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In wilderness is the preservation of the world

Ralf Buckley, *Director of the International Centre for Ecotourism Research at Griffith University for the past 19 years, has written widely on ecotourism and environmental management. The following argument for wilderness and against commercial development in national parks is a condensed version of an article first published in 'Online Opinion', March 2010. Copyright remains with the author.*

Wilderness and sustainability

Can we still 'afford' wilderness? And if so, should we aim to use it 'sustainably'? The straight answers are: yes, and no. But the terminology is misleading.

The total cash cost to buy all the world's remaining areas of high biological diversity at current local land prices is estimated at \$20 billion per year for ten years. This is less than annual US expenditure on soft drinks. So yes, the world can afford it.

We rely on relatively undisturbed natural ecosystems to clean the dirty air and water which emanate endlessly from our cities. Wilderness areas, especially oceans and tropical grasslands and forests, also absorb atmospheric carbon to mitigate human-induced climate change.

The only realistic way to get carbon out of the atmosphere is to put it back in the soil, or (better) keep it there. 'Biochar' is an artificial approach; it's much cheaper to keep areas under native vegetation.

Wilderness areas contain the genetic diversity that underpins our food, textile and pharmaceutical industries, and allows us to keep breeding new varieties of staple food crops and livestock.

Ten years ago, economists calculated that the recurrent financial value of goods and services which humans derive from nature is at least twice as large as the entire global economy: many tens of trillions of dollars every year.

Most of this is 'ecosystem services' such as clean air and water, which rely on wilderness. So wilderness is something we definitely can't afford to lose.

Can we use wilderness sustainably?

Given that we can afford to keep wilderness and can't afford to lose it, is it possible to use it 'sustainably'? This is a misleading question.

We do already use wilderness, all the time, to keep the planet habitable for humans. Every breath you take and every drop you drink uses wilderness.

And since humans as biological creatures are completely dependent on the natural environment, they can only continue to survive as long as there are also areas where that environment is not being consumed: that is, wilderness.

For the world as a whole to remain 'sustainable', a place where humans can continue to live for the foreseeable future, wilderness must be kept as wilderness.

Can we afford wilderness?

A much more important question is whether we can afford the continuing loss of wilderness worldwide.

Wilderness (in this case, Mt Buffalo NP) getting on with the job of supplying ecosystem services.

PHOTO: GEOFF DURHAM

Impacts

There are four different ways, apart from planetary life support, in which people want to use wilderness.

Wilderness outside protected areas suffers continual attrition and degradation from high-impact human uses ranging from agricultural clearance, industrial forestry and fisheries to mining and oil production.

These activities are 'business as usual'. But they continually reduce the world's remaining supply of wilderness, on which we all depend for survival. The area protected within national parks is not enough on its own.

Even within protected areas, wilderness is still subject to some attrition. The oil and mining industries lobby to operate inside parks. But this has enormous impacts.

At the other end of the scale, most national parks are used for recreation as well as conservation. This does have impacts, but they are relatively minor and manageable.

Spending time in parks also saves on public health, hospital and aged-care costs. 'Healthy Parks Healthy People' is not just a Parks Victoria marketing tag. It's part of the state budget.

Commercial tourism

Midway between the mining industry and the individual hiker lies the commercial tourism industry. National parks are major drawcards for both domestic and international tourists. Three-quarters of all overseas visitors to Australia visit at least one national park.

The commercial tourism industry gains by selling these tourists their transport, accommodation and some activities. A quarter of the Australian tourism industry bases its businesses in natural areas.

In most of the world, tourist accommodation and commercial tourism hubs are in gateway areas outside the parks themselves, and all activities in protected areas are controlled by the park management agency. This approach works well even in very heavily-visited parks, such as those of India and China.

Not surprisingly, the commercial property development sector sees publicly owned parks and wilderness areas as a plum prize, an opportunity to profit at the public expense.

If property developers can build tourist accommodation inside a park, then the attraction, infrastructure, operational management costs and marketing are all publicly subsidised.

Exclusive

If in addition a tourism developer can negotiate an exclusive right to provide accommodation and retail services in a particular park, that operator also gains a monopoly rent.

But this imposes inequitable costs on the parks agency, on less wealthy independent visi-

tors, on other tourism providers and regional industry, and on the wilderness areas themselves. It is neither affordable nor sustainable.

The tourism industry calls this 'partnership'. But it's not a partnership in a business sense. Tourism operators want to use and control parks resources, but not the reverse.

Tourism property developers argue that they can make money for parks. But where tour operators have to pay park fees already, they complain bitterly.

Park agencies in five developing countries get more than 40% of their operating funds from tourism. But this proportion is high only because government funding is low.

And they earn their tourism revenue directly from individual tourists, via entry fees. Commercial tour operators contribute less than 5%, in fact generally less than 1%.

There are more than 20,000 national parks worldwide. Less than 1% have any kind of private tourism infrastructure; and most of those either pre-date park establishment or are on pre-existing enclaves of private land.

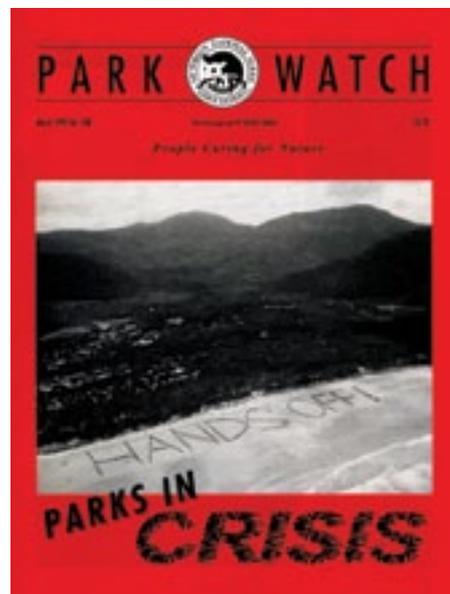
Private tourism development can also impose huge costs on parks agencies, especially if something goes wrong. The Thredbo landslide is a famous Australian case.

The idea that a hotel inside a park will somehow contribute to conservation is not supported by evidence. It's just lobbying.

And people actually don't want hotels in parks. They want to be able to go to parks cheaply, and camp and enjoy nature. When the Victorian Government proposed a luxury lodge in Wilsons Promontory National Park, Victorians lodged thousands of objections. People want wilderness the way it is.

As Thoreau said more than 150 years ago, wilderness really is the hope of the world. It is essential for sustainability, social and economic as well as environmental.

And it only works if we leave it the way it is.



Thank you for supporting our Parks under Threat appeal!

We're delighted with the generous donations we've received in support of our work to protect our national parks.

You can still support the appeal by calling 9347 5188 or donating online at www.donate.vnpa.org.au. All gifts of \$2 and over made by 30 June will be tax deductible this financial year.

We've done it before and we can do it again! *Park Watch* cover, March 1997, during the "Hands Off!" campaign against a proposed luxury lodge at Tidal River, Wilsons Promontory NP.