
Interview: Susan Woenne-Green

Handing national parks to Aborigines

A collaborator of former Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) head Philip Toyne, Woenne-Green is the key individual conducting the studies and pilot projects (such as turning Ayers Rock/Uluru over to Aboriginal control) to justify ultimately turning over the vast areas of Australia under "conservation," "World Heritage," or "wilderness" designations to Aboriginal control, thus cutting these areas out of the nation of Australia forever. An American by birth, she moved to Australia in 1967.

Q: Donna Craig mentioned an interesting report that you had done on the co-management of national parks by Aboriginal people, in conjunction with the state or federal governments. I would like to get a quick idea of what the study was, what it showed, how it came about.

Woenne-Green: The volume that was produced was called "Competing Interests." You could get a copy from the Australian Conservation Foundation in Victoria. Several things caused it to happen. One is that I have had a lot of experience working with Aboriginal organizations and in the attempts with government to gain some position of equity with respect to management of nature reserves, national parks.

Even under the Northern Territory Land Rights Act, which is Commonwealth, the issue of national parks was a matter of dispute—well, not dispute, but it was a matter that the Act could not in fact deal with the on-the-ground lands reserved to the state or Commonwealth national park service which were not available for claim.

So, with quite a lot of work under my belt, and also one of the other authors whose name is Russ Johnston, he and I both, coincidentally, have had a lot to do with Ayers Rock, Uluru National Park. Then, through some other contacts at that time, the Australian Conservation Foundation had just developed a policy, a pro-active policy, which supported joint management arrangements between state and Commonwealth bodies and Aboriginal "traditional owners." (Although Aboriginal people use that term, only in very few places is that backed up by legislation.)

And so the ACF hired us, with funding from the Commonwealth, to do basically a national survey of how Aboriginal people were getting on in attempting to deal, with governments in various jurisdictions, with land which Aboriginal people considered their own, but which had been

reserved by the state for their own conservation or tourist uses in the name of the Australian people.

Q: This co-management idea, to the extent it is successful, could it lead to increasing Aboriginal claims or rights to areas which are now dedicated to conservation as a state or national park? Is that one possible outcome over time? Most of these parks are land that Aborigines do not own now, right?

Woenne-Green: Absolutely.

Q: So, to the extent they establish a precedent in handling these places well, would that give some legitimacy to them over time, reasserting their traditional land rights?

Woenne-Green: That is a good question. Absolutely.

Interview: Michael Dodson

Regional agreements will lead to autonomy

Michael (Mick) Dodson is the Federal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner. He is an associate of Nugget Coombs, and wrote the foreword to Coombs's 1994 book, Aboriginal Autonomy. Dodson is also a collaborator of Nobel Prize-winning terrorist spokeswoman Rigoberto Menchú of Guatemala.

Q: I am doing a study on Aboriginal rights, particularly the question of regional agreements and moves toward autonomy. Maybe you could give me an overview.

Dodson: We are going far too slowly. I work for the Human Rights Commission in Australia. My primary task is to monitor and report on the exercise and enjoyment of human rights by indigenous Australians.

Now things have not improved. And in some quarters the indicators are that we are going backwards, particularly in relation to health. We just had two significant reports released nationally, one is an assessment of what was known as the National Aboriginal Health Strategy, which was agreed upon between the Commonwealth and the members of Federation, states and territories, and Aboriginal leaderships, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), and Aboriginal Medical Services, back in 1990. The assessment of that strategy is that it by and large has failed, primarily due to lack of commitment by government, particularly in terms of financial resources put in.

The government said that it would respond in three ways.