

WILD RIVERS ARE FOR ALL OF US

In what must seem to many to be a desperate bid for environmental credibility Tony Abbott has promised some significant environmental initiatives concerning the care of the Murray Darling Basin and the development of a greatly expanded conservation corps. With Labor failing to deliver on whales and backing away from its Antarctica world heritage promise these proposals have the potential to work for the Opposition's advantage.

Unfortunately, public support is likely to be dampened, by Abbott's private members bill to negate wild river dedications on Cape York Peninsula which was introduced into the House of Representatives as the Wild Rivers (Environmental Management) Bill 2010 on 8th February.

The case for wild rivers was broadcast far and wide with the decision to protect the Franklin River in 1983 but for a new generation confronted by Abbott's wild Canberra manoeuvring it is worth revisiting the issue of why we should care about wild rivers. Put simply, rivers running free of modern technological intrusions such as dams and mines are of importance to the wider community through their contributions to catchment protection, biodiversity conservation, recreation and science. Wild rivers, unlike most Australian rivers, are free of the destructive bank erosion which causes considerable downstream silting.

In June 1980 the Australian Conservation Foundation developed a comprehensive national policy on wild rivers which included a call to Australian Governments to follow the example of the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act passed by the US Congress in 1968. ACF soon developed a list of candidate wild rivers some suggested by aboriginal groups.

Since then by one way or another each of the States and Territories has moved to protect its wild rivers, some in national parks such as Tasmania's Franklin Gordon Wild Rivers National Park (1981), but in Victoria (from 1992), New South Wales (2001) and Queensland (2005) by means of specific wild or heritage river dedications. If a wild river is in a national park it means that additional consultation must be taken if any development is proposed that could affect it.

These systems are still evolving. New South Wales last year designated over 7,600 square kilometres of the Grose and Colo Rivers (see photo) and their tributaries as the fifth and sixth wild rivers in that state. In Queensland several wild river declarations in the Gulf Country were welcomed by local aboriginal groups. On Cape York Peninsula aboriginal opinion is split.

The Queensland Government is currently moving to honour an election pledge and give wild river status to rivers in the Lake Eyre Basin. These are the Georgina, Diamantina Rivers and Cooper Creek. While grazing practices would be allowed to continue in a sustainable manner the move would prevent large scale irrigation farming. The case for wild rivers has been widely made in Queensland and has been endorsed at three successive state elections.

An excellent example of how such river designations can work in the public interest is provided by the Mitchell Heritage River in Gippsland. A Rivers and Streams Investigation undertaken by the Land Conservation Council between 1987 and 1991 had identified the Mitchell as being the largest free flowing river in Victoria in terms of annual flow; one of 18 that the Council said deserved heritage river status for their significant conservation recreation, scenic or cultural heritage values. There are still some who favour a dam on the Mitchell, as was initially proposed in 1987, but its declaration as a heritage river has created a major obstacle to all these proposals - a situation welcomed by most Victorians.

What is clear on Cape York Peninsula is that the condition of the rivers is the legacy of past care by the indigenous inhabitants and that the declarations show respect for this history. Unfortunately, the limitations placed on large scale development of the wild rivers has become a platform for advertising the economic development aspirations of some groups. As a result there is more fiction than fact in the claims of the wild river opponents. Cultural practices, eco-tourism ventures cattle grazing and fishing are not affected. Outlawed are dams, intensive irrigation and mining.

As for Abbott's bill wild rivers are a matter of national interest and a truly federal scheme would be welcome, but the Opposition leader's trip down these rough waters

appears to be mainly motivated by trying to win the federal seat of Leichardt for Liberal Party member Warren Entsch.

What Tony Abbott has overlooked is that while there will always be some who will seek to destroy wild rivers for their own advantage it is important, as in the case of the Mitchell, that the national public interest should prevail - without exception. Rivers and their interdependencies deserve our utmost respect. Logically, if you are concerned about the future of our water you will support the protection of our wild rivers.

Geoff Mosley

I have supplied a dramatic aerial photo of the Colo Wild River in New South Wales.

(Dr Geoff Mosley AM Is a former CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation).

