

CHAPTER 1 THE SOCIETY IS BORN – MAY 1909

'The Wild Life Preservation Society has been formed for the purpose of preserving intact the typical fauna of Australia. Many birds and animals of great scientific interest and national value are in danger of extinction and the present generation of Australians must not incur the reproach of allowing even a single species to perish.'

From a leaflet issued in 1909

From late in the nineteenth century, a number of concerned individuals, mainly members of the NSW Naturalists' Society, had been talking of the urgent necessity for the formation of a special organisation which could crystallise in its constitution and activities the growing interest and concern regarding the future of native wildlife. David George Stead, a member of the Naturalists' Society, had discussed the formation of such a body before the Society in 1901. He had also published items concerning this matter in the columns of the daily papers - notably the *Sydney Morning Herald* in 1900 and February 1902. There had been no response at that time.

David Stead, in his Letter to the Editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* in April 1900, had said:

'It should be thoroughly understood that both the fauna and the flora of Australia possess a peculiar interest to all mankind, because they are really relics of a very remote bygone geological period, when the same kinds of animals (e.g. marsupials) and plants (cycads, grass trees, etc.) flourished in other parts of the world. This being the case, then, it is a duty we owe to mankind generally, and to posterity, that we should conserve as much as possible of the land and its interesting tenants.'

This was a rare and radical point of view at a time in Australia when the pastoralist and agriculturist were established on the land and still expanding.

The arrival of the European invaders to Australia spelled disaster for much of the continent's natural wildlife. European settlement in *Terra Australis* changed the native fauna by altering the vegetation, either directly by clearing, or indirectly through grazing by introduced animals, including the rabbit. Some animals, such as the kangaroos, benefited from the extension of grasslands and watering points, but many of the smaller mammals were exterminated by habitat disturbance, making them more vulnerable to predators.

Settlers also saw native fauna as competitors with their own livestock. They responded by poisoning, trapping and shooting. In addition, the uncontrolled use of fire destroyed the habitats of much native fauna.

The attitudes of the settlers were probably understandable. They considered dingoes to be a threat to their sheep and saw kangaroos reducing the stock - carrying possibilities of their runs. The slaughter that resulted was fairly indiscriminate: poison baits killed small native animals and it is probable that many Aborigines were also killed this way. Drives against kangaroos and emus often resembled sport rather than a serious, well-

thought-out solution to land management problems. More importantly, the early settlers were not aware of the limitations of the Australian environment.

The idea of forming a preservation society was under constant discussion at Naturalists' Society meetings for the next eight or nine years following Stead's original suggestion. The first practical move was made by a representative of Sweden, Stead's friend Count Birger Mörner, a well-known naturalist and poet. At that time, he was a member of the Consulate for Sweden in Australia. He had particularly sought that Consular position so he might the more readily follow up his studies of the Australian fauna.

Following the canvassing of the idea of the new preservation body among a number of naturalists, nature lovers and some interested public figures, a preliminary discussion meeting was held at the offices of the Royal Swedish Consulate on 11 May 1909. As an outcome of this, it was decided to call a public meeting for the formation of the Society. Held in the Royal Society's Hall, 5 Elizabeth Street, Sydney, on the night of 19 May 1909, it is worthy of mention as showing initial enthusiasm, that despite the fact that the weather was extremely unfavourable, about fifty people attended. Fifty members were enrolled that evening and, within a week, this number had been raised to over one hundred. The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia was launched, with the Honorable F. E. Winchcombe MLC presiding and a committee appointed to draw up a draft constitution for submission to members.

The provisional committee held two meetings and drew up a draft constitution, which was submitted to the general body of members at a well attended meeting in the Board Room of Vickery's Chambers, 82 Pitt Street, Sydney. At this meeting the following were appointed to be the General Council of the organisation:

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| President: | Hon. F. E. Winchcombe, MLC. |
| Vice-
Presidents: | H. C. L. Anderson, W. W. Froggatt, Dr. George Hurst,
and David G. Stead. |
| Council: | Mrs. L. Harrison, Mrs. S. Kearney, Mrs. Garvin, Mrs.
Ramsay, Miss Maclellan, Miss E. Mallarky, Dr. E. A.
D'Ombraïn, A. G. Hamilton, J. R. Garland, J. Le Gay
Brereton, Sir J. H. Carruthers, H. D. Baker, Charles
Hedley, Frank Farnell, A. S. Le Souef, W. H. Clarke, C.
Thackeray, H. E. Finckh, P. Gilbert, and A. W. Atkinson. |
| Hon. Treasurer: | S. Kearney. |
| Hon. Secretary: | L. Hamilton. |

Count Mörner would have been elected to this first Council, but, as he himself put it, he was only a 'bird of passage' and would soon be 'winging his way' once more to northern climes.

In July 1909, *The Australian Naturalist*, journal and magazine of the Naturalists' Society of New South Wales, carried this announcement:

'Wild Life Preservation Society

A society which should commend itself to all naturalists has been established, and promises to be highly successful. The name of this organisation is 'The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia.' Its objects are the preservation of all forms of wildlife in Australia, by the development of public interest in its beauties, economic uses, and scientific value, by discouraging the wanton or promiscuous destruction of any form of mammal or bird, by accepting affiliation from any society or corporation in Australasia for the furtherance of the fore-going objects, and by any other means incidental or conducive to those objects'.

David George Stead, from 1909 until his death in 1957, variously held positions of Vice-President, President, Secretary, and Editor of *Australian Wild Life*. Roy Bennett, a Past President of the Society, said in 1959:

'The most outstanding event in the history of the Society has been the leadership of David G. Stead. Particularly in its formative years and then throughout its whole life until his illness and death but two years ago, his was largely the power and his the initiative that inspired its work'.¹

So the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia was established in 1909 as the first wildlife conservation body in Australia. It was not the first in the world, however that was probably the Sierra Club of the United States of America, its headquarters being in San Francisco. The Sierra Club was formed in 1892 by a group of Californians who wished to sponsor wilderness outings in the mountain regions of the Pacific coast. The naturalist John Muir was its first president (1892-1914) and very soon involved the club in political action to further nature conservation. By the late twentieth century the Sierra Club had branches in all states of the USA, and was working to educate the public on environmental issues, and lobbying local, state, and federal bodies for environmental legislation.

The first Council meeting of the Wild Life Preservation Society was held on 23 July 1909. It is of interest to note two of the matters which occupied attention at this first meeting. One was the necessity for protecting the rapidly disappearing koala and the other was a complaint as to the use of potassium cyanide for killing marsupials. In 1934 David Stead reported that 'both of these things have occupied our attention more or less ever since, with a host of other questions of importance to the preservation of our unique fauna and flora'.

Though a large part of the first year was taken up in the preliminary work of organisation, a satisfactory amount of good work was accomplished. Through the efforts of the Society absolute protection was given to the grey kangaroo and the red kangaroo for a period of three years, the koala for five years, the satin bower bird and the cat bird for six years and the Bourke grass parakeet, in the Police District of Broken Hill, for three years. An extension of protection for the platypus was also obtained.

An important action at this time was the issuing of a Public Notice under the name of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, drawing the attention of the general

¹ *Australian Wild Life*, Vol. 3, No. 4, June 1959, p. 51.

public to the protection accorded to kangaroos, koalas and platypus throughout the state of New South Wales. With the co-operation of the Minister for Justice this notice was placed prominently upon the notice boards of all Court Houses throughout the State. At the end of the Society's first year, these notices were being displayed on the boards of 316 Court Houses, 'making widely known the fact that the animals were protected, while drawing attention to the existence and work of the Society itself'.² This first notice was the forerunner of a number of such which were issued by the Society from time to time through the years. This claim that the posting of notices in Court Houses was an effective means of publicity has its criticism: how many responsible persons had occasion to visit Court Houses?

During the first year of operation a large collection of lantern slides made from the photographs of leading ornithologists and other naturalists was acquired, and these were used to good purpose in that year and in succeeding years as an important part of the educational propaganda of the Society. The first illustrated folder showing *The Tragedy of the Osprey Plume* was also issued and widely circulated throughout Australia. At the end of the century the Society repeated this excellent idea but was able to provide a set of coloured lantern slide transparencies which covered all phases of the Society's work.

PRESERVATION AND CONSERVATION

During the past 2,000 years the world has lost, through extinction, well over 100 species or subspecies of mammals. Approximately two-thirds of these losses have occurred since the mid-19th century, most since the beginning of the twentieth. In addition to those mammals already extinct, many others are vanishing or threatened.

The primary factor has been modern human society, operating directly through excessive commercial hunting or, more disastrously, indirectly through invading or destroying natural habitats. The placing of firearms in the hands of peoples who previously were without them, or introducing to the native fauna such exotic non-native animals as the rabbit and the fox, put extra pressure on wildlife in the case of Australia, for example.

Although early people had a far more immediate stake in wildlife than modern people do, it is virtually certain that early humans had little concept of conserving game. The disappearance of the moa and the mammoth taught no lessons. The disappearance of the passenger pigeon did and, in Australia, the threat to the koala in the early twentieth century aroused a concern which ultimately led to action. Convinced of the enormous destructive power of humans, pioneer conservationists of the early twentieth century, like David Stead, emphasised the ethical responsibility of their own generation to conserve natural resources for posterity. Stead often expressed this ethical concern in words such as the following: '... this organisation (W.L.P.S.A.) has been a very potent agency for good in the community and has helped in no small measure to preserve for the future generations of Australians that extraordinarily valuable and unique legacy handed down to them in the form of the wildlife of our bushlands'.³

² *Australian Wild Life*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 1949, p. 36.

³ *Australian Wild Life*, Vol. 1, No. 1, November 1934, p. 2.

Stead was concerned about preserving our wildlife. 'Wildlife' can be defined biologically as all living things, apart from humans and their domesticated plants and animals, in the great web of life. This definition includes, along with familiar animals like koalas, kangaroos, kookaburras and common plants like eucalypts, the humble organisms such as insects and earthworms, and invisible life such as soil bacteria. However, as Len Webb points out,⁴ the usual definition of wildlife is self-centred in a humanist sense (anthropocentric). Most people do not think of stationary plants as part of wildlife or unconsciously restrict its meaning to conspicuous, useful, attractive or harmful forms that move, i.e. mammals (including marsupials), birds, reptiles, some domestic animals that have run wild, but usually not fish. Even David Stead had this restricted view of wildlife in the early days. This definition, which exists in the popular mind, provides a key to the problems of wildlife conservation. Yet we should realise its limitations, because nature is indivisible and 'wildlife' is dependent upon and interrelated with ecological cycles involving other organisms. The plea today for maintenance of biodiversity should not go unheeded.

Modern ecologists perceive that nature is a series of complex biotic communities of which the human species is an interdependent part; a spokesman for conservationists, Aldo Leopold, has argued that the Golden Rule applies to the land and to its animals as well as to people. Thus we find ourselves responsible for the fate of many products of nature, guided by a conservation tradition and code of conduct less than a century old.

The Oxford English Dictionary indicates 'preservation' as a synonym for 'conservation.' However, some attempts have been made to give 'preservation' a special meaning by defining it as referring to those types of conservation measures where there is no removal of material from an area, as in the case of either the establishment of a national park or the complete protection of a species. This is an unnecessary and potentially confusing distinction, as conservationist Geoff Mosley points out. Any conservation measure is more effectively defined by spelling out the objectives, the types of uses considered appropriate and the management principles to be applied.

Part of the anti-conservationists attempt to change the meaning of conservation to suit their own ends has been the giving of a special meaning to 'preservation.' It is seen as the saving of a resource and a denying of consumptive use of it, such as in the management of an area as a national park. They have then used 'preservationist' as an abusive label for persons who are claimed to be obsessed with complete protection of the environment and opposed to all changes in land use.

Similarly, development interests have taken such definitions of conservation as 'the wise use of resources' and 'sustainable use' to mean use in the sense of consumptive use and have sought to interpret them in this way to gain approval for a wide range of developments. It should be stressed that neither conservation, nor its synonym preservation, implies that a resource being conserved cannot be used. In fact, conservation measures are applied mainly by means of the planning or adjustment of use. It is interesting that the Society in the 1960s adopted a regional park policy and brought this new concept to the attention of a number of state governments.

⁴ L.J. Webb, *Environmental Boomerang*, 1973, p. 20.

Although the idea of conservation is probably as old as recorded history, the widespread use of the word in its present context is relatively recent. Len Webb reports that the word 'conservation' was in use in English, in precisely its present sense, as long ago as 1490.⁵ An Act passed in the fourth year of the reign of Henry VII was largely concerned with the illegal netting of fish, and appointed the Mayor of London as 'conservator having the conservacie of the Watir and Ryver of Thamys.'

However, it is certain that over the years 'conservation' has acquired many connotations: to some it has meant the protection of wild nature, to others the sustained production of useful materials from the resources of the Earth. The hunter and angler believe in conserving an assured supply of prey; a tourist promoter wants to preserve attractive scenery and fauna sanctuaries, while the scientist looks for sufficient specimens for clinical study. The point is that nature conservation is not only a many-sided affair but also that it appeals to and derives support from a wide cross-section of human interests and needs.

The most widely accepted definition, presented in 1980 in *World Conservation Strategy* by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), now World Conservation Union (WCU), is that of 'the management of human use of the biosphere so that it may yield the greatest sustainable benefit while maintaining its potential to meet the needs and aspirations of future generations.' The document defines the objectives of conservation of living resources as: maintenance of essential ecological processes and life-support systems, preservation of genetic diversity, and guarantee of the sustainable use of species and ecosystems. More generally, 'conservation involves practices that perpetuate the resources of the Earth on which human beings depend and that maintain the diversity of living organisms that share this planet. This includes such activities as the protection and restoration of endangered species, the careful use or recycling of scarce mineral resources, the rational use of energy resources and the sustainable use of soils and living resources'.⁶

Conservation is necessarily based on a knowledge of ecology, the science concerned with the relationship between living things and their environment. Ecology itself is based on a wide variety of disciplines, and conservation involves human feelings, beliefs and attitudes, as well as science and technology. Attitudes towards the environment and its resources of necessity involve a study of how humans can satisfy their physical and aesthetic needs from the resources of their environment without spoiling its capability to go on satisfying those needs.

That is why the Society, from its earliest days, has seen education as one of its roles. In addition to solutions for technical problems, there must be an enlightened public opinion so that the conflicting interests and demands for different uses for our natural resources can be resolved after the scientific, economic and social requirements have each been given appropriate consideration.

In Australia, nature conservation has involved three main streams of interest: scientific (dating from the formation of the first Royal Societies in the 1840s and 1850s);

⁵ L.J. Webb, D. Whitelock and J. Le Gay Brereton *The Last of Lands*, Introduction.

⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, Vol. 16

wildlife and field naturalism (the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, 1909); and bushwalking (the National Parks and Primitive Areas Council formed in 1933). These groups sometimes worked together on campaigns for conservation reserves and legislation. The National Parks Associations (the first formed in Queensland in 1930) gained their membership from all three groups above. The most important conservation groups today are the State Conservation Councils.

Public interest in conservation took its greatest leap forward in the late 1960s and early 1970s with the election of the Labor Government, with Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. It forged a conservation role for the Federal Government. A suite of Acts was passed providing for the Australian Heritage Commission, the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service (now the Australian Nature Conservation Agency), for the protection of the Great Barrier Reef and for environmental impact assessment (embracing both the social and physical environment). The signing of the World Heritage Convention in 1974 marked the beginning of the establishment of a system of world heritage areas in Australia.

By 1982 there were over 1,100 conservation groups in Australia with over 600,000 members, exceeding the combined membership of all political parties. From the early 1970s onwards public opinion polls showed a strong and undiminished support for conservation even where this was posed as being at the expense of economic development.

The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, formed in 1909, was the first voluntary organisation to take an interest in specific nature conservation measures. Its activities, including field investigation, representations to government and public education, set the pattern for all succeeding bodies. The history of the Society reflects to some extent the changing pre-occupations of the nature conservation movement in general. From an emphasis on improving laws relating to fauna protection, its work gradually broadened to include flora protection and reserves other than fauna reserves. This Society, long before public concern developed markedly in the 1960s and 1970s, had already played a major role in the drawing up of new legislation regarding wildlife, and the setting aside of many reserves.

It seems appropriate to conclude this chapter on beginnings with the summing up that David Stead gave in his *Brief History of the Society* published in the 1949 journal. His words are just as pertinent to the members of today as they were fifty years ago:

'For the future, I would say this. Whatever the governments concerned may do in the way of wise control and regulation in the work of conservation, the need will be just as great for the existence of such a Society as this and the Tree Wardens' League, to act as liaison bodies between government and people, to spread education and understanding, and so to cultivate that conscience which we have so often spoken of, and without which the law by itself is of no permanent avail in the essential work of preservation. I hope that our people will take these words to heart, and will do everything possible to assist and to encourage our work - by their labours, by their example and by financial help as well.'⁷

⁷ *Australian Wild Life*, Vol. 2, No. 2, December 1949, p. 72.