



## **INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE CHIPPENDALE**

(NPA President 1971)

*MATTHEW:- This is an interview between Matthew Higgins and George Chippendale taking place at George's home in Canberra on 17th December 1999. We're doing this interview for the National Parks Association ACT (NPA), Oral History Project and*

*George, can I just begin by thanking you for putting some time aside this morning to talk to me about your involvement with NPA.*

*GEORGE:- I am always pleased to do anything like this.*

*MATTHEW:- Well, thank you and I know the NPA committee is appreciative too. Now we will get on to the NPA period fairly quickly, but just briefly to recap your earlier life. You were born in 1921 in Sydney, worked in the Herbarium at the Botanical Garden after the Second World War, studied botany, then worked in the Northern Territory from 1954, before coming to Canberra in 1966 to work at the Forest Research Institute. So already, well before you joined the NPA in 1966, you certainly had an interest in things botanical and things natural.*

*GEORGE:- Indeed I did, it was one of my main interests. I was always interested in conservation, even when I worked in the Northern Territory, after all conservation is a big topic in the pastoral industry and we did not have a national park up there. I think Nancy Burbidge knew that I was interested in the things that NPA believed in so, I suppose, I was a natural target for her to look for straight away. With a bit of an interest in botany, as she did also (more than a bit of an interest), I suppose she thought that I could take over some of the things she was doing.*

*MATTHEW:- In NPA?*

*GEORGE:- In NPA, certainly not in her job.*

*MATTHEW:- She was a botanist at the CSIRO?*

*GEORGE:- Yes, she was a senior principal research scientist, one of the highest in CSIRO at that stage. She was the moving force, as I saw it, in the NPA at that stage when I came to Canberra. She told me about the NPA and I thought that was a nice thing, I'll get into it later on. But Nancy wasn't having that, she mentioned that they have nice walks and family picnics and I might care to join it, so I joined it. That was not a commitment that was just joining, going to meetings, certainly going on picnics, going on walks (short ones) and we enjoyed it. Our youngest girl was only 4 or 5 or something like that at the time we joined and it did have a family aspect then, I guess it still does, but we just haven't been involved as much recently, so it may have changed somewhat.*

*MATTHEW:- That was 1966 when you joined and you met Nancy through the course of your work?*

*GEORGE:- Yes. I had visited Canberra several times before and was always working with Nancy when I came here because she had the herbarium and that is what I wanted to look at. She was always extremely helpful, more than helpful. She took me out to see places, during the working day, that I would not have had a chance to see as I didn't have a car here. She took me over to the old, the original, National Library in Kings Avenue; it is historic now, a big magnificent place. Nancy did think more around the job she was doing and she was extremely helpful to me, and always a very friendly person.*

*MATTHEW:- And a fairly strong personality would you say?*

*GEORGE:- Yes, she had a dominating personality I'd say. I know some people might have been afraid of her because of her knowledge and because she was a woman, but I found her very nice*



to visit and most helpful to me. Helpful when I needed help and left me alone when I wanted to do things myself. I always enjoyed coming to Canberra because Nancy made me so welcome. I should say, a lot of other botanists throughout Australia did the same, but Nancy was here where I came a bit more frequently, I suppose.

*MATTHEW:- So at that time in 1966, George, when you joined, could you give me an idea of how passionate the NPA was about its campaign for a national park for the national capital?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I didn't absorb it for a while, you never know how you can go when you're working at a Government trying to get something done. National Parks I knew, even from the Northern Territory, it was a difficult thing to get the reserves made. As soon as you made a reserve, say in the Northern Territory, well pastoralists thought that must be good, we will have that and they would start agitating. So, I suppose, I was a bit doubtful about what effect a small organisation like NPA could have, but that was discounting the really concentrated effort of Nancy and Julie Henry (I think she was Vice-President at that stage).

In their concentrated effort they were very determined. Both very strong ladies and both very nice people and I think it was their dynamic personalities and drive that got the whole thing going. It was just loosely called .. , it had some other name rather than the one it has now, I tend to forget what.

*MATTHEW:- Well, was it the Mt Kelly National Park?*

GEORGE:- That's right, Mt Kelly. It was interesting because one of my wife's ancestors was married into the Kelly family who were around here, and it sounded interesting to my wife as well at that stage. We took a great interest in the whole thing, but I still had doubts myself. I thought, well, how can you get past governments, they are always very difficult; but they managed it and it was a lot of effort.

There was a book *Mountains, Slopes and Plains* that Nancy virtually wrote. There were contributions from other people, but Nancy was the guiding force behind it.

*MATTHEW:- So was that really a guide to the flora of the ACT?*

GEORGE:- It was a bit more general, it covered animals and the ecology, a lot of things, it was just drawing attention to the place, I think, rather than a flora, it was trying to bring all nature into the one place. It was good. At that stage I think the now Capital Territory Department, I think it was called at that stage...

*MATTHEW:- Department of Interior.*

GEORGE:- That's right; they published it eventually and I would think that was because of Nancy's knowledge of the people there and their knowledge of her that they decided to publish it and, therefore, save NPA the cost. As far as I can remember, it was given away rather than sold; no, I am confusing it with the opening of the Botanical Gardens, where there was a book they gave away.

*MATTHEW:- And you were President around about the time the book came out, you were President 1971-72.*

GEORGE:- Yes, I have looked up the journals for that period and I find that it was dominated by Black Mountain. I cannot remember whether we wanted it for a national park, we certainly wanted it reserved. We had many meetings and I know I was on a Black Mountain committee. We had a lot of meetings at that time, and in the general meetings it was one of the main topics as well. Nancy had been interested in Black Mountain for many years obviously before I came here.

I think that was the biggest thing that was going on because it was associated with the, at that time, proposal to build the tower on Black Mountain. NPA was vehemently opposed to it. I know Julie Henry at least and others also went before the parliamentary committee and made their



attitudes known. I did not go before the committee as, I think, I was getting ready to go to Kew at that stage. That was later in 1972 from memory. Those two things, Black Mountain and the tower on Black Mountain; we had the attitude that building the tower and making a road would deteriorate the environment there. In retrospect now, I do not think it's actually damaged anything seriously; certainly they took the top off the mountain and created a tourist attraction. I suppose our worst thoughts on that didn't come true, but still if we hadn't said anything there might have been a hell of a lot more things put up there.

Well, I always leant on Harry Frith who was a great conservationist in the wildlife division of CSIRO. He always said, "If you are a conservationist - as we called it then instead of Greenie or whatever - you have got to go for the whole lot or you'll only get a little bit. But, if you go for the lot you'll get it". Well, maybe that is an ambit claim usually, but anyway I think the attitude was correct. We tried to stop something that we thought was going to damage the mountain and although it hasn't damaged the bits we expected, the attitude was correct, that was the main thing.

*MATTHEW:- As well as members giving evidence to that parliamentary committee were there other forms of protest that the NPA initiated?*

GEORGE:- I know I went to see the member for the ACT at that moment, I think it was Kep Enderby. His attitude was, well he was a politician at that stage, he was off-hand when I interviewed him or he interviewed me one lunchtime. We had a talk - let's say he was rather off-hand - it was a small time topic to him. I think he was looking at it from how many votes he might get. I was not impressed. He also came along and gave a brief talk to one of our general meetings. I cannot remember anything very important coming out of that because, again, I think his attitude was, well these are a few potential voters and if I do something for them well I might get a few votes.

*MATTHEW:- So he obviously saw no votes in conservation at that time?*

GEORGE:- At that stage I'd say that would be true. A bit later, it must have been somewhat later, another politician, who was the Minister for Conservation in the Whitlam Government, Moss Cass I think, we had him to a luncheon at probably Bill Watson's place. I think Bill was the President then as he followed me. I talked to Moss Cass particularly and asked him about Black Mountain, because it was still going, although they had decided. I said, "What do you really think about it" and he said, "I think it should be saved. You know the conservation should be the main thing" but I said, "Can you say that in your committees or in cabinet or somewhere" and he said, "Well, we have to think of votes". I said, "But if you were elected on something, you believe in it" but he discounted that somewhat; it's not the way they have to make their decisions. So that's Black Mountain, of course the road up Black Mountain was already put in and the powerlines and so on I think were put in before there was actual cabinet approval, and we knew they were going to do it no matter what, but still we tried.

*MATTHEW:- Now there was another issue about, well in the early '80s this proposal for a gondola to go up Black Mountain. Do you recall that issue?*

GEORGE:- I do vaguely, I wasn't involved in it but I do recall it. It reminded me of a similar thing when we were living in the Northern Territory, they were going to put a similar thing up on Ayers Rock. It was an airy-fairy thing and never came to fruition and thank God the one on Black Mountain didn't either.

*MATTHEW:- If we can go back now for a little while, George, to talk about the campaign for, as it turned out, Gudgenby Nature Reserve, subsequently Namadgi. Now the original NPA proposal had gone in 1963 and you joined just a few years after that. How was the NPA both in the late 60s and through the 70s, how was it prosecuting that campaign? For example, when you were President, were there any major moves then to further that aim?*



GEORGE:- No, I don't think so. I think Nancy [Burbidge] had written something and that went the rounds of people on the committee and others. Nancy was handling that, I would say. I do not remember any big moves then. It was a slow build-up with that one. I remember reading things, but it was totally unfamiliar to me; the country and the things they'd done. I was just learning about the ACT when I came here, small visits never gave me any impressions or any knowledge of the ACT, and I was learning from other people. No, I certainly do not remember any particular drive at that time; it took quite a few years and many submissions. I remember reading many submissions that were going; I presume they went to the Capital Territory Department or NCDC, one of those two places.

*MATTHEW:- Was there much use made of the media, for example doing radio interviews or putting articles into the Canberra Times?*

GEORGE:- Some, I remember writing letters as President to the *Canberra Times*, they weren't terribly effective. I do not remember any interviews on radio or television at that stage, none at all. I cannot think of any particular things in the paper. Chris Watson who I think was on the committee, was not satisfied that the NPA was as dynamic as he wanted. He is a very deeply conscious conservationist, he rides his bike everywhere and walks and so on, he is very devoted to it, I think he might have had an article in the *Canberra Times* at that stage about conservation in general, perhaps about NPA a little bit in particular. There was another one on the committee, Doctor somebody - John Kirk, who started a vineyard out Murrumbateman way, he also did not stay very long because he wanted more activism. NPA was not, well it was active but not extremely active as many conservation bodies used to be and perhaps still are. I remember those two, if not disappointed, wanted more real action to go on, whereas NPA went along and built up slowly and, I think, had the effect eventually without antagonising people. They got what they wanted through the proper channels. The only way it is going to last is if you do get the people onside anyway.

*MATTHEW:- I know that one factor, which I guess slowed the whole process down, was getting the legislation in place under which any park would be managed and you were on the NPA legislation sub-committee commenting on the draft ACT Conservation Ordinance at one time, do you recall that?*

GEORGE:- I don't recall it, I don't doubt it but I don't recall it. I know the attitude I felt was that a lot of national parks, nature parks and reserves are often just a means that some legislative body has used to conserve it for a while, while they think of what they are going to do with it later on. It is a bit of lip service, "oh yes, we will make that a reserve, but oh well, we might be able to build something on that later on". I think that will always be, I do not think there is anything inviolate in a democracy. People who may be in various positions can always change something and get the majority of a council to change with it. I do not actually remember much about that committee, I know it was there but I do not remember much of it.

*MATTHEW:- Alright, now when Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared in 1979 on the centenary of the original Royal National Park, what was the feeling within NPA?*

GEORGE:- I think there was a lot of joy about it. In 1979, hard to think, I know my mother died in that year, so did my wife's father and my brother, but I cannot remember much in particular. I know people were very happy they had achieved something; the whole body had achieved something. There were thoughts of what could be done to help the idea but it was in the hands of the administration, so I think it was an achievement and we will wait and see. That is about all I can remember of that.

*MATTHEW:- There was no celebratory occasion held by NPA that you recall?*

GEORGE:- I certainly don't recall any, no.



*MATTHEW:- OK, now a few years later, 5 years later when Tom Uren in 1984 declared Namadji National Park having added the upper Cotter catchment to Gudgenby, but at last it was the national park in name for the national capital, was that as big an event for you and NPA, do you think, as the 1979 declaration?*

GEORGE:- I think it was bigger. I think it was the ultimate achievement of Nancy Burbidge's original aim of the Mount Gudgenby, the Gudgenby project. Mount Gudgenby to me was, "where the hell was Mount Gudgenby" when I came here. You hear a lot of names when you don't live here, you don't know where they are or what they mean. I think Nancy always worked quietly, she knew people and worked on that aspect, so there was a build-up to what she wanted and the final thing as a national park really was her achievement. Certainly, no one person ever does it alone. Nancy was able to direct other people into helping and to get to the point. I do not remember any big celebration, I do not remember any party or anything like that, but there was probably at a meeting I wasn't at.

*MATTHEW:- What about Bob Story and his role?*

GEORGE:- Bob was always a very quiet worker. He never wanted to be in the forefront of anything and yet he did. He organised rescue groups when people got lost in various bushland places here, and he went out at many odd times to find people. It was often reported in the paper that he was organising that. Bob was a very self-effacing person, very quiet, most knowledgeable and he would help and do anything, but he rarely wanted to take the lead. He might talk about it perhaps, but did not like giving public talks. He was a very quiet man.

*MATTHEW:- Was it you that was saying to me you invited him to give a talk?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I wanted different other colleagues to give brief talks to my botany class in U3A and I asked Bob, he was nervous to start with, but he finally agreed. Then he came along about half an hour earlier than need be and he read, it was only half a page he'd written, but he read that through and through and through. I think he had 2 or 3 slides to illustrate points that he'd made on ecology. He was not nervous when he was talking. He went over wonderfully well, so that the class asked me would I get him back, they liked him. He had a warm personality and they knew that he knew what he was talking about very well. I hesitated to ask him again, I could see it was a big stress to him to talk even though he talked well and got it over very well. I liked Bob a lot.

*MATTHEW:- One aspect of national parks everywhere over the last few decades has been the, well I consider, the unfortunate rivalry as it's been seen between natural heritage values and cultural heritage values, both Aboriginal and European. Was there much awareness in the 1970s in the campaign for Gudgenby Nature Reserve of cultural values?*

GEORGE:- I didn't hear of any, no I didn't hear any of that mentioned at all. If anybody knew about it, I think Julie Henry would have been aware. At the same time I never heard anybody against anything like that, if there'd been a proposal about incorporating cultural values into a national park there would have been no objections, I'm sure. Nobody on NPA was anti-aboriginal, as some groups may tend to be; nobody was anti any nation at that time, as far as I remember.

*MATTHEW:- So the campaign was really on natural heritage grounds of flora?*

GEORGE:- Yes, that was the basic aim of NPA as I saw it and certainly as Nancy proposed it. It was all the natural things; it was a totally natural national park.

*MATTHEW:- OK, just before we leave that campaign for the national park, is there anything further on that topic you would like to say?*

GEORGE:- No, I think that covers it pretty well, in my memory anyway.

*MATTHEW:- OK, now we also spoke earlier about Black Mountain. Now elsewhere in the ACT*



other issues, for example Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve, now that came into being the year that you joined NPA, 1966. Did NPA have much role in, say, acting as a watchdog as to what was happening at Tidbinbilla or making submissions or making use of Tidbinbilla for its outings during your time?

GEORGE:- I think we did have a couple of outings there or one, at least, that I can remember. I don't think we had anything to do with it, I heard of Tidbinbilla before I came to Canberra but I didn't know what it was. I knew it was some sort of place where there were kangaroos and perhaps birds and sort of a mini zoo, but that's all I'd known of it. I knew one zoologist who said he would have liked to have worked there, but I knew nothing about it.

I do not think NPA was involved in it although Nancy may have been on the advisory committee for it and perhaps even Julie Henry; one or both might have been on the advisory committee. I was never on any of those committees at all, I used to go away a lot in my work, so I was absent for weeks at a time throughout every year for a long period.

MATTHEW:- *The significant Canberra figure who certainly figured in the very earliest years of NPA was Lindsay Pryor and Lindsay was somebody you would have known, I imagine, fairly well. Did Lindsay have any involvement with NPA during the years you were a member?*

GEORGE:- I don't remember him ever being at a meeting, but he also was a world traveller at that stage. I know he was interested; he was always interested in national parks. I think he was one of the foundation members [of the NPA] from memory and he would have helped. Of course, he would have worked with Nancy Burbidge as well, even behind the scenes. I don't remember Lindsay ever coming to a meeting, and I didn't ever ask him to give a talk there either. I suppose because his views were too much in line with ours. I tried to get people who had opposite views to create discussion. I think Lindsay certainly was on our side but not a meeting attendee.

MATTHEW:- *Any other areas within the ACT where NPA was showing an interest, say, during this 1970s period, for example Jerrabomberra Wetlands. Was there any involvement with that?*

GEORGE:- I don't remember any.

MATTHEW:- *OK, the Molongo Gorge?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I know that was mentioned a number of times. I think (but not in my time as President) that we had a number of walks up the gorge. I've only been there once or twice myself and I don't know much about it, but I don't remember any more than that we did have a couple of walks there and may still have (I don't always read the *Bulletin*).

MATTHEW:- *Alright, now issues outside of the ACT that NPA had an involvement with: of course Kosciuszko National Park is a very big park in our neighbourhood, and during your period did NPA have much of a role in making submissions on Kosciuszko management issues?*

GEORGE:- Not to my knowledge, no. I do not remember it being mentioned at all at our committee meeting or general meetings; it was just there and that was the end of it.

MATTHEW:- *So your committee meetings were really taken up with issues inside the ACT?*

GEORGE:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- *So the Budawangs, for example, that didn't come up, or Jervis Bay?*

GEORGE:- Jervis Bay might have been mentioned and certainly some, like Ian Currie, would have gone there on weekend camps, but I don't remember them being big topics that were discussed.

MATTHEW:- *The government at one time did have a plan to have, of all things, a nuclear power station at Jervis Bay.*

GEORGE:- Yes, I heard about that even before I came to the ACT when I was ringing up from the



Northern Territory to find out what they were going to do about it. I was told it was going to be this wonderful power station that was going to provide power for all of Australia and make water, it was going to be heaven on earth. I did not know about all the dangers of such things at that stage. I do not think there was anything more than just a passing interest in Jervis Bay at that time; they had no plan certainly in the time I was on the committee.

*MATTHEW:- Now, a little bit further down the coast with wood-chipping at Eden, I noticed in the Bulletin I think that you had some extracts from articles in there in the early '70s on these sorts of matters.*

GEORGE:- Yes, I went down there. We were down the coast on holiday and I went down and had a look at the Eden works. I was very much opposed to it, and still am, and yet you know people are being employed there. My wife's family had a cousin living at Eden whose husband worked for the chip mill. When you see people making their living from it you wonder what is the best way; but I certainly don't think the best way is to cut down all the eucalypts without planting any. If they had a plantation then that's another thing, but mostly they think, or used to think, that we have so many eucalypt trees and many, many species what's it matter if we cut them down, there's still plenty left. That is the attitude that might have decimated many other countries. You think it's all going to last forever, like silky oak and red cedar, well they didn't. It's a lesson even members of NPA are learning and reiterating that these things are not indefinite, they won't last forever unless we take some care.

*MATTHEW:- NPA has been trying to, I think, educate!*

GEORGE:- Oh yes, I think one of NPA roles is to educate people. I know I had the attitude during the President year that people, the speakers, should be able to give some information that would help members make up their own mind. It is very hard to tell people dogmatically that they have got to conserve this and you have got to conserve the other, but if you give principles and perhaps examples then the attitude will carry through into decisions later on and support for the committee who make the decisions. There are always attitudes that we have so much here. I know we have a lot here but we should try to keep it.

When I was in England, some of the botanists there were telling me about certain species and I asked where do you find them, "Oh they're in the verges of the motorways". I asked where else, "Oh no, they've been wiped out from everywhere else, they are only left in un-natural verges". In the same way, a lot of their stuff was only found in the hedge-rows or the big stone walls they make between boundaries on properties. The actual species' original habitats had been wiped out. I thought at that time while I was in England, this should never happen in Australia, we have got ample opportunity to save just about every species we need or that we have, but it depends on peoples' attitudes, do they want to keep cutting things down, making more towns, more cities and so on. It happens inevitably, but I think the best we can do is slow it down.

*MATTHEW:- Moving on: another area of NPA's work over the years has been actual physical work on the ground, now the Orroral Homestead conservation project was one aspect of that. I realise that was started in the early 1980s, well after you were off the committee, I guess, however, have you had any involvement with Orroral as a member?*

GEORGE:- I went out on a couple of those sort of picnics but I can't remember where they were, they were out in that area, but I really don't remember where they were. We just went out and provided work and they were picnic things too, of course. I guess it was out that way, but I do not remember any particular place or name. We just went because we liked going.

*MATTHEW:- There was other sorts of work the organisation has been involved with, for example, the Yerrabi track in 1987 and I know you had an involvement there. Could you tell me about that George?*



GEORGE:- Reg Alder was the prime mover on that one, he'd ring me up some mornings, it must have been after I retired because he'd ring up and say, could I go out with him to Yerrabi and name some plants, have a walk up and see where they needed to make a bridge and so on. I suppose we had three or four mornings, or more than mornings, there, sometimes we'd take lunch. Reg would call in whatever great wagon [*car*] he had at that stage and we would spend all the morning out there. I think somebody else came along once but I cannot remember whom. I went with Reg and others and made a little bridge just over the tiny creek not far into the walk. I guess that has got a real bridge by now.

MATTHEW:- *Just a little one and that creek is Little Dry Creek.*

GEORGE:- Yes, little dry thing. They were always very pleasant because Reg is still very dedicated to doing anything like that. He had the strength and still seems to have it too. He's an amazing bloke.

MATTHEW:- *And you provided the botanical information for the signs along the track?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I named some of the trees; it was only the main tree species that they thought they could put a label on. Of course, there are always problems, you put labels on things and people move them. I used to be involved with that in Sydney Botanical Gardens and finally we nailed them onto trees and that also caused problems as spiders hide behind them.

MATTHEW:- *So when you say people move them, why?*

GEORGE:- They move them around. That is easy enough. In a botanical garden you get used to where things are and you know when they are out of place. But out in the bush, if they move one not many people know that it has been moved. It can be very misleading, not life threatening but I have always been a stickler for the right name belonging to the right plant. It stands out in my mind, if I am reading something and if it's the wrong name or the wrong spelling of it, it annoys me.

I was glad Reg asked me to help with that.

MATTHEW:- *And did you help to actually make the signs?*

GEORGE:- No, I don't know whether Reg made them himself or had somebody else, but they were very professionally made, wood from memory. No, I don't know who really made them.

MATTHEW:- *Did you attend the opening of the track in 1987?*

GEORGE:- I think I did, yes. The Member for ACT, one of them, the one who's gone now; can't think what his name was but...

MATTHEW:- *Was it Ken Fry?*

GEORGE:- No, it was another one, he was a short man. I think he was more interested in foreign affairs, overseas things. I know he resigned, he held the northern seat of the ACT for a while.

MATTHEW:- *John ---, well we'll think of it.*

GEORGE:- Well, he was there. I do remember that.

MATTHEW:- *John Langmore.*

GEORGE:- Langmore, that's the one. There was a lot of cars, I remember all the cars parked, it was one of the few times I felt all the cars are safe as there are so many of them. We parked on the road. It was a very big picnic that one. We went right up to the flat rocks and everybody had lunch up there. It was a nice day that one, a good perfect sunny day.

MATTHEW:- *A big event in the history of the organisation.*

GEORGE:- Yes, I think it was. I know Reg Alder was wonderfully pleased with that. I know he'd



had a lot of opposition, he felt the opposition, he used to ring me up and ask me to write something for him or help him write something about the place. He wanted to make another one a little bit further back and I had a look at that one with him too, but I do not think that one's come to fruition. It would have been pretty close to Yerrabi.

*MATTHEW:- When you say there was opposition you mean, within NPA or outside NPA?*

GEORGE:- No, within NPA there was opposition. Reg felt it, whether it was that they felt he was pushing too hard or not, I don't know. I believed in what he was doing, but he thought there were people on the committee or in the organisation that did not want it to go ahead. I did not want to know who as I got on well with everybody. I didn't feel that at all myself but then again, I was only helping Reg, so it was not my idea, I didn't think it up in any way.

*MATTHEW:- Alright, were there any other working type projects, for example, the re-vegetation of the Nursery Swamp fire trail after the 1983 fire, were you involved in that at all?*

GEORGE:- No, no I wasn't.

*MATTHEW:- Or removing of briars and wildling pines down there in Boboyan, Gudgenby?*

GEORGE:- No, in 1983 I retired and I think for the next 3 years, at least, I was working at home writing a book that I said I'd write after I retired. So I didn't go out on anything then, I had to use all of the time that I had. I proportioned it out so I would finish the book within 3 years. It was published in 1988 and it takes a while to get them published.

*MATTHEW:- OK, now the outing program, you have made reference to NPA outings a little bit so far but, of course, the walk you are most famous for is the Black Mountain walk looking at the wildflowers especially up there. How did that get started, George?*

GEORGE:- Well, again, it was one of those things that Nancy [*Burbidge*] talked me into, if you like. I used to go on her walks on Black Mountain on Saturday afternoons and I enjoyed them. I remember one where she went along, it was teeming rain but people turned up in raincoats. We noticed that every little rivulet was running on Black Mountain and it was all covered in detergent too, it was soap or that effect anyway, great suds building up everywhere. It was an indication of how things do pollute. Anyway, Nancy asked me eventually would I take over the Black Mountain walk. I thought I don't know ACT plants, I was busy working on eucalypts in Western Australia at that time, so I thought I don't know much about it, but I agreed. I thought, oh well, I can do it. I liked doing it, so I got Laurie Adams who is both a colleague and a friend, and he went out with me one lunchtime. It doesn't seem much time to go out in a lunchtime, but we might have extended the lunchtime a little. We carried our lunches and just had it as we went and walked in virtually the area I knew Nancy had walked in, and Laurie told me what a number of plants were. I also knew some and I felt just about ready after that, so I think I took it over from there on. I have varied it a bit as time goes by, but I was always glad that Nancy had done it for years before I came. I have always felt that a traditional walk is good for both the organisation and for people and for Canberra, but that is something that you don't want to necessarily change.

I can remember observing who came then, as I said it could be suitable for anybody from five to 85. John Cumpston, who you may have heard of, well John and his whole family used to come along. I only found out recently they lived pretty close, on the lower parts of Black Mountain anyway. He came with the whole family, I think he had grandchildren and they were all pretty fit. I liked the idea that it could be for any aged people. Certainly, if they had children younger than five they carried younger ones in a papoose or so on, never any prams, thank goodness. I do remember that our youngest daughter was only about 4 or 5 when she started coming with us on these walks. Fiona Brand's daughter Morag also came on these walks and another girl who was the daughter of Janet Pearson. There were a number of other young girls but I remember those young girls. Ian Currie's young family came along too.



A number of people, I enjoyed seeing them, came on that walk and I was able to tell them a few things. Some people who came along knew a lot of the *[plant]* names already and that was interesting to me, because botanists often think they are the only ones who know these names and nobody else does. I was glad to find that people already knew names and, in fact, could tell me some name when I didn't know it terribly well. I continue to enjoy the Black Mountain walk and this year was one of the best because I included the Friends of the Gardens, U3A and National Parks and somebody else invited Field Naturalists as well, so it was a good turn-up of about 60 people. I find they are interested, that they want to be told something about it rather than just turning up and going for a walk to do it yourself.

I've always tried to give some information both about the ecology and about the species within the ecology of Black Mountain. I must say, I learn a lot myself from what people say and what they are interested in. Occasionally somebody is there who knows what the birds are as well or perhaps even the lizards, that's always very helpful to me because I don't know any of those things. I continue to want to have that walk; I enjoy it and enjoy seeing people come along. Obviously, there are many who have come along year after year, Reg Alder is one, he hasn't been for a little while lately but he used to come along regularly. Laurie Adams always comes and he is a great help to have on the spot, he still knows a number of areas where I don't go, so we often divide up at morning tea time and Laurie takes over those who want to walk a bit more and I take the rest back to the cars. I think Laurie enjoys it a lot too because he has got a lot more knowledge of the ACT flora than I have. He's a really good member, I think he'd be one who also wouldn't want to talk much in public but he's got the knowledge. I would rely on Laurie anytime, if I want to get something identified from the ACT, I'd ask Laurie Adams.

*MATTHEW:- And he's a retired botanist from...?*

GEORGE:- From CSIRO. He is still in there every day, they give him contracts and he has just created, with another person, a 'CD Rom' key to plant families. A lot of people don't want to identify families, but it's a great start and there is a lot of work in it. I have not used it, but Laurie's still in there despite retirement.

*MATTHEW:- Now you have been leading that walk for, well 30 years I suppose, close on.*

GEORGE:- Somewhere between 25 and 30, yes.

*MATTHEW:- Have you noticed any changes during that time both in the types of people that come, the age groups and their own attitudes to what you are trying to show them?*

GEORGE:- No, not particularly. There used to be a lot more people in the early days and they certainly tapered off in the last ten years, I think, because there is a lot of younger people who want to go on longer walks. I've changed it from Saturday afternoon to Saturday morning and that might have affected it. The main reason for that was, originally the walk usually took place on a Saturday afternoon when the grand final of the rugby league was on TV and I thought that I would never see it, so I changed it to Saturday morning. A lot of people still like Saturday morning. I think it dwindled down to about one person who turned up back about 2 or 3 years ago and that wasn't entirely satisfactory, so I started inviting other groups. I think it is good mixing the groups who are all interested in the same thing really. I find Friends of the Gardens, National Parks and a lot of U3A, certainly the ones I get in my classes, are all interested in the same sort of things. Often they are members of each different group anyway. Because I was taking that walk on Black Mountain I extended it to take my U3A class on the same walk every year as part of the course. Then I decided to take anybody from U3A, where they have 2000 members, on the Black Mountain walk. It all came from doing it for NPA. This year, as I said, I combined them all and that was a lot better to have people together and it saved me doing it 2 or 3 times.

*MATTHEW:- How many did you have this year?*



GEORGE:- About 60, which was a very good number where you can't get lost and you can't do any damage as we were on broad tracks. You can pull up and talk about practically anything now I've got used to different places. I find even the simplest things that they don't know is great news for them, and that's good. I know many botanists who go, everybody knows that, so the more you can say the better. I think people do appreciate hearing something about it rather than just walking through it.

*MATTHEW:- OK, you mentioned there about the children participating and I think you mentioned to me last week that Nancy was very big on this sort of thing, walks wherever possible should be family orientated.*

GEORGE:- Yes, definitely, I know on the Black Mountain walk I'm always interested to have children, particularly if I've got a trigger plant as I want to demonstrate how it works. Also with the plants called *Leucopogon* which have very, very fine white hairs on the petals. I ask the younger ones to tell me what they can see on the petals or what they can see in the trigger plant. They see them much clearer than the rest of our members, and if they can tell I feel they have learned something and so have the adults on that one. I do like to see children on the walk. They are often very interested and, of course, they do remember a lot more than many adults do.

*MATTHEW:- And of course, the desire to have children on these walks is so that you are educating the next generation.*

GEORGE:- It helps, I think it helps a lot. I tried it with grandchildren, you tell them a few botanical names and you hope to god they will remember them in time, but they don't always because they are not always interested. Having the interest is one of the biggest things. I think NPA brings together people with the same interest, therefore there is fertile ground to listen to anything about nature, not only botany of course. I've seen that time and time again, they are interested, and I've realised throughout my working life that if people are interested in botany then they will be willing to work and enjoy what they are doing. I've had a few assistants where it was a job and they wanted to do it and get paid, but if they were not interested I knew they were not going to be much good in the long run.

*MATTHEW:- You mentioned to me again the other day, George, that as far as your own personal philosophy on walking goes, you much prefer to ramble than go on a tiger walk.*

GEORGE:- Yes, definitely. I think I started going on hikes way back in my younger days, they were just good fun picnics, boys and girls going on a picnic, making jokes with one another and they were good, good fun and I liked that sort of a walk. That's a ramble. It was called a hike then. I rarely ever went on one where we were trying to go from here to there and do about 10 miles a day or something. We just ambled along, therefore a ramble on Black Mountain is to me a pleasure and I prefer it that way.

*MATTHEW:- OK, before we leave the subject of the outings program of NPA are there other walks that you have been on with the organisation or led which are memorable to you?*

GEORGE:- No, but I did take one through the Westbourne Woods once. I'm not entirely familiar with the pines, so I felt a bit out of the water there. It's a lovely place to walk through and I would like to do it, but there are people more competent doing that one now for the Westbourne Woods Association. Ken Eldridge and a number of others, Ian Broker I think, is doing it now and there was another Ken somebody. There were a number of them doing it far better than I could because they are foresters and they know the other trees. I hate trying to do something I'm not competent with.

*MATTHEW:- Alright, we might go on then to talk about the Bulletin, the NPA Bulletin. How important do you think that was to the organisation and also to getting its message out to the wider Canberra community?*



GEORGE:- I seem to observe that in those earlier days it was hard to get articles for the *Bulletin*, that is why we often extracted things from elsewhere. I think it's a most important venue for giving information and keeping peoples' interest, even members who don't go to meetings. If they get the *Bulletin* they're still getting information and we are stirring an interest. If there is a topic they are deeply interested in, well, they will turn up at a meeting because they saw it in the *Bulletin*. I think the *Bulletin* is most important. It must be a very difficult job for the editors, at any time and in any organisation, getting people to write things is a major chore, I know.

*MATTHEW:- And as far as its production and style are concerned; now photographs started to appear from about 1974, I think, so that obviously made a difference in the way it looked?*

GEORGE:- Oh yes, it looks a lot better now, it's getting more towards a professional journal that people will want to keep. I was surprised to find that I had all of mine. They don't take up much space, the earlier ones were very small much less than A4, about half A4, I think.

*MATTHEW:- And fewer pages?*

GEORGE:- Yes, very few pages and a very small journal. I thought I would have to hunt everywhere to find them, but I found them very easily, they were so small and I think they are all together. I think it's one of the most important features to have that communication with all members, because all members never turn up to meetings. You will get the few, or comparatively few anyway, and you must communicate with all members or otherwise you finish up not having any at all.

*MATTHEW:- Were there any notable issues of the Bulletin during your time of involvement that spring to mind as either well produced ones or that had something very significant to say?*

GEORGE:- I can't remember anything, I don't even remember who the editor was when I was President, as a matter of fact, I just expected it to come out and it did. The way people were committed, they committed themselves to something like that. I think Sheila Kruse was the Secretary while I was President and I hear, just this week, that she is leaving Canberra, I am very sad to know it. Well after all, she was the secretary to the Chairman of CSIRO, so we couldn't have got a better Secretary than that. I remember ringing her up at lunchtime and going up to see her up at Limestone Avenue with some problem we had that we needed to get fixed and Sheila fixed it, she was marvellous.

*MATTHEW:- OK, now the other NPA publications that have come out over the years, you mentioned Mountains, Slopes and Plains and then in 1978 there was Rambles Around Canberra written by Alan Mortlock and, I think, Julian O'Loughlan. Did you have any involvement with that at all?*

GEORGE:- No, none at all. I think that was purely a commercial venture between those two people.

*MATTHEW:- And NPA?*

GEORGE:- I didn't know NPA was involved with that.

*MATTHEW:- Yes, I believe that was an NPA publication.*

GEORGE:- I did not know that, I know they published a number of other things. I always thought they were straight commercial things.

*MATTHEW:- Maybe NPA had some involvement. Well the next one to come out in 1983 was the Field Guide to the Native Trees of the ACT. Now, you had some involvement there.*

GEORGE:- Yes, I was on the committee for that one. I think I gave advice, I didn't actually write anything. There was Laurie Adams doing one part and two other people doing other parts with somebody else doing eucalypts, I cannot remember the names. I think it was launched by Ken



Fry from memory.

*MATTHEW:- Or Tom Uren?*

GEORGE:- Tom Uren, you are right, sorry I remember he was Minister for Conservation or something then.

*MATTHEW:- Or Capital Territory.*

GEORGE:- That's right, I remember going to that meeting. I think it was in the Botanical Gardens they launched it. Yes, I was simply on the committee and gave advice, I certainly didn't write any of it. I think at that time, which date was that...?

*MATTHEW:- 1983...*

GEORGE:- Yes, 1983 was the time I retired and started writing at home for this other book, so I did not have time to do any other outside writing then.

*MATTHEW:- So did you look at the draft text?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I read through it very well. I think, I was one of the proof-readers or pre-readers as well. It was pretty well done, the people who wrote it were dedicated to it and they knew what they were doing, it was good.

*MATTHEW:- Since then, of course, NPA's brought out a couple of other field guides, the Bird Book in 1993 and Reptiles and Frogs in 1998. I realise you wouldn't have had any involvement in them.*

GEORGE:- No, I went to the launching of the first one, the bird one. I was not involved or even at the opening/launching of the other one.

*MATTHEW:- Do you think that, over the years, the NPA has made a significant contribution to the available literature on the native flora and fauna of the Territory?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I think so. I know there was a plan in recent years to do another wildflower book. I went to a number of committee meetings for that book over about a year, or perhaps two, but I think we were outdone by Ian Fraser who was publishing a lot of commercial books. He is really good, so it was probably wise to give up trying to oppose somebody like that. It was a pity, as there was a lot of effort put into it by those who were on it; but again, I was only advising. There was a young bloke from the Herbarium, who I always have trouble remembering his name, I see him frequently, he did most of the work on the botany. He was in a position to do it, whereas I wasn't, I had left work and so on. But I was interested.

*MATTHEW:- OK, now the general meetings of the organisation and selecting speakers. Now I know, you had a certain philosophy on who you wanted to have as a speaker at NPA meetings.*

GEORGE:- I wanted to have people who could give an opposite view to some of our own views. I invited my own boss, Alan Macarthur, who was running the bushfire program at Forestry as I thought there were a lot of NPA members who were vehemently against burning off the forests. I thought they will be able to question him or even criticise him, but either he talked so well or they were not game as it was a very amicable meeting. I was a bit disappointed, I suppose, but he wasn't, as he said he felt that perhaps he got his message across well. After all understanding is what we should get, understanding one another. I also had somebody representing the Kleenex company or whatever it was.

*MATTHEW:- Kimberley-Clark?*

GEORGE:- Yes, I can't remember where I got him, but I got somebody to talk about that because at that stage there was a lot of conjecture about whether coloured Kleenexes help to pollute the environment. It may or may not have been true, but I followed it up and again we had such a



competent speaker that I do not remember any arguments and no big questions or anything. Perhaps people get put off by other people who have the power and apparently the knowledge they don't want to ask them too much. I tried to get other people to present these sort of views because I would rather that than go along and everybody say it's nice we all agree with that. That seemed to me to get us nowhere, and I was always interested to go along when somebody appeared to have an opposite view. You often find that they are not so opposite, it's just a matter of understanding one another. That has always been one of the things I've learnt in a lot of different situations, understand something and you get on a lot better.

*MATTHEW:- You were just talking about the sorts of speakers and why you chose them in order to get discussion going and, in fact, in the early days of the NPA, the organisation seems to have been able to get a lot of quite high-profile speakers. For example, one during your time was Milo Dunphy.*

GEORGE:- Yes, that was the annual one, I think it was in the Canberra Theatre from memory. I cannot remember what he talked about, but I remember the occasion very well. I did not organise getting him, I think it was probably Nancy Burbidge or Julie Henry, as they had met him before, I had not. As chairman I chaired the meeting in the theatre. I cannot remember much about it except that it was there. I cannot remember his topic even at the moment.

*MATTHEW:- Was it well attended?*

GEORGE:- I think so, that theatre is a pretty big place. We certainly didn't fill it, but I think there was a good attendance. I know I was satisfied at the time, that is about all I can remember about that one.

*MATTHEW:- Was that like the Annual General Meeting and you get a high-profile speaker for that?*

GEORGE:- I don't think it was the Annual General Meeting, but it was a specific occasion, I think, separate from all of our other monthly meetings. That is all I can remember, they used to have one every year, and I cannot remember any others. I think it was mainly that Nancy knew people and so did Julie Henry and they were both well known to other people. I think that helped a lot at that stage.

*MATTHEW:- Now you also gave talks yourself, in February 1974 you gave a talk on conservation bodies in England for example.*

GEORGE:- Yes, that was after I spent a year in England. I was impressed by them having an umbrella organisation that covered all conservation organisations, and I thought it sounded a great idea. I looked into it a fair bit in England, and a number of the botanists where I was working were involved in it. It was an entirely different situation in England to Australia, as they had many, many small groups that were held together under one organisation, which I cannot remember the name of. I thought that was something for people to think about. I do not think the Australian Conservation Foundation is perhaps an umbrella body. People were not usually associated with it, they might believe in it but they do not join it as groups, and it doesn't have a supervisory brief to look after all the other conservation bodies in Australia. I felt at that time that that would be needed, but at the same time I know many conservation bodies such as NPA in any State like their individuality and like their own independence as well. Yes, I enjoyed preparing that one, it was good.

*MATTHEW:- The venue has changed over the years. Up until 1969 it used to meet in the Institute of Anatomy. What was that like?*

GEORGE:- It had a big stage up above, the chair people were up above everybody there from memory. It was a bit dingy and the other thing I can remember about it was that the lighting was not terribly good, but it was there and I guess it was free at that stage which is always a major



consideration. While I was President they were all in the Griffin Centre. I know when I was going to Kew near the end of my term (normally I certainly would have stayed on for another year or whatever I was elected to) as I was going away, I think Bill Watson was elected. We had a dinner over in some restaurant, Charles I think it was called, which was quite close to the meeting place. We had a dinner there, or the committee gave me a dinner I suppose, and yet we still got over and had the meeting. It was a pretty bright meeting as we'd had a bit of wine with the dinner. I think I was leaving within a few days.

*MATTHEW:- As far as the social meetings of the organisation, like the President's barbeque for example, was that going during your time?*

GEORGE:- No, I think that must have started somewhat later when Ian Currie was President and the Christmas one too. Ian fostered those very well, nice bloke, he made people feel like it was a family picnic, and it was good fun out on the Christmas one. We used to go to that with our younger girl.

*MATTHEW:- And one venue for those in a number of years in the 70s was Blue Range Hut.*

GEORGE:- Yes, that was where it was when we used to go, when Ian was there, sure. That was a good place to go; you would get there in late afternoon in summer and could have a bit of a walk around just to find out what's there. I know the young girls used to climb a few hills; they wouldn't get lost but get into a little bit of falling over.

*MATTHEW:- You mentioned there Ian Currie being concerned to develop the social cohesiveness, I suppose, of the group and I believe he used to take gluhwein to Blue Range Hut?*

GEORGE:- Yes, he started this gluhwein thing and it was a real tradition. I like to think it is still continuing, but I don't know whether it is. Ian brought it along. In the dark as it was in that hut, there were not many people left by then as a lot went home of course, but this warmed us up whatever it is, gluhwein, it was good fun.

*MATTHEW:- OK, now there were a number of public events that, over the years, the NPA has contributed to for example during heritage week. Now that probably came in after your time on the committee but the NPA seemed to have a role in schools from the early days like in helping to organise essay competitions and poster and photographic competitions. Do you remember being involved with that aspect at all?*

GEORGE:- Not personally, I knew they were on and some other people did the judging of those, but I don't know who they were. I do not think they were there when I was President anyway. It is a very worthy one, I think I would have always been willing to go and talk to schools. I have talked to Girl Guides and Brownie groups occasionally, not Scouts, usually it's Girl Guides or Brownies that asked me; I suppose because my daughters, both daughters were in those organisations and therefore they asked their father.

*MATTHEW:- Is this you speaking in an NPA role?*

GEORGE:- I don't think it was, but it might have been. I can't remember that particularly.

*MATTHEW:- Also in 1970s, Glyn Lewis and perhaps others got together an audio visual display for NPA. Do you remember that at all?*

GEORGE:- No, I don't, I know Glyn did it, but I don't remember anything more about it.

*MATTHEW:- Perhaps to finish off, George, some reflective comments on NPA's achievements over the years and how you feel it's faring now and into the future, and also the issue of conservation.*

GEORGE:- Conservation. They call it the green outlook these days and I'm not always in favour of that. I still think conservation is the word, you are conserving something not preserving something and greening seems to have a tinge of criticism about it, people use it in a critical way. I



know greening has got to politics. it's a pity because although we need to influence politicians in order to get something done, I still feel it's a pity. When you try to mix in somebody else's sphere you do not always come off best, they are better at it. I think attitudes have changed a lot, there are far more professional attitudes and of course, getting money from different grants allows the committee to do more, even, I suppose, spend money on the *Bulletin* and make it look better.

There are a lot of ways that things have changed. Whereas in the original way it ran purely on members' subscriptions, now they tend to want more, once you get a grant you seem to want more. I've never entirely been in favour of any of the societies getting grants, I feel you want to do it of your own free will and, therefore, it is going to be slow with members' subs and fund raising and so on. It certainly helps, I know. It is still to me a matter of politicians buying a few votes when they give you some money, they do not expect anything from it, but it's a subtle way of influencing people. I think that is the only change I have really noticed, that all societies are seeking money from outside now to further their aims which is, of course, a good thing. But getting money from governments often has strings on it in one way or another. You do not really want to be beholden to them when you have got an aim that you want to see carried out.

I think NPA has a vital role in the society, in our society, in any State. I frequently read the NSW bulletin from their National Parks Association. They are all held in high esteem by the general public and people who want to go walking often join them just for the walks alone, and that in itself is a good thing. Although I do not want to go on long walks I know a lot of people do, therefore NPA gets them together and gives them the companionship which adds a lot to any outing in the bush. If you go on your own it's one thing, but to go with other people is far more enjoyable.

*MATTHEW:- OK, well if you would like to leave it there or are there any other points you would like to make or had in mind to make?*

*GEORGE:- No, I don't think so, Matthew, I think you have covered just about everything I was involved in. As you know I have not been able to get to meetings in recent years for many different reasons, we do not like going out at night if we can help it. Some societies now meet at 6pm or even 4pm before work finishes, I go to some of those. No, I think we have covered a fair range of things there.*

*MATTHEW:- OK, well thank you very much for your time this morning, George.*