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WILD ABOUT RIVERS

Words: Fiona Harper

There's something seductive about a wild river. Indigenous Australians have relied upon life-sustaining healthy river systems for thousands of years. Banks flanked by densely overgrown vegetation are an enticing inducement to dabble one's toes in flowing water bursting with fish life; even better for contemplative relaxation if the river is peppered with boulders that create a watery bridge to hop across.

Anyone who has read Richard Flanagan's novel *Death of a River Guide* set on Tasmania's Franklin River should relate to the pure, rugged beauty of a river cutting a swathe through the wilderness. The subject of a fierce environmental movement in the 1980s, the campaign to protect Tasmania's south west wilderness against development was a significant victory.

Further north, Queensland has its own wild country under threat. Recent state government changes to environmental policy mean that we're likely to hear much more about wild rivers and world heritage in 2013.

The *Wild Rivers Act* was passed by Queensland's Beattie Government in 2005 to '... preserve the natural values of rivers that have all, or almost all, of their natural values intact.'

Essentially, if an area receives a wild river declaration it means that development, like intensive irrigation, strip mining and

dams, are kept out, but smaller commercial projects involving fishing, grazing or outstation development are supported. Native title rights are protected to ensure that the legislation doesn't impinge on cultural practices by restricting hunting and fishing.

There are twenty-two river systems in Queensland declared as wild river areas and are categorised either as protected, under consultation or awaiting protection.

In 2007, the first river systems to receive protected status were Settlement Creek, Mornington Inlet, Staaten and Gregory Rivers on the Gulf of Carpentaria along with inland waterways of Hinchinbrook and Fraser Islands. Two years later the Archer, Stewart and Lockhart River systems on Cape York Peninsula were given protected status. The Wenlock River system, which also covers the Steve Irwin Wildlife Reserve, was under threat from bauxite mining before being granted protected status in 2010. The Channel Country of western Queensland had the Cooper Creek, Diamantina and Georgina River basins protected in late 2011.

The Wilderness Society is the principal driving force behind wild rivers protection in Queensland, which has some of the world's healthiest water catchments. Their argument: the rivers support unique and diverse wildlife and, by keeping river basins free of weirs,

dams, industrial development and polluting irrigation schemes, cultural and natural values remain intact.

River systems globally are becoming increasingly rare as many of the world's major rivers are either drastically degraded or verging on total collapse thanks to human interference with natural landscapes. Plagued by environmental problems caused by dams, agricultural schemes requiring vast amounts of diverted water and destructive mining practices, one result is a dramatic loss of wildlife and fish. As the landscape is altered, invasive weeds and other pests dominate, causing their own problems. One only has to consider our own Murray-Darling Basin as an example of unsustainable river management that can be traced way back to initial European settlement.

The original intention of wild rivers legislation was to ensure that Queensland's rivers were managed and protected in such a way to preserve their unique ecosystems. Nevertheless, not everyone was happy with the consultation process that led to the legislation and changes are afoot.

Some opponents argue, amongst other things, that the term 'wild' river implies that river areas are uninhabited. The Lockhart River Aboriginal Council points out that Aboriginal people have successfully managed wild river areas for thousands of years.

Cape York Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson is also a vocal opponent to wild rivers legislation, insisting that the decision-making process was flawed, with resultant economic development restrictions placed on Cape York's Indigenous communities.

Other community groups, such as the Carpentaria Land Council Aboriginal Corporation, are in favour of the legislation. According to spokesperson, Murradoo Yanner, the corporation: 'Would rather have the sustainable rivers so we can continue as we have for thousands of years to draw our food and nourishment from those rivers.'

It's a contentious issue that sees environmentalists pitted against the state government, Indigenous land owners, graziers and mining interests, who want more flexibility to manage and utilise Queensland's natural assets. And it would appear the naysayers are gaining ground. The Queensland Government has declared it will scrap the *Wild Rivers Act* in 2013 in order to encourage development of Cape York.

Meanwhile the Australian Government says it's committed to a world heritage nomination in 2013 for appropriate areas of Cape York in consultation with traditional owners and the Queensland Government.

World heritage listing brings international recognition and provides protection for the listed cultural and natural heritage values of a place under Australia's national environment law – the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.

A listing doesn't prevent communities from continuing their economic development and the tenure of listed areas doesn't change, only activities that are likely to have a significant impact on the listed world heritage values require referral and approval under the Act.

According to the Wilderness Society, 'The future of Cape York Peninsula is at a crossroads, with new plans proposed for the region that could turn it into an industrial mining complex.'

The Society is concerned that the state government's statutory regional planning process pre-empts the world heritage nomination for Cape York's abundant and diverse natural and cultural values. It's calling for world heritage consultation and other conservation-focused traditional owner engagement to be given priority over fast-tracked state planning processes and the expansion of mining in the region as well as the deferring of changes to wild rivers declarations until the world heritage process is resolved.

In a recent interview with *The Australian*, Deputy Premier Jeff Seeney dismissed Wilderness Society claims the [regional] plan threatened the environment, saying it would draw 'a balance' between conservation and the need to promote economic opportunities for Indigenous communities on Cape York.

'It is certainly a seismic shift from prioritising the Wilderness Society's agenda in favour of local communities and their needs for the future,' he said. Also adding: 'We want to have strong economic drivers for the communities and to balance that with legislative protections for the environment.'

Mining companies, pastoral land owners, and traditional owners all have their reasons for supporting or denouncing wild rivers protection and, indeed, world heritage status. With so many groups at odds the only certainty is that not everyone is going to be happy with the final outcome.

As the southern summer rolls to an end, perhaps now is an opportune time to venture north and explore Queensland's wild rivers country. For who knows how long these lands will retain their raw wilderness appeal. ❖

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Archer River – Dry.

The Wilderness Society, Queensland

FACT FILE



Hinchinbrook Island National Park

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/hinchinbrook

Hiking the 32 km Thorsborne Trail is the main reason for camping on Hinchinbrook Island (permit required with an 'on island' capacity limit set). Allow 4 – 5 days to hike the trail which traverses tidal beaches, freshwater creeks with waterfalls beneath a rainforest-clad mountain range backdrop. Campers should be fully self-sufficient, taking in (and out) all supplies.

Fraser Island, Great Sandy National Park

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/fraser

Permits required for camping as well as vehicle access. Fifteen camping areas ranging from intimate informal sites with no facilities to large formal sites with toilets, water, fireplace and seating areas. Some sites have dingo-deterrent fences.

Archer River

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/oyala-thumotang

Thirteen camping areas throughout Oyala Thumotang National Park west of Geikie Range, accessible by dirt road from Coen on Cape York Peninsula. Saltwater crocodiles are a major hazard near rivers.

Lockhart River

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/kutini-payamu

Beaches that stretch forever bookended by rocky headlands and the largest lowland tropical rainforest in Australia below rugged mountain ranges predominate in Kutini-Payamu (Iron Range) National Park. Four camping sites, including a beachside site on Albatross Bay south of Cape Weymouth are accessible by road from the Peninsula Developmental Road, or there's an airstrip at Lockhart River.

Gregory River

www.nprsr.qld.gov.au/parks/boodjamulla-lawn-hill

Deep into Gulf Country not far from the southern coast of the Gulf of Carpentaria is the Lawn Hill Creek camping area. Feeding into the Gregory River, the caravan and camping site in Boodjamulla (Lawn Hill) National Park is accessible from the Barkly Highway before it crosses into the Northern Territory.

More information

The Wilderness Society: www.wilderness.org.au/campaigns
Reconciliation Australia: www.reconciliation.org.au and search 'Wild Rivers Legislation'.

Queensland Legislation: www.legislation.qld.gov.au and search 'Wild Rivers Act 2005'.

Queensland Government Department of Environment and Heritage Protection:

www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildrivers

Australia Zoo, Save Steve's Place: www.savestevesplace.com

Australian Government, Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities: www.environment.gov.au/heritage

Fruit Bat Falls, Jardine River National Park, Cape York.



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