

SOME THOUGHTS OF BARRON THURAT

Myles Dunphy

(Editor's note: 'Barron Thurat' was a pseudonym occasionally used by Myles Dunphy, most notably in *The Katoomba Daily* of August 24, 1934, when the local Blue Mountains newspaper included a 'Blue Mountains National Park Special Supplement' submitted by the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council. The following extracts are taken from this detailed and visionary prospectus.)

The sign of the axe

The task of subjugating wilderness is the past rightly was reckoned to be a manful job. Sturdy men and trusty axes, confronted with primeval bushland, steadily hewed a wide and wasteful way through it and out the other side. Later on, tree destruction became a kind of national complexus, it went altogether too far; it became spiteful. For some settlers the very zenith of land 'improvement' was a holding absolutely short of trees – a grassy desert. Rain-drags never were considered; wind-breaks rarely. Sometimes a settler – after much mind travail – might plant a couple of pine trees for a little shade which he thought his beasts might need.

In the early days, wilderness was considered to be Public Enemy No. 1. There were no half measures about the way our fathers dealt with land cover – or the creatures thereof. Tour the country now and grieve for some of the results. Progress here was built upon ten million log-fires, half a million bright-edged axes and a continuity of steady effort. We have to admire the energetic determination of our honoured progenitors, whilst wishing they had mixed a little more intelligence with their plain and fancy and all too proficient axe-work.

The trouble today is that too many persons have the same old '40's and '70's yearning to sink an axe, in one second, into the butt of a tree which may have taken any time from 40 to 300 years to grow. Far too many axes and saws are in evidence. The inherited habit of four generations still hinders our national intellect. It is inevitable that very soon we shall follow the same path of painful realisation already taken by other countries. Like them, we may be able to reduce our loss by unhesitatingly grabbing our tracts of scenic wilderness whilst there remains any wilderness to grab. The matter is urgent. Why? Because – viewed nationally – those log-fires we spoke about now constitute National Enemy No. 1; the axe is National Enemy No. 2, No. 3 Enemy is not far behind; it is production beyond demand, and this includes unnecessary roads – even emergency relief work roads. Especially into goodly, scenic places best suited for preservation as primitive wilderness; not so much for the people of to-day, but rather for the more necessitous people of the future. The world was not made for any one particular generation alone. Whether we like it or not, we hold the land in trust for our successors.

Prescience

Who can correctly measure the needs of the future? Have not most provisions fallen far short of the real measure of necessity? It behoves the acknowledged experts to indicate suitable areas, and Government to set them aside in time, before alienation can take place or the wilderness qualities be leased away for ever; so that our people, whose land it is, may enjoy the amenities of noble scenery and priceless natural environment, bestowed once, and only once, by beneficent Nature.

Every scheme for the preservation of the beauties and environmental qualities of this our native Australia, or the provision of necessary training grounds for initiative and physical perfection, or for recreation areas for our citizenry, is greatly controlled by the monetary factor. This is largely due to the fact that this Age is not so much one of common service as it is of profit and loss, hence a stern struggle for existence which allows little time or opportunity for the exercise of aestheticism. Naturally, land resumptions for aesthetic and educational purposes must be avoided unless absolutely necessary; even then the means may be absent.

Have not we casual spoilers sufficient proof already that the flouting of such unique gifts of wilderness beauty and wild life is fraught with grave loss and danger to ourselves? Let rational-minded Australians ponder this matter – THEN ACT BEFORE IT BECOMES TOO LATE. THESE OPPORTUNITIES DO NOT RECUR.

Equilibrated minds and wilderness

It is paradoxical that wilderness or primitive bushland should be one of the really indispensable necessities of modern existence in its soundest sense. This is the new and modern view. So far, civilisation has destroyed the greater part of what once was primeval wilderness. But now, when mankind begins to envisage complete urbanisation and subjection of the remaining wild parts of the country, the prospect is a wearisome and worrying one; for where else can man go to escape his civilisation?

The thought that the country can never go wild again is positively appalling. It has resulted in this action: that all over the world forested and scenic areas have been set apart for the recreation purposes of mankind, where he can rid himself of the shackles of ordered existence. Hence the great national parks.

But more significant than this is the demand for really ‘primitive areas’ – great portions of huge national parks wherein no roads may be constructed, no buildings erected, and no fences or other ‘improvements’ are allowed. To lose themselves for a while in such roadless, primitive-areas, to ‘go bush’ in the mountains, is the great endeavour of countless thousands of human beings – from the cultured academician and the businessman, with their multifarious interests, to the countryman, tradesman and labourer, with their simpler modes of living.

More and more people want back again the forested and mountainous wilderness which has been lost. The movement is not merely a passing phase. The more complicated existence becomes the more necessary it is to have this wonderful palliative handy to preserve the natural balance of minds, strengthen ordinary, comradely human nature, and perfect healthy physique; also to reserve for the human race that connection with things natural and wholesome which now is more than ever necessary, because of our remarkably artificial city and town environments.

Primitive areas and tourist open areas

The National Parks and Primitive Areas Council propose, as ordinary theory of working, that all future national parks, scenery, tourist, recreational and conservation reserves be definitely designated and dedicated as ‘primitive areas’ or ‘tourist open areas’. In the case of national parks, it is proposed that the whole area be made as large as possible; that it be divided as above, according to the best considered requirements of posterity rather than of strictly present use. That the ‘primitive area’ portion be compacted wherever possible, and that the ‘tourist open areas’ be more in the nature of

access points to the perimeter of the whole national park – of course plus reasonably sized ‘open’ sections. By this means, motor tourists may obtain a maximum number of avenues of approach, and maximum change of location without actual penetration into the wilderness heart of the region except on foot or horseback.

Thus the requirements of the future are looked after; the relatively or wholly undisturbed primitive area of rugged country is comparatively free from the acts of irresponsibles who invariably accompany tourist crowds; fire danger is lessened; no forest growth is destroyed by wholesale camping; the inner water supply rising from selected elevated areas is protected (a primary reason); and wildlife given a real chance to maintain itself.

The contention of the N.P.P.A. is that primitive areas constitute the last hope for the conservation of wildlife in general. National parks and reserves such as are known here cannot adequately effect this purpose, because their purpose being merely general, no particular study can be made for unimpeded development or conservation. Our duty to posterity demands that provision be made for true conservation of wilderness.

National parks should consist of a true wilderness and roadless core or compact section (not necessarily centrally placed) within an outer protected area open for general motor-tourist use.

A ‘tourist open area’ is a stipulated portion of any scenic, tourist, recreation or fauna and flora reserve in which reasonable improvements for the accommodation and comfort of tourists and all reasonable space for vehicular travel will be permitted – such as roads, bridges, huts, picnic shelters, accommodation houses, garages, view shelters, refreshment places, etc.

A ‘primitive area’ may be defined as being an area of primitive wilderness, compact in shape and extensive, so that one may be able to travel on foot in any direction for at least a full day without meeting a road or highway (American definition). It must preserve its natural characteristics and adjuncts – plant life, wildlife – in every way, and must be roadless but not necessarily trackless. Naturally its purpose must be the preservation of wilderness as it stands, and the best possible fire protection must be instituted to this end; and those other things which are aids to the destruction of true wilderness must be eliminated or prevented; viz: roads, bridges, accommodation houses and settlements, etc.

Wilderness and progress

Somewhere handy to the various heavily populated districts of our continent there must be wilderness and plenty of it in terms of the fairly certain requirement of the future 100 years from now. If we have any thought at all for the future – not ours but our successors – and if we are able intelligently and unselfishly to abandon some of our present pretensions to ‘progress’ and ‘development’, and our complexus concerning the ‘inevitability of progress’ we must see that the same ignorance of cause and effect, the same paucity of relative values, the same vociferous inability to distinguish between real and pseudo-progress in terms of the greatest good for minorities as well as for majorities, already has ruined large areas of the world’s surface. Even after the fullest consideration of climatic changeability and its direct and indirect effects all over the globe, it must be admitted that considerable change for the worse has been produced by action born of sheer ignorance and inability to conserve

and to plan for the future. It is axiomatic that real progress follows from the ability to plan wisely and from action according to plan.

It is disquieting to us, as reasonable conservators, when looking about, to see so much evidence of chanceful and deliberate land change for the worse perpetuated by our fathers – upon land much of which could never be regarded as fertile, and some of which never should have been more than 50% cleared, and some not cleared at all. And all without plan, the only incentive being to clear every acre for grass and yet more grass, without thought for the ultimate land condition. Our pioneering fathers had this excuse – that times were young and innocent of precedent regarding the law of diminishing returns (studied in the land economy of many older countries); the land was new, and its luxuriant vegetation a sort of malignant growth, possible of being destroyed only by constant application of axe and fire. How luxuriant it really was, and how beautiful, most of us shall never know.

But that rough and ready land technique has been carried much too far in this State of N.S.W., now it is time to make a study of results and returns, with a view to the possibility of some certainty in proper ultimate land use. Especially so with inferior lands in most instances. Of the scenic areas of this State, the Blue Mountains region is the most important, scenically and economically, because of its remarkably diversified character (as yet unknown to the tourist), and its proximity to Australia's greatest population area. Moreover, as rugged wilderness purely and simply, it is not exceeded by any other region in the State, and probably nowhere else in Australia.