

## WildCountry

REGARDLESS of the merits and values of individual national parks and nature reserves, Australia's conservation reserves do not ensure the survival of the continent's biota. There are many reasons for this. Reserves, even the largest, are too small and vulnerable to broad area disturbance. Consider that, in January 2003, fires burnt more than two-thirds of Kosciuszko National Park, which at 690 000 ha is the largest park in New South Wales and one of the largest in Australia. This shows how even the largest conservation reserves are at risk of catastrophic disturbance. The much smaller Nadgee Nature Reserve (21 000 ha) in southeastern New South Wales has burnt almost in its entirety twice in the 35 years I have worked there. The Nadgee fires and those in Kosciuszko were started by lightning and were the result of prolonged drought, events common across the continent. When small size is coupled with isolation, the long-term survival of populations and the exchange of propagules within the reserve system becomes problematical. Small size and isolation do not leave much scope for plants and animals to adapt to long-term climate change, either through dispersal or by evolution. Even reserving 10 or 15% of land for nature conservation, as recommended by some international conservation agencies, will be inadequate; a target of 30% would have better ecological credentials, but even this could prove inadequate unless the nature conservation reserve system was designed to allow for long-term evolutionary change, which it is not (see Archer 2002; Recher 2002a,b).

One reason why targets of 10 or 15% are inadequate is the tendency to exploit and develop the land outside the reserve system more intensively in the mistaken belief that the land reserved for conservation is adequate by itself and as "compensation" for the resources no longer available for exploitation within the reserves. Australians are already witnessing this with the intensification of harvesting in native forests outside conservation reserves as Regional Forest Agreements allocate forest land between development and conservation.

The lack of representation within the reserve system does not only mean that large parts of the biota are not sampled, but migratory and nomadic species are dis-advantaged by the likelihood that resources critical for their survival are diminished. Whether those resources are needed seasonally or only infrequently, as during drought or after fire, population sizes will be set by the least abundant resource. This, more than any other reason, explains the decline of migratory bird species along the length of eastern Australia. The clearing of wintering habitats in Queensland, the loss of nectar resources on the western slopes and along the coast of New South Wales, and the degradation of wetlands have already had significant impacts on honeyeaters, water birds,

and migratory insectivores. Similar declines have occurred in Western Australia following clearing for agriculture and the degradation of pastoral lands throughout the State. None of these issues are catered for in existing or proposed reserves. It is unlikely that they ever will be given the prevailing faith in conservation reserves and wilderness designations, without regard to size, location, representation, evolutionary processes or the movements of migrants and nomads, by Federal, State and Territory Conservation agencies and peak environment groups. Indeed, even presenting alternative views to the wilderness and reserve paradigm meets with suppression and censorship within government conservation agencies and disapproval from environmentalists.

None of what I have written in the preceding is new. Nor is it new that something different needs to be done to have at least a chance of saving more than a small sample of Australia's biodiversity. The need to manage and conserve nature outside the reserve system is increasingly put forward as a necessary adjunct to national parks and nature reserves. Managing the "matrix" is important and the contributions made by individual land owners in protecting or restoring even small parts of their land are more than useful in conserving biodiversity and providing scope for species to move across the landscape. However, with less than a third of Australian farmers involved in Landcare and the reluctance of Local and State Governments to comprehensively consider environmental and conservation requirements when deciding on urban expansion and coastal development or implementing vegetation clearing controls on rural lands, off-reserve conservation initiatives need something more to fully compensate for the limitations of the reserve system.

One approach has real promise for the conservation of biodiversity. This is the vision of the Wilderness Society known as WildCountry. The vision is to protect "*Australia's wilderness, plants and animals into — and beyond — the 21st Century*". It could be said that this is also the vision of the reserve system, but WildCountry "*is a unifying programme to protect and link Australia's wilderness and restore degraded lands*." An important difference between the WildCountry concept and the reserve system being developed in Australia is the theme of "unifying and linking" and not excluding degraded lands from conservation initiatives. A primary goal of WildCountry "*is to produce an Australia-wide, comprehensive system of inter-connected core protected areas, each surrounded and linked by lands managed under conservation objectives. Eventually every region of the continent would be represented*." This network of protected areas will embrace wilderness areas and national parks, and use conservation agreements with private land holders and indigenous management/ownership to buffer and link core conservation areas. A prime goal is

*"To cover all possible environmental and landscape variations in order to ensure maximum survival and evolutionary potential of biodiversity". (Quotes from The Wilderness Society, undated WildCountry pamphlets).*

WildCountry is modelled on the North American Wildlands Project started in 1992 by some of America's leading scientists and wilderness supporters, including Reed Noss, Michael Soule and Dave Forman. Wildlands is a simple concept. *"To stem the disappearance of wildlife and wilderness we must allow the recovery of whole ecosystems and landscapes in every region of North America. Allowing these systems to recover requires long-term design. This design must rest on the spirit of social responsibility that has built so many great institutions in the past."* (from the Wildlands manifesto). The way I have always liked to think of the Wildlands project is as a programme that will eventually allow a grizzly bear in Alaska to walk to Mexico or an elk in California to walk to New York without either of them needing to cross a farm or highway. Ridiculous? Possibly, but not impossible given enough time, community support and tax breaks for land dedicated to conservation.

Look at Wildlands and WildCountry in this way. When land is developed for housing or as a marina, it is virtually eliminated as land for nature conservation. Unlike land cleared and used for farming, the cost of infrastructure is usually too high and the impact too great to seriously consider acquiring such developments for conservation (unless, of course, there is significant benefit in removing the impact of the development on more pristine lands and waters). The developed land is "locked up" and what we have witnessed in Australia since the arrival of European settlers is the progressive "locking up" of land and water and their alienation from nature and our children. It is time to reverse the process. Wildlands and WildCountry are programmes to prevent land from being locked up by development and to use them for nature conservation and for the wider benefit of society. Unlike most commercial development, this will be done to a plan and with a vision of the future. More than anything, the vision is about ecological sustainability, nature conservation and the sharing of resources with other species and future generations. It is all about equity, something conspicuously lacking in all the commercial developments I have witnessed over the past half century.

The time horizon I have heard for Wildlands is 400 years; 400 years is how long it is considered that it took Europeans to comprehensively degrade the North American continent, so 400 years to restore continental ecosystems is an appropriate and realistic time line. The Wilderness Society speaks of 50 years and longer to meet the goals of WildCountry in Australia. However, I think it will take longer and be closer to the 200 year time line of European settlement on this continent before we see real gains. It will take

longer because acquiring land without compulsion is likely to be slow and expensive — especially without significant tax concessions for land committed to nature conservation — but with perseverance, it will happen. Today's Landcare seedlings will eventually become 200 + year old trees with the attributes of age required by much of Australia's flora and fauna.

We can already see "WildCountry" happening in the acquisition of land for nature conservation by a growing number of private, non-profit organizations, such as the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, which operate much like the Nature Conservancy in North America. WildCountry will provide the vision by which the activities of these groups can be integrated. A good example is the "Gondwana Link Project" in southwestern Western Australia. Initiated by local groups and individuals, the aim of this project is to link the forest reserves of the south-west with the woodlands and mallee of the inland. It will do this by building on existing conservation reserves, such as the Stirling Range National Park, and committing existing freehold land between the reserves to nature conservation either through purchase, donation or via covenants for nature conservation. Another link is developing along the northern edge of the wheatbelt where a recent acquisition by the Bush Heritage Fund is helping connect an existing series of conservation lands extending along the biologically rich mulga-eucalypt line to the woodlands of the Goldfields. The Wilderness Society is using the vast Cape York Peninsula (14 million hectares) as a model for the implementation of the WildCountry Project with an alliance already fostered between graziers, indigenous groups, conservation groups and the Queensland Government. Significantly, the South Australia Government issued a policy statement in 2002 to support the WildCountry philosophy and apply it to South Australia.

Only time will tell if Wildlands and WildCountry will succeed. My view may be biased as I support the WildCountry project through membership on the WildCountry Scientific Council<sup>1</sup>. I consider the opportunity to participate in WildCountry an honour and an opportunity to make a contribution to a real revolution in the way Australia will conserve its rich flora and fauna for the future. It will succeed, because WildCountry puts people in partnership with government for nature conservation.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>1</sup>Members of the Scientific Council are Richard Hobbs, Rob Lesslie, Brendan Mackey, Henry Nix, Hugh Possingham, Harry Recher, Michael Soule, Jann Williams and John Woinarski.