

The World Wilderness Congress

BY VANCE G. MARTIN

The World Wilderness Congress (WWC) is the oldest continuing international public forum on wilderness and related conservation concerns. As preparation for the 7th WWC in South Africa, November 2 through 8, 2001, *IJW* offers this perspective on the history, accomplishments, and vision of the Congress.

Overview

The WWC is unique in international conservation because of its continuity, evolving structure, and diverse professional and public participation. Here is a recap of the principles around which the Congress is organized every few years, where and when it has convened, and our perspective on its value and accomplishments. We hope this will encourage your greater involvement in international wilderness issues—and maybe even bring you to the 7th WWC in November 2001.

The Roots

The WWC was conceived by noted South African and international conservationist Ian Player and his Zulu friend, mentor, and game scout Magqubu Ntombela. The idea grew from conversations while leading hundreds of small groups into the African wilderness, watching (and dodging) hippos, elephants, and lions, sitting under the African stars and around the campfire on night watch. They both knew that some important action was needed for wilderness to be understood and to survive globally, and Ntombela suggested they call an *Indaba*—in Zulu culture, a great gathering of all factions and perspectives. Hence the WWC was born out of an idea conceived in the wilderness and rooted in indigenous traditions.

The 1st WWC convened in South Africa in 1977 during the apartheid regime and just months after the tragedy of the Soweto riots. The first congress put blacks, whites, and Bushmen on the same stage (at the time not only was this unconventional, but illegal) and featured such diverse participants



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as business, banking, and cultural leaders meeting with the public. Such diverse interaction turned the conservation world on its ear. Searching such new ways to protect and sustain wilderness was a radical idea then, and perhaps even unthinkable to most South Africans.

The WWC concept became the responsibility of the International Wilderness Leadership Foundation (now called The WILD Foundation), evolving into a forum convening periodically around the world (see figure 1). The diverse participation continued, creating an international agenda for wilderness, empowering local and regional action, and always involving business, political, cultural, and environmental leaders in constructive dialogue. Proceedings of cultural and technical symposia provided a continuing record of the issues, resolutions for action, and accomplishments of the gatherings.

Summary of Major WWC Accomplishments

The 1st WWC convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 1977, chaired by Ian Player, with 2,500 delegates from 27 countries (Player 1978). The accomplishments included introducing wilderness as an international issue of importance to developing countries, not just to Western, developed cultures; integrating diverse cultures and races in the nature conservation dialogue, along with economics and banking, thus bringing many new perspectives for the first time into the environmental agenda; and hosting the largest exhibition of conservation art assembled to date in Africa.

The 2nd WWC convened in June 1980 in Cairns (Queensland), Australia, chaired by Australian farmer and conservationist Wally O'Grady, with 1,000 delegates from 25 countries (Martin 1981). Beginning the practice of using each congress to stimulate action, Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser opened it and recom-

mended the Great Barrier Reef as a World Heritage Site. The premier of Queensland then announced the protection of additional areas of virgin lowland rain forest as parks. Bob Brown, president of the Tasmanian Wilderness Society, focused international attention to wilderness conservation in Tasmania, helping make this issue a critical factor in the subsequent election of a new labor government under Prime Minister Bob Hawke. The value of indigenous, aboriginal knowledge to nature conservation, and how to define wilderness as an internationally relevant concept, were prime topics of discussion again, establishing them as continuing themes for future congresses.

The 3rd WWC convened in October 1983 at Inverness and Findhorn, Scotland, chaired by Scottish forester and environmentalist, Finlay MacRae, with 600 delegates from 25 countries (Martin and Inglis 1984). British Prime Minister Thatcher's government (through the secretary of state for Scotland, George

Younger) announced for the first time their ratification of the World Heritage Convention (Younger 1984). Barry Cohen, minister of environment in Australia, reported on his government's protection of southwest Tasmanian wilderness (Cohen 1984). Italian environmentalist Franco Zunino was empowered in his dream to form the Wilderness Associazione Italiana, which has since led to the establishment of wilderness areas in Italy (Zunino 1984, 1995). The congress also prompted establishment of the Wilderness Action Group in South Africa to advocate for wilderness training and legislation (Hendee and Dawson 2001, chptr. 3). Professor C. A. Meier of Switzerland, a leading psychologist, launched the continuing concern of the congresses with wilderness psychology (Meier 1984). A major focus of this congress was defining wilderness as an international concept and launching the successful campaign for inclusion of wilderness as a separate and specific classification under the World Conservation Union

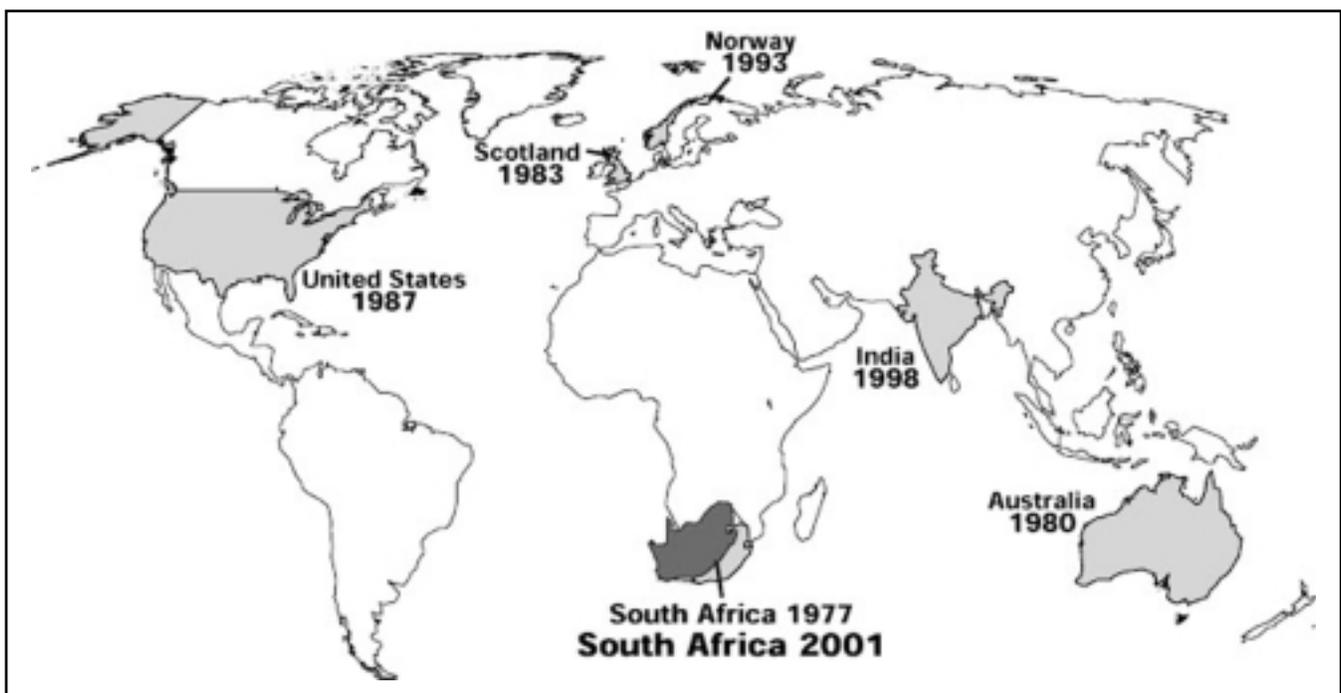


Figure 1—The World Wilderness Congress has convened in six different countries over the past 20 years.

The agreed upon definition of wilderness is: “Large areas of unmodified or slightly modified land and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition.”

(IUCN) Framework for Protected Areas—more on this below.

The 4th WWC convened in September 1987 in Denver and Estes Park, Colorado, USA, chaired by Maurice Strong (director general of Stockholm 1972 and The Earth Summit 1992) and natural resource dean Dr. Jay Hughes of Colorado State University, with 2,000 delegates from 64 nations (Martin 1988). It was opened by U.S. Secretary of the Treasury James Baker, who called for an integration of economics and environmental concerns, adding weight to the congress proposal for a World Conservation Bank, initiating the process leading to establishment of the U.S. \$1.3 billion Global Environmental Fund of the World Bank. Other accomplishments included presentation of the first World Wilderness Inventory by Michael McCloskey (McCloskey and Spaulding 1988); and Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway and chair of the United Nations (Brundtland) Commission on Environment and Development, addressed the congress and conducted the only public hearings with her commissioners in the United States (WCED 1987).

This congress was the first to feature a major science program, with several plenary addresses, eight concurrent technical sessions meeting for four days each, plus poster sessions focusing science on international wilderness concerns. One of these sessions on marine

wilderness concerns, organized by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (USA), launched and empowered the idea of marine wilderness, which is only now coming to fruition. The continuing congress focus on the use of wilderness for personal growth, therapy, and education was expressed in both plenary events and technical symposia (Hendee 1987; Martin 1988).

The 5th WWC met in October 1993 in Tromsø, Norway, chaired by Nobel Laureate and explorer Thor Heyerdahl and Judge Rakel Surlien, with 600 delegates from 25 countries (Martin and Tyler 1994). Under the theme of Arctic Wilderness, the congress strengthened the wilderness concept in the circumpolar development debate, advocating specific legislation to protect wilderness areas and values while recognizing sustainable use by indigenous cultures. Environmental guidelines were proposed for the Arctic economic development strategy of the Northern Forum, an association of 20 regions and states in the circumpolar north. A strong science focus continued with plenary presentations and concurrent technical symposia (Hendee and Martin 1994; Rothenberg 1995). The first inventory of wild rivers of the north was presented by Mike McCloskey of the Sierra Club (McCloskey 1994), and the concept of sustainable living was introduced as an evolution of the sustainable development debate.

The 6th WWC met in October 1998 in Bangalore, India, chaired by Mr. M. A. Partha Sarathy, convening 700 delegates from 30 nations and the first gathering in Asia focused on wilderness (Martin and Sarathy 2001). Here we joined the region’s environmental leaders in formally introducing the concept of designated, protected wilderness areas in Asia, with guidelines for policy to fit Asian conditions. Mike McCloskey, building on his world inventory work, presented the first comprehensive inventory of wild rivers of the world (McCloskey, Michael 2001), while his wife, Maxine McCloskey, presented a summary analysis of underwater wilderness and a proposal to recognize and better protect the unique values of wilderness on the high seas (McCloskey, Maxine 2001). The now familiar congress science program of concurrent technical symposia, poster sessions, and proceedings (Watson et al. 1998, 2000) were supplemented by daily meetings of an Open Council for delegates to share the personal challenges of their wilderness conservation work. This forum was especially appreciated by delegates from developing nations, for whom this “heart-space” was healing and empowering (Hendee and Riley 1999).

An Evolving Format and Inquiry

As the forgoing review demonstrates, each congress features host country leadership and important discussion focused on concerns in that country and world region. At the same time, world wilderness issues remain center stage. The evolving framework now features multidisciplinary inquiry from diverse sectors of human endeavor for example, business, culture, the arts, politics, and education; a rigorous scientific and technical program in both the natural and social sciences; a cultural program; and

an Open Council to address matters of the heart and spirit.

An underlying principle of the congress is that nonmaterial issues need to be recognized, respected, and included. Much nonmaterial wisdom and perception resides in the traditions of indigenous people who are still residing in and/or dependent upon wildland areas for practical and cultural survival. The WWC was one of the first environmental forums to integrate the needs and views of first peoples, native peoples, indigenous peoples—and we continue to do so. This will be especially important at the upcoming 7th WWC (see below) where the format will emphasize visual presentations, group dialogue, and Open Council (*Indaba*) to involve Africans and their concerns, as they hold the key to the future of wilderness in Africa. Accompanying this, of course, will be presentations by key leaders in politics, business, science, education,

and culture; technical symposia and poster sessions; plus field trips to nearby areas.

The WWC is many things, but one thing it most certainly is not is an institutional process. The key to WWC accomplishments is its encouragement of leadership by individuals and organizations to protect and sustain international wilderness.

A Wilderness Definition for the World

A central concern of the WWC has been an internationally acceptable definition of wilderness. Over the years results of WWC discussions and resolutions have been submitted to the World Commission on Protected Areas of the IUCN for consideration, urging official recognition for wilderness as a protected area category. Finally, in the Framework for Protected Areas (revised 1990), wilderness was

listed as an IUCN category 1 (b) area (out of five categories) with Strict Scientific Reserves as category 1 (a). The agreed upon definition of wilderness is: “Large areas of unmodified or slightly modified land and/or sea, retaining its natural character and influence, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition” (IUCN 1998).

The simplified management objectives provide further clarification:

- To ensure enjoyment by future generations of areas largely undisturbed by human action.
- To maintain essential natural attributes and qualities, long-term.
- To provide appropriate public access to best serve the physical and spiritual well-being of visitors while maintaining wilderness.
- To enable indigenous communities to continue living at low density, and in balance with available resources to maintain their lifestyle.

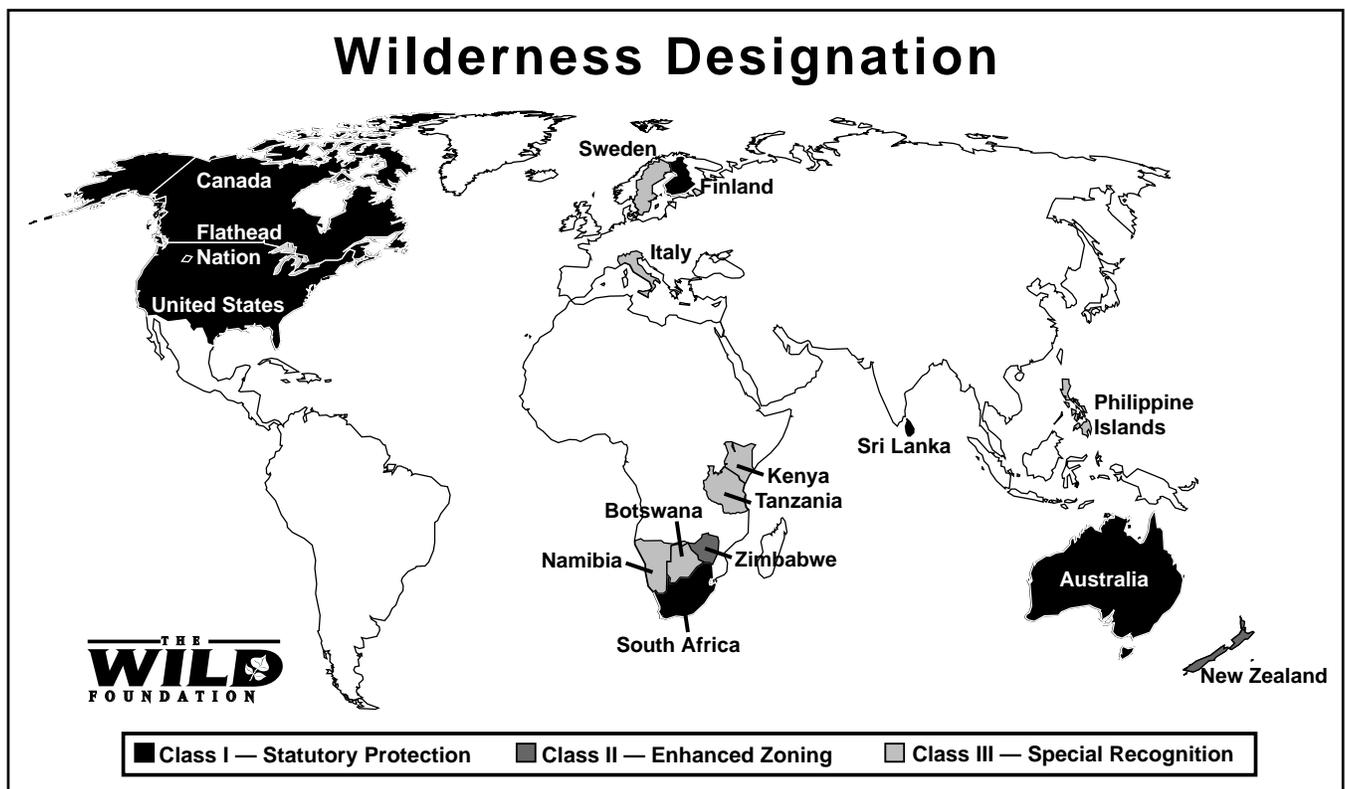


Figure 2—The classes of Wilderness Designation around the globe.

Wilderness Designation around the World

Supported by an enhanced awareness of wilderness possibilities, in part due to the WWCs, and given legitimacy

by the IUCN's definition, wilderness has now been protected by law or administrative policy in numerous nations. The various types of wilderness recognition and protection have been categorized (Martin 1997) into three

classes based on the degree of protection provided (see figure 2).

Class 1 Wilderness

Statutory or legally protected wilderness includes areas protected by the highest law of the nation and/or jurisdiction in which the areas reside. Such protection can only be revoked through a legislative process. Class 1 protection for wilderness is provided in the United States (The Wilderness Act 1964,) Australia (legislation in numerous states), South Africa (National Forest Act, amended 1971), Canada (National Parks Act, revised 1988), Finland (Wilderness Act, 1991), the Flathead Indian Reservation, Montana, USA, (Mission Mountains, Tribal Wilderness Ordinance, 1982), and Sri Lanka (National Heritage and Wilderness Act, 1987).

The legislation virtually always mandates a certain type of management by relevant authorities in order to sustain wilderness values such as no mechanized transport, no permanent human habitation, and so forth.

Class 2 Wilderness

Protection of wilderness by zoning, usually within some other protected jurisdiction. This provides significant protection, though less than for legislated areas. New Zealand (mandated through actions of the minister of environment), Zimbabwe (Tribal Authority Declaration in the Mavuradonha Wilderness), and Italy (various municipal acts, 1990s). Generally implicit (though not required) in these areas is a strong emphasis on management that sustains wilderness values.

Class 3 Wilderness

Wilderness is protected by administrative designation as part of a conservation or resource management program under authority of a departmental managing authority or official. Included are Namibia, Waterberg Wilderness; the

The 7th World Wilderness Congress to Convene in South Africa

The 7th WWC will return to its roots and convene in beautiful Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape, South Africa, from November 2 through November 8, 2001.

The theme is *Wilderness and Human Communities: The Spirit of the 21st Century.*

Major objectives include:

-  Wilderness on privately owned lands—models for private sector action and responsibility in designating, managing, and sustaining wilderness lands in perpetuity.
-  New public wilderness areas—initiatives and opportunities for southern Africa.
-  Expanded wilderness education—experience and training programs, pan-Africa.
-  Science program—with posters and summary symposia for expanded participation.
-  A new fund for African protected areas.

While presenting wilderness in a global context, the 7th WWC will emphasize wildlands in and for Africa and Africans. The congress will convene in a Wilderness Summit for two days, followed by a day of field trips to local wilderness and wildlife areas, and then provide four days of Wilderness Working Sessions—plenary, technical, poster, and training sessions, plus an Open Council to share the heart-space of wilderness work.

For delegates' pleasure, education, and relaxation, the 7th WWC will also include an extensive cultural program of contemporary and traditional music and art, an international environmental film competition, outdoor events under the African skies, and ample opportunities for pre- and postcongress tours to African wildlands, communities, national parks, wilderness areas, and private reserves. In all congress activities the public will join a wide range of professionals from business, politics, science, education, the arts, and humanities. This is your invitation to be a delegate.

For more information and registration details go to www.worldwilderness.org.
E-mail: info@worldwilderness.org.

Philippines, Palanan Wilderness; Suriname, Wilderness Nature Reserve; Zambia, Kafue; and more.

There are other areas and countries in the world in which the word *wilderness* is used generically as the name of a natural area, but very few of these actually have any management guidelines to maintain wilderness values.

The WWC Perspective

While wildlands conservation and sustainability have some success stories

that must be recounted, evaluated, and steadily improved upon, the fact remains that they still amount to little more than triage in the face of unrelenting ecological trauma. Voices from every quarter offer solutions, criticisms, worries, and complaints; for example, “more scientific data,” “better economic valuation,” “improved policy and monitoring,” and more. All of these ideas and issues are important, but they are still unmistakably only emergency room jargon and provide neither essential rem-

edies nor create environmental health. We need to get out of the emergency room and into a healing process for people and the planet. This is what the WWC is all about. We are a part of nature, not apart from nature, and we need to live our life in balance with the natural world. 

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Hence the WWC was born out of an idea conceived in the wilderness and rooted in indigenous traditions.
