

World Heritage Listing

The Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage was adopted by UNESCO in 1972. Listing is a recognition by the international community that the subject is irreplaceable and must be conserved for the benefit of all the world's people. Already almost 600 cultural sites, including the Egyptian Pyramids, and 150 natural sites, including the Grand Canyon, have been listed.

At a meeting of the World Heritage Committee at the Sydney Opera House in 1981, the first three Australian sites were listed – The Great Barrier Reef, Kakadu and Willandra Lakes. The following year Lord Howe Island and Western Tasmania National Parks were added.

It was clear that the new rainforest National Parks would only be safe while Labor was in Government. In order to prevent any changes when the Coalition regained power, it was suggested to the Premier by one of his senior staff, John Grant, that if they were listed as World Heritage they would be safe. A Working Group consisting of Peter Hitchcock, John Whitehouse, Paul Adam (Senior Lecturer in Botany at the University of NSW) and Ian Sim (DEP) prepared a comprehensive nomination which relied mainly on the earlier research of Alex Floyd and Len Webb. In May 1984 the Premier moved in the Legislative Assembly “that this House supports the nomination of rainforest National Parks in NSW to be submitted for inclusion in the World Heritage List under the UNESCO Convention”. It was passed despite objections from the Opposition. When the nomination was published, Bob Carr, then Minister for Environment and Planning and later Premier, wrote: “The conservation of the State's rainforest is one of our biggest wins yet for the environment. As Neville Wran has said, it may well be regarded by future generations as the Government's crowning achievement.”

Dr James Thorsell inspected the site on behalf of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature in February 1986, and strongly recommended inclusion. It was guided through UNESCO by Gough Whitlam, who was Vice President of the committee.

Hopefully he was aware that it was his Government which had approved the grant of \$5,000 to the Border Ranges Preservation Society back in 1975.

The nomination satisfied three of the four criteria required for natural properties:

- An outstanding example representing major stages of the earth's evolutionary history.
- An outstanding example representing ongoing geological processes and biological evolution.
- Containing important and scientific habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity.
- The fourth, unsatisfied criterion was scenic.

The first of the six nominated sites totalling 203,000 hectares was the Tweed Volcanic Group of which the Border Ranges National Park was the jewel in the crown, Gradys Creek being specifically mentioned because of its spectacular and dense rainforest.

Following the electoral defeat of the Bjelke-Petersen Government, the listing was enlarged to include rainforest areas in South East Queensland, and renamed Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves (Australia) – CERRA. In 1994 it comprised 50 sites in eight clusters totalling 366,507 ha, not only in National Parks and Nature Reserves but also in State Forests and Flora Reserves. It was officially described as a living illustration of the evolution of Australian plant life during and after the break-up of Gondwana.

The eight clusters comprise:

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| 1 | Main Range Group | Sub-tropical rainforest in South East Queensland. |
| 2 | Border Ranges Group | Border Ranges, Nightcap and Mt Warning National Parks in NSW and Lamington and Springbrook National Parks in Queensland. |
| 3 | Focal Peak Group | Mt Barney, Toonumbah and Tooloom National Parks. |
| 4 | Iluka Group | Littoral rainforest in Iluka Nature Reserve. |
| 5 | Gibraltar Range Group | Washpool and Gibraltar Range National Parks. |
| 6 | New England Group | Dorrigo and New England National Parks. |
| 7 | Hastings-Macleay Group | Oxley Wild Rivers and Werrikimbe National Parks. |
| 8 | Barrington Tops Group | Barrington Tops National Park. |

Dr James Thorsell told members of the NSW Ministers Parliamentary Committee that IUCN considered NSW a world leader in rainforest protection and NPWS one of the top four Park Services in the world.

Gradys Creek, which the Forestry Commission almost succeeded in destroying eight years earlier, was now recognised as being of world significance; it lay in the heart of the largest undisturbed sub-tropical rainforest in Australia, comprising the Border Ranges in NSW and Lamington National Park in Queensland. The extensive bibliography supporting the World Heritage nomination contains my name as author of *How the Rainforest was Saved* (1983), even though, because of fears of an action for defamation, it does not appear in the publication itself.

John Whitehouse, who accompanied Thorsell in his week-long evaluation of the seven rainforest parks, said that it was when they reached the Border Ranges that Thorsell made up his mind that World Heritage listing was merited, remarking that although each park was unique, together they were akin to the Galapagos Islands in their contribution to science.

Following the gazettal of the new rainforest National Parks, members of the Coalition maintained that although they would not allow the logging of rainforest, they would allow the logging of hardwood, which they had long argued should not have been included. Liberal Party Shadow Environment Minister Tim Moore realised that once the parks achieved World Heritage listing this was an untenable policy, so he arranged for the Leader of the Opposition, Nick Greiner, to meet James Thorsell when he was in NSW assessing the nomination for IUCN. As a direct result of this meeting, “the inescapable political conclusion” (Moore’s words) was that the Party could not face the overwhelming opprobrium which would follow changing the boundaries in order to make the hardwood available to the sawmillers. However, the Liberal Party was unable to convince the National Party members who were still fretting over the declaration of the new parks, and an embarrassed Tim Moore was forced to admit publicly that “the Coalition Parties are in disagreement in regard to National Parks”. This did not prevent Nick Greiner declaring in 1986 that no Government led by him would change the boundaries, and it was so. Thus the Labor Party strategy resulted in permanent protection. No longer need Bob Carr cry “The barbarians are at the gates!”

Tim Moore LLB MP was a keen conservationist with whom I had numerous discussions. In a speech in the legislative assembly in October 1985 he stressed the need for bipartisan support for the environment, but when he did become Minister for Environment in 1988, his efforts were often frustrated by members of his own side.