

THE WEAKNESS OF WILDERNESS PROTECTION POLICY

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Introduction

There is no legislated national wilderness designation in Australia, though wilderness is a component of protected-area planning in particular States. Wilderness is hence largely a descriptive rather than a legal term. Wilderness is an important concept in Australia environmental and land management policy, however. Indeed, one of the country's four principal non-government organizations is named The Wilderness Society.

My aim here is not to review the history of wilderness science and politics in Australia, but simply to summarize major current issues and controversies. These fall into three principal categories:

- the National Wilderness Inventory (NWI)
- recreational pressures on wilderness in protected areas
- political controversy over future management of wilderness in public forests.

National Wilderness Inventory (NWI)

The federal government has for some years been compiling a national inventory of wilderness throughout Australia, including an inventory of wild and scenic rivers. This has been a large-scale exercise involving the compilation of data from all possible sources including new studies commissioned specifically for the NWI. Information has been available on the Environment Australia Website (www.ea.gov.au), but only in summary form: the detailed information compiled during the NWI has not been published. The NWI culminated in the Wilderness Delineation Project, where expert teams carried out aerial and ground surveys of areas identified by the NWI as being the highest wilderness quality. These surveys focused initially on core areas, adjusting wilderness rankings where appropriate. They then examined the edges of each area, delineating practical boundaries which could potentially be gazetted or at least identified through a series of national wilderness maps.

At the end of June 1999, however, the current federal government cut all funding to the National Wilderness Inventory, the Wilderness Delineation Project and the Wild and Scenic Rivers Branch of Environment Australia. There appears to be no mechanism or commitment to publish the considerable volume of data collected and analysed to date. Nor, apparently, is there any intention to proceed to the logical next step, which would be to negotiate some form of joint federal-state wilderness agreement and legislation.

Such an agreement could give formal recognition to wilderness areas identified in the Wilderness Delineation Project. Their national significance could be recognized, and they could be branded as National Wilderness for tourism marketing. They could also be identified as priority areas for conservation, with restrictions on activities which reduce wilderness values, such as vegetation clearance, construction of roads or powerlines, and so on.

The Commonwealth of Australia's decision to close down the wilderness component of Environment Australia might be seen as simply a step from federal research to state implementation, were it not for two critical factors. In some States many of the areas identified in the NWI, such as military training areas, are in fact under Commonwealth control. Other areas, such as World Heritage, are under joint Commonwealth–State control. In either case, the States cannot proceed without Commonwealth consent and involvement. Even for land under State tenure, State governments cannot proceed unilaterally because they have no information on which to act – the detailed data from the NWI and WDP have apparently not been made public even to State governments.

This situation is particularly ironic in view of recent history. When the Commonwealth first proposed the designation of areas such as South-West Tasmania, the Wet Tropics of Queensland, and Kakadu National Park as World Heritage, the State Governments opposed the nominations and withheld data which the Commonwealth wished to use.

Wilderness in Parks: the Growth of Tourism

Historically, national parks in Australia have been perceived as areas where fauna and flora, water quality and wilderness quality are all protected for posterity. Certainly, parks are for people too, and recreation has long been a significant land use in particular parks. In Australia, however,

recreation has always been secondary to the primary conservation purpose of the parks. In most parks, high-intensity recreational activity has largely been restricted to relatively small sacrifice zones near roadheads and other entrances. Currently, however, there is a worldwide trend to increased use of conservation reserves for commercial nature, eco and adventure tourism (NEAT) as well as private outdoor recreation (Buckley 2000). Parks are being managed more as playgrounds than preserves. Plant and animal species, airsheds and water catchments, whose security was supposedly assured through inclusion in protected areas, may now be threatened by tourism and recreation inside those reserves.

In addition to an increase in the total number of visitors to national parks, there is also an increase in the proportion of commercial tourists as opposed to private individuals. This trend to commercial tourism is important for wilderness management, because tourism is a large and powerful industry with considerable political power. Some members of the industry view commercial tourism operations in national parks as a right. This view is not held by environmental groups and park management agencies. Quite apart from philosophical and legal concerns over the primary purpose of conservation reserves, there are concerns about the ability of park services to manage protected areas for conservation, if management for tourism were given a higher priority.

If governments believe that parks can meet their management costs by levying the tourism industry, they may fail to provide the basic resources required for fundamental conservation management, e.g. for the control of weeds, pests, pathogens, feral animals and fire, and for monitoring and management of endangered species populations.

If the tourism industry believes that any financial contributions it makes to park management should be used for tourism infrastructure, such as car parks, tracks and toilets, then park management agencies will be left without the resources for basic conservation management. If parks obtain their funding through their value for commercial tourism rather than their value for conservation and private recreation, it seems likely that park management agendas will be modified to reflect the priorities of commercial tourism. This would apply whether funding is derived directly from tour operators or from governments which treat parks primarily as a basis for short-term economic returns through tourism, rather than longer term economic, social and environmental returns through conservation.

This is not an argument against commercial tourism in national parks, but a question of priority and perspective. In Australia, parks are legally designated for conservation first, and private recreation second. Commercial tourism is potentially a valuable adjunct to either or both in so far as it adds economic and social value without reducing the environmental and social value of the conservation estate. These priorities, of course, are not solely the view of conservation groups: they are specified by the statutes under which national parks were established in most countries.

In Australia, attitudes to commercial nature tourism in national parks are currently divided and ambiguous. Several states have produced strategies or draft strategies for nature tourism or ecotourism, but these have been produced by different government agencies and have met with varied receptions. Queensland, for example, has an Ecotourism Plan, but this was produced by the tourism portfolio rather than the park management agency, and is a general document not confined to the conservation estate (Queensland 1997). Implementation is the responsibility of an environmental group in the state tourism portfolio, relying largely on public communication rather than a statutory approach.

In New South Wales, the parks management agency produced a Draft Nature Tourism Strategy in response to large increases in visitor numbers and the growth of commercial tourism (Worboys 1997). It has not yet been adopted, however, because of public perception that it would constitute a *de facto* grant of rights to commercial tourism in public national parks. Western Australia has a Nature Tourism Strategy (Western Australia 1997) which has apparently been adopted by both the tourism and land management portfolios.

In some states at least, funding for basic park management is perilously low, and park management agencies are looking closely at nature tourism as a potential source of operating revenue. Most states already charge park entrance fees and operator permit fees, at least to the more heavily visited parks. Some are considering quite substantial increases in fees for commercial tour operators.

One model which might be adopted more widely is that used by the management agency for Purnululu National Park in the Kimberley region of Western Australia. This agency issues a single licence for the exclusive right to run helicopter overflights over the Park's famed bee-hive-shaped sandstone domes. The licence is allocated by tender, and the successful tenderer reputedly pays substantially for the privilege – enough to meet the entire management costs for the park. Because

of the fragility of the sandstone domes, the management agency has a deliberate policy to encourage flights over them rather than on-ground visitors, even though noise from helicopter and light aircraft has a considerable impact on backcountry hikers, and perhaps also on native birds.

Wilderness Tourism in State Forests and Other Public Lands

Australia has a federal system of government, but its public forest management agencies are at a state government rather than a federal level. In Australia, tourism is only now being recognized as an important land use in public forests. Historically, because of public concern and controversy over logging and woodchipping, state forestry agencies have completely banned the public from some areas, using special legislation in some cases. In other areas, however, state forests are used extensively for private recreation, principally by people who want to travel in 4WD vehicles, light fires, carry firearms, bring pets, and participate in other activities generally restricted or banned in national parks. Because this is largely private recreation rather than commercial tourism, however, it has been largely ignored in land use policy. Its social economic value as measured by travel costs, however, is an order of magnitude higher than gross income from logging and woodchipping (Driml 1997, Ward in press), even without taking into account the far higher environmental costs of logging.

In cases where land use has actually changed from logging to conservation and tourism, as in the Queensland Wet Tropics, actual income has also increased by an order of magnitude (Driml 1997). In areas of southeast Australia, where logging has historically been subsidized by the public purse and woodchips are still sold for as little as 5 US cents per tonne, the relative economic gain from changing to tourism as a principal land use would be even greater.

While state forests are very important from a wilderness conservation perspective, forests make up a relatively small proportion of total land area in Australia. There are large tracts of public wilderness land in the arid zone. Some of this is in national parks, but much is in Aboriginal reserves or vacant Crown land. Most is under pastoral lease. Since cattle are restricted to areas around waterholes and stock bores, however, even pastoral leases may contain wilderness areas several thousand square kilometres in extent. Both tourism and oil exploration are increasing in the arid zone, but the impacts of these are far less than that of logging in state forests.

Regional Forest Agreements

Until a few years ago there were a number of federal environmental controls on logging. Logging and wood-chipping licences were granted by state government agencies, but most woodchipping is for export, which gives the federal government the constitutional right to trigger its own environmental legislation. This backstop, however, has been opposed vigorously for many years by the forestry industries and at least some state forestry agencies.

Both the current right-wing federal government and its left-wing predecessor have successively abandoned their environmental powers to the state governments, first under the federal-state Inter-Governmental Agreement on the Environment (EIA), and more recently through abolishing the Register of the National Estate, removing export controls as a trigger for federal EIA, and greatly weakening both the triggers and substance for federal EIA and conservation law. Some state governments, such as Queensland, have simultaneously weakened their own EIA and nature conservation law. Protection for wilderness in Australia through planning and endangered species legislation, therefore, is currently at a very low ebb.

In addition, during the last couple of years, again in response to lobbying from the timber industry and state forestry agencies, federal and state governments have embarked on a series of so-called Regional Forest Agreements (RFAs). The intention is that all public forests throughout Australia should be subject to Comprehensive Regional Assessments; those of high conservation value, including wilderness, should be converted to national parks; and the remainder should be allocated to production forestry essentially free of environmental controls.

This would be a reasonable approach if carried out competently and allocated adequate time, resources, expertise and public participation, and without political bias. In practice, however, it seems to have been a highly political exercise aimed at removing environmental controls from logging and woodchipping in Australia's few remaining stands of old-growth forest. No doubt this story sounds remarkably familiar to those from the United States.

The RFA process has proceeded separately in each state. When it started it was perceived as a political contest between logging and conservation. The tourism industry and private recreation received little mention. As the process has proceeded, tourism and recreation have emerged as a critical component. This has occurred principally through representations from individuals in

research institutions and government agencies, environmental groups and specialist organizations such as the Ecotourism Association of Australia, off-road vehicle associations and so on. Until very recently the mainstream tourism industry, including national associations, state government agencies and large tourism corporations, has taken little or no part in the Regional Forest Agreement process.

Concerns and claims raised by environmental groups about the conduct of the RFA process in different states include the following:

- information on the conservation values of state forests is very scanty, with new species still being discovered, and the Comprehensive Regional Assessments have been written up largely without the time or resources needed to carry out adequate baseline surveys;
- public involvement has been very limited, and often restricted to non-controversial aspects such as European cultural heritage;
- land with no trees of interest to the logging or woodchip industries has been added to the forestry estate specifically so it can then be allocated for conservation, leaving all the forested or timbered areas for logging and chipping;
- even after the forestry and parks agencies have reached agreement on a state RFA, secret political deals at ministerial level led to key areas, scheduled for conservation, being reallocated to production forestry.
- continued logging and woodchipping in Australia's few remaining stands of old-growth forests could only prolong the current lifestyle of rural timber towns by a few years at most, whilst destroying their future opportunities for long term livelihood from nature tourism.

The RFA process may well have helped to raise public awareness of the conservation, wilderness and tourism value of old growth forests in Australia. Perhaps the most impressive demonstration of this occurred in Western Australia, where several hundred prominent members of the right-wing political party which currently holds government in that state, staged a media event in which they simultaneously telephoned the State Premier on their mobile phones in order to protest the continued logging of forests in the southwestern part of the state. In Western Australia, the forests and parks were managed by the same government agency, which has invested in infrastructure for forest tourism in some areas and is well aware of its economic value. Since that protest, the agency has now been split into two, one part responsible for production forestry and the other for conservation and recreation.

It is possible, and indeed quite likely, that public concerns may lead to the repeal of Regional Forest Agreements during the next decade. By then, however, it will be too late. The areas will already have been logged. Historically, whenever suggestions have been made that an area of forest might be converted to national parks, the rate of logging has intensified dramatically; so that by the time the area is designated as a park, most of its forest cover has been cleared (Ward 2000).

Whilst individual staff in the State Forestry Commissions now recognize the importance of conserving old growth and wilderness areas as a resource for nature tourism, agencies generally seem to believe that they will be able to profit from tourism without changing current logging practices. Meanwhile, environmental groups argue that a national process which was supposed to protect forest areas of high conservation value has in fact removed existing environmental controls and hastened the rate of clearing. They argue that this has occurred not only in areas with tall trees and high-value sawlogs, but also in areas which are clear-felled simply to sell woodchips at bargain basement prices.

In July 1999, tourism and conservation interests joined forces to lobby the Queensland State government in regard to the South-East Queensland RFA. Private tour companies, two tourism research organizations, and the Queensland state branch of the peak national tourism industry association joined as signatories to an open letter to the State Premier by environmental groups. The Premier of Queensland was quoted as follows: “The Federal Government has promised US\$10 million at the end of the RFA process which we will forego if we opt out. Ten million dollars is a very small percentage of the money involved in this process and we stand to gain far more from a sensible forest management scheme” (Beattie 1999). On 16 September 1999, the Queensland Government, timber interests and environmental groups signed the South East Queensland Forests Agreement. As of May 2000, this had not been ratified by the federal government and is hence not an RFA. The Premier, however, has stated that the State will proceed independently, irrespective of Commonwealth endorsement (Keto and Scott 1999).

However, a national precedent was set also in July 1999 when tourism and conservation interests joined forces to lobby the Queensland State government in relation to the South East Queensland RFA. Private tour companies, two tourism research organizations, and the Queensland state branch of the peak national tourism industry association joined as signatories to an open letter to the State Premier by environmental groups. This led to a landmark agreement between the State government, the timber industry and conservation groups. As of May 2000 this agreement is still

not a formal Regional Forest Agreement, however, because the federal government has refused to ratify it. This apparently illogical stance is believed to be due to lobbying by multinational timber corporations who do not wish the Queensland agreement to be duplicated in other states.

Conclusions

Wilderness in Australia is under increasing threat. It has no legal status except in national parks, and at least one state apparently now intends to allow commercial exploitation, including mining, in national parks. Federal and state environmental and nature conservation laws are weakening and funding for protected-area management is pitifully inadequate. A national wilderness inventory has been abandoned. Land clearing for agriculture continues. The Regional Forest Agreement process has done little or nothing to halt logging of the few remaining old-growth forest areas, and may well have accelerated it. Tourism has the potential to help in wilderness conservation but, in practice, tourism developers and tourism industry associations are lobbying for increased commercial development in existing national parks, not for an increase in the protected areas estate, or even for tourism in public forests as in the United States. Wilderness in Australia needs international attention now if it is to survive.

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