

Does Tasmania Need a Wilderness Act?

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How do we define wilderness and how is it best protected? These questions have been central to the ongoing debate in recent years given the ongoing review of the management plan for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area.

The importance of wilderness is globally recognized with Wilderness Areas recognized under Category Ib of the IUCN Protected Area Categories System. The primary objective of such areas is to *“protect the long-term ecological integrity of natural areas that are undisturbed by significant human activity, free of modern infrastructure and where natural forces and processes predominate, so that current and future generations have the opportunity to experience such area”*

The ICUN lists distinguishing features of Wilderness Areas to include being *“free of modern infrastructure, development and industrial extractive activity, including but not limited to roads, pipelines, ..., other permanent structures, mining,..., agriculture,..., low-flying aircraft etc., preferably with highly restricted or no motorized access”*.

Furthermore, Category Ib Wilderness Areas are seen as distinct from Category Ia (Strict Nature Reserve) areas which are usually strictly protected areas with generally limited human visitation and Category II (National Park) areas which usually includes (or plans to include) use by visitors, including supporting infrastructure, whereas for Ib visitor use is more limited and confined to those with the skills and equipment to survive unaided.

Both within Tasmania and globally, Tasmania’s wilderness areas have long being recognised for their outstanding features and this recognition culminated in the declaration of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) in 1982. The inclusion of the term wilderness in the name of the WHA property was an acknowledgement that the wilderness character of the area was an overarching theme to which all other values contribute and enhance. This has recently been re-affirmed by the World Heritage Committee which has stated that the *“...wilderness character of the property..(is)..one of its key values and ...fundamental for its management”*

The current (1999) management plan for the TWWHA includes an objective to *“maintain or enhance wilderness quality”* and this is achieved through the use of a zoning system where the listed objectives for the Wilderness Zone include *“to retain a challenging unmodified natural setting that suitably experienced and equipped people can visit..”* and *“to use wilderness as a primary means of managing, protecting and conserving World Heritage and other natural and cultural values”*

With the release of the Draft Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan 2014 there was widespread criticism of the removal of the recognition and protection of wilderness as a management objective and the inadequacies of the proposed zoning system

to help effectively regulate use of, and activities within, the TWWHA. The later change, coinciding with the State government's call for Expressions of Interest for new tourism developments and activities in the TWWHA, was seen by many as allowing inappropriate new uses which would lead to a degrading of wilderness values. For example, the placement of infrastructure associated with the Three Capes Track has resulted to the loss of wilderness values within the Tasman National Park (see the article by Grant Dixon in this newsletter).

Given these recent concerns, where the policies of an incumbent government can result in changes to the TWWHA management plan which threaten the acknowledged wilderness values of the area, one can ask whether there are another means by which these values can be afforded greater protection, free from the whims of the latest government. In search for an answer it is instructive to look at other avenues through which wilderness areas have been acknowledged and offered protection.

Central has been the use of explicit Wilderness Acts by several jurisdictions around the world. The most well-known is the 1964 Wilderness Act of the United States of America, which created a way for Americans to protect their most pristine wildlands for future generations and which celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2014.

The Purpose of this Act includes the statement: *In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to ... secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness".* According to the Act: *"a wilderness..is ..recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain...retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation..."*.

Written by The Wilderness Society's Howard Zahniser this Act, which is considered one of America's greatest conservation achievements, created the National Wilderness Preservation System which provides the means for Americans to protect unspoiled natural areas and currently protects nearly 110 million acres of wilderness areas (5% of the land in the United States). Considered the highest form of land protection, no roads, vehicles or permanent structures are allowed in designated wilderness which also prohibits activities like logging or mining. Today, millions of Americans enjoy wilderness areas for hiking, camping, backpacking, fishing and more. The Wilderness Act continues to protect unspoiled wildlands with the possibility of new designations each year.

Closer to home, both New South Wales and South Australia have enacted Wilderness Acts (1987 and 1992 respectively). In NSW the term 'wilderness' is used to describe large, natural areas of land that, together with their native plant and animal communities, remain essentially unchanged by modern human activity. By 2010, the state's declared wilderness reached some two million hectares, which is approximately 2.5 per cent of NSW. The Act in South Australia seeks to provide for *'the protection of wilderness and the restoration of land to its condition before European colonisation'* and as of June 2015 the 14 declared wilderness reserves had a total area of 1,843,449 ha or 1.9% of South Australia's area.

Whether such Wilderness Acts afford greater protection to a designated wilderness area remains uncertain, but unlike the changes to statutory management plans (like that for the TWWHA) there may be a need for greater public and parliamentary scrutiny for changes under a legislated Act. Despite the stated objective to preserve the natural, primitive and remote character of wilderness areas under the National Parks and Reserves Management Act 2002 it is my understanding that presently in Tasmania there is no legislated protection offered to wilderness areas.

Wilderness worldwide is a scarce and diminishing resource which needs protecting to ensure it will be available for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations so that they also have the opportunity to see and experience unspoilt landscapes. While also helping to maintain biological diversity and habitats that assist in the conservation of endangered species, wilderness also offers people a place of solitude and inspiration and offers an escape from the pressures of day-to-day life. They also help to conserve areas which are culturally significant to indigenous people.

Within Tasmania we are privileged to be custodians of a magnificent wilderness area and all Tasmanian's should be proud that the system put in place over 30 years ago to protect this wilderness has to a large extent worked well. Nevertheless, as highlighted above protection of this wilderness is not ensured and threats to its outstanding values remain. To ensure that this unique heritage remains available for the benefit and enjoyment of future generations it is incumbent upon us to seek appropriate means of achieving this outcome. The question therefore remains as to whether the present approach (via the present TWWHA management plan and future revisions) has the ability to achieve this outcome or whether other legislative means (such as a Wilderness Act) may be more appropriate.

Personally I do not have an answer to that question. The issue is complex but perhaps can be informed by a debate on the pros and cons of the present and different management approaches to wilderness protection. Perhaps we can continue this debate in forthcoming issues of the *TNPA News* and as such I call on those with an interest in this issue to offer their views.

I would like to finish with the following quote taken from the latest National Geographic which leads with the question "Why we need wild". *"But like any protected area, the Serengeti is essentially an island, a primeval world that has survived into the 21st century. It exists only because humans have agreed – or have been forced to agree - not to conduct business as usual within its boundaries. That covenant is always open to challenge and, for the sake of future generations, must always be renewed"*.