

VICTORIA'S NATIONAL PARKS

A scenic landscape of a large blue lake, likely Lake Victoria, surrounded by forested hills. The water is a deep blue, and the hills are covered in dense green trees. In the distance, a small island or peninsula is visible. The sky is a clear, pale blue with a few wispy clouds. The overall scene is peaceful and natural.

*Laying the
Foundations*

By Ron Turner

The background of the cover is a soft-focus photograph of a large body of water, likely a lake or reservoir. In the distance, there are rolling hills covered in dense green forest. The sky is a pale, hazy blue. The overall mood is peaceful and natural.

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I was a fan of Crosbie Morrison, the first director of the National Parks Authority. Many years hence I was an avid listener to his radio broadcasts about flora and fauna. Regrettably, the subject of his many broadcasts now elude my mind. Except one, and that related to mischievous keas in New Zealand sliding down the roof of a hut, then looking in the window in response to a broom handle rapped onto the ceiling. And the damage those wicked beaks could cause to soft topped cars and rubber windscreen wipers!

I was to often remember Crosbie Morrison, when after completing my trades of Turning and Fitting, and Toolmaking, followed by six months in the Navy learning how to kill, and to survive shipboard fire and sinking, I was living in the Southern Alps of New Zealand cursing the kea and the damage done to our aerial food drops, trying to collect food items scattered across the snow grass slopes after being ripped from heavy potato bags.

After some years in New Zealand's high country I returned to Australia and tried to settle back into my trades prior to marriage. That period in the wilderness was a life changing epiphany for me for it changed my life and attitude towards conservation management. I just could not concentrate on machinery tasks. I had come to hate the indoor work.

1961-62

Dr. Len Smith gave me a really good hearing in his office when I approached him about a job and, shortly thereafter, I was interviewed by some committeemen of the Wilsons Promontory National Park. The interviewing panel seemed kindly and tried their best to convince me to honeymoon at Tidal River two days after marriage in May 1961.

My immediate role at Tidal River was to construct alone, by hand and 'by eye',



the benched walking track from the southern end of Norman Bay around to Little Oberon Bay. At completion of that task I was promoted to Assistant Ranger and worked with the Authority's first Technical Officer John Landy in opening up the tea tree bushland to extend the camping area and other developments and supervising the casual workforce of university students. I was then involved with various aspects of the busy camping holiday season followed by more track work west of Darby River.

While I had met briefly various members of the Committee of Management I was aware of a degree of tension between the committee and the Director. For Dr. Smith, 'The Prom' was perhaps his favourite national park. The exotic lemon tree in the Assistant Ranger's garden 'should be removed'; he insisted the slogans painted on the sides of the tipping rubbish trailer and mobile sewerage pumper be removed. One just didn't caricaturize Elvis Presley and other rock stars in 'his' national park. I thought they were quite artistic and raised a smile with visitors.

Then there was the incident where an instruction came from head office that all wombats with 'mange' (prevalent at the time) were to be caught and treated with the recommended solution. After one attempted capture I was made aware of the 'stupidity of head office'. The committee stepped in to countermand the instruction and it seemed this wasn't the first time either.

Dr. Smith held the view that a large fire which occurred in the north-eastern corner of the park in 1961 was lit in retaliation for Bob and myself burning down a decrepit deer poacher's camp on the Five Mile Beach. It had actually been a lightning strike and fortunately I had enough photographic evidence of its remoteness from the coast to allay his suspicions.



My first hand involvement with the 'committee' was perhaps my own fault. Rabbits had built up around the Tidal River camping area and workmen had told me it was the norm for specified persons to shoot them when there were no tourists about. Soon after, hearing shooting, but not being able to locate the source, I made enquiries and found out the father of the head ranger was carrying out the shooting, but no other staff had either been given permission to shoot, or knew anything about when or where the shooting was occurring.

Not long after I was called to a meeting with Mr Seaton, one of the committee who, after giving me a dressing down for 'stirring up the other staff', gave me a written dismissal notice.

Fraser

Whether Dr. Smith thought the dismissal unfair, or wished to show the committee who was in charge I do not know but, shortly afterwards, I found myself appointed by the National Parks Authority as Ranger in Charge at Fraser National Park with responsibilities to a Committee of Management.

(I was amused, some two years later, when the same Mr Seaton visited Fraser NP. When I told him how much the new brick veneer house being built for 'me' was costing he spluttered so violently into his hot tea that some actually spilled. He went on to tell me that no such extravagance was ever considered within Forestry, and of his early years describing his spartan accommodation as the accepted norm.)

The head office of the National Parks Authority was, in those early years, I thought, a friendly place, a place one was both a 'part of' and 'belonged' to. Staff (including the female secretarial staff) would readily chat and ask how things were going, or tell me of something that might interest or concern me, or ask for clarification or an opinion on some matter. It was possible to knock on Dr. Smith's door and be invited to enter.

In 1968 I called at the head office to collect a long wheel base Land Rover which had been given an extremely hard time at Mallacoota. The object was for me to go to Pentridge Prison and collect netting for conservation projects at Fraser. I always remember Ted Hannon telling me 'the brakes don't work, the front wheels wobble but, don't worry, you're insured'. (He didn't tell me that, when loaded, it was possible to see the tube through a slit in a front tyre). Perhaps I was a bit laid back also for one just got on with the job - although I did dump half of the load at a Fisheries and Wildlife depot in Footscray before proceeding home.

The Fraser National Park Committee of Management had, as its chairman ex councillor and former Shire Chairman, H. E. FitzRoy, and it was he that I had most of the early directives and advice from. Another ex councillor was a local grazier-neighbour of the park who was generally so negative towards the park that I wondered why he stayed. All was revealed, however, when he stated he was fighting for a wide sealed road to be built to provide public access to the park (past his driveway) and not a narrow rural road. He complained long and bitterly about rabbits and eventually forced the committee to destroy wombats adjacent to his property, although the committee's direction to me was restricted to burrows within a distance of 50 metres.

In agreeing to the creation of Fraser National Park the State Rivers & Water Supply Commission (SR&WSC) kept an area above the full supply level and a considerable area of land below that line placing it under the control of an Eildon Water Reserve (EWR) Committee of Management. Almost the only good thing about this was that the personnel for both committees were identical. At the conclusion of the national park committee meeting Chairman FitzRoy would open the EWR meeting and proceed with business relating to that area.

This meant to a duplication of similar matters crossing an almost 'imaginary' line. The official monthly meeting day would see two sets of agendas, minutes and financial statements as I collected monies for each committee. I would prepare reports relating to the national park and other reports for each area as necessary, especially in relation to infringements of the similar, but different sets of regulations.

Despite the bureaucratic problems thus created both committees complemented the activities of the other with the Water Reserve committee often funding manpower or projects within the national park or crossing the legal boundary into the park.

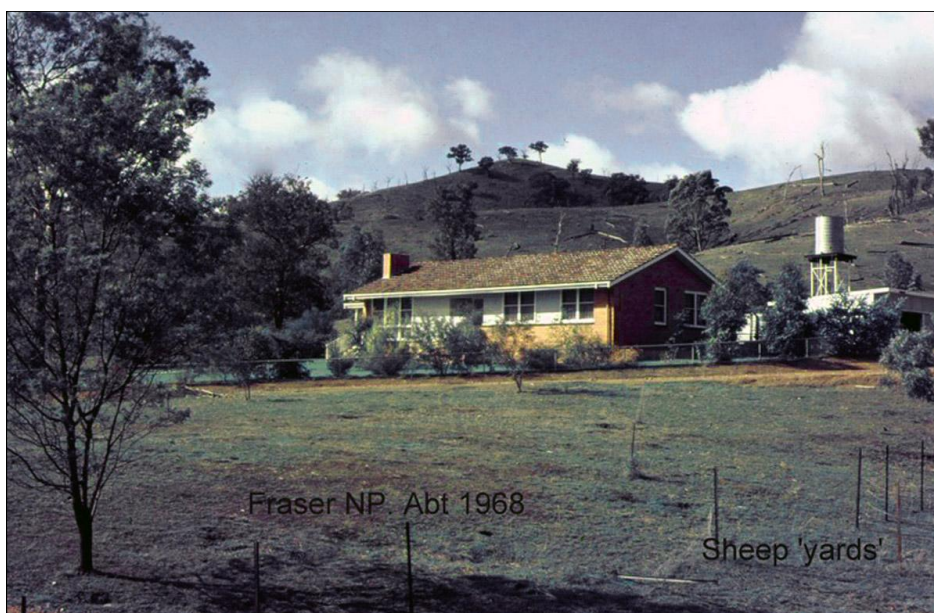
Another local man honestly and sincerely supporting the park and its natural inhabitants was Mr. Lin Cumming, a local apiarist. He staunchly opposed aerial poisoning as this was too indiscriminate in application. He accepted my invitations to walk within the park to observe first hand the effects of poisoning both aerial and land based. His stance mellowed as we started to suppress the rabbit numbers and there was no longer a need for aerial poisoning.

Other committee members represented the Forestry officer at Taggerty, State Rivers and Water Supply officers from Eildon and their head office. Jim Wharton, as Deputy Director of the Fisheries and Wildlife Department had travelled overseas and often led with innovative ideas of a nature trail, or an open air theatre. 'Mac' Wood the Deputy Director of the Soil Conservation Authority would often advocate the use of exotic plants to stabilise erosion but never pushed his views. Bill Brake was an engineer from the Country Roads Board. These men contributed both within the areas of their own expertise, and general broad wisdom.

An officer was provided from the national parks head office for Secretarial work and it was probably this interface which allowed a reasonably harmonious relationship to develop and continue over the years. Undoubtedly the Secretary would report directly to Dr. Smith well in advance of the official minutes confirmed a month later on what was going on at the park .

Graeme McKenzie was an early Secretary, Jim Bromeyer another. A later Secretary John Counihan was popular with our younger son who had an appreciation for sporty cars. John would tell him the car had wings which allowed him to travel extra fast from Haines Saddle! I believe these men deserve credit in keeping up with the dual administration of both areas.

I believe great credit should be given to Dr. Smith in providing these personnel for, over the years they would, in addition to national park duties, be applying for grants to both State and Federal authorities for the Eildon Water Reserve to enable various improvements outside the park such as the construction of launching ramps, or to employ staff to make walking tracks and handle all the wages and other issues not strictly within the charter of a National Parks Authority.



I generally felt the committee and secretariat were supportive of myself in various ways which is not to say they accepted everything I said or did. Generally they left the day to day operations to myself. Perhaps the most sensitive matter was for Lin Cumming to advocate and the committee to support a request for me to be allowed to shoot rabbits within the park. They supported my request for some fencing materials when I stated my

belief I could drive trespassing sheep off the hills for impoundment when most, if not all of them, thought my idea was 'far fetched', to say the least.

Requests for manpower for special purposes such as camp ground management were generally approved. If finance was a bit short the matter would be deferred and raised again in the EWR meeting where it would often be approved. Items within 'our' home such as a ceiling fan and a small electric hot water booster were approved. Equipment to 'do the job' out in the park would be supplied if not immediately, within a budgeted time frame. A 'silent number' telephone was installed to cut down the many after hours interruptions.



Initial meetings were held in the Soil Conservation offices at Alexandra and, when the house at Fraser was completed they all crowded into the small office attached to the house. I had never had a real involvement with any committee. My attendance at these meetings obviously gave the committee members the on-going opportunity to assess my person and my ability to perform tasks allocated. It was a great learning curve for myself.

Perhaps one of the best features of this committee was that it met monthly, and generally within the park where the personnel either as a committee or individually would inspect various areas and keep abreast of what was going on. To attend these meetings gave me a chance to observe the various personalities involved, to observe the chit-chat going on and Mr. FitzRoy's steady influence bringing the personnel back to focus on the matter at hand.

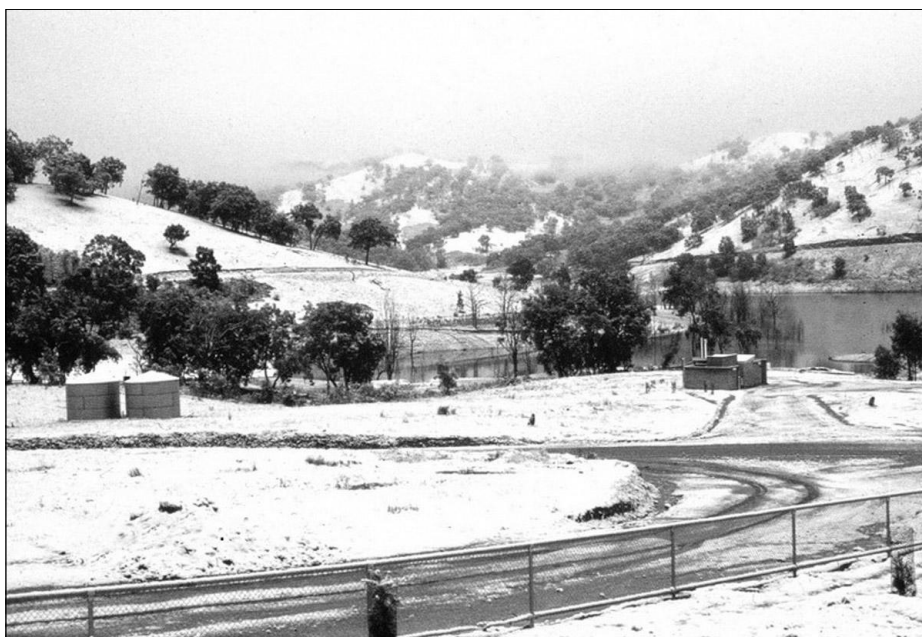
Les Collier would often advance some view point printed in his 'bible', 'The Weekly Times', and if it was printed there it 'must be right'. His main concern was how the park affected him personally. He claimed at one stage the rabbits were marching '15 abreast out of the park and down the road' and infesting the whole district. As rabbit numbers declined he developed a more vocal antipathy towards wombats, then kangaroos. Like many farmers all his problems came from crown land which in his case was a declared national park.

Nicholas Cole Jnr. was a stud sheep farmer from the Western District. He was a late appointee to the committee representing piscatorial interests. I considered him more as a 'political' appointment. He would claim his entitled expenses for travel and two nights accommodation at the Federal Hotel in Spring Street and often arrive at meetings stating he had to leave early to attend the theatre in Melbourne, or a dinner engagement, or other meetings. As he always travelled to the park with other members this would often lead to rushed meetings, or other items left to be discussed without an official quorum and confirmed by the full committee the following month. In all sincerity I cannot recall any real input or ideas either of these men

advanced.

Mac Wood, as Deputy Director of the Soil Conservation Authority was a pleasant man. He reckoned the soil around the house would be just right for growing roses, which he loved while hating the neighbour's cats which fouled his garden. Remembering Dr. Smith's aversion to lemon trees in national parks I didn't accept the offer of rose cuttings. In later years, when I had a permit to shoot in the park, he sought my advice about how to control the neighbour's cats. I described a tiny .22 bullet which I was using from the cover of my vegetable garden to shoot in the head at close range any rabbits grazing outside the house yard fence. It was really hilarious when he returned next month and told the rest of the committee how he now had a row of tiny graves under his house.

The various committee members were able to use their particular area of expertise in assisting the park. Mac Wood had local officers of the Soil Conservation Authority become actively involved in erosion control within the park. Bill Brake was able to use his engineering expertise with the Country Roads Board in checking a source of gravel I had located and expediting its use to extend roads and tracks in the park, and the proposal to construct the Skyline Road. Undoubtedly the early widening and sealing of park roads stemmed from his involvement.



Jack Channon, the then Forester in charge at Taggerty was able to utilize a road construction team to construct the new road to Wallaby Bay. Jim Wharton was able to expedite two releases of koalas from Phillip Island to the park. The State Rivers and Water Supply Commission appointee was able to point the way towards a better water quality, for visitors.

Keith Jerome, who had taken over from Jack Channon at Taggerty sought committee approval for me to join him in encouraging Country Fire Association districts to apply for a pump and motor prize for the best prepared headquarters shed. I was to accompany Keith on many of these inspections. He was a very strong advocate of continuing the practice of allowing campers to have open fires.

After the meetings Mr. FitzRoy would often accept our invitation to join my wife and I for a cup of tea at which time we could discuss in more detail various events. In time I was to visit his farm and assist with some water problems he had. I often called on Lin Cumming and found he could be quite fixated and stubborn with his point of view, especially about wildlife. His walks with me within the park could not really support his points of view about poison and he, in time,

came to accept my observations about rabbit control. He would jokingly complain about how I should turn a blind eye to an outbreak of Patterson's Curse in the park saying it was good for bees. I was to point out to him a more or less hidden track on the edge of the park which gave him an apiary site overlooking the bushland within the park. I would often assist him with various aspects of honey production and still maintain my own hives 35 years later.

Listening to these men air their wide ranging points of view about park management issues often made me feel I was actually lucky, even unique, in having an active committee and an excellent and friendly head office secretariat. Perhaps I was also lucky in having quality Technical Officers giving me good advice and guidance. Many other rangers either politely 'suffered' head office and the staff there, or actively 'railed' against them as incompetent and interfering.

Head Office - Committee of Management Relationships

As time went on the committee would occasionally invite one of the Technical Officers from head office to attend their meetings especially if there was a need for clarity or for resolution of some issue such as the site of a new amenities block. These men, mainly Trevor Arthur and later Geoff Edwards all had the good sense to 'lead' with advice rather than dictate policy

This is not to say that the committee and head office always agreed on every issue.

An area of disagreement occurred during a period of financial austerity across the public service. Our Secretary tabled a proposal from head office asking if the committee would use their financially independent status to purchase some office equipment for the head office. The few public servants on the committee reacted with undisguised hostility; Mr FitzRoy, on behalf of the committee, declined the 'offer' gracefully.

Dr. Smith kept a close eye on rabbit control methods especially the use of 1080 poison just as he had done at Tidal River. I had travelled to Kinchega NP in western New South Wales to learn about a new tar baby technique wherein poison was mixed with grease and placed within a burrow. My recommendation to the committee was turned down by Dr. Smith, as was my proposed use of hand broadcast poisoned carrot in later years. In fairness, Dr. Smith subsequently relented on the hand broadcasting years later always aware of opposition from within conservation quarters. In hindsight, I believe he had established a good personal relationships with Mr. FitzRoy and Lin Cumming especially. Both could see the rabbit numbers going down and kangaroo numbers coming up.

The greatest area of disagreement between Director and committee stemmed from the head office belief that burghan scrub was part of a progression of natural revegetation while both national park and water reserve committees saw it as a pest, virtually a noxious weed. However, the matter never became an 'issue' with the national park committee accepting the decision of head office to not eradicate the scrub within the national park. When the matter was raised within the Eildon Water Reserve meeting they allocated finance to control it within the 'their' foreshore strip. Another area of minimal disagreement was revegetation. The EWR committee planted many Silver or Buxton Gum around the foreshore at their cost whilst such non-indigenous trees were never planted within the national park.

While the National Parks Authority had agreed to extend the road past Devils Cove to reach what became Wallaby Bay, Chief Technical Officer Trevor Arthur later had to adjudicate on a concept advanced by the committee to extend this road to Cook Point. This road had been extended, aimed almost wholly at enabling the Eildon Water Reserve committee to enhance their boat mooring capability. I personally thought the existing extension was a horrible gash across the landscape pointing out to Trevor the limited area of 'useable' land on or adjacent to Cook Point.

Interdepartmental Relationships

Over the years I was aware of the antagonism from other departments and even politicians towards Dr. Smith personally, and national parks in general. For example: the Forestry Department in the Kulkyne State Forest approved the logging of river red gum trees along the Chalka Creek. The tree heads were left within the channel of the creek which, over time, allowed a build up of sand which progressively choked off the flow of life providing water into the Hattah Lakes National Park. The lake areas were slowly dying. Both the Railways and an extremely hostile and vocal neighbour were pumping water from within the park.

It was a matter of regret that Forestry fire fighting equipment was to infect the gravel pit along the Five Mile Road in the Wilsons Promontory NP with *Phytophthora cinnamoni*. Additionally, this event, in turn, infected other areas within the park. I know, being personally involved with this 1961 fire that Forestry didn't want national park staff or equipment involvement; we were an unwanted encumbrance. At one stage we three park staff were sent 'out of the way' to hike northerly across the bushland towards Corner Inlet only to find that a back burn had been lit behind us with a south easterly wind blowing. This forced us to run southerly around the flame front to avoid being caught by the fire. The law at the time was that Forestry were legally responsible for fire control within national parks. I recall the attitude of the Director of Forestry shortly thereafter that any wildfire had to be extinguished by whatever means at his disposal and other points of view were 'not relevant'.

The Postmaster Generals Department wished to put obtrusive towers on Mt Oberon for telephone communications across Bass Strait. Horses emanating from the Railway Chalet concession at Mt Buffalo were causing severe damage along walking trails and spreading weeds from their dung. Political pressure had resulted in a new ski run operation within Mt Buffalo National Park. The rangers observed the clearing of bushland, and oil and sewerage spills and I recall Dr. Smith's comment 'private enterprise' means 'private, and enterprise, and the National Parks Service should stay away'. Even councils were not sympathetic. For example, when it came to preserving the integrity of Mt. Eccles National Park or mining scoria at the park entrance.

During my time at Wilsons Promontory (1961-62) my wife and I became quite friendly with Bob Austin, the Fisheries and Wildlife inspector based at Port Welshpool. I was to become aware of inter-departmental tensions following Bob's release of exotic trout fingerlings into Derby River and, when Dr. Smith protested, Dunbavin-Butcher, the Director of the Fisheries and Wildlife Department telling him in no uncertain manner it had the power to do 'whatever' to promote game management. Anyhow, Derby River was not strictly 'in' the national park (the then boundary was the southern edge of the river).

With a very strong game management ethic Bob was to tell me that both he and his department were furious at the poisoning of many hog deer that roamed the Tidal River area at night, (much to the delight of tourists wandering about with torches). As the Technical Officer for the area Bob Yorston was not 'flavour of the month' despite his calm, unruffled, clouds-of-pipe-smoke approach that the poisoning of deer was 'regrettable', but rabbits had built up and needed controlling. The matter remained a very sensitive one for many years.

Perhaps my best recollection of Dr. Smith as an administrator fighting to establish and preserve the 'Jewels in the Crown' (as he termed Victoria's early national parks) was the bitter public attack on his person made from within the protection of State Parliament. Dr. Smith's approach was to 'turn the other cheek' at this cowardly attack, and to maintain direction, whatever his personal thoughts.

That the national parks service was a young and 'weak' department was illustrated when a proposal was advanced to enlarge the Wingan Inlet National Park. The local shire engineer was reported as saying he put his ruler on the map and drew a line. That line subsequently became the new boundary taking no account at all of creeks and ridges or other environmental features.

A major change of attitude was looming and came to the fore when the rangers were gathered at Tidal River. Dr. Smith had long been 'battling' with the Lands Department for many years trying to add the Yanakie isthmus to the national park - in addition to many other areas across the State. Local cattle owners saw the area as an area of cheap stock grazing with no responsibility to any form of land management.

Land had also been sought in the Little Desert for national park purposes while the Lands Department was pushing hard to see the Crown Land status revoked and huge areas selected for farming. It was a riveting time for anyone interested in conservation and the national park concept; the issue steadily moved from a minor article buried within the newspapers to a part page, then full second page, then the front page. From this debacle the Land Conservation Commission was established and government attitudes changed.

Technical Officers

My wife and I liked John Landy, the Authority's first Technical Officer. At one stage we invited him to an evening meal - provided he brought his own chair (we only had two) which he used half in and half out of the doorway into our former horse stable unit. With his quiet, almost shy manner, he activated an interest in me in the flora and fauna of the area. Both my wife and I and would spend much of our free time searching for orchids.

After a few years in the mountains of New Zealand I had obtained a certain knack of traversing along walking tracks under and over and through obstructions. Being very fit I found it no drama to keep well in front of John on a return trip from Sealer's Cove. He invited me to run from Windy Saddle back to Tidal River, which I declined, for someone had to drive the Land Rover. Regrettably, the CSIRO made John an offer he told us he 'just couldn't refuse'.

I first met Bob Yorston in 1961 at Wilsons Promontory but really had little to do with him afterwards (which rather pleased me as he smoked a rather odious pipe with an obnoxious brand of tobacco!). As an ex Forestry person he designed a new fire fighting trailer tanker. Eric

McDonald collected water for personal domestic purposes from Nowingi, perhaps half an hour from home where he lived with his wife in a caravan in the park.

Rudd Campbell gained some extra 'standing' in the local community when, carting water in his unit to the picnic area in Wyperfeld he came across a wildfire in a paddock of wheat. He was able to douse the fire single handed by driving through the crop directing the water from the driver's window of his Land Rover. My unit was only used for one fire and that was well outside the park - for which I got perhaps a deserved rebuke.

Trevor Arthur, the Chief Technical Officer often came to Fraser and his dedication to the environment was infectious. His knowledge of a wide range of environmental issues seemed extraordinary. He would be recommending which type of grass seed to use and which fertilizer, and how to prepare and look after the regeneration areas. He helped design the toilet blocks and would often come to me to see how mundane issues had worked out such as the slope on the floor, type of toilet bowl, how the drainage lines worked, etc. His advice was good and practical and, as with the other Technical officers, never contained any directives.

Geoff Edwards was appointed and 'allocated' to Fraser and it was he who became the main conduit of advice or information from or to the head office. He 'thought outside the square' as with the example at the Organ Pipes NP where control of artichoke thistle had always been by use of chemical spray. Geoff listened to Ranger Jack Lyale, investigated and found a powdered form of this weedicide was in production. Jack was then able to put a required dose right onto the rosette without any overspray, or spray drift in this windy plains area. Geoff encouraged me to continue my correspondence studies and to even enrol in a university. I continue to review our relationship with he and his wife with pleasure.

At Fraser NP I seemed to get odd visits from Technical Officers. On one occasion Colin Hutchinson arrived in relation to a proposed road through the park. Colin spoke of flying his plane to Tasmania to re-discover the thylacine. I remember him most because of an iron clad catchment he designed and built at Wyperfeld to overcome the desperate water shortage there.

I thought these various officers always led with constructive knowledge and by example; I can't recall any directive, or goals or deadlines or pressure or expected achievements that I couldn't meet. Perhaps they had a willing student for I was aware of the disdain in which other rangers held 'head office'. Some of the other rangers barely listened then went ahead and did what they thought best. I recall Eric MacDonald at Hattah, with whom we used to stay in the new house at Hattah, 'suffered' their visits with restrained dignity.

Ranger Training

My wife and I together with our young family started to visit other Victorian and interstate national parks to learn about them for I believed, as a spokesman for the concept of national parks at Fraser, I should be able to talk more broadly about parks, where they were and why they had been preserved. They were also interesting places to visit and camp and also gave me a chance to renew my acquaintance with other rangers.

Trevor Arthur saw the need for ranger training and was to spend time in the United States

national parks. The ranger staff, perhaps with the exception of Eric MacDonald, had no environmental training. Often they were a 'nearby farmer' who could keep an eye on the park, pick up litter and do or oversee some minor improvements, or a mechanic, or a tradesman like myself. Trevor worked hard at setting up and operating week-long Ranger Training schools held in venues like Wilsons Promontory, Mt Buffalo, Little Desert or the Natural Resources Conservation League in Springvale. He would bring in various personnel from other departments to talk, even arranging for staff from Queensland and South Australian National Parks to attend.

In a bid to set up a more qualified and professional ranger force Trevor instituted a three month training course at the Forestry Training School at Creswick. This proposal was seen as a necessity to establish credentials within the Public Service and upgrade ranger skills. It created major problems for myself with a wife and four young children who could be left without a vehicle and a host of visitor interruptions. Fortunately the matter was never pushed while I was at Fraser.

I 'took on board' Dr. Smith's view that we rangers were 'today's custodians of the nations perpetual treasures' and sought to improve my conservation knowledge with some years of correspondence studies. I greatly appreciated the chance to associate with professional people from various environmental disciplines and began private studies using microscopy to determine via animal scats just what native animals lived in the area.

Jim Wharton, as the Deputy Director of the Fisheries and Wildlife Department and representative on the Fraser committee for many years supported my application to his department to be allowed to legally hold small samples of the skin and fur of known native animals. I had long known that Eric MacDonald had been granted such a permit to both take and hold native fauna at Hattah and I was greatly disappointed at the negative response to my trying to be honest and 'up front'. I had to wonder whether the decision was based more on past inter-departmental tensions.

On one occasion I approached Dr. Smith for support with an application I had prepared for the then new Churchill Fellowships to study in the American national park's ranger training facility. He obviously knew nothing about the concept, and stalled. On my next visit he still hadn't made a decision but called into the office Technical Officer Don Saunders who subsequently did travel to the USA. While I was disappointed at not being supported I recognized Don was better qualified than I, and was in a much better position to institute ideas he might gain.

Ranger Association

One matter to arise from the Ranger Training Schools was a move within the ranger ranks for a representative 'union' type structure arguing for better pay and conditions, and a better uniform. I took on the role of Secretary of the Victorian National Park Ranger's Association issuing a monthly Newsletter. Within a short time we were agitating as a group to have a say in our conditions of employment including the concept of having all rangers employed by the department and not Committees of Management.

I had personally been agitating via the Fraser committee for an appropriate wage more in proportion to the amount and complexity of my work, and staff responsibilities compared with other rangers on like pay.

The preferred model for rangers at the time was aligned to the Country Fire Officers Association with a fall back position of entering the Public Service. Events finally moved quickly and we found ourselves within the Public Service without any discussion or proposals put to us at all.

The early rangers wore a uniform supplied by the Cushen Clothing Company of Melbourne. There was no custom fitting and clothing tended to vary in size. Also supplied was a scout commissioners hat. Stiff and uncomfortable it could only be worn 'correctly', not pulled down on any quarter to make it more comfortable. One of our more colourful rangers, Rudd Campbell of Wyperfeld NP, once angrily pulled the hat down on the director's head asking him how it felt. Rudd never wore the issue hat adopting his preferred squatters model.

I was perhaps the more active person in talking to clothing manufacturers first hand looking particularly at different types of materials, and colours. As a group we advanced the concept of the wedge tailed eagle for an insignia; Dr. Smith felt a kangaroo more appropriate. The rangers felt the kangaroo had already been 'done to death' as a logo for different brand names; we re-stated our interest in the eagle. The matter came to a head when, at a Ranger Training Course at the Little Desert I modelled a new green uniform complete with a kangaroo insignia and buttons embossed with a kangaroo.

Regionalisation

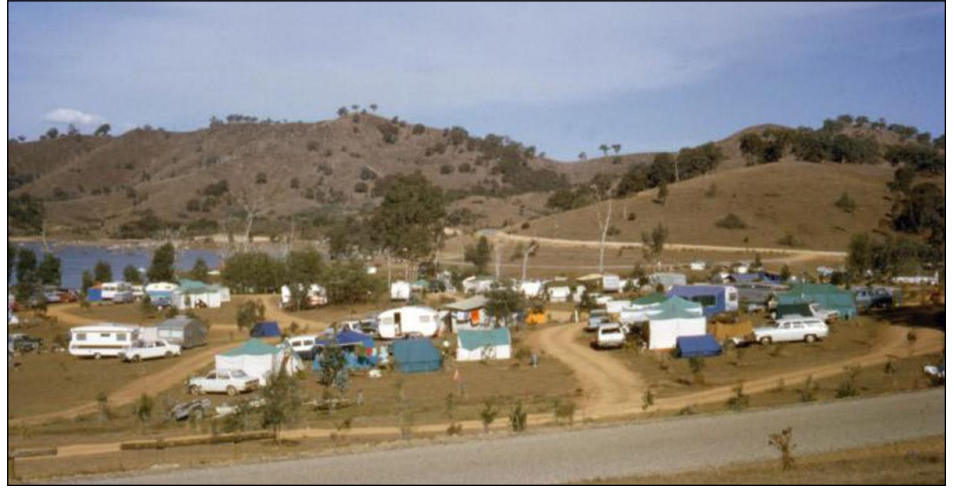
Time moved on; Dr Smith retired having held the organization together in the face of an often unsympathetic and uncaring public, hostile politicians, insufficient funding and a less than happy ranger force starting to 'flex a little muscle'. In this adverse environment he laid the foundations from which the national park movement could go forward. I believe he did much to establish the great system of national parks Victoria now has.

Regionalization was now the way of the future and I was not the only one to be uneasy. It was known that many public servants - especially Forestry personnel - could see their chances of promotion and salary increase within their respective departments was limited. This was a period in Victoria when Forestry were vying for the title of being the 'real' conservation managers with multiple use of the natural resources their catch cry. I believed there was a question about their sincerity towards the natural as opposed to a production environment, and national parks in particular.

My world changed at this time. Committees were being disbanded. Mr. FitzRoy accepted a role as part of a State wide group advising the Minister on national park issues. My standing within the organization was damaged. I believe, by a relieving ranger who believed the committee system was 'stupid', an 'anachronism', that I was 'too old', and my methods were 'out of date'. Mr FitzRoy told me of 'something going on' but despite his new found access to Director Brookes couldn't ascertain what the problem was. I was never told.

Over a period of 16 years I had taken Fraser from a uncontrolled hunting wilderness to a popular family oriented recreation area with 350 defined campsites. Toilets were always clean and rubbish never allowed to accrue. I had instituted a booking system for camp sites; the park had a good reputation. There were many walking tracks, an open-air theatre. Hostility from business people in the district changed to support as they saw money coming into the district. They

erected a sign across the major crossroads in the town 'Welcome to Alexandra; Gateway to Fraser National Park'.



The major impasse of trespassing stock had been resolved by myself physically driving sheep and cattle off the hills towards impoundment to the point where I could lift the telephone and the stock owners couldn't get to the park quick enough to remove them. Rabbits were under obvious control and district farmers were acknowledging this; the number of kangaroos had increased to now become a popular wildlife viewing spectacle. A lot of erosion control was in place and there was a large work force. I had been the only ranger from Victoria to attend the inaugural week long gathering of the New South Wales NPWS at Royal NP.

However, my efforts at Fraser seemed to count for little when it came time to cover up illegal sheep shooting activities that had taken place while I was absent on long service leave. Despite pointing out to Director Brookes the 'telephone control' I had achieved I had to agree I was absent on leave and therefore could not prove what had happened even though many of the sheep said to have been despatched after being injured by vehicles were high above the road. At the time of our leaving Fraser NP the whole committee attended a public dinner at an hotel in Alexandra as a farewell gesture presenting us with a wallet of money. Park staff at Fraser and The Lakes also presented us with gifts.

Leaving Fraser National Park

Being unsuccessful with applications for advertised positions the promise by Director Brookes of a house on Rotomah Island was presented really as an only option. We moved but were only there for a few weeks before I was told of a new house about to be built. This involved a move to a substandard area for a family of four children in a bushland setting with no views. Worse still was the dirty black ilmenite sand which so easily got the children so dirty.

There appeared to be a lack of a clearly defined purpose in my being at the Gippsland Lakes. It seemed I was to consider development options for areas outside the existing Lakes NP. While these areas were said to be going to come across to the national park estate no one could state definitely if this would really happen or when, or knew what the tenure of the land might be. The move away from Fraser took on punitive overtones; there was no support or sympathy for correspondence schooling for our children and we were to eventually board our two eldest children weekly in Sale.

The philosophy of my immediate superior (a sycophantic ex Fisheries and Wildlife appointee - 'a modicum of wine for your son, Mr. Brookes?') was focussed towards game management with regulated rabbit and deer hunting in the yet to be gazetted extended parklands. I had just spent 15 years getting rid of rabbits only to be now told I would be expected to manage feral animal hunting.

The regional Director at Bairnsdale was an ex Forester whose aim, when I arrived, was to have a bird group take over the house at Rotomah Island. I was to move to the new house when it was built and I could like it or lump it; he had not made any undertakings regarding our tenure on Rotomah Island. The decision had been made without any input from myself.

The previous ranger in charge at The Lakes, a motel owner/operator at nearby Loch Sport, concealed his disappointment somewhat at my taking 'his' job. I soon found a lot of what I said or did was 'known' in Bairnsdale. My position probably wasn't helped when I declined an invitation to become a member of a regular wine purchasing club the above three men operated.

After Fraser NP the area was 'dead' with a mere handful of defined campsites in the old Lakes NP. I could only shake my head at the concept of a works team that were scheduled months in advance to move around the district arriving without regard to weather or on-site conditions or when work really needed doing with the existing work force, such as weed control. This was all top down Forestry style management.

Perhaps the 'final straw' for me was to attend a staff conference at Bairnsdale and receive the congratulations offered myself in front of other staff present by the Regional Director. Shortly after this I received his written adverse report. I just could not conceive the previous administration countenancing such an immoral and dishonest act.

I decided to 'vote with my feet' at my dislike and disgust at what I perceived as a new 'dog eat dog' National Parks Service in which the most important task seemed to be to open the Government Gazette and scan it to see who had moved up the ladder and see what opportunities to do the same might be listed.

I drove to Canberra for an job interview and shortly afterwards took up the position of District Ranger with the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. After 17 years with the national parks in Victoria I received a brief comment stating merely that I 'left of my own accord'. It was interesting to me personally, upon leaving what I saw as a toxic and poisonous atmosphere in Victoria, I was taken into the Directors office in Brisbane with a few other staff and, over drinks, told 'welcome aboard'.

While I am aware money is never plentiful to manage national parks, I firmly believe that it is better to preserve areas as national parkland even if they cannot be immediately managed the way many expect. My recent visits to parks in Victoria indicate to me standards have slipped. Along with standards I perceive a lack of pride. If money is short there is no reason why toilets are not absolutely clean, rubbish removed and signage presentable.

Further Reading:

The History of Fraser National Park, by Ron Turner, 2011. 38p.

The Writings of Ron Turner: a dossier of several short articles about Fraser National Park.

Victoria's National Parks - Laying the Foundations



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