

History of Geoconservation in Tasmania

Conserving our geodiversity has gone through three major stages of development.

Conserving for scenic values

Reserving outstanding caves and areas of scenic landforms such as Hastings Caves and Russell Falls, could be broadly regarded as the beginnings of geoconservation work in Tasmania. However the first work, clearly aimed at the conservation of our geodiversity, was centred around the 'Geological Heritage' or 'Geological Monuments' approach of the Geological Society of Australia.

Conserving for scientific values

This early work was mostly based on recognising the scientific heritage value of certain bedrock features which inform us about the Earth's past development. This resulted in the preparation of two inventories of significant bedrock sites and some landform features (Jennings et al. 1974, Eastoe 1979).

Whilst this approach is of undoubted importance, its focus on the value of significant features only for scientific research and education does not have much immediate relevance to the broader issues of land management and ecological sustainability. So geoconservation remained an oddity, divorced from mainstream nature conservation, and having a fairly low priority within land management agencies.

Integrating geoconservation with land management

As well as conserving our geodiversity for its scenic and scientific values, it has long been recognised that we need to manage our landforms and soil processes to prevent hazards such as landslips and subsidence which may impinge on our use of certain areas.

However more recently, it has been recognised that we should be protecting our geodiversity for its intrinsic value as well as these other values. So we should manage our lands to not only prevent hazards but also to conserve the intrinsic values of geodiversity. This approach accepts that bedrock, landforms and soils form the essential and integral basis of the broader ecological systems on which most nature conservation concern has been focussed. From this perspective, the integral role of geoconservation in nature conservation can be readily appreciated.

The political arena

The presence of a large area of wilderness in Tasmania has made nature conservation issues an important part of our political agenda. This first became apparent in the late 1960s, with the controversial flooding of the unique Lake Pedder landform assemblage by a hydro-electric development. This action has been widely regarded as the issue that effectively launched environmental politics in Australia.

The political importance of conservation in Tasmania continued with the Franklin River dam issue and the forestry debates of the 1980s and 1990s. The high profile of these nature conservation issues provided the political and intellectual environment for the development of a broadly-based, management-relevant approach to geoconservation.

During the mid-1980s, political events created a climate enabling geoscientists to press the case for geoconservation to be recognised as an important land management issue in Tasmania.

Geomorphic values were raised as a major issue in the 1987 Helsham inquiry into Tasmanian forest conservation values (Helsham et al. 1988). Karst and glacial geomorphic values were prominent in the subsequent listing of extensions to the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area in 1989.

Working to protect our geodiversity

Around this time (in 1986), the Tasmanian Forestry Commission (now Forestry Tasmania) employed a specialist geomorphologist to provide landform conservation expertise. In 1988 bank erosion on the World Heritage - listed Gordon River caused the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service to employ an Earth Scientist, and later concerns regarding damage to Exit Cave (in southern Tasmania) by quarrying similarly resulted in employment of a karst specialist.

These government land management officers, together with other project staff, have initiated programs within their agencies to further raise the profile of geoconservation. In particular, the 1996 - 1997 Regional Forest Agreement process for Tasmania has provided an opportunity to consolidate work to date and has resulted in further theoretical development of approaches to geoconservation (e.g. Houshold et al. 1997). In order to participate more effectively in Tasmanian land use debates, in 1994 a group of Tasmanian geoconservation professionals informally convened a body now known as the Tasmanian Geoconservation Committee.

A more detailed discussion of the development of geoconservation in Tasmania, and a comparison with approaches elsewhere, can be found in Dixon (1995b).

References

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