TOUCH OF THE WILD: Mt Wellington. Picture: SAM ROSEWARNE

Talking Point: Honouring nature’s playground

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WHERE I come from we do not have mountains or wilderness.

It is not surprising then that someone like myself born in London and brought up on its suburban fringes should have a fascination with the high country. To say nothing of the south-west wilderness.

Along with exotic animals, mountains always seemed to feature in the picture books I was bought as a child. They reared off the page, always with their jagged tops painted white to indicate snow.

But us Cockney kids did not have mountains to call our own. At the time Sir Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay were conquering Everest in 1953 we had to make do with the stairs, and ropes slung to banisters.

Forget mountains, I grew up in place that did not even have a horizon.

It was a flat landscape that did not extend as far as the eye could see. The panorama, if it can be described as such, was obscured by red brick and glass and framed by grey cloud.

My home was a vast housing estate on the fringe of London in Surrey, built to house the people of south-east London who had lost their homes during the blitz of World War II.

It was supposed to be Utopia, Paradise for Londoners escaping the smog and over-crowding of their city. We were in the country, after all, “at one with nature” as the term went in those days but even at a very young age I knew something was missing.

We were in a false environment divorced from nature. And even out in the country there was still no mountain to relate to. The highest point in Surrey was Leaf Hill on the North Downs, standing at 294m. In old money it was just below 1000 feet until an eccentric gentleman in Victorian times built a tower to put it into the “1000 club”.

In fact, kunanyi/Mt Wellington eclipses the highest point of England, Scafell Pike in the Lake District, which is 293m lower than our mountain, and the highest in the entire United Kingdom, Ben Nevis in Scotland, tops it by only 74m.

The knowledge of these statistics might reveal I have a bit of an obsession about Hobart’s very own mountain. I can get very boring talking about it. It represents something denied me in my youth, a playground for the budding nature lover, a destination for adventure and discovery.

I can understand people growing up in Hobart taking their mountain for granted, not viewing it in actually the same emotional way. Perhaps it takes an outsider to see the mountain and all it represents in a different perspective.

I didn’t know it at the time but a wilderness of a kind had made way for the housing estate where I grew up, a wilderness that has become the most endangered environment in Britain.

It’s a landscape formed by glaciers in the ice age, dumping sands on areas of southern England. The soil was so poor that over thousands of years it was never cultivated and it was left in place, wilderness, as common ground. It is now providing land for housing developments.

What remains of it has unique fauna and flora, the main feature being silver birch, pine and heather in place of the rich deciduous forests of oak, beech and elm found in other areas that did not fall under the plough.

Although my homeland was on the other side of the world, when I arrived in Tasmania I found a striking parallel with what had occurred, and was still occurring there, to what was happening to wild places in Tasmania. This is commercial interests eyeing wilderness as something not to be left as it is, as wilderness, largely untouched by mankind, but as a means to make money. The site of the housing estate in Surrey could just as well be land in Tasmania not yet put to the process of generating a profit.

Sometimes it takes an outsider, like myself, to see the bigger picture.

I’m not saying Tasmanians don’t care about their environment, their mountain, but it is so familiar, part of the scenery, it’s easy be become blasé about it.

But people who want to view the mountain in its largely pristine state are now waking up and fighting to make their case known, fearing that, if they don’t speak out, a carpet bagger will come and take the Mountain for themselves.

The clock is already ticking in the countdown to development on the mountain. The cable car proposal has just had legislation to ease its progress passed by parliament.

I agree there’s a strong argument for making our Mountain more accessible, especially in winter when snowfall sometimes closes the Pinnacle Road to the summit, even if in my view this argument overlooks the fact that the inclement weather which so often wreaths the mountain in low cloud would make the project unviable, to say nothing of disruption caused by high winds.

All the same, the cable car proponents and their supporters see the mountain as a tourist “asset” to be realised. I see it differently and align myself to those who want it left in its natural state, in the raw.

The mountain brings the magic and mystery of the south-west wilderness, the notion of the primordial and pristine, right to the doorstep of a major centre of population. A cable car would form a bridge in more than a metaphorical sense between concrete and glass and the wild world. Instead of wilderness coming to the city, the city would come to the Mountain.

Don Knowler writes “On the Wing” bird watching column in the *Mercury*’s TasWeekend magazine and has just written the book, *The Shy Mountain*.