

# **Wilderness support opinion poll 2021**

**Results of a national poll of support for protecting  
Australia's wilderness areas**



**Martin Hawes & Grant Dixon**

**May 2021**

## Summary

A national opinion poll conducted in May 2021 by Roy Morgan Research Ltd. has found that 90% of Australians agree with the statement 'Australia's remaining wilderness areas should be protected'. The margin of error for this figure is  $\pm 1.7\%$ . Seventy-one per cent strongly agree. Only 7% disagree.

The poll, which was commissioned by wilderness researchers Martin Hawes and Grant Dixon, also found that 91% of Australians consider it important to protect the remoteness of wilderness areas. Only 3% consider it unimportant.

Sixty-three per cent agree that luxury lodges and helicopter-based tourism should be kept outside wilderness areas. This is three times the number who disagree.

Support for protecting wilderness was consistent across all demographic categories, with slightly higher support among females (92% vs 87%). Support also cut broadly across political lines, with 86% of Coalition voters and 92% of Labor voters agreeing that wilderness should be protected.

## Background

This report presents the findings of a nationwide poll conducted by Roy Morgan Research Ltd. in May 2021 to assess the level of public support for protecting Australia's wilderness areas.

The poll was commissioned by wilderness researchers Martin Hawes and Grant Dixon as part of an ongoing program of research into the definition and protection of wilderness. (See 'About the authors'.)

Wilderness areas are places where the natural world remains largely undisturbed by the impacts and activities of modern technological society. Contemporary definitions acknowledge that wilderness includes areas that are or have been traditionally inhabited, utilised and influenced by Indigenous people, as is the case with most Australian wilderness areas.

Wilderness areas have ecological, Indigenous, experiential and cultural values (Casson et al. 2016; Hawes et al. 2018. See References.). They provide vital ecological services including climate stabilisation, carbon sequestration and the maintenance of biodiversity. They also offer unique opportunities for self-reliant recreation in natural settings. Many people enjoy wilderness vicariously and appreciate the fact that it exists, even if they never go there.

Australia is one of only five countries that collectively contain over 70% of the Earth's remaining wilderness outside Antarctica (Watson et al. 2018). Yet wilderness is rapidly being lost, both globally and within Australia. By some estimates, an area of wilderness larger than India has been lost since the mid-1990s (same ref.). In Australia, wilderness and wilderness values are at risk from developments such as land clearance, mining and inappropriate tourism development.

Broadly speaking, there are two ways in which wilderness and wilderness values can be damaged and lost. The first is by direct physical disruption or damage, such as the clearance of native woodlands and inundation by artificial impoundments. The second way is more subtle, and involves compromising the remoteness and wildness of wilderness areas. For example, landing helicopters in remote areas may not have a significant impact on the physical landscape, but it can substantially reduce the quality of wildness and isolation of an area.

Recent controversies such as those over proposed commercial tourism developments in South Australia's Flinders Chase National Park, and at Lake Malbena in Tasmania's remote Central

Highlands (part of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area), have highlighted widespread concern in the Australian community about the protection and management of Australia's remaining wilderness. However, the authors are not aware of any recent polls that have measured the level of this concern. This poll was commissioned to redress that lack.

## **Design and conduct of the poll**

The poll consisted of four questions. Three of these related to wilderness, while the fourth related to political preference.

The questions were drafted by the authors and refined by specialists at Roy Morgan Research Ltd. to minimise the risk of bias and ambiguity.

The questions were asked as part of an omnibus poll that was conducted online during the week ending 16 May 2021. Respondents were initially approached by email. The poll was completed by 1207 respondents aged 18 and upwards. It included questions on a range of demographic data including age group and region.

A web-based poll was selected in preference to a phone poll, as it gave respondents more time to consider the introductory sentences and to decide their responses.

The three wilderness-related questions were prefaced with an introductory/explanatory sentence. This appeared on a separate web page, which respondents would view immediately before the page that contained the associated question.

The fourth question asked respondents which party they would vote for if a federal election was being held at that time. This question was included to allow the authors to investigate the relationship between respondents' answers to Questions 1-3 and their political preference.

## **About the authors**

Martin Hawes and Grant Dixon are independent wilderness researchers who have over 70 years' combined experience in wilderness management and research, and over 100 years' personal experience of wilderness both within Australia and around the world. They have co-authored numerous peer-reviewed papers on wilderness management issues for international journals, and co-authored the book *Refining the definition of wilderness*, which was published in 2018.

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Front page photo by Martin Hawes.

## References

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# RESULTS – DETAILS AND DISCUSSION

## QUESTION 1

### INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

*The next series of questions are about Australia's wilderness areas. Wilderness areas are large natural areas of land that have not been significantly modified by the impact or activities of modern society.*

### QUESTION

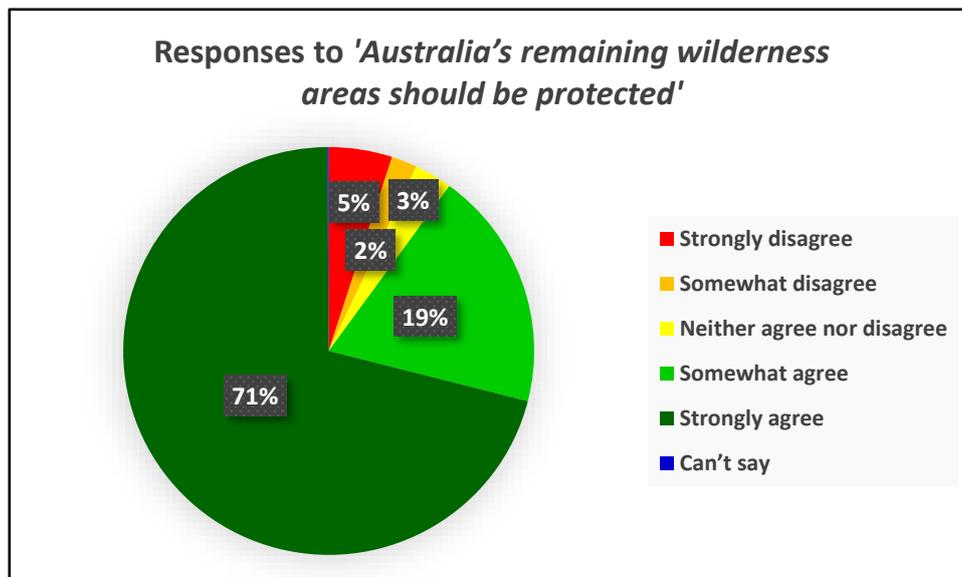
*Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement*

***Australia's remaining wilderness areas should be protected.***

- Strongly agree*
- Somewhat agree*
- Neither agree nor disagree*
- Somewhat disagree*
- Strongly disagree*
- Can't say*

### RESULTS

The following chart summarises the responses for all respondents. Overall agreement ('Strongly agree' plus 'Somewhat agree') was 90%, while overall disagreement was 7%.



### Agreement by demographic

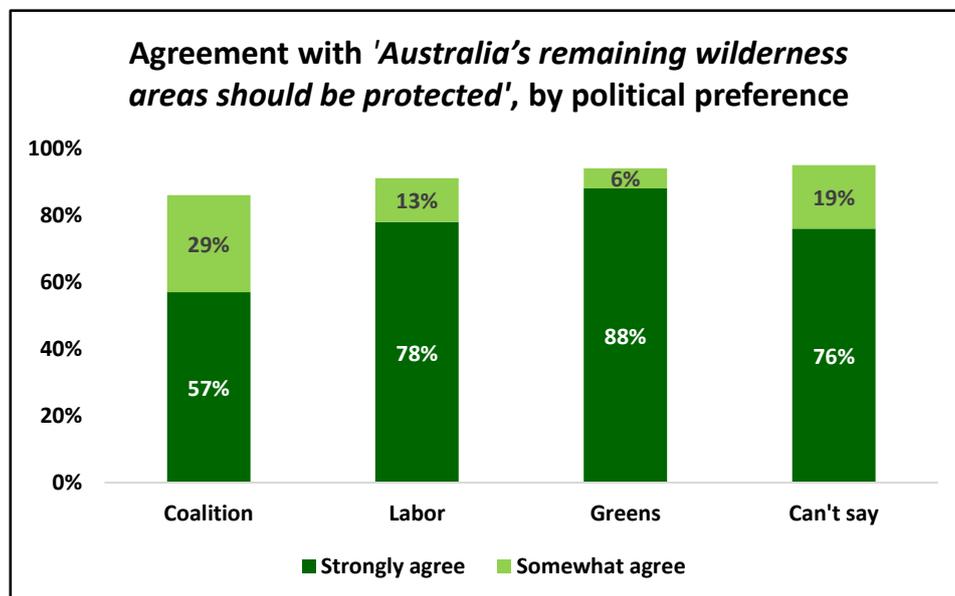
Data for agreement (i.e. respondents answering either 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree') were broadly consistent across age groups, states, the capital/country divide, education level, employment status, income, and total household income.

There was some gender disparity, with agreement by male and female respondents being 87% and 92% respectively.

### Agreement by political preference

The following table shows the breakdown of agreement (i.e. respondents answering either 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree') by political preference.

Data for One Nation, Independent and Other are not included because sample sizes for these groups were less than 50.



### COMMENTS

The introductory statement to Question 1 included a broad definition of the term 'wilderness area'. This definition implicitly recognises that wilderness areas include areas that are or have been traditionally inhabited, utilised and influenced by Aboriginal people, as is the case with most Australian wilderness areas. This definition is consistent with the majority of contemporary definitions of wilderness, which recognise the role that Indigenous people have traditionally played and continue to play in utilising, managing and modifying many of the planet's wilderness areas. See in particular the definition of 'wilderness area' adopted by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (Casson et al. 2016).

In their book *Refining the definition of wilderness* (Hawes et al. 2018) the authors have proposed a definition in which wilderness is required to be remote as well as natural and largely unmodified. This more restricted definition was not used in the poll as it is not in mainstream usage. A separate question (Question 3) was used to canvass respondents' views on the protection of remoteness.

## QUESTION 2

### INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

*There are currently proposals to develop tourism ventures in Australian wilderness areas such as developing accommodation and /or flying clients in to remote areas by helicopter.*

### QUESTION

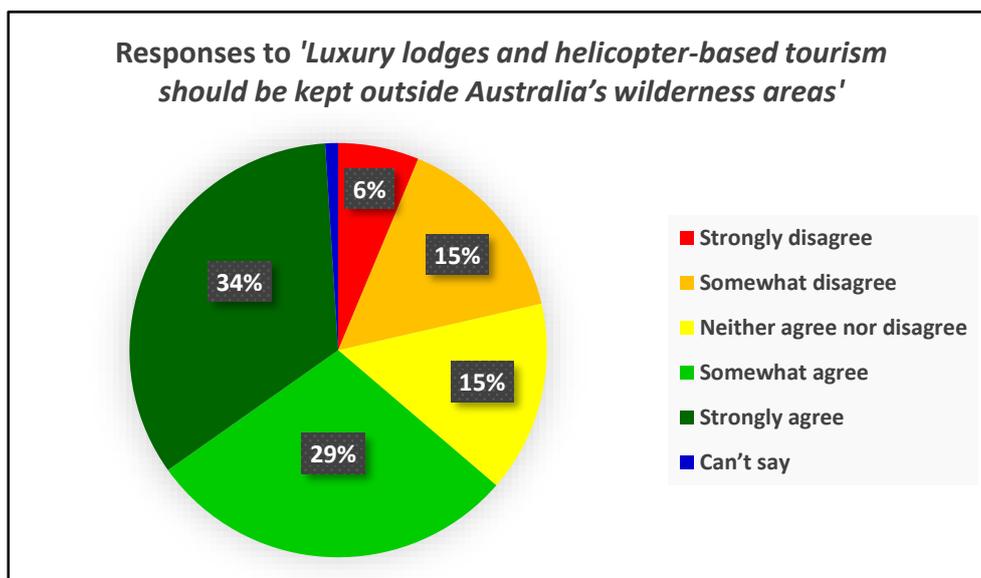
*Please say whether you agree or disagree with the following statement*

***Luxury lodges and helicopter-based tourism should be kept outside Australia's wilderness areas.***

- Strongly agree*
- Somewhat agree*
- Neither agree nor disagree*
- Somewhat disagree*
- Strongly disagree*
- Can't say*

### RESULTS

The following chart summarises the responses for all respondents. Overall agreement was 63%, which was three times the level of overall disagreement (21%). Sixteen percent of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed, or couldn't say.



### Agreement by demographic

Data for agreement (i.e. respondents answering either 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree') showed a substantial gender disparity, namely 53% for males and 72% for females. There were moderate variations across other demographic categories.

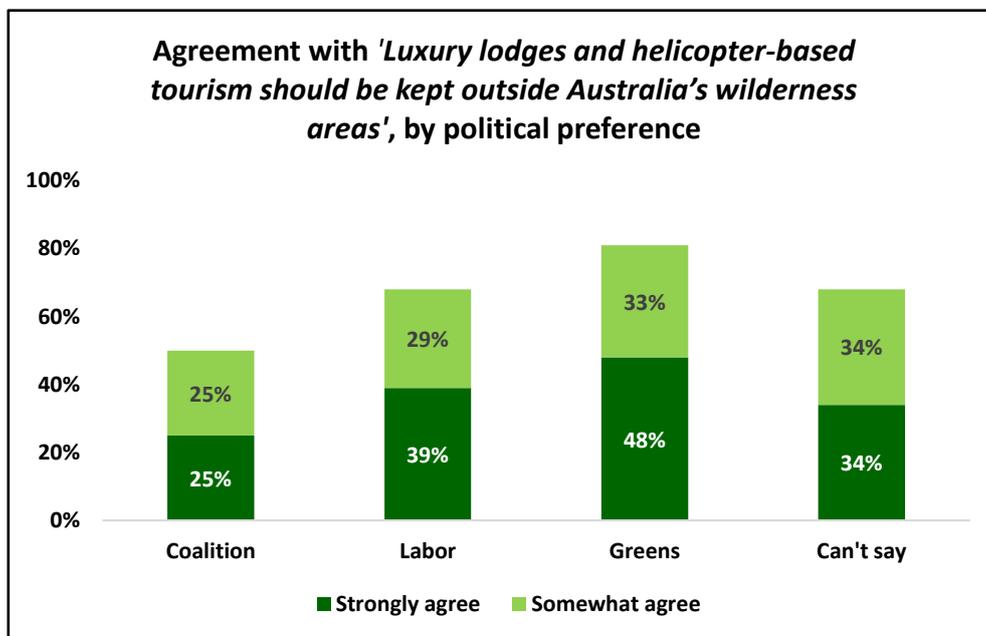
Agreement across six categories of total household income, including 'Can't say/Refused', varied from 46-69%, with agreement tending to decrease with increasing income.

### Agreement by political preference

The following table shows the breakdown of agreement (i.e. respondents answering either 'Strongly agree' or 'Somewhat agree') by political preference.

Data for One Nation, Independent and Other are not included because sample sizes for these groups were less than 50.

Note that agreement is at least 50% for all categories.



### COMMENT

As noted previously, the introductory statement to Question 1 included a definition that did not require wilderness areas to be remote. Consequently, the sub-group of respondents who did not agree with the lodges/helicopters statement may have included people who consider such developments acceptable in non-remote areas, but who oppose them in remote areas (and hence might have agreed with the statement in Question 3).

## QUESTION 3

### INTRODUCTORY STATEMENT

*Wilderness areas may contain areas which are remote from access and remote from roads, human settlement or agriculture.*

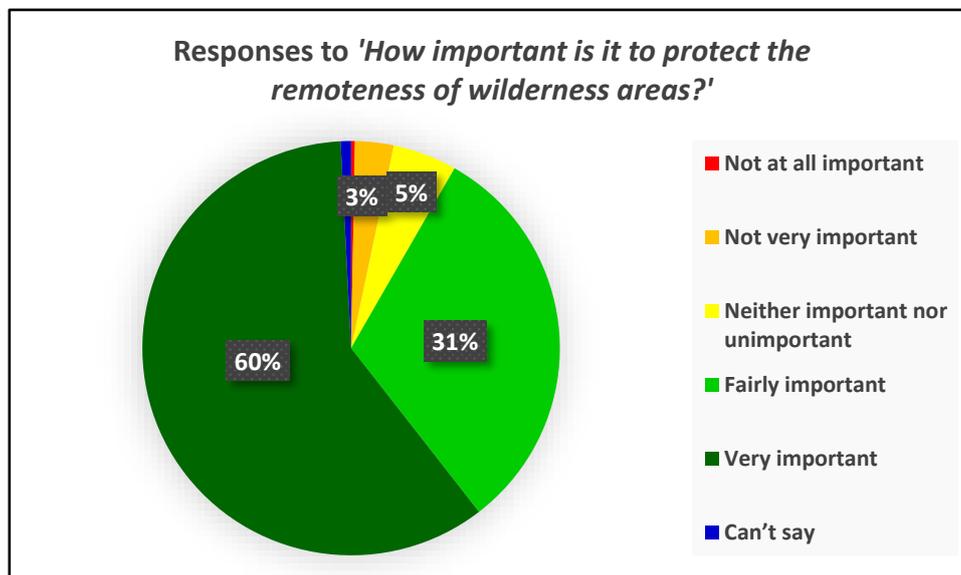
### QUESTION

***How important is it to protect the remoteness of wilderness areas?***

- Not at all important*
- Not very important*
- Neither important nor unimportant*
- Fairly important*
- Very important*
- Can't say*

### RESULTS

The following chart summarises the responses for all respondents. The total for 'Very important' and 'Fairly important' was 91%, while the total for 'Not very important' and 'Not at all important' was 3%.



### Importance by demographic

Data for total 'importance' (i.e. respondents answering either 'Very important' or 'Fairly important') were broadly consistent across age groups, states, the capital/country divide, education level, employment status, income, and total household income.

As with Question 1 there was some gender disparity, with agreement by female and male respondents being 95% and 87% respectively.

### Importance by political preference

The following table shows the breakdown of 'importance' (i.e. respondents answering either 'Very important' or 'Fairly important') by political preference.

Data for One Nation, Independent and Other have not been included because sample sizes for these groups were less than 50.

