

Introduction: Wilderness in Australia

Amongst the western industrialised nations, Australia is lucky to have an unusually large area of surviving wilderness representing Australia's exceptionally rich landscapes and biodiversity. But we also carry a frightening record of damage to our environment and wildlife. These facts raise a special responsibility to protect what remains, for all humanity and for the magnificent life with which we share the land and waters.

Australia's remaining wilderness areas are shrinking, biological 'islands' in an expanding sea of exploited and wounded land. The number of species that can survive in these remnants decreases as the 'islands' become more fragmented. Legal protection and careful management of our remaining wilderness can help to arrest this decline, and make a powerful contribution to rescuing the Earth.

The World Conservation Union (IUCN - the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources) defines wilderness as:

a large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition.

Put simply, wilderness is a term used to describe large areas of natural land. This does not necessarily mean 'pristine' or completely unaffected by humans, for such places are rare. But wilderness is the best we have left. All areas that might be considered to be wilderness in Australia (except for Antarctica and the sub-Antarctic) have been influenced by many thousands of years of Indigenous occupation and activity. Some places have also seen more recent low-level activity by Europeans and others.

Outward signs of Aboriginal presence might include the effect on vegetation of past burning, galleries of rock art, campsites, artefacts, scarred trees and other archaeological features. Less tangibly, the spiritual landscape may be rich with Aboriginal meanings, stories, special places, connections and responsibilities. Although there may be no permanent habitation, traditional Indigenous connections and activities continue today in many areas that might be regarded as wilderness.

Use of the term wilderness does not discount this ongoing Aboriginal presence, nor does it imply that an area is otherwise 'untouched' by humans. Rather, wilderness recognises the absence of the large-scale and widespread effects of industrial technology and occupation. A few rough vehicle tracks, open range grazing or small clearings may be present or rehabilitating, and some weeds and feral animals that have penetrated most parts of Australia will probably be present. Wilderness is also open to low-impact, unmechanised recreation that accepts the limitations of an unmodified landscape. But in wilderness there are no towns, farms, mines, roads, highways, dams, resorts, intensive recreation or other industry.

Wilderness has escaped the almost complete removal of natural vegetation, the decimation of wildlife, accelerated erosion and abuse of waters that has affected much of Australia since white settlement in 1788. In wilderness, natural processes continue to dominate over the influence of humans. The biology, lands and waters are largely

intact and undisturbed. Wilderness represents the abiding presence of non-human nature, rather than an absence of all human activity.

It could be said that these conditions can be met in quite small areas, even a few hectares surrounded by devastation, perhaps in your own backyard. But only large areas are capable of sustaining the natural processes and plant and animal populations needed for long-term survival and continuing evolution. For conservation, the bigger the better. It is also those vast sweeps of wild country, changing, growing and living under the elements, that offer a close interaction with nature, remote from cities, towns and human-modified areas. Wilderness speaks to the human soul in a way no other place can.

The IUCN definition refers to areas that are protected and managed as wilderness. Although all Australian states and territories except Tasmania have enacted wilderness legislation, most wilderness areas have not yet been formally recognised. Some *de facto* wilderness areas (e.g. in Tasmania) have a level of protection within conservation reserves such as national parks. Other wilderness areas, especially in northern and central Australia, are on Aboriginal land, and an increasing number of national parks with wilderness are coming under joint management with traditional Indigenous custodians. There is a growing recognition that all people and cultures have a mutual interest and obligation to protect large natural areas in their healthiest ecological state, and that working together can be the best way forward.

But many of our wild areas still have no protection at all.