# Pilgrimage to Pedder

## Tasmania's drowned Lake Pedder – receptacle for a time capsule that may yet see the light of day

STORY BY GABI MOCATTA

THE OCCASION felt like a burial at sea. But under a sombre grey sky, as the wooden casket slipped beneath the water, there was no final fanfare, no formal salute. Only the slap of the water against the side of the rubber boat and the whistling of an icy wind disturbed the winter silence. We were at the man-made Huon-Serpentine Impoundment in south-western Tasmania on a freezing afternoon in April and we had, in a way, gone there to mourn. Just 13 metres below our boat lay the remarkable pink beach of Lake Pedder, the jewel of the south-west wilderness, lost exactly 30 years before beneath the waters of a vast hydro-electric scheme. We'd come here to commemorate that drowning, and also to show faith in the real Lake Pedder's future by depositing a time capsule to be recovered when the dammed waters retreat, and the true lake is restored.



*Jewel of the south-west wilderness. Lake Pedder as pictured in 1972 by legendary Tasmanian wilderness photographer Peter Dombrovskis, before its drowning by a hydro-electric dam. Formed during the last ice age, Lake Pedder was unique, its tannin-stained waters and pink quartzite beach home to species found nowhere else on earth.*

PETER DOMBROVSKIS

The anniversary pilgrimage to the impoundment was not a particularly Tasmanian initiative, nor was it planned just by Pedder old-timers who knew the lake before inundation. In fact, as one of the organisers, Melbourne-based Adam Beeson, commented: "Most of us weren't even born when the lake was flooded, but it's incredible to see the passion it still ignites." That passion led Adam and fellow bushwalking enthusiasts on repeated trips to Tasmania's south-west during which they became acquainted with the ranges around the lake. "As we got to know the area, we felt so strongly about the environmental tragedy that occurred here, that we decided we had to do something for the campaign for restoration," says trip organiser Steve Curtain. Out of that conviction was born the time capsule idea, intended, Adam explains, as "a message to the future. We wanted to leave something for the next generation, to remind people of the story of the drowning, to tell them that it wasn't always like it is today."

It's primarily the beauty of the old lake that the time capsule represents. Submissions came in from across the world remembering "this Tasmanian gem" and "the jewelled heart of the south-west wilderness" that "phoenix-like, will rise from destruction the day they pull the plug". Letters and emails were sent by environmentalists David Suzuki and David Bellamy as well as Greens leader Bob Brown, and from hundreds of ordinary people who knew and loved the lake. Photographs by legendary Tasmanian wilderness photographers Peter Dombrovskis and Olegas Truchanas attest to its different moods, from summery tranquillity to the storm-whipped lake in winter. Included too are newspaper articles from the time of the drowning, many lamenting the short-sightedness of Pedder's destruction. All now lie in a sealed tube inside a recycled-jarrah casket, washed by the tea-coloured waters that cover the old lake's fine, sandy beach – waiting, perhaps for generations – until the tide of environmental insensitivity turns.




***Few had seen Pedder's natural splendour until roads were cut into the wilderness in the 1960s. With walking time to the lake reduced by several days, people flocked in along muddy tracks. Pedder's flat, wide beach also made an ideal landing spot for light aircraft. Hundreds flew in the summer before the lake went under, their tyre marks still visible on the submerged beach.***



OLEGAS TRUCHANAS




COURTESY HOBART MERCURY

*Opposition to Lake Pedder's drowning toppled the Tasmanian government and spawned Green politics in Australia. Hundreds joined street protests like this one outside the Tasmanian Parliament in 1972. Although feasible engineering alternatives were proposed, none was ever taken up, and as the winter floodwaters rose that year, Pedder's fate was sealed.*

# HERITAGE SACRIFICED

LAKE PEDDER wasn't always an object of such passion. For millenniums its main feature was splendid isolation. Tasmanian Aboriginals probably camped round it in the milder summer months, but the first record of a European visit was not until 1835, when surveyor John Wedge came upon the lake and named it for the colony's Chief Justice, Sir John Lewes Pedder. For the next 100 years, few made the arduous trek across jagged ranges and swampy buttongrass plains to Pedder's shores. Only prospectors, track cutters and a handful of early bushwalkers reached the lake – but they were unanimous in their praise of its beauty. In 1955, an area around Pedder was declared a national park, and in 1968, 192,000 hectares, incorporating Lake Pedder, were gazetted as the Southwest National Park. Today, it's 605,000 ha.

In the early 1960s, however, talk of the need for additional energy generation to power Tasmania's industrialisation began. Tasmania would soon have an energy deficit if the abundant potential for hydro-electricity were not utilised – and so the planning that would drown Pedder began. Survey roads were cut into the untouched wilderness and with the construction of Strathgordon, the south-west saw its first permanent human habitation. The Serpentine River, which drained Lake Pedder, and the nearby Huon River were to be dammed; and their combined waters would provide storage for the Gordon Dam, allowing the generation of about 288 megawatts of power – the solution, for a time at least, to Tasmania's energy problems. But Lake Pedder would be lost. Despite sustained protest both nationally and internationally, the dams were built and in the winter of 1972, Pedder's whisky-coloured waters were engulfed by the rising flood.

Pedder had been unique in more than just looks. A broad, shallow lake of almost 10 square kilometres, it rose and shrank with the seasons, in summer exposing a pink-tinted quartzite beach with a pattern of shifting ripples like light shafts through a gem.

Pedder was a product of glaciation and had existed since the last ice age. An ancient body of water, it was home to species that were found nowhere else. In fact, it had more endemic species than any other lake in Australia. Small plants previously unknown to science populated the beach, and several worms, snails, shrimps and crayfish were native to Pedder's sands. The lake was also home to a rare fish *Galaxia parvus*. All of these were jeopardised by the flooding.

But for many who campaigned for a reprieve for the lake, the value of Pedder was all of these things and more. "It was our heritage," explained Tasmanian Annabel Richards during our expedition to the lake. As a student in the 1960s, Annabel had spent weeks in the south-west wilderness and was devastated to see Lake Pedder drowned.

"It was so remote and hard to get to that few people realised what we were losing," she said. Once the Strathgordon road (now the Gordon River Road) was built, walkers in their thousands made the day's hike along the muddy track to Pedder's shores. But by then Pedder was already lost – just as it was being discovered.

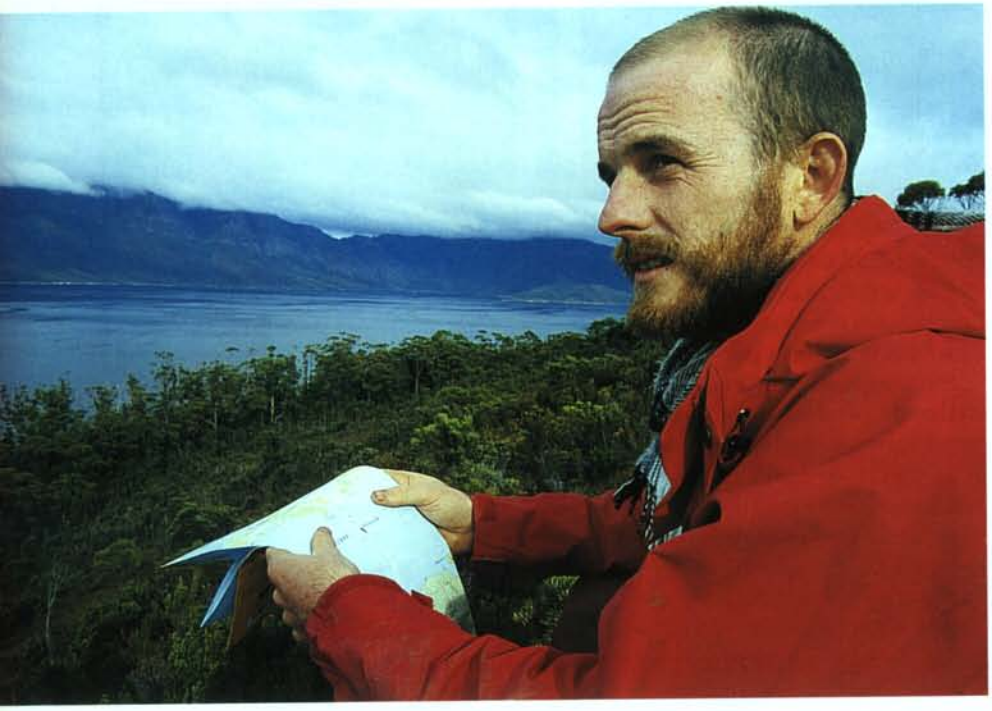
# BACK TO THE BEGINNING

TO COMMEMORATE the last walks along that original track to the lake 30 years ago, our anniversary party set out to follow the path to the edge of the present dam. Without regular maintenance, tracks in Tasmania's south-west are quickly swallowed by vegetation, so our walk would involve some hunting for the original route. We were lucky with the weather. After a day of torrential rain, the morning dawned misty and cold, but a weak sun soon banished the low cloud. Driving along the Gordon River Road through territory that had been untouched by humans until just a few decades ago, it was hard not to lament the environmental damage that hydro-electricity has caused. Close to the Scotts Peak Road, metal pylons heaved their way across the wild, green landscape and in the valleys, we could see the ragged spread of Lake Gordon, less than half-full, laced around with dead trees and a crust of rust-coloured earth.

At the start of the walk there was little sign of the original path, but as we climbed towards the Sentinel Range, we picked up patches of a deeply cut track weaving its way through almost impenetrable vegetation. Everywhere, little tea-tinted brooks drained their tannin-stained water into the valley below. The air was fresh and fragrant from the grasses crushed underfoot. As we walked we talked about Tasmania, about development and about wilderness. Those who had known Pedder spoke of their love for it, of its gentle beauty and of times spent with friends on its shores. "Pedder was a profoundly special place," explained Annabel. "It was the very heart of the south-west wilderness, the most perfect and pristine part of the world."

That afternoon, there were glimpses of that beauty in the grey green of the hills, the gentle buffeting of the wind, the strong peaty smell of the ground and the camaraderie we shared. But before us we saw not a miraculously treacle-coloured lake encircled by beaches of sugary pink and beige. Instead there was slate-grey water – and a feeling for what had been lost.

*Co-organiser of the 30th anniversary expedition to Lake Pedder, Adam Beeson looks over the Huon-Serpentine Impoundment to the site where the lake once lay. Adam is passionate about seeing it drained: "Putting together a time capsule was an expression of hope for the future; hope that some of the damage inflicted on the environment last century can be reversed."*



STEPHEN CURTAIN

## LAKE PEDDER

- **What was it?** Lake Pedder was a shallow, 10 sq. km glacial lake in south-west Tasmania. Its quartzite beach, richly coloured waters, endemic species and untouched natural beauty were unique.
- **What's been said about it:** "The lake and the surrounding area is of immense aesthetic value...It is a unique wilderness of incomparable significance. Its impending destruction to provide power...for about half a century must be regarded as the greatest ecological tragedy since European settlement of Tasmania." (UNESCO, 1972)
- **What happened?** Despite a parliamentary inquiry, feasible engineering alternatives and a public outcry that gave rise to Green politics in Australia, in 1972 the lake was flooded for the then Hydro Electric Commission's Gordon hydro-electric scheme.
- **What is it now?** The 242 sq. km Huon-Serpentine Impoundment, shown on most current maps as the present-day Lake Pedder, covers the bed of the old Lake Pedder in up to 16 m of water. The impoundment is used as storage for the Gordon Dam, where a power station now has the peak load capacity to generate 432 megawatts of Tasmania's energy from the two 144-megawatt generators commissioned in 1978, and a third installed 10 years later. The dam averages power output of around 320–350 megawatts.
- **Will it be restored?** Restoration is feasible and since 1995 there has been a sustained campaign for the lake to be drained.

"Pedder was a profoundly special place... It was the very heart of the south-west wilderness, the most perfect and pristine part of the world."





PHOTOS: GABI MOCATTA

*Roger Richards (above left, at left), Richard Dodson and Annabel Richards hoist the weighted time capsule, made of recycled jarrah flooring, into a Zodiac near Scotts Peak Dam. Annabel walked this part of the south-west before Pedder's flooding, and tears came to her eyes when she spoke of its lost beauty. Diver Michael Barron (above) prepares to descend to the submerged quartzite beach to deposit the time capsule. He reported the beach still intact, covered by only a few millimetres of fine silt.*

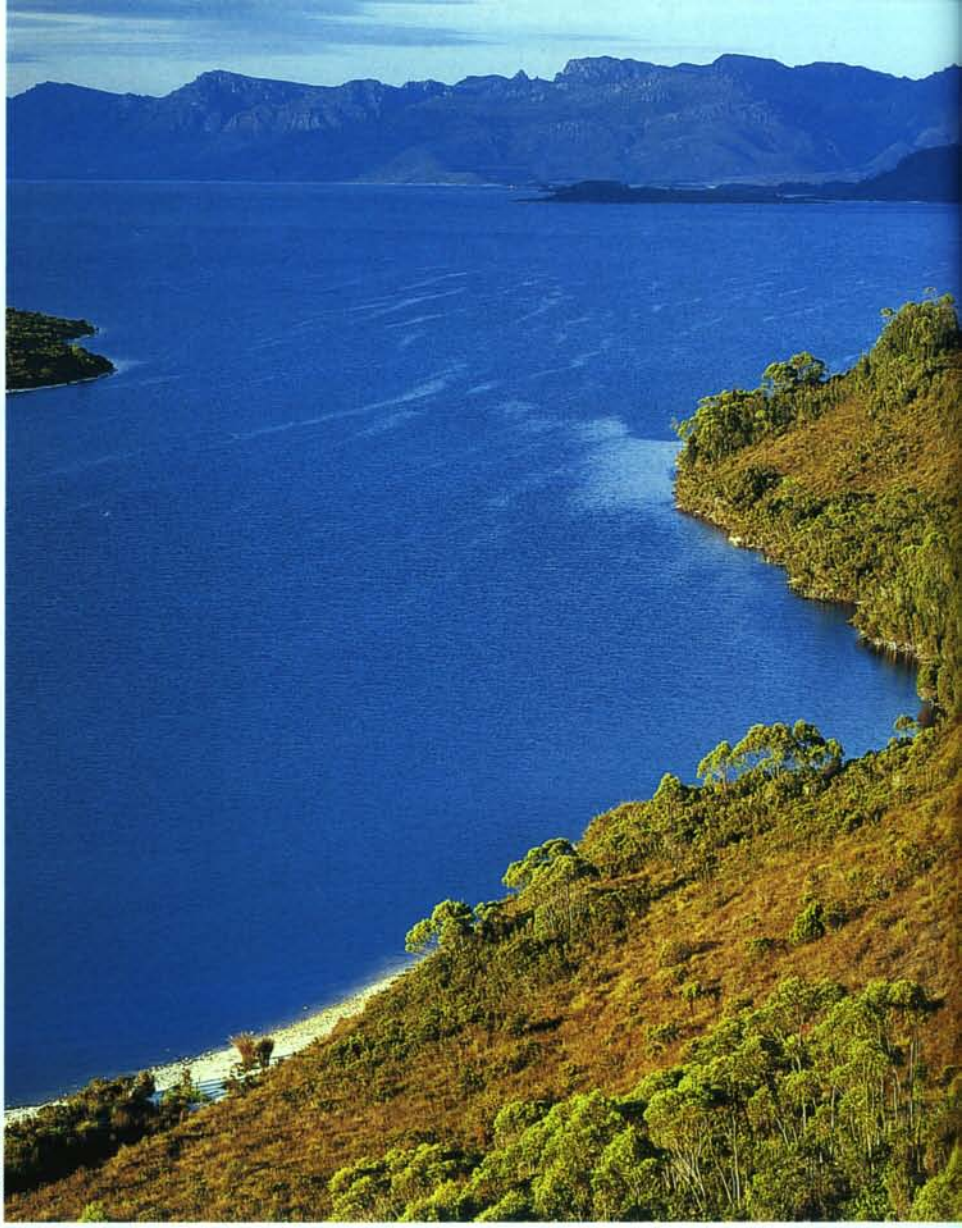
## CAPSULE OF HOPE

BY THE AFTERNOON of the following day, our mission was almost accomplished. We'd found the old path down to Pedder's northern shore, and had later boarded a boat near Scotts Peak Dam accompanied by the divers who would take the now-sealed time capsule to its resting place on Pedder's beach. Earlier, we'd spent some time pinpointing where the capsule would be placed and guided by GPS we would now navigate to the precise spot.

The lowering sky was grey as we set out across the waters of the artificial lake. Curtains of cloud billowed down over the Frankland Range. We headed towards a narrow channel between Mount Solitary – prophetically named, because it's become an island since the flooding – and the rest of the Frankland Range. As we emerged from the channel, I was unexpectedly swamped by emotion. Suddenly, the landscape became familiar. There was the great curved sweep of the Franklands, and a wide valley bordered by low hills – the features I knew from old Pedder photographs. But there was no real valley now and there was no real lake, just a flat expanse of grey water extending in both directions.

For the first time I felt a sense of overwhelming loss...yet mingled with excitement. We were right there, where Pedder had been, and below us it remained. We would give the lake our time capsule and trust that one day it would be retrieved on foot. We were making a gesture of hope and one of faith – faith in a better future.

*Flanked by the Frankland Range, the Huon-Serpentine Impoundment serves as storage for nearby Gordon Dam, which generates up to 432 megawatts of Tasmania's power. Despite this, the last decade has seen increasing calls for the impoundment to be drained and the original Lake Pedder restored.*



GEOFF MURRAY

## TIME OF CHANGE

- **Last ice age** – Lake Pedder formed by glacial action
- **1835** First known European sighting by surveyor John Wedge
- **1896** First track cut to Lake Pedder
- **1955** Lake Pedder National Park declared
- **Early 1960s** Hydro-electric survey work begins. First road is cut into the south-west
- **1967** Hydro Electric Commission (HEC) Report on the Gordon River Power Development made public. Protest movement collects 10,000 signatures in a petition against the damming
- **1968** Southwest National Park (incorporating Lake Pedder) declared
- **1968–72** Work on Gordon, Serpentine and Scotts Peak dams completed
- **March 1972** Tasmanian parliament collapses due to Pedder protests. United Tasmania Group (UTG), a political grouping opposing Lake Pedder's flooding, puts forward candidates for State election
- **April 1972** Street protests in Melbourne and Hobart
- **April 1972** HEC publishes advertisements in three Tasmanian newspapers on election eve, threatening greatly increased electricity costs if Gordon power scheme is hindered
- **April 1972** UTG polls 7 per cent of the vote, does not win a seat
- **Winter 1972** Floodwaters slowly rise from the Serpentine and Scotts Peak dams. Walkers make last visits to the lake. Pedder goes under
- **September 1973** Federal Government inquiry into the flooding of Lake Pedder
- **1995** House of Representatives Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage inquiry into the proposal to restore Lake Pedder finds draining and restoring the lake is possible but cost, as forecast by the Tasmanian Government, too high
- **1995** Pedder 2000 campaign established. Aims to have the lake drained by the new millennium
- **2002** 30th anniversary of the flooding of Lake Pedder. A UN environmental program-sponsored conference in Scotland calls for the lake to be drained

# PEDDER'S FUTURE

SINCE LAKE PEDDER'S flooding in 1972 there has been a sustained call for its restoration. During a hearing at the 1973 Federal Government inquiry into the flooding, one committee member commented: "If not we ourselves, the day will come when our children will undo what we have so foolishly done."

More recently, a group campaigning for the restoration of Lake Pedder, called Pedder 2000, increased the intensity of debate in the hope of having the impoundment drained in time for the end of the previous millennium.

"It would've been a powerful symbol for the rehabilitation of the earth, something that will be essential in this new century," says Helen Gee, Lake Pedder Restoration Committee National Convenor.

But could Lake Pedder be successfully drained?

By 1995, the idea of Pedder's restoration had generated enough discussion and political credibility to prompt the Australian Parliament's House of Representatives Standing Committee On Environment and Heritage to launch an inquiry into the proposal. Research presented found that all of Pedder's unique land formations still exist below the waters of the present dam. The quartzite beach, the "megaripples" in the sandy shallows, the surrounding dunes and the lake's inlets and outlets are still intact. Only a 3-millimetre silt layer covers these features. In the previously vegetated areas, there was found to be enough topsoil remaining to support natural revegetation if the



waters receded. If the impoundment was drained, the dam walls could be left in place or only partially dismantled, without affecting the regeneration of Lake Pedder.

Draining, however, would reduce power production from the Gordon Dam. Although the dam's power-generating capacity is now regularly affected by drought anyway (and Tasmania now has other sources of energy), the cost of draining – both political and financial – was found by the committee to be too high.

Despite this, the scientific feasibility of restoration has spurred on the campaign to drain the lake. "Dams in the USA and Canada have been successfully drained for environmental reasons," Helen says. "Restoring Lake Pedder is completely possible. It will just take political will."

And although the restoration may at times seem a distant prospect, the international campaign is as strong as ever. A 2002 environmental conference in Scotland, under the auspices of the United Nations Environment Program, concluded with eight calls to action on restoration projects worldwide. One of them was the resuscitation of the heart of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area: the restoration of Lake Pedder.

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