

Loss of wilderness quality associated with the development of the Three (two) Capes Track

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There have been many flaws and concerns associated with the assessment and construction and promotion of the new Three Capes Track development, which opened for use in late December 2015. Most such issues have previously been raised in this newsletter as well as the wider printed and electronic media, but the impact on wilderness has not been clearly described and has largely been ignored by the proponents.

Aerial photographs of the near-complete hut complexes were captured and publicised by The Wilderness Society in early December 2015, partly to illustrate the impact on wilderness character of the development. In response to the considerable publicity this generated Luke Martin (CEO of Tourism Industry Council of Tasmania) stated "to suggest a one-metre-wide track and small huts are trashing the wilderness value of the National Park is baseless scaremongering" (although the huts are hardly "small" - see below - nor the track corridor limited to one metre in width), further adding that "less than 0.2 per cent" of the Tasman National Park had been affected by the clearing for the Three Capes Track.

These statements reflect a clear (and perhaps, on the part of Mr Martin, intentional) misunderstanding of what characteristics make wilderness important and, more importantly, what is required to maintain and manage it. Construction of the Three Capes Track has resulted in perhaps the most dramatic loss of high quality wilderness in eastern Tasmania in modern times, and it has been perpetrated by the Parks and Wildlife Service, the state's conservation management agency.

The draft *Three Capes Track Development Plan and Environmental Management Plan* (DPEMP) was prepared in 2011. While this draft plan discussed the potential visual impact of aspects of the then-proposed development (concluding they would be minimal), there was no mention of wilderness. This is remarkable given that the area then contained some of the highest wilderness quality in eastern Tasmania, and the only such remnant on Tasman Peninsula. Furthermore, the Parks and Wildlife Service's (PWS) Reserve Activity Assessment (RAA) criteria (the PWS environmental impact assessment process under the auspices of which the DPEMP was prepared) specifically indicates (in the internal version in use at the time; PWS 2010) that potential impact on wilderness values is one of the things that should be considered for proposed developments. Submissions (both public and internal) clearly pointed out that neither the DPEMP, nor any of the reports prepared to supplement it, described the potential effect of the Three Capes Track development on wilderness values, but all were ignored.

Defining and mapping wilderness

There is a broad diversity of opinion about the meaning of the word 'wilderness' and about the measures that are necessary to protect wilderness. The situation has not been helped by the fact that numerous definitions of the term are in circulation, and that the word 'wilderness' is often used loosely to the point where it is virtually meaningless.

The values associated with wilderness are diverse and sometimes subtle, and cannot be fully accounted for in quantitative terms (Landres *et al* 2008). It is nevertheless possible to identify some of the key physical and geographical attributes that are necessary and sufficient for an area to qualify as wilderness, and to a large extent it is possible to quantify these attributes. Assessments based on such measurements can be used to estimate the extent and quality of existing or potential wilderness across a given region, and can be a useful tool for protecting, maintaining and enhancing wilderness character. The commonly recognised qualities of wilderness are naturalness and remoteness, in particular remoteness from mechanised access.

In the mid-1980s the Australian Heritage Commission developed a wilderness-assessment methodology as the basis for a nationwide wilderness inventory (Lesslie *et al* 1988a, Lesslie and Maslen 1995). The National Wilderness Inventory (NWI) methodology identifies remoteness and naturalness as the key components of wilderness character (termed “value” in the NWI methodology). Rather than attempting to distinguish ‘wilderness’ from ‘non wilderness’ the methodology assesses wilderness value as a continuum ranging from urban to pristine. The methodology was used to assess wilderness character across Tasmania (Lesslie *et al* 1988b) and other parts of Australia in the late 1980s and 1990s. It has since formed the basis for several studies in Europe (e.g. Henry and Husby 1995, Carver *et al* 2002), and wilderness character mapping undertaken in the USA is also based on remoteness and naturalness indicators (Landres *et al* 2008, Carver *et al* 2013, Tricker *et al* 2013).

Although the NWI methodology is the most comprehensive wilderness-assessment methodology yet developed in Australia, it has some deficiencies). To address some of these, a modified version of the NWI approach was developed in 2005 (Hawes 2006, Hawes *et al* 2015).

The fundamental point that wilderness mapping can illustrate is that a location or area can have high wilderness character *only* if it is surrounded by areas of land or sea that are in a largely undeveloped condition (although such remoting country may not in itself have high wilderness character). Maintaining high wilderness character therefore requires maintaining the predominantly natural and undeveloped condition of both high quality wilderness *and* its associated remoting country.

Of course, no amount of data can fully convey the ecological significance of a pristine landscape, nor can maps such as those derived in this study necessarily represent the less tangible or more personal qualities of wilderness, the perception of which inevitably varies with the individual.

Photo (right): The Munro hut, located on a new section of constructed track, overlooking Munro Bight with Mt Fortescue beyond, has had the greatest impact on wilderness quality as it lies near the heart of the area of former highest wilderness quality.

Change in wilderness character associated with the Three Capes Track development

The most recent formal mapping of wilderness character (value) of Tasman Peninsula was that undertaken in 1995, using the NWI methodology, during the Tasmania-wide mapping that formed part of the Regional Forest Agreement (RFA) process. It shows a small area of high quality wilderness (wilderness value >12, the threshold defined by the RFA) on the Cape Pillar Peninsula, the only such remnant on Tasman Peninsula.



As noted above, PWS developed a revised wilderness mapping technique in 2005 but it was only applied to the World Heritage Area. The two mapping methodologies treat buildings, huts and tracks slightly differently, but either would show significant degradation of wilderness character (value) associated with the Three Capes Track hut and track construction.

Prior to construction of the Three Capes Track, most of the area south of the Fortescue Bay road, and particularly beyond Calculation Hill, contained only tracks originally cut or marked by walkers with a mostly unimproved natural surface. The area also contained no huts and virtually no built infrastructure (just some sections of boardwalk and planking on the track between Agnes Creek and Calculation Hill). Construction of the high grade Three Capes Track network (including both major upgrading of sections of pre-existing track

plus some new tracks) and (in particular) the three hut complexes has had a major impact on both the naturalness and remoteness of and hence significantly degraded the wilderness character of the area. The following comparative maps show that the development has completely obliterated the former area of high wilderness quality (wilderness value >12) that existed on Tasman Peninsula immediately prior to construction of the Three Capes Track.

References

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