Introduction
This article follows the synopsis of mountain wilderness areas and a historical account of wilderness management in South Africa (SA) in IJW (vol 7, no. 2, Bainbridge 2001a). It attempts to provide an update and short overview of the status of the wilderness areas of SA as a component of the national protected area (PA) system, in the context of the new South Africa, following the democratic elections in 1994. It also provides some insights into the present status of the wilderness system and considers some of its values and future prospects for improved legal protection.

SA has played a leading role in the establishment and management of protected areas in Africa for more than a century, since proclamation of the first reserves on the continent in 1895 (Pringle 1982). The national system comprises more than 400 individual areas that cover about 6% of the land surface and about 5% of marine and coastal environments. This includes 11 legally designated wilderness areas and a number of wilderness zones on other protected area categories. These, however, have only been established in the past 50 years. The total extent of the designated wilderness areas is small in comparison with that of all other PAs, forming less than 3% of the PA system numerically and only 0.5% of the total extent (Department of Environment Affairs & Tourism [DEAT] 2000; Bainbridge 2001b).

Most of the PA system was designated prior to the new political dispensation brought about in 1994. Since the election in that year, which brought to power the democratic government led by Dr. Nelson Mandela, some important advances have been made in nature conservation in this country. In the first instance, the national PA system has been extended by some 380,000 ha (938,300 acres), and several new marine protected areas have been declared. Also, an official announcement has been made to further increase the extent of the terrestrial system up from 6 to 8% (DEAT 2000). In the second instance, a Board of Investigation headed by Mr. Justice Kumleben was constituted to investigate and make recommendations on the institutional arrangements for nature conservation in SA. These developments are likely to bring significant benefits to the country and its citizens. They include the development of a conservation model and institutional arrangements aimed at rationalizing the PA system, in order to optimise biodiversity conservation and economic development. The PA system should also have significant benefits for wilderness conservation.

The Key Role of the PA System in Protection of the National Biodiversity Resources
SA is a country rich in biodiversity resources, on which the livelihoods of many of its people depend. It is recognized as one of the three most biologically diverse countries worldwide, characterized by seven biomes and nearly 70 distinct vegetation types. These have high levels of species-richness
and high levels of endemism. SA is a signatory to the Biodiversity Convention, and in fulfilment of its obligations and responsibilities in terms of this, has published a national biodiversity conservation strategy, the White Paper on Conservation and Sustainable Use of South Africa’s Biological Diversity (1997). This states that these resources are at risk. Both plant and animal species are overutilized by both commercial and subsistence use. There is growing awareness of the need for decisive action to be taken for the protection of both the national terrestrial and marine resources. The national PA system forms a key role in the overall national strategy to achieve this. Bainbridge (2001b) indicates aspects of the significant contribution made by the wildernesses toward these aims.

Legal Protection of the Protected Area System

The national PA system was established in a somewhat haphazard and uncoordinated manner, largely according to historical circumstance. The range of protected area categories has been proclaimed in legislation at both national and provincial levels, with considerable variation in the form of legal protection afforded. The White Paper outlines the situation as follows:

The fragmented, polarised, and inefficient administrative and legislative structures created by apartheid resulted in no fewer than seventeen government departments having primary responsibility for nature conservation prior to the 1994 election. This situation did not improve with the establishment of new provinces and government structure. Divided responsibilities, together with a duplication of effort, a profusion of laws, and, most importantly, a lack of coordination, have been major factors hampering the effective conservation of biodiversity. Aggravating this has been a lack of integration of biodiversity considerations into national decision-making, weak political will with regard to environmental conservation, and the insufficient and declining allocation of resources to conservation. Over and again, the need to link biodiversity conservation to the needs of South Africa’s people has been highlighted as a major concern, as well as the importance of integrating conservation into an overall strategy for conserving and using natural resources sustainably.

As an example of the somewhat haphazard approach to protection of the national PA system, there are some 19 national parks proclaimed under the provisions of The National Parks Act of 1976. This provides secure protection against incursion or nonconforming land uses, such as mining. In contrast, the statutes by which provincial PAs are protected do not enjoy the same levels of protection, especially against mining. Yet, while the National Parks Act provides protection to some of the most important PAs in the country (such as the Kruger National Park),
in terms of the biodiversity and other resources they conserve, some national parks must be considered significantly less important than certain of the provincial PAs (Kumleben et al. 1998).

The Forest Act is part of national legislation, and until recently, was the only statute that made provision for the designation of wilderness areas. It also provided a higher degree of legal entrenchment than that enjoyed by provincial legislation (except against mining). However, it is only applicable to state forest land, and could not be employed for the designation of wilderness areas on other land. Recently, the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Management Act of 1997 has been amended to enable the declaration of wilderness areas, but this is only applicable to PAs in that province.

Possible New Legal Status for Wilderness Areas

The report of the Kumleben Board of Enquiry has presented important recommendations to government to redress a number of these problems. New legislation is currently being drafted to implement the national strategy for conservation of biodiversity resources defined in the White Paper. Of particular significance for wilderness areas and important provincial reserves, the board recommended the following:

There should be a scientific appraisal of all existing PAs, to determine those that qualify for such status, and at the same time, to determine the category in which an approved PA should be included. The protected areas thus determined should be given formal national and legal recognition, and be known as Nationally Proclaimed Protected Areas (NPPAs).

All NPPAs that have been determined as Category I or II protected areas are to have the status of “National Parks”, and are to be entitled to such appellation, regardless of their management authority.

It is envisaged that most, if not all, existing wilderness areas, listed as Category I(b) by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN) international list of protected area categories (IUCN 1994), and possibly some candidate areas will qualify for NPPA status (Bainbridge 2001b).
This is potentially of utmost importance for entrenchment of the national wilderness system.

Other Challenges
Possibly the most important challenge to wilderness enthusiasts is to generate public awareness, support, and resources for wilderness conservation in the new SA. It is unfortunately a reality in this country that:

- The wilderness concept is hardly, or not at all, understood or appreciated by the ordinary SA or villager or person in the street;
- Obtaining the support of the people, or more significantly, that of our leaders for the concept, is at least as important (possibly more important) than legal protection for the long-term survival of wilderness conservation in this country; and
- The alarming and rapid decline in national and provincial government budgets for nature conservation activities poses significant challenges, not the least of which is possible loss of “institutional memory” and skills at staff level.

Responsibility for the necessary action to remedy this situation lies with both the official nature conservation agencies, as well as with wilderness-oriented nongovernmental organization (NGO) movements. It is possible that neither are currently sufficiently active to meet the very large challenge that lies ahead. Much of the wilderness initiatives that have been put in place have their origins in the NGO movements. This is to some extent understandable in that wilderness conservation does not feature prominently on the national priority list, and the official agencies have experienced enormous pressures since the introduction of democratic government. To those of us who are committed to the cause, there is no question in our minds that it is in the public interest that not only should the present wilderness system be retained in its entirety but, if possible, should be expanded to include the most important candidate areas. There is reason to believe that a significant number of traditional leaders and politicians are supportive of this, but far greater effort is needed to nurture this support and to meaningfully expand the support base.

It is also important that the wilderness concept be interpreted in local idiom (wilderness in an African context) in order that Africans themselves may understand and appreciate its values in ethnic and cultural terms.

Finally, the role of the NGO movement within SA and internationally cannot be overemphasized. As public agency budgets decline, greater response from other sectors is required, and financial assistance for public awareness, training, and education of current and future wilderness leaders is imperative. Important initiatives are currently underway, such as the partnership that has been developed between the University of Montana of the United States of America and the University of Natal of South Africa on development of the Protected Area Management Programme, which will involve postgraduate studies, research, and exchange programs. A component of this involves training of field staff; another component involves training of North American students in the management of protected areas.

[South Africa] is recognized as one of the three most biologically diverse countries worldwide, characterized by seven biomes and nearly 70 distinct vegetation types.
of this is professional training in wilderness conservation undertaken by the University of Natal, the Wilderness Action Group, and the United States Forest Service. The WILD Foundation is collaborating with the Wilderness Foundation and others to fund and implement the 7th World Wilderness Congress in South Africa. The benefit of these partnerships will be felt not only in the status and sustainability of wilderness in SA but will spread throughout Africa. This is evident in the Wilderness Management Training course conducted for the first time prior to the 7th World Wilderness Congress, in which 10 African nations will participate (also for the first time) with participants from other countries.

Conclusion

The national wilderness system of SA is a priceless natural heritage of which its citizens, the government, and official nature conservation agencies may be justly proud. Although relatively restricted in relation to the extent of the remainder of the national PA system, the wilderness areas conserve vitally important watersheds, biodiversity resources of both national and international importance, and sacred space. They are the only areas of public land in which true wilderness experience is available, on foot and without the filtering effect of mechanical transport. The system has already acquired an international reputation because it includes the first wildernesses on the African continent to be afforded formal protection, but also because of the high standards to which they have been managed and the unique resources they protect, some of which are of outstanding universal value.

Considerable attention will be necessary in the future from both official agencies and NGOs to ensure that the system receives the most secure and effective legal protection in the new dispensation under consideration for the national PA system, and that the high standards of management afforded the system in the past are maintained.

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