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*Speaking of the wild:
Australian attitudes to wildlife*

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of
The Australian National University**

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Statement of originality

Except where otherwise noted, this thesis is entirely the result of my research.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Heather Jean Aslin". The signature is written in black ink and is centered on the page.

Heather Jean Aslin

Foreword

All researchers have personal reasons for undertaking enquiries, although these are often not stated explicitly. In research which rejects the claim that objectivity is possible, it follows that the researcher should try to give the reader an idea of the personal interests underlying the research. My interests, and the background leading to them, mirror those of some of the people whose voices are represented in this thesis.

For me, choosing this research topic stems from a lifelong interest in wildlife. This began with early years spent on farms in the Adelaide Hills and the south-east of South Australia. So it is true to say initially I had a country background. My contacts with wildlife were relatively infrequent during my school years as my family then lived in the city of Mount Gambier, but there were occasional trips to the country with my father (who worked on the land most of his life). During my tertiary education at the University of Adelaide I developed an interest in animal behaviour, particularly the work of ethologists such as Lorenz and Tinbergen. This led to studies in comparative psychology. My honours science project was a study of discrimination learning in the Norway rat. After completing my degree, I worked as a scientific officer with a research unit which focused on establishing captive colonies of smaller Australian mammals, principally native rodents and small marsupials. I also undertook extensive field work as part of this job and through biological survey work done voluntarily by local field naturalist and conservation groups. I have been involved with non-government natural history, conservation and environment groups all my adult life.

In 1980, I returned to the University of Adelaide part-time to complete a Master of Environmental Studies degree at the then Graduate Centre for Environmental Studies. This involved collaborative research on community perceptions of the South Australian national parks system, using quantitative survey techniques. I later joined the South Australian Museum as a science communicator, writing and editing publications on museum research. Here I also pursued my emerging interest in community-based environmental education. This led to a position as senior community education officer with what is now the South Australian Department of Environment and Natural Resources, and to a year's secondment as a lecturer at the Mawson Graduate Centre for Environmental Studies. I left my departmental position to begin this enquiry.

Acknowledgments

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Mr Keith Mitchell of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies kindly drew the maps for the thesis. I would like to acknowledge the helpfulness, efficiency and courtesy of the library staff at The Australian National University and the Australian National Library — they made literature searching a pleasure rather than a frustration.

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I would like to acknowledge the intellectual influence and inspiration provided by the late Dr Phil Tighe, Dr Ros Taplin, and Dr John Young, all formerly of the Mawson Graduate Centre for Environmental Studies at the University of Adelaide.

I owe a great debt to my interviewees and group discussion members. Without their willingness to participate and to reflect on the questions I asked, this enquiry would not have been possible. I have a great respect and admiration for many of them, and count the opportunity to have met and spoken with them as one of the unexpected bonuses of this research.

My special gratitude to Dr David Bennett of the Department of Environment, Sport and Territories for his inspiration, advice and support throughout, and also for being prepared to read and comment on the tome! Without his example this thesis would never have been written.

Finally, the support and encouragement of my parents has enabled me to undertake my tertiary education. To my late father, Lyle, I owe much of my interest in wildlife and the bush. To my mother, Esther, I owe a continuing interest in many intellectual endeavours, and the desire for the university education she was denied herself.

Abstract

This enquiry examines the attitudes and values of adult Australians toward their country's wildlife, and addresses a primary research aim of constructing or identifying a conceptual framework for these attitudes and values. Its secondary research aims are to identify the range of attitudes and values towards wildlife among Australians, how they can be described, who holds which types, and why. I review typologies for these attitudes and values identified in eco-philosophical, sociological and psychological literature. I examine conceptual and empirical bases for distinguishing different types; and methodological approaches used by researchers investigating their distribution in western societies. In considering ways to answer the research questions suggested by this literature and differing approaches to social enquiry, I argue for a methodological stance incorporating structural and interpretive/phenomenological approaches, and addressing cultural, social and individual levels.

In the structural approach I describe and categorise some current wildlife interest groups and organisations at eight sites (Sydney, Canberra, Cairns, Melbourne, Alice Springs, Adelaide, Echuca and Cobar); and use similar categories to examine relevant articles published over a period of a year in the national newspaper, *The Australian*.

In the interpretive/phenomenological approach I use theoretical or purposive sampling techniques to identify and interview 51 Australians with specialised interests in wildlife, living mainly in and around Sydney, Canberra, Cairns, Melbourne, and Adelaide. They include staff of relevant government agencies; non-government conservation, environment, industry and hunting organisations; voluntary wildlife carers and rehabilitators; veterinarians; educators; and self-employed farmers, nature writers, and wildlife artists. I also conduct seven group discussions with people from the general community, incorporating approximately equal numbers of men and women, and covering major occupational sectors, differently-sized population centres, and age ranges among the adult Australian population. These group discussions are held in Sydney, Melbourne, Canberra, Echuca, and Cobar, and involve 54 people. Interviews and group discussions are semi-structured and I ask participants mainly open-ended questions covering wildlife perceptions/definitions, attitudes/values, behaviour/experiences, social issues/goals, and demographic characteristics.

I use mainly qualitative techniques to analyse responses, taking respondents' own words as primary data. I develop response categories for the various questions, summarise responses by categories, and make comparisons within and between the different data sets. Through this analysis I identify emergent themes and concepts giving insight into answers to the research questions.

My findings provide evidence of a range of strongly-held views about wildlife. These views relate to interviewees' and group members' situations, particularly social situations, and to learning experiences in these situations. The most significant of these learning experiences are ones associated with socialisation into major life situations and social roles — family/childhood situations, gender roles, and occupational/interest group roles. So these emerge as major influences shaping attitudes and values.

I identify an explanatory conceptual framework based in experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984). This draws connections between the range of occupations in western societies, cognitive styles, and bodies of social knowledge. It implies that people learn different cognitive styles through being socialised into occupational roles, and by extension, other roles such as gender and interest group roles. These differences are in a sense entrenched in the structure of western societies. People's current situations, and the attitudes corresponding with these situations, represent a compromise between socially-structured role constraints and individual preferences, aptitudes or abilities. I relate this to interviewees' and group members' situations, explain how this approach satisfies the research aims, and show how it is consistent with other researchers' findings about wildlife attitudes.

In discussing the *social conflict* theme emerging from interviews and group discussions, I draw upon Serpell (1986), who identifies the role learnt psychological distancing mechanisms play in helping people engaged in occupations or recreational pursuits which require killing animals, to avoid emotional conflicts. These distancing mechanisms help these people to see individual animals in objectified and mechanistic ways conflicting with the personalised ways they may be seen by other social groups. The *contact* theme I identify points to the importance of personal experiences with wildlife in influencing attitudes, and suggests Australians need to be encouraged to integrate wildlife into their everyday lives if conservation goals are to be achieved.

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List of abbreviations

ABS —	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACT —	Australian Capital Territory
ANCA —	Australian Nature Conservation Agency (commonwealth)
CSIRO —	Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation
DEST —	Department of Environment, Sport and Territories (commonwealth)
DSP —	Dominant social paradigm
NEP —	New environmental paradigm
NSW —	New South Wales
NT —	Northern Territory
Qld —	Queensland
RSPCA —	Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
SA —	South Australia
Tas. —	Tasmania
Vic. —	Victoria
WA —	Western Australia