

# Searching for ‘wilderness’: environmental protests in *The Mercury* and *The Age*

**Bruce Tranter**

## Abstract

‘Wilderness’ is a highly contested concept but one that has been used effectively by environmentalists to frame environmental issues and valorise wild places, particularly the wild rivers, lakes and old growth forests of Tasmania. Content analyses of articles sampled from *The Mercury* and *The Age* suggest substantial variation in the reporting of ‘wilderness’ between the two newspapers. In the Tasmanian *Mercury* ‘wilderness’ is only weakly associated with coverage of environmental campaigns in areas environmentalists claim to be wild places, but is more strongly associated with environmental campaigns in *The Age*. Over a similar period, the phrase ‘forest protest’ also emerges as a distinctive frame. Yet while ‘forest protests’ occurs more frequently in *The Mercury* than *The Age* over time, it is only associated with ‘wilderness’ in *The Age*. The findings suggest that while differences in the tone of ‘wilderness’ articles in the two newspapers may have softened since the Franklin campaign of 1982-83, when it comes to framing and reporting ‘wilderness’, substantial differences remain between the two papers.

## Introduction

Environmentalists in Australia have for decades used the concept of 'wilderness' to valorise wild places. Attaching the label 'wilderness' is an attempt to signify the 'wild', unspoilt quality of these remote areas. The process of setting aside wild areas as distinct, of differentiating them as other than human, is a powerful way of highlighting what for many environmentalists is their intrinsic value. Categorising wild places as 'wilderness' is a strategy used to great effect by environmentalists in Australia, particularly in Tasmania, with its long history of environmental campaigns and protest actions aimed at the preservation of wild rivers, lakes and old growth forests.

Such campaigns began with the attempt to save Lake Pedder in the Tasmanian southwest in the late 1960s and early 1970's (Gee 2001). The beauty of Lake Pedder and other photogenic areas were publicised by environmental aesthetes, the photographers, painters and musicians who played a pivotal role in bringing wilderness areas to the public. The (literally) trail blazing photographer Olegas Truchanas was the first to promote the value and beauty of the Tasmanian 'wilderness' to the Tasmanian public through his popular slide shows in the early 1970s. The baton was later taken up by Truchanas' protégé Peter Dombrovskis (Cica 2011). The latter's iconic image of *Morning Mist, Rock Island bend* powerfully symbolised wilderness and brought the Franklin River to national prominence during the federal election campaign in 1983, when it appeared in colour advertisements in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age*.

Yet the notion of 'wilderness' as Nelson and Callicott (2008: 1) suggest, 'remains emotionally highly charged, contested, and controversial'. Cronon (1995: 85) argues that wilderness:

tends to privilege some parts of nature at the expense of others. Most of us, I suspect, still follow the conventions of the romantic sublime in finding the mountaintop more glorious than the plains, the ancient forest nobler than the grasslands, the mighty canyon more inspiring than the humble marsh.

Labelling this the "received wilderness idea", Nelson and Callicott (2008: 4) explain that wilderness 'connotes many different and sometimes contradictory things to many different people. To some it connotes a place for a certain kind of physically challenging recreation; to others...a place of solitude and reverential reflection; to still others...a habitat for big fierce predators'. But what is 'wilderness' and how has the concept been employed by environmentalists? A common theme running through definitions of wilderness is the notion that it is 'untouched by human hands' (Nelson 1998:154). Rothenberg (1995: xiv) succinctly explains how the concept evolved:

First, it was [a] dangerous expanse beyond the frontier that needed to be tamed in order to be ready for human habitation. Now as the world has been mowed over by our renovations, nostalgia for the natural has set in. We long for the wilderness. We pine for the shrinking grandeur of nature untrammelled by humankind.

While problematising 'wilderness' potentially undermines its efficacy as a concept in environmental campaigns, many are highly critical of the concept. Bayet (1998: 318), for example, points out that '[T]he concept of wilderness as nature without any trace of human interaction dehumanises the indigenous peoples living within that landscape'.

'Wilderness' therefore, is very rarely pristine or untrammelled by humans. Wilderness is also argued to be a social or cultural construction. For example, Cronon (1995: 69) argues 'It is

not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it's a product of that civilization and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made'. Rather for Cronon (1995: 12; 11), wilderness is 'a complex cultural construction' that 'embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall'.<sup>i</sup>

Lester (2005:125) suggests that '...even into the 1960s, as organised efforts to protect the southwest of Tasmania began, the word 'wilderness' maintained a specific, descriptive and uncontested meaning. It defined a particular type of place – a place without roads or human interference (indigenous histories were ignored), not an inherent promise of something more' (Lester 2005:125). However, the meaning of wilderness shifted over time. A decade later 'Wild lands had become desirable for what they offered in their wild state', so that by 1982 during the Franklin campaign 'the idea of wilderness as desirable has begun to enter the mainstream. When used in news, the word was powerful, emotive and loaded' (Lester 2005: 126). While eco-philosophers, environmentalists and others may argue over the term, this preliminary study is focussed upon how 'wilderness' in the context of wild places and environmental campaigns has been reported in print media.

If Lester (2005) is correct and 'wilderness' became mainstream during the Franklin campaign, this should be reflected in print media coverage of subsequent environmental campaigns related to wild places. To what extent do the print media and environmentalists engage in a struggle to shape the agenda on environmental campaigns? Are print media sometimes resistant to the attempts of environmentalists to shape public opinion (see Hutchins and Lester 2006)? If 'wilderness' is used as framing device (e.g. Gitlin 1980; Noakes and Johnston 2005) by environmental organisations and groups, is this reflected in print media coverage of Tasmanian environmental campaigns after the Franklin?

### **Routinisation of Environmental Issues**

Lester's (2005) claims regarding the mainstreaming of 'wilderness' is supported by the work of Pakulski et al. (1998). Drawing upon Max Weber, they argue that environmental issues in Australia have become 'routinised' as radical new issues and 'unconventional' forms of political participation enter the political mainstream. Routinisation involves the 'absorption of social innovations into the established, and typically institutionalised, ways of doing and experiencing things through repetition and habituation' (Pakulski et al. 1998: 239). Referring to the Australian case, they suggest that symptoms of routinisation include declining levels of environmental group membership (Pakulski et al. 1998, p. 241), a 'shift from new, unusual and unique' (e.g. the environment as a 'new' political issue) 'to old, expected and familiar' (i.e. environmental issues are absorbed into the platforms of political parties) (Pakulski et al. 1998: 239).

Pakulski et al. (1998) suggest environmental issues divide into 'green' (i.e. logging of forests and wildlife preservation) and 'brown' clusters (i.e. pollution and waste disposal), claiming mass media tend to concentrate upon 'brown' issues, while environmental groups focus their campaigns around 'green' issues. In the context of protest campaigns 'wilderness' is clearly a 'green' issue. In fact, according to Pakulski and Crook (1998: 9), 'the environment' hit Australian headlines in the early 1980s defined almost exclusively as a political issue related to wilderness conservation and opposition to logging', although it is not clear when 'wilderness' was first used in the framing of environmental campaigns. Coverage of

environmental issues also varies across print media, with Lester (2005: 123) finding that '[I]n up to half of its stories on the Gordon-below-Franklin dam issue over much of the 10-week blockade period, the *Age* used the word 'wilderness' in its naming of the region under threat. The *Mercury* used it less than five times in total'.

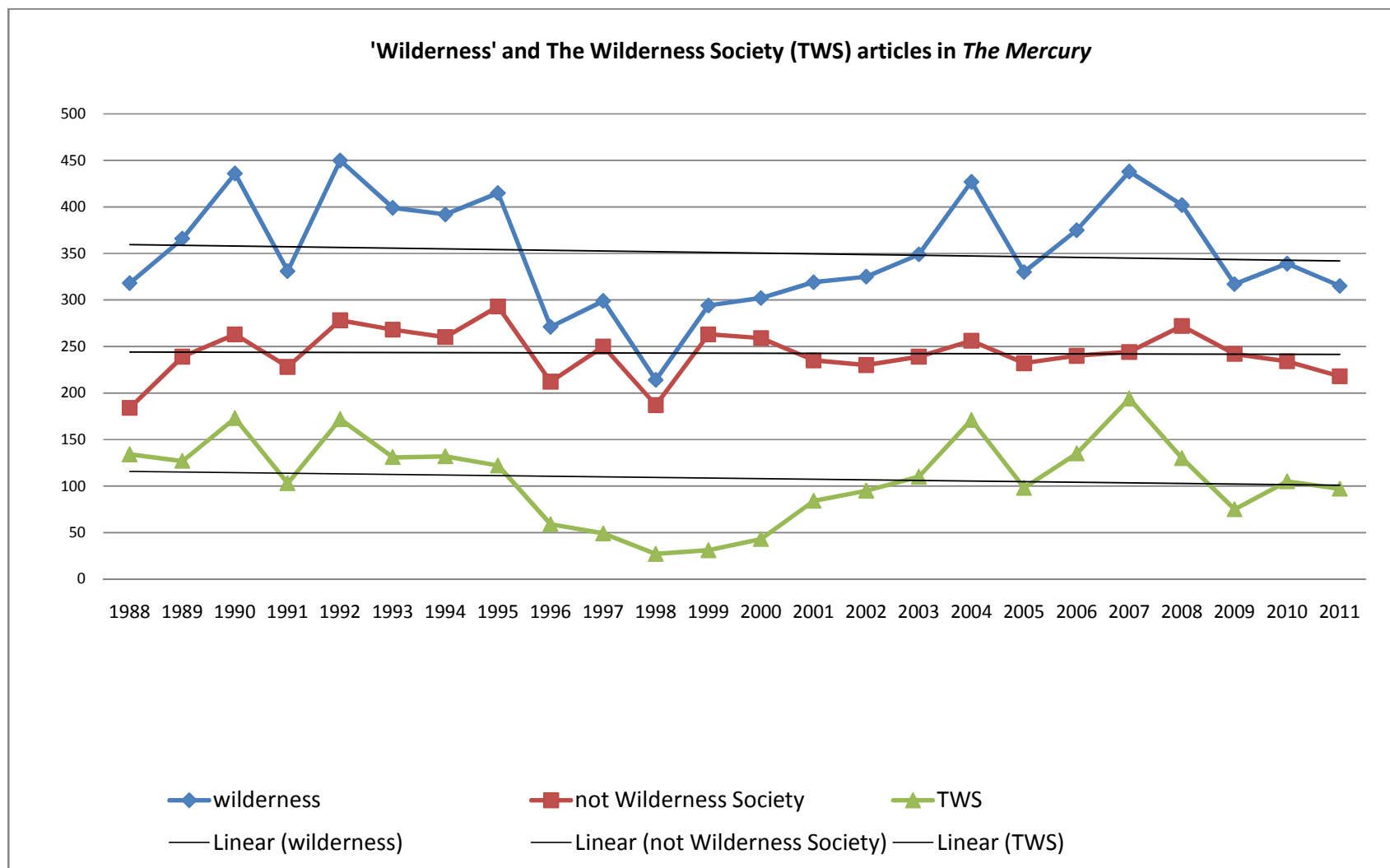
To an extent this research extends Lester's work on 'wilderness' in the Franklin River campaign and examines, empirically, aspects of the routinisation thesis. Following Pakulski et al. (1998), 'Wilderness' is expected to be treated by print media as a 'green' issue that is associated with campaigns seeking to protect 'wild places' (e.g. old growth forests) to a greater extent than other environmental campaigns. Further, if Pakulski and Crook (1998) are correct and environmental issues have become increasingly routinised and the incidence of protest actions has waned, 'wilderness' should be portrayed in a less divisive manner in relation to environmental protests, and, we should witness a shift in the 'tone' of articles toward more positive coverage over time.

### **Data and Method**

Two approaches are adopted here. First, findings of keyword searches of electronic databases for *The Mercury* (1988-2011) and *The Age* (1991-2011) newspapers are reported to show the incidence of the term 'wilderness' over time. Second, preliminary content analyses were conducted of 'wilderness' articles in *The Mercury* on every Saturday for selected years (1988; 1995; 2004; 2007) with some excerpts from articles presented as examples of 'wilderness' coverage. The earliest year of *Mercury* data capture, 1988, acts as a reference point, with three years chosen due to their high incidence of coverage (1995; 2004; 2007). 'Wilderness' articles were also coded for tone (positive, negative, neutral) and any links to environmental campaigns were recorded.

### **Results**

The occurrence of the keyword 'wilderness' in *The Mercury* newspaper between 1988 and 2011 is shown in Figure 1. The top line represents all articles containing 'wilderness', the bottom line those mentioning The Wilderness Society (TWS) only, and the middle line 'wilderness' articles with TWS articles removed.



**Figure 1**

Certain environmental campaigns and election years align with 'wilderness' peaks in *The Mercury*. The state election year of 1992 was notable for the formation of the Australian Greens, the 10 week forest blockade at East Picton and calls by TWS and the Tasmanian Green Independents to halt logging in the Tarkine. Another peak for 'wilderness', (although not for TWS) occurs in 1995, relating to actions to save the Tarkine from the construction of the Heemskirk Link Road. TWS coverage dropped when campaigners moved to distance the organisation from the 'radical' protest actions of the 'Tarkine Tigers', as Law (2001: 21) explained, 'TWS tried to do things other than direct action to stop the road'. The withdrawal of TWS from high profile direct action tactics in the mid to late 1990s, accounts for their lower coverage during that period.

Clear peaks also occur in three federal election years, the 'green' election of 1990 (Bean et al. 1990) and more recently in 2004 and 2007, where the increased 'wilderness' coverage is due to TWS related articles. Detailed analyses of articles for these two years is ongoing, but these peaks are likely to be related to the joint TWS /Greenpeace protests in the Styx valley, including the Global Rescue Station (TWS 2012a), and to Mark Latham's ill conceived foray into the Tasmanian logging debate during the 2004 election campaign. Coverage of the 'Gunns 20', the 20 individuals and groups involved in a law suit initiated by Gunns Ltd (TWS 2012b) is expected to account for much of the TWS coverage in 2007. Alternatively, the federal election year of 1998 was a low point for 'wilderness' in *The Mercury*, again influenced by TWS' withdrawal from direct actions in the mid to late 1990s.

Content analysis of article text sampled in 1988, 1995, 2004 and 2007 indicates that the framing of the Tarkine as 'wilderness' by environmentalists was viewed sceptically by *Mercury* journalists. For example:

'Protestors stage-managed their own arrests in a day of theatre and farce on Tasmania's so-called road to nowhere yesterday...The 50 kilometre, four wheel drive dirt road passes through what is known to green groups as the Tarkine Wilderness' (Mercury 1/3/1995).

'Tasmania's so-called Tarkine wilderness area was the focus of national protest action yesterday' (Mercury 20/5/1995).

'Dr Brown was arrested on February 23 with 12 others for trespassing in the so-called Tarkine wilderness and later spent five days in jail for failing to agree to bail conditions made against him' (Mercury 3/6/1995).

Not all coverage was critical however, with one story beginning 'Conservationists have had a big win with the listing of Tasmania's Tarkine Wilderness on the national heritage register.' Quoting the Australian Heritage Commission chair, the article continued: ' "We will keep campaigning to stop the road" Commission chairwoman Wendy McCarthy said: "The Tarkine contains an excellent example of a large area of relatively undisturbed rainforest and is an important wilderness area in Tasmania" ' (Mercury 18/3/1995).

Yet while journalists were sometimes sceptical, the unproblematic use of 'wilderness' by journalists, environmentalists and occasionally their opponents is also notable in *Mercury* articles. For example, in the excerpt above, the Tarkine is claimed to be 'relatively undisturbed rainforest' (i.e. not untrammelled) but also 'wilderness'. A mill proponent maintained, 'We do not want to use wilderness, we can use regrowth [logs]' (Mercury 21/1/1995). Such application of 'wilderness' tends to support Lester's (2005) claim of mainstreaming, that routinisation of the concept has occurred. The fact that even opponents of environmental campaigns engage with the concept, suggests that by the mid 1990s, Tasmanian environmentalists had been successful in framing wild areas as 'wilderness'.

Interestingly however, TWS and ‘wilderness’ rarely co-occur in *Mercury* articles sampled here. TWS spokespeople did not tend to refer to ‘wilderness’ in relation to forest actions or other protests, perhaps because they are well aware of the problematic notion of the concept. ‘Wilderness’ is a particularly sensitive notion in a state where indigenous interests are sometimes aligned with those of environmentalists, on other occasions at odds with them. Still, when veteran TWS campaigner Geoff Law was interviewed for a human interest story and asked ‘What makes you angry?’, he did not hesitate in replying ‘The hideous destruction of Tasmania’s wilderness’ (*Mercury* 7/8/2004).

**Table 1: ‘Wilderness’ and major Tasmanian environmental campaigns**

	<i>The Mercury</i>	<i>The Age</i>
Franklin	.14	.30
Wesley Vale	.10	-.10
Tarkine	.13	.59*
Styx	-.10	.29
Florentine	.09	.18
<i>Forest Protests</i>	.04	.36*

Notes: Correlations are Kendal’s tau b; \*  $p < .05$

**Table 2: Coverage of ‘Wilderness’ and Forest Protests over time**

	<i>The Mercury</i>	<i>The Age</i>
<i>Wilderness</i>	-.09	.12
<i>Forest Protests</i>	.33*	.25

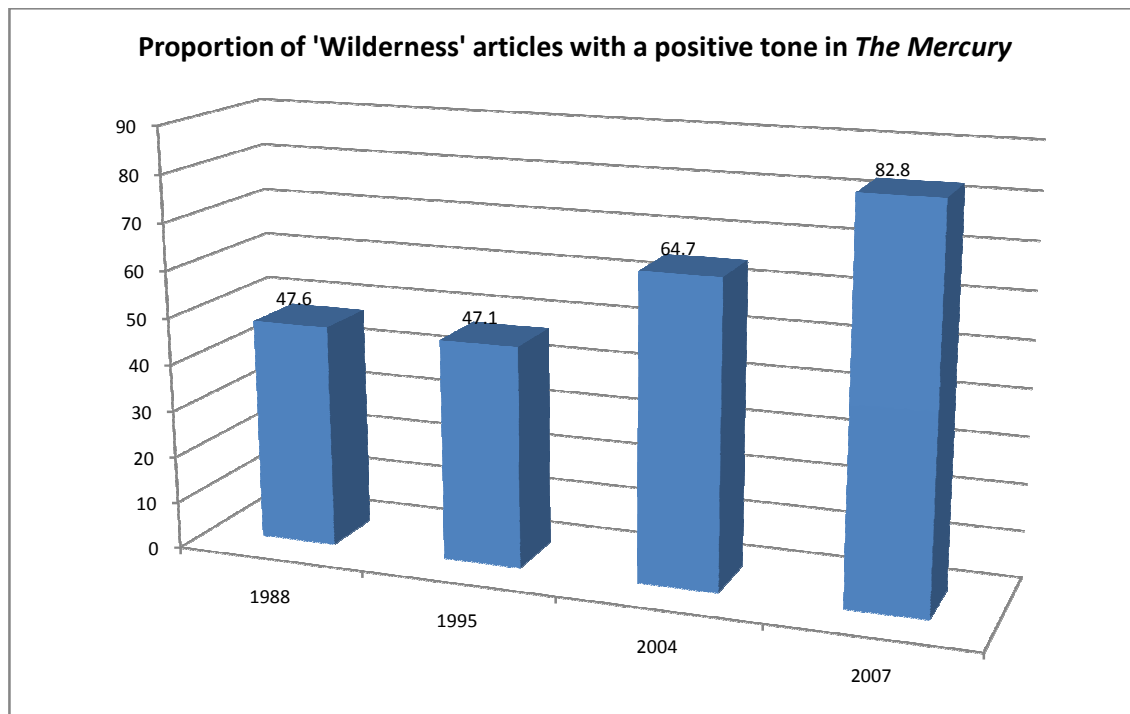
Notes: Correlations with year (Kendal’s tau b).

Some limited statistical analyses (Table 1) have been conducted, correlating *Mercury* ‘wilderness’ articles and those containing keywords representing high profile environmental

campaigns (i.e. Franklin River, Wesley Vale, Tarkine, Styx and Florentine). Wesley Vale, a campaign against building a pulp mill on farming land in northern Tasmania was not a 'wilderness' issue and serves as a reference point. The other campaigns relate to areas claimed to be 'wilderness' by many environmentalists - a 'wild river' and old growth forests. While further analyses will be undertaken, these preliminary results provide a sense of the relationship between 'wilderness' and individual campaigns. Associations for *The Age* are reported for comparative purposes, again extending Lester's (2005) research.

None of the environmental campaigns as reported in *The Mercury* are associated with 'wilderness' at the 95% level of statistical significance, with the magnitude of correlations close to zero. However, the Tarkine campaign is positively associated with 'wilderness' (tau b .59;  $p < .05$ ) in *The Age*. The phrase 'forest protest' is also positively correlated with 'wilderness' in *Age* articles (tau b .36;  $p < .05$ ), although not in *The Mercury*, suggesting that 'wilderness' and 'forest protests' are both frames associated with environmental actions in the Victorian newspaper.

Correlations with 'wilderness' and time are not significant at the .05 level for either newspaper (Table 2). While 'forest protests' do increase over time in *The Mercury*, suggesting a potentially distinct frame, the question of whether their portrayal is positive or negative requires further research. Finally, examinations of the tone of 'wilderness' articles in *The Mercury* indicate that the proportion of positive 'wilderness' articles has increased across the four years sampled (Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

## Conclusion

This research supports claims that ‘wilderness’ is an important frame used in environmental campaigns to protect ‘wild places’ (e.g. old growth forests). However, there appears to be considerable variation across print media sources in the way ‘wilderness’ is reported in association with environmental campaigns, with ‘wilderness’ rarely appearing in *The Mercury* in this context. There are several potential reasons for the relative absence of the term ‘wilderness’ in this Tasmanian newspaper. Although Tasmania is in many ways the ‘greenest’ Australian state, with several influential environmental organisations and groups, 5 Greens in state parliament and 2 Greens Senators, it is also home to a large and vehemently anti-environmentalist constituency. Perhaps, as Lester (2005) argues, newspapers tend to employ language deemed to be compatible with the preferences of their readers, in this case the majority of whom are not environmentally sympathetic. Editorial influence upon journalistic content may also serve to remove potentially divisive terms such as ‘wilderness’. These reasons may partly account for ‘wilderness’ being downplayed to a greater extent in the Tasmanian *Mercury* than in *The Age* with its (relatively) urbanised, environmentally aware audience.

Yet major newspapers are commercial enterprises that must respond to shifting consumer demand in order to survive. In earlier research, Sylow (1994: 209) found that ‘Increasing public support for environmentalism and declining newspaper sales also contributed to the change in press coverage’ in *The Mercury* after the Franklin campaign. Following a period of declining readership that was identified as a response to ‘unsympathetic and biased treatment

of the Franklin dam debate...*The Mercury* started portraying conservation issues more favourably' (1994: 209).

There is some evidence here that 'wilderness' has become a less divisive issue for *The Mercury*, with a shift toward more positive coverage over time. In 1995, twelve years after the Franklin blockade ended, *Mercury* journalists adopted what could be interpreted as a sceptical tone in referring to the 'so-called Tarkine wilderness'. Perhaps, as Lester (2005: 133) maintained in relation to coverage of the Franklin campaign, '*Mercury* journalists may have been aware of the political power of the idea of wilderness, and thus the importance of not identifying the area as such, or perhaps they simply did not believe the area to be wilderness'. A more positive interpretation is that journalists recognised the conceptually problematic nature of 'wilderness' and tended to avoid it when referring to wild places in Tasmania. It remains to be seen how environmental campaigners will respond to the threat of hunting in national parks, following the passing of legislation in New South Wales in June 2012. However, regardless of the contested nature of the concept, it is likely that 'wilderness' will once again be employed as a frame in an attempt to defend these wild places.

## References

- Bayet, F. (1998) 'Overturning the Doctrine: Indigenous People and Wilderness - Being Aboriginal in the Environment Movement' in Callicott, J. and Nelson, M. (eds.) *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, Athens, Georgia: The University of Georgia Press, pp. 314 - 324.
- Bean, C., McAllister, I. and Warhurst, J. (eds.) (1990) *The Greening of Australian Politics: The 1990 Federal Election*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Booth, K. (2011) 'In Wilderness and Wildness: Recognizing and Responding within the Agency of Relational Memory' *Environmental Ethics* 33(3): 283
- Cica, N. (2011) *pedder dreaming: Olegas Truchanas and a lost Tasmanian wilderness*, St Lucia, Queensland: University of Queensland Press.
- Cronon, W. (1995) 'The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature' in Cronon, W. (ed.) *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Co., p. 69-90.
- Gee, H. (2001) *For The Forests*, Hobart: The Wilderness Society.
- Gitlin, T. (1980) *The Whole World is Watching: Mass media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hutchins and Lester (2006) 'Environmental protest and tap-dancing with the media in the information age' *Media Culture and Society*, (28): 433-51.
- Law, G. (2001) 'Eight years of campaigning by TWS' in Gee, H. (ed.) *For The Forests*, Hobart: The Wilderness Society, pp. 20-22.
- Lester, L. (2005) 'Wilderness and the Loaded Language of News' *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, 115, 123-134.
- Nelson, M. And Callicott, B. (2008) *The Wilderness Debate Rages On*, Athens Georgia: University of Georgia Press.
- Noakes, J. And Johnston, H. (2005) 'Frames of Protest: A Road map to a Perspective' in Johnston, H. and Noakes, J. (eds.) *Frames of Protest: Social Movements and the Framing Perspective*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Pakulski, J. And Crook, S. (1998) 'The End of the Green Cultural Revolution: Environmental Activism, Issues and Publics in Australia' in Pakulski, J. and Crook, S. (eds.) *Ebbing of the Green Tide? Environmentalism, Public Opinion and the Media in Australia*, Hobart: School of Sociology and Social Work, pp. 1 - 20.
- Rothenberg, D. (1995) 'Wilderness Untamed: The Evolution of an Ideal' in Rothenberg, D. (ed.) *Wild Things*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Sylow, K. (1994) 'The Tasmanian Conservation Movement and the Press' *Journal of Sociology* 30(2): 209.

The Wilderness Society (2012a) ‘Working Class Man’ lends a hand to Styx campaign: Jimmy Barnes to visit Styx Global Rescue Station’  
<http://www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns/forests/jimmy> (accessed 18/7/2012)

The Wilderness Society (2012b) ‘Gunns Law Suit Against the Wilderness Society & Others’  
<http://www.wilderness.org.au/regions/tasmania/gunns-20> (accessed 18/7/2012)

---

<sup>i</sup> In a critique of Cronon, Booth (2011: 283), drawing upon Naess, argues that wilderness ‘is not a cultural concept, but a fluxing and complex gestalt that includes both human and more-than-human-agency’.