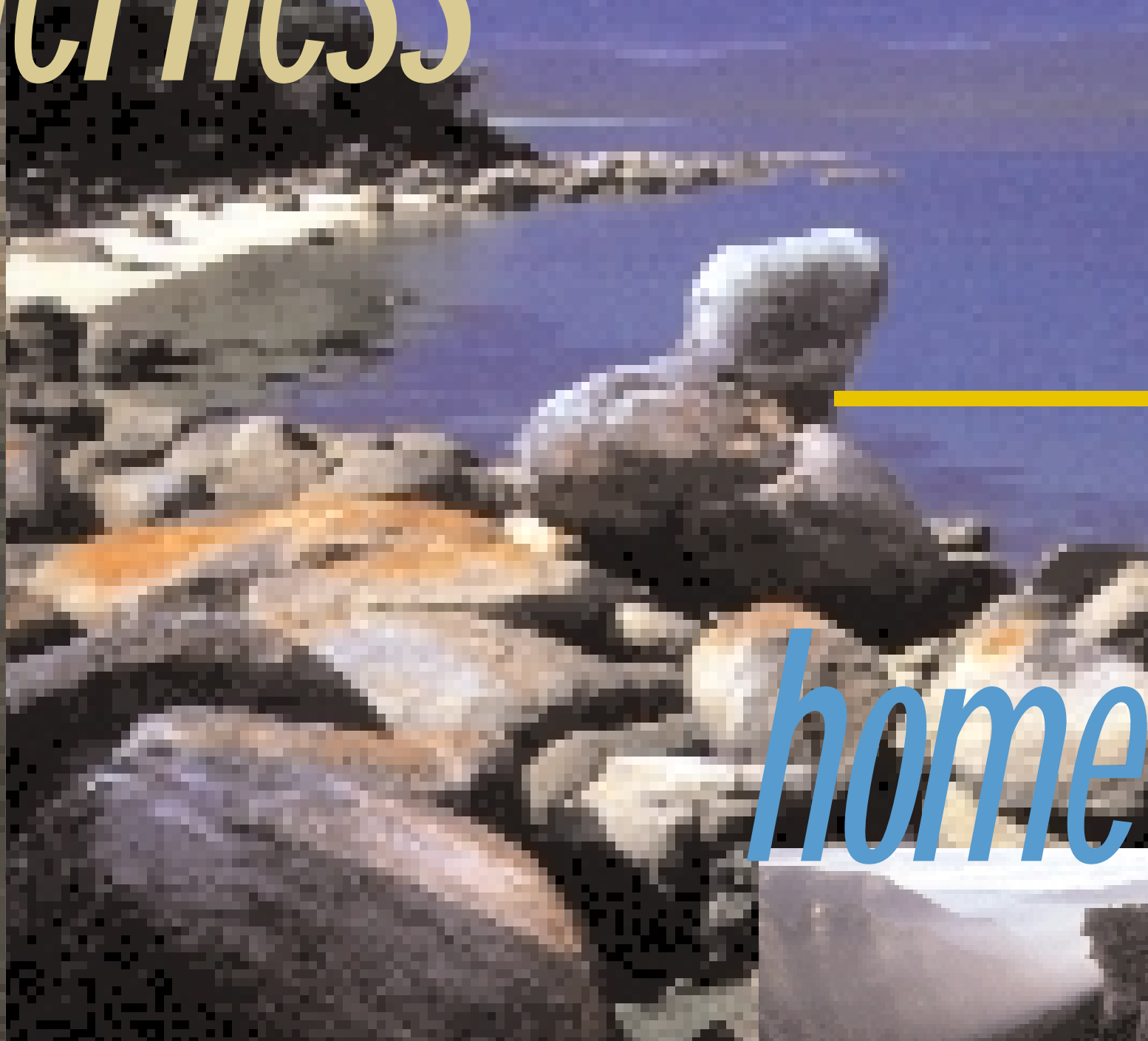


*wilderness*



*home*



wilderness

WE CALL IT  
home



AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE  
COMMISSION

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# wilderness

W E C A L L I T H O M E

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**W**ILDERNESS — for most of us it conjures up images of deep forested valleys or vast outback expanses. While the word is commonly used to describe those places that are remote from the influences and structures of modern society, all have been shaped to some extent by human hands. The evidence of human occupation and use is all around — scatterings of stone tools, a rock wall decorated with hand stencils, a stone arrangement on a hillside, a coastal midden of shells. Even our diverse flora and fauna have been shaped by humans through millennia of land management practices by Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous peoples' connection with the land, including wilderness areas, remains today. Such areas are often crisscrossed with dreaming tracks and are sources of food, shelter and spiritual sustenance. Every rock hole, plant and animal has a name and a function. It is the country where grandmothers grew up, where fathers take children to fish, where aunts show nephews and nieces how to hunt and gather food. The land remains full of stories. For Indigenous Australians wilderness is, simply, home.

Many Indigenous people believe they have a continuing obligation, responsibility and right to use, protect, maintain and manage such places. For these people, retaining or regaining access to, and use of, their country is critical to the long-term survival of their cultures. In recent years, various government park management authorities and environment groups have accepted this position. They have also recognised the nature conservation benefits of re-introducing Indigenous land management practices, such as traditional burning regimes, into parks and reserves. Gradually, local Indigenous communities have gained a greater say in the manage-

ment of some protected areas. In a few, such as at Uluru-Kata Tjuta and Kakadu National Parks, title has been handed back to the traditional owners who now manage the parks in partnership with government agencies.

The means by which Indigenous people use and manage their country has changed. Today, they use vehicles to access their cultural sites and firearms with which to hunt. To insist that Indigenous use of wilderness places be restricted to traditional practices is to treat their cultures as museum pieces, denying their evolution. Ultimately, there is a need to balance the sometimes competing needs of different sectors of society with the need to care for the long-term health of natural country.

Recognising these issues, the Australian Heritage Commission has developed a policy that acknowledges and respects the rights of Indigenous people to maintain and strengthen their spiritual and cultural relationships with wilderness places (<http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/wwr/cwp/indig.html>). During 1998 the Commission also convened a meeting of representatives from Indigenous communities and land councils, government land management agencies and conservation groups to discuss Indigenous aspirations for areas reserved or zoned as wilderness. The meeting produced a set of broad principles for wilderness management, the Malimup Communiqué.

Underlying the Communiqué principles is a commitment that Indigenous use of wilderness areas will ensure long term protection for all natural and cultural values. Importantly, conditions for Indigenous use of wilderness areas will be agreed with the relevant park management agency and the impacts of this use will be monitored by all stakeholders.



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The Communiqué advocates joint management of wilderness areas by rightful Indigenous communities in decisions that affect their rights and the maintenance of their cultures. It addresses key issues for Indigenous communities including:

- *involvement in relevant policy formulation, management plan preparation and day-to-day management;*
- *incorporation of Indigenous knowledge and land use practices into wilderness management regimes;*
- *direct management of places and matters of Indigenous significance by rightful Indigenous people;*
- *sustainable hunting and gathering;*
- *limited vehicular access along existing management tracks; and*
- *the need for accommodation where this is required in order to maintain their culture.*

The full text of the Malimup Communiqué can be found on the Environment Australia web page at: <http://www.environment.gov.au/heritage/wwr/cwp/malimup.html>

The Communiqué is a step towards marrying social justice and cultural survival with the long term protection of some of our most cherished wild places.

wilderness

MACQUARIE DICTIONARY—1985

**wilderness** /ˈwɪldərnəs/, *n.* **1.** a wild region, as of forest or desert; a waste; a tract of land inhabited only by wild animals.

wilderness

MACQUARIE DICTIONARY

—THIRD EDITION 1997

**wilderness** /ˈwɪldərnəs/, *n.* **1.** a large tract of land remote at its core from mechanised access or settlement, substantially unmodified by modern technological society or capable of being restored to that state, and of sufficient size to make practicable the long-term protection of its natural systems

wilderness

THE DEFINITION USED BY THE AUSTRALIAN HERITAGE COMMISSION

wilderness areas are large areas in which ecological processes continue with minimal change caused by modern development.

Indigenous custodianship and customary practices have been, and in many places continue to be, significant factors in creating what non-indigenous people refer to as wilderness.



wilderness

## finding common ground

*Pat Dodson, former Chairperson of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, outlines the imperative for environmentalists and Indigenous people to resolve their differences and find common ground.*

Environmentalists have the potential to come closest to Aboriginal people in their understanding and appreciation of the importance of our land and sea. Over the last thirty years, while Aboriginal people were fighting for land rights on the basis of a centuries-old bond with the land and their sacred duty to nourish and guard that land for all time, environmentalists were fighting to preserve the land and sea, the flora and fauna and the atmosphere from overuse and abuse.

Both these fights have been fought valiantly and successfully. The fight is not over, but the concept of land and country is fixed in the minds of most Australians...

For the sake of this country, reconciliation and a close working relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is not an option but a necessity. It is imperative that the environmental movement and Indigenous peoples work out the common ground between them, understand where they are both coming from and create forums and networks to work together and to sort out differences.

Concepts such as wilderness, Indigenous ownership and joint management of national parks, and the need to ensure the survival of species have led to differences between the two groups. These differences are not irreconcilable if we sit down in the bush together, let the land speak to us and give ourselves time to understand each other.

(from *Habitat Australia*, April 1997)

PHOTOGRAPHY CREDITS

1 *Rob Jing*, 2 *Bob Massel*, 3 *David Tatnall*, 4 *Kerry Trapnell*, 5 *Dave Noble*

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