

Wildman River Wilderness Work Camp

1986 – c. 2004

Details

The Wildman River Wilderness Work Camp was established by the government in May 1986. It was a low security bush work camp for males aged 14 -18 who had been in lots of trouble with the law and was intended as an alternative to prison time. Residents and staff built the camp. By 1991 the camp had beds for 15 or 16 youths. The Wildman River Wilderness Work Camp ceased to operate as a detention centre in 2004.

The Wildman River Wilderness Work Camp was situated on the Mary River near Kakadu National Park about one and a half hours drive from Darwin in an area with no towns and fewer than two hundred people. The camp was a ten acre-bush block with a 1.5 metre high cattle fence around it. It operated as a low security bush work camp for males aged 14 -18 who had been in lots of trouble with the law. Its remoteness was meant to stop escape.

The camp was established in 1986 shortly after the Northern Territory government made new laws about juvenile crime and handed the job of looking after juvenile offenders from Welfare to the Northern Territory Department of Correctional Services (NTDCS) who ran the Territory's prisons. Some Welfare staff were very upset about the transfer of responsibility and worried that people who ran prisons would take a 'lock-em up attitude' to juvenile justice. Prison staff, however, wanted to show that they could keep juveniles out of adult prison. The Wildman River Wilderness Camp was seen as an alternative to jail for young offenders.

When the camp first opened it had no toilets, showers, kitchen or running water. Everyone lived in tents. Residents and staff spent the first two years building camp facilities. By May 1988 they had built a large iron shed with a cement floor, toilets and showers. They slept, cooked, ate and played in this shed. They had running water and a video machine. They also had a teacher, though lessons took a back seat to sport and work.

Every morning inmates did two hours of physical training. Youths were often dropped in the bush under the supervision of a staff member, 15 km from the camp, in order for them to run back to camp. Sometimes they ran through rainforest and creeks where they had to climb through vines and other obstacles. The camp supervisor, or camp boss as he was known by the inmates at Wildman River, said the youths needed 6 to 8 weeks of this kind of training to be fit enough for camp work.

During the day, the youths worked at the camp building, cooking and gardening. In the dry season they also worked on projects for the Northern Territory Conservation Commission (NTCC), later called Parks and Wildlife. They cleared land and built picnic tables and toilets for tourists in places like Shady Camp, a popular fishing spot.

In the afternoon they played sport including boxing, touch football and volleyball. They took part in local sports competitions. Some of the boxers won Golden Glove awards. Local sports teams also visited Wildman River. A 1988 report on sport and recreation and its affect on juvenile offenders refers to the thoughts of the camp boss of the Wildman River Wilderness Camp. It reveals that the camp boss liked individual sports more than team sports. He said that individuals could 'hide behind' the team instead of doing their best. In individual sports the youths had to work harder to improve themselves. He wanted them to learn how to win and lose. He also talked with them about their problems. He thought sport and talk would help them change their ways. He wanted the youths to stay in camp for at least three months in order to help them change.

Camp punishment included running around the oval with a car tyre around the neck. According to a report by visitors from the Australian Institute of Criminology (AIC) in Canberra this punishment was invented by the youths themselves who enforced it on the losing team when they played games. Though the visitors from the AIC thought this punishment looked brutal they also agreed with the camp boss that the youths had had such tough lives that this punishment may not have seemed brutal to them.

The report shows that the visitors from the AIC were not sure if camp life stopped the youths breaking the law more than time in jail, although they thought there was a small amount of evidence to show it did. The visitors also thought that the camp boss was an important part of the camp's success stating that; 'He was dedicated to the project, the youths and their personal development'. They were worried that there was no-one to check up on the youths when they went home and recommended that prison staff involve Aboriginal communities more.

The visitors from the AIC also noted that research into work camps in other parts of the world showed that they worked best with youths who were in trouble with the law for the first time. The Wildman River Camp, however, was for 'end of the road' offenders, the last stop before jail. It was tougher than youth camps in other places and therefore prison staff did not use it for first-timers.

In its first two years, 73 youths lived at the camp. Most came from Darwin, Groote Eylandt, and Port Keats (aka Wadeye). A smaller number came from Alice Springs and other remote Territory communities. Some were from interstate. 58 were Aboriginal. By 1991, 144 youths had been through the camp. They had built more than 40 kilometres of fences around the Mary River Conservation Reserve, now the Mary River National Park, protecting it from feral cattle, buffalo and pigs.

By 1991 the camp had enough beds for 15 or 16 youths. Though the youths 'enjoyed relative freedom during the day' they were now locked inside a dormitory at night. The camp had two teachers. These teachers worked between the camp and the new Don Dale Detention Centre in Darwin. The teachers trained the youths in the skills they needed to do the work at the camp and outside of its confines. Apart from fencing, inmates also built a store and childminding centre at Binjari Community, removed bitumen, planted a rainforest and constructed paved pathways at Nakara pre-school.

In 1993-94 the camp inmates helped the Northern Territory University (later called the Charles Darwin University) study feral cats. The youths built, set and watched the cat traps. They also helped build a new office at the camp, propagated seeds for Landcare, helped pave an Alcohol Rehabilitation Centre and build playground equipment at the Daly River Mission. They built a shed and fence at Port Keats (aka Wadeye) as well as making things to sell at the Rogues Gallery shop at Fannie Bay Gaol. They maintained their own camp and the tourist facilities in the Mary River Conservation Area. Prison staff estimated that the detainees had done about 6,500 hours of community work which they thought was worth about \$56,000.

Some staff within the Department of Corrections were proud of the camp and believed it helped to keep young people out of adult jails. In 1985, under Welfare, there were 46 youth in the Territory's adult jails. By 1990 there was just one. Numbers of young people in detention centres had also gone down. Some prison staff put this decrease down to the work at the Wildman River Camp. Other reasons put forward for the improvement included the increase of prison staff in remote communities making community based sentencing possible. Opinions within the Department, however, differed on how effective Wildman River was at deterring young people from reoffending as opposed to time in prison.

By 1995 the Department had reduced the number of beds at Wildman River to 10. It had also reduced the number of prison staff. However, in 1997 the Northern Territory passed Mandatory Sentencing laws, which forced magistrates to put young offenders in detention instead of sending them back to communities. Prison reports for 2001 state that the Wildman River Camp had beds for up to 20.

Some youths at the camp were going to school during the week. Others continued to work on community projects. National Park work included building a heritage walking track at Windows on the Wetland; fish ladders at Love Creek; Saltwater Intrusion Barrages in the Mary River System; maintaining the Wangi Falls day use area; cleaning interpretational shelters, toilets and bird hides; maintaining tracks and camping areas; helping with controlled burns and removing rubbish. They also performed a wetlands survey on airboats for weed control and

erosion checks at Wildman River.

Youths also worked for other government departments like the Coastal Plains Research Station, Department of Primary Industry and Fisheries. They helped set up classrooms at the Howard Springs Primary School. Set up and took down the Orchid Spectacular for the Darwin Sunrise Rotary Club. In 2002 they rebuilt the NT Scouts Association ride-on mower and cleaned up roadways following motor vehicle accidents.

In 2001, a newly elected government reviewed juvenile justice. The review looked at the places juvenile offenders came from and the value of the buildings and other equipment at Wildman River.

Following the review, the government decided to build a holding facility in Alice Springs, add a new medium security centre to Don Dale and put juvenile offenders through a 'graduated behavioural management' program. At that time very few juveniles were considered suitable for life at the Wildman camp. The Wildman River Wilderness Work Camp stopped being used as a detention centre sometime in 2003-2004. Buildings from the camp were transferred to the Darwin Prison or sold in 2006.

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- [Department of Health and Community Services - Correctional Services, Northern Territory Government \(1987 - 1989\)](#)
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Resources

- Atkinson, Lynn, [An overview of juvenile detention in Australia](#), National Conference on Juvenile Detention: Proceedings of a conference held 10-13 August 1993, 1994

Records

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