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

by

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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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