

CHAPTER 15

TOWRA POINT AND OTHER PROJECTS – THE 1990s

*\$1.5 million beach rescue begins at Towra Point, Sydney.
June 2004*

RAMSAR AND TOWRA POINT

The Society's continuing interest and concern for wetlands led to its support for the Ramsar Convention. It is now 38 years since representatives of 18 nations, including Australia, met at Ramsar, the small Iranian town on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. They had come to sign a convention that aimed to halt the world-wide loss of wetlands and help conserve what was left.

Since that historic meeting the number of signatories to the Ramsar Convention has grown to over 100, a number of new members joining at the sixth triennial conference of member countries held in Brisbane in March 1996.

There are now more than 750 wetlands designated as having international importance under the Ramsar Convention, covering 500,000 square kilometres. Australia has 42 of these, covering 46,000 square kilometres and including Kakadu National Park, the Ord River flood plain, Coongie Lakes, Westernport, Cape Barren Island lagoons, the Macquarie Marshes and Moreton Bay. There are at least another 500 sites around Australia which are of national importance.

These Australian wetlands are not just swamps. They include:

- rivers and lakes
- coastal and intertidal reefs
- mountain rock pools
- shallow salt pans - natural in arid areas and artificial along the coast
- tropical estuaries and flood plains
- mangroves and saltmarsh
- intertidal and subtidal seagrass beds.

Although the original emphasis of the Ramsar Convention was on wetlands as waterfowl habitat, the importance of total wetland ecology - the fish, invertebrates, and flora - has now been recognised. Wetlands provide important ecological services such as water supply, flood control and food resources. They are cradles of biodiversity, providing the water and primary productivity upon which countless species of plants and animals depend for their survival.

The 1993 Ramsar Conference in Kushiro, Japan, passed a resolution that contained guidance for the implementation of the 'wise use' concept that has become central to all aspects of the Convention. Social and economic factors have been recognised as the main reasons for wetland loss and therefore need to be recognised in wise use programs.

Brisbane hosted the Sixth International Conference on Wetlands of International Significance, especially for waterfowl. The Conference was hosted by the Australian Government through its associated agencies and attended by some 1,200 delegates from over ten countries. The Brisbane Conference in March 1996 marked the 25th anniversary of the formation of the Ramsar Convention to protect wetlands and the waterfowl which inhabit these wetlands. The Society's Executive Officer, Patrick Medway, represented the Society at the Brisbane Conference and on behalf of the Society presented a paper on Towra Point Nature Reserve to the Ramsar officer for Oceania Region, Janet Cowan.

In 1996 the Society made a decision to adopt the Ramsar site of Towra Point as a project for active involvement. This area was bought by the Whitlam Government in 1975 as a nature reserve and transferred to the NSW State Government in 1982. From that day until 1996 nothing in the way of management took place except for paper planning. The landscape became more degraded and the Point less important as a feeding and resting place for waders.

Towra Point is a special southeast corner of Australia's historic Botany Bay - rich in rainforest, mangroves, saltmarshes and seagrasses. It occupies an area of 660 hectares; furthermore, it has significance because of its contribution to a number of migratory bird international agreements: CAMBA, the China-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement; JAMBA, the Japan-Australia Migratory Bird Agreement.

Towra Point and its wetlands provided an appropriate focus for the Society's concern about wildlife and its habitat. A longtime interest in wetlands had begun with a concern for the Macquarie Marshes, but this site was too far removed from the central body of the Society for any direct, on-the-spot involvement in a fight for its survival. Likewise, Kooragang Island, another Ramsar site, near Newcastle, was not a practical choice as a project.

At the Ramsar conference in Brisbane in March 1996, Patrick Medway presented a paper on the role of the Wildlife Preservation Society in protecting wildlife and the need of Towra Point to be protected. The paper outlined the history of the area, its neglect by the NSW State Government and a fourteen-point action plan to better preserve the site for wildlife.

As a result of the Society's action in raising awareness about the plight of Towra Point, a NPWS ranger was appointed. Early in 1997 the Society assisted in the launch of Friends of Towra Point before a large crowd of supporters. The NSW Minister, Hon. Pam Allen, was keen to help and the National Parks and Wildlife Service became involved.

In 1996 volunteers from the Society began the huge task of cleaning the land section. In early 1997 five volunteers from the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers produced helpers from Denmark, Germany and England, who cleaned up the surrounds of the pool where, in 1770, Captain Cook's crew took fresh water for their ship. On Thursday 15 May 1997 the whole of De La Salle College, Caringbah, all 350 students aged between twelve and sixteen, gathered at midday to collect the rubbish that had disfigured the entrance to Towra Point. Volunteers continued to clear rubbish and remove weeds, with plans to restore Towra Point to its old glory in time

for the grand opening at the *Earth 2000 Conference* to be held on World Environment Day, 5 June 2000.

BERNIE CLARKE – THE OLD MAN OF BOTANY BAY

In 1996, with concern for Towra Point on the Society's agenda, Patrick Medway made contact with Bernie Clarke, well-known as a campaigner for the preservation and conservation of all things to do with Botany Bay. Bernie invited Patrick to accompany him on a boat trip on Botany Bay to visit and see at first hand the state of this very important area of historic, scientific and environmental significance.

Patrick was horrified by what he saw. The neglect of the area, the beach erosion, the pollution and rubbish washed up on to the beach and mangrove area and the disturbance by boat owners was terrible. The Society clearly had a long way to go to stop the pollution and to redress the neglect of the area by the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

Bernie explained to Patrick that the Towra Point Lagoon had become saline, as good as dead, over the past fifteen years and that ancient banksia forests along Towra Point Beach were dying and slipping into Botany Bay as erosion was taking place. Over his lifetime Bernie had witnessed the drastic changes to fish and birdlife resulting from the loss of more than half the Bay's natural beaches and seagrass beds by the constant dredging for the 800 large ships which berth at Port Botany each year. 'Captain Cook called this place Stingray Bay. You could fish for a week now and not catch a single stingray,' Bernie said.

Bernie became a member of the Society's Scientific Advisory Panel in 1996, but his fight to preserve and protect the historic Botany Bay area started in the 1950s. His experience and expertise proved to be extremely valuable for the Towra Point project in which the Society became involved. Bernie was awarded the Medal of the Order of Australia (OAM) in 1987 for his outstanding conservation and environmental education work for Botany Bay.

It was Bernie Clarke who contacted the Federal Minister, Senator Robert Hill, asking him to visit the Reserve. On 30 July 1996, Senator Robert Hill visited the Bay and Reserve and, after an impassioned plea by Bernie and Patrick, promised to assist with a Federal Government Grant of \$100,000 to review the management of the Reserve and enable steps to be taken to mitigate the erosion on Towra Beach. Senator Hill sent the promised Federal funds to the State Government in 1997 and the money was handed over to the NPWS for action.

Before a crowd of 135 conservation supporters, the Friends of Towra Point Nature Reserve was officially launched on Saturday 8 February 1997. This new conservation group grew out of a series of successful meetings between the Society, the Sutherland Shire Environment Centre and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, its aim being to provide future support for restoration of the Towra Point Nature Reserve. In 1999 the Friends group won the coveted National Parks Foundation Award for Excellence in Conservation – against strong competition from many other conservation associations and projects across New South Wales.

\$1.5 MILLION FOR TOWRA

Funding for the project continued to be a concern for the Society, but in September 2000 Hon. Bob Debus, Minister for the Environment, announced that \$1.5 million had been set aside to pay for the rehabilitation of the Towra Beach. The new Plan of Management was completed and officially launched by the Minister in December 2000. In the Spring 2002 issue of *Australian Wildlife* President Medway announced:

‘I am pleased to advise that the advertisement calling for consultants to quote on the preparation of the EIS (Environmental Impact Statement) for the Towra Beach Nourishment project has been run. The closing date for applications is 25 September 2002. NSW Waterways Authority is managing the project on behalf of NPWS and we are optimistic that work will commence in the New Year to restore and preserve the beach habitat for the migratory wading birds in Botany Bay.’

The EIS went on public exhibition in August 2003, and by winter 2004 the project to rescue this internationally significant wetland was underway. The aim of the project was to restore the beach alignment by pumping sand from around the Towra Spit Island area back to the front of the Towra Beach. Thus a protective dune would be built in front of the freshwater Towra Lagoon. During the project 60,000 cubic metres of sand would be moved up to 2.5 kilometres from Towra Spit back to Towra Beach. It should be said that this operation was not approved by everyone interested in restoration.

TOWRA WORK COMPLETED

In *Australian Wildlife* Summer 1/2005, President Medway announced:

‘I am pleased to report that the major restoration work on Towra Point Nature Reserve beach area has now been completed by the contractor. The serious environmental degradation of this important Ramsar site was highlighted and work initiated by our Society back in 1996 and pursued with vigour to a logical conclusion. The total cost so far is in the vicinity of \$1.5 million and is one of the first Ramsar sites ever to be restored in Australia for migratory wading bird habitat.’

In 2009 opinions differed as to the situation at Towra Point and estimates on the population of the waders there. However, the NSW Wader Study Group has figures going back to 1994, and from 2001 has carried out monthly counts of the species in Botany Bay, including Towra Point. Their figures show that numbers have been fairly stable, especially in the southern areas of the Bay, with some species, such as the bar-tailed godwit, even increasing. Wader numbers in the north have been declining due to disturbance such as construction work and clearing of mangroves. The Friends of Towra Point were not operating as a group at the opening of 2009, yet there is still work for them to do and there are plans to have the group functional once more.

By 2008, one hundred and fifty-five member countries had designated 1,675 wetlands for special protection as ‘Ramsar sites’, including twenty-two in Iran and sixty-five in

Australia. A Ramsar listed wetland receives global recognition for its value as an important habitat, especially for conserving the pathways of migratory birds.

The role of the Society in this particular conservation project was in the true spirit of the founders of the Society in 1909.

WINGECARRIBEE SWAMP

The welfare of the Wingecarribee Swamp, near the Shoalhaven River in New South Wales, is an excellent example of how the vision has to be broadened in order to protect wildlife; in this case it was necessary to call a stop to the peat mining in the area. Back in the 1960s a mining group, Emerald Peat, was granted a permit to mine for peat in the swamp and operations commenced in the 1970s. A few years later the permit expired, but extraction of peat continued. Water quality in the area was being affected by the mining operations, so a local group became involved in the matter, forcing the Department of Mines to review the licence. But the Company rose up in defence.

The Society and other conservation groups lobbied to oppose the renewal of the permit. In February 1997 a submission from the Society, written by the Executive Officer, Patrick Medway, was handed in, mainly addressing concerns about wildlife in the area. However, it also stressed that there were alternative sources of peat, all sustainable. The Court's 'Enquiry by the Chief Mining Warden into renewal of leases for peat extraction at Wingecarribee Swamp under Section 334 of the Mining Act 1992' still had not reached a decision by the close of 1997 and the mining continued. In July 1998 the Court of Enquiry convened and issued a twelve month's injunction to stop the mining. On 4 August 1998, during a major storm, water in the Wingecarribee-Robertson valley washed millions of tons of peat, as well as the mining barge, out into the reservoir. By late 1999 the Warden had still not released his mining report to the public and the Society was still asking that this important ecological area be gazetted as a nature reserve. Mining did not resume in the swamp.

At the Australian Network for Plant Conservation Conference in April 2008, Selga Harrington described the changes to the Wingecarribee Swamp resulting from its collapse in 1998. A large channel now runs the length of the swamp and many areas of peat have dried out. A major invasion of willow (*Salix cinerea*) has occurred, resulting in about one million trees. Removal of *Salix* is now being implemented, the methods depending on the proximity of threatened species – these species include three plants and the giant dragonfly (*Petalura gigantea*).

SHOALWATER BAY (QUEENSLAND)

It was reported in *Australian Wildlife*, Spring 1994, that the beautiful piece of wilderness known as Shoalwater Bay was to be saved from sand mining. Many years earlier the Society had this region placed on the Register of the National Estate, but there is a misconception that any region listed on this prestigious honour roll becomes in effect a quasi national park. Listing merely states that the present state is valuable

for a number of reasons and any major change by the Australian Government should be treated carefully.

In this case the Shoalwater Bay area was used by the Defence Department and their years of occupation had kept the bushland in pristine condition. In the late 1960s the Army was concerned about the condition of many of the training areas. Some of these were huge, Shoalwater Bay being 274,000 hectares, consisting of beach rainforest, mangroves, freshwater swamps, woodlands, salt marshes, heaths and shrublands.

A new Army Unit had been formed and the Colonel, having his doubts about relying on the CSIRO for data, decided to talk to the Society. Advice was given, assurance also given regarding the CSIRO and the land finally protected. At the time the land was still in Defence hands, but sand mining was out.

CRITICISM OF RESOURCE LEGISLATION

In July 1991, Vincent Serventy, as President of the Wild Life Preservation Society, wrote to the Prime Minister, Hon. Bob Hawke, to say:

‘The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia is concerned at the implications of the proposed Resource Security Legislation and urges your government to reconsider its introduction.

‘It would effectively guarantee that large areas of remaining old growth forest would be destroyed to the benefit, not of Australia or Australians, but of foreign companies. The clearfelling of such forests cannot be supported on environmental, economic or employment grounds. Plantation forestry is the only way to produce a sustainable industry ... Any gains will be short term for foreign investors with long term losses for Australians ... Our Society urges you to abandon the proposed legislation and pursue alternative strategies to provide for our timber needs.’

There was no record in *Australian Wild Life* of a reply from the Prime Minister.

SPIKE MILLIGAN

It was in the 1990s that Spike Milligan, a great friend to Vincent Serventy, was made an honorary Life Member of the Society following his outstanding contribution to wildlife preservation and conservation. Vincent described him as a comic genius and conservationist, angered at the way humans are treating the Earth. Spike gave two free concerts for the Society, one at the Skeleton Gallery at the Australian Museum, the second at West Gosford. His last letter to Vincent on 24 January 2001 included this poem:

Last night in the twilight gloom
A butterfly few in my room
Ah what beauty Oh what grace
Who needs visitors from out of space?

Spike Milligan died on 27 February 2002.

THE NEW MILLENNIUM

The new decade and a new millennium were to bring changes for the Society, the most significant being the retirement of long-time President Vincent Serventy in 2002. There was a definite move to upgrade the Society's public image, one way being to sponsor and attend a number of important conservation conferences. Membership figures started to climb from 2001 and many more people were hearing about the Society's important conservation and preservation work for Australia's unique Australian wildlife.