

# In praise of national parks

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## ABSTRACT

Innovation and the avoidance of dogma will undoubtedly be required in the massive effort to stem the decline, and then rebuild Australia's outstanding biodiversity. There is wide consensus that our traditional protected areas alone will be inadequate and a whole range of other instruments which cover many tenures and achieve greatly increased areas for conservation will be required. However, enthusiasts for additional conservation mechanisms need to avoid undermining the existing protected area concept which, despite its faults plays a major role in conservation. This opinion paper argues that 'off reserve' or 'new reserve' efforts should be integrated into and build on existing national parks if the agreed goal of whole of landscape conservation is to be achieved.

## Introduction

Our grandmothers had a particularly evocative expression - 'Don't throw the baby out with the bath water!' It pithily encapsulates a simple idea. When you are discarding something you no longer want, make sure you don't inadvertently lose something precious. What we most definitely wish to discard is unsustainable Australian land use; however the 'baby' at risk is the national park system of Australia.

Ironically this risk comes not from the 'usual suspects' of extractive industries but in fact from people genuinely seeking long-term conservation. No less a figure than the Director of the Australian Museum, Michael Archer argues that because we need *vast* areas under conservation management to give biodiversity a chance, we should abandon our current concept of national parks. The Bulletin headed its feature by Bob Beale on Archer's views, *Wanted Urgently Rational Parks*, (Beale 1999) with the statement:

*Australians may be proud of their national parks but to zoologist Michael Archer they are little more than 'environmental leper colonies'. He believes they must encompass economic activities such as mining if they are to achieve long-term conservation goals...*

Archer is quoted as describing parks as 'death traps', 'token remnants', 'lands of the living dead' and places where wildlife is 'incarcerated'. This 'park attack' is inspired by the view that the small size and isolation of most parks means that these 'islands' will not ensure long term survival. The

scientific basis for such a view is widely accepted. There is in fact an international consensus that our conservation 'islands' must be turned to conservation 'networks' to ensure long term viability and to survive disasters and climate change (Figgis 1999). However, it is a huge leap to jump from the *inadequacy* of current parks to depicting them as a *negative* for conservation.

Virtually all of the commentators on the future of nature conservation agree that the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Australian continent are profoundly damaged and increasingly threatened. In this dire situation it is certainly legitimate for major figures like Archer to stimulate a robust debate on how to best protect and restore our ecosystems while sustaining the economic needs of Australians. Indeed there are many points of agreement. It is unarguable that the current 7.8% of Australia in national parks and protected areas *alone* will not protect our biodiversity in perpetuity. Vastly greater areas of the Australian land and coastal seas need to be actively managed for conservation purposes. We need to massively expand bioregional conservation management on a whole range of tenures and phase out current land use practices which cannot be made both ecologically and economically sustainable. We need to seek land uses that *require* healthy biodiversity as their base resource. Many of these concepts were discussed in the author's (Figgis 1999) publication *Australia's National Parks and Protected areas: Future Directions*.

## Parks protect biodiversity

Despite the strong agreement that biodiversity conservation requires augmentation of parks, it is a strange twist of logic to attack the legitimacy of the core lands *currently* dedicated to biodiversity. *The National Strategy for the Conservation of Biodiversity* (Commonwealth 1996) emphasises the role of parks clearly: 'Australia's current protected area system includes a significant proportion of our biological diversity'. Scientists like Mackay, Leslie, Lindenmayer and Nix (1998) agree that substantial wholly natural areas have a vital role in nature conservation, containing larger and therefore more viable animal and plant populations. Our larger national parks are playing this vital role now, why would anyone undermine their standing and community support?

Not only are parks currently strongholds of biodiversity, but they are also the key lands from which we can build the whole of landscape conservation initiatives to which we all aspire. Most of us are familiar with the principles of bush regeneration; if you wish to repair and restore degradation you build out from the strongest point. Well, in nature conservation, national parks, for all their problems, *are* the strong points. They are the places where we can still find nature intact - rivers running clear, ferns clothing stream banks, giant trees still living through their entire cycle till their fallen hulks feed the leaf litter and the fungi and a myriad of other wonders. These are areas where full sequences of plants, animals and other living organisms remain in place. These are the human-induced equivalent of climatic *refugia*, holding the biodiversity fort, so that if we are successful at building off reserve buffers and corridors nature can expand out. We all acknowledge that feral animals, weeds and other management problems undermine these values, but it does not challenge the role of national parks as *core* lands for present and future biodiversity.

This central role is certainly supported by many scientists. Nix and Mackay, from the Australian National University (personal communication 2000) say 'A system of reserves provides the nodes around which necessary and complementary off reserve management can then be developed'.

## A Multiple Use Future?

Archer's vision of vast conservation landscapes where ecologically sustainable activities have displaced damaging land uses is, of course, very appealing (Archer 1999). However, he appears to believe that this vision requires the demise of

strict protection and the integration of human economic endeavour into *all* natural landscapes. He promotes a multiple use future with particular enthusiasm for kangaroo harvesting, ecotourism and mining. Beale (1999) states that 'Archer believes it should be possible in most places to integrate the twin goals of making a sustainable living off these conserved lands while retaining their key natural values'. Archer expresses the desirability of putting people and industries back into environments. Beale quotes him as saying: 'All I'm talking about here is rediscovering what our ancestors knew and practised very well - how to live successfully within natural environments rather than outside them'.

The issue of the ethics and ecology of kangaroo harvesting is an issue for a separate and major debate, but what of ubiquitous multiple use? Again one can acknowledge part of Archer's approach. Undoubtedly as we seek biodiversity conservation across whole landscapes and bioregions we will be seeking to bring in a multitude of lands under many jurisdictions. Such regimes might be made up of a mosaic of forestry lands, local government, Aboriginal lands, sanctuaries protected by non-government organisations and private foundations and areas of private properties. Certainly not all these lands will be managed as strict protection national parks. They will hopefully allow for a whole range of sustainable uses, as well as being lands where innovative conservation tools, such as, voluntary conservation agreements, land and water stewardship payments, revolving funds with covenants and carbon and biodiversity credits can flourish.

However, the notion that all natural environments *need* to have human economic activity requires a challenge. It was one thing to have humans and nature integrated when there was abundant nature, few humans and low levels of technology, it is quite another in the 21<sup>st</sup> century when nature is scarce, humans abundant and the technological capability to subdue nature is immense. The vast percentage of the Australian landmass outside our protected area estate is available for commercial extractive industry, why should we also compromise these core lands?

Many would argue that our national parks are already 'multiple use' in the sense that most are used for recreation, many for tourism, all produce ecosystems services of economic value and they all have existence value (IUCN 1996). However Archer is clearly using multiple use as meaning

combining extractive industry with conservation. This will be music to the ears of all the arrayed forces who oppose the allocation of land for nature: components of the rural lobby; the right wing recreational access and gun lobby; some of the mining industry; the oil industry and commercial fishing industry. These are the forces most likely to use any chink in the strict protection concept, not the environmentally benign interests envisioned by Archer.

The notion that national parks can accommodate extractive industry is also refuted by the evidence of CSIRO scientists Julian Reid and Jim Puckridge (1992) who, after studying the Innaminka Regional Reserve in South Australia, strongly criticised the concept as 'flawed':

*"All resource utilization, however well managed, imposes environmental costs. In practice, such costs are most effectively minimised by separating exploitative activities and sites of high conservation value. The multiple-use concept rejects this simple and effective approach."*

Archer appears to have a particular enthusiasm for mining based on the contention that agriculture is far more more damaging than mining. This may be true, but it is hardly a reason for a sweeping endorsement of mining. Mine sites may be small but when they dispose of mining waste irresponsibly or otherwise go wrong the damage can cover vast areas. The case of OK Tedi to our north is the most vivid example, although there are many other Australian and international examples of substantial off site impacts. Current plans by South Australian uranium mines to pump mining wastes into aquifers just above the Great Artesian Basin question the depiction of mining as a relatively benign industry.

So my view is clear, conservation should move out from national parks, not multiple use move in.

### **Parks are ethical refugia**

There are other reasons for defending the concept of parks retaining a high degree of naturalness. Here I touch upon some areas which can make scientists uncomfortable as they do not fit in the objective scientific paradigm. Nevertheless, if we are seeking ways to protect the natural world it is valid to look at all values which will lead to that goal.

Protected areas are our only land allocation where, to some degree, the rapacious human species takes a back seat. They are our only land allocation that overtly acknowledges that the

other 30 million plus creatures who share the planet have rights to live and thrive regardless of their direct utility to us as humans. These values are often deemed intrinsic values. In *The Sacred Balance*, David Suzuki (1997) argues that the global environmental crisis has been caused because we have lost this fundamental understanding of our place in nature. He says:

*Through our loss of a worldview, our devotion to consumerism and our move into the cities and away from nature, we have lost our connection to the rest of the living planet...we must find a new story, a narrative that includes us in the continuum of Earth's time and space, reminding us of the destiny we share with all the planet's life, restoring purpose and meaning to human existence.*

We therefore need national parks as *ethical refugia*, places where we can still be humbled by the beauty and majesty of nature, its complex systems and its forces. Wild, natural landscapes are essential if we are ever to have a hope of reclaiming the essential understanding that humanity is not a thing *apart from* nature, but relies fundamentally on the fabric of all life on earth. If one looks forward 50 or 100 years I do not believe this reconnection, this proper reverence, would occur if such areas disappeared into an overall blurred 'multiple use' landscape. Similarly I would argue that rather than turning our wildlife into yet one more fashionable human commodity by making them pets as Mike Archer advocates, we should be encouraging *real* contact with *real* wildlife in their natural habitat.

Whether you call these moral or ethical or spiritual values is not very important. It is the understanding of parks as symbols of a nature ethic, which goes beyond science and self-interest. This ethic is not new, in fact it is ancient, an approach of some of the great religions and the worldviews of indigenous people.

### **Parks inspire action**

Parks are also a crucial well spring of aesthetic inspiration for conservation action. There is a South American Indian saying '*To become human we must make room in oneself for the wonders of the universe.*' (Suzuki 1997) Poetry and inspiration are seldom used any more to justify conservation. Champions of biodiversity have long condemned as emotional and subjective those who used their love of beauty and joy in the natural world and its wildlife as a reason to conserve. Yet these emotions were a crucial motivation for most conservation pioneers and I would contend remain a crucial, if

under articulated, spur for most modern environmentalists. In other words behind the vigorous advocacy for the natural environment in this country are individuals motivated by the *love of nature*, often developed in childhood.

Given the topic of our seminar is conservation in the future, this role of parks can still be of fundamental importance. Having really beautiful national parks where people can develop powerful affections for the particular area and for nature in general is a great, indeed a central, nature conservation tool. However, an essential part of this inspirational quality is that nature should predominate. Standing on a sandstone cliff and looking into a wilderness landscape of natural valleys and mountains is very different from looking into farms, cleared lands and powerlines. This unspoilt quality is also the principal asset sought by genuine ecotourists who Archer identifies as part of a better future.

In the United States, the National parks system is deeply loved and has become part of how Americans see themselves and very much part of how they project to the world. I doubt that this is because of their strictly scientific *biodiversity* or *ecosystem* values. Its because they are defining aesthetic images of a nation. Perhaps the same kind of central importance of landscape to national pride is gradually emerging in Australia. Kakadu, Uluru, the Great Barrier Reef, the Tasmanian wilderness, the Alps, the Blue Mountains, the Daintree, the Kimberley are all central icons of Australianness.

### Parks are an economic asset

Even if we return to the comfortable territory of quantifiable benefits, national parks are a vital economic asset. 50% of Australia's \$59 billion dollar tourism industry is nature based, with natural areas being sited as a major motivation by nearly 25% of international visitors. 50% of visitors visit at least one national park. (Bureau of Tourism Research 1996, 1998). The IUCN publication, *Economic Assessment of Protected Areas: Guidelines for their Assessment* (IUCN 1996) confirms that rather than protected areas constituting a sacrifice of economic values, national parks and protected

areas provide a wide range of services of economic value. It strongly argues that 'protected areas and national parks represent an increasingly valuable source of economic activity which more than offsets their cost'.

However, we must get beyond this notion that national parks can only be part of a sustainable economy if they are actively used by an industry. The report not only deals with the more obvious area of income generated by visitation, but also points to the many *ecosystem services* provided by protected areas. Ecosystem services include such benefits as: catchment protection; water filtration and production, protection of soil stability, nutrient recycling, climatic controls, carbon sinks, genetic resources, pollination of economic species, habitat for economically important species such as insectivorous birds, protection of hatcheries of commercial marine species and many other benefits which have direct economic consequences (Beattie 1995).

Proper accounting for ecological services has great potential importance as a tool for conservation, through full cost accounting, economic incentives for conservation, and internalising environmental externalities. Such developments are in their infancy in most countries including Australia. It is clearly an area deserving of substantial research, not least because it will end the myth that national parks are 'locked up' economic resources.

### Conclusion

In the formidable future battle for nature, which is our focus, new paths undoubtedly need exploring, but in doing so there *also* needs to be a substantial reassertion of the central importance of protected areas where nature conservation is the pre-eminent value. Our parks need much more effective management, they certainly need additional lands - buffers, connections, complementary lands of many tenures and uses, but scientists of influence should help the community see our national parks, not as 'environmental leper colonies' but as 'bastions of biodiversity' 'refugia for regeneration' and 'sanctuaries for sanity'.

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## QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

**CHRIS DICKMAN:** Many thanks, Penny.

**MIKE ARCHER:** Penny, Mike Archer, the gentleman with the nails in his wrists.

I want to say first of all that I completely subscribe to virtually all of the things you said. It is definitely the case that I have used such radical statements as "leper colonies" and "land of the living dead", but actually that comes from Daniel Janzen who made those remarks about park areas that are too small for long-term sustainability.

I certainly focused on mammals because I think that there's a pretty powerful case to be made that if we relax with our wonderful national parks system, that certainly is a baby that none of us has a right to throw out. In fact, we are not doing enough to support the idea. My focus has been to accept the national parks. I am focused on the fact of not having enough total land. As you have mentioned, we have to find other ways of achieving conservation, that is, from the land that people are currently on.

It is not about introducing people into the parks system, but about basically introducing parks into people's systems, and putting those things back together again. So I think we are pretty much on the same wavelength. I've probably been quoted out of context.

**PENNY FIGGIS:** I think we are more or less on the same wave length. The trouble is I think there's a danger that you, as a powerful communicator for conservation, could be interpreted as bagging national parks, and I don't think you are. You mentioned 'Bookmark' Biosphere Reserve earlier, as an example of what you are advocating. But it is the only one in existence and that is after 10 years when everyone has been talking along these lines. I must say when we've got 20, 30, 40 Bookmarks - that is, large scale integrated conservation and multiple use lands - then I might consider saying, "Okay, perhaps we can look at abandoning the parks some time in the future." But until we have achieved that there's no way. But I'm glad to hear what you're saying.

**MIKE ARCHER:** My problem with Bookmark is that it is not about sustainable harvesting of resources that could give it economic viability. They're still exploring their way through that.

**PENNY FIGGIS:** Yes. They're trying.

**MIKE ARCHER:** They're trying. They're looking at sustainable harvesting of citrus trees. It's interesting. When Bookmark was conceived - at least 30 years ago - there really wasn't a viable kangaroo industry; and they concluded at that point there was no point in looking at that question because they could never service an industry themselves. But now that the industry exists they use a different sort of approach.



In fact I got into a lot of trouble with you and your colleagues some years ago because when I was in Central Australia and there were 200,000 horses in the Central MacDonnell Ranges. I believed they needed to be reduced massively because they were competing with the wildlife. They were dying, during the drought times, into the waterholes where the other animals needed the water. So I just think these will always be really hard personal ethical issues, ecological issues; but at the end of the day I am first and foremost an environmentalist and first and foremost I will put the native fauna of this land first.

**JOAN PAPAYANNI** (Animal Society Federation of New South Wales): First of all, I'd like to congratulate Mark Pearson for making the point that feral animals are also deserving of our compassion and I think it's a very important point to make. But the question I had for Penny was just a short one. I was really interested to hear about Sainsbury's classification. Was it nature friendly or animal friendly, you said?

**PENNY FIGGIS:** Nature's Choice.

**JOAN PAPAYANNI:** Nature's Choice, fine. Well, I wondered then if you were aware of the fact that Sainsburys refused to stock kangaroo meat on their shelves? Is this because they believe there is a real cruelty problem in the kangaroo industry?

**PENNY FIGGIS:** I simply can't answer that because I don't know. I don't know if that's correct and what the reasons were for it.

**JOAN PAPAYANNI:** I understand is it is correct, and I think that many Australians, if they really knew the cruelty problems in the kangaroo industry, would not want to eat it. It's a fact of joeys being bludgeoned to death; the fact that many kangaroos are not shot outright but hop away into the bush to die a slow lingering death. I think for many people it's just not acceptable to them

**PENNY FIGGIS:** . A lot people do feel very strongly like that. Again, it's a major tension between the people who genuinely and deeply believe that there are huge ecological gains to be made and people who feel as you do. I mean, I've lived amongst that spectrum of people all my adult life and I more or less understand where they're all coming from, and it's just one that will have to be worked out. You're dying to ask me something about kangaroos, Gordon.

**GORDON GRIGG:** I just wanted to say something about the soft and wobbly end. I think I'm very much at the soft and wobbly end myself. I've now been a qualified zoologist for damn near 40 years and I still get huge thrills from being with wildlife and seeing wildlife. The notion that people seem to have that for some reason if you're recommending, as I am, a controlled regulated humane kill of kangaroos as a harvest in the hope of making a conservation gain for the land and the biodiversity that that somehow disqualifies me from feeling compassionate about animals.

I'm sorry if you think that. People who think that are not understanding where we're coming from. You said in your talk that you didn't think that we seem to be saying that the only way to conserve wildlife was to shoot it and eat it. I've never heard anybody advocate that. That might be a strategy in some cases. The first overhead that I put on, the first thing that I said, was every case of wildlife utilisation should be judged separately on its merits.

So please don't fall into the trap of thinking that some of us who do believe that there is conservation and gain from consumptive use of wildlife that it's denied to us to be at the soft and wobbly end; and I think that I'd speak for a lot of my colleagues here today.

**CHRIS DICKMAN:** Please join me thanking both our first afternoon speakers.