

[Megan Holbeck]



WILD THINGS

Mind the Gap

Reflecting on a year that didn't go to plan.

The gap between Christmas and New Year is a natural space for reflection, with time for long walks and adventures and days at the beach to justify the ongoing devouring of leftovers. Work and admin and routines get replaced by catch-ups with family and friends and leisure, time to think about which plans did and didn't happen; about the good and bad bits of the last 12 months. In most years, these reflections, realisations, and regrets are significant only to me, but 2020's are part of a gigantic, global puzzle showing a new and shifting reality.

Even the normal, family-sized things in my life reflect global issues and events, and are tinged with a yearning for simplicity, certainty, and things lost. With my youngest child finishing preschool, I'll lose a buddy for midweek adventures, but we had plenty of those in the long months of home schooling. Memories from the summer holidays are less shiny than usual. Last year's were obscured by smoke and fire; this one was locked down by a pandemic.

The cancelling of another summer's plans reminds me of a conversation I had with fire scientist David Bowman in 2020 while writing a piece on the bushfires. He suggested that Australia's six-week school holidays would eventually be moved from summer to a cooler time—maybe Easter—for safety and comfort as the climate changes. This would prevent half the population being on the move during peak fire season; families could spend the long break enjoying the outdoors rather than bunkering inside away from the heat; people would be at work when most needed. The idea may make sense, but it triggers

a deep nostalgia for a simpler time, when the long, hot stretch of summer spelt fun rather than dangers to be managed.

Researching an upcoming piece about *Wild's* history led to more nostalgia. (For a start, it's been 13 years since I left the magazine—when did I get so old?) It also gave me a chance to re-appraise *Wild* and the Australian outdoor scene from a more distant perspective, looking at the ways both have changed in the last 40 years. For example, looking at the iconic ad for The Wilderness Society's

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campaign to save the Franklin River is bittersweet. Sure, the Franklin is still there, but even environmental battles used to be so simple: Don't dam a river; stop logging. Now everything is interconnected, global and too late. It's no longer enough for the world to go carbon neutral—itself a massive ask—we need to suck carbon from the atmosphere, rewild the world, increase biodiversity and rethink so much else. Looked at with optimism and energy, it is a wonderful, heartening challenge, but it's a challenge that will continue well beyond the lifetime of my kids.

While I'm feeling wistful, there's a long list of things I planned for 2020 that didn't happen: trail running trips

to Tasmania, sailing courses, overnight walks, skiing and overseas adventures. Smaller things too: concerts and catch-ups, writing gigs and boozy trips. Everyone's got one: the planned, alternative version of 2020, which is mostly not at all how it turned out. Which is fine, really—in the big picture, I've no doubt it's good for humanity to realise that we're not in control, and never have been—but it's still worth a small moment of mourning.

Then there are all the things that shouldn't have happened that did. Fires, floods, pandemics, mass deaths, riots. There was a biblical load last year.

These reflections are not mine, but shared across the world, affecting us all in one way or the other, to varying degrees. Which is kind of the point—this is the first time I can remember when it wasn't *my* actions and decisions that determined the shape of my year; the first time I realised how much life is dictated by things outside my control. This realisation is spreading: We're not in charge; the world is not ours to change, and mould, and make fit our wants and timelines and demands for ease and comfort. We've been forced to appreciate our own little pockets of the world, to slow down and live our lives moment by moment. To begin reconnecting with people and places and purpose.

Maybe the year just gone will broker a new relationship with the world: the time when we change our collective narrative. Develop the story where we learn to live in the world as part of it—smaller, lighter, with more care and foresight—rather than overrun it. Because the one thing 2020 should have taught us is that we are all in this together, whether we like it or not.