A brief history of the Australian environment movement (post-1770)

1770 English botanist Joseph Banks, traveling with Captain Cook, sets foot on Australia at Botany Bay. His landing party clashes with Indigenous residents, and wounds several. Later the same year Captain Cook collides with Great Barrier Reef. Cook writes of Indigenous Australians, “they seemed far happier than we Europeans…they live in a tranquility which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition. The Earth and Sea of their own accord furnish them with all the things necessary for life.”

1870 New colonist Mrs Georgiana Molloy commences documenting the extraordinary floristic diversity of a small part of the south west corner of Western Australia – and is led to a sense of reverence by its beauty, in contrast to Banks and Darwin who were both generally dismissive of the Australian landscape and flora.

1857 Eugene von Guerard, a migrant from Austria, paints the forest at Ferntree Gully in Dandenong Ranges, Victoria.

1861 This painting inspires probably Australia’s first environment campaign when the art critic at the Argus newspaper in Melbourne, James Smith, commences a campaign to prevent the logging of Ferntree Gully forest.

1866 German biologist Ernst Haeckl coins the word ‘ecology’ (not in Australia).

1878 Nature lover R M Collins, born into one of Queensland’s oldest pastoral families, begins campaigning for McPherson Range (Lamington) National Park after visiting Yellowstone in USA. He is elected to Qld Parliament and campaigns for legislation to establish national parks, finally adopted in 1906. Qld national parks campaign carried on from 1908 by Romeo Lahey, son of timber mill manager.

1879 Australia’s first national park declared: Royal NP, south of Sydney.

1880 Victorian Field Naturalists Club formed.

1886 The Heidelberg school of painters (Roberts, McCubbin, Streeton), start traveling out into the bush to paint nature. Their paintings help change the way Australians perceive and value nature and the natural landscapes, building on the earlier work of Glover, Martens, Chevalier, von Guerard, Piguenit and Buvelot. Artists continue to help colonial Australians come to terms with Australia through the work of Heysen, Preston, Namatjira and on to Nolan, Boyd and Drysdale.

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1888 Australian government establishes Australian colony to dispose of poor Britons. No official recognition of the rights, or even existence, of Indigenous Australians, and little appreciation of the richness and vulnerability of the continent’s natural environment. Cattle and sheep, cats and dogs introduced.

1889 First legislation to protect specific native wildlife species (on Norfolk Island). In following decades a number of Acts passed to protect specific species.

1866 David Stead, father of Christina, co-founds arguably Australia’s first environmental campaign organization: the Wildlife Preservation Society, in Sydney.

1890 Myles Dunphy forms National Parks and Primitive Areas Council in NSW to campaign for protected areas.

1893 Sydney novelist Eleanor Dark writes “Sun Across the Sky” – dealing with the clash between local residents and a property developer in a small seaside resort.

1893 Also in 1893, Philip Crosbie Morrison, the ‘voice of nature’, commences long career of journalism and broadcasting on the environment. His “Wild life” radio show, initially to run for 6 weeks in 1938 in Victoria, ends up running for 20 years, goes national, and becomes one of the most popular shows ever on Australian radio.
1946 Judith Wright, born 1915, publishes first book of poetry. Wright goes on to become a leading conservationist, as well as poet. In 1954 she co-founded the Queensland branch of the Wildlife Preservation Society and went on to lead successful campaigns for the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and many other Qld environments.

Listen, listen
latecomers to my country
eat of wild manna
there is
there was
a country
that spoke in the language
of the leaves

1962 Rachel Carson publishes “Silent Spring” in USA.

1963 Yolngu traditional owners from Gove in NT present bark petition to Federal parliament in Canberra opposing proposed Nabalco (now Alcan) bauxite mine. Justice Blackburn subsequently (1971!) rules that the Yolngu TO’s do not have a ‘proprietary interest as understood by our law’. Mining proceeds.

1964 The Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) is established in Canberra by a one thousand pound grant from Liberal Prime Minister Robert Menzies.

1965 Australian Littoral Society is formed to protect fight to protect the Great Barrier Reef.


1966 Vincent Lingiari and other Gurindji stockmen and TO’s commence strike on Wave Hill and Newcastle Waters pastoral leases in NT. Liberal PM John Gorton offers financial assistance to conservationists to help put their case for the protection of the Great Barrier Reef to Queensland Royal Commission into the reef. Reef campaign succeeds.

Also in 1970, trade unionist Jack Mundey teams up with three Sydney women to place the world’s first ‘green ban’ on proposed destruction of Kelly’s Bush for housing development. Green bans and Jack Mundey become internationally famous.

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1972 Aboriginal tent embassy set up in Canberra, prompted by anger over non-recognition of Aboriginal Land Rights in the Yolngu case. Still going 30 years later!

Flooding of Lake Pedder in south west Tasmania despite national campaign in opposition. United Tasmania Group, Australia’s first green political party, established in response to damming.

Indepenently, Dr Bob Brown, newly arrived in Tasmania and working as a doctor in Launceston, places an advertisement in the Australian and three Tasmanian newspapers likening the flooding of Pedder to the killing of the last Thylacine (Tasmanian tiger) and the genocide of Tasmanian Aborigines.

1974 The first Field Study Centre opened in Queensland at Jacobs Well

1975 Campaigns against woodchipping, and subsequently bauxite mining, in WA’s native karri and jarrah forests take off. Original campaigner Dr Beth Shultz still campaigning for WA’s forests in 2004.

1976 Liberal PM Malcolm Fraser shuts down sand mining on Fraser Island after a long campaign by environment group FIDO lead by John Sinclair. Fraser Island becomes a national park shortly after.

Also in 1976, Dr Bob Brown rafts the Franklin; helps form the Tasmanian Wilderness Society (TWS); and fasts on top of Mt Wellington in Hobart to protest against visiting US warships.

1979 Seminal Terania Creek NSW nonviolent protest campaign against logging of rainforests, leads to creation of 6 new national parks and Premier Neville Wran’s decision to ban rainforest logging in NSW.

1982 The Franklin blockade. 1,200 arrests; dam stopped in 1983.

1983 Environment Centre of the Northern Territory formed

1989 Nudgee Beach Field Study Centre opened in May.

1991 Queensland 20 field Study Centre’s are renamed Environmental Education Centres

1999 Queensland Environmental Education Centres and Outdoor Education Centres begin to operationally work together.

Northern Territory’s only Field Study Centre is closed
2005 Victoria and New South Wales begin trialing the Australian Sustainable Schools Initiative

2007 Queensland initiates Queensland Sustainable Schools Initiative (QESSI)

2009 Earth Smart Initiative and Science Sports Initiative highlights sustainability and science in Queensland primary schools

2012 Australian Government put on notice by the United Nations committee regarding the World Heritage status of the Great Barrier Reef

Reference