

Libby Robin

# Wilderness in a Global Age, Fifty Years On

## INTRODUCTION

The Wilderness Act marked a dramatic shift in the rhetoric of wilderness in the United States. Earlier, “the culture of wilderness” was about agriculture and the grand colonial project of civilizing the West, as Frieda Knobloch has argued persuasively in her 1996 book of that title. Until the American frontier closed, nation building was about eradicating unproductive nature and opening up land for people to farm. The Wilderness Act turned the frontier tradition on its head, valuing wilderness itself as aesthetically beautiful and in need of protection in an overdeveloped America. Nature, rather than agriculture, could now civilize post-agricultural, hyper-industrial society. The wilderness shift in the American mind happened in response to just over half a century’s development. Frederick Jackson Turner declared the frontier closed in 1893, and the Wilderness Act appeared in 1964.

Australia, like the United States, also battled its land and forged a civilization of sorts for its settlers and the British Empire using the blunt tool of agriculture. Australia was an early adapter to global thinking. The nation and its individual states turned to the models offered by bigger nations—particularly Britain and, after World War II, the United States—for governance and policy. Originally a suite of colonial outposts of empire on a continent apart, Australian colonies federated as a nation in 1901. However, the states maintained many management roles after federation, especially in relation to land

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management and natural resources. Frontier nationalism still prevails; unlike the United States, our frontier was never declared closed. Rhetoric in favor of a new agricultural frontier continues in the north of the nation to this day.

While the US national parks model, “America’s Best Idea,” had a strong following in Australia in the 1960s, the idea of wilderness never had the strong transcendental or romantic attraction it held in America. Our wilderness did not create heroes. Australians died in the bush: being away from settlement meant being away from water, and survival was precarious. By 1990 the idea of wilderness was also seen as “western” and not inclusive of Indigenous history. Australian ecologists and historians fiercely debated the limits of “wilderness thinking” some years before *Environmental History* published William Cronon’s “The Trouble with Wilderness” in 1996. While Richard White’s wry paper “Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?” had a strong following among historians of our 1980s forest debates, it has been the powerful critiques from Aboriginal Australia that have determined new directions in twenty-first-century practices of biodiversity conservation and in the way national parks are now managed.

## SAVING THE BUSH

The US Wilderness Act came at a time when metropolitan Australia also saw its wild country (we call it bush) as vulnerable, fragile, and in need of protection, no longer just a limitless nuisance to the farmer. Initial perceptions of Australian wildlife as primitive and inferior waned as people enjoyed recreational walking in places ever more distant from the cities, with the rise in private car ownership. Bushwalkers appreciated indigenous plants and animals more than in any earlier era, and they were more articulate about the need for protecting it from the explosion of postwar expansion. Biologist and polemicist Jock Marshall called it “Anglo-Australian cupidity, wickedness and waste,” in the subtitle of his 1966 book *The Great Extermination*. This book was Australia’s *Silent Spring*, a wake-up call to change the direction of economic growth to take into account the interests of nature.

Wilderness was not so much an idea as a description of places in need of management in Australia. The American model for National Parks that it fostered was extremely popular at a time when there was a (late) turn to manage natural environment on a national scale spurred by international pressure from the International Union for Conservation of Nature. The national boundaries provided by its coastline are visible on a map, but the political and administrative boundaries created by the governments of separate states dominated

environmental and land management. The Australian Academy of Science grappled with assembling a national picture and better incentives for each of the states to protect wild country in national parks in the 1960s. The academy established ecological principles (rather than directives based on aesthetics) to inform nature reserves, recommending “gap analysis” that aimed to preserve as many representative ecosystems as possible.<sup>1</sup> This direction showed the influence of the international Man and the Biosphere initiative, the International Biological Programme underway. Representative ecosystems are rather different from wilderness; nevertheless, national parks expanded rapidly in the 1970s on this model. By 1981 the success of this approach in reaching management levels was noted with irony by historian Jim Davidson who commented that the National Parks Service [of Victoria] displayed an “almost philatelic concern . . . to complete its set of parks drawn from the 62 major habitat types to be found in the State.”<sup>2</sup>

Some states followed “America’s Best Idea” more closely than others. The New South Wales (NSW) *National Parks and Wildlife Act* (1967) was directly modeled on the American legislation; its inaugural director of the National Parks and Wildlife Service was Samuel Weems, former parks adviser to the US Department of the Interior. NSW learned of the model at the First World Congress of National Parks held in Seattle in 1962, a major international meeting. NSW National Parks Service joined the enthusiasm for a second congress, in Yellowstone National Park, timed to celebrate a World Centennial of the National Parks Idea in 1972. It was only late in the game, after the US Congress had approved financial support for the event, that organizers realized Yellowstone itself was not a legislated national park in 1872. Technically, the world’s first national park legislation had been passed in NSW on March 31, 1879, to establish the National Park (later Royal), an urban park, just 15 miles from the center of Sydney. This was nothing like the bigger, wilder model of Yellowstone, 1,000 miles from any city. NSW parks managers, as keen as their US colleagues to celebrate a World Centennial in 1972, did not press a claim for priority.<sup>3</sup> They wanted larger more remote wild national parks, and having little interest in city parks, they were aware of wide support for a World Centennial not just in the United States but also in other Western nations where national parks had emerged early including New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, and Sweden.

## RETURNING TO WILDERNESS

In the years since the World Centennial, there has been a huge revision of the history of people in Australia between the first arrival of

humans and the arrival (now seen as the invasion) of the British in 1788. The Aboriginal past has been recognized politically: first through granting citizenship and rights to vote to Aboriginal people (1967!) and later through the formal recognition of native title, in the 1992 Mabo judgment of the High Court.

Australia's second wave of humans arrived directly after (and partly because of) the American Revolution. The British brought European-style agriculture and the tools of the Industrial Revolution almost simultaneously. Before the 1960s, the Aboriginal people were regarded as "timeless"—they had neither history nor voting rights, and some states managed their concerns through flora and fauna boards. In the revolution since, archaeologists have shown that there were fully modern humans, ancestors of present Aboriginal people, living in this country 55,000 years ago, making them among the longest dwellers in place in the modern world. As so-called nomads, they were deemed "primitive," but in 1969 archaeologist Rhys Jones named the technique that Aboriginal people used to manage the land for hunting "fire-stick farming." In this continent of fire, as Stephen Pyne calls it in *Burning Bush*, careful deliberate fire is a form of farming. This phrase recognized that Aboriginal culture was highly civilized, even agricultural. Seemingly nomadic practices were actually moving for water and hunting within "Country," a rich Aboriginal English word for homeland.

Biodiversity management practices in Australia have been described as oppressive of Indigenous understandings of Country and in denial of the history of both Aboriginal and settler land management practices. "Biodiversity is a whitefella word," one bumper sticker declared. In her explanation of Country, anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose uses the term *nourishing terrains*, evoking the idea of places that care for people and where people reciprocate that care. Country is not land to be owned and transacted through a market system. Country owns a person and is part of personhood. By contrast, wilderness in the 1964 US act celebrated "solitude and unconfined recreation." It is an aspiration for postindustrial peoples who earn their living somewhere else. These are not lands of livelihoods:

[I]f one cannot see traces or signs of one's own culture in the land, then the land must be "natural" or empty of culture. In the context of Australian settlement by Europeans, . . . the concept of *terra nullius* (land that was not owned) depended on precisely this egocentric view of landscape. Not seeing the signs of ownership and property to which they were accustomed, many settlers assumed that there was no ownership and property, and that the landscapes were natural.<sup>4</sup>

Wilderness, for Aboriginal peoples, means Country that has lost its stories, that has not been cared for with fire. Its people have neglected

its stewardship. Traditional elder Daly Pulkara from the Yarralin community in the Northern Territory told Rose that good country was “quiet.” Wilderness was made by men and cattle, where rain washed the life of the land away in gullies (arroyos). Wild land was “sick.” In 1969 Frank Gurrmanamana, a Gidjingali man, visited Canberra, the nation’s well-planned capital city. He was dismayed by the “wilderness” and told Rhys Jones “this country bin lose ‘im Dreaming.” Canberra was a “land empty of religious affiliation; there were no wells, no names of the totemic ancestors, no immutable links between land, people and the rest of the natural and supernatural worlds. Here was just a *tabula rasa*, cauterised of meaning.”<sup>5</sup>

Because national parks were established to save ecosystems, Australian legislation excluded people. They were places where people visited but didn’t live. Such a hyper-separation of nature and culture denied settler history as well as their long history of Aboriginal land management. It was as if, as Tom Griffiths put it in 1990, the conservation movement for natural history was “in conflict with conserving the history of place.”<sup>6</sup> Traces of history such as stockyards and huts (even recreational huts in the alpine areas) did not belong in national parks and were removed. The aesthetic of pristine wilderness should be restored to the place and the history denied. As depopulation in rural and regional places is increasingly recognized as a problem, the idea that people are good for conservation is gradually superseding earlier ideas of purity. Dwelling in place, even living in national parks, enables responsibility for the care of the land and divests governments of that expense.

The rub comes with the idea that the ecosystems we try to save are both historical and cultural. While a decision to remove historical buildings is clearly a cultural decision based on an aesthetic of the other-than-human, what about managing nature by removing weeds introduced by disturbance? What can be said to belong or not belong in a dynamic ecosystem, particularly in a time of climate change? Is the aim of removing weeds or culling feral animals to restore pristine nature or to promote the future health of ecosystems? The problem is that we need history to decide what baseline to assume. Ecologists wanted to use 1788, the date of British settlement, but as archaeologist Sylvia Hallam explained, “the land the English settled was not as God made it, but rather as the Aborigines had made it.”<sup>7</sup> Aboriginal peoples preserve the cultural and natural together by not separating the domains and keeping the history in nature. This is not an argument for what Shepard Krech termed the “Ecological Indian” but for rather a different ecology of nature that is inclusive of people, something that mainstream Australia is increasingly supporting.

New understandings of Country have created a rather different nature reserve system in Australia, one that does not depend so much on the idea of wilderness as on caring for Country. The Natural

Heritage Trust of Australia Act (1997/no. 6) has created a National Reserve System (NRS) that includes national parks (mostly state managed), private reserves, and Indigenous Protected Areas (IPAs). IPAs have been made possible by the recognition of native title. Aboriginal communities now own much of the land that used to be designated Crown (public/empty) land, and they take responsibility for its care. The NRS is now “the nation’s premier investment in biodiversity conservation,” comprising nearly ten thousand protected areas covering over 103 million hectares. In 2013 sixty IPA agreements covered 48 million hectares, representing 36 percent of the NRS. Private sector conservation initiatives, funded by philanthropy, have come very late in Australia compared with the United States. Bush Heritage Australia and Australian Wildlife Conservancy (AWC) are two of the larger organizations that work in partnership with the Natural Heritage Trust to buy land for conservation, particularly in the last decade. International groups such as the Nature Conservancy and World Wildlife Fund are also involved as well as local and regional groups. In 2014 Bush Heritage and AWC forge partnerships among a range of regional conservation organizations and also support Indigenous corporations in managing their own land, thus expanding the areas protected for natural values in the NRS.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the proposed geological epoch of the Anthropocene where traces of human enterprise are found throughout the biophysical systems of the planet, the partnership between nature conservation and people is crucial. The Wilderness Act is perhaps most important now in that it reminds us of a duty of care for the other-than-human life with whom we share the planet. The stewardship and the care for Country that Australian Aboriginal people believe make them fully human are ways to help us all live “with Country” and not against it. In the twenty-first century, we are beyond owning biodiversity or imagining that nature can be restored to a state before history. Rather we ourselves are of nature, and our cultural futures depend on caring for our natural world more than ever before. Caring for Country is complicated, and we need good environmental history to inform it.

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## Notes

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- 2 Jim Davidson, "Victoria," in *The Heritage of Australia* (Melbourne: Macmillan, 1981), 3–7.
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- 4 Deborah Rose, *Nourishing Terrains* (Canberra: Department of Environment, 1996), 24.
- 5 Rhys Jones, "Ordering the Landscape," in *Seeing the First Australians*, ed. Ian Donaldson and Tamsin Donaldson (Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 1965), 207.
- 6 Tom Griffiths, "History and Natural History: Conservation Movements in Conflict?" in *Packaging the Past? Public Histories*, ed. John Rickard and Peter Spearritt (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1991), 16–32.
- 7 Sylvia Hallam, *Fire and Hearth: A Study of Aboriginal Usage and European Usurpation in South-western Australia* (Canberra: Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, 1975), vii.