



INTERVIEW WITH SYD COMFORT

(NPA President 1989; Life Member 2003)

MATTHEW:- This is an interview by Matthew Higgins with Syd Comfort in his home in Canberra on the 20th December 1999 for the National Parks Association ACT Oral History Project.

Syd, thanks very much for putting some time aside today to talk to me about your memories of and contributions to NPA. I know the Committee is appreciative of you being involved. Now firstly to look very briefly at your pre-NPA life, if we can call it that. You were born in 1927 at Hurlstone Park in Sydney and taught for 5 years after the Second World War as a secondary teacher and then joined the Navy in 1951; and you served with the Navy through to 1982, coming to Canberra firstly in 1963 and then again in 1979. Now, it was in 1979 that you joined the NPA. Can you give me an indication of what sort of influences or experiences you had in that pre-1979 era which might have lead you to being interested in national parks, bushwalking and conservation?

SYD:- Well, I was generally interested in walking and had done a limited amount but found that other interests predominated and I didn't have the time really to pursue it to any extent. So when I came to Canberra in 1979 I could see that I would have more time available to me in the future, and so this seemed an opportunity to take up what would have been an interest of some kind and devote more time to it.

So why the NPA? Well, I had a look at what seemed to be offering in Canberra and what I saw of the programs of NPA and what they were doing seemed to be more in touch with my interests. I did know a couple of members.

MATTHEW:- Who were they?

SYD:- That was Charles Hill and Reg Alder.

So I became a member and when I retired from the Navy I was determined to spend a fair bit of time outside and not behind a desk. A couple of the interests I pursued immediately; one was horticulture and the other was to become involved in bushwalking. There were some other interests as well but certainly the emphasis was to be in the outdoors in various forms.

MATTHEW:- And the thing that is shared between those two interests, I mean, horticulture and bushwalking is, of course, the flora generally.

SYD:- I was interested in that but, to be honest, I hadn't become particularly involved with any environmental issues pertaining to that point. I certainly had an interest in the maintenance of the bush and enjoyment of it, but I hadn't been active in pursuing various causes.

MATTHEW:- As we said, you joined in 1979 and that was a watershed year really, because Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared and that was something that NPA had fought for, for a long time. Do you remember what the feeling within the organisation was when that declaration was made?

SYD:- No I don't, to be honest.

MATTHEW:- So there wasn't a big celebration or anything like that?

SYD:- There may have been but, I think, I was on the edge of the organisation and I was still pretty busy working. I wasn't heavily involved, so I can't comment on that.

MATTHEW:- OK, so it was after you retired that you started to get a bit more fully involved and going onto the Committee. I think you started with the Committee in 1984, convenor of the finance and membership sub-committee. Can you recall for me what sort of activities you were involved with in that role?



SYD:- Well, I should say that then the Association was pretty busy, it was active. The sub-committee approach had been very much accepted and so we were just in this looking at issues like budgeting, grant seeking and the ordinary day-to-day operations of the financial part of the Association. So they were the main sort of things we were doing.

MATTHEW:- And with the membership aspect of that was there much of a membership drive at that time or did you find that enough people were being attracted to the organisation anyway?

SYD:- Well, it was a period of growth in numbers, membership numbers, and there was no particular campaign or active seeking of members. We just seemed to be going through a growth period, and so we hadn't mounted publicity or other forms of seeking members in particular.

MATTHEW:- You mentioned there the grants and, of course, NPA when it started out didn't have any sort of grant funding very much, and grants seem to have become very much more important to community groups as times have gone on. Just looking at your entire period of say committee involvement would you like to comment on the role that grants have played and how significant they have been to NPA and what they have been used for?

SYD:- Well, certainly they permitted us to use paid staff, I think, in various ways either on a continuing basis or for particular projects. They also have assisted some publications and they have enabled the greater use of specialists with knowledge of particular areas. I think that has been one of the very big achievements that we've been able to use specialist advice in this as well as providing in this way support to the members of the committees. So without the help of grants we wouldn't have been able, in some of these areas, to mount the detailed approaches that we have taken on a number of issues.

MATTHEW:- So this is like writing submissions on management issues in natural areas?

SYD:- Well, I find it a bit hard to be specific in some areas. I think, it remained that submissions were still put together by Association members but we could take particular topics and have these chased up by the administrative assistant or... as the person was called. Then some particular reports were commissioned, one on grasslands by Kevin Frawley and there was another one done on the forestry area by Debbie Quarmby.

MATTHEW:- The Eden wood chipping issue?

SYD:- That's right, these were examples where there were important studies involved. Another important one was done in connection with the Boboyan pines; a smaller effort was put together with the help of some professional advice there. So it meant that although the Committee in general retained the actual drafting of most of these actual submissions, they were backed either by advice or supplemented by particular studies.

MATTHEW:- Now looking at other aspects of your work on the Committee, you became treasurer in 1985. Would you like to comment on that role?

SYD:- Well, during the period I was treasurer our finances were rolling along fairly comfortably and we didn't have any great problems of meeting our commitments from a financial viewpoint. One of the things that developed then was the organisation, just an internal thing within the Association, between the voluntary treasurer and the administrative office secretary and the various components that were associated with that. The payment of wages, tax and all the other things associated with the employment of staff and also the split up of duties really between the paid staff and the treasurer. At this stage, during the time I was treasurer, the records were kept manually and we worked out quite a satisfactory arrangement between those two positions

MATTHEW:- Of course, it was 5 years later that you became President of NPA. What led you to put your hand up?

SYD:- I think put my hand up is the wrong metaphor to use. There is the other one of having



your arm twisted. No, it was just suggested to me. Actually, Charles Hill approached me and it came out of the blue, I hadn't really considered it. So he approached me and I said I'd undertake that, but it wasn't an active involvement on my part that brought it about.

MATTHEW:- And you were President, I think, for a couple of years?

SYD:- Only one.

MATTHEW:- OK, 1989/90 and what do you recall were the main issues that year, and what do you think you achieved?

SYD:- That was at a period when self government was in the formative stages, so there was a great deal of activity with the national capital planning, the establishment of the new plan and then the establishment of the Territory Plan and the Land and Environment Act over this period. So that you had a period of transition and also a period of enquiry, really, into a lot of issues affecting the ACT and its relationship, new relationship really as a self governing territory within the Commonwealth. The particular concern from the NPA (this was such a big issue) was, of course, with the natural areas, the protection of the environment and related issues. So we limited it, we had to limit ourselves to that sort of concern. I mean there were many other issues that we did not become concerned with to any extent such as the direct urban issues of planning, housing development, transport development, all these other issues that were pretty important. We had to concentrate ourselves on the open spaces very largely in the various forms.

So that was an important time, but there were a lot of other things going on, there was the day-to-day running of the Association, our involvement with other organisations, the Conservation Council, the Environment Centre. We had our part to play there.

MATTHEW:- What was that part?

SYD:- Well, we were just a constituent member and so that we attended their meetings and had our say. At that time I don't think any member of the Association held an executive office so we were just members of the Council in both cases. From then, for quite a period, we became involved in an organisation based around the 'ROCKS' area, that's the Residents of Childers and Kingsley Street where we had our little office, and for a period that was quite an issue and we devoted quite a lot of time to that.

MATTHEW:- What was the issue, that you had your office there or was it threatened redevelopment of that area?

SYD:- Well, we just had, I think we could say safely, our foot in the door. When we went there initially the area we were in was actually on university land. It's a very complicated issue, although it's only a small area there are so many components to this, but one of them was the actual area which looked to be one area was actually under two titles, part of it was in the university and then part was public land under Territory administration. The section we were in, the little bit of real estate, the few square feet we had was actually in the university and at that stage there was no clear direction in which the future of this lay. There had been various studies made, a couple of studies made I should have said, as to what could happen. The groups there were principally the Environment Centre, the Conservation Centre, and the Work Resources Area. The Childers Street Hall was there then, it hadn't yet been burnt down. So it was really pretty important real estate. The community groups felt that it should remain that way and they were moving towards retention of the area for community use and in a low-key environmentally friendly type of development. The group however, had very few resources of course but John Rowlands, who had been a previous chairman of the Conservation Council, took a lead in this and I and others became involved with him in forming small groups to try and pursue this. I mean, there are many ins and outs to this which could take a lot of telling but those are the main issues really.

MATTHEW:- You have had quite an intense involvement in the Namadgi sub-committee, I think



you were on it in 1991, 1992 through to 1993 at least. Can you tell me about what was the basis of your getting involved there and what sort of issues you were looking at during that period?

SYD:- I felt that the Namadgi area was terribly important to Canberra, and it needed all our efforts to maintain its integrity as a national park. So that's really why I became involved and we handled any issues which came up. Throughout this period there were issues, a lot of them related to the management plan. That was a constant recurring theme and the implications for the park of other Territory and Commonwealth planning and their impact on the park. Within it there were particular areas of concern that cropped up at times, our involvement with the Gudgenby homestead, of course, was a long enduring one which took a lot of time really and at times for apparently little result.

MATTHEW:- So it's Gudgenby homestead or Orroral?

SYD:- I'm sorry, Orroral, did I say Gudgenby. Well, we'll come to that next. The Gudgenby homestead was another area of considerable interest when that was incorporated into the park. There was a study undertaken, I'm trying to think of the contractors that undertook that study, and they came up with proposals for it, so that was another area.

The Boboyan pines, our ground on that shifted a bit, the emphasis changed. Originally we were keen to see that the areas which had been damaged by fire were not allowed to regrow. The earlier plan was for the remainder of the pines to grow to maturity and then be cleared and rehabilitated with native species but we were keen to see that the areas that had been damaged by fire were not allowed to regain full growth, so the early emphasis was on that. Then it extended to an accelerated program to remove the rest of the pines.

Later on we became very interested in Tennent homestead and that's unfinished business as far as I'm concerned, the Tennent homestead. They were particular issues that came along. There were the continuing ones of the type, I suppose, you could say improvements in inverted commas that could be supported within the park.

MATTHEW:- Like the Yankee Hat carpark or things like that?

SYD:- Well things such as that, yes. Well, there are particular issues there, but also whether or not there should be more extensive development of walking tracks or the like.

MATTHEW:- And what was the relationship like between the park and NPA, was NPA's contribution welcomed by the Park Administration?

SYD:- Well, I think we had a pretty good relationship at the sort of head office level most of the time with the people responsible for administration in the Park Service. But the relationship, the working relationship, with the people on the ground was uneven to say the least, really. We weren't at all sure that the managers of the park, those directly involved with it, always were very welcoming of our intentions or of our effort. At different times during that period we found that we didn't feel that we were getting the cooperation we should have or that our efforts were appreciated or valued. So yes, we had some difficulties. Of course, with the Orroral homestead that became a very galling issue because of another issue: the archaeological value that brought in the Heritage people and various archaeological studies. So you had two bodies there with uncertain boundaries between their authority; that is the Park Administration and the Heritage Unit. Eventually, of course, the Park people did take over responsibility for activities there and the Heritage Unit became more of a consultative advisory body rather than having an executive function as they did at one stage.

MATTHEW:- You used the word galling. Is that because it was frustrating for NPA to be held up in that circumstance?

SYD:- Yes, that's what I'm saying. We constantly, I shouldn't say constantly, but we at times were held back waiting for various approvals to be given, or studies to be completed, or decisions



to be made, and there seemed to be grave difficulties in concluding any of these things. Anyway, others could detail this better than me but certainly that was reflected in my work.

MATTHEW:- We'll talk a little bit more in due course about the actual work that you were personally involved in at some of these sites as we go on. As far as some of the other issues in regard to Namadgi, not just during the time you were on the sub-committee but, say, during your period of membership. When Namadgi was declared as a national park finally in 1984, was there much reaction by NPA to that or do you think that the 1979 Gudgenby declaration represented for NPA the main achievement of its goals?

SYD:- I think the recognition of the park in 1984 was very well received. Of course, that was associated with the building of the Visitors Centre as it happened.

MATTHEW:- Well, the Visitors Centre was later, that was 1990 and that was the extensions to the park during that time.

SYD:- Oh yes, that was the extensions, I'm sorry, you're quite right. The declaration of the park, I think, was very well received. It raised the issue then of the Commonwealth's commitment to the park. That was very well received because with the declaration of the park there were also some extensions and they'd been sought, so it was very satisfactory from that viewpoint.

MATTHEW:- Yes, the addition of the upper Cotter catchment to what had been the old Gudgenby Nature Reserve.

SYD:- Yes, that's right. I think that was really the fact that there was Commonwealth involvement in this at that stage, so there was interest in it and secondly the extensions and, of course, given the name we felt greater protection.

MATTHEW:- There was this history, I guess, of how strong a form of protection the Nature Conservation Ordinance was. Was that a great concern to NPA, the sort of legislative structure for protecting the park?

SYD:- Yes, well it was of concern. I don't recall just how much we were moving to have that improved; I can't recall.

MATTHEW:- OK, as far as the later extensions in either 1990 or 1991 around Mt Tennent and the northern Brindabellas, the NPA had commissioned a report on that northern area, the northern Cotter by Ian Fraser, were you involved with that or the meetings with Greg Fraser that preceded those extensions?

SYD:- No, I wasn't.

MATTHEW:- So you have no comment to make?

SYD:- No, not on that.

MATTHEW:- OK. One earlier comment you made when we were speaking last week on the management issues in the park was the Orroral Tracking Station, do you want to comment on that?

SYD:- That was a lively issue and it was brought to a head by the proposal by the Park Service to demolish the existing buildings. This brought a good deal of opposition from some community groups in the ACT who thought these buildings still had considerable heritage value. Now there had been a study of the Gudgenby undertaken by Egloff, I think it was, at this time; he was on the staff of the University of Canberra, and he strongly supported the retention of the buildings. He came to this with very, very good credentials. Brian Egloff had been involved, I think, in Tasmania in Port Arthur, as I recall, so he was a man of considerable standing. The National Trust also supported the retention and, of course, that was headed, and still is, by the Professor of Landscape Architecture, Ken Taylor. There were also other people in the community of standing, whose names I can't recall now.



I think the only group that was actively happy that the buildings were to go, was the NPA and that was largely on the basis that their retention was inappropriate in a national park that was really devoted to the preservation of natural values. The Park Service represented by Mr Greg Fraser at the time saw it in more practical terms, that the buildings were just, as they stood then, of little value because they were only a shell of insubstantial buildings which posed a considerable drain on resources and cost management problems to try and retain. They saw from their practical viewpoint that they were better demolished.

I do remember the President of the Conservation Council, Graham Evans, called a meeting one Saturday afternoon on this to try and get a viewpoint which could go to the Park Service with which would represent the community viewpoint. So he brought together a number of people, but it remained the NPA in one position and the other representatives there in a different position and a common viewpoint was not reached.

So yes, that was at the time quite a strong issue. The view of these Heritage people was that they were quite happy that most of Namadgi National Park should be preserved for the natural values, but they did see a few key areas of having considerable heritage values and the Orroral Valley was one of those.

MATTHEW:- Syd, you were just saying that there was a view of all the buildings within Orroral being a heritage.

SYD:- Well, that's because it showed a continuity of occupation of the site from Aboriginal times through the grazing periods, the various grazing periods, to its use for the tracking stations and then to a national park. They saw a continuity of heritage in that one place which they wanted to preserve. Anyway, we know what's happened and we were involved with some discussions on the subsequent Orroral plan by the Park to retain just the foundations with a few plaques. That plan was generated within the Parks Service and we had some consultation. We didn't have any great objections to that, I don't think we had any great enthusiasm for it either, but that's the way that issue went.

MATTHEW:- It's interesting to see in 1994 the NPA's constitution was changed to incorporate reference to cultural heritage conservation in addition to natural heritage which had formally been there in the statement in the objectives. What comment would you like to make on that?

SYD:- Well, I think, that for a long time many members within the Association felt that our emphasis should be absolutely on the preservation or the protection of the natural environment, a fairly extreme group, and that was certainly a factor in our position, say, on the Orroral Tracking Station. However, the fact was that we had for some years also been active in the preservation of the cultural heritage, notably the Orroral homestead, where we put in a great deal of effort. There were other examples too.

My viewpoint was, I felt that in terms of what we were doing, the omission of our interest in cultural aspects in the constitution did not reflect what we were doing. The other thing is, I did see that, as a principle, in preservation of heritage we should be not confined to looking at the different components of it, but we should be taking a much broader view and it served little purpose to really limit our official position just to that of natural heritage. Of course, the two so often exist side by side and need to be looked at together. So my viewpoint was strongly in favour of the changes that were made.

MATTHEW:- OK, if we can just leave Namadgi for a little while and talk about some of the other issues firstly within the ACT that NPA's been involved with or that you personally have been involved in during your committee time, for example Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve. Was there any involvement by NPA there on issues?

SYD:- Well, very little in my time that I can recall.



MATTHEW:- OK, you mentioned earlier the Mulligans Flat study by Kevin Frawley, the Grassland Study and the NPA policy of really trying to get that area reserved or conserved. Were you involved with that personally?

SYD:- Not very much, no, not in more than a general supporting role.

MATTHEW:- I'll talk with Beverley [Hammond] further about that because it was more during her time. Canberra Nature Park in general, now were you involved in that, I think you mentioned that you gave evidence before the Land and Management Bill, was that to do with Canberra Nature Park particularly and its status under the Territory Plan?

SYD:- Yes, well we certainly had an involvement with Canberra Nature Park. We had been concerned about its lack of status, standing really, for a long time and we had made submissions (the outset this goes back to about 1988, I think) on the Canberra Nature Park and its movement towards the production of a management plan. So we'd been involved in this from the outset, but its standing was very vague in those early times. One of our major concerns was that it have adequate protection as a type of public land and also that its significance as part of the landscape and as a natural area be protected by that legislation rather than it become just another urban park. So at least from 1988, about then, the NPA had been active in putting forward those few points on Canberra Nature Park.

MATTHEW:- So, the protection that the Canberra Nature Park enjoys today, do you think that it could be said that the NPA played any sort of significant role in achieving that?

SYD:- I think with these things it's difficult to attribute to just where the influence lies. We certainly had our say and it may be to others to indicate whether or not that was significant. I wouldn't be able to really comment on these things, but we certainly did maintain a viewpoint and brought that to the attention of the authorities whenever we had the opportunity. But, of course, it's a long protracted process and it's still not complete. Do you know the Management Plan for Canberra Nature Park has not yet had ministerial approval?

MATTHEW:- It takes a while. Another area, what about Jerrabomberra Wetlands?

SYD:- I wasn't involved.

MATTHEW:- The Lower Molonglo?

SYD:- Yes, well I was involved there but, I think, as part of the Namadgi sub-committee, this was a little bit later. I'd certainly been involved in some field studies that were done. We'd taken people from the Association and gone with members of the Parks Service and consultants and walked over these areas. We'd then put up proposals again for a Management Plan and for the adjustment of the boundaries there. So again it went over quite a period of time but we had been involved there.

MATTHEW:- And that's now been included in the Murrumbidgee River Corridor has it?

SYD:- Yes. I'm not in touch with the final position because there has been more recent consideration there in relation to the boundaries and the rights of the adjoining landholders. There's been a position reached there because one of the big factors was that stock were being permitted use of big areas, right down to the water level. But what the exact position is now has largely been remedied with some sort of a compromise arrangement with the landowners.

MATTHEW:- Was there any great concern about the Lower Molonglo Water Quality Control Centre and pollution from that as part of this process?

SYD:- No, I don't think so, not in my time. Well, I certainly didn't become involved in this issue, where at certain times the effluent overflowed into surrounding areas since it has been dammed. The lizard was threatened, the legless lizard habitat was threatened, but I wasn't involved in that situation.



MATTHEW:- OK, now just if we can look for a little while at issues outside the ACT that the NPA was involved in during your periods of involvement, for example, Kosciuszko National Park. What sort of role has NPA had there in making submissions or commenting?

SYD:- Well, I haven't been personally particularly active in this area. I don't know much about it. As part of the committee system we'd take any opportunities to comment on issues as they arose but I can't talk about specifics there.

MATTHEW:- But what about the 1985 NPA Alps Conference, were you involved in assisting with that?

SYD:- I assisted in it but not in a role related to the issues involved to any extent. I was just one of the workers, an 'Indian' as it were, rather than a chief in that. So I attended it and it, I think, was a great achievement for NPA. There were good papers produced and some good resolutions made, but I wasn't really part of the directing group.

MATTHEW:- Not very long after that there was the Government move to have tri-state management across the Alps, ACT, NSW & Victoria. Was it the feeling within NPA that NPA had been a fairly serious catalyst in that process?

SYD:- I couldn't really say that; we certainly had proposed this or been involved in this sort of approach. I don't know that we've ever been of the opinion that we had great influence on it, not personally anyway, other people may have felt that. Certainly I think our efforts were just another contribution to bring this sort of thing about. I don't think we'd overstate our achievement in this regard.

MATTHEW:- What about coastal national parks, Jervis Bay and elsewhere?

SYD:- Yes, well our interest in Jervis Bay has really, I think, changed depending on the enthusiasm of particular members at the time. We certainly saw some responsibility there because of its connection as part of the ACT Administration, but our involvement with it varied with the energy available from individuals to press the case. Now at different times that has been quite well pursued and the NPA had become involved but, I think, it was more a response to individual pressure or willingness. Perhaps I shouldn't use 'pressure' but willingness to do something about it.

MATTHEW:- An individual knowledge of particular areas too, I guess?

SYD:- Yes, and so at different times we'd taken up the drum and we'd given it a beat, but I don't think it's had that continuity of interest that we'd had in areas more closely associated with Canberra.

MATTHEW:- What about the Budawangs and Morton National Park?

SYD:- Well again, I think, this is rather the same situation, where individuals had a particular interest there and then could gain the ear of NPA and through their willingness to contribute to it we'd put a position forward, but it hasn't been such a continuing stream with us outside those times when individuals had raised the issues. One issue I remember taking up, I think I was President at the time, and this was the positioning of aerials, I just forget where they were now, in Morton National Park for transmission of TV signals in that area. It was brought to our attention by a member who put a fair bit of energy into getting information and we took it up and we again added our voice to those many other voices. The outcome was, of course, that the TV towers were a forgone conclusion but some concessions were achieved in the way they're being managed. I think it was probably improved by the various responses that were made from conservation groups. That's an example but we hadn't that continuing interest. It's just, I think, come at times when we'd been goaded by issues being brought to our attention at particular times.



MATTHEW:- OK, now to look at the actual work on the ground, work by NPA members, as opposed to policy work as such, and in Namadgi to start with. Now we've talked quite a bit about Orroral already but would you like to recount some of the work parties you were involved with and what sort of work members were actually doing there?

SYD:- Well, my contribution was quite small at Orroral, you know, as a member of working parties really, I didn't take a lead there. The sorts of things we did: I helped lay some of the flooring which was a task we were given and we found that some people were better at driving nails into hardwood than others. We were re-stumping the building which involved excavating the old stumps and then splicing in new ones. I remember the old kitchen area being removed, the collapsed kitchen roof being taken away.

MATTHEW:- Was any of that material kept?

SYD:- Yes, some of it was, quite a deal of it taken and put in the old woodshed ...

MATTHEW:- Woolshed!

SYD:- Yes, woolshed, some parts were and, I think, some bits were labelled. Then, I think, we gave some assistance in going through some of the areas around the homestead and underneath looking for archaeological bits and pieces that could be of interest. So they're the sorts of things that I did, other than general repairs that were being done on the homestead.

MATTHEW:- And was this work undertaken under the supervision by the Parks staff or Heritage Unit people who were there at the time or did you really have free rein once you were on site?

SYD:- No, a deal of this work was done as part of a contract by ...

MATTHEW:- Pip Giovanelli?

SYD:- Pip Giovanelli, yes. That was the re-stumping of a section, the re-establishment really and the levelling.

MATTHEW:- So he was there on site directing you?

SYD:- Yes, he was. I think when it came to putting the flooring down, we just did it. Then subsequently when it came to the restoration of the chimney we were asked to provide someone to run it and Reg [Alder] did that. So it was different situations.

MATTHEW:- So Reg was in charge of that?

SYD:- That's right, yes. He was talked into doing that and did it pretty well, of course. So it varied depending on the situation.

MATTHEW:- And with that work and, say, work done at Tennent homestead or other projects generally, do you think these had been important to the members themselves as individuals in terms of getting something out of it, and also is it important to the cohesiveness of the Association to have these sort of physical projects to get involved with?

SYD:- Oh, I think you are right on both scores. Some people do find the work interesting and develop a sense of achievement in this sort of work. Certainly if they're well run these work parties can be quite interesting and a good way to bring people together in a common cause, so called bonding we have in organisations today. I think we got a good deal of enthusiasm, for example, in some of the early work parties on the Boboyan pines when we were at that earlier stage of trying to contain the burnt areas, the damaged areas, and the clearing of the wildlings around there. We had some quite sizeable work parties, some of them were in association with the KHA. I remember we had a couple, one or two of them which were very good really. So they combined a number of things. A number of us camped out there so you had that bit of outdoor activity, and a feeling that they're actually achieving something of value.



MATTHEW:- And how were you taking the pines in, what sort of tools were you using?

SYD:- Just hand tools.

MATTHEW:- So axe and bush saw?

SYD:- That's right, yes. At times, again, we felt we weren't getting the support that we might have had from the staff of the park. If they'd had one man with a chainsaw going through the big stuff we could have achieved a lot more, I think. We were hindered because we weren't going to use chainsaws; we were taking on by hand what was really quite an inefficient way of doing some of the larger things, but for the smaller wildlings and smaller remnant pines it was a perfectly sound way to go about it.

So in the event, I don't know just how effective what we did has been. A lot of regrowth did occur but other events have overtaken the issue but, at the time, as well as the actual physical achievement by clearing quite considerable areas of regrowth and remnant and struggling pines, it certainly brought the issue to attention.

MATTHEW:- So do you think a bit of a hidden agenda there by NPA with the bigger picture in view to get rid of the plantation altogether?

SYD:- Yes, although at that stage we were happy to accept it should grow to maturity, I think that was expected to happen in the mid '90s when it would be profitable or commercially viable to remove the pines. There were the two aspects I think, one was to see that the pines didn't overtake the area which had been partly destroyed and secondly to keep pressure in the longer term on the commitment to remove them eventually.

MATTHEW:- And the briars also were another target for NPA work parties generally, around Gudgenby especially.

SYD:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- And how did you approach those?

SYD:- Initially just cutting, but subsequently cutting and attacking with a glyphosate herbicide. Initially, as I recall, Parks people didn't like us using the 'Roundup'. They required that one of their staff do that but later that restriction was removed. That was the approach taken there.

Another work party, I think, we might have had one or two which were quite interesting, was to assist in the ACT section of the Alpine Track from the cypress pine track or the cypress track, whatever it's called, on Mt Tennent from the Visitors Centre through to the Bushfold Flats area. We had a few work parties on that. They were generally follow-up work parties because a lot of that work was done by the Richmond Foundation, I think, or one of the volunteer, assisted volunteer, groups.

MATTHEW:- So what sort of work would NPA be doing there?

SYD:- Well, that was maintenance of the track.

MATTHEW:- Putting in steps, drainage?

SYD:- Yes, putting in steps, drainage, edging, clearing overhangs, that sort of work. Yes, putting in water bars. Also, for one section of it, there was a degree of consultation with us on the route that it should be taking, and we did quite a bit of exploratory work. The Parks Service, I think, had marked out a route and we were asked to comment and we looked at that.

MATTHEW:- That was from the Booroomba Rocks carpark through to the Cypress Pine lookout?

SYD:- That's right, yes, and so we were involved in that. For my part I would have been happy to see the NPA become associated with particular projects or particular areas of the park and the maintenance of them. That would have been, I think, a very good one for us to have taken under



our wing and say well, we'll look after that; we'll look after the Yerrabi track. We would have had identified projects. It hasn't really gone that way, but I think that that would have been and remain quite a satisfactory way. In that way, I think, individuals might become more associated by having a specific focus within the park.

To some extent we are doing that now with the Gudgenby Bush Regeneration Group, although it's a separate group outside the NPA, but that provides the same sort of focus on a particular area within the park. I still think that it would be a good thing for us to do, I mean we could take on another project. I would really like to see us take on the Tennent Homestead but this has been a nettle I think, we haven't really grasped.

MATTHEW:- There have been work parties there by NPA?

SYD:- Oh yes, we have had a couple of work parties but we haven't pursued it vigorously. There was a very good report done on it by Mr Hobbs.

MATTHEW:- Roger Hobbs, yes!

SYD:- Hobbs, Roger Hobbs, yes. We had KHA and the National Trust, I think, all involved in that report. We haven't been able to convince the Park people to become really interested in it. I think, they would be happy to let it just have its value but not have any work to lengthen its life.

MATTHEW:- To allow it to become a ruin entirely?

SYD:- Yes, and that would really have been discouraging. I can see they have discouraged its visit by people really, because some sections are considered unsafe.

MATTHEW:- Especially the pisé section?

SYD:- Yes, well that's collapsed. They did have on their program last year a public walk there. I think, they've had a few of these public walks under the guidance of a ranger.

MATTHEW:- Yes, Geoff Young!

SYD:- Yes. Anyway, I hope that it will be picked up again because it is, I think, quite a valuable piece of cultural heritage, and now that it is legal for us to become involved in it and I think we ought to do it. I can see it's got some problems mainly because of its accessibility really. It's just so close to the roads and I think that does pose some problems.

MATTHEW:- Though it is out of sight of these!

SYD:- Oh yes, it's out of sight, true, it's not like ...

MATTHEW:- Brayshaw's for example!

SYD:- That's right, Brayshaw's. I was thinking of those at London Bridge, that area. Anyway that's that.

MATTHEW:- OK, now the other side of NPA really apart from its conservation and advocacy role was its role as a bushwalking organisation, and I want to ask you whether you have lead many walks yourself?

SYD:- Yes, I haven't recently led many but there was a period, I suppose, when I had at least one walk in every program for quite a few years. Some of them were car camps, some day-walks, I don't think I led any pack walks in the ACT, I might have but I don't think so. So yes, I did that.

It's interesting, when I joined the Association there was a lot more emphasis on car camps but again, it's just a matter of having people with those interests and I think the age group of the people had a relation to that, there were a lot more people with families, younger families involved which car camping suited. So that was a more prominent component of the walks program early on.



MATTHEW:- Just continuing the walking subject, Syd, do you think you actually had a philosophy about bushwalking as a leader and did you chose places, destinations just at random or were you trying to achieve something for people and how do you lead a walk yourself?

SYD:- Well, first I would say that I came to this well aware of my limitations, a lack of really very much experience in bushwalking and only a limited knowledge of the natural environment we were walking through. So I came to this not feeling that I had a degree of expertise which would have been desirable. But in walking I do think it's very desirable for people to be able to have a reasonable understanding of the areas they are walking through. Sometimes I've been rather disappointed in the bushwalking fraternity. Many haven't as much knowledge as I might expect of the natural area they are walking through, considering the time they have spent on it.

So I feel really that perhaps I hadn't learned as much about the bush, about plants, animals, the geology, the landscape, the geography and so on as I might have. Now I don't know that I was ever really in a position to do very much to rectify that, not having the particular skills there. So I was interested in taking walks and that people have a general understanding of what the plan is for the walk. I think that there is a great problem, or a possibility, of people walking and just following the leader without having much appreciation of what the overall plan is, and secondly without having much understanding really of the areas they are walking through. I'm not saying I was in a position to do very much to rectify this situation but I do feel that there's room for us as walkers to be more knowledgeable about the areas we are going through, but at the same time doing it in a way that's not making it a hardship in that it's becoming too much a study rather than a matter of enjoyment.

Now as far as the choice of areas, I tended to take those areas that were within my knowledge and capabilities, so that I did not tend to go into areas with which I was unfamiliar. I tended to go to areas probably nearer to hand, the Bullen Range, places like Billy-Billy Rocks and the like with which I was fairly familiar rather than going to the more remote and little used places.

MATTHEW:- Are there some particular trips or experiences that you would like to recount for any reason?

SYD:- Well, I don't think there would be many. I can recall a couple of the early car camps. Ian Currie was a very keen car camper and I went on a few of his car camps. Interestingly he had the most immobile mobile home I have ever seen and that always provided a bit of fun. He had a pet name for it, Fat Albert, it was an old 'Commer' vehicle and he used to take it into some extraordinary difficult places and always managed to get it out somehow. It might have been at the Ravine one Easter, we went with him and he appeared on Easter morning complete with large bunny ears distributing goodies to everyone in the traditional Easter sense. So yes, I think a lot of the car camps, Bournda and other car camps I went on were always very interesting.

But as far as anecdotes, well I'm not an anecdote person really, so I wouldn't be able to tell many in an entertaining way. There is always plenty of interest and plenty of good fun, good fellowship. So I think that both the car camps and the walks provided this very successfully, the companionship aspects have been very successfully achieved in all the activities. That's very important, I mean it's all very well saying you are going out to learn something, that's one aspect, but then you should not overlook the other aspects of personal satisfaction, exercise in fresh air and companionship that goes with it. I think they have all been very successful in that.

For myself I've tended to take a bit more interest in pack walking over the last few years and in some of the longer pack walks, just personal interest and it's not more significant than that.

MATTHEW:- And it's helped you get into places that you wouldn't otherwise have got to either on car camps or day walks?

SYD:- Yes, that's right.



MATTHEW:- OK, I'd like to talk to you about the Bulletin, the most recent change to the production of the Bulletin has seen it being taken away to some extent from Green Words, from a purely commercial operation to a sub-group of members playing more a major role and Green Words playing more a lesser role and of course, you have been convenor of this sub-group since this change in 1997. Could you tell me why this change came about and how it currently operates?

SYD:- Previous to this we really had a contract with Roger Green of Green Words to produce the Bulletin. At the time I made the offer to try and get a group together to produce the Bulletin. We were looking for some economies, financial economies. The Bulletin has always been a fairly substantial part of the regular outgoings of the Association. So at this time I suggested that we do most of the work ourselves. We could save quite a deal of money and I also felt that we could improve the relevance of the Bulletin to members by having greater involvement of members. So they were two aspects.

At the same time we wanted to do it in such a way that we didn't cut our retreat line, as it were, if this didn't work. So I thought it desirable to maintain a reasonable involvement with Green Words, should it be necessary or desirable to go back to the previous arrangement. So we have the current arrangement now where the Bulletin Working Group produces or develops all the material to an edited stage and then provides it as a quantum of text really and photos to Green Words with suggestions on layout. Then they carry out the layout and pass it on to the printer. That division of responsibility has worked out pretty well. Green Words were very cooperative about reducing their role. They might have been relieved, I don't know, but they were quite happy to accept a lesser part in this. We have very little overlap, it's pretty clear where the lines between the two organisations are drawn. To my mind, as far as operating is concerned, it's worked quite well with the sort of software that's now available in desktop publishing and the sort of equipment that is available. If we so desired, the Association could, I think, move the other step and do the layout ourselves, but it's a matter then of another commitment for members and of whether you could do this on a continuing basis. What we are doing now seems probably sustainable; it's not too big a drain on our membership to sustain this.

I think you will always need an individual who is willing to put a fair bit of time into bringing it together. If so, then you can find the other people to come along with it. Although it's not as much demand as perhaps there used to be on the editor when we operated in that way, it still does need a coordinator who is willing to put a fair bit of time into it. I think the current arrangement could be sustainable and I think it gets the benefits of the greater membership involvement and therefore it's more likely to better reflect members' opinions and interests.

MATTHEW:- As a member I'd always assumed that the present style and design of the cover, because it seemed to begin with the Green Words period, that it was designed by them, but you were saying that is not the case?

SYD:- No, it was Kim Verass who was briefly secretary in 1989. Her husband was in the printing game or publishing game and he put that together for us.

MATTHEW:- And so that's been quite a change in the corporate presentation of the organisation?

SYD:- Yes, we have stuck with that.

MATTHEW:- Now you yourself have written a number of articles over the years ranging in subject matters from a rescue on Queens Peak to ACT planning matters, fire policy and the draft Namadgi Plan of Management in 1985, and a walk to Crooked Falls with Ken Johnston, so obviously you have been keen to write on all sorts of aspects of relevance to the membership. Why do you contribute to the Bulletin, why do you think it's important?

SYD:- For a lot of members the Bulletin provides the major association with the organisation. Now I haven't seen recent surveys, but I expect that it's one of those organisations in which we



have a sizeable membership but the number of faces we see at outings, at meetings and at other activities is only a small proportion of that membership; but they all receive the *Bulletin*. Whether they read it I don't know, but it remains quite an important link in an organisation like this. One would hope it is also read by people outside the Association and might carry a little bit of weight in the community.

I have always been interested in community organisations. I think these are important in Australian society. Within these organisations the publications which they produce or their means of communications are an essential part of them, particularly in an organisation where there is not a lot of direct contact with individuals. Then, I think, the publications become quite important. So that's the reason that I really continue to support the *Bulletin*.

Now feedback: perhaps we haven't gone out of our way to receive this as well as we might, but one asks people about this and they generally say, yes it's good, quite interesting. But to what extent that's a reflection of their good manners rather than their actual view I don't know.

MATTHEW:- Perhaps the secret ballot is what's required?

SYD:- *[Laughter]* I don't know but it is curious. However at one stage - this is going back before Green Words was responsible for it, I think this might have been even as far back as when Ross Carlton was president, so back in the early 1980s - because of the strain that the production of the *Bulletin*, produced in the organisation to get people to keep it going, I proposed that we reduce the frequency of the *Bulletin* and just supplement it by a news sheet in between issues which gave the current information, meeting dates and so on. That was generally strongly opposed, saying that quarterly was about the least frequency that could be tolerated to keep reasonable continuity going. Since then, to the best of my knowledge, an alternative has not been looked at, such as say the Historical Society which has their journal and then they have a news sheet as an intermediate position and that's not a bad way to go, but we have not gone this way.

MATTHEW:- Now, with the other publications that NPA has produced over the years, there has been a couple, three actually, two before you joined, then the tree guide came out in 1983 but was then reprinted in 1990 while you were President, I think, obviously the initial print run had run out so was it a brave move of NPA to reprint that book?

SYD:- I don't know whether it was brave. I can't just recall how our finances were then, but we were able to manage it and there was a need there. I think the difficulty was not so much finding the heart to do it but the practicalities of getting the corrections done and the necessary illustrations; there were a few new illustrations. I think it was the practicalities rather than the risk involved, I don't think we saw it as a great risk but we ran into various problems. There was a sub-committee that did most of that work.

MATTHEW:- I think you were saying Les Pyke was in charge of that?

SYD:- I think he was as I recall. It turned out to be a rather larger task than was anticipated, I think, whether there were more corrections or what other difficulties were I'd have to look back to recall specifics of that.

MATTHEW:- Did that book give the organisation increased confidence to consider further guides?

SYD:- I think so, yes, and we were looking for areas that we could handle. The difficulty again had been to do it largely within our own resources. It's a matter of partly finding the topic but also finding, for a new project, the skill to do it. If one had to buy that, of course, you run into a financial problem. As you know, the solutions to those things were found subsequently.

MATTHEW:- Of course, the organisation brought out other guides, with the bird guide in 1993 and the reptile guide in 1998. You weren't involved with those?

SYD:- Not really, no.



We also did look at the possibility of another publication to coincide with the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Association, which is next year. I was rather keen that we produce a guide of some sort. I had two that appealed to me. One would be about Canberra Nature Park, I don't think it's well covered in any current guide that brings it all together. The other would be a guide more generally on the open spaces of Canberra and that would incorporate particularly Namadgi, Tidbinbilla and the Canberra Nature Park. They would be the main components and, of course, include the river corridor.

For somebody coming to Canberra, whereas there are some quite good guides particularly on the general area of Canberra, I didn't feel that we have an adequate guide to the natural areas of Canberra. The one of the alternatives that did attract some interest was the Canberra Nature Park, but we pursued this and we might have been in a position to do it but it was then recognised, or Ian Fraser brought it to our attention, that he was a deal of the way down the track about producing that. We did not want to cross his path and so we haven't pursued that. For my part I still would think there is room for a broader guide to the natural Canberra, the natural ACT really, which is only partly covered now within existing guides.

MATTHEW:- Before I ask you the last few questions I've got in mind, you have got some points there that you made in preparation!

SYD:- Just a few points that I may mention, that I've been involved in. The period I was President was very interesting in the amount of effort being put into planning, both the plan for the ACT and the machinery. So we had the formation of the National Capital Plan in that period and we had some involvement there in helping to prepare the submissions and appearing before the National Planning Authority as it then was. It's interesting to note that our submission at that stage favoured Commonwealth control of the Namadgi National Park as an Association viewpoint. That was an issue which was quite important. I remember the then Minister, Tom Uren, favoured Commonwealth control of the national park but, of course, events turned out the other way. So we had the National Planning Authority who were required within 12 months of the declaration of Territory self governing to produce a plan. They were under a lot of pressure and it really was a very interesting planning process. Considering the time constraints they were under they did very well in undertaking a good deal of public consultation. I attended a number of the seminars that were held and the like. So that was a very interesting period.

Now consequent to that was the production of the Territory Plan and the legislation to operate the land control and environment control in the ACT. That happened and resulted in the Land and Environment Act 1990 and the Territory Plan which was produced about that time. Subsequently the Territory Plan was incorporated into the Act.

So involvement in the issues was an interesting period. We perhaps had a few little wins. In general our interest was related to the open spaces and to securing better safeguards and better operations for that.

Another area which for a period I became involved in, a few years ago, probably about 5 or 6 years ago, were a couple of inquiries into tourism in the ACT. This dragged on, I'm a bit vague now about the details, but there was a Commonwealth tourism policy produced. Part of that was that there would be an interlocking tourist policy produced by each State and Territory. Again there was a consultative process here, and Beverley Hammond and myself became involved in preparing for this. We were one of the very few community groups that were involved in this. It took up issues such as the sort of controls that should be placed, not only controls but the framework within which eco-tourism operators should conduct their business; what sort of training, what sort of licences, what sort of safety features and so on were to be a requirement of this. It went into many other areas as well. For a period they were working towards a timetable but that seemed to go out and out, and I'm afraid I rather drifted out of it and I don't know whether the Association really continued an interest, I didn't pursue it. It seemed to just taper off. It became



quite complicated because at the same time as this tourism investigation was going on there was a marketing investigation going on within the ACT Government and the two really covered a lot of common territory. It became very difficult to sort out just which way they were going. Anyway, I just mention that that's an area in which the Association for a period had quite an input and was one of the few community groups to do so.

Another project in the same sort of vein, in this planning area was the more recent one, I think it was called the Canberra 2000 Project. This would be about 3 years ago now and involved the development of a strategic plan for Canberra. Again we had some inputs into this but I left the committee and I haven't really seen it through, but it was one for a period in which I became very involved.

Another area in which I put a fair bit of work, was in the archives of the Association. This would go back probably about 8 years. Sheila Kruse, who was many years ago secretary of the Association, and a life member I think, volunteered to go through a lot of old material, some of it had been passed to her by previous committee members, and to catalogue this. Then we had support from a professional archivist in

MATTHEW:- Theo Exley?

SYD:- Theo Exley, yes. So we had a busy little group going then and a lot of materials put together. We had quite a few meetings, a lot of people interested and then we got to the two things we needed to do. One was find a place to keep this archival material and there was a difficulty there in that at this stage there was shift in responsibility from the Commonwealth to the Territory. The Commonwealth had divested itself of it but the Territory hadn't yet taken it up, so there was an interregnum, since overcome. The other thing to be done was for some decisions to be made on policies for retention. I really bowed out of this although I put quite a lot of time into it before those two things were tied up. They were left there and I don't really know what the position in that area is now but a lot was done. Really, people had put a lot of effort into that.

MATTHEW:- Well just one question, what changes do you think you observed in the membership over the years, well the size of the membership but also the types of people who are in NPA, has there been much demographic change or other change over the time?

SYD:- Well, I think we have become a bit older, I think that's the main change. I think it seemed to me when I joined that we had a far more widely spread active group in the organisation. I could be wrong there but there seemed to be more active people that were willing to do things, help in submissions, help with research and generally share the load of running the organisation. At one stage, I think, we had 5 sub-committees, something like that, operating about the time I first went on the committee, each taking a share of the load. The number of people within the sub-committees was larger so that, I think, there was a greater spread and we had more active people. I think there has been a movement towards an Association with far fewer people who are willing or motivated to take the active roles, and I think that's a shame.

MATTHEW:- Syd, was there anything further you wanted to say on that one?

SYD:- I think this has resulted in overloading a few committee members and this is a very serious problem, this trend. I don't know where the answer lies, but if you are asking about change, I think that's the significant one really, in that we haven't that broad base of people who are willing to contribute time. There still remains a lot of good will and a lot of support but not the number of people doing work, and that makes it very difficult, I think, for the organisation to continue. I think it's one of the reasons. Of course it's sort of a catch 22 situation in that because it's known that committee members are very busy it is difficult to recruit, particularly to the more important positions, and if that continues those that are there are more heavily loaded.

We've certainly expanded, continued to expand the areas in which we have become interested



but partly this is a reflection, I think, of the Territory becoming established as a self-governing organisation and that we are part of this so that there are more issues in which the community or the ACT Government has a part, whereas years ago so much of this really operated at a more distant level in the Commonwealth. An example was our involvement in the environmental flows in the water systems here. That is just as an example of the sort of thing that it is probably unlikely that we would have become interested in because the decisions would be or the involvement in that would be at a more distant level of government. I think partly because we are now seeing the full implications of running our own affairs in the ACT, that we have a much closer community involvement in many more activities. So that has led to, I think, a broadening of our base.

MATTHEW:- But fewer people to deal with then?

SYD:- Well, that's true and so we have tended to rely more on grants to use professional advice. The issue which some would take up, and I think it's one that we need to address in the Association, is whether we should be concentrating more effort on the national park, the distinct open areas, rather than so many of these more general environmental issues. I mean it is by name the National Parks Association.

However, within the ACT, apart from the Conservation Council which is a second-tier organisation really and hasn't many direct members, there is not a broadly based conservation group and we've tried to fill in, I think, a lot of those gaps. You have specialist areas, I mean you've got say the ornithologists in that particular area who are making a tremendous contribution in that area, but we haven't a community body with a large individual membership which can represent a lot of environmental issues and I think we, to some extent, have filled that void. Now whether that's been at the expense of perhaps concentration on the matters within Namadgi is unclear. Clearly there are some big issues heading up here, native title, of course, is the dominant one for the future, it must be. I think we have been fortunate that we have had members who have contributed a lot to looking at and examining it. With that particularly in the wings and about to become centre stage whether we should be girding our loins to concentrate more on Namadgi is a good question I think, we haven't really addressed.

MATTHEW:- Alright, we are just about at the end of what I had in mind so if there are any other comments you would like to make, Syd?

SYD:- I think we could go on but I think I've covered most of the things that are significant and this seems a reasonable point to stop.

MATTHEW:- Alright, well thanks very much, Syd.

SYD:- I think for a brief time we have covered many of the issues. I'd just like to thank you for this opportunity, Matthew, to recall some of these things and hope this is of interest down the line and I thank you very much for the way you have gone about this and helped to put a few ideas together.

MATTHEW:- Thanks very much.