

Henry Gold: an eye for wilderness and the future



Left, Henry Gold at work in the Snowy-Indi National Park in 1985. Craig Benjamin. Right, more recently in 2005, in the West MacDonnell Ranges. James Swinton

Anne McLeod profiles the valuable contribution of this wilderness photographer and environmentalist

Henry Gold's contribution to the life-and-death struggle to protect wilderness in New South Wales's southern Blue Mountains was to camp out on the freezing 1200 metre high Boyd Plateau and photograph threatened areas. In one of the state's most scenic areas, timber companies and the Forestry Commission had been cutting into native forests for years, leaving devastation behind them. They planned to create huge pine plantations. At the same time, conservationists were fighting to have the entire Blue Mountains wilderness declared a national park but were a fragmented collection of individuals and bushwalking clubs. The threat to destroy the Kanangra-Boyd wilderness brought them together into one coherent lobby group and saw the birth of the modern conservation movement.

On his expedition in August 1974, Gold drove his old Holden station wagon to the start of the track to the Boyd Range and set off through the snow-covered eucalypts but, unprepared for the sub-zero weather he encountered, he retreated to the mattress in the back of his car. The following night he camped en route in a sheltered saddle protected from the strong southerlies and made it to the Kowmung River at 8 am, but the water was high and flowing fast. He wrote in his diary at the time:

Impossible to cross at Lannigans Creek junction. Checked upstream where river splits into two channels and successfully crossed first channel (water icy), but second one very deep and rapid. There was a fallen tree across, but it was covered with a thick and slippery layer of frost. Too dangerous to cross, especially on my own. Impossible to follow the river at this high level of water. Can't afford to get my camera equipment wet, let alone lose it, at this early stage. Decided to return the way I came.

Night again below freezing, but overcast since early morning. Icy southerly winds obviously a front moving through. Walked to Mount Misery and Wheengee Whungee area. Sunny breaks from midday through to sunset enabled me to get the photos I wanted.

The Boyd Plateau was saved from becoming a pine forest a few days after a book illustrated with Gold's emotionally resonant photographs was presented to the Minister for Lands. In 1979 Neville Wran, then Premier of NSW, walked into Parliament with a book of Gold's photographs under his arm during the successful battle to save the Colo Wilderness region, the state's largest, in the northern Blue Mountains.

Gold's latest book, *Blue Mountains World Heritage*, vividly illustrates the entire history of the epochal campaign that began in 1932 with a proposal by Myles Dunphy for a Greater Blue Mountains National Park. In 2000 this impressive collection became an effective tool for lobbying delegates deciding whether to declare World Heritage status for the entire Blue Mountains wilderness. Until the 21 delegates viewed these photographs, only eight of them were convinced of the area's special qualities. Afterwards, the proposal passed unopposed.

Henry Gold's love for the Australian landscape was formed in an unlikely place. As a teenager living in the cramped one-bedroom apartment he shared with his family in postwar Vienna, he saw a woodcut of the Blue Mountains with their cliffines and mysterious valleys. It had a profound effect on him. A few years later Gold could stand the harsh austerities no longer. He decided to get as far away from Europe as he could. Australia was the most distant country and was desperate for migrants who qualified under the White Australia policy. Immediately on arrival in 1956, he headed to the view that had captured his imagination. Relishing the freedom to camp and roam without restriction in the wild bushland, he explored alone, capturing on film much of the landscape he loved. Joining the Sydney

Bushwalker's Club, known for its commitment to conservation, he found others who shared his feelings.

In the early 1960s, a visit to the United States gave him the opportunity to show his images to the Americans, who were then completely ignorant of Australia and its natural features. Those who saw them were so excited that Gold was invited to present a screening to the international convention of the American Photographic Society in San Francisco. Through this he met Ansell Adams, the renowned nature photographer.

Gold was keen to study Adams's methods. This gave him his start in black-and-white photography. After he returned to Australia, Gold decided he could play a part in the environmental movement through his images. He wanted to open Australians' eyes to their unique natural heritage and used the black-and-white techniques he had learnt to create dramatic photographs. But his love for black-and-white was never profitable enough to provide for his growing family. Gold refined his skills in colour photography and established his own studio, producing the stunning NSW wilderness calendars and diaries. His Sydney heritage calendars of old houses in the inner suburbs were also popular and were sold mainly through the National Trust.

As Honorary Photographer for the Colong Foundation for Wilderness (the oldest wilderness society in Australia), Gold's photographs have been used in every environmental campaign in NSW since the 1960s and have played a major role in overcoming ignorance and apathy. They take us on a visual journey through the beauty and grandeur of the state—its rivers, gorges and rainforests. In 2006, Gold was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia for 'Services to wilderness preservation through the use of photographic documentation'. Nearly six million hectares, over seven per cent of New South Wales' total land area, is now part of the national parks system.