains. Out there, the vast sea of savanna can be broken by grasslands, and rare patches of vine scrub.

Downstream, the rivers spill into some of the most extensive and diverse wetlands and mangrove forests in Australia, home to an abundance of waterbirds, as well as very healthy populations of the world's largest reptiles: estuarine crocodiles – affectionately known as 'salties', even though they also live way up the bigger rivers.

The east coast has extensive areas

of heathland on poor sandy soils, reflecting the probable tropical origin of these communities, and large dunefields. Offshore lie the reefs and islands of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (and World Heritage Area). The Cape's fauna is also incredibly rich. Of 734 vertebrate species a number live nowhere else and many others link with New Guinea.

Unsurprisingly, a report by heritage experts ('The Natural Heritage Significance of Cape York Peninsula', Mackey, Nix and Hitchcock, 2001) found that the region would easily meet all four natural criteria for world heritage nomination. It is also very likely that it could succeed on cultural heritage grounds, at least for the vast body of rock art.

The Wilderness Red Index, based on a 1986 report by Peter Prineas and Roger Lembit, shows that nearly half of Cape York Peninsula is de facto wilderness. It is the most extensive wilderness region in eastern Australia, even including Tasmania, with potentially several million hectares of wilderness. Beyond the major transport corridors and settlements, most of the Peninsula is substantially intact (i.e. without clearing, constructed roads, mines, dams, logging, industry, infrastructure or permanent habitation). Unfortunately much of that has been (and is being) disturbed by exotic animals (notably cattle, pigs and cane toads, which have all penetrated virtually everywhere) and changed fire patterns (due to changed Aboriginal use and burning by pastoralists).

Cape York Peninsula was the scene of the first recorded landing by Europeans in Australia – the Dutch in 1606. Then in 1770, it was on an island off the tip of the Cape where James Cook claimed the east coast of the continent for his British king. Today, major industries are cattle grazing, mining (bauxite at Weipa, silica at Cape Flattery, gold) and, increasingly,

continued on page 8

Cape York Peninsula

continued from page 7

tourism. Development is creeping in with better roads, but the area remains fundamentally a 'third world', pioneer economy. This has so far prevented over-development, but provides few opportunities for the predominantly Aboriginal population.

Conservation is also advancing, with a steadily expanding but under-funded and under-managed system of national parks. The Queensland Government has been acquiring marginal grazing leases to be carved up between Aboriginal and conservation tenures. But of all places, conservation here must be integrated across the landscape, not confined to reserves with the rest thrown to the dogs of degradation.

The Wilderness Society is running a strong WildCountry campaign for the Peninsula, in consultation with the Aboriginal community, and with the long-term objective of achieving world heritage. A recent success was the identification of 13 of the Cape's streams for wild river status – although some Aboriginal people are not happy with the implications. Working with Aboriginal interests will be the key to conservation progress. There is more land under Aboriginal tenure than conservation tenure and more pastoral leases are steadily coming under Aboriginal management. Highly disrupted and marginalised by both history and present conditions, the Aboriginal people of the Cape are entitled to social justice while

conservationists seek environmental justice.

The joint task will be constantly challenging. For instance, to this observer cattle are the environmental scourge of the Peninsula: changing the vegetation, trampling the ground, fouling water supplies and displacing wildlife. But many Aboriginal people have a long association and affinity with pastoralism, and the understandable desire to continue grazing on acquired properties.

There are many remarkable sights on the Peninsula: waving golden grasslands studded with the grey steeple spires of magnetic termite mounds; five metres of crocodile asleep on the beach; red-brown dune lakes cradled in blinding white sand; bare granite boulders rising hundreds of metres from the sea to hoop pines against the sky; sweeping friezes of rock art showing extinct animals, horses and guns; rainbow lorikeets zooming through the flowering savanna; pink Cooktown orchids bobbing in the heath; a million flying foxes beating across the evening sky.

To sustain and to rehabilitate such wonders will be a very hard road, demanding goodwill, commitment, understanding and patience from all parts of the community. An agreed vision for the future of the Cape will need to be negotiated, and governments will have to spend real money on managing feral animals, fire and people.

Ian Brown has been visiting Cape York Peninsula for 20 years, where he has walked and paddled more than 2000 km.

Cape Flattery dunefield, Hope Vale Aboriginal Lands PHOTO: I. BROWN



Greenhouse emissions subsidised

In a talk on sustainability given at Montsalvat on Feb. 25th, Geoff Mosley said that "For the last quarter of a millennium in particular we have been demanding more and more from a finite world. We have in fact a way of life which is predicated on the impossible premise that we can go on making continuously increasing material resource demands on the planet – forever. This can best be described as a total commitment to 'sustainable growth' and Kevin Rudd talking about 'adapting to climate change'. In all this business as usual approach growth is a non-negotiable element, from Howard to Bracks and Rudd the key objective is 'growing the economy.' ... 'Sustainable growth' is the supreme oxymoron.

And how is growth to be achieved? Not by preserving the natural resources on which it is based, but, according to a report by the Institute for Sustainable Futures at the University of Technology Sydney, by subsidising energies to the extent of \$10 billion. Energy and transport subsidies in Australia during 2005-06 were between \$9.3 billion and \$10.1 billion. Only 4% of this went to renewable energy and energy efficiency. Over 90% of the subsidies would increase greenhouse emissions. Coal fired electricity generators are subsidised, as are motorists, the cost of road network being \$4.7 billion more than the revenue received from road users. The aluminium industry is subsidised by \$210 million or more. And so, rather than setting an example in reducing the burning of fossil fuels by taxing greenhouse emissions, we subsidise them, despite the heat and drought caused by global warming and the prospect of worse to come.

Meeting Dates

General meetings will be held at our office on level 2, Fortuna House, 322 Pitt Street, at 2pm on the second Thursday of the month: July 12th, August 9th, September 13th and October 11th.

Bushfire in a Heating World

by Ian Brown
(Hon Fire Management Officer)

THIS year's bushfire conference organised by the Nature Conservation Council of NSW (supported by the Rural Fire Service) brought together fire managers, conservationists, researchers and others for two days (31 May - 1 June 2007) to hear about the latest research and discuss the management of fire under a changing climate.

Beginning with Professor Andy Pitman (an Australian author of the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report), speaker after speaker repeated the same mantra on what our profligate release of stored carbon means for bushfire in south-east Australia: reduced rainfall + higher temperatures = more days of high fire danger and therefore more frequent, larger and more intense fires. It is likely that the indirect effects of increased fire will outstrip the more direct impact of a shifting climate in driving ecosystem change – change that now seems alarmingly inevitable and frighteningly rapid. Even if we can achieve a low emissions future, the carbon train has already left the station and the world is locked into a level of climate change.

The situation is so serious that conservation groups, supported by the Blue Mountains World Heritage Institute, recently called for the Blue Mountains (listed primarily for its vegetation values) to be recognised as world heritage in danger. Dr John Merson of the Institute raised the prospect of the region being converted to heathland. There is no doubt that the ecological resilience and flexibility possessed by large natural areas (wilderness) like the Blue Mountains will become increasingly valuable refuges for biodiversity in a climate-threatened world (see Keith Muir's article in this issue, on page 2).

So, like King Canute, has the point been reached where we can't hold back the tide of pyro-ecological change? If

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"The jury is still out, but... it looks as if our fire management system is not well placed to cope with the emerging challenge."

we try, will it be as useful as urinating in a thunderstorm? Well, the jury is still out, but to this observer at least, it looks as if our fire management system is not well placed to cope with the emerging challenge. As palaeoenvironment researcher Dr Simon Mooney asked: 'If we don't understand the past, how can we plan for the future?' The debate on pre-1788 fire patterns continues (even though much of the evidence is there for us to read in the best database of all: nature) and I would argue that we barely understand fire in the present.

Although an almost bewildering array of useful research was described at the conference, much of it was disturbingly fundamental. How come we are only now carrying out basic comparisons of fire occurrence against climatic patterns, and comparing vegetation patterns in the Blue Mountains with fire histories? Dr Kate Hamill, who is undertaking the latter project, noted that along with areas burnt it would be very useful to have records of fire intensity. National park fire managers in the Blue Mountains have been wanting to map fire intensities for at least two decades, but the resources have never been available. Now we need it.

By contrast, Andy Pitman spent a whole year on a supercomputer to complete future climate modelling for Australia. Fire research is a long way down the pecking order, but it has become critical to the survival of many ecosystems and species. And how well do we understand the effectiveness of existing programs for fire mitigation

and fire suppression?

We all know that prescribed burning can reduce subsequent fire intensity, but it only works for a few years and is less useful in severe conditions. The windows of weather opportunity for effective fuel reduction are narrow (and diminishing), near-urban burns are complex and labour-intensive, and the probability of having burned where a wildfire will strike in the next few years is not very high. So where is the analysis of the overall cost-effectiveness of burning programs in protecting human assets? And how come we can repeatedly spend \$10 million and more on suppressing dangerous wildfires, without putting a small fraction of that into analysing the effectiveness of the operations? This is not high level research, but basic stuff.

It is understood that the recently established Centre for Environmental Management of Bushfires at Wollongong University (under Professor Ross Bradstock, funded by the NSW Rural Fire Service) will be tackling these sorts of issues. It needs to happen quickly, and there needs to be a much faster transmission of research knowledge into policy and then into on-ground practice. If increased fire will be unavoidable and bad enough for ecosystems, then we certainly don't want to make it any worse with our response.

Increased fire is not only going to threaten natural communities, but human communities too. The great danger is over-reaction or a misdirected and unbalanced response. We live in an age of policy by assertion, with actual evidence often ignored. Fire management is a particularly complex and fraught area of public policy. There is no one-size-fits-all solution; every environment is different in its fire needs. But Mythology, misunderstanding, bias and ideology often call the tune over ecology. It's easy to imagine a politician declaring, hand on heart, that when it comes to fire, people must come before nature. There is a risk that communities

continued on page 10

BUSHFIRE IN A HEATING WORLD

continued from page 9

will demand repeated burning, with the decimation of biodiversity, to 'save' them from the increasing fire threat.

If only it were that simple. If the global warming crisis teaches us anything, it must be the critical need for a fundamental change in how we do business. Bashing the environment for perceived human benefit is the counter-productive path to hell.

It was good to hear several speakers, including Bob Conroy from NPWS (DECC), saying that there has to be a shift from expecting the fire agencies to 'protect' people (an impossible task) to individual property owners taking responsibility. Have community expectations been inflated in the past?

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“Will it be necessary to accept a damaging level of off-season burning?”

Ross Bradstock often points out that fire management in Australia is 'world's best practice'. This is both encouraging and worrying. There is a long way to go before we can confidently manage fire for biodiversity now, let alone with the rapidly-moving goalposts under climate change. We are entering unknown territory. In the absence of certainty, risks may have to be taken. Conservationists may have to make some very hard choices. Will it be necessary to accept a damaging level of off-season burning to mitigate the perhaps even worse impacts of repeated hot wildfires? This debate rages even now, and it's not getting any simpler.

We need a much bigger research effort, with greater independence, more rapid transmission into evidence-based practice and careful use of resources to greatest effect. And there is a critical need to bring the community along. Ultimately, it will be the wider community that controls the decisions. They must be well-informed decisions, or the consequences for biodiversity will be very grave. ■

New Plan removes Kakadu's Wilderness protection

by Keith Muir

UNDER the newly released fifth management plan, Kakadu's 'Stone Country' is no longer protected by a 425,000 hectare wilderness zone that was first approved by the Kakadu Board of Management in 1986.

There are no zoning controls in the new plan that would prevent the development of sensitive areas, such as the Stone Country escarpment. Without a planning map to regulate park use, the eyes could be cut out of Kakadu's beauty spots and sensitive areas for visitor use and development.

The new plan of management made in 2007 provides no explanation for the removal of all the previous zoning controls.

Development control now reverts to 'trust us management', with no certainty of outcomes for our biggest national park. While all decision making will be made through a governing Board and the Director of National Parks, these bodies are subject to all sorts of political pressures. For example, the Board, as a matter of policy, must consider the benefit of any development for the local Aboriginal community.

The social contract of any leaseback national park should provide for certainty of conservation outcomes. As taxpayers we pay the rent for the national park. The plan for the park should strictly limit and control development to protect natural and cultural values, including wilderness. In fact a national park should have no development within it, but Kakadu has major roads, towns and resort developments. Kakadu National Park is a bit like a tropical Kosciuszko, but without development controls.

Under the new plan all sorts of 4WD safaris and wilderness camps could be permitted in the former wilderness zone. There would be environmental assessment processes for



Kakadu's stone country – no longer protected wilderness. PHOTO: H. GOLD

any development, but the protection outcomes from park management planning are gone.

Further vehicle-based tourism in the park would be almost as damaging as more mining. Concentrations of people would cause sewage effluent, garbage, new roads, clearing, and infrastructure for electricity and telephones. Even the most ecological facilities displace nature and put people first.

Wilderness protection in Federally managed parks should be greatly expanded to curb increasing development pressures that come with increased park use. Minister Turnbull should establish a Wilderness Unit in his Department of Environment and Water to ensure the large intact areas inside our national parks remain that way and are properly managed throughout Australia.

With the rapid erosion of large intact natural areas outside the reserves it is becoming increasingly urgent to secure wilderness within reserves, particularly those in Northern Australia.

The new Kakadu plan represents a new management model for an Aboriginally-owned national park. This approach is reliant solely upon the governance of a Board and assessment processes to ensure park protection. Without reference to planning prescriptions or a map, this form of 'trust us park management' will place park values at risk of exploitation and should be strongly resisted. ■