

Action toward wilderness protection in Australia

by Keith Muir¹

Abstract

In 1992 a National Forest Policy Statement created a political opportunity to protect wilderness across Australia. The following decade saw over a million hectares of wilderness reserved in the state of New South Wales (NSW) but, until recently, little progress was made elsewhere in Australia. The success in NSW, as opposed to other states, can largely be attributed to the activism of the NSW environment movement and its different relationship with both the political and executive arms of Government. This relationship is structured through the NSW Wilderness Act, 1987 which was the first Australian statute to allow the community to formally nominate wilderness areas. Such community-based proposals can advocate the suitability of areas to be managed as wilderness by consideration of particular wilderness values, social and economic factors, as well as provide suggestions for park management.

Introduction

Wilderness in all its diversity has evolved over 3.5 billion years. When we experience wilderness, we reconnect with the environment of our seven million year human evolutionary journey, but now the environment that nurtured this development can only continue on its evolutionary journey with our help. This paper is about Australia's efforts to protect wilderness from the all-pervasive influence of modern technological society.

Australia, just like America, is a federation of states and each one is as different as the people within it. Due to the constitutional difficulties of co-ordinating the nine governments of the federation any national resources strategy, such as for wilderness protection, generally requires bilateral agreements between each state and the federal government based upon a set of over-arching principles. The 1992 National Forest Policy Statement provided just such a framework (Commonwealth of Australia 1992).

The Statement committed all governments to establishing a comprehensive, adequate and representative reserve system on forested lands and, concurrently, timber resource security. The implementation policies developed under the Statement included a reservation target of 90 per cent of all forest wilderness, and the development of management plans to protect these wilderness lands (Commonwealth of Australia, 1997).

By the time governments had signed the Forest Policy all, except for Tasmania, had passed legislation for the protection of wilderness areas (Whitehouse, 1993). Yet only the most populous and developed states of Victoria and New South Wales had active wilderness programs, a trend that has continued until recently.

Northern Territory, Western Australia and Queensland – three states with a frontier mind-set

The Northern Territory is Australia's 'frontier' and perhaps has more wilderness than anywhere else in Australia. The Territory has no formally protected wilderness areas, except for an area of Kakadu National Park; a park managed by the Commonwealth Government. The Territory Government, however, has been notably progressive in its attitude toward joint management of national parks with indigenous people. The Gurig National Park became Australia's first jointly managed park in 1981 and in 2004 the Government decided that Aboriginal traditional owners would jointly manage all of the Territory's reserves in co-operation with the Parks and Wildlife Commission.

Arnhem Land contains perhaps the most important wilderness in the Territory's Top End and is a stronghold of Aboriginal culture (Mittermier 2002). It is also the latest uranium

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exploration site for the Canadian-based mining giant Cameco. At this point in time arguments between Indigenous people and non-Indigenous people about the Arnhem Wilderness would be unhelpful. In these circumstances those concerned with environmental justice should close ranks with those who support social justice and use their collective talent to fight for the earth. It isn't a dress rehearsal where we can split hairs over the meaning of wilderness while the bulldozers push exploration roads into remote river catchments. Those concerned with social and environmental justice will learn respect for the different perceptions of wilderness most quickly when joined in a common struggle. As the world's resources run out these beautiful, precious, undamaged areas will be on the front line for those environment issues climbing to the top of the political agenda: energy and greenhouse policy.

So why has the Territory disregarded its duty toward wilderness preservation? A commonly held opinion is that there is lots of wilderness and few Territorians, so there is no urgency. The National Wilderness Inventory (Anon. 1995) indicated that more than half the Territory is in a high wilderness condition. This positive assessment of condition needs to be treated with care, however, as the impacts of pest species, particularly cane toads, horses and camels, have caused serious impacts. These impacts have included local extinctions, loss of native vegetation and massive soil erosion in much of the area identified as wilderness. Unless backed by reliable scientific assessment and data, a regional-scale wilderness assessment, like the National Wilderness Inventory, can produce misleading results that ignore the need for urgent management action for areas vulnerable to environmental degradation, inappropriate use and development.

There is another important reason for concern in relation to the Territory's present wilderness estate. The Territory is working to develop a more comprehensive reserve system without adequate regard to protection of wilderness values. The national parks estate in the Northern Territory has increased from two million hectares in 1992 to five million hectares today. Nine national parks larger than 100,000 hectares contain considerable wilderness areas. The management plans for several of these large parks have either a 'limited use' or 'natural' zone to regulate development and high impact use. There was even a proposal for a Spirit Hills Wilderness Conservation Area (Anon 2001). But this area, like all wilderness-like zones in the Northern Territory, may be open to mining activities and some national parks are being actively explored. The draft plan of management for Barranyi National Park describes the need to preserve the unique wilderness character of the island, which has only one species of feral animal and few weeds. The draft plan of management unfortunately fails to live up to its stated intentions toward wilderness by leaving the way open for future wilderness lodge development.

An open assessment of the issues and problems of preserving naturalness is essential as Territorians continue to develop their land, on-park as well as off-park. I fear that what I call 'wilderness' and indigenous people may call 'our country' is all too often available for someone else's plans for wilderness lodges, 4WD vehicle-based recreation, development of roads, mining activities, clearing, grazing, safari hunts and other forms of commercial tourism.

In contrast to the Territory, Western Australia has progressed toward wilderness protection in the last five years. A 'super-department', the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM), manages the state's national parks, state forests and other Crown Land (i.e. lands owned by the state government). For decades CALM has been the gatekeeper for the future use of the state's public lands. In such large bureaucracies wilderness protection struggles to have a voice, being represented by a small branch of a division and a long distance from the source of political power. Wilderness protection has been a hard fight in Western Australia and The Wilderness Society has put in a tremendous effort to save wilderness in that state. There are all the usual interests competing for each piece of wilderness land and CALM, with its multiple use mind-set, trades off these last remnants, even within national parks.

A 1998 outcome of Australia's National Forest Policy saw 342,000 hectares of forests reserved in national parks in the south-west of Western Australia by 2003, but the subsequent wilderness assessment of the new reserves initially did not identify any areas for protection. The assessment was redone following an outcry, but only small areas were eventually flagged. The assessment process used criteria to find areas remote from modern technology.

The application of remoteness criteria work most effectively when used to describe threats of proposed development to areas already identified or protected as wilderness. In the case of a proposed development, such as road or logging operations, the potential retreat of wilderness is graphically illustrated by the map-based remoteness criteria (Kirkpatrick 1980). When defining suitable wilderness boundaries, however, the application of remoteness criteria facilitates a reductionist process that often emphasises the obstacles more than the opportunities for wilderness protection. The remoteness approach also creates the misleading impression that the areas are rarely visited. Despite the political settings for an adequate forest wilderness protection outcome, achieved after much hard work by a broad coalition of environment groups over a decade, the CALM bureaucracy and the wilderness assessment methodology focussed the public debate on 4WD roads and made a successful outcome for on-park wilderness protection very difficult.

In the longer established national parks, four have wilderness zones within them, totalling about 225,000 hectares but these were never afforded statutory protection available under the Conservation and Land Management Act, 1984.

Examination of options for protection of wilderness values is now part of a plan of management review process. The results of this process may prove more fruitful although, so far, CALM has only proposed 21,000 hectares of wilderness for protection. Placing wilderness protection last in a long chain of land use decision-making creates difficulties as competing activities, such as tourist operations and the pervasive off road vehicle user, become established and then tend to dictate park management. In these circumstances some form of interim protection is necessary, even if this measure is initially only a negotiated moratorium on road making and upgrading, park facilities development and commercial use until the wilderness assessment processes are completed.

Queensland has presented major opportunities for wilderness protection over the last decade but first the major setbacks created by a previous right-wing government, who used national park reservation as a tool to block indigenous land rights, had to be overcome. The Wilderness Society and the Australian Conservation Foundation undertook a strategy of placing land rights on an equal footing with park reservation. They agreed to work with the traditional owners, so when a progressive government was swept into office over a million hectares of land were reserved as national parks or handed back to the region's traditional owners. Queensland now has 7.2 million hectares of protected areas, including 6.7 million hectares of national parks.

The National Parks estate can, however, never be big enough to carry all Aboriginal and Islander aspirations forward. A regional land use agreement approach, such as that developed for Cape York in Queensland, provides a cogent solution to ensure an economic base for indigenous people. Providing for claims over lands with a broad range of productive resources can greatly assist with self-determination and economic independence. This alternative is better than remote areas of national park being developed by the first Australians to provide for economic and social objectives.

The current challenge for the new national parks in Cape York, being taken up by The Wilderness Society, is to obtain adequate funds for the management of feral animals, particularly cattle and horses, and weeds, which are huge problems in the tropics. You cannot separate people from wilderness because wilderness needs management.

There are no wilderness areas formally protected under the Nature Conservation Act, 1992 in Queensland because conservation groups have dropped formal wilderness reservation from their campaign priorities. Wilderness is protected 'de facto' in national parks, such as Mount Barney, Hinchinbrook Island, Currawinya and Carnarvon. In the case of Carnarvon and Hinchinbrook Island, national parks with high wilderness values, their plans of management designate remote-natural zones over most of the park with minimal or no visitor facilities and no motor vehicle access, except for management purposes. For the other parks, the plans of management have tended to make the remote-natural zones much smaller.

In 1999, the South East Queensland Forest Agreement resulted in an immediate addition to the reserve system of 425,000 hectares and a further 215,000 ha of new national

parks in 2004. A transition program is underway to phase commercial logging out of many areas, including the Wet Tropics. The Shelburne Bay Wilderness was protected from mining in 2003 when existing mining leases over its pure white dunes lapsed on expiry. As I write this paper the progressive Queensland Government is about to introduce a Wild Rivers Bill that would protect 19 of the state's best rivers, following yet another vigorous campaign by The Wilderness Society. The Bill, if passed, will represent the nation's first stand alone and comprehensive legislation to identify and protect wild rivers. The legislation will help to protect the wilderness characteristics of selected catchments of reserved rivers.

Indigenous people own almost half of Australia north of the Tropic of Capricorn and many desert areas. There should be a place for wilderness in the Indigenous landscape, and the management value of wilderness protection should not be compromised by a trend emerging in some quarters to have the definition of wilderness altered to accommodate modern technology, such as 4WD vehicles and permanent settlements.

The political debate regarding national parks must surely turn on what we can do for the land, not what nature and national parks can do for us. Aboriginal and Islander leaders should address the preservation of nature within their land base, particularly within their national parks. Not all areas should be developed, have road networks or permanent settlements within them.

New South Wales – a success story

New South Wales (NSW) has earned a reputation as the centre of wilderness protection in Australia. The state has just passed through an enlightened decade of government where wilderness was not just recognised, but received priority. A wilderness logging moratorium began in 1992 and was expanded as National Forest Policy negotiations progressed. In most cases, the areas where logging was deferred in 1995 became declared wilderness by 2003.

This wonderful result came about, at least in part, due to seeds planted twenty-five years ago by a charismatic environmentalist called Milo Dunphy. He was famous for leading politicians on well-organised trips into the wilderness. He took one future state leader to Mount Cloudmaker, who became inspired by the majesty, awe and wonder of the Kanangra-Boyd, the second largest wilderness in NSW. That leader's name was Bob Carr. In 1987 Carr introduced the first Wilderness Act in Australia. The Act enabled any person to nominate wilderness areas in NSW for assessment and put forward a case for protection. The environment movement has since advanced a series of detailed proposals and these have been carefully assessed by the state's park agency, the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), which is now part of the Department of Environment and Conservation.

The NPWS uses a wilderness assessment method that examines naturalness of the environment by means other than its surrogate remoteness from development. It is recognised that some of the best wilderness in the state is not remote but within two hour's drive from Sydney, the state's capital city. A naturalness approach that assesses ecosystem disturbance can better provide for opportunities to protect wilderness. The nature-focussed assessment reflects the assessment criteria of the Act, which allows for the restoration of land when considering whether an area should be identified as wilderness. Once a wilderness is identified, there can then be an open and transparent, even if politicised, debate over whether it should be protected. Issues associated with unsealed roads then come into play but are considered in the context of the need for protection of the natural environment rather than as the prime factor in defining wilderness boundaries from the outset.

Progress towards wilderness protection under the Wilderness Act began during the era of a conservative government, which declared 650,000 hectares of wilderness between 1991 and 1995. Even in the darkest hours, when two Parliamentary mavericks compromised a major set of wilderness proposals, the future Premier Carr used the opportunity to censure government in Parliament for failing to meet its wilderness promises. He then announced a strong wilderness protection policy and his government secured 1.3 million hectares of threatened forest wilderness over the next ten years.

A new Premier, Morris Iemma, has recently replaced Bob Carr and a further set of wilderness proposals have been submitted for assessment. Whether wilderness remains on the agenda for the new government depends not only on continuous public education and dialogue between those interested in wilderness protection, key decision makers and everyone else, but also on-going sympathetic consideration of wilderness proposals by the newly created Department of Environment and Conservation.

NSW has saved more wilderness than any other state but has only one wilderness in Indigenous ownership, within Mutawintji National Park. Very few national parks in NSW are Aboriginally-owned but legislation has been established to allow for the transfer of publicly owned parks to traditional owners as freehold land on a term lease arrangement. Conservationists support these moves but are concerned that the lack of unalienable community tenure, and inadequacy of the provisions preventing subdivision, sale and development when the park leaseback term lapses. These weaknesses in park laws may reduce the security of Aboriginally-owned national parks in NSW in the long term.

Wilderness areas are important repositories for Aboriginal culture. A Bega Valley Aboriginal heritage study found that many Aboriginal pathways, migration routes, trade routes, cultural routes, song lines and dreaming or dreamtime tracks pass through the wilderness areas of south-east NSW and these pathways are essentially in an intact condition (Blay 2005). The most significant discovery of Aboriginal rock art in 50 years was found only two years ago in the Wollemi Wilderness near Sydney. At the time, Bob Carr described the 4,000 year old drawings as simply "the greatest advertisement for saving wild places in national parks" (Carr 2003). The art gallery is in near-perfect condition and its exact location, along with the location of the now famous dinosaur tree, the Wollemi Pine also in the Wollemi Wilderness, will be kept secret.

The nation's capital, Canberra, lies within the Australian Capital Territory, which is within New South Wales. While the Territory is self-governing, its small size makes it essentially a glorified local government. The Australian Capital Territory protects its 28,900 hectare wilderness under the Nature Conservation Act, 1980 and the area also adjoins a similar sized wilderness in NSW in the Kosciuszko National Park, but unfortunately separated from it by a recently established fence exclude feral horses. While there are no provisions in the legislation to consider community-initiated wilderness proposals, the creation of two community-conservation group initiated roadless areas are proposed within the park under the recently released draft plan of management, but roads for essential fire protection purposes will be allowed (Anon 2005). The Nature Conservation Act does not define wilderness but its wilderness management principles prevent road construction and are strengthened by other legislation that prevents access by motor vehicles and other mechanised equipment.

Victoria and the one-off, state-wide wilderness assessment strategy

The story of wilderness protection in Victoria is again different. In 1991 the former Land Conservation Council undertook a major study of wilderness. The Council identified many wilderness areas across the state, and subjected these areas to a transparent process of assessment and public review. The Land Conservation Council (LCC) was required to balance competing needs of Victorians. The state-wide processes, while efficient and democratic, relied on the remoteness approach that played into the hands of wilderness opponents. The LCC cut pieces off wilderness here and created easements there, as if every identified wilderness was a pie to be shared out to user groups, like off road vehicle enthusiasts, with nature only receiving a piece of the pie.

The LCC assessment increased the wilderness estate of Victoria to 842,050 hectares. The areas that became too small through balancing wilderness and development were placed into a lower category of wilderness protection called remote and natural areas. These lesser protected wilderness areas total a further 268,900 hectares within which existing high impact recreation abuses were retained, but with the promise of no additional abuse within these national park areas.

No wilderness outside national parks was considered for protection by the LCC process, which was completed just before the National Forest Policy was signed. Part of the Wongungurra wilderness, a mere 7,420 hectares, was added to the national park estate in 1999 through the Forest Policy process but it was not reserved as a wilderness or a remote and natural area. No indigenous wilderness areas in Victoria have been created and no wilderness has been protected at all since 1992 when the state wide process was completed. The downside of a state wide process is that it creates the impression that the protection program was comprehensive, making the wilderness issue difficult to revisit. A recent decision to rapidly phase out cattle grazing in the state's alpine wilderness over the next twelve months, however, provides an opportunity to revisit wilderness boundaries that were, in some places, established to avoid grazing areas.

Tasmania and the case for Wilderness as a criterion for World Heritage listing

There is no systematic process for considering wilderness protection in Tasmania within protected areas. In this state the World Heritage Convention has played a critical part in ensuring wilderness protection. The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area was inscribed on the World Heritage list of properties in 1982 and was greatly extended in 1989. At the time of its nomination the area was described as one of the last great temperate wilderness areas remaining in Australia. Wilderness was recognised as being of World Heritage value under the scenic beauty criteria for natural areas. As a consequence of the listing, a one million hectare wilderness zone was established in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area under the plan of management in 1992. The World Heritage Area has now had three areas of Aboriginal land handed back to the community with one of the areas in the wilderness zone and the other two in the self-reliant recreation zone. This wonderful wilderness is more or less intact except for two easements. One easement provides for commercial tourism along the Overland Track and the other provides road access to the Franklin River to enable short rafting trips in the wilderness. As these concessions to development indicate, the wilderness zone is vulnerable to policy changes and subsequent development through alteration of the plan of management.

One of the important threatened Tasmanian wilderness areas is the 390,000 ha Tarkine. Half the Tarkine is in a national park and the other half is mainly unreserved public land, including the Wellington Range. The Tasmanian government reluctantly signed the National Forest Policy Statement in April 1995. However, the timber industry in Tasmania obtained resource security legislation in 1991 and only small forest protection gains have been made through the forest negotiations under the National Forest Policy Statement.

Tasmania has a higher density of conservationists than any other state in Australia, and more green politicians as well, but this weight of support has not secured either wilderness-specific legislation or adequate wilderness protection through park plans of management. Areas like Tasmania benefit from granting World Heritage level recognition to high quality wilderness areas. Such listings help to give these areas the recognition and protection they deserve through the bilateral federal-state government processes that regulate the nomination and management of World Heritage Areas in Australia.

Wilderness mining, a South Australian anomaly

South Australia (SA) passed the Wilderness Protection Act in 1992 and it provides for the creation of wilderness protection areas and wilderness zones. The Act can apply to indigenous and privately owned land as well as Crown Land. The Act has adopted the NSW model that allows any member of the public to propose wilderness areas for protection. In the case of South Australia, however, the mining lobby gained a major concession as mining activities are allowed in wilderness zones, as opposed to wilderness protection areas, a stricter reserve category preventing mining operations. This has greatly weakened the concept of wilderness as applied in SA and opportunities for mining in wilderness create public confusion over appropriate wilderness management.

South Australia's wilderness protection areas and wilderness zones are only reserved after repealing any existing protected area status and then proclaiming the new form of

wilderness reserve. This approach to wilderness reservation is necessary because the state's other reserve categories are too weak to support wilderness management.

So far eight wilderness areas have been protected totalling 184,419 ha and most of this area was reserved only last year. In addition, three large informal wilderness zones have been established under plans of management in National Parks and Conservation Parks but these areas lack the security of being reserved under the Wilderness Protection Act and are also open to mineral exploration.

The Wilderness Society has nominated eight terrestrial wilderness areas for assessment under the 1992 Act and a further eight marine wilderness areas. This growing pile of proposals also has a growing political weight that becomes increasingly receptive to a political trigger event. Trigger events can bring about determination of the outstanding proposals and rapidly advance wilderness protection. They include any conservation debacle, as the government will be keen to distract the public attention with important conservation news and placate agitation by the environment lobby.

The Yellabinna Wilderness Protection Area proposal is the most important mallee woodland wilderness proposal in the state and is currently under determination. The government's Wilderness Advisory Committee assessed Yellabinna as having high wilderness value in 1996 and recommended that 1.2 million hectares be protected. The government announced its intention to protect 500,000ha in 2004 and gazettal is expected this year. The new park will form the largest strictly protected reserve created in South Australia since 1970. At the same time as making the Yellabinna wilderness protection announcement, the State's Premier signalled that some 14 mining exploration licences will be granted over 2 million hectares in the Yellabinna mallee region. Some of these licences will be in the Yumbarra Conservation Park that had its protection status removed in 1999. Track construction for mining exploration is now fragmenting sensitive arid ecosystems.

Two wilderness dreamings

Wilderness for non-indigenous Australians is seen as a place where the last remnants of the natural world are safe from the spoiling forces of modern technology. Outside wilderness, any economically useful land is generally dedicated to production for our urban-based society (although The Wilderness Society's *Wild Country* project and new land clearing laws are attempting to change that paradigm). Wilderness offers respite for the increasingly stressed urbanites and their feedlot society, where food and services are brought to them and their wastes are carried away. In wilderness we can connect with life that still evolves by natural processes.

The wilderness of Aboriginal and Islander Australians is a living story based on up to 40-60,000 years of belonging to the country – a land of spirits, dreaming paths, myths and ceremony that create a framework of indigenous responsibilities for country. The impacts and influences of indigenous societies in wilderness are recognised, as are the opportunities for indigenous people to retain links with the landscape. While some wilderness critics like Tim Flannery in Australia claim Aboriginal land use precludes wilderness, the issue of impact from indigenous land use is one of degrees, particularly when compared to recent use of modern technologies.

The harmonisation of these two cultural dreamings is imperative to the survival of wilderness in Australia, as much unprotected wilderness is located on Aboriginal land. The belief that Indigenous land use treads more lightly on the land underpins the Malimup communiqué, developed by the former Australian Heritage Commission (Commonwealth of Australia 1999). The communiqué acknowledges and respects the right of indigenous people to maintain and strengthen their spiritual and cultural relationships within wilderness, and has built goodwill in that the preservation of wilderness does not exclude people or indigenous rights. Indigenous wilderness as described by the Malimup communiqué allows for indigenous hunting using firearms, the gathering of bush foods, the use 4WD vehicles and the establishment of permanent accommodation. The agreement has, in effect, inadvertently defined the distance between these two dreamings.

This distance between the two dreamings will increase as indigenous communities living in a wilderness area use modern technology more intensely and extensively over time. While the occasional use of management roads by indigenous people in 4WD vehicles would perhaps pose a low level of threat, it does set a precedent for further public use of motor vehicles that would be incompatible with wilderness values and possibly damages the integrity of biological diversity. Further, the establishment of permanent settlements clearly contradicts the wilderness management principles currently adopted in most Australian states and the IUCN wilderness definition. World Conservation Union, 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”.

Intensive use of modern technology and permanent or significant habitation is not consistent with accepted wilderness management practice. Everything that is true and just, desirable and worthwhile is not always compatible or mutually reinforcing (Lines 2005). There will be times and places when the social justice for indigenous people and environmental justice for wilderness do not coincide. In a mature relationship between conservation groups and Indigenous communities there is space for acceptance of difference.

The efforts made to redefine wilderness, to allow modern technology into wilderness as a special case, can only erode the potential for understanding the management purposes of wilderness. Either the redefined wilderness becomes further fragmented by the expansion of permanent Aboriginal settlements and increased use of 4WD vehicles in these reserves or indigenous communities are alienated and infuriated by conservation groups who supported the granting of indigenous wilderness areas but then successfully oppose any further increase in the use of modern technology or the expansion of settlements into what they believe should be strictly protected reserve areas.

The two wilderness dreamings must be married so as to avoid potential confusion in wilderness reserve management, during public awareness programs about wilderness and, particularly in campaigns to save wilderness areas. This resolution should be achieved through the development of detailed wilderness proposals in consultation with indigenous communities.

The indigenous wilderness concept as found in the Malimup communiqué, has not seen wilderness protection extend across northern Australia. Here, non-indigenous wilderness concepts could sit within indigenous wilderness, between the low density of existing roads and settlements. This solution has been developed for Kakadu National Park in a process evolving over the last twenty years and that will go on evolving. Kakadu National Park, a Federally managed park within the Northern Territory, contains a wilderness area (designated ‘Zone 4’ in the plan of management) which covers about 475,300 hectares of the 2 million hectare park (Misso, 2005). However, such an approach contains in it the risk of repeating the lessons learnt in the more settled districts where much wilderness has been compromised by development that should have been avoided.

The degree to which the Malimup communiqué creates conflict with wilderness management principles can be moderated through the *Wild Country* approach developed by The Wilderness Society. Wild Country management can partly accommodate ideological inconsistencies by retaining important bushland links around development areas and linking potential wilderness reserves areas.

Now is the time to preserve wilderness, not when the last options are being played out; when every national park is an outdoor amusement park for tourists on package tours and the 4WD vehicle enthusiast. Now is the time to save wilderness in Cape York in Queensland, Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory and the Kimberly in Western Australia. Aboriginal communities have 4WD vehicles, and should have modern settlements and all the best that modern society can offer. Yet motor vehicles form a barrier between wilderness and the human soul. You must ‘walk the land’ to fully relate and belong to the land. Surely the most sacred, most biodiverse places should be visited on their own terms.

Concluding remarks

What I call protected wilderness is, in administrative reality, a park management system that successfully defends nature from the spoiling forces of modern technology. Wilderness is also a powerful belief that respects the rights of nature and those of indigenous people, and in politics such beliefs become reality. The wilderness idea has done much to protect nature and there is much more to be done.

Indigenous and non-indigenous Australians can effectively act together when the bulldozers, miners, loggers and resort developers arrive to despoil the wilderness. Such defensive campaigns should be closely integrated with positive plans for wilderness protection. The efforts toward wilderness protection will be most effective when detailed wilderness protection proposals are advanced that can then be assessed in an open and transparent manner. Such an assessment of wilderness should be nature-focused, provide opportunities for restoration and be undertaken by a receptive park administration supervised by a sympathetic minister. This is a task that requires constant dialogue between wilderness advocates and government.

The Colong Foundation for Wilderness advocates that management of large national parks can provide adequate visitor opportunities for quiet enjoyment and ensure effective conservation of aesthetic, cultural and natural values by adopting the following principles:

- All activities governed by the plan of management;
- No visitor accommodation on-park;
- The majority of the park should be subject to wilderness-style management with suitable areas on the edges set aside for motorised vehicles;
- Vehicle access should be on formed 2WD roads approved for use by the plan of management;
- Low key facilities such as picnic tables and basic camping grounds should be located near park boundaries.

Limited high quality road access on the edges of parks and associated low-key facilities are the key to visitor management that can provide ample opportunities for enjoying a national park, while ensuring the integrity of remaining areas. Almost all heavily used park areas are within an hours walking distance of a vehicle access point. There are some exceptions to the above use versus distance rule, but they are few. These principles have been fundamental to the development of national parks and wilderness areas in NSW and it is time for the other states of Australia to reap the benefits of a greatly expanded wilderness estate.

The World Heritage Committee of UNESCO should consider advancing wilderness as one of the criteria in its World Heritage Operational Guidelines for the assessment of nominated natural properties. Such a criterion would reflect the true value and role of wilderness in this increasingly crowded world. Under the current Operational Guidelines, the consideration of important wilderness values is relegated to being either a factor influencing the biophysical integrity of the nominated property or an element of the conservation of scenery criterion. These limited assessment opportunities do not give due recognition to the enduring many values of the last remaining pristine parts of the natural world.

The identification and promotion of wilderness that would follow the establishment of such a World Heritage criterion would provide more people with life changing experiences. Appropriate low impact wilderness use is a humbling experience that can provide many visitors with the inspiration to work for a more environmentally sustainable society. A wilderness World Heritage criterion would help to secure a higher priority for nature-focused management for the reserves listed under that criterion. Such a criterion may also assist with protection of the extensive areas wilderness in Queensland, Western Australia and the Northern Territory through the development of operational procedures under existing bilateral state-federal government agreements that regulate the World Heritage nominations.

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