

The Wilderness Society's *WildCountry* Program

An interview with its National Coordinator, Virginia Young

Compiled by Tein McDonald

The WildCountry program boldly aims to offer 'a future for Australia's wilderness and biodiversity throughout and beyond the 21st Century'. This is to be achieved through building partnerships — one of the most important being a formal partnership with ecologists.



Figure 1. The *WildCountry* program, established to foster collaborative conservation and restoration across Australia, will take markedly different approaches in the already highly fragmented southern half of Australia (where restoration will be the emphasis) compared to Australia's north (where emphasis will be on protecting vast, intact areas needed to support species such as the nationally Endangered Brulga, *Grus rubicundus*, pictured here at Karumba floodplain in Queensland's Gulf lowlands). (Photo courtesy of Wayne Lawler/EcoPix.net.)

TM: People are only starting to hear about the *WildCountry* program and are gradually appreciating the enormity of its potential importance. Can you tell us what it is about and, especially, what was its genesis?

VY: We have been talking about *WildCountry* inside The Wilderness Society since 1997. We didn't call it *WildCountry* in the early days, but we were aware we needed to have a long-term framework

for our conservation work. Sure, we were confident that we were doing great things by saving fabulous bits of bush, but we were also aware we did not have a 'forever' framework. We were essentially putting out 'bushfires' and stopping inappropriate developments. So, for some time we've been looking for a framework that would encompass a more proactive vision and provide a long-term future for Australia's biodiversity.

Box 1. *WildCountry* — the Vision

The Wilderness Society, as most Australians will be aware, has its roots in a passion to protect Australia's wild places and has a 30-year history of drawing public attention to critical issues and proposing alternative plans. However, protecting the little pristine wilderness that remains across large parts of Australia is not enough to secure a long-term future for Australia's wilderness and wildlife.

The *WildCountry* vision is different because it centres on identifying the ecological processes that underpin Australia's diverse landscapes and protecting and/or restoring not just small patches of country, but entire ecosystems, along with the ecological processes that drive and underpin them.

Harry Recher, member of the Science Council, puts it this way 'An important difference between the *WildCountry* concept and the reserve system being developed in Australia is the theme of "unifying and linking" and not excluding degraded lands from conservation initiatives. A primary goal of *WildCountry* is "to produce an Australia-wide, comprehensive system of interconnected core protected areas, each surrounded and linked by lands managed under conservation objectives. Eventually every region of the continent would be represented." This network of protected areas will embrace wilderness areas and national parks, and use conservation agreements with private land holders and indigenous management/ownership to buffer and link core conservation areas. A prime goal is "To cover all possible environmental and landscape variations in order to ensure maximum survival and evolutionary potential of biodiversity".' (Recher 2003: 221)

The underpinning aims of *WildCountry* as devised by the Science Council are to assist conservation planning by focusing on the need for connectivity at all spatial and temporal scales; focusing on ecological flows (e.g. migration, dispersal of genes, ecosystem movement in response to climate change, rivers transporting water and nutrients from one ecosystem to another). *WildCountry* combines the two principle approaches to conservation of biodiversity: 'protection' of extant nature, and 'rehabilitation' of ecosystems which have been degraded. It aims to generate new, cutting-edge science, to analyse current national biodiversity and environmental data sets to give a far better picture of the state of Australia's biodiversity.

Information in this Box was derived from material prepared by The Wilderness Society's WildCountry team.

TM: What is the vision and how did it evolve?

VY: The *WildCountry* vision is unashamedly ambitious. It is to protect and restore not just small patches of country, but entire ecosystems, along with the ecological processes that drive and underpin them and involving every element of Australia's biodiversity, in each part of the country. So this is an inspirational vision not just for the next few years, or decades, but for the next few centuries and beyond (Box 1, Fig. 1).

And this vision did not evolve in isolation. It evolved over a few years in discussion with the scientists that we would consult from time to time in our work. We had heard about the Wildlands Project initiative in the US which aims to stem the disappearance of wildlife and wilderness across every region of North America, and realized we should examine it for its applicability to Australia. That really started

people thinking because Wildlands has a big focus on top carnivores. While we do have top carnivores and there are a whole lot of important trophic relationships in Australia, the scientists we talked to didn't think they were necessarily the major issue. Rather, the major issue was rebuilding linkages and connectivity in the landscape for a range of ecological processes. So an interesting dialogue began with a group of scientists, leading to the first meeting of scientists in April 2000 and the formation of the *WildCountry* Science Council in 2001 (Box 2, Fig. 2). It really wasn't until the end of 2002 when we received a substantial major private donation that we were able to kick-start the science work.

TM: What does the Science Council actually do?

VY: We have asked the Science Council to direct their considerable expertise to

devising a scientific framework that would underpin the *WildCountry* project (Box 3). Our ambition was to 'think big' both in terms of time and space to protect what remains of our precious heritage. and it turns out that 'thinking big' is exactly what scientists are telling us must happen if Australia is to even begin the process of ensuring the survival of the continent's biota.

All Council members are volunteers; we just cover their expenses to Science Council meetings. So clearly the vision is something the Science Council members are also committed to personally. And perhaps they also value the opportunity to contribute in a space that is not politicised, where scientists don't have to compromise, where they don't have to second guess what the political realities would be, where they can give the benefit of their expertise and knowledge in a completely unfettered

Box 2. The *WildCountry* Science Council

An initiative of The Wilderness Society, the *WildCountry* Science Council is made up of leaders in the field of conservation biology, landscape ecology and related disciplines. Their role is to ensure that *WildCountry* projects are soundly scientific-based and draw upon cutting-edge conservation principles and methods.

The Council first met in May 2000 and has developed a framework based on the recognition that biodiversity will have its best chance in the long-term if ecological processes and environmental drivers that nurture and support biodiversity, are preserved. This framework highlights the importance of large-scale ecological processes and the landscape linkages needed to maintain the necessary connections, interactions and flows. The maintenance of such large-scale 'connectivity processes' needs to be integrated into landscape planning and management systems to help promote the long-term conservation of biodiversity across Australia in the coming centuries and millennia.

The Science Council currently consists of: Emeritus Professor Michael Soulé (Co-Chair); Emeritus Professor Henry Nix (Co-Chair); Professor Richard Hobbs; Dr Robb Lesslie; Associate Professor Brendan Mackey; Professor Hugh Possingham; Emeritus Professor Harry Recher; Professor Jann Williams; and Dr John Woinarski.

Research priorities are to:

- Investigate a priority set of large-scale ecological processes and the necessary landscape linkages
- Develop a computer based planning tool that assimilates the results of the above analyses and prepares information and options for use by stakeholders
- Integrate stakeholder and local knowledge into the planning system

First steps

The Wilderness Society has secured the funding to enable foundational scientific work to commence. The Australian National University, has been contracted, in collaboration with Science Council members and state-based partners, to devise a scientific framework, establish analytical procedures, assimilate key data sets, and undertake preliminary analyses. Analyses and field research is proposed for northern Australia, south-west Western Australia, and South Australia in partnership with the SA State government. Various continental-scaled analysis will also be undertaken to provide the necessary ecological context for the regional projects.

[Information in this Box was derived from material prepared by The Wilderness Society's *WildCountry* team.]

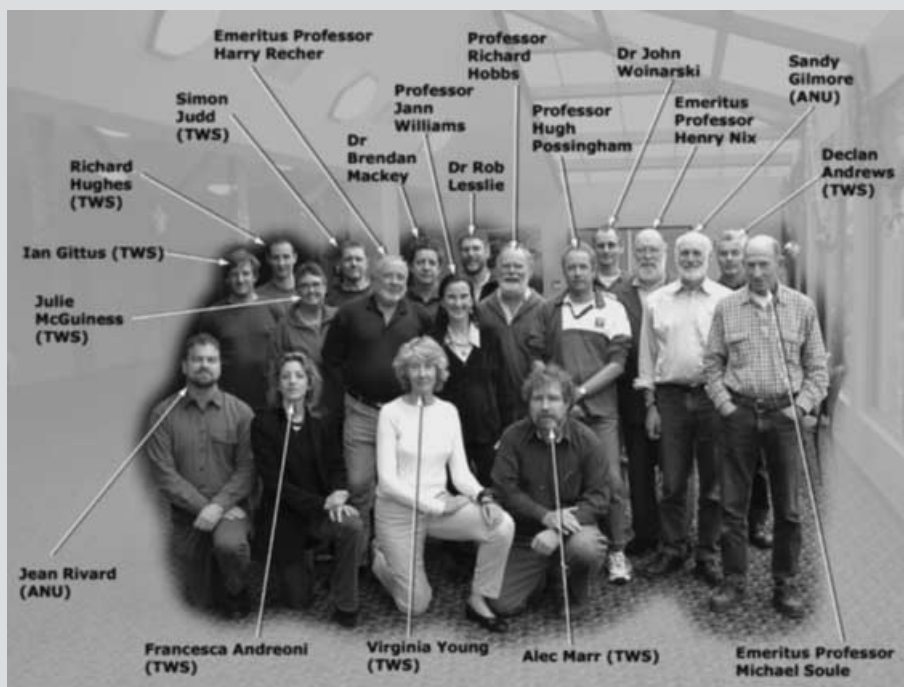


Figure 2. The *WildCountry* program represents a partnership between The Wilderness Society and the independent ecologists who make up the *WildCountry* Science Council, with the purpose of enabling the *WildCountry* program's ambitious conservation and restoration projects to be guided by ecologically meaningful principles and priorities. Basic to the partnership is a mutual recognition of the importance of conserving linkages and ecological processes on a large scale. (Photo: The Wilderness Society Collection.)

way. That, to me, is very exciting. To the Science Council we say 'Don't worry about the politics. We know *we* have to worry about implementation, *we* have to worry about the politics. We just want your best, independent, advice. We need your help'. So it is a wonderful contribution and really very valued by our organization and other organizations we're working with in key project areas.

The *WildCountry* Science Council will have an important role in each project area. However, the scientific underpinning to improve conservation planning for the whole of Australia will take some time to pull together. In the short term, we plan to have *WildCountry* Science Council meetings at alternative locations where they're accessible to people involved in particular projects, so they can ask questions and use the Council as a sounding board.

TM: What are we learning from the Science Council already?

VY: Well, one thing we are learning is that there will not be a single formula for the entire country. The contrast between the principles and implementation in northern Australia and southern Australia will be quite great. The vast savanna country of northern Australia, one of the world's last great wild frontiers, stretches some 2500 km from the Kimberley to Cape York and covers 100 million ha. It contains more extensive, intact systems than the highly fragmented landscapes of southern Australia (Fig. 3). It is fair to say that most people would be horrified (governments included) at the idea of applying the sort of benchmarks in the northern half of Australia that are being talked about for the southern half — benchmarks such as conserving only 15% of each ecosystem! In the north, do we really intend to clear 85% of the landscape?

So in northern Australia we are trying to understand what we've got and prevent the damaging activities that have been undertaken in the south. In the south, it is certainly about protecting remaining large areas of bush, but it is also about looking at restoration and reinstating connectivity to conserve and rehabilitate ecological processes at a range of scales. Understanding what ecological processes require connec-

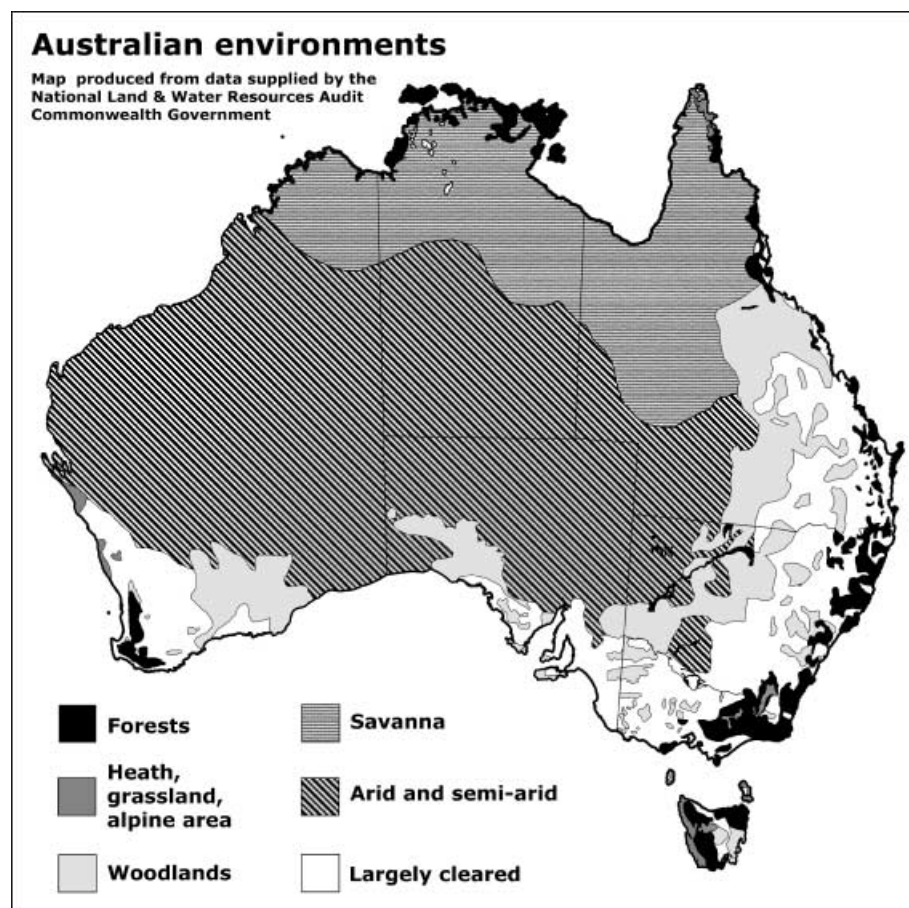


Figure 3. Land clearing data show that much of the forest and, particularly woodland of southern Australia, has been cleared, leaving only central Australia's arid and semiarid zones and the vast savanna country of northern Australia, relatively intact. Targets for vegetation retention and reintegration that need to be applied in the southern half of Australia will be understandably lower than those that need to be applied in the northern half, where the extensive conservation of ecosystem processes is still possible. (Map courtesy The Wilderness Society.)

tivity and how to return and/or restore it, is a central challenge for *WildCountry*.

It also helps to think of the program as having two strands that can be applied variously to the north and the south. There's the 'protected area network design' strand that is relevant across Australia, but there is also a 'natural resource management strand'. The scientific principles will be relevant for both strands and what emphasis we give to each in different parts of the landscape will depend on the partnerships formed and our capacity and the urgency of some threats. In northern Australia it will be very much on understanding why we are losing so many species, understanding the threats, and trying to develop a new economic paradigm so we don't see the

landscape devastated like we have seen in southern Australia. There are current pushes to dam rivers and to introduce irrigated crops such as cotton, so there are really quite critical contemporary issues to be addressed and a need for the best available science to be factored into planning. But people have to have livelihoods, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal. So at its most idealistic level, we are seeking models for an economy that don't depend upon broad scale land clearing, damming the rivers, and destroying what are now a very rare set of natural values on earth... that's what we will aim for. For example, on Cape York Peninsula (14 million ha), we, the Australian Conservation Foundation, some indigenous groups, and



Figure 4. Across many areas in Australia, including the north, Aboriginal people maintain an extraordinary depth of knowledge about their surroundings. Pictured here is Tom Birdingal from Doidji outstation near the Arafura Swamp, central Arnhem Land, who has a detailed knowledge of local ecosystems and traditional, conservation-based land management practices. The Science Council recognizes that Aboriginal knowledge of Australian environments can add a significantly different perspective to the understanding derived from scientific training and research and seeks to encourage a continuation of that knowledge and the land management practices that flow from it. (Photo courtesy John Woinarski.)

other conservation groups are attempting to devise alternative economic models, and in particular, examining what a 'conservation economy' would look like.

TM: So it is not all going to be able to be based on ecotourism?

VY: No, that's right. A lot will, but not all (Fig. 5). Gondwana Link is a case in

point, down in the south-west of Western Australia. (Box 4, Fig. 6.) For the restorative part of that project, people have been looking at mixed species plantations (planted for both biodiversity and income for the farmer) as well as floriculture and a range of different agricultural activities that are more sympathetic with retaining and restoring biodiversity. Integrating biodiversity and

agricultural goals will be a major challenge in many parts of Australia. Hopefully, some of the knowledge gained will assist landholders, in even radically disturbed landscapes, to take steps to improve the chances of our flora and fauna surviving.

TM: Speaking of on-ground actions, how can you envisage actually carrying out projects simultaneously across the country at a range of scales?

VY: That is a challenge but we envisage addressing this partly through partnerships with other organizations, partly through encouraging governments to improve their own programmes, and forming new programs where appropriate. We anticipate there'll be different approaches in different parts of Australia but our emphasis to date has been on working in partnerships with existing groups, helping to maximize the value of everybody's efforts where we can. A couple of examples of this approach are the Northern Australian Environmental Alliance and the Gondwana Link Project in Western Australia. (Box 4, Fig. 6.)

The Northern Australian Environmental Alliance is a partnership of every major conservation group that has worked or intends to work in northern Australia — in recognition of the fact that community resources are pretty thin on the ground in the north of Australia. Partners include The Wilderness Society, ACE, the Environment Centre of the Northern Territory, Cairns and Far North Environment Centre, the Queensland Conservation Council, and Environs Kimberley. The Alliance has asked The Wilderness Society, through the *WildCountry* Science Council, to provide the scientific framework and understanding of the north to help develop an effective approach to conservation planning and natural resource management in the north.

Gondwana Link in Western Australia is a formal partnership between Greening Australia, Australian Bush Heritage Fund, The Wilderness Society, Fitzgerald Biosphere Group, the Mallee Fowl Preservation Society and a number of other groups (Box 4). The Wilderness Society had been working away at *WildCountry* in a fairly low-key way and seeding ideas into Gondwana Link. But so has Greening Australia with its Living Landscapes project, so this is not a

Box 3. Views from the Science Council



Richard Hobbs, *Professor, School of Environmental Science, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia.*

What really interests me about *WildCountry* is that it is trying to tackle the larger issues of what it actually means to conserve and restore something on a large enough scale to make a difference. I've been standing up for a long time now and waving my hands about on the issue of landscape scale conservation and restoration that the *WildCountry* program is trying to tackle. But *WildCountry* is actually lifting that up to an even bigger-picture level, to a regional and even a continental scale. So it's nice to be involved with a bunch of people who are doing more than waving their arms around.

There needs to be some sort of catalyst to get things going and I am more and more convinced that it is with these NGOs that the action is really happening now. I find that they've actually got more flexibility than agencies but are very complementary to what the federal and State agencies do with their limited resources. The Gondwana Link Project in WA, for example, has been just fantastic at bringing together people and groups who wouldn't have got together otherwise. And it has triggered everyone to lift their horizons a bit and move away from their remnants-based or species-based focus to look at the bigger picture. And the thing I like best about the Gondwana Link philosophy is that every bit in the jigsaw has to make sense in its own right. So you're not actually subtracting anything, you're adding more. A project that is valid in its own right — that is also adding into this bigger picture — must be a win-win situation for everyone.



Brendan Mackey, *Reader, School of Resources, Environment and Society, Australian National University, Canberra, Australian Capital Territory.*

My involvement with the Science Council is to help development of a science program in support of the long-term conservation of biodiversity in Australia. That's not to undermine in any way all the good work that has been done to develop policies and programs at national and state level. The Australian and State governments have been proactive in developing policies and funding research and conservation projects for particular conservation issues. But, I think it's true to say that we do not have a scientific-based long-term framework for conservation in this country.

To protect what is left we certainly need an improved network of protected areas, but we know that there is a social limit to the percentage of Australia that is going to become a protected area. So protected areas are essential but insufficient, in themselves, for the long-term conservation of biodiversity. The only solution is to see those protected areas as just one dimension embedded within a broader landscape matrix. And we need to start managing the whole, the reserves and the matrix, on a landscape-wide basis. This means forming partnerships at a regional level with all Australian land managers including lessees and landowners, indigenous communities and local governments.

This approach is needed not just to buffer reserves but because there are many larger-scale processes in operation in Australia that occur over long time frames and at landscape, regional and continental spatial scales. One example is variation that arises from the high year-to-year variability of rainfall across the continent throughout central semiarid and arid zones. Many of the inland fauna are highly dispersive, having life history attributes that enable them to move in response to this highly variable rainfall, water availability and resultant primary productivity. This phenomenon presents a real challenge in terms of long-term conservation planning and is one of the main scientific perspectives that will underpin the kind of landscape-wide, regional-focused partnerships that The Wilderness Society are talking about.

In recent years, many commonwealth and state organizations have been spending a lot of resources pulling together available spatial data on all sorts of variables to do with land cover, vegetation, land use and infrastructure. So part of the task of the Science Council is to help draw these together in a form so that they can be readily applied to conservation assessment and planning issues. We are also synthesizing into a systematic coherent framework, the relevant scientific principles around which *WildCountry* projects can be designed. We are tying in, where possible, with relevant stakeholders

(be they government agencies, communities or NGOs) and are keen to see that those collaborations spread. We are also talking with our colleagues in the different States who are actively involved in conservation assessment and planning issues. There are hundreds of great ecological scientists in Australia, but there are only about ten of us on this committee. So, most of the expertise needed to promote the long-term conservation of biodiversity in Australia lies outside the Science Council, not in it! We're very much dependent on our colleagues' expertise and input on particular issues.



Hugh Possingham, *Professor, The Ecology Centre, Departments of Zoology and Mathematics, The University of Queensland, St Lucia, Queensland.*

WildCountry needs a conservation 'decision support tool' to do some fundamental research to help us try to conserve 'functional' ecosystems. So, I see my role on the Science Council as being to extend existing planning software to allow it to deal with the connectivity issues inherent in *WildCountry* thinking. The MARXAN software we use (initially developed by Ian Ball, available from <http://www.ecology.uq.edu/marxan.htm>) was the tool used to rezone the Great Barrier Reef from 5% to 33% green zones and it has been used effectively around the world. The software,

through a 'simulated annealing' algorithm, allows us to find very good answers to very big problems, quickly. This is appropriate because, in conservation planning we need a range of possible answers. A good decision support tool needs to provide planners with a range of options to chat about with farmers, local councils, and whoever is involved, rather than as single answers determined by a computer, leaving everyone disempowered other than the person who pressed the button. So MARXAN is not a decision-making tool, it is a tool that provides decision 'support'; delivering a range of choices to the decision-makers.

But there are at least two things not in the MARXAN software which we need to add for this endeavour. One is that it's currently set up for reserve system decision support, whereas for *WildCountry* (and other applications) we want to make it a much more multiuse planning tool where the outcome for any planning unit could be one of several uses or management regimes. For example, a site could be identified as suitable for light grazing, agroforestry, full restoration, any one of a number of different fire regimes, fully reserved or able to be developed without constraint. The other very important thing we want to do is allow people to look at maintaining connectivity and flows across the landscape (whether the flows are of water, nutrients or organisms) and account for that in conservation planning. We need to devise a way of getting connectivity issues into the existing software and allow people to set targets for flows across space and time as opposed to just assuming that the whole world is disconnected and static.



John Woinarski, *Biodiversity section, Natural Systems, Department of Infrastructure Planning and Environment, Palmerston, Northern Territory.*

I contribute to the Science Council because of my concern for the place where I live and work; northern Australia, one of the most exciting places on earth for a biologist. Here, the landscapes are large and appear little changed from their pre-European state. Here, there are lands still nurtured in the time-honoured fashion by expert Aboriginal land managers (Fig. 4). Here we can learn about how ecological processes work over vast scales and how this is dependent upon local-scale, intimate understanding and management.

But these values are being diminished: the extensive lands appear to be losing elements of their fauna; ecological processes are being disrupted by broad-scale invasion of exotic plants and pests; fire regimes are becoming unsuitable; and Aboriginal land management is being lost.

Conservation approaches developed in the largely agricultural living spaces of Europe or southern Australia will not maintain the north Australian environment and its assets. We will need a larger vision, a different set of principles and practices. *WildCountry* offers such an approach. It is about recognizing the value of linkages in the landscape, it is about maintaining and supporting sympathetic management of unreserved lands (such as on the extensive areas of Aboriginal lands that characterize the tenure of much of north Australia), and it is about planning for sustainable futures on a continental scale.



Figure 5. An important part of the *WildCountry* program is gaining public support through campaigns designed to tap into Australia's identification with the unspoiled nature of many of Australia's extensive ecosystems. With northern Australia already being a tourist destination highly valued by domestic and international travellers, potential exists for gaining widespread public support for *WildCountry's* goals. (Photo: The Wilderness Society Collection.)

top-down process where The Wilderness Society, with our *WildCountry* vision, comes in and superimposes itself over the top of other groups. Gondwana Link is an independent project and our relationship with projects of this kind is more one where we sit beside our partners, with each contributing their unique skills. I think we are good at advocacy, we're good at team building, and we are good at communicating with the public. And we've contributed a science officer to the Gondwana Link project to gather up all of the best and most relevant scientific and community knowledge on the region to integrate into the planning process. So we're not seeking to duplicate Greening Australia's work or Australian Bush Heritage Fund's work. We see ourselves as playing a catalysing and

Box 4. *WildCountry* Projects

Gondwana Link Project

South-western Australia is internationally renowned as a global biodiversity hot spot. Intensive agriculture has heavily fragmented these ecosystems. An alliance of environmental and other community groups, through Gondwana Link, aims to protect and restore ecosystems across the south-east from the Margaret River in the east across to Kalgoorlie in the west.

Gondwana Link is a formal partnership between Greening Australia, Australian Bush Heritage Fund, The Wilderness Society, Fitzgerald Biosphere Group, and the Mallee Fowl Preservation Society. Strong interest is being shown in the project by local indigenous groups. Each partner contributes to the project in ways which match their expertise.

The Wilderness Society and the Science Council are playing a lead



Figure 6. There are five areas where The Wilderness Society is currently focusing development of *WildCountry* scientific principles and partnerships. The biggest progress to-date has been made in Western Australia (through the Gondwana Link project) where the aim is to restore ecosystem flows across the gradient from wet to dry forest through one of Australia's major biodiversity hotspots. (Map courtesy The Wilderness Society.)

role in developing the scientific underpinning for the project. The Wilderness Society has appointed two new project positions: a science co-ordinator and a woodlands campaigner.

South Australian Western Wilderness

'We will support the efforts of conservationists to introduce the *WildCountry* philosophy into Australia to produce an Australia-wide comprehensive system of interconnected core protected areas, each surrounded and linked by lands managed under conservation objectives.' South Australian Premier Mike Wran, Policy Statement 2002.

Significant areas of intact Mallee-covered dunes stretch from the Eyre Peninsula to the Western Australian border. The Wilderness Society has appointed a *WildCountry* project officer to progress this 21 million ha Western Wilderness project and further develop partnerships among stakeholders. The South Australian Government has formed a partnership with *WildCountry* to help conserve this area through Science Council — based strategies, using the local project name 'Nature Links'. The government is providing all relevant information and data held within its departments to the Science Council. Government funding is being sought for a Western Wilderness co-ordination position to be based in the Conservation Council of South Australia.

Northern Australia

Northern Australia is dominated by a band of tropical eucalypt forests and woodlands, grasslands, wild rivers and monsoonal wetlands. This vast savanna stretches east to west across the continent, some 2500 km wide and 100 million ha in area. It is one of the world's last great wild frontiers. Despite the intact nature of northern Australia's vegetation cover, there are significant emerging threats. In total, 16 bird species, mostly grass-seed eaters, are in decline, the Gouldian Finch and Golden-shouldered Parrot are now highly endangered, and regional extinctions of small mammals are continuing.

The Wilderness Society has contracted the Australian National University to prepare a report on hydro-ecology in northern Australia. The Science Council has prioritized northern Australia as a critical case-study area and the information generated will be aimed at supporting the work. Research project proposals, if successful, will generate significant new understandings of ecological processes and the reasons for biodiversity decline in northern Australia.

Cape York

Cape York Peninsula is a vast 14 million ha area of monsoonal wilderness landscapes, including tropical rainforests, heathlands, savanna woodlands, dune fields, extensive monsoonal wetlands, and marine environments. It has one of the largest, most pristine, and least-populated woodland savanna ecosystems on earth, with more than 99% of Cape York Peninsula intact.

A subset of the *WildCountry* Science Council was involved in preparing a report for the Qld Government on the Natural Heritage Significance of Cape York Peninsula (Mackey *et al.* 2001). This found strong hydro-ecological reasons for protecting the Cape and forms the basis of a further report (Hitchcock 2003) to provide a path to permanently exclude land clearing from high conservation value areas. The Qld Government has committed to use the report (and science team) to help develop a Cape-wide conservation plan. The Wilderness Society hopes the report will be used to progress the innovative Cape York Heads of Agreement prepared through collaboration among non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal stakeholders.

Western Victoria

This project stretches from the coast in Victoria's south-west, through wet forests and far inland to the semi arid mallee woodlands of south-west NSW and South Australia. The area encompasses Gariwerd (the Grampians), Little Desert and Wyperfield National Parks, and the Bookmark Biosphere Reserve. Key issues include declining biodiversity, salinity and stressed river systems.

Discussions are underway with a range of organizations about forming partnerships for a potential cross-border Gondwana Link — style program, including: Trust for Nature Victoria, Minerals Policy Institute, Greening Australia (Vic), Portland and Hamilton Field Naturalists, Environment Victoria, Bookmark and Barkinji, Neds Corner Station, and community groups in Horsham, Natimuk and Edenhope.

[Information in this Box was derived from material prepared by The Wilderness Society's WildCountry team.]

integrating role in a process that is already starting throughout Australia.

Another element in our approach is using leverage everywhere we can. For example, Michael Soulé, Brendan Mackey and I recently had a meeting with the NSW Premier Bob Carr who was very keen to collaborate and support the project. Hearing our priorities meshed with theirs, the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) has commenced a dialogue with the *WildCountry* Science Council and us which we hope will lead to the development of a *WildCountry* conservation plan for the south-west corner of NSW. And in South Australia we are exploring ways in which the state government can support *WildCountry* scientific analysis and integrate it into conservation planning and natural resource management in the state.

TM: That brings me to a question about the relationship with government agencies.

VY: Traditionally, The Wilderness Society has maintained a distance from agencies. The reason is that we are still engaged in very hard conservation battles involving public land and we don't want to compromise our position. But this does not mean we cannot form partnerships of various kinds. As I mentioned, we are working closely with the SA Government. But when they wanted to use the *WildCountry* name for their work, we were able to say without rancour, 'If you do that, you'll have to give us a guarantee that you will deliver *WildCountry* precisely to our standards. Are you sure you can do that?' So they're working on the same concept and are liaising with the Science Council, and they've handed over all their State data, which is fantastic, but their project is called NatureLink. So that is great as it acknowledges the partnership but it also recognizes that, from time to time, we're going to have differences of view with governments.

But, at various points, there will be critical roles for governments. Gondwana Link successfully bid for government funding for fox control, for example, and we would love to see the Department of Conservation and Land Management in WA take on a more ecologically sound basis for their fire regime policies. Federally, it is mixed. There

will be a leap forward on something like protection of parts of the Great Barrier Reef, but major threats such as climate change are neglected. We've had our share of really quite intense battles with various federal departments. As most people know, we've been at the forefront of community campaigning over Australia's forests and other issues like Kakadu's Jabiluka uranium mine and have created quite a lot of discomfort for the Federal government on a range of environmental issues. The Wilderness Society is not going to shy away from that kind of campaigning to protect the special places in Australia, but we think *WildCountry* can encapsulate all of that and broaden the scope of our work by providing some very positive, less confrontational, platforms for cooperation.

TM: Mm. Non-confrontational sounds great. But I do fear the potential for compromise approaches, such as working with planners to identify more less-ecologically critical habitats for example, could actually drive land clearing or diffuse degradation in the less-developed north? Could this happen?

VY: We are not into identifying expendable areas or creating sacrifice zones. We will only become involved in specific projects for protected area network design or improved landscape management (Fig. 6) where these actions can improve outcomes for biodiversity and sustainability. We will be looking for solutions which help prevent further degradation of the landscape.

TM: So, what contingencies are built-in if the model looks like it is being appropriated for development rather than conservation? I mean, if The Wilderness Society is involved in a final compromise now, who can fight for higher standards in the future?

VY: We will always fight for higher standards if it becomes evident that what we've achieved is not working or not good enough. I think our record shows that we are not going to be easily convinced to take the 'soft option'! Also, it is not a matter of compromising in favour of development

but fostering a climate where we can promote a change in attitude towards conservation and to achieve management outcomes within ecologically sustainable boundaries — now, when there is still something to conserve. Our position is to avoid further degradation, to build into planning structures a process whereby better choices can be made and the mistakes made elsewhere can be avoided.

TM: It is interesting to me that leadership in these areas is coming from a 'radical' conservation group and scientists rather than our civic leaders. Is part of the reason that non-Government organizations (NGOs) are more effective at engaging communities?

VY: Yes, and after all, whether or not we can implement this program depends on the goodwill of the community as well as governments. In some parts of the landscape, we know there will be real social and economic constraints that we will need to deal with. One of the spectacular failures of some of the government attempts, such as the Regional Forest Agreement process, is that community participation has been ineffective and has not integrated community knowledge and aspiration into the planning process. Yet we see this as essential, because ultimately the success of any of these ideas is going to depend on ownership at the community level.

TM: What sorts of responses are you getting from communities?

VY: So far, in Gondwana Link, we're being met with enthusiasm and excitement from the community at being part of attempting something at a larger scale than anything attempted before in Australia. And the enthusiasm is spreading to other parts of Australia so that now, part of our difficulty is actually keeping up with the level of interest that is emerging. Meetings of people who want to set up *WildCountry* projects are occurring in various parts of the country. These people have needs and ideas and are asking us 'Will *WildCountry* be the answer? Can you help?' In Victoria we have a *WildCountry* officer who has been spending a lot of time with community groups and NGOs such as Greening

Australia and the Victorian Trust for Nature and some major landholders. There seems to be potential there to develop a cross-border Gondwana Link-style project linking areas in south-west NSW, north-west Victoria and south-east South Australia. So apart from our existing projects in Western Australia, South Australia and the Top End, there is strong potential for other projects forming in Victoria, NSW, Tasmania and elsewhere.

It's exciting, but the truth is we can't cover all the expressions of interest at the moment, we just don't have enough resources. So a major task is to increase capacity fairly rapidly so we can adequately support all the interest. But the thing that always amazes me with the concept is that you only have to sow a tiny seed or press a small button and the ripple effects are truly

fantastic. I think people are very thirsty for a hopeful structure through which they can work; something that has vision and also good science.

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Postscript: The Australian National University and The Wilderness Society have recently been awarded an Australian Research Council (ARC) grant of \$440 000 over 4 years to fund the development and testing of an Australia-wide Biodiversity Conservation Assessment and Planning System.