

CHAPTER 6

AUSTRALIAN WILD LIFE – THE 1930s

‘On May 19, 1935, the Wild Life Preservation Society will be twenty-five years old and will thus have completed a quarter of a century’s earnest work in the cause of fauna and flora protection and conservation in this country.’

Australian Wild Life, Vol. 1, No. 1

Roy Bennett was President in 1934 when the Society’s ‘modest journal’ was issued for the first time. David Stead was Vice-President, Secretary and Editor of the Journal. This first publication had been planned for production from the earliest days of the Society, but did not appear until November 1934. This publication was produced once a year and the bulk of it was occupied by the Annual Report. In 1966 it was announced that in the future the Report would be a separate publication and *Australian Wild Life* would appear twice during the year with factual material intended to be of general interest to members. In addition, another publication, *Nature in Australia*, appeared towards the end of 1965. This was to replace the old well-known and useful *Australian Naturalist*, the publication of the Naturalists’ Society of New South Wales, which by this time had amalgamated with the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia. However, *Nature in Australia* ceased publication with the April 1967 issue, being replaced by *Wildlife in Australia*. This latter magazine, a product of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Queensland, had been first issued in June 1963, and *Nature in Australia* was suspended so that New South Wales members could support the Queensland publication.

Wildlife in Australia, as the title suggests, did cover aspects of wildlife conservation for the whole of Australia and this comprehensive outlook was supported by Vincent Serventy, who was Editor for sixteen years (1967-83). During this time Carol Serventy was Assistant Editor. In later years this publication tended to emphasise the Queensland scene, although topics of relevance from other states were often included.

Australian Wildlife has undergone a number of changes in presentation over the years, difficulties being experienced at times with finding an Editor with adequate time and expertise. Now the magazine has received a new attractive and informative format, dating from the 1990s when Patrick Medway was Editor and Suzanne Medway Assistant Editor. Today, with Patrick in the position of National President, Suzanne Medway is the Editor.

The first issue of *Australian Wild Life* in 1934 carried a concise and informative outline of the nature of the Society’s work. Included here is an extract:

‘The Society’s work is necessarily carried on rather unobtrusively; yet an examination of the work coming before almost any one of the administrative meetings of the Council will immediately reveal its wide ramifications – both as regards the geographical regions covered and the great variety of the related subjects dealt with.

‘Although there has been a progressive development of the work of the Society for many years past, it is true that a great deal of it is more or less of a recurrent nature. This, of course, is quite inseparable from the labours of an organisation whose sphere is to such a large extent advisory, educational

and propagandist. Apart from its own initiatory work, the assistance of the Society is regularly sought by persons or by public organisations desirous of preserving particular species of our fauna or flora or who wish to have tracts of Government or private lands set aside as 'districts' or sanctuaries for the preservation of fauna and flora or because of their special scenic or scientific interest.

‘As a result of the Society's labours in these directions alone, we have today in the State of New South Wales many hundreds of thousands of acres of forest and other lands which have been set aside for general conservation and public purposes. In addition, the Society has frequently cooperated with a number of organisations in similar work. One of the most gratifying things to be noted in this connection is that interest in such matters has spread very widely throughout Australia during the lifetime of the Wild Life Preservation Society, and it is perhaps not too much to claim that the Society's general educational and propaganda work has assisted to produce such a condition to no mean extent. At least, that is the view which has been expressed publicly by authorities not members of the Society.’

The 25th Annual Report of the Society for the period June 1934 to June 1935 stresses the fact that some intensive propaganda had been carried on throughout Australia. 'It is worthy of stressing here, as in some past reports, that this local and general propaganda work has always been one of the strongest sections of our work.' The report goes on to state that while working to foster an atmosphere of concern and understanding about wild Australia, this did not detract the Society from taking part in the genesis and formulation of Acts for fauna and flora protection. 'While we are interested in teaching the people, we are prepared to enforce, or to aid the enforcement of, the laws where we find the necessity.'

In the early days of the Society's existence its members were practically playing a lone hand, but by the 1930s it had the assistance and co-operation of several other organisations, some of which were right at the forefront of the Society's conservation and rehabilitation work, or its educational propaganda. Among the groups concerned were the Australian Forest League, the Parks and Playgrounds Movement (with its able and energetic Honorary Secretary, Dr. C. E. W. Bean), the Federation of Bush Walkers, the Town Planning Association, the Associated Tree Lovers Civic League, the Royal Zoological Society, the Gould League of Bird Lovers and the army of Junior Tree Wardens, which by the mid thirties had an enrolment of some 30,000 children in the public schools.

CONTINUED INTEREST IN PARKS AND RESERVES

A small reserve acquired by the Society by purchase was Angophora Reserve located in the core of the Barrenjoey Peninsula bordering the suburbs of Avalon, Clareville and Taylor's Point, a little north of Manly, New South Wales. On this land was standing the largest known example of the Sydney red gum, *Angophora costata*. Negotiations for the purchase of this area were begun in July 1935 and the matter was frequently discussed by Council before acquisition was determined upon and was confirmed at a special meeting of the Society on 24 November 1936. From the

beginning there was never any doubt in the minds of Councillors as to the wisdom of having this piece of wild land set aside; it was just a question of finance. The receipt of a sum of £78.7s.0d from the estate of the late Councillor, William Cope, helped the Society in its final decision and the whole transaction was concluded in January 1937. The Council placed the area in the hands of the three Trustees, President W. G. Kett, Honorary Secretary D. G. Stead and Councillor T. Y. Harris. Later Miss Thistle Harris was appointed as Honorary Curator of the Reserve.

After a few years it was found to be impracticable for the Society to exercise adequate supervision over the Angophora Reserve so, following negotiations with Warringah Shire Council, the area was placed in its custody. In 1997 an inspection of the Reserve located the giant tree, but it was dead. The Reserve, now under the control of Pittwater Council, is kept in good condition by National Trust Regenerators, hired by Pittwater Council; a spokesperson for Pittwater Council said in 1997 that although the angophora is dead, it is still a fine habitat tree and they intend to leave it *in situ* for the present.

Another reserve acquired by the Society was Chilworth Flora Reserve at Beecroft, on the rim of the northern suburbs of Sydney. This was a free gift from Mr. and Mrs. C. B. Byles in 1938, the donors also undertaking to pay the transfer costs. Their daughter, solicitor Miss Marie Byles, was a noted bushwalker and conservationist; she arranged for the deeds to be prepared and transfer to take place at a minimum cost. As was the case with Angophora Reserve, this reserve at Beecroft was eventually placed in the custody of the local council, in this case Hornsby Shire Council.

The Society also took an interest in Ball's Head Reserve, on the shores of Sydney Harbour, commencing with the first tree planting there in 1931. Before 1931 Ball's Head was a wasteland covered with rubbish and lantana. The Naturalists' Society of New South Wales approached the North Sydney Council with a view to clearing the rubbish and replanting with native flora. Permission was granted and many hours were spent clearing the area for the first official tree planting on Saturday 25 July 1931. Annual tree plantings by the Wild Life Preservation Society and others continued for many years and in December 1975 it was reported in *Australian Wild Life* that there were still replacement plantings being carried out with trees grown by members of the Wild Life Preservation Society. November 1978 appears to be the last recorded tree planting ceremony by the Society.

It was also in the 1930s that the Society participated in a successful campaign to protect Hinchinbrook Island, most of the Island being declared a national park to become Australia's largest island national park.

INVASION OF SANCTUARIES BY GUNNERS

In *Australian Wild Life* for January 1937 the Society reported its concerns regarding the use of firearms by people out to have sport shooting protected birds and other wildlife. There was particular concern about the Burraborang area and the report declared that 'it is clear that we shall have to keep on fighting for a tightening up of the law, while endeavouring to enlist the good offices of tourists and residents of these areas alike.' Advertisements encouraging people to enjoy 'good shooting' were

said to be common in tourist agencies and boarding house establishments. Consider these extracts from the report in *Australian Wild Life* Vol. 1, No. 3, January 1937:

‘Government and other tourist bureaus also have assisted - whether intentionally or not is beside the point here - by the free and wide circulation of notices and advertisements in which would be patrons of the various boarding houses or car services were told of ‘good shooting’, ‘game’, ‘splendid sport with the gun’, and what not. This is by no means a new trouble. In our past reports we have referred to folders or advertisements issued by the Government Tourist Bureau, or under its auspices, in which people were openly invited to destroy protected birds. Paradoxically enough, the Tourist Bureau is associated with the Chief Secretary's Department and the Chief Secretary is the Minister charged with the administration of the Birds and Animals Protection Act! Surely we do not speak harshly, or without reason, when we say that this, at least, indicates a great lack of oversight on the part of the Department of State principally interested.

‘Even in our last Annual Report we drew attention to the Society's concern at discovering that the Tourist Bureau was distributing folders, which, *inter alia*, suggested the shooting of the quaint Scrub Turkey (or Tallegalla) at Barrington Tops. Not only was the bird protected, but the area itself is a sanctuary! Tourists were told that the birds were plentiful and were ‘delicious table birds’. After our exposure and representations in the matter, the offending publication was withdrawn.

‘The carrying of a gun into a sanctuary may be taken, under the Birds and Animals Protection Act, as *prima facie* evidence of an intention to kill protected fauna; yet we read in the ‘society column’ of the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Mr. and Mrs. So-and-So had closed their flat in Sydney and ‘with gun, torches and riding kits’ had gone down to Burragorang. We submitted this to the Chief Secretary, and, after enquiry by the police, were informed that ‘no evidence could be found that any illegal shooting had taken place’. Council members were very perturbed at the official acceptance of the actual invasion of the sanctuary by these and other people armed with firearms, and the Chief Secretary was informed accordingly’.

IS A ZOO A DESIRABLE SANCTUARY?

David Stead, supported by other members of the Society, had long been opposed to the holding of native wildlife in zoos and sanctuaries. He was particularly concerned about the granting of a permit for the keeping of animals to a private concern which established the Koala Park at West Pennant Hills on the northern outskirts of Sydney. The Society submitted a number of stringent conditions for incorporation in the licence. These were adopted, at least at that time, in 1929. In an article on the koala in *Australian Wild Life*, April 1939, David Stead said, with reference to Koala Park:

‘It must be clear to all that places of exhibition of the koala play no part whatever in bona fide preservation work. It is difficult to see how they can justify entertainment of the human at the expense of the enslaved animal. It is quite clear that no such exhibiting place can be of any practical use at all in

restoration work unless used as a depot for the handling of koalas destined for planting out in controlled but wild sanctuaries'.

Then in 1939 came the good news that the New South Wales Government was to take over the business of running Koala Park. 'The Government has announced its intention to appoint trustees to administer the Park, though it has not yet been made clear that this administration is to be directly aimed at the use of the Park as a unit in preservation work. If the complete acquisition of Koala Park by Government implies that the Government intends to undertake a satisfactory scientific method of re-establishment of the Native Bear, and will only use it as a part of such, and not the end itself, then, I feel sure, that it will meet with the full support of all naturalists and conservationists, who have been so gravely concerned for the welfare and continuity of the animal for so long past.' So said David Stead in his 1939 article on the koala.

However in October 1939, it was learned that the Government did not propose to proceed with the taking over of Koala Park, which therefore remained, as before, as a private tourist resort, dependent on gate money, restaurant and other aspects of tourism.

The Society had its own plans for re-establishment of the koala. A scheme proposed early in the 1930s was for the setting aside of a large section of rough country, difficult of public access, for the settlement of koalas. One or two resident ranger-caretakers were considered necessary, both to preserve the area from spoliation by wandering shooters and to keep down vermin, such as dogs and dingoes. Such caretakers also would keep necessary firebreaks in order to prevent the encroachment of forest fires, which are one of the chief enemies to the spread of the koala in the wild.

THE SOCIETY A VOICE AT NATIONAL CONFERENCES

It has been part of the Society's policy to support allied conservation groups over many years of its existence. This support includes a presence and a voice at conferences wherever the conservation message is being promoted. An early example of this kind of support was reported at the Annual meeting of the Society on 26 November 1936, included in *Australian Wild Life* Vol. 1, No. 3, January 1937:

'ANZAAS Congress in New Zealand

As this Report is being published on the eve of the congress of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, we desire particularly to refer to this great science meeting and wish the members every success in their efforts to gather and to spread science and knowledge generally. W.L.P.S.A. delegates to the General Council of this Auckland Conference will be our President, Mr. Wm. Geo. Kett, Mr. Edwin Cheel, the well-known Australian botanist and Captain E. V. Sanderson, one of our members, who is the President of the New Zealand Forest and Bird Protection Society, at Wellington. The kind thoughts of our members and friends will go with these delegates in their important work.'

Three examples from the later years will serve to illustrate the breadth of interest shown by Society Councillors in the conferences they have attended. In September

2003, Society Vice-President Dr. Clive Williams attended the National Conference held in Brisbane by the Australian Koala Foundation; in 2006, Patrick and Suzanne Medway were in Perth, and attended the ARAZPA conference, hosted by Perth Zoo. Patrick has been a member of the Australasian Regional Association of Zoological Parks and Aquaria Inc. for many years, but the Society is also a corporate member. David Stead would have taken a particular interest in the conference there of 'Integration', the challenge of which was the examination of the operation of zoos and the understanding of how they operate as organisations in relation to conservation in their business areas, species management, general husbandry, education programs, media relations, and veterinary programs.

The attendance of Vice-President Dr. David Murray at The Australian Network for Plant Conservation Conference in April 2008 is an indication of a changing attitude towards flora conservation within the Society. National President Patrick Medway has given the sign to David Murray that the Society realises how fundamental the conservation of our forests and grasslands is to the survival of fauna and as a factor in dealing with climate change. The conference in April 2008 was held at Mulgoa, near Penrith, the title being 'Our Declining Flora – Tackling the Threats'. Some of the major threats which were addressed were climate change, weeds, fire and the soil disease *Phytophthora cinnamomi* (cinnamon fungus). Many speakers were at pains to point out the link between plants as habitat and fauna. Without suitable habitat, fauna will also fail to survive, and that is why WPSA continues to support the ANPC, right from its establishment in 1994.

The First Corporate Member

In August 1930, the young Thistle Harris became a member of the Science staff of St. George Girls' High School, Kogarah. She was to have a lasting impact on the school and the local district. A local native tree campaign was initiated and the students learned their botany in practical fashion. They learned to select trees suitable for the district, to plant them and care for them, and in a short time they had three sides of their playground shaded with fine specimens of blackbutt, spotted gum and cedar wattle. In 1933 Thistle supervised the planting of one hundred lemon-scented gums along the length of Victoria Street in front of the school and by 1939 the trees were already twenty feet high. The girls decided to form a Tree Lovers' League, all pupils and staff to be eligible for membership. At the beginning of the year 1934, Miss Geer, Principal of the school and Patron of the school's Tree Lovers' League, drew the attention of members to the vigilance which would be necessary due to the commencement of new building operations at the school – young trees planted in the school grounds in 1933 would need care and, in fact, no young trees were subsequently to suffer damage. St. George Girls' High School, no doubt with encouragement from Miss Harris, became the Society's first corporate member.

The Society's Work in the 1930s

'Suffice it to say for the present that, both officially as a united body and through the action of its individual members, much has been achieved in wild life and wild flower preservation – through active educational propaganda, by working on the growing patriotism and national consciousness of the people, by active and sometimes aggressive action in urgent cases, and by constantly keeping in touch with the Government authorities concerned. Assistance has frequently been given to the Government in the preparation and passage of enactments, proclamations, etc.,

relating to Birds and Animals Protection and to the Preservation of our Wild Flowers and other Native Plants. We ask our members and friends, and the City and Country Press, to do all they can to assist in spreading our membership and in our progress in carrying on work which can only be of lasting good to the people of our Australia.'

David G. Stead, November 1934.