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*The role of Non-Government organisations in restoring  
and managing outback tracks in WA*

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## Abstract

WA's outback tracks are increasingly popular with domestic and international travellers, singly, in groups and in organised tours. Outback travel provides a unique and demanding form of adventure travel and a range of experiences for travellers. From the unique natural and social history of these tracks to the cultural experience of the present day, outback travel is a valuable and fragile product on the Australian tourism scene.

*Track Care WA* emerged in 1996 out of concerns by individuals and tour operators for the deteriorating conditions on the Canning Stock Route (CSR). Increasing traffic over the CSR during recent years has seen an accumulation of rubbish and some track damage. *Track Care* aims to provide a program of maintenance and environmental protection while promoting the education of future visitors for all off-road tracks in WA, not just the CSR. Thus, consistent with the link to *Tread Lightly!*, *Track Care WA* has evolved to include the broader goal of encouraging responsible use of off road vehicles, in particular 4WD driving. At the same time, and working closely with DOLA and CALM, *Track Care WA* has taken on a key role in the management of other outback and historic tracks in WA.

This paper will outline this history, including the 1998 program on the CSR, work on the Holland Track by the Land Cruiser Club and some of the social and political dynamics involved.

### 1. Outback tracks in Australia<sup>1</sup>

There is a romance and a sense of adventure attached to the very mention of the 'outback' in Australia and to add the word 'track' is simply to magnify the myth and mystique, the sense of romance and adventure. But, there is an historical reality attached to most of the 'icon' tracks that ties in with the myth of the rugged outback Australian that informs so much of our travel and tourism literature and national mythology. Further, there is a physical reality to these tracks that will challenge even the most well prepared outback traveller; this is a harsh country when you get off the bitumen.

The outback tracks of this romance and adventure are too numerous to mention but include the following:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The empirical research for this paper has been done through primary documents such as newspapers, participant observation (meetings, events, etc) and informal discussion with government officials and people involved in off road travel.

- The Birdsville Track: Marree - Birdsville
- The Simpson Desert: Oodnadatta - Mt. Dare - Birdsville
- The Tanami Track: Alice Springs - Halls Creek
- The Canning Stock Route (CSR): Wiluna - Halls Creek
- The Gunbarrel Highway: Ayers Rock [sic] - Warburton - Wiluna
- Heart of the Kimberley: Kununurra - Gibb River Road - Derby
- Corner Country: Broken Hill - Tibooburra - Cameron Corner
- Cape York: Cairns to the top of Cape York
- The Gulf Track: Normanton - Burketown - Borroloola

There is a rich social history attached to these tracks, ranging from the early days of exploration in Australia to the needs of war in the twentieth century. Cattle and the need to move cattle to markets figured in the development of some tracks while the search for gold and other mineral wealth created the myths and the routes that are now traversed.

## 2. Outback Travel Motivations:

It does not take much imagination to identify the motivation for travel in the outback. In fact, while our interest here is primarily travel by 4WD<sup>3</sup> vehicles, it would appear that motorised travellers identify similar motivations for their time in the 'bush' to hikers, sailors and campers. That is, they seek the isolation, the challenge (adventure!) and the social and natural history of the area to/through which they travel. They seek to get closer to nature and specifically, they seek to get out of the city. That they may all use a similar language does not imply they attach the same meaning to their motivations or the experience they seek and obtain. (eg. Csikszentmihalyi 1975; Galland 1984; Hollender 1977; Kaplan 1974; Macbeth 1988; McAvoy 1980) However, their motivation is not central to this paper but rather the management issues that arise because of this motivation and the consequent use of wild lands (to use an American phrase).

Leisure pursuits often require significant amounts of effort, motivation and commitment and are accompanied by the adoption of an ideology and a praxis suitable to the activity, its other participants and its 'culture'. (Macbeth 1992) These subcultures can be identified in relation to activities such as sports car ownership, cycling, amateur sport, model building, crafts, dog showing, sailing -

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<sup>2</sup> This list is taken from a magazine entitled *4WD Major Treks. The ultimate Australian Adventures*. (Catlin, undated but purchased in 1997).

<sup>3</sup> The common terminology is used in this paper. Thus, instead of 'four wheel drive' or variations thereof, '4WD' and variations are adopted.

and off-road driving. Of course, within these subcultural domains are varying levels of commitment of time, effort and ideology.

We can assume that the leisure pursuit of 4WD driving is no different from other leisure activities in its development of a subcultural ideology and praxis. Simple observation of newspaper items, 4WD shows and 4WD magazines and websites confirms this, although the specifics of the ideology require further research to identify them with any confidence. Likewise, it is obvious that significant skill and knowledge is required to successfully navigate an off-road vehicle in difficult conditions.

While a small percentage of Australian 4WD drives actually go off road, the owners of those that do go off road for leisure and tourism purposes can be understood within this general model. They show a praxis and ideology (not undifferentiated, of course) which includes for many an involvement with clubs<sup>4</sup> and organisations (e.g. TCWA) that also do 'work' while at leisure. That is, they undertake tasks that many people would see as work (e.g. lugging timbers, mixing concrete). It is this hard physical 'work' that sparked the development of this research interest in TCWA. We might ask why people would go on holiday by driving 4000 km to mix concrete at Durba Springs on the Canning Stock Route.<sup>5</sup>

The icon tracks in Australia all have historical and social significance, whether as the routes of early explorers or because of cattle droving. Part of the lure of the outback for free independent travellers (FIT's) and tour companies alike, is this connection to the history of Australia. The use of these outback tracks in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries is a fascinating chapter in Australia's social history. Today, it is part of a tourism product ideally suited to the mythology of the 'outback', and while still dangerous, bears little relationship to the hardships and dangers faced by those who established the routes.

Today's travellers not only have access to reliable vehicles and extensive knowledge embedded in guidebooks and magazines, but they have a safety net provided by satellite navigation systems (GPS), High Frequency radio, Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS), EPIRB's and numerous fellow travellers (See, for eg Mitchell 1998b). During the outback travel season, even the 1700 km CSR gets busy (which begs the myth of isolation).

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the Clubs are based around a named vehicle, which itself will add another dimension of social cohesion and interclub rivalry.

<sup>5</sup> This 'serious' leisure (Stebbins 19xx) is not, however, the subject of this paper but is part of the context in which management issues arise.

Of interest to this paper is the development of (an ethic of care) an NGO, TCWA, out of a conjunction of commercial, non-commercial and governmental interests. This paper explores the short history of TCWA and these various interests along with examples of projects coordinated or sponsored by Track Care. Discussion of some of the ideological and management issues complete the paper.

### 3. Track Care Western Australia, Inc. (TCWA)

TCWA can be seen as the result of a convergence of interests and events. The 'events' are the increasing numbers of users of outback tracks, particularly the CSR, which played a special role here. There are three interest groups who come together in this convergence.<sup>6</sup>

First, the Western Australian Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) began in the 1980's to take a strategic approach to the management of remote natural areas of the state, which it could see were suffering extensive changes from unrestricted and increasing use of natural areas. CALM set about "establishing strategic alliances with key recreation groups and other stakeholders". (Schmidt and Kinninment, 1997). Among these alliances were those with 4WD clubs.

The second interest group involved in this convergence on the CSR are commercial: tour operators, in particular, Western Desert Guides, and the off road press, in WA, *Western 4WD Driver*. The principals of Western Desert Guides had been travelling the CSR as recreationists and tour operators (mostly tag along) for over 20 years and had become increasingly alarmed at the deterioration of the CSR - track damage, rubbish and waste and the collapse of many of the wells.

The third interest group are harder to identify as a group, but are really the FIT's - these users may belong to 4WD clubs or may not. They may travel alone or in small groups or with organised convoys (e.g. club outing). The growth of the interest in 4W driving can be seen in the growth of clubs in WA from 3 in 1976 to 26 in 1997. (Schmidt & Kinninment 1997)

These three interest groups converged in the formation of the CSR working party in 1996 which had as its goal the 'clean up' of the CSR. That 'clean up' happened in 1998 (in the main) but by November 1997 the working party had developed wider

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<sup>6</sup> The politics of TCWA and various other 4WD interest groups will not be canvassed in this paper.

agendas and the need for incorporation.<sup>7</sup> Hence, the formation of Track Care Western Australia, Inc. Tread Lightly! Australia takes credit for inciting the formation of the working party and TCWA works to a similar ethos. The CSR is considered by Tread Lightly! to be one of their land stewardship projects (Tread Lightly! Trails 1997, September-November)

Tread Lightly! is an important player, more in the background, yet providing some of the moral and philosophical foundations. Founded in the USA as a result of a 1985 US Forest Service task force, Tread Lightly! emerged in a situation of increased recreational use of public lands and the resultant environmental deterioration and increasing closures of wild bush areas. The stated aim is to 'unite Federal and State land management agencies with the private sector, user groups, and individuals who share a basic commitment to care for our valuable resources.' (Tread Lightly! 1998b) They represent all forms of bush activity, including, hikers, bicycles, motorbikes and 4W Drives. The Tread Lightly! approach is embodied in the pledge underlying their education programs: Travel and create [sic] with minimum impact. Respect the environment and the rights of others. Educate yourself, plan and prepare before you go. Allow for future use of the outdoors, leave it better than you found it. Discover the rewards of responsible recreation.<sup>8</sup> (Tread Lightly! 1998a).

#### 4. The NGO and the government

Track Care WA is an NGO working in close cooperation with a government department, CALM, a government department responsible for thousands and thousands of square kilometers of public land vested in various reserves and parks. These designated lands and other public lands earmarked for reserve status are managed and 'policed' by CALM with a limited budget and limited personnel. It was obvious to CALM that they could not police the use of these far flung reserves and parks and that strategic alliances with users and user groups were necessary.

At the same time, user groups could see that increasing pressure of use would lead inevitably to restricting access to motorised travel in wildlands. Similarly, the 4WD 'industry' was likewise concerned. In the USA, the vehicle manufacturers are high profile sponsors of the NGO Tread Lightly! whereas thus far in WA, the

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<sup>7</sup> Some clubs, for example the Foothills Four Wheel Drive Club, began restoration work on the CSR prior to the formation of TCWA. xxxx check CSR book for geraldton club work on a well shown in a photo

<sup>8</sup> There are serious concerns about and contradictions in the approach of motorised users to wild lands that will be addressed elsewhere. The Tread Lightly! Canada embryonic website also lists a pledge based on the word TREAD, but using different items. (Tread Lightly! Canada 1998)

4WDpress and accessories retailers appear to be the largest sponsors. This may be about to change as Toyota has sponsored a booklet on caring for the coast (Mitchell 1998c)

It is with some humility that I use the term 'NGO' in the context of 4Wdrive tourism because that acronym is commonly associated with "words such as 'altruism', 'humanitarianism' and 'philanthropy' - concern for the well-being of others" (McLeon 1991:76. More specifically, "Australian nongovernment organisations (NGO's) [contribute] about \$90 million" annually as aid to developing countries. (Rollason 1991:ix)

There is a wider use of NGO than the aid agencies and that is in relation to the Earth Summit of 1992 in Rio de Janeiro and concepts of sustainable development. This wider use of the term NGO clearly includes concerns for the environment from nuclear energy and toxic waste to biodiversity and climate change (McCoy & McCully 1993).

Many environmental groups fit into the broader philosophical domain of concern for others and for the terrestrial life support system, our environment. It is stretching the philosophy, but organisations such as Tread Lightly! and Track Care WA have, as part of their mission, a caring for the environment. Possibly a contradiction, but their fundamental concern is with access by recreational users to wild areas. Hardly an example of an humanitarian NGO. This caveat aside, Tread Lightly! and Track Care WA are non-government organisations that work with government, corporate sponsors and private individuals to 'care for' and manage natural areas. They aim to protect the flora and fauna for future generations of users and in order to maintain access to the experience of 4W driving and outdoor activity. Certainly with Tread Lightly! there is a wider concern for access by others, including non-motorised users, in order to maintain availability of the experience of adventure/challenge recreation.

The mention of humanitarian NGO's is not a frivolous concern but one used to flag another serious concern with the objectives espoused by 'political' organisations such as Tread Lightly! and Track Care. Their objectives of access to wild lands by motorised transport can be seen as fundamentally inconsistent with environmental protection. Further, publications such as *4Wheel Drive Days Out of Perth*, which was commercially produced in cooperation with CALM, excite considerable controversy. While this publication aims to promote responsible use of off road vehicles, some members of the 4WD fraternity would prefer such publications not exist as they encourage wider use of the tracks. Some of this is undoubtedly about protecting the resource itself but some of it is also about protecting the resource for use by those in clubs. In fact, one model of control

involves restricting access to some tracks to members of clubs only; however, this restriction seems not to be favoured in Western Australia at present.

## 6. The Canning Stock Route (CSR)

The Canning Stock Route runs some 1700 km from Wiluna to Hall's Creek in WA's desert country. While some previous work had been done on the CSR, for example the restoration of Well XX by XX club, 1998 was to be and was a year of massive effort on the track. Under the direction of Track Care WA, the construction of the 'Durba Dunny' was the centerpiece activity and was completed over the Easter weekend by a team of 20 volunteers in 10 vehicles, including an army Unimog and trailer. The composting two seater toilet was prefabricated in Perth and then assembled to replace a 'longdrop' that could no longer cope with the pressure of visitors at Durba Springs, part way up the stock route. CALM officers from the Goldfields region attended during part of the construction period.

Other teams from WA, Victoria and NSW have undertaken projects on the CSR, including restoring Well 15, removing used oil drums, and installing TrackCare 'Code of Conduct' signage. The latter two projects involved the full 1700km length of the stock route.

On another level, Track Care is coordinating working parties who maintain and repair tracks closer to Perth. This follows the commercial publication of *4WD Days Out of Perth*, (Underwood 1998b) a booklet that includes a track report form. A plea for helpers summarises the approach of Track Care and its sponsors.

Let's do it! Let's create an example of cooperation between the 4WD drivers and land managers that will be the envy of all other States. Let's give a bit back. To start the ball rolling, fill out the attached [TrackCare membership] form and send it in and/or send in your first TrackCondition Report when appropriate. (Underwood 1998a:99)

## 6. Case Study: the Holland Track 1998

The Holland Track was slashed 500km from Broomehill to Coolgardie in the 1890's as a short-lived alternative route to the Coolgardie goldfields for 'fortune seekers' who disembarked in Albany. Long in disuse and overgrown, about a 240 km stretch that is not part of the Shire road network was reopened in 1992 by a team led by wheatbelt farmer Graeme Newby. The Holland Track traverses low rainfall country and passes through "sand plain and heath interspersed with open eucalypt woodland and occasional gimlet thickets" (Underwood and Elliot 1995: 32). There is little or no surface water and conditions are so dry in some years that trees will not register any growth rings. No facilities are available between Hyden and



Coolgardie so vehicles must have a range of about 450km for safety, as well as carrying all food and water, and recovery and safety equipment.

Track Care was approached by the Perth based LandCruiser Club who expressed an interest in 'adopting' and managing the track. The Club is aware that track damage in many parts of WA could lead to tracks being closed and their involvement in this track is partly one of self-interest - they want to help ensure that public access to such tracks continues.<sup>9</sup>

The Club undertook a reconnaissance of the Holland Track in April 1998 and reported on its condition to Track Care shortly after. Subsequently, in October 1998, the Club drove the length of the track erecting signs and repairing sections (clearing fallen trees, etc) in order to minimise future damage. CALM also sent an officer and vehicle to make contact on the track with the LandCruiser Club. There were 9 vehicles in the convoy. I was invited by CALM in Kalgoorlie to join their vehicle for the trip on the Holland Track. We were not able to do the entire trip but spent 2.5 days on the track, about half that time with the LandCruiser Club.

Besides erecting signs at the start and finish of the track, the Club provided directional signs (simply an HT with an arrow) where necessary to aid travellers, especially where the Holland Track meets mineral exploration tracks that criss-cross one section. The entry and exit signs included identification of the LandCruiser Club as managers of the Track as well as the standard TCWA sign that outlines best practice 4 wheel driving and camping.

Besides sign erecting, the convoy aimed to clear fallen trees from the track and to restrict vehicles from continuing to use diversions around such trees. The northeastern portion of the track runs through open woodland country and in the space of less than 30 kilometers there were roughly 50 falls with the resultant track diversion. During one day, our convoy cleared about 15 of those falls. Each clearance involved moving the fallen trees and leaves from the track, in most cases onto the diversion cut by previous vehicles. Part of the process was to make access to the diversion impossible so that the original track would be used in the future.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> In other jurisdictions, there are situations where regulations have been struck so that only members of recognised 4 wheel drive clubs are permitted access. Although there is some evidence that some officials of clubs believe that 4wd club members are more responsible in the bush, I've not yet seen a move to restrict specific tracks to members only. I am not aware of evidence that supports this contention, either.

<sup>10</sup> There is considerable doubt in many places where the 'original' track was because of being so overgrown. However, the track as cut in the 1990s is as straight as feasible and the diversions usually mean further damage to the bush. They usually mean sharp turns and turning vehicles cause more damage to the soil structure than straight running ones. Some diversions were very recent so closing them now would allow existing vegetation to regrow. The older diversions will

The members of this convoy were on the track for a complex of reasons, including the desire to travel in the bush, their interest in the historic track and their commitment to the management and maintenance of the Holland Track. It is also important for the Land Cruiser Club to do regular maintenance runs on the track to justify their 'claim' to stewardship over the track. Their intention is to run a convoy up the track once or twice a year.

CALM sent a vehicle and personnel on the convoy for a number of reasons. As is discussed above, CALM is committed to supporting a cooperative management regime with community groups and their officer was there to reinforce that relationship. It was also important for the Goldfields regional office to have more knowledge of the Holland Track which was usefully obtained by joining this convoy. Further, CALM is able to contribute to the education of convoy members in the conservation and restoration of the track. One outcome of the trip was a better idea by both CALM and the Land Cruiser Club of the sorts of equipment and processes needed to continue track restoration and management.

## 7. Issues arising from the Holland Track field trip

There are two main issues I want to discuss at this point: convoy size and the environmentally 'friendly' 4WD.

**Convoy size.** Clubs, tagalong tour operators and informal groups of individuals operate as convoys for safety and social reasons when traversing the outback. Informal groups of individuals are likely to be in small convoys and tagalong tours are to some degree restricted by the logistics of organising a number of vehicles and occupants. However, in any case the question of convoy size is important for a variety of reasons.<sup>11</sup> As the concerns of this paper are primarily environmental impacts, not social or organisational, the limits to convoy sizes are discussed here in relation only to the former.

It is useful to note that the social aspects of convoys means that convoy members prefer to camp and take lunch and tea breaks in close proximity to each other. Where camp fires are possible, it is desirable environmentally and for social reasons to have one main camp fire to which the whole convoy gravitates.<sup>12</sup> It is socially

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take years to reseed although the bush and leaves raked onto the diversions will aid in the trapping of moisture and seeds.

<sup>11</sup> It should be emphasised that these are preliminary observations in this early paper.

<sup>12</sup> In fact, one of the first things I noticed upon arriving in the Land Cruiser Club camp on the first night were the 16 camp chairs ringing the roaring camp fire. Each night on this trip, the first order of 'group' business was to collect fire wood, dig a fire pit, light the fire and put out the chairs. One of

desirable that the vehicles and attendant tents and camping equipment also be in reasonable proximity to the fire, at least within calling distance and in visual contact. This means that the bigger the convoy, the larger the area required for the whole camp and even in open woodland, this poses serious problems for protection of flora, especially small bushes and plants. On this trip, then nine vehicles could quite easily find an area large enough to facilitate the camp suggested above but not without endangering the flora.

Two other issues arise in relation to convoy size. Toilet drill on this convoy was men to one side of the track and women to other and most people seemed to go on quite extensive 'walks' to get privacy and to spread out the impact of their activity. Four wheel drives always carry good shovels so the shovel-and-toilet roll suggested good toilet practice was in force. This convoy camped, for at least 2 nights, in areas that showed no previous camping activity which does help to avoid hardening of the area. However, if the site is left damaged then such practice leads to more locations of damage. This dilemma is a continuing one for managers.

The second issue involves re-ordering the moving convoy. Convoy management usually means some form of organisation and a certain order of vehicles, sometimes because the worse the dust the more desirable the front positions. Reordering the convoy involves vehicles pulling over so others can pass. The more vehicles in the convoy the more problematic this process is for protection of flora. It is hard to be subtle in a big vehicle and is physically difficult to see precisely where wheels are placed. This reordering, along with tea breaks, are a smaller order problem similar to what happens at the camp site.

**The environmentally 'friendly' 4X4.** Is this an oxymoron? With the best will in the world and superior environmental knowledge, it is still difficult to be environmentally friendly in a large vehicle. If you consider the analogy of a bulldozer and a lawnmower, it is hard to be environmentally sensitive in a bulldozer. Not impossible, but physically and, I would argue, psychologically very difficult. Likewise, with a 4wd and a 2wd; the driver of the former is aware that it can go places of poor traction and still get out again. This puts the environment at greater risk as the vehicle moves into more sensitive areas and off already hardened tracks.<sup>13</sup>

## 8. Discussion

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the last activities on breaking camp in the morning is to fill in the fire pit so that no unsightly ash and ring of stones is visible.

<sup>13</sup> Let us be clear, however, the damage done by environmentally aware tourists in 4wd drive vehicles is minimal compared to the damage done by survey and seismic lines and mining activity and, arguably, bush cattle.

This paper has been written at the beginning of a wide ranging project on outback track tourism and aims only to outline some of the players in this dynamic situation and some of the issues and perspectives already manifest in the management of outback tracks in WA. The paper has touched on a number of issues that are still to be researched thoroughly but which will be important in the development of both a research strategy and educational and management strategies.

The history and extent of tourist activity on outback tracks is not well documented although there is considerable conjecture based on the experience of regular track users. (eg Moon xxx) Therefore, one important objective of this wider project is to develop a full history of the tourist use of outback tracks, especially the icons that are so much part of outback history and mythology.

As this paper has demonstrated, there is considerable government, NGO and volunteer interest and activity in relation to a number of tracks, including the CSR, the Holland Track and the group of tracks known as the Len Beadell Discovery Roads Project (Mitchell 1998a). This alliance appears to be a central element in the long-term management of outback tracks. It is notable, however, that thus far the tourism industry has shown little formal interest in this process. The wider project will address all these issues.

A further point should not be forgotten: the tourist. These tracks are a management issue because people want to travel on them. Research is needed to identify the motivation of these tourists and the experience they seek from the outback. Knowledge of these dimensions will also help to develop management strategies that are appropriate to maintaining the integrity of the travel experience, that sense of adventure and isolation so obviously valued by outback 4WD drivers. It will also lead to further knowledge about how and why people will invest so much 'work' effort as part of their leisure pursuits. And, in turn, this will help in the development of management strategies.

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