

Community involvement in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area

Peter Mooney

The Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage (TWWHA) was inscribed on the World Heritage List in December 1982. It covers over 1.4 million hectares, representing about one fifth of the area of the island State of Tasmania.

The property is listed using all four natural criteria and three of the cultural criteria, satisfying more criteria than any other World Heritage property on Earth. Because of the sudden restrictions on timber harvesting, cattle grazing and mining extraction the initial listing caused much local community concern. The Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) quickly realised that to have local communities appreciate the listing and have long term connections with the newly reserved lands a process of targeted partnerships would be required.

Over the last three decades, the PWS has engaged with particular sections of the community to form successful partnerships to care for the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. These partnerships have all created sustainable programs that are mostly resourced from external providers.

Mountain Hut Preservation Society

The listing of the TWWHA resulted in a number of north-west farming families having to remove their cattle from the newly reserved mountain country. This caused much resentment within the local farming communities. Many of these farming families had built access trails and overnight huts to service their cattle herds.

The PWS wished to create meaningful relationships with these disgruntled communities. In the late 1990s, the PWS approached a number of the community leaders to establish a partnership program that would enable the heritage values of the huts and trails to be maintained, with the assistance of the farming community. The PWS knew that sections of the community continued to visit the huts to stay overnight. Many of these visitors were related to the original high country graziers. Most importantly some of the visitors had constructed the huts and retained the necessary bush craft skills used to build and maintain the huts and bridges.

Over several years a trusting partnership was formed, now named the Mountain Hut Preservation Society (the Society). The Society has well organised volunteer working events which are formalised with PWS staff and heritage experts to maintain the heritage assets.

The partnership has generated multiple benefits for both the PWS and the community. The families provide many traditional skills (such as shingle splitting and dry stone



Hazara asylum seeker Abdul Hakim enjoying the sunset on a recent trip to Maria Island as part of the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service's innovative program "Get Outside with Community." Photo © Parks Tasmania



Members of the Mountain Hut Preservation Society rebuilding the Alpine huts.
Photo © Parks Tasmania

construction) to assist in the maintenance of buildings. Normally the PWS would not be able to afford the hire of such specialist skills. The partnership has also enabled the families to reconnect with the country and reinvigorate their passion for the region, creating strong ownership of the huts and trails. This local connection has significantly reduced the level of vandalism of PWS signs, and has created a mutual trust with the PWS.

Sea Spurge Remote Area Team

The Sea Spurge Remote Area Team (SPRATS) has grown from a project involving a small, but enthusiastic, group concerned about coastal weeds in the TWWHA, to a project that is over subscribed with keen volunteers. This program received the 2009 Tasmanian Award for Environmental Excellence in the community section, and they continue to receive Commonwealth Government grant funding and recognition.

SPRATS started from a small trial weeding program and site surveys undertaken during the 2006/07 summer. It was formed with the brief to tackle coastal weeds in the TWWHA before they became established from a few locations, making eradication nearly impossible. With the support of PWS staff, the group has mapped out a 10-year plan to eradicate weeds from the wilderness

coast of south-west Tasmania. Most of this region is within the TWWHA.

In its first three summers the group achieved phenomenal results, removing nearly one million Sea Spurge plants from more than 500 sites between Macquarie Harbour in the west and Cockle Creek in the far south - a distance of 600 kilometres. All plants are removed by hand, bagged, and removed from the region.

The volunteers also target Marram Grass. Both weeds form huge colonies which displace native sand dune vegetation and also blanket flat sandy areas used for nesting by beach birds, including rare and endangered species such as the Little Tern. Both Marram Grass and Sea Spurge are aggressive colonisers of beaches.

The volunteers give up weeks of their summer holidays to travel from mainland Australia and within Tasmania and pay for their own transport and food to be involved in the SPRATS project. The PWS assists with deploying the teams by boat or helicopter, and the teams spend up to 20 days walking remote and rugged coastlines. In some years the volunteer effort has totalled more than 800 volunteer days.

The south-west coast presents a number of challenges including inaccessibility, rugged terrain, wild weather and thick scrub. These challenges are part of the attraction and motivation for SPRATS volunteers, who are experienced bushwalkers who value the wilderness experience and are committed to protecting the TWWHA's wilderness values.

The group has achieved a major conservation outcome in the TWWHA. In some areas there were as many as five million plants to remove in one location.

The SPRATS project is a 10-year program that is due to finish in 2016. In summer 2013/14, the focus will change from weed control to monitoring as a result of the massive amount of work that volunteers have put into successfully controlling sea spurge in the past five years.

Frenchmans Cap Track upgrade – partnership with WILDCARE Inc Gift Fund and Dick Smith donation

In early 2008, entrepreneur and adventurer Dick Smith challenged the Tasmanian Government, in the media, to jointly fund repairs to the Frenchmans Cap Track (the track). This was as a result of his having walked the

track, which is in the TWWHA. Mr Smith had publicly commented that the walking track had deteriorated since his previous visit in 1998. His belief was that if the track did not have an injection of serious money, sections would collapse beyond reasonable condition.

The track is one of Tasmania's great bushwalks, an iconic destination for serious walkers. It leads to the summit of the magnificent white quartzite dome of Frenchmans Cap, the most prominent peak in the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park. It is considerably more arduous than many other Tasmanian walks, including the Overland Track. The track is rough and muddy over extended sections, especially across the Lodden Plains, and is steep in places. Most walkers spend between three and five days completing the return trip, a distance of about 23 km each way.

The PWS spent several months negotiating with Mr Smith to create an agreement that was a practical and effective solution to upgrade the track in this remote part of Tasmania. An offer from Mr Smith to donate \$100 000 per year for a period of 10 years for maintenance works to the track was provided under the proviso that the PWS provide \$50 000 per year

Restoring the iconic Frenchman's Cap Track took a partnership of government and philanthropy. Photo © Parks Tasmania



in matching funds. An agreement was signed in April 2008.

The donation was made to the WILDCARE Inc Gift Fund, which provides an avenue for tax-deductible donations. WILDCARE Inc is an independent non-government organisation that works in partnership with the PWS in supporting conservation projects within Tasmania. The Gift Fund was established in 2005 by WILDCARE Inc to collect and distribute funds specifically for reserve management and nature conservation in Tasmania.

WILDCARE Inc is the major volunteer partner organisation of the PWS, and its thousands of members contribute tens of thousands of hours to the

conservation of the natural environment and cultural heritage sites around Tasmania and its off-shore islands every year.

In the four years since the agreement for the Frenchmans Cap Track was signed, there has been major progress on the track upgrade. A large component of this was construction of 6.2 km of new track, including a major re-route of one section. The majority of the re-route has now been completed. The re-route is located on sloping ground that has enabled correct drainage. This has created better ecological outcomes compared to retaining the track within the low gradient Button Grass valley.

Volunteers contribute to the management of invasive sea spurge in the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area. Photo © Parks Tasmania



PWS Get Outside Migrant Program

The aim of the Get Outside Migrant Program (the program) is to provide people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds with the knowledge and skills to become self-sufficient in undertaking a visit to a nearby national park or reserve. The PWS does recognise that for community conservation to be further embraced by society conservation agencies need to create new partnerships with sections of society that have never traditionally been associated with general conservation activities. This is achieved through the provision of information and education services through PWS Discovery Rangers who lead excursions into the TWWHA (mostly day trips) for migrant groups, which results in the participants gaining a better understanding and appreciation of the parks and reserves conservation values.

The program has become so successful that migrant communities are now adopting a national park or reserve as an excursion focal point, with trained community guides leading excursions. The program trains community leaders in basic conservation values identification.

The program has been recognised for providing new migrants with the realisation that parks and reserves are safe and inspiring locations to visit. This is an important element for many of these people who have, and still experience, significant amounts of post traumatic stress. This type of program has also enabled the PWS to partner with a wide range of community service providers and educational institutions that may not normally connect with a conservation organisation like the PWS.

The program has multiple partners and has recently received a \$25 000 grant from the Scanlon Foundation. This foundation supports initiatives that create a more cohesive Australia. The grant monies will be used to support the wages of the PWS Discovery Rangers, transport to and from reserves, and educational materials.

Conclusion

These four partnership program examples are designed and managed to be ongoing. It has been imperative for the community realise that the PWS is committed to these relationships for the long term. This has created a level of trust that will prevail beyond the individual officer commitment. The benefit for the TWWHA is new groups of people who appreciate, respect and enjoy the reserves. There is a tremendous level of skills and enthusiasm that the PWS now has available for very little cost. Perhaps the greatest benefit for the PWS as an organisation has been the new positive connections with parts of Tasmania's society where there were previously not trusted connections. The other interesting outcome has been the realisation by the many humanitarian organisations operating in Tasmania that our reserves are great locations to use within their individual assimilation and rehabilitation programs.

Author

Peter Mooney

General Manager

Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service

Hobart, Tasmania

Biography

Peter started with the Tasmania Parks and Wildlife Service (PWS) as a trainee, attaining tertiary qualifications in environmental management. From 1981, Peter worked as a ranger and park manager in Tasmania's parks and reserves. He has completed a number of overseas postings working with NGOs; the most recent with the Charles Darwin Research Institute, Galapagos Islands, Ecuador, performing marine ecology assessments with the community.

Since January 2004, Peter has been the General Manager of the PWS. Peter has a strong commitment to building the capabilities of conservation agencies to manage reserves in partnership with local communities and tourist operators. The PWS has been leading a number of programs involving the tourism industry, local communities and Government agencies which have delivered innovative and environmentally sustainable solutions on the ground.

Peter is a board member of a number of environmental NGOs that have strong community-based programs. Peter is particularly keen to increase the PWS's capacity to eradicate invasive species and have sound biosecurity practices in place for Tasmania.