



## **STATEMENT FROM NEVILLE ESAU**

(NPA President 1980-81; Life Member 1989)

### ***A few memories of my time as President***

I must admit that my recollections of issues and actions from my time as President in the early 1980s are now, after nearly thirty years, very few. Only two remain at all clear, and, I hope, somewhat relevant even after all these years.

One was the project to celebrate the "Year of the Tree", which I think was an initiative of the United Nations Environment Program. I don't remember why we decided to become involved but, after much discussion, the committee decided to mark our involvement with three projects: a tree planting program at Glendale, the publication of a book on ACT trees, and I think, a photographic competition featuring trees or tree-related pictures. My memories of the photo competition are now very vague, so I will leave comment on that for others.

In the early eighties the then National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) decided to seal part of the Boboyan Road from the Orroral turn-off to the Gudgenby River. The NPA opposed various aspects of the plan, but it went ahead anyway. This was before self government in the Territory, and deflecting the NCDC from their chosen path was always difficult. Submissions to the then Minister for Territories, Bob Ellicott, were unsuccessful. One by-product of the work was a large bare area at Glendale where the works depot had been built. At the conclusion of the road work the area occupied by the works depot was cleared and levelled but otherwise remained bare of vegetation. The tree planting project was designed to re-vegetate this area.

Charles Hill offered to lead the project and he recruited a range of volunteers for the various stages. Seeds were collected locally (near Glendale), seedlings raised, and the ground prepared with the cooperation of the land management authorities in the Department of Territories. A grand planting day was held at Glendale to inaugurate the project. Thereafter, planting and maintenance days appeared regularly on the outings program as the project progressed. Eventually all the large area between the Boboyan Road and the Gudgenby River at Glendale was planted out, and we all wanted eagerly for the forest to grow.

Unfortunately, nature decreed otherwise. A large number of the young trees succumbed to drought, insect attack, and other setbacks; perhaps thirty percent ultimately survived, but we were all pleased anyway that some greenery had been restored to a ravaged area, and we learned many lessons in re-vegetation techniques. Charles was a dedicated leader throughout and kept all the statistics of the final outcome. Travellers passing the area now can still admire the results of our work.

The second Year of the Tree project I mentioned was the publication of the "Native Trees of the ACT". I suggested this project to the Committee and they enthusiastically supported this initiative. Although a small and compact book, as befits a field guide, this was quite a large project for the NPA, but the many volunteers who took on the work involved, all listed in the subsequent book, toiled long and hard to bring the project to fruition. The book was eventually published in 1983 and proved quite successful, both as an information source for anyone interested in ACT trees, and financially for the NPA coffers. And so it remains to this day, nearly twenty-five years later, where we are now on the second edition. Book publishing is now a regular NPA activity but in 1983 this was new ground, so maybe this book helped point the way to many of our subsequent successful book projects.

The only other significant issue I remember was, of course, the continuing struggle to achieve a national park for the ACT. Darryl Hawke had been successful, as President in 1979, in persuading the then government to proclaim the Gudgenby Nature Reserve. This declaration had taken



nearly twenty years of almost continual lobbying by the NPA. We were determined not to wait another twenty years to have Gudgenby expanded and upgraded to national park status. Unfortunately, the Fraser government, which coincided with the majority of my term as President, remained as obdurate and uninterested as all previous governments to our lobbying to achieve a park. We tried hard and perhaps laid the groundwork for what was achieved during the term of the next federal government.

When the Hawke Labor government was elected in 1983, Den Robin, who was Vice-President during my terms, had the brilliant idea to invite the Minister for Territories, Tom Uren, on a day visit to Gudgenby (as we all knew the area then), and lobby for a national park. We thought that if we caught the new government early in their term, before too many priorities had been set, we might (just might) catch the ear of the minister for our proposals. And so it proved. Although the final chapter of this particular tale took place after I had passed the baton, we all prepared for a major effort at Gudgenby on the day.

It may have been our impassioned pleading, it may have been the magnificent lunch provided by Sheila Kruse and her helpers, or maybe just that Tom Uren was ready, but he and his head of department, the late (great) John Enfield, proved receptive to our arguments. A few months later we were ecstatic when we learned that a new enlarged area, including the Cotter Valley (one of our key arguments) was to be created and named Namadgi National Park. If any one person can take extra credit over our collective effort, it would be Den. She worked tirelessly on this as on many other issues. Den had an uncanny nose for the political wind as well as great knowledge and ability to assemble a position and lobby to apply pressure at the right point in the political structure.

We took some satisfaction from this outcome although it was, and still is, disappointing that it took twenty three years from the formation of the NPA for its major objective to be achieved. Nor did this imply any slackening of effort; we knew that the fight to conserve the park would be relentless and ongoing as subsequent events have shown.

Three lessons stand out from these twenty three years of effort; they are as relevant now as they were in 1983.

It is important to understand the structure of government and government decision-making processes for successful lobbying. It is not enough to present an expertly prepared and documented case. It must be followed up with personal contacts, to convince politicians and bureaucrats of the merits of the proposal. Knowledge of political opportunities, timing, and the ability to capture the imagination of politicians is also necessary. Nor is the support of the bureaucracy alone sufficient, especially in conservation issues, to bring about successful outcomes. This support may be necessary but is rarely sufficient. Departments are often cautious and slow-moving in evaluating, let alone supporting, new policy and changes.

In the campaign for Namadgi the NPA often used its slender resources to poor effect by lobbying too low in the political hierarchy. Its efforts to convince and persuade were dissipated before reaching the appropriate levels. NPA also had internal problems resolving its approach to lobbying. Apolitical activities such as information collection and presentation were seen as respectable and acceptable by the membership, but there was a reluctance to become involved in more politically oriented activities which were less structured and less easy to master.

Secondly, to support a lobbying campaign, a broad base of public and media support is necessary. This may be even more difficult for groups such as NPA, with slender resources, to achieve adequately. Public education and media campaigns are both time-consuming and expensive. Throughout the Namadgi campaign the local media was generally supportive of the proposals for a national park. The long drawn-out nature of the battle, however, meant that coverage was only spasmodic. It was thus difficult, in the press of other events, for NPA to capitalise on favourable



publicity. The NPA did make diligent efforts to capture and hold community support, especially from other conservation groups and other kindred organisations. This activity did result in some additional pressure on the government from other groups, but again, this tended to be somewhat fragmented sporadic. Whether, in the end, it had any bearing on the final outcome is difficult to say.

Lastly, the structure of local government in the ACT before self government created special problems for lobbying relevant ministers. The department responsible for the ACT at the time (1983), then called the Department of Territories and Local Government, had the multiple functions of local and state governments then as now, but with a single minister. Conservation was only one of a wide range of issues competing for ministerial attention at any given time. To gain the attention of the minister, let alone to gain priority, proved to be difficult and frustrating for NPA as for other conservation groups in the ACT. At least with the transition to self government the same issues may have remained, but there are more political masters to approach and lobby for attention, and a better chance to raise issues at the political level.

Even with all these difficulties and caveats, two wins in twenty-five years can seem like a poor average. I hope we have better outcome in the next twenty-five years.

Neville Esau