AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATION FOUNDATION

Policy Statement No. 64 – WILDERNESS & INDIGENOUS CULTURAL LANDSCAPES IN AUSTRALIA

1. Introduction

Wilderness areas are substantial tracts of natural lands, that are essentially free of, and often remote from, the land use activities, infrastructure and related features associated with modern technological society'. In these lands and waters, ecosystems function in a healthy state. Many of these areas are places that have been occupied by Australian indigenous peoples for millennia, where their ongoing custodial action and responsibility maintains and protects the creations of their ancestral beings, reflected in the land and sea scape. For these indigenous people, the wilderness is their home, their country, and its special condition the embodiment of Dreaming tracks, sacred sites, and story places. Wilderness also includes essentially wild natural lands which were not occupied by indigenous people, like Antarctica and the Sub-Antarctic Islands.

The Foundation's goal is to protect, promote and , where necessary, restore, nature conservation, biodiversity, integrity of ecological systems and the wilderness condition of land and waters in a manner that fully respects the rights and responsibilities of Australian indigenous peoples and restores, maintains and enhances their connection to country. The Foundation does not support the use of wilderness declaration to usurp indigenous peoples rights. The Foundation also acknowledges that indigenous Australians may prefer to use other terms for indigenous lands managed for their ecological health and cultural values; the term Indigenous Wilderness has been suggested for parts of Cape York Peninsula and others prefer the term Indigenous Cultural Landscapes.

The Foundation believes that different cultural traditions, values and meaning can converge in a shared understanding of the vital importance of protecting and managing lands and waters, and supports the concept of co-existence of indigenous and non-indigenous peoples values associated with wilderness and indigenous cultural landscapes. This convergence occurs because of a particular condition of the lands and waters, which the Foundation has identified in this policy as wilderness condition, but for which indigenous societies may have many other terms, including "quiet country".

For the wider policy context please see the Indigenous Peoples' Land and Water policy.

2. Global Context

2.1 The processes of industrialisation present all peoples of the Earth with a new reality - that the Earth, its creatures and living systems are deteriorating at a rapid and exponential rate.

2.2 In addition to the impacts of industry, the natural world will face many strains as a result of global warming and climate change; large natural areas free from detrimental impact will be necessary to allow for adaptation and movement of life forms.

2.3 Protection of large areas of the planet, free from the deleterious impacts of modern industrial development and human population pressure, is essential to maintenance and restoration of the health of the planet and its biodiversity.

3. Values of Wilderness and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes in Australia

3.1 The lands, waters, and life forms of Australia have evolved over millions of years to produce a unique continent of immense intrinsic value which represents a vital part of the biodiversity of the Earth. Large areas with wilderness condition have a critical role as reservoirs of biodiversity, and as places for the continued evolution of natural plant and animal communities.

3.2 The land and waters of Australia have sustained and nurtured indigenous peoples for tens of thousands of years and their long occupation has produced a profound cultural and spiritual relationship between the people and their country.

3.3 The interactions of Australian indigenous peoples with the Australian continent maintained the land and waters in a high condition of natural integrity and health, which has rapidly deteriorated in the face of agricultural and industrial development, and modern lifestyles and population pressure.

3.4 There are many people from a variety of backgrounds and cultures for whom wilderness areas are special or sacred places from which they derive aesthetic joy and spiritual renewal, either directly or vicariously.

3.5 The Foundation believes that the desire to protect areas of the planet, such as wilderness, free from industrialisation, and urban exploitation can be a point of convergence for different cultures and values and can be a source of cooperation and unity between indigenous people and non-indigenous people.

4. Management of Wilderness and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes in Australia

4.1 The prime objective of wilderness management is the long term preservation of wilderness conditions as a means to protect biodiversity and natural and cultural values.

4.2 Because areas with wilderness condition in Australia are also frequently indigenous cultural landscapes where the ongoing management action and responsibility of indigenous peoples are integral to the land and sea scape, another objective of wilderness management is to ensure the maintenance and restoration of indigenous peoples' traditions and ceremonies.

4.3 Wilderness condition can be protected through management regimes that fully respect the land, sea and cultural rights and interests of indigenous Australians and involve them in management.

4.4 Protection of wilderness condition requires the exclusion of all significant features of industrialisation, including tracks, bridges and roads. Mechanised access on existing tracks should only be allowed for essential management practices and where indigenous management arrangements apply, for indigenous cultural practices consistent with the protection of natural and cultural values.

4.5 Management of wilderness can not only function to retain existing wilderness condition, but also restore wilderness condition through management action to eliminate pests and diseases, close roads and phase out incompatible uses and activities.

4.6 ACF opposes permanent accommodation and substantial structures that damage areas managed to conserve high natural conservation values.

The Wilderness and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes policy supports Aboriginal people managing areas of their lands, both current and future to retain the highest degree of naturalness.

ACF accepts that in these circumstances it may be appropriate to apply an objective of IUCN Protected Area Category Ib which is "to enable indigenous human communities living at low density and in balance with the available resources to maintain their lifestyle".

Any such accommodation and access should be low impact and sited to minimise environmental disturbance.

4.7 It is essential to ensure the protection of wilderness condition, at local, State and National levels. This can occur through a network of areas whose wilderness condition is protected through a range of regimes such as formal wilderness reserves, zones within reserves or areas managed for other purposes, or under indigenous management arrangements.

4.8 In the situation where indigenous management arrangements would achieve protection of wilderness condition, ACF supports:

- negotiation with indigenous people about legal protection and management arrangements to protect wilderness condition, including financial and other support from government where such support is sought by the indigenous peoples;

- the right of indigenous people to fully participate in programs aimed at protecting flora and fauna
- long term legally enforceable regimes that are endorsed by the traditional owners of the land and waters, and that have as their principal management objective protection and maintenance of wilderness condition for part or all of the land under management;
- continued ownership by indigenous peoples of areas with wilderness condition;
- the continued right of indigenous peoples to sustainably hunt, fish, and gather resources for cultural purposes in areas with wilderness condition. However, in Wilderness Reserves this should be in accordance with appropriate management strategies;
- continued access by indigenous peoples to their cultural sites within wilderness areas;
- the use of appropriate technology to minimise and monitor the impact of ongoing use of wilderness areas by indigenous peoples;
- where appropriate, encouraging the taking of feral animals by indigenous people, within feral animal control plans or programs.

5. Selection of Reserves to Protect Wilderness Condition

5.1 Maintenance of wilderness condition requires protection of large areas that have not been substantially disturbed and modified by modern technological society. The large size of wilderness means not only that it can hold more species in the long term than smaller areas, it is also not as prone to the "edge effects" which affect smaller areas, such as different fire regimes, and the invasion of exotic weeds and feral animals. Where an undisturbed area of sufficient is not available, protection of a core with existing wilderness condition, together with adjoining land where there is the opportunity to restore wilderness condition, can ensure rehabilitation and ongoing protection of wilderness condition.

5.2 The Foundation is committed to the identification of areas suitable for protection of wilderness condition. In a manner that respects and supports the land, sea and cultural rights of Australian Indigenous peoples. We do not support the compilation of inventories of wilderness areas without proper regard to indigenous peoples rights and interests.

5.3 The Foundation therefore supports:

- participation by indigenous peoples from the earliest stages in the identification of areas, and which are suitable for protection of wilderness condition through reserves;
- negotiation of agreements that may include the return of wilderness areas to ownership by indigenous peoples;
- negotiation with indigenous peoples about legal protection and management arrangements to ensure the protection of wilderness condition in areas returned to their ownership.

5.4 Government has a major responsibility and obligation for protection of wilderness. Each State and Territory Government should ensure protection of wilderness in accordance with:

- legislation, policies, programs and funding providing for permanent protection of wilderness, appropriate management and public education which embody respect for indigenous peoples rights as well as respect for the rights of wilderness and natural areas;
- establishment of a network of protected wilderness areas of adequate size and distribution;
- cooperation with the Commonwealth in establishment of a national wilderness protection system.

5.5 Although under the current constitutional arrangements, the States have carriage for the protection of wilderness on public lands, the Commonwealth should:

- establish a leading role in wilderness conservation;
- actively promote the establishment of a national wilderness protection system;
- maintain an inventory of areas with wilderness condition.

6. Education about Wilderness and Indigenous Cultural Landscapes

6.1 The Foundation supports continuing education programs to alert the community to the natural and cultural values of wilderness and to threats to the existence of wilderness condition world-wide.

6.2 The Foundation supports the efforts to enhance the community's understanding of the frequent coincidence of wilderness quality of land and ongoing indigenous connections, management, and associated rights and responsibilities, to such lands and waters

6.3 Government has the major responsibility for conducting education programs in consultation with indigenous and environment groups. Wilderness can provide educational opportunities to nurture understandings of the relationship between people and nature.

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