

National parks and forest conservation

Brett J. Stubbs

School of Environmental Science and Management, Southern Cross University, Lismore, New South Wales

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Introduction

Many forms of protected area are used for the conservation of Australia's forests and other terrestrial ecosystems. Of these, national parks are the most prevalent. About 60 million hectares, nearly 8 per cent of the total land area of Australia, is managed as protected areas, and in most States the great majority is designated as 'national park'. In Queensland, for example, 95 per cent of protected land is national park. National parks are also the best known form of natural area protection, partly because the term 'national park' has been used in Australia since the late nineteenth century, and partly because public access and public recreation have always been important aspects of national parks. By contrast, preservation is paramount and visitation is often discouraged in other forms of protected area, such as 'nature reserves'.

After the first Australian national park was dedicated in New South Wales more than a century ago, the idea was gradually adopted in the other States. Other forms of protected area were created from time to time in response to evolving conservation priorities. Because land management remained a State responsibility after Federation of the six colonies to form the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901, unique systems for the protection of natural areas developed in each State. In addition, the Commonwealth developed its own system for the management of reserves on land controlled by it separately from the States. Despite the resulting complexity, the national park is common to all of these unique systems, and is therefore a useful basis on which to examine the history of the conservation of Australia's forests. Because of the complexity of the subject, the following tends to focus mainly on New South Wales and to a lesser extent on Queensland.

Escaping from the cities

Australia's first national park, 'The National Park', was created in 1879 on the southern outskirts of Sydney, NSW. The name bestowed upon this 7,300 hectare expanse of forest—or 'bushland' in Australian idiom—asserts its position as the first such public reserve in the continent. It probably also reflects some knowledge on the part of its originators of Yellowstone National Park which had been created several years earlier in the United States of America. Despite the similar names, however, the two 'national parks' were very different in nature and served quite different purposes.

The Yellowstone region was a little known wilderness until the end of the 1860s when the first purposeful exploration of the area, then mostly in the Territory of Wyoming, was undertaken. Out of expeditions in the late 1860s and early 1870s arose the idea of preserving the outstanding natural features of the region—its geysers, hot springs, canyons and waterfalls—by setting it apart as a public reserve. This was achieved remarkably quickly with the passage of the Yellowstone Park bill through Congress early in 1872. Through this legislation an area of nearly

one million hectares was ‘reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale’ and ‘set apart as a public park or pleasuring-ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people’. Control of the new ‘national park’ was vested in the federal government.

Much of the credit for creating The National Park in New South Wales has been given to Sir John Robertson who throughout the 1860s and 1870s held high office in the government of the Colony either as Premier, Colonial Secretary, or Minister for Lands. He had nurtured the park idea for several years before its realisation in 1879. It is uncertain what influence the Yellowstone experiment had had on Robertson’s thinking, but it seems improbable that he was unaware of it and unlikely that the choice of the title ‘national park’ for Sydney’s reserve was mere coincidence. Nevertheless, there were some significant differences between the two.

The National Park was only 20 kilometres by land and 40 kilometres by water from the centre of Sydney, the Colony’s major city with a population of about 200,000 in 1879. Yellowstone was in a remote and sparsely populated region; the Territory of Wyoming was created only four years before the park, in 1868. The National Park was created as a public reserve within the provisions of the Lands legislation of NSW, not by special legislation as at Yellowstone. The term ‘national park’ might seem odd today when applied to a creation of a colonial rather than a federal (national) government, but it makes sense when one considers that New South Wales at the time was self-governing, and arguably a nation in its own right; federation was still more than twenty years in the future, unlike in the United States where it had been achieved nearly a century before.

Whereas Yellowstone National Park was created to protect the area’s natural features from imminent commercial exploitation, albeit allowing for their simultaneous public enjoyment, The National Park was principally to afford the people of Sydney a means of sport and recreation, although admittedly in pleasant surroundings. Indeed, it has been suggested that if The National Park had a model, it was probably the large common-type parks, such as Hampstead Heath, which were being created on the outskirts of expanding London to provide open space for various forms of public recreation. Although New South Wales was sparsely populated in the late nineteenth century, it was already highly urbanised, with nearly one-third of the population residing in Sydney by the end of the 1870s. This concentration of population in an expanding industrial city—with all the related health and crowding problems—led to an early desire for areas of open space, in natural surroundings, to be set aside within the metropolis for the enjoyment and for the health of the people. Although not itself an urban park, The National Park was created in a climate of public opinion that undoubtedly was influenced by the public health and early town planning arguments of Sydney’s urban parks movement of the 1870s.

It is evident from the wide guidelines within which the trustees of The National Park were to manage the area that preservation of the park in its natural state was a very low priority. They were empowered to use the park for: ornamental plantations, lawns and gardens; zoological gardens; race-course; cricket, or any other ‘lawful game’; rifle butt or artillery range; exercise or encampment of Military or Naval forces; and bathing-places. They could also grant licences to mine for and to take away coal, lime, stone, clay, brick, earth or other mineral (except gold or silver). Moreover, throughout the existence of the trust (1879-1967), its first duty to develop the park as a recreational area was funded by the exploitation of many of the park’s natural resources, including the felling of timber, the extraction of gravel and clay, the taking of grass-tree (*Xanthorrhoea* sp.) gum, the grazing of sheep and cattle, and the acclimatisation of exotic fish and mammals, mainly deer. The passage of time, however, would see the function of The National Park, and of national parks in Australia generally, shift markedly away from public recreation towards preservation of unspoiled ‘nature’.

Although initially it did not take the name ‘national park’, Ku-ring-gai Chase, which was dedicated in 1894, served the same purpose for residents of Sydney’s northern suburbs as The National Park did for those in the south. Situated on Broken Bay, the mouth of the Hawkesbury River, Ku-ring-gai Chase was a similar distance north of Port Jackson as The National Park on Port Hacking was in the opposite direction. The two parks were of comparable size, and both comprised similar sterile dissected Hawkesbury sandstone plateaux, vegetated with heath and

scrub, and affording spectacular marine landscapes. The trustees of Ku-ring-gai Chase were from the outset concerned with ‘the opening up of the place and the convenience of visitors’, and they did this by constructing roads, horse paddocks, walking tracks, and water supply dams. By the turn of the century visitors came to the park ‘to camp, or fish, or botanise, or merely to enjoy that pleasant vagabondage which comes gratefully to the man doomed to seek his sustenance in cities’ (Hoben 1900).

Three years before the dedication of Ku-ring-gai Chase, an area of bushland in South Australia was set aside as that colony’s first national park, and the second in Australia. The site, the former Government Farm at Belair on the southern outskirts of Adelaide, was dedicated in 1891 ‘for the sole purpose of a public national recreation and pleasure ground’ and became known as The National Park. It fulfilled the need for more ‘breathing space’ for the expanding city, and was developed with tennis courts, ovals, pavilions and walking trails, and decorated with stands of ornamental trees.

Like the citizens of Sydney and Adelaide who found solace in the bushland of their respective national parks, the people of Brisbane in Queensland, also sought respite from civilisation in nature, and several national parks were created during the early years of the twentieth century in the mountains which encircled their capital. The first, Witch’s Falls National Park, at Tamborine, south of Brisbane towards the border with New South Wales, was proclaimed in 1908. Later that year, Bunya Mountains National Park was created in the ranges to the north-west of the capital. Cunningham’s Gap National Park, to the south-west, followed in 1909. Lamington, Queensland’s largest national park at the time at about 19,000 hectares, was proclaimed in 1915. It is adjacent to the border with New South Wales and embraces a series of elevated plateaux ‘clothed by nature with the most luxuriant draperies of rich tropical vegetation’, ‘abounding in wealth of lovely fresh water streams’, and ‘perpetually laid in cool, refreshing breezes’. Earliest calls for reservation of this area identified its suitability as a ‘national sanatorium or park’ which would afford ‘a convenient and refreshing retreat for those [Brisbane residents] not constitutionally fitted to bear the high temperatures generally registered in summer’ (Maguire 1900).

Scenery spectacular

Although most of the earliest Australian national parks were created primarily for public recreation, there was a growing concern in the late nineteenth century for the protection of scenic landscapes, albeit largely for their interest to hikers or ‘bushwalkers’ and tourists. The earliest formal use of the term ‘national park’ in Australia in the specific context of the protection of a scenic natural feature was probably the creation in 1892 of Tower Hill National Park in southern Victoria. Tower Hill is the spectacular crater of an extinct Pleistocene volcano. Degradation of the area, however, led to the ‘downgrading’ of the national park to a ‘state game reserve’ in 1961.

In New South Wales, the term ‘national park’ was being used in the titles of several public reserves by the early 1930s. In addition to the original park which had been created principally to provide recreational opportunities close to the capital city, others had been created in the early twentieth century in areas remote from any major centre of population, where they protected and allowed the viewing of distinctive landscape features. These seem more in the spirit of Yellowstone than The National Park.

The first of these new national parks to be created was the Mount Warning National Park. Mount Warning is one of the principal landscape features of the Tweed valley, in the far north-eastern corner of New South Wales near the border with Queensland. It was described in 1875 as ‘one of the most picturesque mountains imaginable, tower[ing] over everything as if proclaiming himself the sovereign of the district’ (*Richmond River Express*, Casino, 7 August 1875). In 1909 an area of land centred on the mountain was reserved from sale ‘for public recreation and preservation of native flora’. A larger reserve for ‘public recreation’ was created in 1928 and this became known as Mount Warning National Park. It was officially opened to the public in August 1929 at a ceremony performed on top of the mountain by the State’s Attorney-General. Two

years later, an area of land along the Great Escarpment around Point Lookout, one of the highest points on the New England tableland at more than 1,500 metres above sea level, was reserved for public recreation. From here views could be had of ‘some of the most magnificent scenery in this State, if not Australia’. It was renamed as the New England National Park and was formally opened in 1937 by the Governor-General.

Ten years earlier, in 1927, another area of scenic escarpment land in north-eastern NSW had been dedicated as Dorrigo Mountain Reserve for the preservation of native flora. By 1930 this reserve was being referred to by its trustees as the Dorrigo Mountain National Park. Technically, however, it remained a reserve for the preservation of native flora, not for public recreation like the Mount Warning and New England National Parks, so it continued to be known formally by the less grandiose title of Dorrigo Mountain Reserve.

Legal meaning of ‘national park’

Although the three scenic reserves in northern New South Wales were all referred to as ‘national parks’ by the early 1930s, the term had no legal meaning in that State. It remained informal and arbitrary until 1967 when the new *National Parks and Wildlife Act* limited its use to parks created under that Act. The earliest national parks in that State, therefore, in the main, relied for their security on various sections of the general land laws (although Kosciusko State Park is a notable exception). The National Park, the first, was reserved from sale in 1879, pursuant to the *Crown Lands Alienation Act 1861*, and later in the same month was dedicated ‘for the purpose of a National Park’ pursuant to the same Act. Ku-ring-gai Chase was dedicated for ‘public recreation’ in 1894 in accordance with the *Crown Lands Act 1884*. From 1913, until the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1967* came into effect, the legislation for creating such reserves was the *Crown Lands Consolidation Act 1913* which provided for the reservation and dedication of Crown lands for various public purposes. Only two national parks had been created in New South Wales prior to the 1913 Act.

Reserves created under these acts were often temporary, and could be revoked upon the decision of the Minister for Lands. At best, if they had been ‘dedicated’ to some public purpose, they could still be revoked by the Minister, but ‘proposals’ for revocations had to be laid before both Houses of Parliament where they could be rejected by resolution. Thus, prior to 1967, ‘national parks’ in NSW were created in accordance with the Crown lands legislation, either reserved or dedicated for a particular purpose, usually for ‘public recreation’. Some areas reserved or dedicated for the preservation of native flora and fauna became known as national parks, but this was less common. Management of a ‘national park’ so created could be placed in the hands of a trust created for the purpose, and regulations could be framed within which the management would be carried out. Although there was no legal definition of the term ‘national park’ its use was nevertheless usually applied to relatively large areas of land of particular significance.

As in New South Wales, the earliest national parks in Victoria were generally created under provisions of the prevailing land legislation (especially the *Land Act 1898*) and managed, if at all, by local committees appointed for the purpose. From 1898 several areas were set aside as ‘sites for national parks’ in Victoria, and these included most notably: Wilson’s Promontory and Mount Buffalo in 1898, and Wyperfeld, Mallacoota Inlet, and Wangan Inlet in 1909. Similarly, in Western Australia, when John Forrest National Park (then ‘The National Park’ to Western Australians) was created on the eastern outskirts of Perth in 1900, it was a reservation under the general land legislation, not the creation of a specific statute. Moreover, the term ‘national park’ was not to be found in any Western Australian legislation at that time.

By contrast, the first Queensland national parks were created under the provisions of the *State Forests and National Parks Act 1906* which, although principally concerned with the creation of timber reserves, was the first general legislation in Australia to provide specifically for the proclamation of national parks. Elsewhere in Australia, and like Yellowstone, some early national parks had been created by specific legislation. The National Park at Belair in South Australia, for instance, was the creation of the *National Park Act 1891*. In Victoria, the reserve encompassing

Tower Hill was given the status of ‘national park’ by a special act of parliament (the *Tower Hill National Park Act*) in 1892.

Tasmania’s first national park, Mount Field (simply ‘National Park’ to Tasmanians at the time), was established in 1915 under provisions in the *Crown Lands Act 1911*. In that year, however, the new *Scenery Preservation Act 1915* changed the system for national parks, and the park was revoked and re-proclaimed under the new legislation. The 1915 Tasmanian legislation is notable because it was the first in Australia to create a specialised body—the Scenery Preservation Board—for the central control of national parks and other conservation reserves.

The bushwalking conservation movement

An important aspect of the developing Australian national park movement in the early twentieth century was the activities of various outdoor recreation organisations, particularly walking clubs, which became increasingly numerous around the 1920s. An early development in this respect was the formation in 1914 of the Mountain Trails Club, the initiative of three bushland adventurers of whom one was Myles J. Dunphy. The Mountain Trails Club was an association of ‘mountain trackers who preferred the mountains and bushland at vacation time’ and its objects referred to such things as the ‘lasting enjoyment of the trail’, ‘the craft of trailing raised to a high level’, ‘wholesome recreation’, ‘full application of all the senses, cultivation of faculty of observation, powers of endurance and self-reliance’, and a ‘regard for welfare and preservation of natural beauties that lie about’ (Thompson 1986). It was expected that a mountain trailer would ‘reject main roads and beaten tourist routes’, but this became advisable for other reasons by the 1920s with the proliferation of the motor car. Walkers had at first mostly used the roads, but they took to the bush as cars became a hazard, and they broadened their interests to include ‘the preservation of the bush in which they walked, and their right of access to it’. Many more camping and walking clubs appeared in the 1920s, and in 1927, under the auspices of the Mountain Trails Club, the Sydney Bush Walkers was formed, originating the term ‘bushwalking’.

In 1932 a number of bushwalking clubs united under the banner of the NSW Federation of Bushwalking Clubs in order to co-ordinate the campaign to have an area of coastal land immediately to the south of The National Park, and known as the Garrawarra Primitive Area, set aside ‘for the purposes of recreation and preservation of its remarkable scenic, forest, jungle and beach attractions’. This campaign succeeded in having the area reserved, and it was later incorporated into the national park. More significantly, however, the year 1932 also saw the formation of the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council, a body with representatives from Sydney Bushwalkers and other like-minded groups.

The National Parks and Primitive Areas Council had among its objects the location of areas suitable for national parks, primitive area reserves, and other such public reserves. It would be an ‘independent designing and steering group’ to promote current park projects and to ‘initiate and design others’. The Council’s first project was a proposed Blue Mountains National Park which had been originated by Dunphy, and first brought under the notice of the authorities in June 1932. The first definite step towards the formation of this park occurred in 1937 when an area of nearly 40,000 hectares in the ‘Southern Blue Mountains’ was reserved for the preservation of native fauna and flora. This, however, was only a small proportion of the proposed national park, and a long battle ensued to achieve further reservations in the Blue Mountains area.

As well as pursuing the reservation of the Blue Mountains National Park, the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council proposed and campaigned for the creation of further reserves around Sydney and in many other parts of the State. These included the Snowy-Indi National Park, which was proposed in the 1930s and was to include contiguous areas in Victoria and New South Wales. This scheme was partly realised in 1944 with the establishment the Kosciusko State Park in New South Wales, under the *Kosciusko State Park Act*. In 1936 a proposal for a ‘National Monument Reserve’ in the Warrumbungle Mountains was submitted to the Government, and this was realised in 1953 with the reservation of the Warrumbungle National Park. Attention was mostly focussed, however, on the main populated area of the State, from the Hunter valley to the Illawarra, and centred on Sydney.

National parks associations

In addition to its object of locating and promoting areas suitable for new national parks and primitive area reserves, the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council advocated placing them under central control, ‘distinct from shire and municipal parks, state forests, forest reserves, national forests and flora reserves’. Advances were first made to the State Government to create a national parks authority in 1935, but war intervened and it was not until the mid-1950s that an organised attempt to achieve legislation for the uniform administration of national parks began in New South Wales. In February 1957, a public meeting was held in Sydney at which a Central Region National Parks Association was inaugurated. A similar meeting in Newcastle in November 1956 had led to the formation of a Hunter-Manning Region National Parks Association. The NSW Federation of Bushwalking Clubs and representatives of the Sydney Bush Walkers, among other groups, had orchestrated these meetings. The two regional National Parks Associations subsequently elected delegates to a proposed State Council which was formed at a meeting in Sydney in April 1957.

The National Parks Association, like the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council over twenty years earlier, had two fundamental objectives: to define the term ‘national park’ so as to ‘answer the problems of security, purpose, use and misuse’, and to establish a national parks authority to administer all national parks throughout the State. It was a principle of the Association that a national park should be dedicated expressly to ‘the recreation, inspiration and benefit of all the people’, and ‘not combined with other purposes’ such as the harvesting of timber.

In Queensland, a national parks association was established in 1930, and was the only such organisation in Australia at that time. The first president of the National Parks Association of Queensland was Romeo Lahey, one of the principal campaigners for the establishment of Lamington National Park. The aims adopted by the Queensland association included the preservation in their natural condition of the existing national parks of Queensland, securing the reservation of further suitable areas, and the education of public opinion to a fuller appreciation of the necessity for and value of national parks. Unlike its New South Wales counterpart, the Queensland association did not need to campaign for centralised management of national parks for this had already been achieved through the passage of the *State Forests and National Parks Act* in 1906 (albeit that Queensland’s national parks were managed jointly with state forests by the Forestry Service).

The Victorian National Parks Association was established in 1952 with the journalist and naturalist Philip Crosbie Morrison as its first president, and it pressed for the enactment of national parks legislation in its State and for the establishment of an agency for centralised national park management.

National parks legislation and centralised management

In New South Wales the *National Parks and Wildlife Act* became law on 1 October 1967, ten years after the National Parks Association was founded and began its campaign. This new legislation provided for the reservation ‘for the people’ of nineteen national parks and state parks. State parks were less significant areas, but these were renamed national parks under amending legislation in 1974. Most parks comprised or included lands that had been reserved or dedicated for similar purposes under the *Lands Acts* at various times since the late nineteenth century. Some, including state parks, had been known popularly as national parks for many years, even though this term had no legal meaning before 1967. The legislation created a single agency, the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to care for, control and manage the original nineteen parks and any new ones created in the future. It replaced the numerous trusts that had been created under various acts to manage the parks separately. Reserves under the new act would be irrevocable except by another Act of Parliament passed for the purpose. For the first time, New South Wales had a comprehensive legislative framework through which national parks could be created and managed.

A similar pattern occurred in three other States. In Victoria, at the urging of the Victorian National Parks Association, a *National Parks Act* was created in 1956, and under it was formed the National Parks Authority, with Crosbie Morrison as its first director, to administer the State's national parks. In South Australia the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* transferred control of national parks to the National Parks and Wildlife Division of the Department of Environment. Until then they had been the responsibility of the National Parks Commission, established under the *National Parks Act 1966*. In Western Australia, the *National Parks Authority Act 1976* established the National Parks Authority, prior to which the National Parks Board, which reported to the Minister for Lands, had controlled national parks.

In Queensland, where national parks legislation had been enacted in 1906, management of national parks continued to be undertaken by the Forestry Service until 1975 when this responsibility was transferred to the newly established National Parks and Wildlife Service. This was the first time that Queensland national parks had been managed by a dedicated nature conservation agency. In Tasmania, the Scenery Preservation Board controlled national parks from 1915 until 1971 when the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1970* incorporated it with the Animals and Birds Protection Board into a new National Parks and Wildlife Service.

What about the wildlife?

One of the purposes of national parks from an early stage was the protection of native fauna. By the 1890s it was widely feared that Australia's unique fauna was 'rapidly becoming extinct'. When Ku-ring-gai Chase was established in 1894, it was proposed to create a wildlife preserve where Australian marsupials and other fauna might 'roam and breed in safety'. At small cost a reserve would be created which would 'delight millions yet unborn', and perhaps become 'the only place the future Australian will be able to see a kangaroo outside of his national coat of arms' (Hoben 1900; *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 September 1902). This concern for the Australian fauna grew until the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia was formed in 1909. Its objects included 'preserving intact the typical fauna' of the country.

Fauna protection tended to be the domain of independent streams of legislation, and separate forms of reservation. In New South Wales, for instance, a long stream of fauna protection legislation culminated in the *Fauna Protection Act 1948* under which areas of land across the state were dedicated as reserves for the protection, propagation, and study of native fauna. Fauna protection became the responsibility of the National Parks and Wildlife Service when that body was formed in 1967; at the same time, the 'faunal reserves' established under the 1948 Act were renamed 'nature reserves', better expressing the perceived need to preserve the environment as well as, and in order to, preserve the fauna. In 1999 there were 288 nature reserves in NSW, encompassing more than 700,000 hectares, less than a fifth of the area devoted to national parks.

Conclusion

By the end of the 1970s, all States of Australia had specialised national parks legislation and centralised national parks management agencies. They controlled about 10 million hectares of land designated as 'national parks'. The area has more than doubled since then to be nearly 24 million hectares in 1999. This expansion has partly been the consequence of the development since the 1970s of an increasingly articulate, well-informed and campaign-hardened conservation lobby. An increasing emphasis on the conservation of biodiversity has led to the more systematic reservation of areas of land representative of the widest range of ecosystem types. More recently, this process has been driven by the Federal Government acting under international conservation obligations, and in the particular case of forests, it has involved the large-scale transfer of land previously used for timber production into the national park estate. Despite the strengthening in modern times of the ecosystem protection role of national parks in Australia, they continue, however, to provide space for public recreation, thus retaining that fundamental and vital element of their nineteenth century *raison d'être*.

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