

Wildcare (Inaugural) Founder's Presentation

Andrew Smith, Wildcare AGM, 23/3/2019

Wildcare Inc is different. Deliberately.

Parks and Wildlife Service is two years away from its 50th anniversary. By that time Wildcare will have been standing beside the PWS for 23 years – almost half of the lifetime of the Parks and Wildlife Service. I retired from Wildcare a year ago. The King is dead long live the King. Because Wildcare keeps on going. It has moved from my circle of influence and obsession to my circle of concern and interest. So this essay is from the perspective of a continuing interest and concern for Wildcare. A number of people have asked to know more about where Wildcare came from, so I will cover that too.

A few people have said to me that I have left a legacy, that is Wildcare Inc and the way in which PWS relates to the community particularly volunteers. I will accept that with humility. I also accept that what happens with that legacy is up to others now.

When designing Wildcare way back in 1997 I incorporated the things that worked in volunteer programs and organisations I had seen first hand all around the world, and researched on line, and just as importantly did not include those things that didn't work. So botanic gardens friends and volunteers had a big influence as did the Friends of the Golden Gates National Park in the USA. I had looked first hand at community engagement and volunteer programs all around Australia, in the USA, in Brazil and in Spain. I also had already established the Friends of the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and was the Chair for two years. They continue to operate, over 30 years later. I was a founding member of the Australian Network for Plant Conservation Inc and a Board member for two years. All of these organisations fed into creating Wildcare Inc.

I spent time looking at why people volunteered and how they wanted to volunteer, and what was provided to support their volunteering. I looked at why relationships broke down, and the barriers to participation. I looked at why and where the PWS needed a volunteer program, and how it would benefit from volunteer involvement. That meant spending time with Rangers to talk through their needs and fears about including volunteers.

And then I set about designing an organisation that was fit-for- purpose. What developed was an organisation that was very different.

I have since been invited to talk about Wildcare Inc and the philosophies behind it, at conferences all around Australia, and frequently received correspondence asking for advice on how to replicate the organisation in other States.

I was a member of the ANZECC working group that developed the National policy on Public Participation in Public Land Management. Wildcare Inc is a best-practice case study in the final document.

I was National President of the Australian Association of National Parks Support Groups for a couple of years, and frequently fielded questions about how the Wildcare could be replicated in other States.

I spent a number of months assisting Landcare Tasmania to develop the Extra Hands volunteer program – using Wildcare Inc as the model for processes and relationships.

When Island Ark founders visited Tasmania to promote volunteering for islands, they realised that Wildcare Inc already had that covered in Tasmania.

The Tasmanian Active Aging strategy specifically mentions Wildcare Inc as an organisation delivering outcomes for older people in the community.

Through the Get Outside program, Wildcare Inc is delivering on social inclusion aspirations for Tasmania.

And of course, through the 86 branches, Wildcare inc is delivering conservation and reserve management outcomes on the ground.

Wildcare is not a follower, it is in fact a leader in best practice, which has resulted in the Tasmanian PWS also being a leader in volunteer engagement.

The demonstrated willingness of volunteers to step forward and care for their Tasmania, has been surprising for many in government.

At the time of establishment, in 1997, there were a number of things happening with Parks and volunteers that have now significantly changed.

There were few volunteers operating within Parks and Nature Conservation areas, with a few exceptions. Now there are thousands of people participating. There were no systems for engaging volunteers, and potential volunteers were becoming frustrated. Now there are clear pathways to volunteering with Wildcare central to that. There was a common belief across field staff that volunteers were more of a problem than a solution. Now Rangers understand that volunteer engagement is about working differently and smarter but not harder.

At the same time The Natural Heritage Trust was handing out money to community groups, but because PWS didn't have a well-formed community network, it was missing out on this funding opportunity. The exception was Coastcare groups that were undertaking great community-driven projects along the coast, but initially with no planning connection with the PWS at that time. Over the past 20 years Wildcare branches have pulled millions of dollars into reserve management and nature conservation projects through grants, donations, sponsorship and merchandise sales. And those projects were all planned in cooperation with the relevant agencies.

So Wildcare had two objectives –

1. provide a pathway for Tasmanians into practical volunteering, and
2. gain access to additional funding to support on-ground projects.

Wildcare Inc had to be able to work alongside a very diverse and decentralised organisation across a wide range of activity.– the PWS - which at that time included reserve management, cultural heritage management and nature conservation.

The Parks and Wildlife Service needed to undergo some cultural change in regard to inviting volunteers in.

Four key organisation characteristics arose from this

1. A high level of trust of members and the branches, and true delegation, was required
2. A good relationship was needed with local rangers
3. There needed to be a genuine commitment and partnership, organisation to organisation.

The 4th characteristic is the relationship between the Board and the branches.

This is modelled on what I consider to be the characteristics of a good staff manager.

The Boards job is to provide the environment that allows the members to succeed.

The Board needs to be clear about the purpose, direction and vision of the organisation and convey that to members, and then provide policies and procedures that define the organisation, and processes that enable members to get on with it. In other words - provide a well-defined canvas on which members and Parks staff can paint. It should never be forgotten that the paint brushes are held by the members, the branch presidents and Rangers – they are the creative and productive powerhouses of Wildcare Inc.

Wildcare is different. This difference can present problems for people who believe there is only one right answer, and someone else has that right answer. Someone else is best practice.

I find it interesting when I encounter people who concede that Wildcare Inc is the most successful and largest environmental volunteer organisation in Tasmania - in fact having 1 in 62 Tasmanians as members you could probably say it's not just an organisation but indeed a movement, or a culture - they also agree that yes the members provide millions of dollars of time each year, and yes they raise hundreds of thousands of dollars each year and yes they advocate in a positive way for reserve management and nature conservation through their demonstration of practical support, BUT, they insist, Wildcare should change, in order to be the same as other organisations, because best practice lies elsewhere.

There is a reasonable chance that the last 20 years of growth, cooperation and productivity comes from, and because of, an organisation that has a deliberately different approach. Wildcare wasn't established in order to compete, it wasn't set up to operate independently. It was set up to be an interdependent partner, to support and to collaborate.

The relationship between Wildcare and its partners is an embrace, not an arms-length relationship. Wildcare doesn't point at others to solve problems, it stands beside PWS to solve problems.

The reality is that Wildcare Inc and PWS, and the Natural and Cultural Heritage Division, have a shared-interest not a conflict-of-interest.

It is not a business arrangement. It is not a stakeholder relationship. It is a marriage.

This doesn't mean there aren't differing views.

Disagreement, differences of opinion, and different perspectives are part of collaboration and partnership. The capacity share and solve differences and commit to solutions is what makes the relationship powerful. Disagreement is not conflict-of-interest.

Collaboration requires the sharing of power. So powerbrokers need to give up some power, so that others can take on some responsibility. Together the parties define and identify what the issues are, share perspectives on those issues, share ideas for solutions for issues, agree on a workable solution, and commit to implementing that agreed solution together.

Wildcare branches do this almost on a daily basis with the Rangers they have partnered with.

Parks staff have been very astute in terms of understanding the relationship. Wildcare members are not simply an unpaid workforce to be activated when needed. The staff work alongside volunteers in a direct and personal way to explore ways of working together to achieve success, for mutual benefit.

The eventual separation of community support groups from their partners, when friends become enemies, is a common problem that was designed out of Wildcare Inc. It is what drove the design of the Board of Management, with some Directors being nominated from partner organisations, bringing their expertise and knowledge to how Wildcare Inc deals with issues, and the decisions it makes. In turn they take Wildcare knowledge and perspectives to Parks and the Natural and Cultural Heritage Division of DPIPWE. All parties grow together as a result.

Those who want to hold onto control also insist that Wildcare volunteers should be undertaking priority projects as identified by the department.

Firstly, if it's a priority then government should be funding and resourcing it and paid parks staff doing it rather than relying on volunteers to do it.

However, the reality is that prioritisation within government is determined by resourcing, particularly with an under resourced organisation like PWS. So while a region might identify 100 priority projects, the final 10 priorities will be the most *urgently needed that can be afforded*. So there are 90 other important projects that need to be done and these are often picked up by volunteers. So Wildcare extends the capacity of the Service to do what is needed, beyond the restraints of budgets.

Secondly, there are important things that volunteers want to tackle, that don't appear on even the longer list of department priorities.

Ridding Schouten Island, Bass Strait Islands, Narawntapu, and the southwest wilderness coast of weeds, was needed but never a high priority, but is being achieved because volunteers agreed to take it on.

Maintaining and repairing buildings on Tasman island and at the Quarantine Station on Bruny Island was needed but was never a high priority for the department, but it was for a whole bunch of enthusiastic volunteers.

Cleaning rubbish from the southern wilderness beaches wasn't a priority, but was sorely needed, and volunteers have been doing that annually for a number of years.

Thirdly, Volunteers don't like wasting their time.

Wildcare has always been about real projects, real needs, not making stuff up in order to keep volunteers occupied.

Wildcare Inc was designed in such a way that, working alongside government partners, it could develop in any direction that was considered worthwhile by both parties. It hasn't been a static organisation.

After starting off as a register of individuals, who were invited to participate in projects as they arose, the membership decided to come together and create branches around their shared interest in a place or an issue. Wildcare's constitution has always allowed for that. As a result somewhere around 86 branches are now part of Wildcare Inc. These branches and their status as part of the one organisation, are different to, for instance, Landcare groups that are separately and independently incorporated, operating within a loose network.

It was recognised that additional external funding was required to undertake projects beyond the funded priority lists. Branches became the mechanism for applying for grants with a huge level of success.

While technically those funding applications are made by Wildcare Inc, Wildcare delegates management of those funded projects and management of the money to the branch that applied for the funding.

Wildcare Inc is a significant funder of projects in its own right, through its small project internal grants, and through its ability as a tax-deductible organisation to attract large and small donations into its Gift Fund.

The internal grants, funded from the member fees and bank interest, are simply Wildcare Inc, through its Board, deciding to spend some of its money on a project, recommended by a branch.

Wildcare has at times had hundreds of projects on the go, coordinated and managed by the branches - some funded by PWS, some by Wildcare Inc, some supported by external grants, some by donations, and some without funding.

The Gift Fund has attracted millions of dollars of tax-deductible donations to support nature conservation and reserve management. Wildcare Inc altered its Constitution to incorporate model clauses in order to meet the requirements of being listed as an Environmental Organisation, and creating a Gift Fund. There have been thousands of smaller donations and some massively generous donations from the likes of Dick Smith (\$1 million over 10 years), Rob Pennicott (\$100,000 over 3 years) and Alan and Hilary Wallace ((\$500,000).

This is of course all overseen by the Wildcare Inc Board. The Board member responsibilities are the same as for company directors. They have a responsibility to ensure that Wildcare finances are managed properly, and that the organisation continues to support its constitutional objectives.

With such a decentralised organisation and with significant financial holdings the Board has an important job to do.

Wildcare's difference is something to be safeguarded by the Board. While the organisation can and has adapted over the 20 years, it has maintained its core characteristics and its objectives.

So I hope those who stand for election don't do so because they feel that they have the one right answer as to how Wildcare must change, based on another organisation that they know.

Remember, the organisation was designed by a twisted and complex mind. It continues to run on the love, passions and obsessions of its members. It's a labyrinth of possibilities and potential, sitting on a foundation of excellence of achievements. Rather than seeking to change the organisation, put your effort into identifying and developing all the possibilities that the organisation enables.

Its differences are what provides the scope and space for the members to do their thing, to demonstrate their brilliance, to make a difference, to share their passion, to get things done. And it has provided the connection, the resources and the partnerships for PWS that have increased and expanded its capacity to manage our beautiful state.

For many, it is the on-ground difference that members make, that is seen as the main value of Wildcare Inc. Making a difference is an important motivation for volunteers and the results have been outstanding. Weeds eradicated, tracks and buildings maintained, interpretation installed, whales rescued, wildlife rehabilitated, threatened species monitored, walkers educated, islands cared for, beaches cleaned and on and on.

For me, the relationships is where it is at, the support and respect, the trust, the shared vision and values are what indicates the success of Wildcare Inc.

I have worked with every Director/General Manager of the Parks and Wildlife Service since its inception in 1971. Max Kitchell, a Director and General Manager I rate as one of the best in the history of the PWS put it this way - if the PWS budget was doubled tomorrow, and the staff was doubled as well, the PWS would still want Wildcare Inc and its members working alongside it, because of the relationship and connection it provides with Tasmanians and for Tasmanians.

After 20 years of thinking and living Wildcare Inc, while at the same time managing a Parks team focused on servicing the community and visitors through interpretation, education, communication and community engagement programs, I believe that Wildcare Inc is doing its job better than ever.

1. Allowing people with a love of this place to participate in its management as volunteers
2. Building a relationship between the Parks and Wildlife Service and passionate Tasmanians
3. Caring for our environment
4. Building a strong supporting community committed to actions not words
5. Demonstrating that a love for natural areas is part of the Tasmanian culture

Some of you may be aware that I am now a marriage celebrant. Still in the business of relationships and commitment. So, adapting something I say about marriage...

A deep love is the best foundation for volunteering, yet volunteering goes above and beyond the magical and all-consuming brilliance of that love alone.

Volunteering requires a commitment by two organisations to each other, for the long term.

It is about listening and hearing, deciding and acting together. It is about supporting each other, through the good times and the bad.

It is about never leaving the other to stand alone to carry a burden. It is about sharing laughter and happiness and success, wholeheartedly. It is about recognizing and accepting shortcomings, as well as brilliance, and being able to use both to grow and strengthen the relationship.

Good luck with the next 20 years.

Andrew Smith

Andrew is Wildcare's Founder and was Chair/Appointed Co-Chair for 20 years, from 1998 to his retirement from the position in March 2018. He was also Manager of Community Programs with Parks and Wildlife Service, up to his retirement in January 2019. His almost 40-year career with the Tasmanian State Service began as a Trainee Ranger with the Parks and Wildlife Service, and included working with the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, the Resource Management and Conservation Division DPIPW and the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens.