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## WHO GOES THERE! — TRADITIONAL RECREATION AND THE WORLD HERITAGE AREA

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The June/July 1992 edition of the *Tasmanian Conservationist* carried a letter of complaint from the Director of the Tasmanian Conservation Trust, Peg Putt, to the Federal Minister for the Environment, Ros Kelly, about last minute alterations to the World Heritage Area Management Plan. In urging the Minister to refuse the suggested changes, Putt made three interesting points. Firstly, she put the view that the changes flew in the face of an extensive and exhaustive public consultation process; secondly, that the plan was compiled by experts; and thirdly, that the government was exhibiting gross favouritism in only consulting selected so-called traditional user groups. While she was right in one sense, to a significant section of the Tasmanian population she was dead wrong on every count!

The explanation of this apparent contradiction largely rests on our differing cultural perceptions of the World Heritage Area, perceptions conditioned by European understandings of the Tasmanian environment. Historian Richard Flanagan has written of the development of the myth of south west Tasmania as a desolate waste land, of a land without people, of a place without history (Flanagan 1985). It was a modern expression of this myth that led scientists to believe that Aboriginals abandoned the south west after the last ice age, that no-

one could live in the rainforests. The same myth, albeit in different form, has sustained the environmental movement. In portraying the same country as wilderness it became important to claim that people had never lived there and that European use was necessarily exploitative and damaging.

This cultural view of the south-west (now the World Heritage Area) as an empty wilderness, as a land devoid of human heritage and spirit, still persists. It persists in the sense that while there are many scientists who study elements of the World Heritage Area there are few historians. It is reflected in the World Heritage nomination document where, apart from the 'scientific' values of previous Aboriginal occupation, the only cultural values identified of any importance were the remains of the convict gulag in Macquarie Harbour. It is a particular view reinforced by the fact that the majority of those whose task it is to manage the World Heritage Area are middle class, urban and cocooned in the warm partiality of their own scientific training.

The World Heritage Area is, of course, very much a human landscape. Its Aboriginal heritage is now much better appreciated. Its European heritage, however, is not so well understood or even acknowledged. For those who came to this island over the last two hundred years, the World Heritage Area was a frontier. For those individuals who crossed the frontier, people like the piners, the hunters, the graziers and the prospectors and those who chose to live beside it like the bush farmers, the frontier was a cultural forcing ground. Time and the generations of humanity did the rest, turning Europeans into Tasmanians. While the ways of the original frontiersmen may have passed, their ways of viewing the landscape have continued. They have continued with those who call themselves traditional recreationists, individuals who hark back to generations on the frontier, and who, through activities like hunting, horseriding or fishing, recreate the lifestyles of their forebears (Cubit 1991).

The annexation of areas of great significance to traditional recreationists such as the Central Plateau and Macquarie Harbour into the World Heritage Area in 1989, threw into sharp relief these two differing conceptions of the one landscape. What was wilderness to one, was a familiar and comfortable landscape to the other. What one saw as an empty land, the other read as the pages of a family chronicle. Whereas one saw the future best served by regulating and even excluding people, the other saw their cultural heritage under fundamental threat. Yet it was the bureaucrats, encouraged by Green support to see only the natural values of the area, who were responsible for designing, constructing and running the public consultation programme. They had the power of fabricating reality with their Draft Management Strategy, of defining the issues with their planning notesheets and of controlling responses by insisting on written submissions. They were responsible for reviewing the comments of others and

wrote the Draft Management Plan and early copies of the final Plan in their own image. In controlling the consultation process, they controlled the outcomes ignoring community comments that did not fit with their image of the world.

Thus, when Peg Putt spoke of an extensive and exhaustive public consultation process by the Department of Parks, Wildlife and Heritage, she was right. There was such a process but it had little value to the traditional recreationists whose views were devalued, whose values were seen as anachronistic and whose activities were regarded as 'inappropriate' in a World Heritage Area. She was also right when she said the Plan was compiled by experts. Their expertise, however, was in science and in natural landscapes. Without historians, sociologists or anthropologists on staff, they had little experience or sensitivity in recognising or understanding cultural landscapes. Finally, she was also correct in stating that, in so far as user groups were concerned, the government exhibited gross favouritism in only consulting traditional recreationists. What she may or may not have known or appreciated, however, was that those consultations were one of the few times when traditional groups were able to make themselves heard. Far from acting improperly, in sitting down with traditional recreationists the new government merely righted the wrongs and excesses permitted by the previous administration.

The claims the traditional recreationists put to the new government were the same that had been put to their predecessors for nearly three years. They are commonly known and included concerns about the curtailing of wallaby hunting in the Lake Augusta area, concerns about limitations imposed on horse riding access on the Plateau and other traditional areas, concerns about constraints on access by fishermen, and concerns about restrictions on recreational access around Macquarie Harbour. These activities, which pre-dated the nomination of the World Heritage Area, had been opposed by the bureaucrats, ostensibly on environmental grounds. In the majority of cases it was an argument that had little credibility. The reality is that all use, whatever its source, creates impacts. The challenge of management is to reduce those impacts to acceptable levels. In terms of, say, horse-riding, it was pointless and unfair to attempt to ban what amounted to one hundred horse-rider-days on the Plateau a year for their potential impacts when five thousand walkers a year used the same area without restriction. The arguments about impacts that should have been based on science always drifted, upon challenge, to arguments about perception, about who a horse might offend or whether or not it was 'right' to hunt for wallaby in a World Heritage Area. For groups for whom such activities are part of a long standing cultural tradition and who are more than willing to reduce their actual environmental impacts, such arguments were irrelevant and elitist.

With the final form of the plan not yet known, it is not possible to comment

on how the World Heritage Area Ministerial Council responded to the views of the traditional recreationists or to the arguments of Putt and others. Enough work has now been done, however, to demonstrate that the idea of an empty wilderness is both barren and incorrect. Decisions about the place of humans in the World Heritage Area can now not proceed in ignorance of the rich cultural heritage of the place. If those Tasmanians who have used and cared for the area for generations are excluded, it will be because of a conscious decision. In relation to the future management and acceptance of the World Heritage Area, that decision will be important. The fact, however, that objections to the vast majority of the concessions extracted from the bureaucrats under political duress had more to do with ideological images of 'appropriateness' than with actual environmental impacts, does not augur well for the future. It suggests a continued gulf in perception about the landscape and may well confirm the view of traditional recreationists that World Heritage Area status is a liability rather than an asset.

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#### POSTSCRIPT

I believe the final WHA Management Plan, released on September 18 1992, still fails to recognize the legitimate and responsible requests from traditional recreationists for reasonable access to the WHA. In some cases quite fundamental aspects of traditional activity and cultural identity have been denied. A response by traditional recreationists is still being formulated.