

What is Wilderness?

By John Sinclair

In 1987 I was contracted by the Australian Government to produce a Wilderness Strategy. I struggled over the definition of what constituted wilderness. Setting aside that “wilderness” may also be applied to a ‘political wilderness’ or ‘a neglected or abandoned area’ I focused only on the concept natural wilderness areas. In this FIDO Backgrounder Number 84 (October 2017) I am again wrestling with the concept of ‘wilderness’. Definitions of wilderness are widely variable and subject to individual perceptions of wilderness. However defined, wilderness plays a significant role in our lives as either a physical or vicarious challenge. For many it is essential to well-being.

The question of how large and how natural a wilderness area is seems to be very subjective and based on individual perceptions. The degree of primitiveness is also subject to large variation. Essentially the criteria people use to define wilderness falls within a spectrum that judges wilderness values by the distance from the nearest artifacts of modern civilization. The other great challenge is in assessing the value of wilderness to the state the mental health of modern humans. Purists insist that in wilderness areas, humans must meet Nature on Nature's terms. Wilderness areas are considered the most intact, undisturbed wild natural areas left on our planet—those last truly wild places that humans do not control and have not developed with roads, pipelines or other industrial infrastructure.

While most psychiatrists recognize the potential value of wilderness, they are aware that there is a minority of the population terrified by wilderness.

Defining wilderness

Generally there is a spectrum of views of wilderness in the many definitions:

- a tract or region uncultivated and uninhabited by humans This becomes complex when considering the extent to which Aboriginal occupation may have modified the land or the extent to which the land has changed since Aboriginals no longer tended an area.
- an area essentially undisturbed by human activity together with its naturally developed life community
- an empty or pathless area or region
- an area of land that has not been used to grow crops or had towns and roads built on it
- a wild and natural area in which few people live

The IUCN defines wilderness as *"A large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea retaining its natural character and influence, without permanent or significant habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition."*

Despite the proliferation of attempts to define wilderness. The common thread in most definitions tend to revolve around three essential criteria:

- naturalness/primitiveness,
- remoteness, and
- size.

Size

In Australia it is frequently pointed out that 25,000 hectares (60,000 acres) should be the minimum which should be considered as wilderness. However, in the United States areas as small as 2,000 hectare can be considered as wilderness although this does not occur in practice. However in some people's mind wilderness can be much smaller. Erstwhile Mines Minister Ron Camm told the Queensland Parliament:

From the point of view of walking in the scrub to view its natural attractions, I can assure the Hon. members that if one gets into the centre of eight acres of scrub, one sees as much as it is possible to see from the centre of a 48,000-acre area of scrub. (Hansard 19 Sep 1962)

Similar views remain widely held in relation to the extent of wilderness.

Western Australian legislation has defined wilderness as meeting a quality rating standard and having a minimum size threshold of 8,000 hectares in temperate areas or 20,000 hectares in arid and tropical areas.

Remoteness

The most frequently used criteria for determining what is wilderness is the distance from roads and tracks although this varies significantly with how people view wilderness on the spectrum. There is almost universal acceptance of the rule on the inadmissibility of mechanized vehicles to wilderness although some may waive this to make allowance for management vehicles and helicopters. Some people insist that to really confront Nature one needs to be largely self-reliant and more than half a day's walk from the nearest road or track. Others accept that wilderness might come tight to the edge of a road or even that a wilderness area needn't be entirely trackless.

Naturalness/primitiveness

Essentially there is a requirement in most people's minds that wilderness needs to be a natural outdoor area. Rainforest, tundra or desert may all qualify as wilderness but there are expectations that open areas such as desert or tundra need to be larger than forested or mountainous wilderness areas. There is an expectation that a wilderness should be relatively unmodified by modern civilization. That doesn't exclude indigenous people retaining traditional culture and lifestyles.

Fraser Island (Kgari) as a wilderness

By any definition the most northern parts of K'gari (Fraser Island) are wilderness. According to some purists, it may be the only remaining true wilderness in South East Queensland. It depends on personal definitions just how far south that wilderness extends. Many people consider the whole island a wilderness. However it is considered it is rare and increasingly precious.

Wilderness is almost synonymous with adventure on K'gari and FIDO's early safari produced countless adventures. Gone are the days of those early FIDO safaris where we travelled anywhere on the island where our trusty (now rusty) 6 wheel drive trucks could go.

Gone too are the pioneering adventurous expeditions described by one of Australia's great poets, **Judith Wright**. Describing her trip there in about 1947 to the Fraser Island Environmental Inquiry 28 years later she recounted:

I went across on one of the timber loading boats from Maryborough. There was almost no access to Fraser Island for tourists at that time and I worked my way across as cook and tied up in a mangrove creek. I do not like to remember the experience of the sand flies. After leaving that area, I walked. There was almost no way of seeing the island except on foot. I walked across to the ocean beach and through a good deal of the rainforest and it was an extraordinary experience for me. I had not been long in Queensland, I had not seen the kind of landscape that the north coastal Queensland areas offered at all. It was my first experience of rainforest itself and I found it very moving indeed, and I would say that at that time walking through Fraser Island was a more exciting experience in its then more or less untouched state than driving across it was the last time I went.

Of course, when you are walking, when you are actually camping in a place, you do have an experience of it that cannot be provided when you are in a vehicle, which is one reason why I think that the wilderness experience of Fraser Island should be preserved and that access should be more by personal experience that I have never forgotten. ... As I think during my whole three days on the island we met only three people and they were all Forestry employees. The beach was totally deserted as far as one could see. ...There was hardly anybody on the island at all. Yet, when I returned in 1973, the same experience was there quite clearly."

"These are the qualities of wilderness - the qualities of the ocean-side wilderness- which Fraser Island does particularly represent and the water, the lakes and the rainforest, which Patrick White describes so well. They give a sense of awe, I think, of sensitivity towards the landscape, and I feel that that sense of awe pervades both the novel and the paintings. I know very few children - urban children - who have been able to experience, as people of my age did, the joy of loneliness on a coastline, of beauty experienced without human interference."

Leading Australian composer Peter Sculthorpe described the indelible impression made by his K'gari first encounter in the 1960s:

'Two old fishermen took us across to the island and into a great river there, with mangroves down to the water's edge, and the coast of Australia far on the horizon. The fishermen had an ancient truck and drove us across the island to the Pacific.... There were things that we had never seen before, thousands of ibis wading in lagoons, enormous sea-eagles, and tree-eating trees 200 feet high. And rainforest almost like night but for thin slivers of sunlight, the most incredible and beautiful birdlife, a beach 80 miles long with the Pacific rolling in on it, packs of dingos and wild horses, sands like the Sahara and shining white, rotting ships wrecked on the reefs and driven back to the beach, midden heaps with native stone implements, great salt lagoons all teeming with fish.'

Protecting K'gari's Wilderness

Throughout FIDO's whole history maintaining and managing northern Fraser Island as a wilderness area to provide solitude, physical and mental challenge and primitive recreation has been a major priority. FIDO has had a great appreciation of the area since a FIDO team explored the most northern part of K'gari on foot in 1971 to successfully challenge a proposal to quarry silica sand there.

For 25 years FIDO's stated Management Goals have included *maintaining the role of the Great Sandy Region in coastal Southern Queensland as a major resource of undeveloped natural open space, especially with respect to existing and potential wilderness values.*

To these ends FIDO

- Has advocated that areas with high natural values should be kept free of major tourist infrastructure, which is more appropriately sited on the nearby mainland
- Seeks to preserve remaining large undisturbed natural areas for scientific observation, wildlife conservation and maintenance of genetic diversity; and the primitive, nature-oriented and 'wilderness' quality of recreational experiences offered in such places;
- Attempts to ensure that isolated areas remain primitive essentially offering wilderness experience for self-reliant visitors free from roads, human interference, obvious development or evidence of technology; and
- Aims to enhance wilderness conditions by phasing out incompatible facilities and allowing sites of potential to revert to wilderness as soon as possible.