

Wilderness Resurgence – Discussion Paper, March 2004

By Haydn Washington

'Wilderness created itself long before civilisation ... wilderness a state of mind? Wilderness is what there was before there were states of mind'. Holmes Rolston 2001

'Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural ... To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as a measure with which we judge civilisation, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical sustainable honorable human place in nature might actually look like'. Cronon 1996

' Wilderness has virtue unto itself and needs no extraneous justification' Prof. E.O. Wilson, 1992

'The idea of wilderness needs no defense. It only needs more defenders.' Edward Abbey

'Wilderness holds the answers to the questions we do not yet know how to ask'. David Brower

'Humans need to see their lives in a larger context, as embedded in, surrounded by, evolved out of a sphere of natural creativity that is bigger than we are.' Holmes Rolston 2001

'The real question should be not whether wilderness has a tomorrow, but whether Homo sapiens has a future without wild nature' Max Oelschlaeger, 1991

Firstly, I should introduce myself, as this is a general discussion paper to get thoughts flowing in the Wilderness Resurgence Seminar. In summer 1974 I walked down the Colo River for 5 days through the Wollemi wilderness. I fell in love with this rugged sandstone wilderness of gorges and plateau. A few weeks later I was the Secretary of the newly formed Colo Committee, heavily involved in campaigning for a national park for five years. Later, I worked on campaigning for South-West Tasmania, Washpool, and Daintree (amongst others). I am a plant ecologist by training, but have also done a large amount of work on water pollution and Total Catchment Management. I have been a councilor in ACF for four terms and was Director of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW in 1988. I am the author of the books 'Ecosolutions' (1991) and 'A sense of Wonder' (2002). Currently I am doing a Ph.D. on wilderness at the University of Western Sydney, focusing on the problem of what I call the 'wilderness knot' – the confusion around wilderness and what it is.

Wilderness. A word, a concept, a place. 'Wilderness' – it stirs up strong emotions. For some it is a sacred place, that part of the original and best of planet Earth free from modern society. For others it is just a concept of rich, white, macho men, or a colonialist concept. Why is there such a twisted knot of meanings about wilderness? Why is it a conceptual maze? More importantly, **does it matter?**

I would argue that it **does** matter – if we believe the world is real, if we believe that we should protect the independent 'more-than-human' natural world (see Abram 1996) found in wilderness – if we believe this then it matters. To most of us involved in this seminar, the Greater Blue Mountains is **real** – we do not question its reality. Such is not always the case with philosophical movements. Postmodernism in particular has a problem with the 'real'. The sources of Postmodernist criticism of wilderness seem to lie in the key importance given to **language** (e.g. Derrida 1966) , as well as:

- 1) intense skepticism about the **real**, and the claim that we live not inside reality but inside our representations of it (Butler 2002, Baudrillard 1993)
- 2) a fixation that apparent opposites (dualisms) really need one another and always imply the other (Butler 2002), and that all dualisms are inherently bad (Cronon 1996, Adams and Mulligan 2002)
- 3) an intense suspicion of Romanticism, and the influence of these on the conservation movement (e.g. Cronon 1996).
- 4) The apparent view that wilderness itself was a 'metanarrative' (or dogma) that needed to be broken down (Cronon 1996)
- 5) The suggestion that wilderness ignores the history of native peoples in wilderness, and is not only a western concept, but a colonialist one (Langton 1996, Adams and Mulligan 2002).

Most of us live in a world of human artifacts – houses, roads, gardens, parklands – things made or heavily modified by humans. We also live in a world of images – TV, cinema, papers, computers. The questioning of reality has come out of this world of images, but unfortunately has not been limited to the questioning of human society. It has also become fashionable to question the reality of the natural world. Some argue that we

construct our own reality, and the natural world is thus constructed in our minds. I would argue that this is very anthropocentric and self-absorbed. However, it is an important distinction, as if one doesn't believe in the reality of Wollemi (for example), if it is *just in our minds*, then one doesn't need to act to protect it as an independent reality that has a right to exist.

Another important aspect to this whole debate is the idea of ***intrinsic value*** versus being a ***resource***. For some people, all of nature (including wilderness) is just a resource to be used. For 'resourcists', nothing is sacred, nothing has a right to exist for itself, outside of the use humans can make of it. Other people believe that the natural world has a right to exist for itself as an independent 'more-than-human' other. Why more than human? This is the term suggested by Abram (1996) who argues that 'we are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human'. The wilderness is larger, older, more diverse (and probably wiser!) than we are. We evolved out of it millions of years ago. If one believes in the intrinsic value of wild places and nature, then the idea of clearing and destroying all our remaining wilderness (or of sending extinct half the species on Earth) will be profoundly disturbing.

If one is a 'resourcist', one may just shrug about species extinction and say 'one can't make an omelette without breaking eggs'. I think it is important to understand where we are coming from in our attitude to the wild world. It is of course possible to be a resourcist and argue that wilderness needs to be saved due to the resources (e.g. biodiversity) that it contains, and due to the ecosystem services it provides humans. Certainly such arguments get used all the time. However, to *only* use resources as the judge of the value of wilderness is to accept that the resources of minerals and timber will often be seen to outweigh the value of biodiversity and catchment protection.

It comes down to whether you think humans (as just one species amongst millions) have the ***right*** to substantially modify not just most of the Earth, but all the remaining wilderness remnants. Already humans use, co-opt or suppress 40% of the potential net primary productivity (i.e. energy flow of ecosystems) of the whole Earth (Vitousek 1986). At least 2 species are going extinct every hour across the world due to habitat destruction and other stresses (such as exotic species introduction). Do we have the right to change ***all*** the world, to disturb every ecosystem? If we don't - then wilderness is something worth fighting for.

To demonstrate the confusion of the 'wilderness knot' I will list wilderness values and then list a table of the criticisms made of wilderness (with my own comments opposite each criticism).

Wilderness values

The values of wilderness traditionally assigned by wilderness conservationists can be listed (e.g. Mackay et al 1998, Brown, Robertson and Vang 1992, Washington 1991) as:

1) Scientific (evolutionary)

- a lifeboat for biodiversity (the biogeographic value of large areas, the importance of gene pools in populations of native species)
- an area for continuing natural evolution (i.e. minimally disturbed)
- an area with minimal edge effects (e.g. fire, weeds, feral animals, pollution, dumping)
- an area for baseline scientific studies for comparison of how we are changing other areas
- an area which protects water catchments, soils, geodiversity (Washington 2001), etc

2) Social/ spiritual

- intrinsic value – wilderness has a right to exist for itself, as in independent, wild, more-than-human entity
- seeing society in perspective
- being one with the land – feeling a sense of wonder
- solitude in a crowded world
- an antidote to the stress of urban life
- freedom

3) Educational

- wilderness is a 'living museum' to explain biodiversity, ecosystem processes, geodiversity, etc
- allows education on the value of wilderness for protection of water resources, soils, biodiversity, etc
- education on unusual relict and threatened unique species in wilderness (e.g. Wollemi Pine)

4) Recreational / cultural

- physical activities to improve health, such as walking, canoeing, climbing
- visual arts and photography

- indirect enjoyment such as books and films.

The 'conservationist' view of wilderness above is thus *positive* - it sees wilderness as of tremendous intrinsic value, as well as having spiritual, educational and recreational value to human society.

Criticisms of wilderness

Postmodernist criticisms

Criticism	My response
Wilderness is the idea of rich, white, chauvinistic males (Cronon 1996)	There is not much argument or examples behind these assertions. They are presented as 'evident truth'. However, many wilderness advocates are neither rich, white, or male.
Wilderness creates a 'dualism' between wilderness = good nature, and non-wilderness = bad nature which is inherently bad as it creates a barrier to recognising the values of nature in non-wilderness areas (Adams and Mulligan 2002, Mulligan 2001, Cronon 1996, Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992)	Not all dualisms are bad. In any case, is wilderness a dualism? To perceive wilderness as the wild end of the natural spectrum is a sign that people can still perceive wildness. This a hopeful sign. To give it a name 'wilderness' is not to ignore or devalue non-wilderness such as urban bushland. By naming it and defining boundaries, it makes it possible to actually <i>conserve</i> such areas. For Postmodernists, drawing a boundary is inherently bad, but in the real world it is often necessary.
Wilderness is a cultural creation or cultural landscape, a human artifact (Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992, Rose 1998, Langton 1996, Flannery 2003, Adams 1996)	Wilderness was here before we were, it is not an artifact made by humans. In fact one might say that in evolutionary terms humans are a wilderness artifact – that is we evolved from wilderness. To modify natural vegetation by fire is not to 'create' it, only to influence it. The rocks and gorges were not made by humans, nor did we evolve the native species. We influenced community composition to some extent. This is very different from 'creating' something.
Wilderness is a 'flight from history', a Romantic, escapist retreat (Cronon 1996)	Wilderness can be a retreat from the pressures of modern society – this is a positive not a negative thing. If we consider the environmental history of the last 215 years to be the clearing of half of the native vegetation and the fragmenting of the rest, then perhaps we <i>need</i> to confront history and change this trend?
Wilderness does not recognise that such areas were 'home' to native peoples (Langton 1996, Adams and Mulligan 2002, Cronon 1996)	This goes back in part to the American Wilderness Act, which states that wilderness 'is an area where the earth and its community of life is untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain'. The question here is what 'untrammelled' really means. I would argue that it doesn't mean that native peoples never lived there, but the ambiguity has understandably offended many native peoples. Most recent international and Australian definitions are at some pains to avoid such ambiguity, and do recognise that wilderness in most parts of the continent was home to native peoples. Rather than wilderness ignoring native peoples, I see wilderness as a tribute to their land management.
Wilderness is a colonialist term (Cronon 1996, Adams and Mulligan 2002)	Wilderness derives from the Anglo-Saxon 'wil-deor-ness' – the place of wild animals. There is nothing <i>inherently</i> colonialist in the word itself. If it is a colonialist term, why did mainly the colonies of England develop such a term, and not the colonies of (for example) Spain? It seems more likely to me that wilderness gained popularity as a term precisely because England and America led the industrialization of the first world. Wilderness became an important concept there as it was seen as the opposite of this rampant destruction of the natural world.
Wilderness is the same as Terra Nullius (Flannery 1994, Langton 1996) and is a 'mystification of genocide' (Langton 1996)	Terra Nullius under the Mabo High Court judgment did not in fact mean that nobody lived here, it meant that <i>nobody owned the land</i> . The objectionable doctrine of Terra Nullius argued that Aborigines did not have a real civilisation and hence ownership. The essence of the concept of wilderness is large natural areas – Terra Nullius and wilderness have nothing to do with each other. Similarly, wilderness has nothing as such to do with genocide.
Wilderness is an icon of the frontier and a monument to the American past (Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992, Cronon 1996)	This claims that wilderness is a product of machismo. Do only macho, tough men love wilderness or go there? Anybody can enjoy a short or long day walk in wilderness.

Wilderness are human-exclusion zones (Gomes-Pampa and Kaus 1992, Adams and Mulligan 2002, Cronon 1996), and variants of this which claim that wilderness victimizes the disabled (as vehicles and roads are excluded from wilderness)	Wilderness management does exclude permanent habitation. Note the emphasis on the word 'permanent'. Wilderness has the same access today that it had up until 1788 – by foot or canoe. It does not exclude human visitation (for weeks at a time). Surely the key point to consider is that the alleged access 'restrictions' are a consequence of natural conditions, not an action of humans, and that greater access requires damaging modification. Permanent habitation today means (almost universally) roads, power-lines, garbage, water supply, all of which add up to substantial human impact. Wilderness management will mean that some people with disabilities can not visit some parts of wilderness. However, 90% of NSW is extensively roaded - so ethically does any particular group have the right to demand that all natural areas be roaded for them to visit them? There are thousands of kilometres of public access roads provided within national parks outside wilderness areas, providing endless scope for outings, including outings to the edges of all wilderness areas. Roads cause substantial environmental impact (see Aust. Heritage Commission study on 'The role of wilderness in nature conservation'). The more they are used (e.g. firetrails) the greater the impact.
Wilderness is the enemy of the poor, as it prevents the use of land for productive agriculture (Cronon 1996)	Wilderness management does maintain that not all natural areas are going to be a resource for humans. Poverty has to do with the equity of sharing what we <i>have</i> already developed for human use, not clearing our last remaining wilderness areas. Exploiting the last wild areas in Australia will not impact on poverty.
Wilderness is a state of mind, a concept, not a place (Lowenthal 1964, Nash 1979, Cronon 1996, Johnston 2003)	Wilderness <i>is</i> a concept, so is Sydney, so is Canberra, so is this seminar – but wilderness is also a place. One can argue about the definition and boundaries, but large natural areas do exist, they are real places with real problems that need real protection to continue to survive.
Idealizing wilderness means not idealizing the environment in which we live (i.e. non-wilderness) (Cronon 1996)	Perceiving and loving the wildness of wilderness does not mean you can't love your local park. Should we idealise either? Possibly not – but we should <i>love both</i> . We should accept the more-than-human otherness of both places. For me, wilderness catalyses the love of the land – and that spills over to all areas, urban bushland too.
Wilderness stops other uses (i.e. multiple use) which might attain a 'balanced, sustainable relationship' (Cronon 1996).	95% of NSW has been altered so much that it is not wilderness any more – so where is the balance? To degrade the remaining 5% by using it as a resource for humans is hardly going to help us reach a balanced, sustainable relationship. Rather, to reach such a relationship we need to protect <i>all</i> of our remaining wilderness, and link these areas together through a Wild Country vision (as proposed by the Wilderness Society) so as to 'rewild' the state to some extent. For me, wilderness lets us learn about wild nature, and gives us the perspective that we need to reach a sustainable relationship in the future.

Other criticisms

Criticism	My response
Wilderness is the recreational preserve of yuppie bushwalkers (Recher 2003)	Wilderness is for nature, the alleged benefit to walkers is a by-product of travelling there without building damaging roads. Walkers cause less impact than horses, and much less than 4WD vehicles or roads. It is possible to have too many walkers in some areas, and then numbers need to be regulated (as at the Grand Canyon). 95% of the state is roaded for non-walkers, leaving only 5% as wilderness is hardly 'unbalanced'.
Wilderness is not essential for nature conservation (Recher 2003)	This would seem to fly in the face of biogeography, and of experts on biodiversity such as Wilson, Raven and Soule. The opposite was the conclusion of the AHC report by scientists called 'The role of wilderness in nature conservation' (Mackay et al 1998).
Wilderness is an idea based on outdated equilibrium ecology (Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992, Adams and Mulligan 2002)	Wilderness does not rely on equilibrium ecology to justify its existence. In any case, punctuated equilibria theory does not legitimize the major stresses humans are putting on natural areas (else why are half the world's species in danger of going extinct?)
Wilderness is overrun by feral animals and	These pests occur state-wide. They are much less prevalent in well-

weeds (Peter Cochrane, 2004)	preserved wilderness areas (especially where there are no roads). Under park management, control measures occur where particularly needed (e.g. 'Willows out of Wollemi').
Wilderness is degraded (Peter Cochrane, 2004).	While no absolutely 'pristine' wilderness remains on the Australian mainland, wilderness is the best that is left, and is managed to recover (or rewild) its natural condition.
Wilderness is in conflict with the protection of endangered species (as these must be intensively managed) (Cronon 1996).	Wilderness by its large size <i>protects</i> rare and threatened species. This is due to minimum 'edge effects', large biogeographical size, less pressure from weeds and ferals, etc. When there is a threat in wilderness to endangered species, action is taken. There is no conflict.
Wilderness ignores the perspectives/knowledge of rural populations (Gomez-Pampa and Kaus)	Presumably this means that wilderness activists ignore local people. Having worked as an activist for some decades, and for the last 9 years been a 'local' on the edge of Wollemi, I would have to say that some locals have little knowledge about Wollemi. Where there is <i>real</i> knowledge my experience is that activists are very keen to find it. Where there are biased stories, there is a need for skepticism. I am reminded of a claim made by a 'local expert' about an Aboriginal cave on the edge of Wollemi. He said it was a burial cave, but talking to local Wiradjuri people, we found that in fact it was a <i>birth</i> cave. In regard to the Alps, up to half a million sheep and tens of thousands of cattle once grazed on Kosciuszko's mountain pastures. Graziers burnt the slopes remorselessly to encourage new grass. This and the pounding of hard hooves caused serious soil erosion. Where grazing by ungulates has been removed, the alpine flora has returned. The perspectives of the 'horse culture' in the Alps were in fact damaging to the natural environment. The 'Man from Snowy River' is a romantic cultural myth that in reality ignores the damage caused to the land by horses and stock-grazing.

When considering the conservationist values of wilderness, and the criticisms made of wilderness, we can see just how different are some of the views on wilderness. It can be seen from the above, that I don't believe that many of the criticisms of wilderness are in fact valid or useful. The word wilderness has got caught up in political ideology, and in philosophical theory. Who speaks for the wild land itself?

Would it help if we changed the word from wilderness to 'wildland' or some other word? I don't believe so. Many of the above criticisms are in fact criticisms of the *idea* that large, natural, wild areas have a right to exist. For some of the authors of the criticisms, they seem to be arguing that we should protect large natural areas, but not draw a boundary around them and call them 'wilderness'. I find this both poorly reasoned and highly impractical in the real human world of politics and bureaucracy. A wilderness *needs* to be managed as such, so that roads or power-lines are not built through it, etc. To manage it, there needs to be lines on maps – boundaries need to be set, so wilderness management can take place.

In regard to the criticisms above, a 'wildland' could similarly be called a cultural creation, could be called colonialist, would be seen as a dualism, could be seen as a flight from history, etc. A change in name is not in my view going to solve the wilderness knot. Some people don't want to keep large natural areas. If we want to keep them, then sadly we need to fight for them. We have a perfectly good word for large, natural areas, and that is **wilderness**. It is time for us to reverse the 'code of silence' that seems to exist in academia and bureaucracy, where the word wilderness is not mentioned. Ignore it and it will go away – not just the concept *but the wild place as well*. Those of us who believe wilderness *has* a right to continued existence into the next century (let alone the next millennia!) need to stand up and defend the use of the term. Hence the need for wilderness resurgence.

Threats to wilderness

I won't talk much about wilderness campaigns, as Keith Muir and Geoff Mosley will cover much of this. I would like to point out that there is an idea that we have got most of the wilderness, that the pressure is off, that it is just a mopping up exercise. This is not the case. Only around half of the wilderness found by the NSW Wilderness Working Group in 1986 is formally declared as wilderness. So there is the real task of campaigning to get these areas. Then there is keeping the wilderness we that is declared. Already, the wilderness area in Kakadu has been rezoned to 'zone 4' due to criticisms of 'wilderness'. How will this be managed? In the Commonwealth Department of Environment and Heritage (formally Environment Australia), in my recent

experience (Inspirational Landscapes workshop), there is a culture which seeks to ignore wilderness, and pretend the term does not exist (in fact staff get warned off using the word).

Let us not kid ourselves that the attempts to exploit wilderness have gone away! Sydney continues to expand, pressures to allow access by 4WDs and horse riders continue, miners still eye the coal under the parks in the mountains. The price of gaining a declared wilderness area is in fact eternal vigilance to keep it into the future. The proposal for the mega-quarry to mine friable sandstone at Newnes Junction on the edge of the Wollemi Wilderness illustrates the threats, as does the proposal to mine coal nearby in identified (but not declared) wilderness in State Forest at Gooche's Crater.

The population of the Earth is now 6 billion people. We believe it will reach eight or ten billion, before hopefully it declines to a sustainable lower level (i.e. lower than we have today!). With ten billion people on the world, the pressures on wild places will be extreme. This is what Professor Wilson (1988) has called the 'bottleneck' – we have to get the Earth and its species through this time of extreme pressure on natural systems. Wilderness will clearly be under intense pressure during this time, pressure to provide more food and resources to the huge human population. We will not escape this pressure in Australia. If we are to keep our large natural areas (and the diversity of native species they maintain) past the bottleneck period, then a resurgence of wilderness activism is **essential**. We need to formally declare all of the wilderness in the state, and connect these core areas up to each other through green corridors. This is the vision of the US Wildlands Project in America (www.wildearth.org), and is also the vision of the Wild Country project of the Australian Wilderness Society. I point out that we need **both** – we need the wilderness areas, and we need the **connectivity** from wilderness to wilderness (especially with global climate change). At the moment there is a trend to focus on the need for connectivity. As an ecologist, I agree wholeheartedly with this (who could not?). However, we need the core wilderness areas as well. We need both.

Wilderness still remains under threat, it still needs our love and activism to keep it into the future.

References

- Abram D (1996) *The spell of the sensuous*. Vintage Books
- Adams W and Mulligan M (2002) Introduction: conservation and decolonisation. In Adams and Mulligan (Eds) *Decolonising nature: strategies for conservation in the postcolonial era*. Earthscan, London
- Abbey E (1977) *The journey home*. Dutton, NY
- Baudrillard J (1993). "The Evil Demon of Images and the Precession of Simulacra," in Docherty T (ed.), *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1993).
- Brown A.J., Robertson M and Vang K (1992) *Wilderness in Australia: issues and options*. Australian Heritage Commission
- Brower D, quoted in Nash R (1988) 'Why wilderness?' in Morton (Ed) *For the Conservation of the Earth*, Fulcrum Books, Colorado
- Callicott J.B. (1991) The wilderness idea revisited: the sustainable development alternative. *Environmental Professional* 13: 325-247??
- Cochrane P (2004) comments in the media.
- Cronon W (1996) The trouble with wilderness; or getting back to the wrong nature. In Cronon (Ed) *Uncommon Ground: rethinking the human place in nature*. WW Norton and Co, NY
- Derrida J (1966) 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.'
- Flannery T (1994) *The future eaters*. Reed Books
- Flannery T (2003) As quoted in Woodford, J, 'Hunters and protectors', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec 6, 2003
- Gomez-Pampa A and Kaus A (1992) Taming the wilderness myth. *Bioscience* 42(4):271-279
- Johnston C (2003) *Inspirational landscapes: assessment methodology (draft)*. Report to Australian Heritage Commission.
- Johnston C/ Context (2003) *Inspirational landscapes: assessment methodology. (Draft)*. Prepared for Australian Heritage Commission.
- Langton M (1996) The European construction of wilderness. In 'Wilderness News' Summer Edition, 1995/1996, The Wilderness Society
- Lines W (2001) *Open Air Essays*. New Holland Publishers
- Lowenthal D (1964) Is wilderness 'paradise enow'? *Images of nature in America*. *Columbian University Forum* 7(2): 34-40
- Mackay et al (1998) *The role of wilderness in nature conservation*. Report to Environment Australia
- Mulligan M (2001) *Re-enchanting nature conservation work: reflections on the Australian experience*. *Environmental values* Vol 10 No 1.
- Nash R (1979) *Wilderness and the American mind*. Yale University Press
- NSW Wilderness Working Group (1986) *Report of the Wilderness Working Group to the Hon R.J. Carr*. Wilderness Working Group of NSW.
- Oelschlaeger M (1991) *The idea of wilderness*. Yale University Press
- Recher H (2003) As quoted in Woodford, J, 'Hunters and protectors', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Dec 6, 2003
- Rolston III H (2001) Natural and unnatural: wild and cultural. *Western North Amer. Nat.* 61(3): 267-276
- Rose D.B (1998) *Nourishing terrains: Australian Aboriginal views of landscape and wilderness*. Australian Heritage Commission
- Vitousek (1986) Human appropriation of the products of photosynthesis. *Bioscience* 36(6):368-373
- Washington H (1991) *Ecosolutions: environmental solutions for the world and Australia*. Boobook publications

Washington H (2001) Focus on geodiversity: sites, values and management for the Hawkesbury-Nepean, Dept. of Land and Water Conservation, Windsor (now DIPNR)
Wilson E.O. (1988) Biodiversity. National Academy Press
Wilson E.O. (1992) The diversity of life. Harvard University Press, p. 282