

INTERVIEW FOR FILM AUSTRALIA'S WILDERNESS

Tim Low

Biologist, environmentalist and writer Tim Low is the author of six books about nature and conservation, including *Feral Future—The Untold Story of Australia's Exotic Invaders* and *The New Nature—Winners and Losers in Wild Australia*.

Q: What does the word 'wilderness' mean to you?

TL: Wilderness has grown into the one of the biggest buzzwords in Australian history—I mean, it's a marketing tool, it's a way of selling holidays and calendars and diaries. It's just gotten a bit over the top.

When I hear the word 'wilderness', to me it's about remote places where there's been no human impact and people can never get a sense of belonging and I have a problem with that because I think that there's an environmental crisis and the way to overcome that is for people to feel close to nature, and the word 'wilderness' is ultimately alienating because you can never really belong in it—you can be a kind of transient visitor just passing through but you don't really belong there and I think we need a relationship with nature that's based on a much greater sense of belonging and being in rather than passing through.

Q: Can you give me an example of a way in which a person can develop a relationship with nature?

TL: Well, I think a relationship with nature is most powerful if it's there all the time, so if you have a close friend that you only see once a year it's hard to have a good relationship; if your friend is right there all the time your relationship deepens. So I place high value on relationships I can have with the animals and plants around me—those that are in my yard, those that I see when I walk to the corner store. And I think that the rhythm of the seasons, the comings and goings of the birds and flowers and things—that you can get a sense of place, a sense of kinship through that, and I think that that sense of relationship with nature has been greatly undervalued, with the emphasis instead going on the idea that we should have a relationship with wilderness, which always happens to be a very large distance away.

I suppose people tend to think of animals in a sense as being like people and I suppose that's one way that you develop a relationship with animals in the garden—like you look at the birds and you see a bird tugging on something and then it drops the worm and you kind of laugh—a sort of sense of an animal as a person. I don't think they really are like people but that's kind of one way into it. Then of course people have pets and that's another way to relate to animals, but to me I think it's the sense that there's this community around me—there's a community of people, there's a community of plants, there's a community of animals. So it's noticing that wild community and not just the people and the cars and the dogs but the owls, the lizards, the frogs, the moths that come in at summer, sort of noticing that as a community and sort of thinking of yourself as part of that system. I think that's very enriching and that gives you a stronger sense of place, a stronger sense of community and a stronger link with nature.

Q: So how do we need to broaden our concept of wilderness?

TL: I think I have such a problem with the idea of wilderness that the idea of redefining it, I'm not sure that would work. I mean, I sometimes have talked about the idea that—'Well, this is the wilderness—look, it's all kind of rampant and wild and there's little insects and things'—and I think there's some value in talking like that but

I think the sense that our culture has created that wilderness means these big, vast, remote places—I'm not sure that we can actually make the word work for the kind of meaning that I have. I do talk more about nature than wilderness, because it's easier to sell the idea that nature's here and everywhere, whereas to try to say there's wilderness in the garden, it really turns people off.

Q: What do you believe nature is about today?

TL: Well, there's a whole other world out there. I think we can actually very easily forget it because mass media's so powerful—TV, communication—and what alarms me is that people are so cocooned in their cities with this world of mass media that we forget that there's these all other species, all these other systems, that (a) we depend upon and (b) have a right to be able to survive. And for me nature is about—it's that other thing, that other place, those other plants and animals, something we should be paying a lot more heed to.

Q: How do you go about that in your own life, in your own backyard?

TL: I would call myself a naturalist, and for me what that means is I try to be attuned. I'm interested in what the plants and animals around me are doing, so if I wake up in the morning I can hear the different birds and say, 'Oh, the butcher birds have started calling this time of year'. You can hear parrots flying over, then you notice that there's a flush of new leaves on the trees in the backyard and to me that's a very kind of low-key experience but it's a bit like, I suppose, a relationship with a partner or your children, that often the enduring strength of a relationship can be the little things like that, and to me that's building up a relationship with nature which makes me aware of this other world, this world outside what's going on in the cities or outside of what people are doing.

People think that if you want to experience nature you've got to go out into a wilderness or a big national park and I don't think city people realise the extent to which animals have moved into cities, that most of Australia's largest cities have got peregrine falcons that are sometimes nesting on skyscrapers and flying foxes in a lot of cities, little tiny bats in roofs, snakes and so forth. There's a lot of biodiversities in the cities that are overlooked, and I think that there's this wrong perception that if an animal is living in a city it's because we've destroyed its natural habitat when in actual fact, cities can be very, very good environments for animals, and the important message in that is that we don't necessarily repel nature, animals don't necessarily hate humans. We're not awful in everything we do; we're not just this destroyer species knocking everything down—hey, we do knock a lot of things down and we do a lot of destroying but we benefit a lot of animals as well and it's worthwhile remembering that. Sometimes I think we feel so bad about ourselves and that doesn't help us develop a relationship with nature. It's nice to know that some of the birds coming into the gardens are living really happy lives and that we've kind of helped them out.

To me it makes more sense to have a relationship with the nature that's closest to where you live, and hopefully that's in your garden. If you've got birds and lizards and frogs in your garden then I think that's the place to start because you can see these things every day, you can watch them through the seasons. It's like your children or your neighbours, you can build up a relationship through regular contact. To me that's much more meaningful than going to a remote wilderness place once a year and seeing something once and never seeing it again. How can you have a really serious relationship with that? It makes much more sense to focus on the nature that you can get contact with regularly, and that's right there in your garden—somewhere like this.

Do you know that I have more species of reptile wander through my backyard than there are in the whole of south-west Tasmania's wilderness area? People underestimate how much wildlife there is in gardens in cities because they don't look, they're not expecting it, but it's just astonishing the extent to which you get wild native creatures in cities. You will get Tasmanian devils on the edges of Hobart. I've had a deadly brown snake in my garden repeatedly over the years in Brisbane and to me that's very exciting—I mean, that's real wildness right where I live. And the variety of birds that you would see over almost any garden—as long as you're not really inner-city you get a great variety of birds in gardens, and right in the inner-city you've got peregrine falcons nesting on skyscrapers in Brisbane, Melbourne, Perth—and that's just fantastic.

One of the amazing things that's happening in cities now is the extent to which native birds are flocking into cities to roost. This is happening all over the world and a really good example in Australia is the rainbow lorikeets that you get along eastern Australia and the roosts that they have—places like Byron Bay, right in the main street in between Woolworths and the whole shopping centre. There's a roost in Brisbane where it's at a major intersection where you've got supermarkets and there's a nightclub blaring out music, and you look up and there are these little scrawny trees that are full of these sleeping lorikeets. I mean, how can they sleep like this, but there are so many of these roosts in towns all up and down the east coast, and it's a pity you can't interview the birds and say, 'Why do you like roosting there?', but I'd say it was something to do with they feel safe in the middle of the city because they're not going to get attacked by a bird of prey and there's not going to be a python climbing up the tree getting them. So here's an example where animals are deciding that there's safety and value in associating with people and that is something we can kind of celebrate.

Q: Can you talk more about this concept of the city as a sanctuary for animals?

TL: People have this idea that animals that come into a city are only doing it out of desperation and they'd much rather be in the wilderness and it's only because we've chopped down the forest, but there's a lot of evidence to suggest that that's wrong because you can get much higher densities of possums, lorikeets, certain honey-eaters, much higher densities of lizards in cities than you do actually in natural environments. Then when you start to ask why that might be you can see that people have planted so many nectar-rich flowers that there's a lot more nectar in the city than there is in the bush nearby, for possums there's a lot of hiding places in houses, for lizards there's all the rockeries, there's the use of fertilisers and water—in the middle of a drought you can still get fruit on garden plants.

Most animals are suffering as a result of what we humans are doing but some species find that a farm or a city is better than anything natural and I think that's a very hard concept to grapple with—the idea that an artificial environment could be better than a natural one—but there are just so many examples.

Look at satin bower-birds—I mean, we all know that the males build these little bowers of sticks and they put little blue things in there but if you look at what they use now it's all this blue plastic—blue straws and bottlecaps. They used to use blue berries and feathers and there's still plenty of feathers and berries and flowers around but they like plastic better and so we can't make that assumption when we see an animal use something artificial that it has no choice. More often than not it's just using something that's better than before. Like magpies will often build their nests and put bits of wire in it. Well, that nest is going to last for a hell of a lot longer than a nest made out of sticks, so we shouldn't assume that nature's repelled by something just because it was made by humans or that it's repelled by humans.

Often what we do is very harmful to nature but sometimes it's as good as what they can find naturally and sometimes it's actually better.

One of the assumptions that we make as people is that we are just so far outside nature that every animal thinks, 'Woah, that's not natural, that's a person or that's a house or that's something artificial', and that's quite a wrong view, like a lot of birds will move into old shacks and build their nests there. They don't see that as unnatural, there's no reason to think that their mind identifies that house as having this kind of 'Is it natural or is it unnatural?'—it's only in our heads that we have that division. So an example would be seagulls. It is known that they'll follow whales, they'll follow dolphins, they'll follow fishing boats, and I don't think they're discriminating in any way between one being natural and one being unnatural—and we've got to remember that this is a value judgement that we're applying; it's not what the animals are saying and seeing.

Q: Can you give another specific example of nature in the city?

TL: An amazing example of nature in the city is the Olympic site at Homebush Bay in Sydney. It's an industrial zone; there's a requirement under law that because of this huge development, the Olympic site, that they had to do an environmental impact study. It's an industrial zone, you'd think it was a waste of time, [but] biologists go there and they find the biggest population that had ever been found of an endangered species, the green and golden bell frog. These frogs were nesting in an old brick pit that had only filled up with water the year before. Prior to that they'd been living and breeding in some old abattoir ponds, and so here's an amazing example of something rare, something really special, not out there in the wilderness but right in the middle of the city, and because there was a commitment to be a green Olympic Games, they had to redesign the Olympic site to accommodate these frogs. Now the Olympics are over they've created special gardens and ponds for these endangered frogs and it is a striking example of people and an endangered species coexisting in Australia's largest city.

Q: You have written about wilderness and conservation in relation to south-west Tasmania. Could you give an outline of your views?

TL: I think the way the wilderness ethos has developed in Tasmania has been quite unfortunate for conservation of species. The south-west, the area that's the great wilderness, is actually very barren. There's not many birds in there—the diversity of mammals, frogs, reptiles, fish, plants, everything, is very low, but there's been all this conservation effort on protecting this area because it moves people. But I think conservation should be about saving other species and so you should go to where the other species are, and the irony is that in Tasmania the richest places for species is the eastern half, in the drier forests, so it's been quite hard for conservation campaigners in eastern Tasmania to get attention on woodlands, grasslands, dry eucalypt forests and heathlands, which are incredibly rich in rare plants and very important for some endangered birds like the swift parrot and forty-spotted pardalote, but they don't move people emotionally so they haven't received the same attention, and I think that's wrong.

Q: As a conservationist and biologist, how would you like to see humans and nature interact?

TL: I think if you look to the future of conservation, it's been based traditionally on the idea that you set aside natural areas, national parks, and that's where nature is. If you look at what's really going on, animals are just moving all through the landscape, they're moving into cities and farms and it's getting harder and harder to say that conservation is all going to go on in national parks. So I think we've got to look at what the animals and plants are doing and work out where they are in the landscape

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and it means that conservation becomes a lot more creative. Conservation could mean that you leave that old shed there because there's a family of bats in it, it could mean that you leave those blackberries and other weeds on the creek bank because there are native hens living in there. I think that the idea that conservation is in this part of the landscape and people are in the other part of the landscape—you can no longer have that simple divide. Nature's everywhere and conservation potentially can go on anywhere and so we've got to be a lot more flexible in how we approach conservation and living with nature.