Conserving Cultural Values in Australian National Parks and Reserves, with Particular Reference to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

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Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any tertiary institution and to the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text.

Simon Cubit

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Abstract

Beginning in the 1970s and extending into the 1990s community groups, academics and cultural heritage managers in Australia noted with concern the expression of a management philosophy which encouraged the devaluing and removal of European cultural heritage in national parks and protected areas. In the 1990s when the phenomenon became the subject of academic and professional analysis, it was attributed to a longstanding separation in Western notions of culture and nature which underpinned a conflict between the ascendant concept of wilderness and the artefacts of human use and association. As the century drew to a close, these expressions of concern began to fade in line with the emergence of new international valuations of the natural world which rejected wilderness in favour of the conservation of biodiversity. Rather than see cultural heritage as an impediment, this new model saw the values, traditions and diversity of human groups as vital assets in the conservation project. This thesis examines these two shifts in conservation practice and their wider implications for the management of cultural values.

Following an interpretation of Western cultural philosophy and its translation to Australia, a review of the literature established that the first shift was a product of an ecocentric value system adopted by national park managers from the 1970s. Ecocentrism reinforced and extended cultural assumptions implicit in the American 'Yellowstone' national park model influential in Australia and generated a new appreciation of the value of wilderness as a place where non-human species could evolve without human interference. In this way it served to broaden the existing separation of humans from nature. The implication of this shift for the management of cultural values in wild areas was profound. An in-depth case study of the establishment of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area (TWWHA) in the late 1980s, a major part of the thesis, documented an active misanthropism which, it is argued, was based on the moral authority offered by ecocentrism. A 1992 management plan constructed the TWWHA as wilderness refuge with intrinsically valuable ecological communities and processes. Important cultural values of the TWWHA were not identified and those that were tended to be poorly managed and inadequately resourced.

The second shift, it is argued from the literature, had its origins in the 1970s and 1980s in a growing international awareness that the powerful Yellowstone model,

with its focus on spectacular natural features and unpopulated parks, was structurally limited in its ability to conserve biodiversity and slow to respond to the aspirations of indigenous people. These problems fuelled the development of alternate conservation models and prompted new research culminating in the 1990s rejection of wilderness in favour of bio-regional strategies. The new strategies accepted that humans have a positive role to play in conserving biodiversity and recognise that culture and nature are inextricably entwined. A number of contemporary conservation initiatives at national and international levels, including the details of a new 1999 management plan for the TWWHA, were used to provide evidence of this shift. Each embodied a rejection of wilderness for its own sake, revealed a consistent focus on the conservation of biodiversity and integrated the management of natural and cultural values to varying degrees.

These findings confirm the two shifts in conservation practice. The thesis makes contributions to the literature in a number of areas. These include enhancing understandings of the rationales that have underpinned Australian protected area management; in providing an analysis of the impact of ecocentrism of particular interest in relation to emerging trends in environmental history which seek to understand the social implications of conservation initiatives, and in placing the Tasmanian experience in protected area management in a wider context.

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Contents_

Declaration i Abstract ii Acknowledgments iv Illustrations (maps, figures, tables) viii

Introduction viii

Chapters		page
1	The changing status of cultural values in natural areas	1
2	Ecology, national parks and misanthropic wilderness	15
	Emerging visions of Australian nature	20
	The scientific vision	21
	The Romantic vision	21
	The colonial vision	22
	The national vision	22
	The ecological vision	22
	Modern Australian attitudes to nature and the influence of ecology	23
	Ecology as a moral force	25
	Anthropocentrism and Ecocentrism	28
	Ecology and Wilderness	32
	Australian national parks – an American legacy	36
	National parks and ecology – a misanthropic union	45
	Conclusion	46
3	Ecocentrism and the Tasmanian Wilderness World	
	Heritage Area	48
	The creation of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area	49
	The politics of wilderness	49
	The Upper Mersey Valley and wilderness	56
	The development of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area	
	Management Plan	66
	The meanings of heritage	73
	Contesting constructs of heritage	77
	Ecocentrism under political assault	81
	Conclusion	83

·	Draping the blanket of wilderness – Ecocentrism and	
	Tasmanian cultural values	86
	The Management of Cuitoral Values Under the 1992 IWWHA	
	Maria rement Plan	88
	The in Olean intional values of the TWAVHA	94
	Case Study 1: tasanaman skin sheds and snaring hots: Buildings of the for trade	9 S 98
	Towards a typology of skin sheds. Wan stods	99
	Sparra fints	99
	the significance of skins sheds and snaring huts	102
	Case Study 2: Assessing cultural values in natural areas: Fre tipe of Adersey Valley Project First in values assessment Social and aesthetic values assessments	104 105 107
	Case Study 3: The Traditional Practices Project	110
	Case Study 4: Burning back with the snow Environmental and cultural outcomes of burning back with the snew Cross-cultural and other comparisons	114 117 118
	Ociping the blanket of volderness' – The search for alternate meaning	121
	Conclusion	128
5	'A new paradigm for protected areas in a new century'	132
	The matronal park - a paradigm besieged The social justice issue The bodinersity issue	133 134 138
	Furtier challenges	140
	to the permalism is the emerging new paradigm.	143
	International trends in cultural heritage management under the new paradigm. The World Heritage Area Convention. Empowering indigenous Australians.	150 150 155
	The new paradigm in Australia - Emerging landscape models of conservation Towards integrated models of culture and nature - The Regional Forest	157
	A generous process and the Richmond Communique	160
	The 1999 Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area Management Plan	165
	Centioned	171

6 Conclusion	1 7 3
The first shift reviewed	174
The second shift reviewed	176
Limitations of the data	177
Contributions to the literature	178
Concluding comment	183
Appendix: Criteria for the register of the national estate	186
References	188