



INTERVIEW WITH JIM WEBB

(NPA President 1966)

FIONA:- This is an interview with Jim Webb who was the President in the 1960s for the NPA of the ACT. Interview at 11 Dyson Street, Lyneham, on 20th April 1998.

Now Jim, we'll start at the beginning. Were you interested in the environment as a child or was your family very interested?

JIM:- Yes, that's true, I was interested as a child. My father and I used to go out into the bush whenever we could at weekends. Not necessarily doing anything in particular, but just enjoying the Sydney sandstone flora, particularly in spring when the boronias were out and things like that. We were not picking them and, as a matter of fact, we used to get quite annoyed at people who were in those days. You know, my father was very active in sort of going to speak to these people. So you could say that, yes, I did have a conservation-type upbringing.

FIONA:- Now when did you come to Canberra?

JIM:- I came to Canberra post-war. I came here as a student and, I think, it was 1947 when I came back from overseas with the army. I came to Canberra on a Commonwealth training scheme, a trainee.

FIONA:- Was that at the ANU?

JIM:- No, in those days I was a trainee for the Department of the Interior, Parks and Gardens. The idea was for a number of us, there was only about eight, who were to be supervisors in gardens and so forth, to do our training basically in Canberra. It was a special course; basically we had lecturers from the CSIRO and places like that. We were encompassed by the Canberra Technical College at the time. They looked after us and for the rest of the time, apart from the initial six months full-time, we spent three years on the job with one day a week on academic theory type things. We did the curriculum of both Sydney and our own particular exams from Canberra, so we ended up with qualifications from the Ryde School of Horticulture and the Technical College in Canberra.

FIONA:- And so were you then employed?

JIM:- Yes, we were automatically given a job, so I was with them for a while. Then I left to go as a technical assistant, later as a technical officer, with the CSIRO and, of course, that was where I was working in the same building as Nancy Burbidge.

FIONA:- Botany?

JIM:- Yes, botany.

FIONA:- How did you become involved with the NPA?

JIM:- Well, I was at the inaugural meeting Nancy Burbidge called in 1960. That was just immediately before we were leaving for Broken Hill; I had a job in Broken Hill.

FIONA:- Well, that was the first meeting but perhaps you were involved in 1959. Nancy had an exhibition with Ed Slater's photos to test the water?

JIM:- Yes, if I recall rightly, it was at the Institute of Anatomy. I was definitely at that meeting. Well anyhow, then I went off to Broken Hill and I was there for three years approximately. When I came back, of course, I was pleased to see that it hadn't folded, it was going and Ian Grant [*sic*] was the President at the time.

FIONA:- You led walks for the NPA?



JIM:- Yes, Nancy of course had all the knowledge and everything about the flora of the ACT, she was, at that stage, compiling her *Flora of the ACT* with Max Gray. Anyhow, I felt that the people in the group didn't know enough about the areas that we were proposing to make as national park and therefore my brief, I suppose to myself, was that what I should do was to encourage the members to get out into the bush. Of course I was into bushwalking and everything, and I made that my brief to lead people out into the bush and show them what we had in the bush. It was during my presidency that, I think, I achieved a lot of field trips, day trips. Being close to Canberra there was no need to have sort of overnight trips, you know. We did it all from day trips and we went to various areas, I can't detail them all now but, you know, it was all within the ACT.

FIONA:- *You became President in 1964?*

JIM:- I think that's right, 1964 or 65. I could look this up but this is all coming off the top of my head. I can't give exact dates.

FIONA:- *During that time, can you remember, were there any great issues that the Association had to deal with in that period of your presidency?*

JIM:- No, I can't recall any. There were issues, yes, and we were always lobbying for a national park in the ACT, but I don't recall any specific issue. If there were conservation type issues going we supported them, but I just can't recall any specific one.

FIONA:- *Nothing dramatic like the Black Mountain tower, I mean that was later.*

JIM:- That was later, yes.

FIONA:- *I think during your time, though, you had to take on a few extra jobs, did you have to be the Editor as well of the NPA Bulletin?*

JIM:- Possibly yes, I don't recall exactly.

FIONA:- *Yes, I think your load was quite heavy during that time because of that.*

JIM:- Well, someone had to do it, and I didn't mind doing it. In those days, perhaps I had more energy than I've got now, I didn't see it as a problem.

FIONA:- *Now, you have been involved in many environmental groups. What other groups were you involved in, in Canberra?*

JIM:- Well, some of them were only partly environmental, I suppose, in that their aims and everything weren't necessarily straight environmental protection or anything like that, but certainly involved in environment in various ways. I was involved with the Canberra Alpine Club, of course, quite early on, that was a combination of skiing and bushwalking type club in those days, I suppose we could still say it is now. The Canberra Speleology Society: I was the founder basically of that. We were looking at cave exploration in the local area.

FIONA:- *Who else was in that?*

JIM:- Ed Slater, Joe Jennings. Joe Jennings and Ed Slater and myself, we were the nucleus at the start of it, you know. We were joined by people from Sydney. Actually, we had a journalist, Ted Lane, he was in the Press Gallery, he joined us, he'd been in the Sydney University Speleology Society which was already running. The club was formed following on a rescue that a group of us did of a Sydney University Speleology Society member who was lost at Yarrangobilly Cave. I led a group over to Yarrangobilly and we found him and rescued him.

FIONA:- *How many hours was he lost in the cave?*

JIM:- I think it was something like two days, and he'd run out of light and everything. The police and everyone including the other speleology people had given up hope for him. Anyhow, we went over and tracked him down and found him. Anyhow, you were asking me about other organisa-



tions that I was in. I think they'd be the main two. I can't think of others.

FIONA:- Then there was the growing the native plants.

JIM:- Yes, of course. I knew there was something else I shouldn't forget on the spot. Yes, the Society for Growing Australian Plants. I was at various times the President of that and I was the federal Vice-President, it being an Australia-wide organisation. At that time John Wrigley was here and John was the President and I was the federal Vice-President. I was quite active in that, which also involved excursions, you know weekend excursions and day trips, out in the environment.

FIONA:- That's still a very progressive group.

JIM:- Yes, and I'm still a member of it in Wagga.

FIONA:- When did you leave Canberra?

JIM:- We left Canberra in about 1984.

FIONA:- And what job did you go to then?

JIM:- I resigned, took early retirement from the Australian National University Botany Department. At the time Myra, my wife, was ill and Wendy was living with her husband in Wagga so we moved there. I took early retirement to work as a consultant and it was a fairly central place to be in relation to Melbourne and Sydney and Canberra. Most of my work, as it turned out, was with municipality shires and with government departments, federal government departments. For a period I was travelling to Canberra every week for three days a week with the Department of Primary Industries and Energy. I was working on plant quarantine work which involved a number of ADAB projects of which I was the coordinator of the projects. These were very large projects, they were in the order of \$5 million projects. I was able to say that as coordinator of these schemes I was able to complete the project on time and on/under budget. So that's quite a distinction.

Then I was offered other projects in Indonesia, but after my first experience in Indonesia I said no more. I predicted in fact to my wife, I didn't go public on this, but I predicted the sort of thing that's happening today and this was based on my experience that I couldn't get anything done unless I was prepared to bribe. When you are working with government money, there is just no money for that sort of thing and I had to just persist without bribes and it was a very difficult project. I didn't want to subject myself to any more of that nonsense.

FIONA:- I don't blame you. And so you lived on in Wagga till this day?

JIM:- Oh yes. I've been part-time teaching also. I was teaching here at the TAFE, which is now the Institute in Canberra, and when I went over to Wagga there were opportunities for me to teach part-time which I've done.

FIONA:- In botany?

JIM:- No, in horticulture. That was right from when I went to Wagga, I think, over the first twelve months I was there. Then right through to the present but only occasionally, I'm a relief teacher; when the principal's away I'm called in to relief teach. I've generally cut down my load which was getting almost full-time and I didn't want to do that.

FIONA:- But you have a gardening program?

JIM:- Oh yes; that's with the ABC. When I was in Canberra, of course, I had Southern Gardener which was a TV program, a half hour TV show, I used to do that, but that was axed. It went on with other people, of course, but, anyhow, I was doing a radio program which was straight radio talking about it. The one that I'm doing now and have done for the last eight years in Wagga, on the ABC, is a talk-back program on Radio Riverina which goes out on about 13 different FM



bands. It covers northern Victoria and western NSW and the Riverina, so it's got quite a large area that I, sort of, service. People often ask me how could I answer questions from people up at Tumbarumba and Batlow in that cold climate when next minute I'm talking to someone out at Hillston or somewhere like that. The reason is I've gardened in Broken Hill and also in Canberra, the extremes you might say, so I'm quite competent, plus my Wagga knowledge, to answer all those readers' questions that come in. This has got me a certain amount of presence, I suppose you might say, in the Riverina. I'm always being asked to come and address gardening clubs and things like that.

FIONA:- That's interesting. So your involvement with the NPA was from its very beginning to 1984 when you left for Wagga?

JIM:- I'm not sure about that. I think with children growing up and one thing and another you know they took a lot of my time. Also Myra, my wife, was not well and I think I couldn't spend as much time as I liked. But I'm not sure, perhaps you could look up the records.

[Spoken by somebody else, Myra?:- The reason or part of the reason was that you were on the project with and they were going out and doing the botanical survey and, you know, Jim would be away for 6 weeks at a time.]

FIONA:- I don't think you were on the committee for very long, but you did lead walks.

JIM:- Yes. I was a member, but as Myra said, when I was at the ANU I was head technical officer there in the department eventually. I started off there as a technical officer but I became the senior technical officer, then a head technical officer and my job was to look after, well, everything in the department basically other than the teaching program which, incidentally, I used to be sometimes called upon to fill in.

FIONA:- This is the last question now. What's your vision for the state of the environment?

*JIM:- My vision is that the state of the environment is a lot healthier and better in the ACT than it is in NSW where I live. One of my concerns which have been brought out this year is that at the moment, we are talking in April 1998, that we've just gone through what a lot of people are saying is a worst drought ever. I hear all this nonsense; it's not the worst drought ever, statistically if we look at it, it's a 1 in 20-year drought. What worries me is that people talk about the 1 in 100 and 1 in 200-year floods, but they never talk about the 1 in 100 or 1 in 200-year droughts and as we've only been here 200 years, maybe we haven't had it or maybe this is the 1 in 200. If it is, I'm really concerned because of the over-irrigation that's going on, and the greed particularly by the big grazing companies that are exploiting *[the land, the water]*. A lot of this I know in the Wagga area is overseas American capital that's coming in. They're monitoring what's going on on their properties by satellite and then ringing up and abusing the managers.*

So, you know, I'm really concerned at this over-exploitation of Australia, you know, by increased irrigation of large areas. I'm also concerned and involved with the increase in salinity. Of course I was aware of salinity when I was in Broken Hill, and when I came to live in Wagga I was aware there were salinity problems but nobody was concerned at all. Now, however, they have woken up to what salinity is doing, not only do we have rural salinity but we have urban salinity in Wagga. Now this is affecting house values and things like that, you know. There is a bit of notice being taken by Councils and the State Government which is fortunately doing quite a bit towards injecting money so there have been fairly large capital grants to Wagga. The Council also has put in a lot of money and the urban salinity problem is being tackled. I'm on what is called a 'desalt' program, I'm one of the people who goes around to the community groups and talks to them on salinity, so I'm actively involved with that at the moment. So that's environment isn't it.

FIONA:- Yes, you have never ceased to be an environmentalist person.

JIM:- You don't have a salinity problem in Canberra; maybe you have incipient problems but cer-



tainly there are large areas of NSW that are affected. There is something like 22 towns officially that are affected by urban salinity and I myself can add 3 or 4 that are not on the list that I know of.

FIONA:- That's due to clearing of land and irrigation?

JIM:- Yes, clearing of land and over-irrigation. Sensible irrigation is OK but over-irrigation and clearing of trees mainly that's the problem here, the cause. In the urban areas it's overwatering of lawns basically and gardens.

FIONA:- That could happen in Canberra.

JIM:- It could happen in Canberra, yes. The geology has something to do with it too, but I don't know enough about the situation in Canberra. I know not far out of Canberra there are saline areas.

FIONA:- Out at Gundaroo, between Yass and Gundaroo, there are some dreadful problems.

JIM:- So it could be incipient here, you know, it could arise in the future.

FIONA:- Well, thanks Jim for adding to our historical record, the NPA historical record and it's wonderful to know you are still fighting for the cause.

JIM:- And, Fiona, can I say that you, as one of the original members, also it's great for me to see that you are still at it.

FIONA:- I couldn't do otherwise, thank you.