# REMEMBER LAKE PEDDER?

**Robert Rankin**

South West Tasmania has gone down in history as the place that stimulated the birth of the modern conservation movement in Australia. But this fact, of course, can hardly be described as an achievement when so much wilderness was lost in the process. The legacy of these early conservation campaigns, however, is that a group of individuals formed whose expertise in communication and understanding of political matters and processes helped them fight with great success other environmental issues across the country in the coming decades.

In South West Tasmania, the great failure, for Australia, of course was the flooding of Lake Pedder in 1972. The great success was preventing any further building of hydro-electric dams on the Gordon River. All subsequent proposals were cancelled by a High Court decision in July 1983 in the face of growing national outrage.

Plans to develop the hydro-electric capacity of the South West began around 1953 with the installation of flow recorders on the rivers of the region. The island state of Tasmania already had an extensive network of hydro-electric installations on many of the rivers in the north of the state and, from the government's point of view, harnessing the potential of the remote south-west corner of the island was the next logical step.

Bushwalkers were reassured that Lake Pedder would be protected when their submissions for a national park in the region were accepted by the government in 1955. A park enclosing the lake was declared on 8 March. To help reassure the community, the Hydro-Electric Commission (HEC) declared in 1961 that power development in the region was highly unlikely for the foreseeable future. As it turned out, the *foreseeable future* was not far off. In 1963, funds from the federal government were sought to construct a road into the very heart of the South West. Ultimately, two HEC roads would be built into the region. One led to the eventual site of the Gordon Dam beyond Strathgordon—a small town created especially to house the construction workers—and a second road branched southwards at Frodsham Pass south of Maydena to the site of the Scott's Peak Dam. This road passes along the shores of the artificial Pedder impoundment to within about ten kilometres of the Western Arthur Range.

One of the oldest conservation groups in Australia, the South-West Committee, which brought together bushwalkers and other interested groups and individuals, had been formed the previous year, in 1962, and this group now sought from the government reasons for the road's construction. In June 1965, they received their answer with the government, under the leadership of Premier Eric Reece, announcing there would be *some modification* to

the national park protecting Lake Pedder. No one quite knew for sure what that modification meant but ultimately it would be realised that what was intended was the total destruction of the lake.

In March 1967, bushwalkers from the northern regions of Tasmania formed the Save Lake Pedder National Park Committee and in May that same year the government finally released the plans for the Gordon River Power Scheme Stage One. Now it was clear that the lake would be modified to such an extent that it would be eliminated altogether. In Hobart, in the south of the state, senior employees of the HEC actually held important positions in the Hobart Walking Club, the same club that had, a few years earlier, helped in the formation of the South West Committee. Another group, the Lake Pedder Action Committee, was formed in Hobart in April 1971.

The Gordon River Power Scheme involved the flooding of Lake Pedder so creating what the government would try to describe as a bigger and better Pedder impoundment. This is the lake that exists to this day. The ‘real’ Lake Pedder, with its sparkling pink quartzite beach, lies many metres beneath the surface of the current artificial lake. It is the man-made lake which can be seen from many viewpoints along the crest of the Western Arthur Range and it is this lake which many say should now be drained so that the original jewel of the South West can breathe again.

The plan that finally went ahead involved three dam walls being built around Lake Pedder to trap the flows of both the Serpentine River which flowed westward and the Huon River which flowed to the east. These two flooded river systems would join above a low dividing range near Scott’s Peak so creating a giant Pedder Impoundment. The waters of the enlarged lake would themselves only be used to top up the nearby and larger Lake Gordon on which the power station was situated.

There were alternatives to the complete annihilation of the lake. One proposal suggested damming the Serpentine River only partially so that the waters did not back up as far as the lake. The collected water could then be channelled to the power station through an underground tunnel. Scott’s Peak Dam, on the Huon River, could have been of lesser height or even abandoned as it supplies a mere twelve percent of the total water of the scheme. These alternative schemes would have saved the original lake and retained its pristine beauty albeit at the expense of some reduction in generating capacity. The decision to go ahead and destroy the lake was based on a comparison of values—natural beauty of wilderness as opposed to its utilitarian value.

In that era, belief in the value of conserving natural areas was at the fringes of society's thinking. But it was an idea that was slowly awakening and one that would quickly gain momentum. At the time, those who could see value in retaining places of beauty were far too few and far too inexperienced to project their views in a world of vastly more adroit bureaucrats and politicians. To some extent Pedder was lost because of the decisions of a group of older politicians whose thinking belonged to a past era. They could not adjust to the changes in environmental ideas that were at that time beginning to surface.

If the drowning of Pedder served one positive purpose it was to prevent such a catastrophe occurring a second time. Across the nation a consciousness had awoken that would never again allow a natural symbol of such significance to be lost to the often dubious forces of economic development.

At times during the struggle, which lasted many years, it seemed that the conservation movement would win through and the lake would be saved, but sadly that was not to be. The pink quartzite beach of Lake Pedder finally drowned in July 1972. The original lake was the jewel of Tasmania's South West wilderness. Without a heart the land is incomplete. Today, what is left of the South West is still magnificent but it could have been just so much more, and in the minds of those who tried to save the lake, that conviction still remains.

**(This extract is from the book *BEYOND THE HORIZON*)**