

Policy Statement No. 27 - WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS

1. The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) believes in the protection of all wild and scenic rivers and their catchments or corridors in their natural state, free from further development, so that:
 - (a) remaining natural ecosystems are undisturbed and the natural flow is unimpeded;
 - (b) the benefits of natural river environments can be enjoyed by present and future generations.
2. The natural, scientific, aesthetic and recreational values of the remaining free-flowing rivers out-weigh their value for water resource development and water control purposes.
3. The ACF recommends:
 - (a) the compilation of a detailed inventory of all such rivers and river sections in Australia;
 - (b) the classification and management of suitable rivers and river sections in existing and proposed parks and reserves as wild and scenic rivers;
 - (c) the adoption by Federal and State Governments of Wild and Scenic Rivers Act modelled on this policy statement.
4. The following designations are proposed by the ACF for the purposes of classification, leading to preservation, protection in the best possible manner, and balanced development:

A Wild River has not been polluted, dammed or altered by the activities of man. The presence of a road near the river need not necessarily negate its wild quality. The essential character of a wild river is its natural condition; all rivers vary in size and velocity of seasonable flows. Each has unique features, supporting delicately balanced ecosystems particular to their locality, components of which are frequently in danger of extinction.

A Scenic River may be defined as a river or section of river free of impoundments and still largely primitive, but accessible in places by road or rail. Such rivers may be popular tourist attractions. Carefully planned tourist undertakings such as launch cruises can have a minimum impact on such a river.

A Recreation River is a river or section of a river which is readily accessible by road and has continuing recreational potential, despite development along the shoreline, previous impoundment or diversion. Many rivers flowing through urban and rural environment belong to this category.

5. The ACF asserts that the few wild rivers in Australia are areas of international significance. In view of this status, their preservation within wild river national parks is an immediate priority.
6. Management plans are necessary to protect the rivers from visitor despoilation.

7. Management Guidelines

7.1 Wild River Area

- (a) **Land Use.** No exploitative activities are permissible. The most stringent protective measures are essential. Recreational activities with minimal impact on the area will, at times, require some management in terms of the social and physical carrying capacity of the area.

- (b) Management activities in the area should aim at the minimum level of regulation and development necessary to prevent deterioration of the natural resource and excessive interactions between the management staff and users.
- (c) Existing structures should be removed and roads should be closed to motorised vehicles. No new tracks or structures should be constructed in the area. Motor boats will be excluded.
- (d) Essential management practices for the control of fire, exotic species, erosion, pollution and depletion of vegetation may be required. The first consideration will be the maintenance of the wilderness quality of the river and environs.
- (e) Users of the area should rightfully experience total self-reliance, independence and solitude. Search and rescue operations should be carried out upon request only. Where possible, aircraft flight paths should avoid crossing a wild river catchment.

7.2 Scenic River Area

- (a) Mechanised entry should be limited to defined routes in designated areas will impact will be minimal.
- (b) Construction of new roads may be permitted, provided they are screened from the river.
- (c) Limited, screened visitor facilities may be provided.
- (d) Essential management practices for the control of fire, exotic species, visitor safety, etc. may be conducted. The effect on the natural environment and scenic qualities of the area should be monitored.

7.3 Recreational River Area

- (a) Such areas will be zoned to permit mechanised entry to designated areas by defined routes. Speed limit zones should be designated along the river.
- (b) Construction of additional roads will permitted, provided they are partially screened from the river, and only when the carrying capacity of existing roads is exceeded.
- (c) A wide range of visitor facilities may be provided; construction should harmonise with the surroundings.
- (d) Essential management practices for the control of fire, exotic species, visitor safety, etc will be conducted. The effect on the natural environment and scenic qualities of the area should be monitored.

BACKGROUND

The traditional approach to Australia's water resources has been exploitation for domestic, agricultural and industrial purposes.

Settlement has developed along the coastlines and in river valleys where towns were often sited on the flood plain. Land has been extensively cleared for agriculture and the forests have been drastically reduced. With increasing industrialisation, rivers were controlled to provide hydro-electric power and water for irrigation and to supply growing urban areas. Generally, this development was planned and carried out as an engineering undertaking and only limited consideration was given to a wide range of community needs and to the likelihood and pattern of environmental changes. The concomitant need to protect and preserve rivers in their natural state was not considered.

Very few of the rivers flowing through Australia's major population centres have not been affected by developments to harness their resources and by developments along their banks, planned and executed under the aegis of Federal and State governments. Thus, Australia's rivers are already extensively committed to development projects. A policy (or policies) needs to be formulated now for the future management of rivers and sections of rivers which are not irreversibly and permanently committed to development.

The number of free-flowing, unpolluted rivers is rapidly dwindling. Apart from the corresponding diminution of recreational opportunities, and especially wilderness recreation, this process is endangering many species which depend for their survival on a river environment.

Only in the last few years has there been any public recognition of the scientific and recreational values of rivers as independent units of the landscape. State governments, and the Federal Government to the extent that it is empowered, have all evolved and implemented (with varying degrees of good faith and dedication) policies on the identification, declaration, protection and management of national parks and kindred reserves. In general, these are accepted by the community, although opposition is often vocal and well organised.

In terms of overall environmental management and protection, it is logical - and vital - that a river management policy now be devised and adopted in recognition of the fact that rivers are an integral part of the national natural heritage, which require specialised management. To date, little consideration has been given to research, formulation and implementation of management policies specifically designed for rivers.

Planning and management of rivers, as a vital natural resource in a dry continent, need to cater for a wide range of uses: agricultural, domestic, scientific and recreational. In Australia water is an extremely important recreational resource and is used for a wide variety of activities, passive and active, self-contained and motorised.

Planning must be based on the recognition of the dynamic relationship between land and water, so that rivers are treated as systems comprising interdependent components: catchments, valleys, flood plains, banks and stream courses.

Future allocation of river resources should be within a framework provided by a classification system (see above) and should aim to control and develop the river resources where necessary and to protect some parts in their natural, or near-natural condition.

Wild and scenic rivers are vestiges of ancient Australia, still the magnets of life in a semi-arid continent; they are active landforms within a continuous succession of geological eras. Thus they are extremely valuable for scientific study and have unique scenic and recreational values.

A Wild and Scenic Rivers Act was passed by the United States Congress in 1968. It set out the need for a balance between water resource development and conservation in the United States. The Act dedicated eight rivers as the Federal Wild and Scenic River System; 11 had been added by 1977.

The few remaining pristine river systems in Australia are a most valuable part of our national heritage but there is no national policy for their protection. Australia lags far behind the USA and other countries in its lack of such a policy and the legislation to provide for its implementation. The adoption of a wild and scenic river concept would provide a basis for identification and documentation of these values by government agencies and community interest groups. The USA concept is relevant as the only approach which recognises the diverse components of the river environment and the complex needs of modern society.

Management strategies developed and tested in North America should provide useful guidelines for Australia. However, detailed application should place greater value on nature conservation than is the case in the USA, where policy implementation is strongly biased towards the recreational use of rivers.

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