

CHAPTER 13

DEVELOPMENTS IN THE 1980s

“The Greening of Australia will ensure that future Australians have ample plant cover for their ecological, economic, and recreational needs.”

Australian Wild Life, April 1982

The Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia may have had its executive based in Sydney, New South Wales, since its inception in 1909. But its thinking has always been on a broad front and, while its purpose is to support the status of wildlife in Australia, the vision goes beyond our shores. This has continued to be the case since 1966 when Vincent Serventy became President.

The Annual Report for 1973-74 included these comments from President Serventy:

'We are Australia's oldest conservation society and, whilst I am President, I intend to do all in my power to keep our thinking Australia-wide. There has been a tendency amongst some members to suggest that we should concentrate on NSW matters and NSW projects. For example, one such move would have spent a substantial proportion of our finances on a very worthy but local project. Our funds, to my mind, are to be spent on improving our conservation work over the whole of Australia. There is only one other strong state organisation, the Queensland Wildlife Preservation Society, so our Society must cater for the rest of Australia.'

Just one example from many will suffice to illustrate Vincent Serventy's commitment to the above policy in his role as President of the Wild Life Preservation Society. This particular wilderness fight was in Western Australia, the Mt. Lesueur area east of Jurien Bay, in the northern sandplains between Perth and Kalbarri. In May 1989 Vincent Serventy was visiting the area and lending his support to the fight to prevent the area becoming an open-cut coal mine and power station site.

The Mt. Lesueur area has a diverse flora of over 800 species, including many plants found nowhere else. This represents ten percent of the state's known flora. Six species were declared rare and endangered in 1989 and several more were likely to be added to that list. Over 145 bird species and 48 reptiles had been recorded for the area by the WA Museum at that time. As well as being a wildlife haven, it is an area of spectacular scenic beauty.

The area was recommended as a national park in the 1950s, a move endorsed by the Australian Academy of Science in 1962 and by the Environmental Protection Authority in 1976. But it would appear that the failure to be gazetted was due to the power of the Mines Department to veto proposals for Nature Reserves and National Parks. Vincent Serventy was reported in the WA press for Sunday 14 May 1989 as saying that the plans to mine the area were 'a crime against the environment' and were just as newsworthy as crimes against individuals. 'We have a human bill of rights; we need an environmental bill of rights.' Vin went on to say, 'Here we are in danger of destroying unique flora and good farm land to mine poor quality coal which is not good enough for export.'

The battle was successful, and Mt. Lesueur National Park was gazetted in 1992. The coal mine did not go ahead, but in 1998 mining interests were still aware that the coal deposits remained *in situ* and rumblings occur from time to time even though the coal is of low-grade quality.

GREENING AUSTRALIA

The Society lent its support to the Greening Australia program, established in 1982. Its vision looks towards a healthy, diverse and productive environment treasured by the whole community. Its mission is to engage the community in vegetation management to protect and restore the health, diversity and productivity of our unique Australian landscapes.

With over twenty-six years of experience in creating sustainable environmental outcomes, Greening Australia is a solutions-driven organisation that is committed to doing something practical about Australia's environmental problems. 'We do much more than simply plant trees,' said its CEO.

Greening Australia tackles critical issues like salinity, declining water quality, soil degradation, climate change and biodiversity loss through an innovative blend of practical experience, science and community engagement. 'We are dedicated to protecting our heritage, its biodiversity and natural resources, putting back in a way that allows all Australians in be part of the climate change solution.'

With a network of over 350 staff in locations across the continent, Greening Australia lives and works with people from remote and metropolitan communities.

The Society today remains supportive of the concepts of Greening Australia.

LORD HOWE ISLAND AND JIM BROWN

The conservation status of Lord Howe Island was an on-going concern in the years following the Second World War and the Society was directly involved in raising awareness of the need for protection of this unique island. Vincent Serventy, as President, was an outspoken advocate for the cause, but it was a member of the Society who served for many years as a Vice-President who made Lord Howe Island his personal area of interest and concern.

Jim Brown and his wife Mabel, keen bushwalkers, joined the Society in the early 1950s. Not only had he made a career for himself by his inventions, but he also took part in football, surfing and finally in gymnastics. He achieved great fame in this, not only becoming an Australian champion but also a judge representing Australia in four Olympic Games. He was made a life member of the Australian Association of Gymnasts. But it was after his introduction to the beauties of Lord Howe Island that he became involved with the underwater world through mastering the science and art of scuba diving and underwater photography.

Lord Howe Island is a small volcanic island situated some seven hundred kilometres north-east of Sydney. Roughly crescent shaped, it is approximately eleven kilometres long and almost three kilometres at its widest point, totalling 1,455 hectares in area. First settled in 1834, the island is still largely untouched forest, mainly due to the rugged terrain and the island's isolation. Two volcanic mountains dominate the landscape (Mt. Lidgbird and Mt. Gower), the southern one (Mt. Gower), rising to 875 metres from the sea, sheer black cliffs of basalt with steeply forested slopes. The northern part of the island is a series of low hills which slope gently up from the west to a height of about 100 metres; on the eastern side they plunge as sheer cliffs to the sea. Several flat low-lying areas between the hills in the north and the mountains in the south provide land for settlement and these areas have been partially cleared of forest. A shallow reef-fringed lagoon with white sandy beaches adds an idyllic touch to this island paradise.¹

The first recorded sighting of Lord Howe Island was made by Lieutenant Henry Lidgbird Ball on 17 February 1788 aboard the *HMS Supply* as she sailed between Port Jackson and Norfolk Island. On the return journey Ball landed on the island and claimed it as a British possession. He gave it the name of the First Lord of the Admiralty, Lord Howe. Mt. Lidgbird and Balls Pyramid he named after himself.

For many years the island was visited regularly but briefly by government ships sailing from Sydney to Norfolk Island and by whalers operating in the Middle grounds, as the waters between Australia and New Zealand were called. Whalers came in search of fresh water and food, trapping numerous tame land birds that had, until this time, lived without fear of humans. Most of the endemic land birds are now extinct; at least three species were lost in the slaughter for food. Early in this period, pigs and goats were let free on the island to add to the food supply and they too took a toll on the environment.

In 1893 the Burns Philp company commenced a regular shipping service and small numbers of tourists began to visit the island. In 1932 the *SS Morinda* began a regular tourist run. Unfortunately the Burns Philp Company also brought rats (*Rattus rattus*) to the island. They arrived when the steamship *SS Makambo* ran aground near Neds Beach on 14 June 1918. Cargo was thrown overboard and washed ashore, carrying the rats. The rat population soon grew to plague proportions causing the extinction of more species of land birds and reducing the palm seed harvest considerably.

Jim Brown told his story of Lord Howe Island in *Australian Wild Life*, June 1983. 'My conviction that Lord Howe Island should prove to be much more important than the subject of a beautiful island story has persisted since my first visit in 1938.' Jim, his wife Mabel and daughter, Joan, would visit the island almost every year, well into the 1980s. As his photography skills increased he gave many shows, often on the mainland, to raise public awareness. He was also a generous benefactor, to the school in particular.

Jim continued:

¹ Credit is due to Ian Hutton's book *Lord Howe Island*, 1986, for general information on the island

'It was obvious then (1938) that the island had been saved from the effects of considerable traffic flow because of its unique isolation, irregular boat services and the lack of harbour. We were taken ashore in whale boats and carried beyond the water's edge at Neds Beach on the backs of sturdy seamen - and this marked the beginning of a rare and beautiful experience that left us with a desire to repeat it all soon. After World War II and the introduction of a regular flying boat service, the island became more accessible for increasing numbers of people and through this there were problems - serious problems of abuse.

'It was inevitable that discipline and restraints would have to be accepted by all concerned. Controls would have to be enforced by the island management team ... Being a lay worker in conservation, I considered it necessary to channel most of my work through the support of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia of which I was Vice-president and one of this Society's delegates to the Nature Conservation Council - obviously I had the support of both organisations.'

Three important events shaped the island's history in the period following the Second World War - a greater interest in the island by the government of New South Wales, the growth of tourism, and the issue of conservation. The interest by the state government resulted in the Lord Howe Island Act in 1953 which gave the islanders security of tenure (perpetual leasehold) over the land they had previously held only as permissive occupants. However, it was not until the passing of the Lord Howe Island Amendment Act of 1981 that islanders were allowed a greater say in the administrative affairs of the island; the 1981 Act gave them a majority representation of three members on a five-man board.

Perhaps the most significant development of the post-war period was the struggle to define the island's conservation status. The pressure of goat browsing on the rich endemic flora of the southern mountain area prompted P. S. Green of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, to urge the New South Wales government to undertake an environmental survey of the island. The government agreed and the survey, coordinated by Dr. H. Recher of the Australian Museum, Sydney, commenced in 1970. This survey defined the status of plants and certain groups of animals on the island so that changes in the environment, and their effect on wildlife, could be monitored. Scientists from the Australian Museum, Royal Botanic Gardens, Sydney, and the CSIRO Department of Wildlife Research contributed to the studies which resulted in *The Environmental Survey of Lord Howe Island*.

The impetus given to conservation by the *Environmental Survey* was reinforced by the lobbying of conservationists, such as Jim Brown, Vincent Serventy and Milo Dunphy.

After many years of debate the Lord Howe Island Act of 1981 established a Permanent Park Preserve over nearly seventy percent of the island and provided for a Plan of Management for the orderly development of future settlement. It also placed the island within the jurisdiction of the NSW Planning and Environment Act. Part of the success of gaining government interest was no doubt due to Jim Brown being able to introduce Premier Hon. Neville Wran to the beauties of the island - Jim acted as a guide to Neville and his wife, Jill. In July 1986 Premier Wran signed the Plan of

Management for the Permanent Park Preserves, adopted in accordance with Section 75 of the National Parks and Wildlife Act and Section 15B of the Lord Howe Island Act. The two-thirds of the island classified as Permanent Park Preserves are administered and managed by the Lord Howe Island Board, with assistance in management from the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.

In 1981 the Australian government nominated Lord Howe Island for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List. This list consists of properties of 'outstanding universal value' for world culture and heritage. At a session of the UNESCO World Heritage Committee in Paris on 14 December 1982, the whole island, settlement and preserves, together with a square of adjoining ocean and associated smaller islands, was placed on the World Heritage List.

Jim Brown made this comment:

'The award was not easily won. Not after twenty years of unremitting effort and many thousands of dollars in privately borne costs ... obviously there were sacrifices. During the years of greatest demand on all levels of effort and expenditure, both here and abroad, I was sustained in a personal sense by a few untiring assistants who never quailed - I would be remiss if they were not mentioned. Hence my recognition and gratitude to the following persons:

'Vincent Serventy A.M., B.Sc., B.Ed. - honoured academic, President of the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia and executive member of the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, whose wide influence and experience during the latter stages of the project were valued beyond measure. We submitted some of our photographs which were included for final deliberation by the World Heritage Commission in Paris and he visited Lord Howe Island in connection with the survival and captive breeding of the endangered Woodhen.

'Miss Jane Mendel (now Schmidt) was responsible for all the secretarial and much involved representative work on my behalf in Australia, USA, and Britain - she was indispensable because of her versatility and reliability.

Jane was assisted by Miss Doina Botton, academic and linguist, who combined with Jane in much of the publicity, presentations of picture programmes and important public relations work, both in Australia and overseas, where valuable support in the Lord Howe Island project was won, in company with my wife, Mabel, who never failed us on all levels of essential background work and travel arrangements that had to be handled at short notice. Much of Mabel's activity merged with interests in the Lord Howe Island school, and my establishment of a physical education and gymnastic group for young people on the island ... In conclusion, I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all of those qualified people who had the skill and understanding to grant or contribute to the granting of Lord Howe Island's World Heritage status, particularly Warren Nichols of the Australian Heritage Commission.'²

² Article by Jim Brown in *Australian Wild Life*, June 1983, p. 4-5

Jim Brown died in 1989 and the Society discussed the nature of an appropriate memorial. Finally a brass plaque was prepared and sent to Lord Howe Island to be placed on a wooden seat at Old Settlement Beach. It was also the Society which had nominated him for an Australian honour, and in 1986 he had been made a Member of the Order of Australia. It was Jim Brown who had educated and enthused the Society about Lord Howe Island. It is fitting to conclude this section with a reference to a wildlife concern which became a success story, a concern which became action due to pressure from the Wild Life Preservation Society and other interested bodies. This was the captive breeding program for the endangered woodhen.

The program was developed mainly because of a seminar organised by Carol Serventy, the chairperson of the newly formed Australian Museum Society. Vin spoke at the meeting and stated only a captive breeding program could save the species. As a member of the advisory committee of the National Parks and Wildlife Service he was asked to convince the state government this work should begin. Also he convinced the main supplier of funds for research on the woodhen to agree that breeding the bird should have the first priority.

The Lord Howe Island woodhen (*Gallirallus sylvestris*), flightless and curious, was a natural prey for sailors who could easily catch it and make a delicious pie. Furthermore, the rats, goats, pigs and cats roaming the island helped to reduce the numbers so much that by 1980 there were only six known breeding pairs, living high up in the forests of Mount Gower. With finance from the National Parks Foundation, plans were made to start a captive breeding program on the lowlands of the island, together with a concerted effort to remove the feral animals. First, a breeding pair was lifted by helicopter from their misty mountain home and installed in a special pen. The result, three months later, was a batch of eggs and then the happy event, a chick named Widdy. By 1981 he had thirteen brothers and sisters and, with feral animals reduced, plans made to put them back into the wild. By this stage the woodhen project had already cost \$250,000. Spokesperson for the National Parks and Wildlife Foundation, Miss Anne Kennedy Westbrook, considered it was all worthwhile, especially for the international acclaim Australia had won among ecologists. The Lord Howe Island woodhens had been brought back from the precipice of extinction - a wildlife preservation success story.

NOTHING HAS CHANGED – THE SMUGGLERS WHO PREY ON OUR FAUNA

Australian Wild Life, July 1982, reported that throughout Australia thousands of wild birds and reptiles are the pathetic target of a multi-million dollar illegal business, trafficking in Australian fauna. Among the targets are the golden shouldered parrot, sulphur-crested cockatoos, northern rosellas, Major Mitchells, galahs, black cockatoos and the paradise and hooded parrots, as well as many others. Also illegally sought and smuggled are hundreds of reptiles such as the taipan snake, pythons and lizards of all descriptions.

Senior wildlife officers around Australia believe thousands upon thousands of birds and reptiles are being trapped and smuggled, both overseas and interstate. They are

certain also that light aircraft are regularly flying out from remote bush airstrips with their live, frightened cargoes bound for overseas destinations. Wildlife officers, police and Customs investigators say privately that the trapping, dealing and smuggling has reached particularly frightening proportions in Queensland and the Northern Territory, involves hundreds of people and a vast network of trafficking routes covering the Australian continent.

Customs officials and wildlife officers claimed they were hampered by lack of equipment and staff. With three million hectares of national parks and a coastline stretching 3,000 kms it is practically impossible to keep the lid tight on the trade in Queensland, a spokesperson said. 'There is so much work we can't handle it.' At this time (1982) new legislation was before Federal Parliament, but laws are not sufficient to stop the wrongdoing.

MEETINGS

(Reported June 1985)

'It is of growing concern to your Committee that attendances at our meetings are dwindling to an alarming extent. At some meetings we have had barely two people other than the Committee. Most disturbing has been the loss of past regulars, not for just one or two months, but for the whole of this year, and much of last year. Are our programs not to your liking? Was it the weather or something we said? (or didn't say?). Public meetings are a relatively new function of the Society as meetings and activities were not organized for members until within the last twenty years or so, although we have been in existence for over 75 years. If the situation deteriorates further we may be forced to seriously consider abandoning these meetings.'

HAMMERSLEY RANGE NATIONAL PARK

The Conservation Council of Western Australia informed the Society in late 1985 that there was a proposal to mine for gold in the Hammersley Range National Park, threatening the integrity of this unique area as well as that of all other National Parks in Western Australia. This park was listed on the Register of the National Estate because of its national significance. It is an 'A' Class reserve south of Wittenoom, 617,606 hectares, one of Western Australia's premier tourist attractions. The Society sent a letter to the Premier of Western Australia, the Hon. Mr. Don Burke, urging him to reconsider the matter.

In the March 1986 issue of *Australian Wild Life* the reply to the Society's letter from the Minister for Minerals and Energy, Hon. David Parker, was reported as follows:

'I took the trouble to visit the minesite, made a thorough study of the EPA report and discussed the matter widely. After considering all this I came to the conclusion that the project would not permanently alter the landscape ... (it would have) no significant impact on the park's overall recreational or conservation significance ... I therefore decided it should proceed.'

The Society's Editor, in a note, stated that the Society was opposed to this mining proposal on the basis that it created a precedent for future mining claims, possibly on much larger scales.

OSPREY AND BOUGAINVILLE REEFS

In February 1987 a petition was sent to the Hon. Barry Cohen, Minister for the Environment, Canberra, asking that North Horn, situated on Osprey Reef in the Coral Sea, be immediately proclaimed a marine national park ... 'without protection the wonderful and unique marine life inhabiting the North Horn and adjacent reef areas will eventually be ruined by fishermen and spearfishermen.'

In January 1989 a further petition was sent to Senator Graham Richardson, Minister for the Environment, asking again about Osprey Reef, but including a plea for protection of Bougainville Reef also. 'If these areas cannot, for some reason, become Marine National Parks, at least make spearfishing, which is a terrible blood-sport, illegal.'

Below are listed some of the other worthy causes in which the Society was involved in the 1980s:

- The campaign for Jervis Bay was successful, with large areas of land and sea being preserved as national parks
- The Society continued the almost lone war against clearfelling in native forests throughout Australia in order to save native wildlife habitat
- Campaigned for the protection of the Creery Wetlands in Western Australia
- Supported Birds Australia Regent Honeyeater Recovery Project in the Capertee Valley by planting native trees
- Push for wildlife corridors was successful with Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia making this governmental policy
- Produced a brochure in conjunction with the Nature Conservation Council of NSW entitled *Wildlife in Danger in New South Wales*
- Vincent Serventy published *Saving Australia, a Blueprint for our Survival* in 1988.