

CHAPTER 11

PROFILE – VINCENT SERVENTY

The distinguished Indian environmentalist Kailash Sankhala said that Vincent Serventy 'gave a voice to the voiceless.'

Vincent Serventy, naturalist, conservationist, traveller and writer, 'was green before being green became fashionable', said Vin's obituary in the *Sydney Morning Herald* following his death in September 2007. 'He did not wear shoes until he was eleven, 'running wild through the bush like a brumby.' Honoured in 1996 for having fought for the environment for fifty years, he was still fighting in his 91st year, writing to the *Herald*, for example, on the horrors of whaling.

Vincent spent his childhood years with his brothers and sisters on a lonely farm at Bickley on the edge of the Darling Scarp in Western Australia. There were eight children, Dominic (Dom) the eldest and Vincent the youngest. Dom built a rough shelter in the bush near their house and here he began his natural history studies. The rest of them ran across the hills like the local wild horses, returning reluctantly to work in the orchard. To Vincent the natural world around him seemed immense.

Dom's natural history interest, research and writings, led to a distinguished career in the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation, the CSIRO. His doctoral research was in marine biology, but his great love was birds. Dom's story and Vincent's too, is eloquently told in Vincent's 1996 book, *The Flight of the Shearwater*.

The author of this history of the Society still remembers vividly a trip to Flinders Island in Bass Strait with the Australian Museum Society in 1981. It was led by Vincent and Carol Serventy. A never-to-be-forgotten trip by barge to Big Dog Island was an illuminating experience as we watched the muttonbirders collecting their quota of birds (muttonbirds or shearwaters) on a blue April Day.

From Bickley, the Serventy family moved to Subiaco on the edge of the bushland of Kings Park, Perth. This park became a playground for the young Serventys, and the nearby Swan River their swimming pool. To the young Vincent the world was still a natural wonderland which seemed likely to last forever.

University days resulted in the degree of Bachelor of Science (to which was added in later years a Bachelor of Education) but it was in those student days that Vincent became aware of environmental problems – his natural wonderland was really part of his book *Continent in Danger!* He joined the Western Australian Naturalists' Club and in later years was to serve as Secretary and President. This was the major society working for nature conservation in Western Australia. He became a member of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia about this time, but in these early years sister Lucy kept more in touch with the Society than Vincent did.

Vincent Serventy was a co-founder of the Western Australian National Trust, the Western Australian Tree Society and the Western Australian Gould League. Later he was to convince state groups of what was once called the 'Gould League of

Birdlovers' to broaden their aims to include all wildlife and the environment and drop the word 'birdlovers' from the name.

In time, Vincent came to dominate the conservation movement in his home state, both with the media and in education. He was employed by the West Australian Department of Education, and was allotted the task of creating the curriculum for science in the primary schools. As a science graduate he was trusted by fellow scientists and this was to continue when he moved east where, in general, science and conservation were uneasy bedfellows. He became a public figure on radio and television and a strong supporter of the wildlife shows and earth days held throughout the early 1960s.

In 1955 Vincent married Carol Darbyshire. At the time, Carol was an advisory teacher with the Music, Speech and Drama staff of the Education Department. The marriage ceremony was at the Registrar's office and the wedding feast at Carol's home where her mother, Molly Darbyshire, presided. The honeymoon was a bush one, as they drove north as far as Geraldton and camped out for most of the time.

Vincent's battles were many and varied. Several have already been described in an earlier chapter. Another short but successful battle took place when a West Australian Liberal Government gave Alwest a lease to mine the Dryandra Forest. Vincent wrote to Rupert Murdoch, who headed Alwest: 'If you destroy Dryandra, it will be an act of sacrilege.' Murdoch relinquished the lease. The Dryandra Forest is about 180 kilometres south-east of Perth, named for the plant *Dryandra*, a genus found only in Western Australia, a member of the family *Proteaceae*, to which the banksias and grevilleas also belong. The flora and fauna of this area make it a priceless oasis in the midst of cultivated wheatlands. Vincent fell in love with the area when taken there by a friend before the war. Later he was to make a detailed study of this woodland and, having read Gilbert White's *Selborne* and Thoreau's *Walden Pond*, he decided to copy them and tell the story of an Australian forest seen over a year.

Vincent's book, *Dryandra: the story of an Australian forest* was not published until 1970, by which time the family had moved to Sydney. This book was chosen as one of the hundred great books of Australian literature by Geoffrey Dutton in his published work *The Australian Collection*.

In 1965 Vincent resigned from the Department of Education Western Australia, planning to do a doctorate in science education, but he was tempted by Sir Frank Packer to carry out a television show, *Nature Walkabout*. He also promised Vincent a newspaper column in the *Sunday Telegraph*, which he eventually ran for some sixteen years. Thus it was ambition to play a larger part in nature conservation which took Vincent and his family to Sydney in 1965. Articles for the *Bulletin* and *Women's Weekly* as well as international magazines soon followed, together with a stream of books, some sixty in all. Asked in England to write on the endangered noisy scrub bird, Vincent replied, 'There's a whole continent in danger'. This led to *A Continent in Danger* (1966), one of his most acclaimed works.

As recorded earlier, Vincent became President of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia in 1966, remaining in that position until 2002. In 1975 Vincent and Carol

spent a year travelling overseas with their children, Natasha, Catherine and Matthew. Thistle Harris became President of the Society for the year 1975.

When Vincent returned home in January 1976 he received a call from fellow member Dick Mason to alert him to the fact that Thistle had plans to wind up the Society. The Society had some assets and Thistle wanted to merge with the Stead Foundation so that the assets would be available for Wirrimbirra. Dick Mason was extremely unhappy about this – ‘it was a grass roots society for people in the community interested in the preservation of wildlife, and even though it was not in its heyday, it was a society with a proud history and should not be abandoned.’¹ Dick Mason asked Vincent to attend the AGM in February at which Thistle was going to move the motion to wind up the Society; Dick also asked Vincent to accept nomination to be President once more. Thistle, unaware that Vincent had returned from overseas, was at the AGM supported by her friends, Gwen and Aileen Hanley, and Joan and Eileen Bradley. When Vincent Serventy walked into the hall there was a sudden silence. He was duly nominated, elected President, took the chair and proceeded to open the discussion on the future of the Society by speaking against the proposal. The discussion became heated and, at its height, Eileen Bradley collapsed. Dr. Dick Mason tried to revive her without success – she was dead. Vincent had no choice but to close the meeting and adjourn until March, when the matter would be decided. Thistle and her friends did not attend the March meeting. She never attended a meeting of the Society again, nor took a position on the Council. After this setback Vincent worked hard to raise the profile of the Society and succeeded.

Carol Serventy was Vincent’s principal ally – fellow-traveller, editor of many of his books and, at one time, World President of Societies for Friends of the Museum. Vincent also worked happily with people such as the documentary maker Bob Raymond and the artist John Olsen, particularly in Lake Eyre and the Kimberley. Advising Malcolm Fraser to continue Gough Whitlam’s environmental programs, he encouraged him to establish an Australian branch of the World Wildlife Fund. Vincent claimed as a close friend the English naturalist Peter Scott, son of Robert Falcon Scott of Antarctic fame; he rubbed shoulders with David Attenborough who told Vincent his books were his major guides for Australian wildlife.

Vincent campaigned relentlessly for public access to the Sydney Harbour foreshores, the koala, wombat and shark. He railed against soil degradation, the rabbits, foxes and feral cats that kill Australian wildlife and the damage done to our wetlands. His *Easy Guide to Green Living* (1990) was not just about what to put in the shopping trolley, but a way of looking at the planet and the way we live, including a section on ‘How to protest’.

Regional Councillor Max Blanch of Newcastle wrote in 2009:

‘During Vincent’s presidency he was in the habit of sending stuff to me about conservation in my area with a request to look into it which I did and reported back. One bit of stuff I’ve found is a few papers sent me by Vincent with a scribbled note “Warnervale again. Please look into it. Vin.” Vincent was so well known that he was constantly being contacted by local people concerned about unsuitable over-development somewhere.

¹ R. Mason, pers. comm.. 23 November 1996

Vincent was always willing to take on another issue and write another letter. Or a book for that matter. His output was prodigious and his knowledge and understanding were enormous. Australia was his backyard.

‘In the later decades of Vincent’s life he pioneered and fostered the idea of Regional Parks in Australia such as Monkey Mia, the Great Barrier Reef and Parramatta River. As pristine areas became scarce, national parks became harder to establish because of settlement. Vincent championed the idea of regional parks as an alternative, where human activity and enterprise go on under an umbrella of care and concern for the environment. This to limit the unbridled development of the last two decades in Australia in pursuit of growth and wealth at any cost.’

The playwright David Williamson, also a good friend, wrote these words when Vincent retired as President of the Society in 2002:

‘Vincent’s work has been in an area of supreme importance for all of us and he has written passionately, cogently and well. There is a terrible thing happening to our planet and that terrible thing was us. Vincent did something. He gave us his voice which has spoken loudly and clearly and persuasively.’²

² *Australian Wildlife*, Winter 2002