

GOING HOME - THE BENEFITS OF WILDERNESS

by GEOFF MOSLEY, ACF Councillor (and former ACF Director)

In any drive to consolidate the place of wilderness, a central concern in education must be the better explanation of its benefits.

As with clean air and water, wilderness is a basic human right and the attack on wilderness is an attack on everyone.

Wilderness is something that humans have experienced and enjoyed for most of the time they have existed. It is only over the last few hundred years that wilderness has become threatened by the relentless drive to appropriate the whole earth for commodity production and by the spread of mechanical means of transport. This threat is the main reason why wilderness conservation is a modern phenomenon.

For today's people, mostly caged in offices, factories and cities and dependent on modern transport systems, the experience of wilderness is a process of rediscovery. The most recognisable feeling is probably one of spiritual refreshment, similar to that which most of us feel when we make a visit to the beach and the sea, but different.

The strong bond that modern wilderness goers have with the Aboriginal people is that the great majority of the latter were experiencing a close spiritual relationship with the environment until very recently. In South East Australia for instance, as recent work by John Blay and Ben Cruse is showing very clearly, the Aborigines moved regularly to the sea and the mountains using ancient pathways; a pattern found in many other parts of Australia.

The dispossession of the Aborigines was a part of the worldwide move to appropriate more and more of the earth to the needs of commerce just as the recent urbanisation of the most of the world's population was driven by industrialisation.

One of the saddest stories of the clearance of Aborigines from their ancestral lands is that of the forced round up of people from the west coast of Tasmania. Saddest, because even by the 'commercial necessity' type of reasoning used by the persecutors, there was absolutely no such purpose served by their 1831-32 removal to a concentration camp on Flinders Island. Then and now, land in the South West had no commercial use that conflicted with the Aboriginal way of life.

According to the Tasmanian Aboriginal Council, in 1860, twenty eight years after their incarceration, several of the survivors of the round up made their way from Oyster Cove across Tasmania to walk home.

The sudden wrench involved in such events is far greater than most modern people have ever suffered but, in a very real sense, seen against the whole human experience, when we go to the wilderness we too are going back home.

We feel these things in the very fibre of our being but how much more difficult it is to put it into words. As Pascal put it "we understand more than we know".

Personal experience lies at the heart of the recreational benefits of wilderness. Although such experiences differ, research shows that there are some basic commonalities.

How people find their way to wilderness is likely to vary from person to person but it is most likely to be a graded approach. It is something like the staged way to the appreciation of nature which Aldo Leopold, the father of the wilderness reserve concept, described when he wrote:

"our ability to perceive quality in nature begins, as in art, with the pretty. It expands through successive stages of the beautiful to values as yet uncaptured by language" (Sand County Almanac)

My own personal journey to wilderness began in the moorlands of North Derbyshire where, I believe, it is still possible to get further away from a road than in any part of Victoria. The vegetation was nearly all natural except that the heather moors had been expanded slightly by burning for grouse, I stayed in a grouse moor owner's hut. From that beginning I explored wilderness in Lapland and Scotland; sleeping under a boulder in the Cairngorms at a place beyond half a days walk from the nearest roadhead. After that, camping under the stars

in New Zealand, the Blue Mountains, the Alps and South Eastern New South Wales, and in Western Tasmania discovered a large wilderness with scope for ten day plus trips, off track and minus roofed accommodation.

My own wilderness odyssey at this stage gained an additional dimension as I took up wilderness research; first establishing that wilderness travel is a distinct recreational type, then identifying which areas had wilderness potential and then, after studying where the wilderness movement had got to, moving on to wilderness conservation.

The results of my study of the history of wilderness conservation in Australia up to 1946 are to be found in *Battle for the Bush* (1999). Alas, the story of the post 1946 events in wilderness conservation lacks a sponsor. Ignorance of history makes us unable to take advantage of its lessons.

In the early 1970s when my opportunity to contribute to the advancement of the wilderness movement dramatically improved, I wrote the ACF's 1975 viewpoint on Wilderness Conservation as a kind of manifesto on the importance of wilderness, and as a proposal for an Australian Wilderness Programme.

The publication dealt at length with the benefits of wilderness areas, from the distinctiveness of the wilderness experience to their importance as reference areas for science and catchment protection and to their role in conserving genetic diversity. Above all the viewpoint concluded that wilderness conservation involved "Protecting an Essential Freedom".

There are major differences between the way hunter gatherers related to nature (including the beach) and the way we do it today. Included is the fact that then the relationship was organised through local group ownership, with visitors needing permission for access. Today, in our centrally organised societies, areas like beaches and natural areas are viewed as the property of the wider community. The US Wilderness Act expressed this very well when it stated that its purpose was "To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people".

The ACF viewpoint set as its goal the creation of a similar national wilderness system. Although we have wilderness reserves now in every state and internal territory, they are still to become parts of a national system. The national heritage legislation provides a new opportunity for this to be done.

In the renewal of our efforts on behalf of wilderness, we conservationists need to make sure that we do not neglect the explanation of benefits and in this regard we need to keep in mind that the best educator is the wilderness itself.

I also believe we need to give wilderness its due place in the list of things which people should expect to be treated as communal resources - along with clean air and water, and maintenance of the world's genetic variety.

There is also the opportunity for us to draw attention to the valuable role wilderness can play in reeducating society towards a better overall attitude of respect for the environment. Instead of the attitude which prevails in many quarters that we can treat the earth as an expendable object, and that if all fails we can fall back on travel to other planets, we need a renewal of faith in the earth and its intrinsic values.

Nothing tells us more about these values than the wilderness experience. Through wilderness we can find out so much about what the earth has to offer; an earthly paradise, and, as the poet put it, "Paradise now"