

CHAPTER 12

GREENING THE GOVERNMENT – THE 1970s

“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

David Stead, 1949

GREENING THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT - WHITLAM AND BEYOND

If, as most of us believe, the quality of the environment affects the quality of living in Australia, the solution cannot be left to idealists motivated by purely aesthetic considerations and alienated from the political process. As a matter of social priority, governments must assume responsibility for setting high standards in urban development, architecture, design and the preservation of Australia's unique natural environment.

The early executive members of the Society, from 1909 onwards, were aware of how important legislation was to the status of the environment and to wildlife in particular. Involvement by the Society in pressing for Commonwealth responsibility has already been discussed in Chapter 7 and, in the eventual greening of the Federal Government which took place in the 1970s, the continuing lobbying by the Society had no doubt played a part. There has always been a continuous correspondence between the Society and State and Federal Governments, seeking statements of policy and urging action on matters of importance to wildlife conservation and wider environmental concerns.

In 1972 the Federal Labor Party for the first time in Australian history made environmental issues a major item in their policy, spelling out in detail what they would do if elected to office, instead of restating the same old platitudes that had been the staple fare of all the federal parties for so many years. But it is only fair to say it was under a Liberal Government, with Gorton and McMahon, that the initiative was taken to set up the Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation in 1970, under Mr. E. M. C. Fox. When Labor was elected in 1972 the Fox Report was still a matter for consideration by the new ministry.

The 1972 Labor policy gave in detail what actions would be carried out if they were in power. Labor won the election, with Hon. Gough Whitlam as Prime Minister. Every environmental promise was carried out, at least as far as could be done in a federation where the States are an important element of the conservation scene.

An inquiry into the National Estate was carried out and from it came the Australian Heritage Commission. The Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service was set up and State Conservation Councils and their environment centres funded, so that they could play their part in unifying and assisting a fragmented conservation movement. Laws were passed to ensure environmental impact statements would be made before federal largesse would be disbursed. These few years were a watershed in Australia's conservation history.

Most conservationists take no particular political stance at either State or Federal level. In some States Liberal parties have better environmental policies than Labor and the reverse is true in others. In some States one can only say 'A plague on both your houses', as Vincent Serventy did in 1972 when, in an editorial indicating the conservation policies of both major parties, he left the whole page blank. At a meeting with Hon. Tom Uren (then in Federal opposition) Vincent spelled out the Society's policy. All his recommendations were accepted to become Labor party programs that they would carry out if elected. As indicated above, Labor won office and their environmental policy implemented.

By the 1970s all parties had seen the writing on the wall and decided that without a satisfactory environmental program there was little chance of being elected. That was a golden era for conservationists after two hundred years of short-sighted greed. It was roses, roses all the way with an occasional thorn such as the allowing of clear felling in the forests of south Western Australia and mining at Fraser Island.

In 1975 both major parties promised the Society that the environmental initiatives would be continued, though at a lower level of funding. Fraser Island was saved from the miners, a decision of the new Liberal Government, which showed a great deal of political courage.

In the elections of 1977 the Labor Party emphasised urgent problems of unemployment and the economy and made little mention of the arts and the environment. The Prime Minister, Hon. Malcolm Fraser, picked up these discarded clothes and spoke about the government's interest in both fields. He also mentioned a new move to give assistance to the establishment of a World Wildlife Fund branch in Australia. The Liberals were elected.

By 1982 the situation had changed. The Federal Liberal Government, by its lack of interest in holding an inquiry into the damming of the Franklin River, tardiness in declaring marine parks in the Great Barrier Reef, eroding of government grants to conservation groups and other changes of policy seemed to be bowing to the pressure of development lobbies.

'There seems no question that if the Federal Opposition produces a dramatic environmental program to be implemented if they are elected, there is every chance they will have as good an election winner as they did in 1972.'¹

Hawke promised that if elected he would save the Franklin. Fraser, worn out by fighting developers, remained silent. The Society warned him that this inaction would lose him the election. It was an exciting time, and President Serventy spoke at protest meetings in Sydney and Perth.

In 1983 Labor under Hon. Bob Hawke was elected to Federal Government. There was an upgrading of the environmental portfolio with the appointment of Senator Graham Richardson as Minister and as a strong advocate for environmental concerns within Cabinet.

¹ Vincent Serventy, *Australian Wild Life*, July 1982, p.4

By the 1990s there was a sense in which all parties were in basic agreement about the need to assign a much higher priority than in the past to environmental concerns. This provoked conflicts which were both peculiar to each party and general to all of them. In each of the major parties, there is still a tension between the proponents of economic growth and development, and those who feel accountable to the environmental lobbies. There have been moves in both parties to attempt reconciliation between these potentially conflicting tendencies.

In the Minutes for the Society's Council meeting on 24 September 1991, there was this statement:

'One of the problems which encompass the environment is the new Federalism which seems to be giving back power to the States despite a hard-won battle by the environment movement to have responsibility vested in the Commonwealth Government. Vincent has written to the Prime Minister (Bob Hawke) asking for details of the policy to be finalised later this year.'

In certain respects, concern about the environment transcends the boundaries of the parties. There is little sign that it alone will act as a catalyst for a major realignment of the electorate. So in many cases support swings, coming down on the side of the party that provides the best definitive statement of policy if returned to power. However, in the 1990 Federal election, for example, support for independent candidates and for minor parties was much higher than in any previous election since Federation. Much of this support was associated with concern about the environment.

Of the major parties, Labor has generally been perceived as the more progressive on environmental policy, even by many of those who vote for the Coalition parties. Overall, the major parties and other established organisations appear to face a difficult task in persuading voters that they are able to offer appropriate solutions to environmental problems.

Environmental problems continue to be bounced back and forth between the States and the Commonwealth. The whole Federal - States issue is at the very core of the problems of Australian government. Nowhere was this more evident than in the fight to prevent mining and oil-drilling on the Great Barrier Reef in the 1960s and 1970s. The question was - who had jurisdiction over the off-shore waters below the low-water mark? With the two biggest (in area) States straining against the centralism which the Federal Government under Hon. John Gorton first brought into the limelight (*circa* 1968), and the Whitlam Government took further, questions of offshore sovereignty were always the hottest issue.

In her book *The Coral Battleground* Judith Wright tells how a small group of people mobilised others, defeated an application to mine limestone, and then held off the great oil companies which planned, with the backing of the Queensland Government, to establish an oil industry in the Reef's waters. This group eventually convinced the Prime Minister, politicians and trade unions of the danger to the Reef, and the campaign became big news. Everywhere people worried about the Reef's fate.

It was in 1969 that the issue of drilling for oil on the Great Barrier Reef gave national impetus to the conservation debate. A high point was the Great Barrier Reef

Symposium organised by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), held in Sydney on 3 May 1969 and attended by several members of the Society.

The ACF called for a Royal Commission into the drilling of the Reef and Sir Garfield Barwick, on behalf of the ACF, wrote to Prime Minister Gorton. Pending the establishment of a Commission, Sir Garfield Barwick asked that urgent consideration should be given to a special enquiry into all the factors bearing on the desirability and safety of drilling in that region, having regard to the paramount importance of protecting the environment. The Commission was set up in May 1970.

Vincent Serventy gave his support in many ways, both at the personal level and on behalf of the Society: attending meetings, writing letters, and arranging for Judith Wright in late 1969 to have a press conference and television appearance in Sydney. Judith wrote: 'Vin organised everything most efficiently. I stayed with him and his delightful wife Carol; the reporters, the television crew, and a special columnist from the *Daily Telegraph* turned up, and I managed to put across a good deal of information that the Sydney press had either not known, or had forgotten. I was still not used to seeking this kind of publicity - and 'publicity-seeking' was one of the accusations oddly levelled by opposing interests against conservationists. But when the TV program and the press articles came out, it was clear that the move had been a good one. All the southern newspapers began once more to carry the news that oil-drilling was about to begin in Reef waters and that the Commonwealth's assurances seemed to be coming to nothing after all. Again the Reef was a big news story.'²

The Whitlam Government, elected in 1972, supported the Wallace Royal Commission, which recommended in November 1974 that oil-drilling should be prohibited on the Great Barrier Reef but could be allowed fifteen miles out to sea. The Society was strongly urging that the whole province of the Great Barrier Reef should be a National Park.

The Queensland Government, which stood to gain considerable royalties from offshore oil-drilling, was opposed to the Whitlam plans to turn the whole Reef area into a marine park in which no oil-drilling would be allowed. In December 1975, with the Fraser Government just elected, Sir Garfield Barwick released the long-awaited High Court judgement that the Commonwealth had jurisdiction over all waters offshore below low-water mark. The States rebelled, but in November 1976, Prime Minister Fraser was forthright in his rejection of the idea of extending states' jurisdiction offshore.

Today this region of 350,000 square kilometres is the largest protected marine area in the world and the second largest of any protected area on land or sea. It is not a national park but what most folk know as a regional park, similar to the 'national parks' of England. In the jargon of the World Conservation Union it is a multiple use protected natural area. The Great Barrier Reef was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981.

² J. Wright, *The Coral Battleground*, p.100

EARTH DAY

The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia decided to inaugurate Australia's first Earth Day in 1971. Historically there had been Arbor Days, Bird Days and Wattle Days for over fifty years in various States up until that time.

When consideration was given to trying to develop a Conservation Day over the whole of Australia, it was decided to use the American term 'Earth Day'. The fourth Friday in September was chosen as a suitable day for most States - a time when the weather is mild and allows for out-of-doors celebrations, a time when the earth is at its best.

For organisation throughout Australia, it was essential to have cooperation of most conservation societies. This was achieved through the Nature Conservation Councils in each State. New South Wales was able to develop the Earth Day theme on a fairly grand scale, and the *Daily Telegraph* and the Bank of New South Wales supported the Operation Earth Day project.

As already mentioned in an earlier chapter, Vincent Serventy had conceived the idea of a Conservation Day in 1964 while working for the Department of Education in Western Australia.

In Vincent's Presidential report for 1972, he said, 'I regard this as the most significant action of the Society in many years, certainly in my time of Presidency'.

In 1972 the NSW Government extended Earth Day to a week. Displays were organised by the Department of the Environment. The last week in September became a focus for various activities and events related to the environment right through the 1970s. Then the United Nations decided to change Earth Day to 'World Environment Day' and chose 5 June as the day of celebration, glorious mid-summer in the north, chilly mid-winter in the south.

The famous anthropologist Margaret Mead wrote of the first Earth Day on 20 March 1970, in America, 'Earth Day is the first holy day which transcends all national borders ... spans mountains and oceans and time belts, yet brings people all over the world into one resonating accord ... the selection of the vernal equinox makes planetary observance of a shared event possible'.

CENTENNIAL PARK

Vincent Serventy tells the story of Centennial Park in his autobiography, *An Australian Life* (1999):

‘In March 1972 I answered the phone to hear a harsh voice. ‘I’m Patrick White. They tell me you know a lot about Centennial Park and a lot about how to fight conservation battles. Can you help? I’ve never been interested in conservation before but I don’t want Centennial Park to die.’ It was the classic reaction, yet to fight for one’s personal place has stimulated many of us to become conservationists. My eyes were opened by Kings Park and

Patrick's by Centennial Park. He never lost that enthusiasm and remained a good friend of conservation until his death. Patrick White's concern was about a proposal to construct a Sports Complex of Olympic standard in Centennial Park.

'We met and planned the campaign. Patrick had never used the media before but he agreed to talk to an ABC interviewer. One morning we walked in the Park while he spoke for over an hour into a tape-recorder, describing why we were fighting to save the Park that not only commemorated our Centenary but had a piece of original bushland set aside for the Gould League.

'When I asked why the ABC never broadcast the tape I was told that Patrick's voice was not suitable. Here was the great man speaking for the first time to the media and they were not using his voice!

'On the day of the rally there were four speakers – Patrick; Harry Miller, who represented the horse riders; Jack Munday, the hero of Kelly's Bush; and myself. Hundreds marched in procession from the Park to the Town Hall where we heard more speakers including Judith Wright. We won that battle – the Sports Complex was not built.'

THE GREEN BANS

The 'green bans' movement of the 1970s was significant for its wide publicity and increased awareness of environmental issues within the community in general. Until this time community concern and community action, at least around Sydney, were limited to small local issues and initiated by a mere handful of enthusiasts. It was on a small scale, but the awareness was there, initially for the natural environment, but later for the built environment also. The Australian 'green bans' movement marked the first time in an industrialised country that a coalition of workers or unions was organised to withhold labour in the service of broader community interests.

Kelly's Bush was the site of the world's first green ban. 'It was just three hectares of neglected bushland on the foreshores of Sydney Harbour, on the peninsula of Hunters Hill, yet from this almost insignificant piece of nature began the Battle for Kelly's Bush'. These words introduced Vincent Serventy's account of a conflict in which he was an active participant, one of many concerned residents in Hunters Hill in 1970.

The movement was initiated by thirteen housewives from Hunters Hill, alarmed about a development proposal for a number of luxury townhouses in Kelly's Bush. From July 1970 the housewives, subsequently known as 'The Battlers', fought for their piece of land with relatively orthodox activities until a sympathiser suggested they approach the Builders' Labourers Federation (BLF) to ask for a ban on union labour for the site.

R.J. Roddewig, writing later on the green bans, said:

'Jack Munday and his BLF mates, Bob Pringle and Joe Owens, had as much difficulty deciding whether they should ally with the women

Battlers of Hunters Hill as the Battlers had deciding to work with them. Could a union leadership, admittedly Marxist in outlook, justify a coalition with an upper-middle-class group such as the Battlers for Kelly's Bush? The BLF finally decided it could if the Battlers could show they had enough popular support in the neighbourhood'.

The ban went ahead. Kelly's Bush was saved. In the four years from 1971 to 1974 more than forty green bans were applied by the Munday-Pringle-Owens leadership of the NSW Builders' Labourers. Not a single ban was effected by orders from the Union. In each case the initiative lay with the proposed victims of the development, although the more widely-known the possibility of green bans became, the less 'spontaneous' and the more instrumental did the call for a ban to the Union become. The major green bans requested and imposed by the builders' labourers were:

Kelly's Bush	Eastlakes	Woolloomooloo
Centennial Park	Waterloo	North-Western Expressway
Victoria Street	The Rocks	(Ultimo and Glebe)

The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia was only one of many groups writing letters. The Society wrote to the local Council, the State Premier and Sir Albert Jennings who had bought the Kelly's Bush land. In 1975 Vincent Serventy rubbished an Environmental Impact Study commissioned by Sir Albert Jennings, pointing out that all such research promoted by developers was a waste of time and money. It was not until 1983 that the long battle for Kelly's Bush was over. State Labor Premier Hon. Neville Wran announced that the State Government had purchased the bush, saying it represented 'a victory for environmentalists generally.'

SELECT COMMITTEE ON WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

For many years the Society had urged that a thorough survey of Australian wildlife should be carried out. It therefore welcomed the setting up of a House of Representatives Select Committee on Wildlife Conservation. On 14 May 1970 the Select Committee had been formed by the Liberal Prime Minister, the Hon. John Gorton, under the chairmanship of Mr. E. M. C. Fox. The report on the Committee's findings, released in October 1972, was unofficially known as the Fox Report. The Committee was in Sydney in December 1970 to take evidence. Thistle Stead attended twice, once as a representative of the David G. Stead Memorial Wildlife Research Foundation supporting Allen Strom (Chairman of the Board of the Stead Foundation) and once on behalf of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia, supporting Vincent Serventy. Thistle herself was to make a submission at a later date, Wednesday 2 February 1972.

Vincent Serventy appeared before the Select Committee on 4 December 1970, in his capacity as President of the Wild Life Preservation Society. He presented figures to illustrate the position of national parks and fauna reserves in Australia, claiming that the low figures (1.3% in New South Wales, 0.6% in Queensland, 1.1% in Victoria), compared with the five percent regarded by experts as a minimum, was a shocking indictment of governments, and constant pressure was needed to improve the situation. He then made comments on the major reserves to clarify his terms of reference - national parks, nature reserves, wilderness areas, anthropological reserves.

Eight points were put forward as a basis of his recommendations - adequate classification of the environment, monitoring of the Australian environment, income tax incentives for preserving, rather than clearing as at present, a Federal National Parks authority, uniform conservation laws, more research, training of personnel, and more research on nuclear power. Ensuing discussion with members of the Committee ranged far and wide. Serventy was asked to clarify certain proposals to be made. Eventually (after 86 pages of transcript) the Chairman accepted the submission.

Thistle Stead's submission as Vice-President of both the Stead Foundation and the Wild Life Preservation Society in February 1972 was supplementary to those presented by Vincent Serventy and Allen Strom. She opened her presentation by saying that she wanted to cover four fields in which she felt that the role of the Commonwealth Government should be greatly strengthened. These were:

1. Assessment of environmental deterioration and necessary action to mitigate this.
2. Legislation concerned with wildlife conservation.
3. The role of voluntary organisations in wildlife conservation.
4. The education program in wildlife conservation.

Thistle spoke on each of these aspects and made eight categorical recommendations: four recommendations referred to environmental deterioration (1-4); recommendation 5 referred to legislation; recommendation 6 referred to the role of voluntary organisations; and recommendations 7-8 referred to education.

The Select Committee set up under Fox was probably the first time the Federal Government had become involved in environmental matters in an attempt to find out the needs of wildlife conservation. Vincent Serventy remarked in his Presidential Report for 1969-70:

'The highlight of the year has been the appointment of the Select Committee of the House of Representatives to enquire into wild life conservation matters. As your President I have given my views to the Committee ... It is up to us to make sure the final report does not gather dust on the shelves. Of course that implies we think the report is a good one. If it turns out to be mere platitude, we will let it gather dust.'⁵

The Society's newsletter reported in December 1972 that the Report, 96 pages long, was available for purchase, and that favourable recommendations had been made for most of the issues which the Society had been fighting for over a number of years.

However, it would appear that the recommendations of the Fox Report were unable to be addressed because there was a Federal election in 1972 and the Labor Government took over from McMahon's Liberal Government. But it is more than likely, as Vincent Serventy suggests, that the work of the Fox Committee contributed to the deliberations of the Hope Committee, set up in May 1973 by the Whitlam Government to look into the nature and state of the National Estate.

COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY ON THE NATIONAL ESTATE

A Committee of Enquiry into the National Estate was established in 1973. The concept of "The National Estate" was considered to include national parks and other places for the protection of wildlife, buildings, areas of special scientific interest (eg caves), areas of archaeological interest (such as Aboriginal sites), the coastline, inland water expanses and urban parks.

The Committee was established by the Australian Labor Government under the Chairmanship of Mr. Justice R. N. Hope to enquire into and advise the Government on:

- (a) the nature and state of the National Estate
- (b) the measures presently being adopted
- (c) the measures which should be adopted
- (d) the role which the Australian Government could play in the preservation and enhancement of the National Estate
- (e) the manner in which National Trusts of Australia and other appropriate conservation groups could be supported by public funds, and the amount required in order that these bodies can immediately increase their effectiveness in arguing and working for the preservation and enhancement of the National Estate.

President Vincent Serventy and Vice-President Thistle Stead presented a submission to the Committee on behalf of the Society. The submission opened as follows:

'The Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia is the oldest existing society of its kind in Australia, having been established in 1909. It is still actively concerned with the conservation of fauna and flora and its habitat and many of the items listed for enquiry by the present Committee were pertinent to its aims.'

Particular attention in the submission was made with reference to Item (e) above. It was pointed out that a considerable number of organisations concerned with environmental conservation had been formed in the last decade or two. 'They are, however, frequently restricted in their activities through lack of funds, lack of organising experience and lack of offices from which to operate.' The submission was made that:

'In order to consolidate the efforts of all citizens actively concerned with environmental improvement, it is recommended that: The Commonwealth Government establish and maintain environmental offices in central areas (in all capital cities, in ACT and NT) for the purpose of coordinating and assisting voluntary organisations concerned with environmental problems or investigations.'

This recommendation also referred to the need for adequate staffing and services in such centres and the provision of financial assistance by the Commonwealth Government for organisations working in this field.

It is of interest to note that in 1972 the Society had written to the Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts (Hon. Peter Howson) asking for a grant to establish a central office and information centre in Sydney where the public and schools could get advice and assistance on environmental matters. Mr Howson refused the Society's application.

The Hope Report on the National Estate was released in 1974, a most comprehensive report, addressing both the natural and built environment, Aboriginal sites, and cultural property such as museums and archives. In addition to discussing the role and responsibility of the Australian Government, the Report had also addressed Education for Conservation and the role of Voluntary Organisations.

INTEREST IN WETLANDS

'The Macquarie Marshes - this title might almost be called our "theme song." It appeared in our first Annual Report, published 44 years ago.' This was the opening line to an article on the Macquarie Marshes in *Australian Wild Life* in March 1954. Another article in the magazine by Kelvin Ward in September 1970 opened by saying, '1909 to 1969 - and still continuing. This is the period over which the W.L.P.S.A. has been fighting for the preservation of the Macquarie Marshes.'

The Marshes are on the Macquarie River, north of Warren in New South Wales. They used to be a large system of lagoons, billabongs, creeks and swamps, ideal for the breeding of water birds, as well as a habitat for a wide variety of other fauna. In major floods, before the construction of the Burrendong Dam, up to 80,000 acres were inundated. Usually, however, the Marshes were confined to an area of about 44,000 acres in two portions: the Northern Marshes, which occupied about 20,000 acres and the Southern Marshes, about 15,000 acres.

In the period 1909-1919 the Society was apparently able to have most of the Northern and Southern Marshes declared a sanctuary. However, in 1921 the Annual Report had the following item:

'... During the year we received a notification from the Lands Department that further applications had been made for portions of this Reserve. A written protest was addressed to the Department ...'

And so the battle continued until 1949, when David Stead had this to say:

'... To mark out a great tract of this land on the map, publish boundaries, call it a Flora and Fauna Sanctuary, and then put in a lot of reservations about grazing, timber and whatnot, is utter nonsense, as it can never be any sort of real sanctuary under such conditions.'

In 1951 a Macquarie Marshes Investigation Committee, made up entirely of Government representatives, recommended that 'all steps practical should be taken to preserve and protect the extensive breeding grounds constituted by the Marshes', together with a list of recommendations on how this could be done. Still nothing happened, because the Lands Department would not agree to its dedication.

In 1953 the Fauna Protection Panel resolved that:

'The Panel considers that the Macquarie Marshes is the outstanding area in the State requiring the protection envisaged under Section 9 of the Fauna Protection Act and that the Panel is of the opinion that it is not possible to perform fully the functions for which it was created unless action is taken to

make available suitable areas as reserves for the protection of fauna, the propagation of fauna and the scientific study of fauna.'

In 1957-58 the Society was informed, following more protests by its Council, that all applications for mining leases in the area had been refused as 'a grant of authorities to prospect would be inimical to public interest.'

In 1962 Dr. R. Carrick of the CSIR Division of Wildlife Research again drew attention to the need for preservation of the Marshes. Finally, in January 1970, the Society was informed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service of a proposed Nature Reserve over the Northern and Southern Marshes. But in September 1970, the Society was announcing that the campaign to save the Macquarie Marshes was still not over. One problem was that, along with the proposed Nature Reserve, the National Parks and Wildlife Service was also proposing a Game Reserve, which would open the Marshes to shooters.

But there was a further more serious problem. The Water Resources Commission was proposing to construct a channel several kilometres long in the south of the Marshes, with a view to diverting water to the old channel of the Macquarie River. The purpose of this work was said to be the increase in efficiency of distribution of regulated flows in the whole Macquarie River system. The major beneficiaries of the work would be a small number of farmers (about eight) holding irrigation licences of up to 160 hectares each.

According to the Minister for Water Resources, Hon. A. R. L. Gordon, agreement had been reached with the NPWS on environmental safeguards to be employed during the construction phase of the diversion channel, but it appeared that National Parks and Wildlife Service conditions would not be applied to the operation of the scheme.

The aim of the Water Resources Commission project was to reduce water loss to the Marsh area and hence preserve water in the Burrendong Dam. Although this was an admirable aim for water conservation, the results were likely to be adverse for waterfowl conservation. Channel levee banks would cause bank-up of water, changing the depth of the Marshes in places, drowning tree roots and depleting the Marsh of aquatic feed plants. The works would probably result in overall changes to the hydrology of the Marshes, altering flood patterns and varying water temperatures.

In August 1979 it was announced that the State Government had postponed the diversion of the Macquarie River through the Marshes after protests from conservationists. Although plans for the project had been in preparation for ten years, there had not been a full study of the impact on bird and fish life. Nor had there been a cost/benefit study comparing farming, recreation, and wildlife implications.

The *Australian Wild Life* commented in its issue of August 1979:

'The Water Resources Commission claims it will protect the Marshes. What is meant by the Marshes, however, is the present inadequate Nature Reserve, but not the far more extensive semi-permanent and seasonal swamps. These are progressively being destroyed by drainage, fire, and feral animals. Regarding the proposed drain, the planned diversion channel will considerably reduce the flow of water to the Southern Marsh; the

average period during which flow will cease will increase from approximately one and a third months per year to approximately five months per year.

‘... At present the WRC control water allocation via the Burrendong Dam. In view of past actions the WRC cannot be trusted to protect the Marshes, particularly in drought.’

This comment had been taken from the Total Environment Centre Newsletter for May 1979.

In December 1996, an article in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, by Murray Hogarth, highlighted the dilemma facing the managers of a wetlands such as the Macquarie Marshes. The fate of tens of thousands of young waterbirds was being pitted against the thirst of Australia's \$1 billion-a-year cotton irrigation industry. When the State Government decided to allocate 125,000 megalitres of water a year from the Burrendong Dam to the Marshes, angry irrigators stormed into the civic reception for the Cabinet in Dubbo. An irrigator's spokesman told the *Herald* that the State Government's new plan of management for the Macquarie River was 'dysfunctional,' was based on uncertain science and would cost \$100 million in lost farm income and 600 jobs.

Ray Jones, the local National Parks and Wildlife Service ranger said, 'The irrigators say to me, "We've got a crop to grow", and I say to them that we've got a crop to grow too. A crop of birds.'

But the Government kept its nerve and the sky did not fall. The next year, assisted by good rain, there was a bumper crop, of both cotton and birds.

In 1998, the Department of Land and Water Conservation was preparing for release a number of water reform policies for various rivers and streams. The water reform policy for the Macquarie River is a carbon copy of the 1996 policy and water is still being released into the wetlands of the Macquarie Marshes.

The Serventy Conservation Medal for 2007 was presented to Bev Smiles who had been active for many years in the Western Conservation Alliance and the Central West Environment Council. She has had a high profile as an advocate for protecting the Macquarie Marshes (as well as other concerns) and at the time of receiving her award in early 2008 she was the Western Project Manager for the National Parks Association of New South Wales. In *Australian Wildlife* Summer 1/2006, Bev brought us up-to-date on the latest campaign to save the Macquarie Marshes:

‘The Macquarie has only a fifty percent reliability of having a full allocation (of water) available. During the driest period on record from 2000 to 2005, the Marshes have been significantly impacted. Only 20,000 hectares of the Marshes, including 6,000 hectares of the Nature Reserve, have received adequate water since 2000. Healthy condition exists in only about 600 hectares of total Marsh area.

‘No successful colonial waterline breeding has recurred in the Marshes since 2000 and 2,000 hectares of river redgums are dying. There has been

increased incidence of bushfires since the early 1990s. Impacts of climate change are a major long-term threat to the survival of the Marshes. More water is the only solution to keeping this significant inland icon alive. At least another 140,000 mega litres are needed to secure the future of the Macquarie Marshes.

‘The Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia has supported the campaign calling for more water to the Macquarie Marshes and giving a generous donation towards the project.’

GREEN CORRIDORS

In the early 1970s Vincent Serventy was speaking out strongly in support of what he called ‘greenways’ or green wildlife corridors, roads or trails by which wildlife in search of survival could travel. At a World Ornithological Congress in Canberra in 1974 American scientist Jared Diamond showed clearly that the smaller the area an ecosystem was reduced to, the more species were lost. He led discussion on how national park managers should design the shape of their parks. It had long been accepted wisdom that such national parks should be treated as ‘islands’ in a sea of agriculture.

Some state committees had been formed to preserve the bush along roadside verges, and Vincent made the suggestion that the linking of all our pieces of bushland with greenways might help in the survival of species. Dr. David Mills suggested we call these roads ‘wild lifelines.’ The Wild Life Preservation Society pushed hard for wildlife greenways. To capture public interest, they were called ‘koala corridors’, suggesting that with the planting of suitable trees an energetic and long-lived koala might travel in safety from Townsville to the Mount Lofty Ranges near Adelaide.

In Australia books have now been written on this concept of bush corridors. Inevitably there have been critics. In 1996 Vincent Serventy received a newsletter in which the author criticised the cost and questioned whether the corridors were really useful in saving wildlife. Vincent claimed that the true reason for much of the criticism is usually that such greenways could be used to block development projects.³

However, in the Hunter Region, the Green Corridor Coalition (of which the Wildlife Preservation Society is a leading player) is active, supported by fifty community and conservation groups and is party non-political. The coalition has played a leading role in advocating for the ‘green corridors’ to be protected in the National Parks Estate and for the green corridors to be central to good planning. The coalition acknowledges the generous assistance of people from all sides of politics and all walks of life in making the giant steps towards achieving this goal in the Lower Hunter.⁴

³ V. Serventy, *An Australian Life*, p. 151

⁴ *Australian Wildlife*, Summer 1/2007, p. 11

A key part of the green corridors in the Hunter Region is the state significant ‘spine’ known as the Watagans to Stockton Bight and Port Stephens Green Corridor. The corridor begins in the largest sand dune system on the eastern Australian seaboard at Stockton Bight then sweeps through the Hunter estuary wetlands and climbs up the Tank Paddock spur to Mount Sugarloaf and on to the Watagans. Its passage provides a green edge and scenic backdrop to Newcastle, Lake Macquarie, Port Stephens, Maitland and Cessnock. It is approximately fifty kilometres in length and connects to the Great Dividing Range.

In 2004 WPSA National President Patrick Medway led a deputation from the Green Corridor Coalition to Parliament House in Sydney to present 10,000 signed cards to the Minister for the Environment calling for the establishment of the green corridor.

Given that sustainability is at the heart of Government planning, regional corridors must be made part of its strategic conservation policy. It is now recognised that this requires protecting major corridors in the National Parks Estate because failure to do so will see these corridors continue to be subjected to future development pressures, particularly in areas of high-population growth.⁵

A PROGRAM OF ACTIVITIES

Council members and other concerned individuals were the backbone of the Society's fight for preservation of wildlife. But for many years there was a program of monthly meetings for members with some very accomplished and knowledgeable speakers. Activities were also organised for members at weekends. During the 1960s and 1970s Alan Catford became Activities Manager and a well organised program was prepared for members - before that the activities had been more or less sporadic. However, over the years it was disappointing to see only a small number of people attending the monthly evening lectures, despite the quality of the speakers. During the 1980s the meetings became quarterly, but the attendance was still low. Finally, in the late 1980s, it was decided to drop the program of evening meetings entirely.

As an example of the fine programmes Alan Catford used to organise, here are some excerpts from the Activities Program for January-June 1972. The evening lectures were being held in the Community Hall, Blues Point Road, McMahon's Point:

March	Fossils, Key to the Past, Dr. A. Ritchie
April	Marsupials - The Little Ones, Vincent Serventy
May	Pesticides, and their side-effects, Mr. A. Woods from the University of New South Wales
June	The Vanishing Wilderness, Mr. Milo Dunphy.

Excursions:

February	Bilpin and Mountain Lagoon
March	Two-day trip to the Myall Lakes area
April	Elouera Bushland Reserve
May	Hawkesbury River Cruise (Jim Brown)
June	Walk in Royal National Park
June	Two-day Blue Mountains Camp, in association with the

⁵ ibid

National Parks Association.

Jim Brown was another active member in the organisation of field trips and acted as leader on many marine excursions. The excursions organised during the 1970s were very popular and always well attended.

HAIRY-NOSED WOMBAT

The World Wide Fund for Nature, or World Wildlife Fund (WWF), is not only the world's largest conservation organisation, but also helps fund the huge World Conservation Union which acts as the conservation conscience of nations. It should be pointed out that the original WWF name, World Wildlife Fund, was changed to the more cumbersome 'World Wide Fund for Nature' because some few countries did not have the word 'wildlife' in their language.

The Australian section of WWF was established in 1978 and Vincent Serventy became a member of its scientific committee. He was to play a crucial role in leading the WWF to assist in the protection of a rare animal, the Queensland hairy-nosed wombat. This animal has been recorded in only three restricted localities: near Deniliquin in New South Wales; on the Moonie River near St George in southern Queensland; and at Epping Forest 150 kilometres north-west of Clermont, Queensland. The Deniliquin population was small and isolated when discovered in 1884 and had disappeared by 1909. The Moonie River population has disappeared since its discovery in 1891. The only known surviving population is at Epping Forest. Epping Forest National Park was declared in 1971 to protect the habitat of this only known colony, but grazing cattle continued to be a problem.

In 1979 Vincent Serventy was approached as President of the Wild Life Preservation Society by a scientist who was concerned about the status of the hairy-nosed wombat. Unfortunately the Society had no money at that time, so Vincent suggested to the WWF that one of their projects could be to finance the fencing-off of an area within Epping Forest National Park to keep cattle away from the wombat colony. Vincent contacted a friend in National Parks of Queensland to ask if the work could be done if WWF provided the finance. The proposal was agreeable to all parties and one more endangered animal had a second chance.

Years later, as reported in 2002, a new threat arose. Dingoes, increasing with the spread of farming, were killing young wombats. Special fences were needed to keep them out of paddocks near national parks. The Society contributed \$1,000 to help build such a fence and suggested also to the park service that it should create a 'biological fence' of 1080 baits to keep dingoes out of the park until the fence could be built.⁶ In the Summer 2007 issue of *Australian Wildlife* it was reported that the small population of northern hairy-nosed wombats is still not secure and the species is still considered endangered.

A new concept was introduced to the world as the 1980s decade drew near. It was 'sustainability' and a new federation of organisations was established in 1982, its

⁶*Australian Wildlife*, Winter 2002, p. 21

mission to achieve sustainable land and water resources, primarily through improving vegetation management practices. This was Greening Australia.