

# The “Wilderness Knot”

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**Abstract**—The word “wilderness” is beset by a tangle of meanings. This “knot” is made of five strands: philosophical, political, cultural, justice and exploitation. Wilderness has a unique philosophical position—being disliked by both Modernism and Postmodernism. Eight key criticisms of wilderness are identified, and two different meanings discussed—“wasteland” and “large natural intact area” (here shortened to “lanai”). Participatory action research (PAR) is used with the Blue Mountains Wilderness Network near Sydney. Eleven in-depth interviews with scholars and critics of wilderness fed into the PAR. All interviewees agreed that lanais should be protected, though some did not call them wilderness, but used other terms (for example, quiet country, core lands). This study has shown that much confusion is a smokescreen when you find out what people really mean. The project has demonstrated the delicacy needed to gain meaningful dialogue over an issue that raises real passions about social and environmental justice. Insights and three “mind-maps” on the knot are presented. Clearly some scholars do not understand the formal definitions of wilderness (in other words, lanai), preferring to use their own personal definition. The political naivety of academia in regard to wilderness is discussed, considering increasing pressures to exploit lanais. It is suggested that confusion can be decreased by concentrating on the definition of wilderness as large natural areas, and secondly promoting recognition that wilderness is in fact a tribute to past indigenous land practices (not a disregard of indigenous history). The idea of shared custodianship or stewardship is suggested as a way forward.

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## Introduction

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Wilderness has become a knot—a tangle of confused meanings. To some it is the original and best of planet Earth, to others it is just a Western construct. Many meanings and associations are attached to this word. This confusion has reached the stage where, despite the IUCN definition of wilderness being a “large area of unmodified or slightly modified land, and/or sea, retaining its natural character,” some scholars can argue to protect large natural areas, yet be highly critical of “wilderness.” Where does this confusion come from? What can be done about it? This has been the focus of my thesis at the University of Western Sydney, Australia. In order to introduce the “wilderness knot,” it is necessary to discuss its component strands, as well as some criticisms of wilderness from the literature.

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In: Watson, Alan; Sproull, Janet; Dean, Liese, comps. 2007. Science and stewardship to protect and sustain wilderness values: eighth World Wilderness Congress symposium: September 30–October 6, 2005; Anchorage, AK. Proceedings RMRS-P-49. Fort Collins, CO: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station.

There are at least five strands that make up the wilderness knot. These are: philosophical, political, cultural, justice and exploitation. Wilderness occupies a unique position *philosophically* in that it is disliked by Modernism as well as some strands of Postmodernism. It is also a key nexus of anthropocentrism/ecocentrism (in other words, whether humans or the whole ecosystem are placed center stage), and the question of humans being part of nature (and whether belief in a human/nature dualism is somehow related to wilderness). It is not surprising that Modernism (Oelschlaeger 1991) cannot understand wilderness. For modernists, wilderness has no intrinsic value, it is just a resource for human use. However, Postmodernism revolted against Modernism, so one might hope it would support intrinsic value and the right of wilderness to exist for itself. This hope was expressed in Oelschlaeger’s 1991 book, *The Idea of Wilderness*, yet the opposite has occurred, with a number of postmodernists being highly critical of wilderness.

Postmodernism is in fact a *geography of ideas* that developed in opposition to Modernism. The term “Postmodernism” is poorly defined or resistant to being defined (Butler 2002; Docherty 1992; Heartney 2001), but a key postmodernist criticism of wilderness seems to lie in the importance given to *language*, (for example, Derrida 1966). A second source appears to be a fixation with *dualisms* (Butler 2002), and that all dualisms are inherently bad (Adams and Mulligan 2002; Cronon 1996). A third source is the intense skepticism about the *real*, and the claim that we live not inside reality but inside our representations of it (Baudrillard 1987; Butler 2002; Massey 1994). A fourth source is the suspicion of the influence of Romanticism and the *sublime* on the conservation movement and wilderness (for example, Cronon 1996). A fifth source is the suspicion that wilderness was itself a *grand narrative* that needed to be broken down (Cronon 1996). A sixth source is the suggestion that wilderness ignores the history of native peoples, and is not only a Western, but also a *colonialist* concept (Adams and Mulligan 2002; Langton 1996).

Postmodernists Callicott and daRocha (1996) argue that, “the concept of wilderness ... is obsolete.” Gare (1995) is critical of aspects of Postmodernism, stating that while it has demonstrated problems with Modernism, it has been powerless to oppose them. Several areas of concern are summarized by Gare (1995) and Butler (2002) including, the opposition to grand narratives, a failure to take action (thus increasing alienation and “rootlessness”), the fixation on dualisms, problems with reality, and an inability to understand science. Gare (1995) concludes that Postmodernism is consumerist, stops opposition to mainstream modernist culture, and has a tendency to “nihilistical decadence.”

However, there are other strands beside philosophy. The *political strand* also tends to isolate wilderness. Politics is generally seen as a spectrum between the Left (Socialism/Marxism) and the Right (Capitalism). However, *both* these

political ideologies are based on *resourcism* (Eckersley 1992). Marx himself wrote of "first nature" (unimproved nature = wilderness) and "second nature" (nature given value by humans *transforming* it) (Hay 2002). Soulé (2002) has pointed out that, "Extremists at both ends of the wilderness debate promulgate myths to further their political goals. Both the far Right and far Left hate wilderness on the grounds that it excludes human economic uses." The Left/ Right spectrum is quite inadequate to understand wilderness.

There is also the *cultural strand*. Soper (1996) has observed that, "It is only a culture which has begun to register the negative consequences of its industrial achievements that will be inclined to return to the wilderness." Wilderness is a word of Anglo-Saxon/Celtic origin (Robertson and others 1992) and has no strict equivalent in other languages. There is no word for wilderness in Spanish (Rolston 2001), nor, it seems, a strong tradition of protecting such places. In Aboriginal cultures, however, there were *sanctuaries* where there was no hunting or gathering (Rose 1996). Wilderness (where humans visit but do not remain permanently) has come into conflict with the Aboriginal idea of "caring for country," where one needs to *live on country* to look after it. Wilderness is often lumped in with other Western concepts as being exclusively a European idea. Callicott (2003) states that wilderness is an ethnocentric concept, and that Europeans saw the New World as "a pristine wilderness." Part of the difficulty in this debate is *distinguishing* between the fact that the term, wilderness, *does* derive from a European culture, and the reality of large natural areas (and how they should be managed). For example, Rolston (2001) notes, "But the trouble is that such critics have so focused on wild as a word taken up and glamorized in the term wilderness, that they can no longer see that wild and wilderness do have reference outside our culture." Large, natural areas exist on all continents of the world, irrespective of the culture that lives there. Their existence is thus not culturally relative or a cultural creation—but their perception, and the values ascribed to them, *are*.

There is also a strand concerned with the tension between *social justice* (justice for oppressed human groups) and *environmental justice* (justice for the non-human world). Cronon (1996) and Langton (1996) appear to argue that we should allow development of wilderness to help the poor, or to create an economic base for dispossessed indigenous peoples. Langton (1996) states, "It is difficult for an indigenous Australian to ignore the presumption and arrogance in the arguments of many environmentalists ... It seems to us that they are usurping the Aboriginal right of stewardship of the land." Soulé (2002) has argued for a unity of *both* types of justice—"People must have food and shelter, yes, but a world where material welfare is the only acceptable value will be a lost world, morally, spiritually and aesthetically ... We need a broader compassion—an ethic that makes room for the 'others.' We should reject the common accusation that untrammelled wild places, free of human economic exploitation, are 'misanthropic' or 'racist.'"

Exploitation is the fifth strand. It must be recognized that there are strong interests who wish to exploit wilderness. Logging, mining and grazing interests all have lobbyists seeking to exploit wilderness economically. To what extent are the criticisms of wilderness (and the confusion surrounding it) a product of such lobbying? It is difficult to document the

extent of this influence, as it is easy to slip into conspiracy theories. However, the "Wise Use" movement in the USA is a key critic of wilderness, and has strong links to the mining lobby. Luoma (1992) notes that the Wise Use movement has produced a book, *The Wise Use Agenda*, which demands, among other things, that all "decaying" forest (meaning old growth) be logged immediately and that all public lands, including wilderness areas and national parks, be opened to mining.

Of 20 criticisms of wilderness found in the literature, there are eight key ones. The first portrays wilderness as a *dualism*, which is more valued than other natural areas (Adams and Mulligan 2002; Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992). Cronon (1996) argues wilderness is a dualism that actually *stops* humans from discovering an ethical sustainable place in nature. Callicott (2003) also sees wilderness as a *myth* that separates man from nature. Neither explains just why wilderness *must* be a dualism rather than part of a naturalness spectrum, nor why identifying wilderness *devalues* other non-wilderness areas. The *human exclusion zone* criticism is a common claim (Cronon 1996; Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992), even though no wilderness definition today *actually* excludes humans (just roads, settlements and mechanized transport). Rolston (2001) points out that neither the Wilderness Act nor meaningful wilderness designation requires that no humans have ever been present, only that any such peoples have left the lands "untrammeled." Soulé (2002) explains that, "With rare exceptions, such as in the former Soviet Union ... wilderness areas do not exclude human uses. Fishing, bushwalking, and low impact recreation and camping are usually permitted in wilderness."

The third key criticism seeks to suggest that wilderness ignores that most areas were (or are) the homelands of indigenous peoples (Cronon 1996; Langton 1996). Cronon (1996) says the myth of the wilderness as "virgin" uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. This criticism in Australia also suggests wilderness is linked to the ethically bankrupt doctrine of *terra nullius*. Soulé (2002) says the "skeptics myth" is the idea that hunter-gatherer people perceive of wilderness as *home*, as humans today now farm, log and mine using an unprecedented powerful technology. The fourth key criticism is one that wilderness is a concept and not a place (Cronon 1996; Nash 2001; Lowenthal 1964). This has strong links to the postmodernist skepticism of reality and its arguments for cultural relativism. Lowenthal (1964) states, "The wilderness is not, in fact, a type of landscape, but a congeries of feelings about man and nature."

The fifth criticism, that wilderness is a *human artifact* (Adams 1996; Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992; Graber 1995), is much discussed in the Australian context (for example, Benson 2004; Flannery 2003). A major problem here is the distinction between *influencing* a landscape (as all indigenous peoples did) and *creating* it, which is anthropocentric as it places all the emphasis on *human* creation. If wilderness is *our* artifact, then can we do what we like with it? The sixth criticism is *multiple use*—that wilderness is a resource that is "locked up" (Cronon 1996). A related theme to this is that if wilderness is not being *used* then humans won't *value* it. This ignores not only the *ecosystem services* of such areas, but also the artistic, spiritual and recreational uses

wilderness already provides. Multiple use can be many things—sustainable traditional hunting and gathering, but also logging, mining and grazing.

The seventh criticism argues that wilderness is *not* in fact essential for nature conservation (Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992; Recher and Lunney 2003). This seems to discount the importance of biogeography in favor of protecting fragments, but also highlights the fact that species loss can still occur in wilderness, largely due to invasion by exotic species. The final criticism is also scientific—that wilderness reflects the outdated idea of a *balance of nature* based on the idea of equilibrium ecology (Adams and Mulligan 2002; Gomez-Pampa and Kaus 1992). Callicott (2003) argues that conservationists try to “freeze-frame” nature and that conservation is in defiance of “nature’s inherent dynamism.” Noss (2003) points out that no ecologist interprets wilderness in the static, pristine, climax sense that Callicott caricatures it and notes that human generated changes must be constrained because nature has functional, historical and evolutionary limits. These strands and associated criticisms make up the wilderness knot.

## Methods

This project used qualitative research to seek insights into the knot. The key methodology is *participatory action research* or PAR (Reason and Torbert 2001) with the Blue Mountains Wilderness Network near Sydney, Australia. This is a group of a dozen scientists, walkers, activists and artists interested in wilderness. We have carried out four cycles of different types of action. In PAR, the group directs what actions are to be taken on an issue. PAR allows one to *act to do something* to address the issue with a group of colleagues, whereby we all learn as we try to work through aspects of the knot. As part of the most recent cycle of PAR, 11 two-hour interviews were conducted with a variety of scholars (philosophers, Aboriginal people, scientists, conservationists), some of them critics of wilderness. These were fed into the PAR group via tapes and transcripts. We then met to distill insights gained.

## Results and Discussion

The first PAR cycle was a planned overnight campfire in Wollemi NP with traditional custodians. The second was a Wilderness Resurgence seminar. The third cycle was about four forays into the public sphere (articles and seminars). The fourth was the interviews, and gaining insights from these. The first three cycles met major problems in terms of *dialogue*, as the invitees did not come to the first, a key indigenous speaker did not attend the second, and the third demonstrated intensely polarized positions around wilderness. The project has thus shown just how difficult it can be to gain *meaningful dialogue* on this issue, one that arouses strong passions. University of California professor, Mary Clark, in a speech to University of Western Sydney Social Ecology Residential (February 2004) related the need for profound attentiveness and mutual respect in dialogue. This may appear obvious—but faced with a nexus of social and environmental justice, and where the modern term “wilderness” has (wrongly, I believe) been linked to the colonial

doctrine of *terra nullius*—it is impossible to overestimate the difficulty of gaining meaningful dialogue. An important part of this dialogue is to recognize that the past history of wilderness campaigning in Australia may not have given *explicit* recognition to social justice and the rights of indigenous peoples. Conservationist Penny Figgis (interview 3/22/2005) points out that this was largely an oversight, but one that has left an unfortunate legacy of division—given that conservationists and Aboriginal communities often *do* share many aims in common. The wilderness knot is thus in part about meaning and communication.

The PAR work in the fourth cycle was around interviews with 11 selected scholars, indigenous people and activists, asking them about their understanding and experiences of the wilderness debate. It generated valuable dialogue and insights. Much of the confusion can be shown to be a smoke-screen, once one gets down to what people *really mean*. It is essential to recognize that there is a poor understanding of the *formal definitions* of wilderness (= a large natural area). There are many associations attached to wilderness, and it is some of these that are being criticized, rather than large natural areas *themselves*. Of my 11 interviewees, *all* deplored the clearing and fragmentation of native vegetation over the last 215 years in Australia, and *all* valued large natural areas. However, some did not call these areas wilderness, rather preferring terms such as wild country, quiet country, core conservation lands, large flourishing areas, or **large natural intact areas** (here abbreviated to **lanais**, a short-hand I find useful, as it is also a Polynesian word for an outdoor living area). It became apparent that even when scholars *knew* the formal definition, they often tended to use their *own* definition of wilderness—for example mammologist Tim Flannery quotes the IUCN definition in his book *The Future Eaters* (1994), yet in his 2005 interview defined wilderness as “someone else’s country” (interview 4/20/05).

The wilderness debate intersects centrally with larger debates around the land as a whole. One of these is whether humans are part of nature. Philosopher Val Plumwood (interview 12/14/04) points out that while humans are a part of nature, we are not an *indistinguishable* part. One can thus still acknowledge the *difference* of humans without subscribing to dualism (Deborah Bird Rose, interview 3/2/05), and one can see wilderness as the wild end of a *spectrum* of naturalness. Similarly, wilderness cuts across the nexus between the idea of human possessive *ownership* of the land, versus custodianship or *stewardship*. There is also the issue of the past history of wilderness literature, and the perceived emphasis on the *absence of humans* and on *purity*, which has dominated some literature (Plumwood interview 12/14/04), despite recent improved definitions. This led to a view that wilderness did not acknowledge indigenous history of occupation, and was somehow linked to *terra nullius*. The need for an unlinking of *wilderness* from *terra nullius* is one key insight. In regard to the human artifact debate, there were two differing views, one that humans literally did *create* the land, and the other that the *human history of the land* is created by generations of Aborigines or that landscape is socially (not physically) constructed *in our minds*. The term “cultural landscape” is much used in Australia, but a number of interviewed scholars agreed that *any* landscape is a mixture of the cultural *and* the natural. Could this be called a *geobiocultural* landscape?

Another insight is the understanding that both *wilderness* and *wild* are words that each have two key but very different meanings. For wilderness, there is the older Biblical negative meaning of a "wasteland"—a place to be feared—versus the newer positive meaning of a "lanai" that is valued for itself. The wasteland meaning (to varying extents) is linked to *terra nullius*, to dualism, to human exclusion, to the human artifact idea, and to resource exploitation. The newer idea of a lanai is *not* really linked to any of these. Until we acknowledge these two key but very different meanings of wilderness, and point out *what we mean* when we say "wilderness"—then much of the confusion will remain. Similarly the word "wild" has two key but differing meanings. On the one hand it means "natural," as in *wildlife*. However, it also has the meanings of "savage," and "lawless." It is this meaning that has been highlighted by Rose (2004). The meaning of wild as *lawless* has an impact on Aborigines who believe the land must be managed according to Aboriginal law. Calling an area "wild" can thus be understood to mean it has been degraded by modern technological society, and is no longer natural or flourishing. We approach *meaning reversal* here, depending on which meaning of "wild" is used. This certainly adds to the confusion. Another insight is the recognition of the extent of anthropocentrism throughout academia, which impinges on management, on the meaning of "responsibility," and on belief in intrinsic value.

While much of the confusion may be apparent rather than real, there *are* some sticking points that need to be recognized. One is the issue of roads and settlements. In most wilderness areas, roads are closed and permanent settlements are banned. Yet in Aboriginal communities, "caring for country," has traditionally meant living there. Some people seek to *stretch* the wilderness definition to include small sustainable indigenous settlements, while others suggest that such areas should be called by another name. Is "peopled wilderness" a contradiction in terms? Another issue is that of "the land needs people." This goes *beyond* arguing there is great value in a deep human/nature connection. In its extreme form it claims that the land *dies* without its human custodians. This is clearly somewhat anthropocentric, but has received emphasis from recent history, where Aboriginal people have moved out of some lands, the fire regime has changed, and some native species have then gone extinct. What this *actually* shows is that certain species need a particular fire regime. Related to this idea are different meanings around "responsibility" in regard to the land. This can range from an ecocentric idea of "obligation to protect and care for," to an anthropocentric idea of a senior looking after a junior (where the junior is the land). Another insight is in regard to Aboriginal law—that this can *change* in response to the changing world, so the "law" is not always static. Perhaps the law may need to evolve to protect wilderness?

Another point is that of conservationist Rosemary Hill (interview 4/29/05) that Aboriginal communities *primarily* see the human history rather than the nature in the land. This is queried by anthropologist Deborah Bird Rose (personal communication, 7/19/05). However, it would not be surprising (given their long history with the land) if the human stories attached to the land gained special significance in indigenous societies, compared to conservationists, who mainly see natural values. In this regard, the term "storied wilderness" raised by Cronon (2003) may be worth

developing. It is thus essential to recognize the importance of the stories (or "song-lines") that have been attached to lanais. Another related aspect is the question of what "management" and "looking after" land really means. There is one view that if land is managed it must be *controlled* by humans, while another view sees the land as independent, and not under human control, even if influenced by management. Nash (2001) points out that "pastoralism is a form of control." Plumwood (interview 12/14/04) refers to a stream of "nature devaluing" in our society that seeks to overplay the contribution by humans and eliminate or render invisible the contribution by nature.

One unforeseen tension is that between fundamentalism and evolution in regard to wilderness and Aboriginal communities. This fundamentalism (and literalism) may be both Christian and from Aboriginal Dreamtime religion. Taken literally, they both espouse *creation* and refute evolution as "just another story." Evolution, I believe, acts to give humans perspective and humility, and reduces our human-centeredness. To refute it tends to align one with the view that humans are *central*. This issue was highlighted by paleontologist Mike Archer (interview 1/31/05), who at one site reported that some local Aboriginal people insisted that these pre-human deposits came from the Great Flood, and wanted to know, "what are you doing with the human skulls you are finding?"

The above may be described as sticking points, but are not so extreme as to prevent conservationists and indigenous people working together for the protection of lanais. Certainly, in Australia today, where modernist resourcism is still considered the "Australian way," the two groups have more in common than most other groups.

I used a mind-map to grapple with the many issues involved in the knot. It soon became clear that many aspects related to the land in general, of which wilderness is a subset. Figure 1 thus shows a mind-map of the aspects involved in how we think about the land, and the 11 spectrums of thought involved. This is not a diagram about dualisms, but of the "middles" in the spectrums of thought, nor is there necessarily a "right" or "wrong" side to the diagram. It is the "electron cloud" of positions in the middle that make up the tangled knot of meanings around how we see the land. Arguably, activism seeks to shift thinking more towards the top part of the diagram. Figure 2 is a mind-map specifically for wilderness as a subset of the land. There are some seven spectrums of thought tied into the wilderness knot here. In general, it can be said that activism seeks to shift the mind-set towards the top part of the diagram, which uses the positive definition of wilderness, one that focuses on the presence of the non-human (or more-than-human) (Abram 1996), sees wilderness as the end of a spectrum, acknowledges indigenous history and focuses on wilderness as being a lanai.

So, how do we unravel the wilderness knot and reduce the confusion? Figure 3 suggests a way forward to protect wilderness as lanai. Part of it lies in recognition of the various associations that have been attached to the word "wilderness." We need to focus on the *reality* of lanais themselves as formally defined, and steer away from popular and personal definitions. We need to avoid the politics of divisiveness to reach meaningful dialogue that disposes of unnecessary confusion, and to elucidate the *real* areas where there are

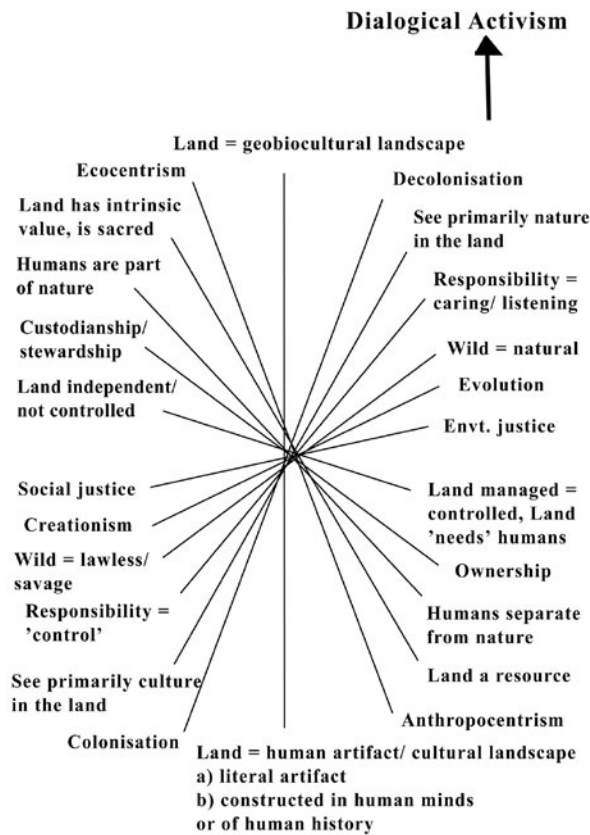


Figure 1—Mind-map of the land.

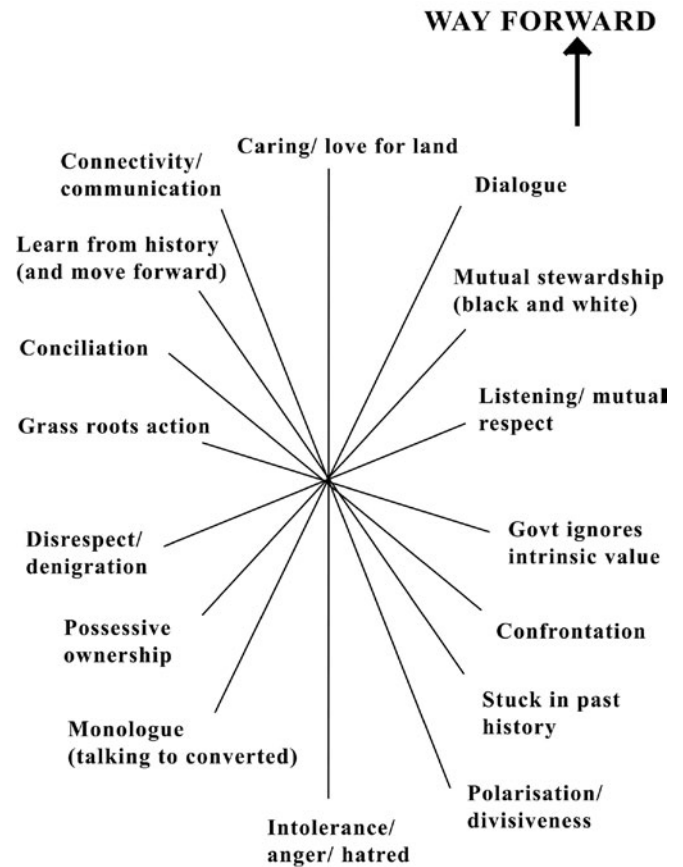


Figure 3—The way forward for "wilderness" as lanai?

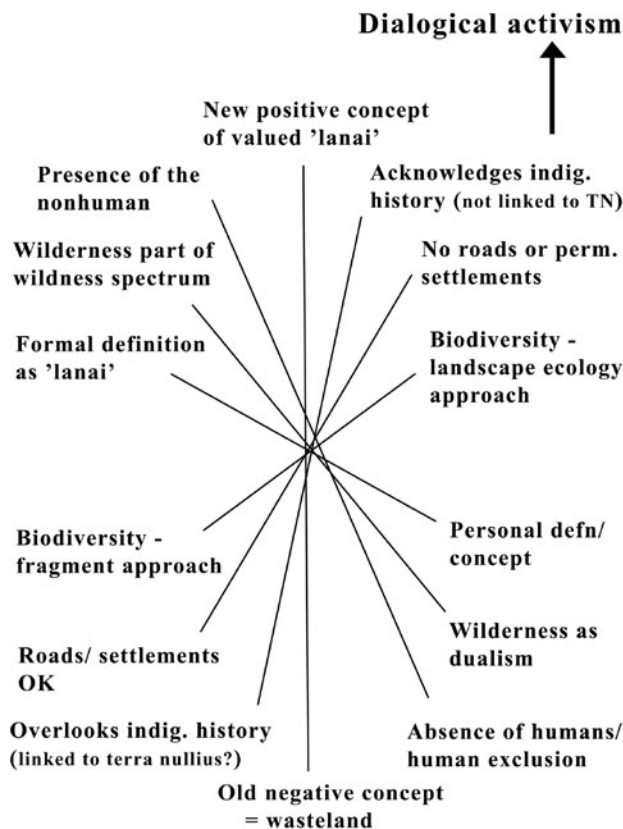


Figure 2—Wilderness mind-map.

sticking points, and how these can be resolved. We can seek to make connections or we can stay polarized, we can talk to ourselves or have meaningful dialogue, we can stay stuck in past history or move beyond it to mutual stewardship, we can let the unresponsive political ideologies of government ignore intrinsic value, or we can act at a grassroots level for change. Rather than deconstruct all grand narratives, perhaps we need to espouse a grand narrative of Earth protection and restoration, related to the "Great work" of Berry (1999), which in part includes protection of wilderness as lanai.

There is another issue however—that of *political naivety* in academia. Many academics are actually criticizing the associations *attached* to the word wilderness and *not* the formal definition and reality of lanais. This naivety is a problem, as criticisms deriving from it are having an effect in the real world in terms of the gazettal and management of wilderness. Given the very real power of the exploitation lobby, such naivety plays into the hands of those who are seeking *any* means to continue the exploitation of wilderness. By all means, let academia criticize some of the associations (rightly or wrongly) attached to wilderness—but every time this is done there is a need to re-state the urgency to protect large natural areas (= wilderness). The pressures to exploit wilderness have not gone away, rather they have increased. Many academics seem to forget this in the rush to make their particular contribution.

It is suggested that substantial confusion can be avoided, not by retreating from the use of the word, but by concentrating on the definition of wilderness as *large natural areas* (lanais), and by promoting the recognition that wilderness is in fact a *tribute* to past traditional indigenous land practices (and not a disregard of indigenous history). It was the evolved wisdom of sustainable traditional cultures that retained and sustained lanais—which today we call wilderness. Keeping wilderness is thus about honoring that traditional “wisdom of the elders” (Knutson and Suzuki 1992). The idea of shared custodianship or stewardship of the land (rather than the possessive sense of ownership) is suggested as a way forward to disentangle the wilderness knot.

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