

CHAPTER 14

PROFILE – THE SOCIETY’S EVOLVING EMPHASIS

‘Conserving ecosystems is a new drive.’
Australian Wildlife, Winter 2002

By definition the Wildlife Preservation Society should be focused on the preservation of wildlife, but over the years it has evolved into a broader conservation movement. This shift away from a strict preservation emphasis has continued under President Serventy and President Medway, and he is supported by others who realise that preservation of habitat is needed to protect wildlife. From this stand, to protect a species and its habitat has come another shift, with the realisation that other factors, such as predators, can affect the survival of a species. A prime example is seen in the recent restoration of the woylie population in Western Australia.

The woylie, a small pademelon wallaby, survives in four localities in south-western Western Australia. The species was widespread two hundred years ago; in eastern Australia it was rapidly eliminated within two or three decades of European settlement, through a combination of competition from introduced herbivores (including rabbits which invaded the burrows), predation from foxes and cats and poisoning or hunting of 'bush vermin' by early settlers.

The brush-tailed bettong (as it is known in the east) is now better known by its Aboriginal name of woylie. The woylie (*Bettongia pencillata*) has a distinctive tail, which has longer hair towards the tip on the upper surface, forming a black crest or brush. By the early 1970s this rat-kangaroo was already extremely rare, except in the wandoo forests of south-western Australia. Clearing for agriculture had been a major factor, but in forest areas predation by foxes and cats was taking its toll.

Over thirty-five years ago the Society was showing concern over the status of the woylie (and other species at risk). In the minutes of the Council meeting on 13 November 1973, one item read: 'It was resolved that information be sought about the possibility of preserving the woylie and numbat areas at Manjimup as fauna protection areas.' Today, controlling foxes has meant that the woylie has now been removed from the threatened species list.

An example of the dramatic increase in fauna populations following fox control is the recovery of woylies at Batalling in Western Australia. Only one woylie was caught per two hundred traps laid at Batalling, near Collie, in the 1980s. In 1995, just four years after regular fox control began, twenty-four woylies were caught for one hundred traps. At Perup, near Manjimup, it is now common to catch more than fifty woylies per one hundred traps.

Western Australia has led the way in facing the problem of feral animals. The Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) successfully pioneered programs to control foxes to prevent further extinctions. The campaign's name was "Western Shield", CALM's project to expand predator control and then reintroduce native animals to former habitats, an operation with an annual budget of \$1 million. Pioneering research by CALM scientists has shown that effective fox control leads to

a recovery in the number and range of many species of native animals, from mammals such as numbats, woylies, chuditch and rock-wallabies, to ground-nesting birds and some reptiles. As a result of 'Western Shield', people will once more be able to see mammals that were once almost extinct.

Western Australia has a natural advantage in controlling introduced predators - a group of plants known as 'poison peas'. These native species contain the poison sodium fluoroacetate, which is manufactured synthetically under the name '1080' (ten-eighty). The native animals that evolved alongside these plants have a natural resistance to the poison, but it is lethal in minute amounts to animals introduced from overseas, including foxes and feral cats.

Tough, leathery meat baits carrying small amounts of 1080 will kill foxes (and cats, if they will take the baits), but won't harm native animals. Unlike other toxins currently available, research by the Agriculture Protection Board (APB) and Curtin University has shown that 1080 breaks down quickly in the soil without causing any environmental side-effects. There is absolutely no possibility of 1080 building up in the soil or finding its way into water supplies as a result of feral predator control measures.

With the help of sponsors, volunteers, landholders and other members of the community, 'Western Shield' is going to make a massive difference to the recovery of Western Australia's native species. Why not an 'Eastern Shield' also? In 1996 the Society contacted the Federal Minister for the Environment with a plea that the Western Australian initiative should be spread to all parts of Australia. No response. Premiers of other states say, 'We have our own experts.'

THE CRUCIAL IMPORTANCE OF HABITAT PRESERVATION

In the issue of *Australian Wildlife* for Summer 2002/3 Vice-President Dr. Clive Williams wrote of the importance of habitat preservation. He pointed out that the Society was currently refining a set of policies which would both guide it in its activities and publicly pronounce its stance on important issues. Among the set of policies was one related to habitat preservation. Following is an extract from the article, just one indication of the shift taking place in the Society's thinking:

'In its current format this policy is divided into two sections:

1. The WPSA gives high priority to measures to protect habitat. Rationale: Loss of habitat presents the greatest threat at the present time to the preservation of biodiversity in Australia.
2. The WPSA supports measures to encourage and ensure proper management of lands outside parks and reserves, including ecologically sustainable management of agricultural lands. Rationale: The vast majority of endangered plants and animals are located outside National Parks and Reserves and governments do not have the resources to set aside adequate areas to protect these species.'

Dr. Williams went on to point out that some plants and animals are particularly adapted to specific environments. 'If these environments are disturbed, or worse, destroyed, then the plants and animals which are adapted to them are at risk of

destruction too. Efforts to preserve animals such as the northern hairy-nosed wombat and the bridled nail-tail wallaby have involved attempts to preserve their habitats ... We have a real challenge to plan ahead to minimise the effect we have on our environment.'

SEMINAR IN 2002

The Society sponsored a seminar in April 2002, its topic giving a clear indication of the shift in emphasis which had taken place. 'Soils, Habitat and Biodiversity' were the themes to be addressed and the Society had spent twelve months planning the Seminar and raising significant funds to carry it off. It was seen as an opportunity to promote the work of the Society through a different kind of medium. The Nature Conservation Council was the co-sponsor and over 135 people attended on the day. This ground-breaking event to address vital concerns was originally the idea of Vincent Serventy.

NEW TRENDS IN WPSA POLICY SINCE 1970

- The importance of biodiversity
- Increased wetlands protection
- Consideration of a total ecosystem approach
- Protecting the wider environment
- A broader view rather than emphasis on specific items, such as the koala or possum
- Support for research
- Attention to global warming and thus the greater need for wildlife corridors, especially for mammals
- A renewed commitment to environmental education.

In short, the emphasis now for the Society is the protection of the wider, broader, total environment. This changing emphasis is a reflection of the enlightenment, or new environmental awareness that developed in Australia and elsewhere during the 1970s. Concepts such as biodiversity, sustainability, and even the study of ecology, were not prevalent in the Stead era.

'Threatened communities' was a heading for a paragraph in *Australian Wildlife*, Winter 2002. 'Conserving ecosystems is a new drive. CALM, in Western Australia, has distinguished four categories - critically endangered, endangered, vulnerable and those gone forever. The Society saved one of those endangered - the woodland of Dryandra.'

Increased wetlands protection is reflected in the Society's continuing support of the Ramsar Convention, and its commitment to the environment of Towra Point. Support for research is behind the University Student Grants Scheme where grants are available for research projects of direct relevance to the conservation of Australian wildlife - plant or animal. The Society's goal of establishing an environmental education centre, is based on meeting the need for environmental education.

Autumn 2/2004 issue of *Australian Wildlife* reported on the success of the Society's new website. Public enquiries can now be accessed from this website; schools can access wildlife information for projects from this source; frequently asked questions can be answered from this information site. The Society's National Office receives and answers hundreds of routine wildlife calls each week from school students and the general public wanting to find out more about our native wildlife and the conservation of its vital habitat. A wide range of information brochures is available on the website and in hard copy for posting. The website may be viewed at <http://www/wpsa.org.au>

Joan Brandt, a member since the early 1960s, reminisced during a conversation early in 2009. Her husband, Franz Brandt, was Treasurer of the Society for about eleven years before he died in 1997. In Joan's opinion, the Society in the 1960s, with Thistle Stead at the helm, was not broad enough in its thinking because Thistle didn't have the wider vision that Vincent Serventy later brought to the Society. The direction in which the Society was moving was not clear enough, Joan added, but now there is that wider vision. Both Vincent and Patrick Medway brought to the Society a concern which encompassed the whole of Australia, and even global concerns. However, Joan Brandt reflected with enthusiasm on the wonderful outings the Society sponsored in the 1970s – they stopped, she says with regret. Field trips to places such as Bungonia Caves, Gunnamatta Bay, Lion Island, the Pitt Town Bottoms for bird watching and the Cattai area – just a few of the activities for members are fond memories. Joan agrees that the changing emphasis towards concern for habitat is a move in the right direction.

AUSTRALIAN WILDLIFE

By the 1990s the shift within the Society towards recognition of the importance of a total ecosystem had taken place, but this shift had not yet been reflected in the pages of *Australian Wildlife*. There is no intention here to detract from the quality of the earlier issues of *Australian Wildlife*, only to point out the slowly evolving emphasis. Of course, 'desperate dolphins', 'swimming snakes' and a 'pierced pelican' inspire much more interest and concern than ironbark trees or the needs of a freshwater ecosystem. But small marsupials feed on eucalypt blossoms and birds feed in freshwater habitats, so our concern should and must expand to the wider frontiers. As Vincent Serventy said, Dr. David Murray has come out of his 'ivory tower' to educate the Society on the broader issues of biodiversity. This is one reason why Patrick Medway has invited David to be a Vice-President and spread his knowledge about the importance of the total ecosystem concept.

The Spring 2002 issue was mainly concerned with information about birds and other creatures. Winter 2002 had made a brief statement on land clearing and expressed a hope that the Pilliga Forest would become a tourist mecca! A shift on emphasis was not apparent until 2007. Summer 1/2007 contained an article on new reserves and green corridors, emphasising not only fauna protection but protection of threatened plant communities in the Hunter region. The shift was more pronounced by 2008.

In Autumn 2/2008 there was a one-page article on land clearing and a short article on a new species of spinifex grass. Winter 3/2008 included a comprehensive article by

Dr. David Murray on the Australian Network for Plant Conservation. Another article in Winter 3/2008 by Carmel Flint and Bev Smiles stressed the urgent need for river red gum national parks. This article made it clear that emphasis for conservation cannot be on fauna species alone. The forests of south-western New South Wales have conservation values which include:

- Known or likely habitat for ten endangered and thirty-six vulnerable fauna species
- Nineteen migratory birds listed for protection under international agreements
- 84,000 hectares of internationally significant wetlands and the associated fauna and flora that is dependent.

The Society successfully launched its revamped coloured-cover magazine, *Australian Wildlife*, in 2003 and it continues to be widely acclaimed by the members and the wider community. The Editor, Suzanne Medway, is to be congratulated as she has raised the standard of the magazine to a new height.

However, a real milestone eventuated with the excellent issue of Summer 2009, the first of the Centenary editions. An issue in full colour, an editorial by the Editor, Suzanne Medway, informative articles by two recipients of the University Research Grants and articles by other authors. The Society should look on this new production with great satisfaction and congratulate Suzanne Medway for a first-rate publication.

THE FUTURE

Another step towards sustainability was taken in 2008. The following paragraph is taken from *Australian Wildlife*, Autumn 2/2008:

‘Acting on sound legal and accounting advice, the Council has implemented a major sustainable program for the future work of the Society; with a new and modern constitution to cope with the administrative and structural changes necessary for the Society to receive Tax Deductible Status and to be registered as an Approved Environmental Organisation with the Federal Government. Members and friends can make a tax deductible donation to the work of the Society, which will help to establish our long term viable future.

The Centenary goal? More members and resources, as well as measures, to better serve membership.’