



PRIME MINISTER

FOR MEDIA

MONDAY, 9 JUNE, 1980

OPENING OF SECOND WORLD WILDERNESS CONGRESS

CAIRNS, QUEENSLAND

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak to you this morning, at this opening session of the Second World Wilderness Congress.

It is a matter of some satisfaction to me that Australia was chosen to host the Congress since Australia still possesses much land and sea in what is essentially a wilderness condition. The location of the Congress at Cairns is particularly appropriate because of the access Cairns provides to the vast stretches of wilderness in Northern Australia including the Great Barrier Reef.

Hopefully your discussions over the next week will assist in developing guidelines as to how wilderness can be protected and managed. This needs to be done within a planning framework which provides for the varied needs of future generations of Australians.

I believe that such a framework has been provided to us in the form of the world conservation strategy, a copy of which was presented to me a few months ago by the President of World Wildlife Fund (Australia), Sir Noel Foley.

This document, prepared by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in collaboration with the World Wildlife Fund and the United Nations Environment Programme, has as its goal the integration of conservation and development to ensure that modifications to the planet do indeed secure the survival and well-being of all people.

It points out that conservation, like development, is for people; that while development aims to achieve human goals, largely through use of the biosphere, conservation aims to achieve them by ensuring that such use can continue.

The strategy proclaims the ethic "we have not inherited the earth from our parents, we have borrowed it from our children".

In accepting the strategy on behalf of the Government, indeed on behalf of all Australians, I pledge support to what the document calls "a more focussed approach to living resource conservation".

The Government has already commenced its detailed consideration of the world conservation strategy.

During the next few months, we will be examining closely its implications for Australia.

We will be considering ways in which the Commonwealth Government can give effect to the thrust of its recommendations.

The setting aside of appropriate areas of wilderness has an important place in the world conservation strategy. Later on I propose to say a few words about wilderness and what it means to me.

But before doing so, I would like to give you a broad outline of the Commonwealth Government's policies concerning the environment and conservation and set out for you some of the things which we have done during the last five years to give effect to these policies.

Our record of action to protect the environment will withstand any scrutiny. It is a record of which I am personally proud. It must be seen, however, in the light of the respective roles of the Commonwealth and the States which together form the Australian Federation.

For the facts are, that we are a federation of six States and the Northern Territory; and responsibility for protection of the environment, and for nature conservation, lies significantly with the State and Territorial Governments as well as with the Commonwealth.

On coming to office, my Government recognised that, in order to protect the environment and to ensure that our native plants and animals were conserved, it was necessary for the Commonwealth Government to work in close co-operation with those other Governments.

Throughout our term of Government we have sought to do this, principally through joint consultative councils of Ministers such as the Australian Environment Council and the Council of Nature Conservation Ministers.

We have placed great importance on ensuring that development, whether of an agricultural, industrial or a mining nature, takes place with due regard for the maintenance and enhancement of the qualities of the environment in which the development is to be located.

Our commitment to this is best illustrated by our acceptance in full, in 1977, of the recommendations of the Ranger Uranium Environmental Inquiry concerning the development of uranium mining activities in the Alligator Rivers region of the Northern Territory.

The Government decided that the mining of uranium should proceed but only subject to the most stringent controls. In accordance with the Committee's recommendations we established the statutory office of the supervising scientist to co-ordinate and supervise the development and implementation of standards and controls, for both mining and milling operations.

We also enacted the Environment Protection (Nuclear Codes) Act under which the Commonwealth, the States and the Territories are collaborating to develop codes of practice which will ensure the maintenance of uniformly high environmental standards relating to nuclear activities.

As a central element of our policies for the Alligator Rivers region we have established, in close association with the Northern Territory Government, the Kakadu National Park which will be, without doubt, one of the great national parks of the world.

Not long ago I announced the Government's intention to nominate this Park for inclusion on the World Heritage List which is established under UNESCO's Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage.

The plan of management for Kakadu National Park, which has recently been released for public comment, provides for different, but appropriate uses, whilst ensuring the retention of its wilderness character and providing for the needs of the traditional aboriginal owners and for visitor use and enjoyment.

We have worked closely with a number of State Governments in relation to national parks and similar areas of national significance.

As part of our election policy in 1975 we promised to assist the Tasmanian Government to establish a national park of world significance in south-west Tasmania which would include a substantial wilderness area.

In accordance with this commitment, over the past three years we have provided \$350,000 to the Tasmanian Government to bring together all relevant background information on south-west Tasmania.

This study, which has been undertaken in association with the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service and is now nearing completion, will assist the Tasmanian Government in deciding the future of the area and in reconciling the different potential uses of this beautiful remote region of temperate Australia.

I have recently advised the Tasmanian Government of the Commonwealth's willingness to provide further practical assistance should the Tasmanian Government decide to proceed with the establishment of a national park.

Good progress is also being achieved here in Queensland. I would like to pay tribute to the continuing interest of the Queensland Premier, Mr. Bjelke-Petersen, in the National Parks and Wildlife Service. His support is well known. It deserves acknowledgement. In co-operation with his Government, plans are well advanced in the proclamation of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, a marine wilderness of international standing.

Already an important area at the southern end of the reef - the Capricornia Section - has been proclaimed and a zoning plan has been developed for it which has also recently been released for public comment.

The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority is now moving towards the proclamation of the next section of the Reef - in the vicinity of Cairns - and invitations have been extended to the public to submit their views on this proposal.

The Great Barrier Reef has been recognised as part of the natural heritage of Australia and later this month will be entered into the register of the National Estate maintained by the Australian Heritage Commission.

This action obliges Commonwealth Government Ministers, Departments and agencies to ensure that any actions which they propose to take, which may have an adverse effect on the Great Barrier Reef, as part of the National Estate, are proceeded with only after the most careful consideration and then only if there is no prudent and feasible alternative.

However, we have made it clear on a number of occasions and I repeat the commitment today, that it is our intention to protect the Reef and its ecosystems from danger of any kind. We will not allow oil drilling on or near the Barrier Reef while there is the slightest risk of harm to the Barrier Reef arising from such drilling.

The international significance of the Great Barrier Reef is widely known - not only as the location of the largest coral reefs in the world but also as a major and growing tourist attraction.

Because we wish to emphasise its role and status even further, the Commonwealth and Queensland Governments have under discussion a proposal that the Reef be nominated for the World Heritage List - a list of properties forming part of the world's natural and cultural heritage.

Discussions on this matter are proceeding and I have provided the Queensland Government with further details concerning the proposal.

I have no doubt that the Reef will be accepted for inclusion on this list and I am hopeful that an announcement will be made to this effect shortly.

I know that all Australians feel confident that the Great Barrier Reef will take its place with other great natural wonders of the world such as the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone National Park, and the Galapagos Islands.

I am equally confident that such a listing will provide a strong stimulus to international tourism in Queensland.

My Government has taken a particular interest in species of wildlife threatened with extinction.

Through the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, we have supported a variety of projects concerned with research on endangered species and with educating Australians about them and their needs.

We have supported the establishment of a branch of the World Wildlife Fund in Australia in order that it too may assist in whatever action is necessary to ensure that no species of the Australian flora or fauna is inadvertently forced into extinction.

Australia and Japan are signatories to a migratory bird agreement to protect species common to Australia and Japan, which migrate between the two countries.

The agreement also contains provision for special protection of endangered birds.

Australia is moving towards early ratification of the treaty, following consultation with the States and Northern Territory on the necessary legislative measures. Our stand on the protection of whales has been proclaimed internationally.

Last month important new legislation to protect whales was passed by the Commonwealth Parliament. This legislation prohibits killing, capturing, injuring or interfering with whales, porpoises and dolphins and will apply in the 200-mile Australian fishing zone as well as to Australian citizens, Australian vessels and their crews operating beyond the 200-mile Australian fishing zones.

Severe penalties are provided for breaches of the provisions of the Act including fines of up to \$100,000.

We will continue to seek support for a total world-wide ban on whaling by actively participating in the International Whaling Commission through which we helped establish the Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary last year.

In the Australian Antarctic Territory, Australia exercises sovereignty over a significant part of the last great continental-scale wilderness area of the world. In administering the Territory we have been very conscious of our responsibilities to safeguard it and its fauna. We have been active in scientific research in the Antarctic and, as members of the Antarctic Treaty, we have worked with our Antarctic Treaty partners to protect the environment of the Antarctic and to ensure that its remarkable fauna is safeguarded from harm.

My Government has recently introduced legislation which will enable Australia to give effect to the measures for the conservation of Antarctic flora and fauna as agreed under the Antarctic Treaty.

These provide standards for protection of the natural environment and we are proud to incorporate them into our domestic law.

In further recognition of the importance of the Antarctic's living resources, Australia recently hosted a most successful conference which agreed upon the text of new convention to control the harvesting of species found in the Southern oceans.

The convention on the conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources adopted a unique ecosystems approach, which requires that in any harvesting of a particular species, full consideration shall be given to the effect on all dependent and related species.

We are particularly pleased that Hobart, Tasmania, has been selected as the site for the headquarters of the Commission which is to be established under this Convention and which will be responsible for giving practical effect to its conservation requirements.

These are but some of the many important initiatives we have taken in nature conservation and in the protection of the environment.

But it is no good having the policies and the aspirations in environmental matters, unless they are adequately supported by a wide range of institutions, incorporating a wide range of disciplines, which provide the research and technical expertise that enable these programmes to be put into effect.

The Government's record in this regard is further evidence of its commitment on environmental matters.

For example, at our request the Australian Science and Technology Council has reported on priority areas for marine science programs. Last year, we acted on that report and expanded the scientific resources available to the Australian Institute of Marine Science to enable it to accelerate its existing programme of research in the Great Barrier Reef.

We did this by providing additional staff positions and increased support funding; proof of our determination that A.I.M.S. becomes world renowned, engaging in research of the highest calibre, and internationally admired for its scientific and professional expertise.

We also accepted A.S.T.E.C.'s recommendations to provide \$400,000 to commence a programme on marine science research; and \$200,000 has been allocated to the Barrier Reef.

The Government's response to the A.S.T.E.C. recommendations has been widely applauded. We are now examining the most recent report from A.S.T.E.C. to assess what additional funds need to be provided to continue this important momentum in marine science research.

Similarly, the provision of resources to the C.S.I.R.O. will assist it in allocating additional funds to the high priority areas of fisheries and oceanography.

The Government has recently made a \$25 million decision to relocate and develop in Tasmania the C.S.I.R.O. Division of Fisheries and Oceanography.

This will involve the acquisition of a suitable site in Hobart; the construction of the C.S.I.R.O. Marine Science Laboratories; and the construction of a \$9 million multi-purpose oceanographic research vessel.

Through these, the division will have the capacity to do more, and better work, thereby establishing it as a first class marine science centre.

The C.S.I.R.O. in the environmental field has, of course, for many years been outstanding. The Division of Wildlife Research is one body, whose work demonstrates how the knowledge of the biology of birds and mammals may be applied in the management of wildlife populations.

One important area of its work involves research into the effects on the native fauna of eradication campaigns against pest species. No-one wants to see fauna exterminated and the division is undertaking research of great value to identify animals affected by such campaigns and their sensitivity to them.

Another valuable contribution by this division has been the production of an extensive body of data on the effects of fire on fauna. Studies have shown that despite the severity of fire, most species in most habitats, return to previous levels of abundance within three to five years. Work of this kind supports the Government's concepts for the protection and preservation of the environment; and in relation to the unique and irreplaceable Barrier Reef, that task falls to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority.

We have strongly supported their efforts and their authority for recommending the declaration of marine parks in the Great Barrier Reef region; for developing zoning and management plans for the parks; and in arranging for relevant investigation and research:

In the last two years, we have increased the staff of the Authority from 18 to 44 while recognising that there is a limit in a new body of this kind to the rate at which it can assimilate staff and usefully direct them to their proper functions and responsibilities.

These institutional arrangements complement our support for the international union for the conservation of nature of which Australia is proud to be a State member; our support for the U.N. Environment Programme on whose Government Council we presently serve; our support for Australian voluntary conservation bodies; and the recent establishment of the Bureau of Flora and Fauna within the Department of Science and the Environment, to expand and co-ordinate national taxonomic effort relating to the Australian plants and animals.

Before concluding my remarks I would like to say a few words about the concept of wilderness.

I believe that, in recent years, there has been a tendency to define "wilderness" in a very restrictive way.

For many people, such a concept seems to be elitist, and to have little relevance to their needs, since they can never hope to experience it personally.

It seems to me that this Congress will, at the very beginning, need to reach some understanding of what is meant by wilderness and will wish to explore whether such a narrow interpretation is justifiable; and to consider the problems arising from the strong polarisation of community views which such a concept engenders.

I believe that everyone here would appreciate that wilderness is the culmination of natural evolution - a process which began with the appearance of life on earth and whose complexity is beyond our comprehension.

The observation and study of wilderness provides opportunities to understand and apply the lessons and experience of natural evolution for the benefit of all people. Since wilderness protection preserves that option, it is in the interest of people to ensure that adequate reserves of wilderness are kept intact as an insurance for the future.

Whilst we now have the technological capacity to tear apart wilderness, we are unable to reconstruct it once it is changed or destroyed.

The best that we can do is to implement costly programmes of rehabilitation, for instance to control alien weed and pest species. An inevitable result of the wanton destruction of wilderness is that some species of living things are placed at risk.

Already untold numbers of plant and animal species have become extinct as the area of wilderness has shrunk.

Many more species are known to be on the way out unless their habitat is protected.

I see each species lost as a downgrading of the human environment through the lessening of biological diversity.

Fortunately there is still time to halt the world tide of species destruction, for people have not become so remote from nature as to be insensitive to the needs of other living things.

Despite all our manipulative skills and mechanical aids, people are still part of nature.

It is difficult to see how anyone could seriously challenge the dedication of some space for the preservation of habitat in the interests of creatures and people.

If the human race cannot do this, then self destruction of this planet may result.

Recognition that wilderness is something special and worthy of protection, is by no means a universally accepted view, but it certainly commands wide and increasing support amongst today's Australians.

Especially, for our aboriginal community, the maintenance of our environment is essential for the continuation of their lifestyle, their traditions and their culture. We all have a part to play in preserving our environment, for we all have so much to benefit from our natural heritage.

There would be few families in this country who have not at some time or other, savoured unique pleasure from the quality of wilderness to be found in many parts of the Australian outback, in the bush or on the seashore. For many people those experiences are of such moment that they become central to their recreational activities.

Even those people who are unable to experience wilderness by walking through it, may still obtain satisfaction from knowing it is there and from viewing it from afar.

These are just a few personal observations on what wilderness means to me. I am sure that, in the days to come, you will develop a much greater understanding of wilderness, of what it is, and how best to ensure its continued existence.

I look forward with interest to studying the report of your discussions and I see this Congress as a further step in the development of a more rational and harmonious relationship between man and nature.

In declaring this Congress open, I wish you every success in your deliberations and I trust you will enjoy the various field trips, which have been planned to give you an appreciation of this wonderful area of Northern Queensland in which your meeting is taking place.

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