



Wilderness Amendment (Procedure) Bill

Second Reading

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WILDERNESS AMENDMENT (PROCEDURE) BILL

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Bill introduced and read a first time.

Second Reading

The Hon. MALCOLM JONES [4.52 p.m.]: I move:

That this bill be now read a second time.

Areas declared as wilderness are vast tracts of land that are effectively locked up, preventing public access except on foot. These large wilderness areas generally comprise a minimum of 25,000 hectares or more, the size of which makes penetration extremely difficult except by the super-fit, ardent bushwalker or by those with lots of time on their hands. The prevention of access by motorised transportation or on horseback prevents families, the elderly and people with disabilities from enjoying the best features of our national park estate. I have visited many wilderness areas and seen some access trails so overgrown that it can take hours to proceed only a kilometre or so through the thickets. Apart from attempts at window-dressing, neglect is sadly the management principle for wilderness—partly by design and partly because of the financial constraints on the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Overgrown trails and derelict infrastructure make management nearly impossible.

During bushfire emergencies wilderness areas have proven to be vast, unmanageable tinderboxes. Sooner or later the public will wake up to this fact—probably during the coming bushfire season if it is half as bad as it threatens to be. Why? It is because hazard reduction cannot be practised sufficiently and access is a huge problem. Even management trails often cannot be traversed with ease: Rangers simply cannot wander through in their management role. Trails become overgrown unless a degree—not necessarily a high degree—of traffic moves through them. This traffic includes walkers as well as horses and vehicles. With the best of intentions, those who created wilderness areas also created a dangerous liability that must be managed. We recently had a small example of the danger of that liability created by wilderness: overgrown trails and lack of access as identified by the bushfire inquiry. By the way, Parliament had better get used to the idea of bushfire inquiries as there will be many more until a greater level of commonsense is applied to bush management. The bush is truly a place for recreation: for recreation of the spirit and for recharging the batteries of workers from the technological, industrial and commercial world in which we live.

New South Wales has great areas for the recreational pursuits of its people. People need access to such places. Many people with whom I associate were taken to the bush by their parents and, in many instances, their love of the bush stems from this early experience. People who are indifferent to the bush and who shun the camping-out adventure invariably were not exposed to this experience by their parents. I truly believe all children should be encouraged and given the opportunity to go camping during their formative years. I also believe adolescents should be encouraged to go bush to have a spiritual rebirthing and to experience the resulting re-creation of the spirit. This is a huge benefit to the individual and his or her sense of self. The national park estate is a marvellous collection of great areas, especially in the Great Dividing Range and areas abutting the coast. For my part, one valley and one mountain in the Great Dividing Range is worth one million hectares of flat, scrubby western land. So the comparison of how much land is locked up in wilderness as a percentage of the State's area is somewhat silly: I would be happy if 33 per cent of the State's western scrub were swapped right now for the declared wilderness areas.

However, in non-wilderness areas the penny has dropped as National Parks has again started to harness the resources of volunteer recreational clubs. These clubs are eager and are waiting to help where

they can. They have the manpower and the horsepower and will do the work. The memorandum of understanding is certainly working, with a definite gain for parks. To its credit, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has again decentralised authority to the regions, allowing local knowledge to benefit management. The earlier experience of centralisation at Hurstville, with the desk-bound Greenies calling all the shots, has started to make a mockery of National Parks and Wildlife Service management. To ensure that national parks continue to flourish we must spend approximately \$350 million on the National Parks and Wildlife Service. Its budget last year was about \$260 million and tomorrow it will be more than \$400 million and rising.

I put it to Parliament that if we want conservation in the future we cannot expect those excluded from nearly half of the national park estate to want to fund this extravaganza-which is how those who do not have first-hand knowledge of remote-area national parks will view this expense, if not now then certainly in the future. If we want future generations to love and cherish the forests we must give them first-hand experience of them. Society cannot gain a true understanding of the bush and of forests from the Discovery Channel or from coffee table books. Why should our children's children's children-pity about our children-pay for wilderness if it is off limits and they cannot go there unless they are into extremely long route marches and survival camping?

The criticism of wilderness as nonsense is not confined to those who consider themselves to be locked out. Grose Valley in the Blue Mountains has always been the domain of bushwalkers and boy scout troops. Boy scouts have earned their badges there for years. When the area was declared a wilderness two staggeringly stupid things happened: first, signage was removed-how terrible that a wilderness area should have appropriate signage; the fact that it might save a life seems to have no bearing on the philosophical zealots who run the show-and, secondly, groups were restricted to five people, thereby excluding scout troops from the area or reducing the size of each group to a dangerously low number.

Why add commonsense to the wilderness? This all leads to one question: Why do we have conservation? The answer-I am sure we all agree-is to save the planet or to aid mankind. Either way people need to maintain contact with nature, especially as cities grow bigger and become more overcrowded, as work becomes more dehumanised by increasing technology and generally stress is greater. Defenders of wilderness may jump up and say there is no prohibition on people entering wilderness areas. But many families, the aged, the disabled, cannot cover the now vast distances and penetrate the overgrown thoroughfares.

There is a term wholly worthy of analysis. Biodiversity: The existence of large numbers of different kinds of animals and plants which make up a balanced environment. Darwin taught us that the balance is constantly changing. As some species survive in the wild, some species do not survive. Pantheists believe that nature has one conscience which contradicts all Darwin taught us. The Australian bush, especially forests, is often thought of by city people as some form of Walt Disney film effect with Bambi and Thumper living in perfect harmony with nature. This is a totally humanised view shaped by romance and ignorance, with people imagining what they want to imagine. The opposite is actually the reality. For animals in the bush, life is day-to-day survival and reproduction. Feral animals abound. Not only do we have the extreme Greens management philosophy, which results in feral carnivores depleting their native wildlife resources, but also in many areas they actively resist any organised attempts to reduce feral animal numbers through hunting and baiting. The lack of action against ferals in wilderness areas is one of the major issues that will prove to be a component in its own destruction.

On the basis that each feral will destroy approximately 1,000 native animals in a 12-month cycle and the ferals are multiplying, we will soon reach a point of no return. The nonsense of introducing even tighter threatened species bills when such devastation is taking place in Government-sponsored native animals slaughter zones, is typical of a philosophically blinkered administration driven by concepts and perceptions rather than by commonsense. Man is not a threat to wilderness; ferals and the National Parks and Wildlife Service management are. The process of nominating, assessing, public consultation and declaration requires special mention. Anyone can virtually nominate anywhere. There is no financial requirement by the nominator-probably the only area of government not requiring financial input by the individual or group.

It is possible—who would know—that greening groups have nominated everywhere and wasted huge sums of assessment dollars in the process. Even private land is nominated and assessed when it cannot be declared without the owner's permission. The public consultation process has always been a joke. I have attended many public meetings with National Parks and Wildlife Service staff. Invariably the meetings turn nasty, with people becoming extremely angry with National Parks and Wildlife Service staff. I have never witnessed agreement to their proposals, but down the track the announcements made by the National Parks and Wildlife Service are the same: We have had wide public consultation; we have wide public support. Yes, the National Parks and Wildlife Service has had consultation but the confrontational experiences I have witnessed have never matched the rhetoric of this Government. Public submissions are another area of grave concern. The Government will inevitably claim wide range support but when I seek access to submissions from the Minister—no way! The latest obstacle is the Privacy Act, which prevents the Minister making submissions available under freedom of information.

Debate resumed from 5 September.

The Hon. MALCOLM JONES [11.17 a.m.]: Prior to this debate being adjourned last week I was commenting on the absurdity of the nomination, assessment and declaration of wilderness areas. Since then an astounding event has taken place. On Sunday, at a public meeting held by the Australian Horse Alliance at Maitland, the Director-General of the National Parks and Wildlife Service told a gathering of several hundred people that wilderness areas had been declared for political reasons and not for physical reasons. This admission of what I have always suspected puts the Government and the National Parks and Wildlife Service in breach of the Act. It also makes a total mockery of the whole concept of wilderness and leaves New South Wales littered with areas that have been illegally declared as something they are not. So apart from the amendments to the Act which I am proposing, the Government must rapidly make amends with its citizens to right the wrongs perpetrated by wilderness declarations over the past few years.

Public submissions are another area of grave concern. The Government will inevitably claim wide-ranging support, but when I sought access to submissions from the Minister that was denied. The latest obstacle is the privacy Act, which prevents the Minister from making submissions available under freedom of information legislation.

No wonder that information was withheld, as I have previously described. The whole exercise has been a sham. However, recently I requested access to submissions for marine parks under freedom of information legislation. "No problem with that" was the response from the official with whom I spoke. Clearly, that was opaque stonewalling from the Minister for the Environment. The Government has decided in advance what it wants to do, and will do it, shoehorning into place compliance, or apparent compliance, with legal requirements.

The Opposition has tried to prevent wilderness being declared over freehold land. The Government has resisted this, even though wilderness cannot be declared over freehold land without the owner's consent. This is bloody-mindedness! Purchasing land which has been declared wilderness is clearly a great disincentive to purchasers and it devalues the land. This is most unfair and is an example of the Government not acting in anyone's interest and actively reducing the value of citizens' property. Or is there another motive? I seek clarification of the Government's motives in its response to this bill, especially now that we have been able to determine that the whole exercise has been politically, rather than physically, assessed. The consultation process is also marred by the history of the process of issuing advice concerning wilderness identifications. Today the mailing list may be reasonable; however, in the past it has been so exclusive as to call into question whether the circulation of such advice was used as a tactic to minimise submissions from potential opponents of wilderness declarations.

The maps distributed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service over wilderness areas are, and have been, atrocious. As a member of Parliament I was recently supplied with fairly good maps, but prior to my becoming a member of Parliament it was impossible to accurately determine the boundaries. In one incident, when Kanangra-Boyd was in the process of being declared, the area of Mowong Falls was, according to the map, outside the identified areas. But when the area was declared, Mowong Falls ended up within the wilderness boundary. Most honourable members will not have a clue where the Mowong Falls are, and now the falls are locked up, they never will. The intolerance of the National Parks and Wildlife Service to suggestion, or criticism, also demonstrates its determination to declare predetermined areas as

wilderness. In 1995 when I visited the wilderness unit at the National Parks and Wildlife Service headquarters at Hurstville, I spoke with the then head of the unit. We discussed the leaving of the trail known as Carters Brush outside the identified wilderness area. Carters Brush runs along a ridge line in the centre of two huge wilderness areas at Barrington Tops. This is not an original concept and is used successfully in Victoria where envelopes of land frequently carry trails between two wilderness areas.

The likely traffic flow along this trail would be very modest, perhaps 12 vehicles per week. There would be none in the winter months, as the trail is subject to winter closures, with which I heartily agree. The trail has historic value because it is a link between the communities of Stewart Brook and the Allyn River. I was told in no uncertain terms that "Twelve vehicles per week would prevent wombats from cross-mating on opposite sides of the trail". Apparently I do not understand how wilderness works. It is suggested that "gene pooling", politically correct speech for "breeding", which is probably the most powerful force on earth, would be destroyed by a handful of vehicles passing along a dirt trail once per week! I will leave honourable members to decide what they feel about that statement.

The Hon. Rick Colless: I have seen them on a muddy road. They walk over a muddy road.

The Hon. MALCOLM JONES: But they could not cross a dirt road! I strongly urge this Parliament to accept the reforms in the bill. I want our people to be able to enjoy all our parks. If people are allowed into the parks, there must be appropriate policing, appropriate behaviour and appropriate camping. I am in full agreement with behaviour controls. My colleagues and I am more than prepared to work with government on this issue. That would be much better than the current lockout mentality. If a hoon drives between Sydney and, say, Bathurst, speeding and being reckless or driving in an antisocial way, there are myriad laws to control him. We do not lock up the highway, so let us regulate behaviour in parks. I can guarantee large-scale support for enforcing appropriate behaviour. I also expect throughout the second reading debate attacks from opponents with statements about my friends and I being involved in bush bashing. I have never bush bashed and I have rarely been in the presence of people who are bush bashing. That may have happened years and years ago, but the culture of people who are now accessing the bush in motor vehicles—usually, but not exclusively, four-wheel drive vehicles—is a responsible one that has largely extinguished such behaviour.

I know that some green groups have photographs of vehicles competing in heavy mud. First, the vehicle models in the photographs are very old and, probably, so are the photographs. Who is to say where the shots were taken? This behaviour does not take place on public land. Technology has now made spinning the wheels of four-wheel drives almost redundant. Wheel spinning causes very expensive damage and gets nobody anywhere. The National Parks and Wildlife Service has admitted that four-wheel drive usage does not cause any lasting environmental damage: there is no proof that it does. Vehicles have been blamed for erosion. Yes, vehicles can cause erosion, but so can a shower of rain, and so can bushwalkers. Every river valley in the world was caused by erosion. Erosion is a reality, it will take place anyway, and it cannot be suspended. If honourable members are interested in the environmental science of wilderness issues, they should perhaps consider two schools of thought. First, an international overview of the wilderness experience worldwide that was conducted by the Royal Society—which incidentally has been interested in Australia for longer than Australia has been interested in itself—was the subject of a publication entitled "Carbon, biodiversity, conservation and income" by Ian Swingland from the University of Kent who has analysed the government-run style of conservation all over the world. I commend the publication to the Government and suggest that the Government have a look at it. Second, there is the local "We want to do this project, and here is the science to prove it" school of "scientific" thought.

This bill seeks to amend the Wilderness Act to include access for all members of the public—the disabled, the elderly, families with children, and everyone else—and to enable them to partake in traditional bush activities such as fishing, horse riding, canoeing, bushwalking, cycling, camping and vehicle-facilitated camping. The bill also seeks to amend the identification process, namely, to prevent the identification of freehold land as wilderness without the owner's consent. Wilderness declaration has the effect of devaluing land, rightly or wrongly, by applying a stigma to the future uses to which the land may be put. The public exhibition process needs to be reviewed to provide adequate consultation because the land potentially will be locked up forever. The current public exhibition process is insufficient. The bill does not seek to ruin or dramatically change the views on wilderness commonly held by moderates. When I

first arrived in Parliament in 1999, but before this House was session, I was approached by a number of right faction Labor backbenchers.

The Hon. Dr Brian Pezutti: What faction?

The Hon. MALCOLM JONES: The right faction.

The Hon. Dr Brian Pezutti: That is Roozendaal's faction, is it not?

The Hon. MALCOLM JONES: They were Labor backbenchers. They told me how much they agreed with my issues and how good it was that I was trying because their constituents, working-class people in rural areas especially, were severely affected and hurt by wilderness closures. They encouraged me because they said they felt helpless against the party machine to change policy. They said how intolerable it is that they have to "pander to the dreadlock brigade for no good reason, other than politics". It is not good enough for urban people to sit back and say that they never visit remote area wilderness or national parks, and espouse clichés such as "I like to know it is there". What about the work that has to be done to control feral animals and prevent bushfires? What about those in the community who had always been able to access these areas but no longer can because of age or infirmity? What about the families who wish their children to enjoy these experiences? It is not good enough that armchair experts pass their uninformed opinions, to the detriment of so many.

My colleagues and I stand ready to work for, to protect and care for the bush, as we, in reality, actually do. We want access for all Australians to public land. I love everything about remote area national parks—the camp fires, the eucalyptus fire smells, even as they linger on the Driza-Bone days later, dawn and still mornings, with mists and roos for company, breathtaking views through blue mountain haze, even the downpours while huddled under sagging tarps with a cup of tea and good friends, the noises of the bush at night as I nestle in my sleeping-bag, bathing in streams, and kids singeing marshmallows. All of that should be ours, by right, not locked up to satisfy some pressure group's unworkable, temporary yet trendy philosophy. I believe, as many others do, that the act of locking up land under the current rules of the Wilderness Act will not endure, nor should it, especially as the truth is out: the basis of declarations is solely political. Too many people have been disadvantaged, too many people are extremely angry, and there is too much theory and not enough commonsense. This is a huge experiment at a great cost to many people. There is too much spin and too little consideration. Bearing in mind the cyclical nature of democracy and trends, sooner or later the Wilderness Act will be drastically modified or scrapped. By modifying the Act and making it user-friendly, wilderness will have a far better chance of surviving. I commend the bill to the House.