



## **INTERVIEW WITH ALASTAIR MORRISON**

(Life Member 1995)

*MATTHEW:- This is an interview with Alastair Morrison by Matthew Higgins for the National Parks Association Oral History Project on the 20th December 1999 taking place in Alastair's home in Canberra.*

*Alastair, thanks very much for putting some time aside this afternoon to have a talk with me. Feel free to relax in that chair. You don't have to be too close to the microphone. That's good.*

*Now, you were born in 1915 in Peking and grew up in England, went to Cambridge, and you developed an early interest in becoming a freelance naturalist, and while we'll go on to your involvement with the NPA fairly soon, I was just interested in particularly your trips to South America in the 1930s where you were working as a freelance naturalist. That must have been a pretty exciting time of your life?*

**ALASTAIR:-** Oh, it was, and I had hoped to make a career out of it but I soon realised that it wasn't on, but I had three very interesting trips to South America. The third one was cut short by ill health, so I really only completed two of them; one to Peru and one to Chile.

*MATTHEW:- And the collecting that you were doing, these were birds that would be for museum collections?*

**ALASTAIR:-** I was collecting skins for the British Museum. In Peru I worked in an area in south central Peru which hadn't been worked before and on top of that I was hoping to bring back live birds of species which had not been previously brought to the UK, or had only rarely been brought there. I hoped to cover my expenses largely by selling live birds or animals.

*MATTHEW:- And then of course, not only illness but the Second World War intervened and you were by that stage back in China, weren't you?*

**ALASTAIR:-** In the beginning of 1940 I went across the Pacific to China, spent some time in Shanghai getting medical treatment. Then I went up to Peking and spent the next two years there, leaving in 1942 when diplomatic staff were evacuated and sent to their respective countries and replaced by the Japanese. I had been given a modest job in the British Embassy Peking, rating as a cipher officer.

*MATTHEW:- And you saw service through the Second World War?*

**ALASTAIR:-** Yes, I had a job with the British Intelligence Organisation, actually. I went to their Calcutta Office for a time, but didn't get on with my boss who I thought behaved very badly to me on one occasion. Then I joined the Indian army, and spent the next few years nominally in the Indian army but I was also sent back to China in 1944, and in 1945 I was with Force 136 in Malaya.

*MATTHEW:- And what was Force 136 doing in Malaya?*

**ALASTAIR:-** It was the body which had been formed to work with the resistance movements in occupied areas of Asia.

*MATTHEW:- So you were behind Japanese lines there?*

**ALASTAIR:-** Yes. Not very long because shortly after I went in, the atomic bomb was dropped and that sort of activity came to an end.

*MATTHEW:- Now, you married Hedda in 1946 and, I think, for a short time were in Hong Kong?*

**ALASTAIR:-** Yes, married in 1946 and spent the winter of 1946 and 1947 in Hong Kong and then went back to the UK. I was demobilised and then I joined the Colonial Service and was sent to



Sarawak where we spent the next 19 and a bit years.

*MATTHEW:- And did the natural attractions of Sarawak hold a lot of attraction for you, bird life and plant life there?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, it was wonderfully attractive, every aspect of Sarawak, but I cut down on my bird work. I learned to recognise the local birds and did a little bird study and collecting but I was so busy with other things which were also very interesting, working with the local people and in a variety of jobs. My bird work sort of fell behind, but I never lost the interest which is a lifelong one.

*MATTHEW:- And your work there in Sarawak, that was in the lead up to independence or the creation of Malaysia?*

ALASTAIR:- I was there in 1963 during the formation of Malaysia. Sarawak became a state of Malaysia. I'd done a lot of work promoting that idea and I was seconded to the Malaysian service for four years to help with the period of transition.

*MATTHEW:- Then you left in 1967 to come to Australia. Was that because your period of employment was only set for four years? Is that why you left in 1967 to come to Australia?*

ALASTAIR:- Work had become Her Majesty's Overseas Civil Service. My work there had come to an end and we didn't want to go to Europe. We had travelled round Australia in 1961 and this is where we wanted to settle down.

*MATTHEW:- That trip around Australia in 1961, that was by campervan, wasn't it?*

ALASTAIR:- Campervan, yes. It took us five months. Wonderful experience and something that really, really sank in was the variety of scenes and episodes. It was wonderful, a really wonderful experience. Much better then, I think, than now when the roads are much better. It was probably much more attractive in 1961 when we had so much of the country to ourselves.

*MATTHEW:- Yes, I guess it's much more common today for people to travel round, but then you would have been on your own most of the time.*

ALASTAIR:- We met occasionally people doing the same thing, but on the whole we didn't meet a great many people. You felt quite secure. You could stop where you liked, and often we would just pull off the road in outback conditions and spend the night there and we had no feelings of insecurity.

*MATTHEW:- Now, you joined the National Parks Association of the ACT in 1969. Can you tell me how you learnt of the NPA and why you decided to join?*

ALASTAIR:- I thought it was earlier than that but may well be wrong. When we came to Australia, of course, our natural interests were in country Australia, the environment and the natural life. So we joined appropriate bodies such as COG and the Australian Conservation Foundation. We joined the National Parks Association partly because both Hedda and I had a natural interest in the sort of things they were promoting and also to help us to get to know the ACT and the country around here. That was a considerable help.

We used to go out on some of the outings, but with the passage of the years Hedda found it more and more difficult to keep up with walks, even if they were quite gentle ones, and so we stopped going on outings. It had helped us and been a very valuable introduction to the ACT but thereafter we always did things on our own and, of course, visited places where the NPA would not necessarily go.

*MATTHEW:- Now that time in the 1960s, of course, the NPA's campaign for a national park for the national capital was under way. Did you participate in that campaign in any sort of active way yourself?*



ALASTAIR:- Hardly in an active way. I mean, naturally I was a supporter as I thought it was a grand idea, but I wasn't a member of the committee and I didn't play any particular role in that.

MATTHEW:- *Now, during these years before Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared - which took place in 1979 - was it still possible to go walking down in those areas which are now the national park?*

ALASTAIR:- It was wonderful, you could go where you liked. Nobody bothered you and gates were generally opened so you could drive through to places where you can't get to now by car. That was a great help, because we could drive out and then walk for a few hours and then come back again, it was ideal. I think most people we saw at that time really enjoyed it. The people who did have landholdings were generally very accommodating if you asked them politely if you could go through their land, so we had no problems there.

MATTHEW:- *So it was a good relationship between NPA members and the landholders at that time?*

ALASTAIR:- It was good. There was exceptions, one case in the Goodradigbee where a landholder was very hostile, but that was largely hostility directed at the formation of the Kosciuszko National Park and the growth of the dingo population which of course was very harmful to his sheep farming activities.

MATTHEW:- *Was that, was it Lindsay Franklin?*

ALASTAIR:- Yes, it was Mr Franklin, I forget his first name. His daughter was also very active. Their feelings were perfectly reasonable, they objected to the growth of weeds and the increase in the numbers of dingoes. Which I must say we saw something of; we occasionally encountered dingoes on our outings.

MATTHEW:- *Including inside the ACT?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh yes.

MATTHEW:- *And did you see any evidence of feral pigs at that time in the 1960s?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't remember much evidence at that time, but certainly, in the latter half of our stay here it certainly had developed very considerably. You would see whole areas that had been rooted up and the control measures were not effective.

MATTHEW:- *Just before we leave that question of the relationship with landholders, do you have any memories yourself of meeting with, say the Gregorys at Orroral, the Bootes at Gudgenby or the Lutons down at Boboyan?*

ALASTAIR:- The Bootes at Gudgenby we knew them quite well. I can't remember the name now, but the very nice old gentleman, just after you go out of the ACT on the way to Adaminaby.

MATTHEW:- *Shannons Flat?*

ALASTAIR:- Shannons Flat, on the right there, there's quite a big property.

MATTHEW:- *Maurice Luton, would it have been Maurice Luton?*

ALASTAIR:- Do you know, I don't remember. There was an elderly gentleman and his sons and they were great. We encountered them on a number of occasions and we'd ask if we could go through. Sometimes we just went through anyway.

MATTHEW:- *And would you ever like, have a cup of tea at the homestead or something like that? Was it on that sort of level?*

ALASTAIR:- I can remember having quite long talks to him but I wouldn't say it was, you know, having a cup of tea in their homestead. Once we met him out at the - what's the name of the old, very impressive homestead which got pulled down in the early...



*MATTHEW:- Boboyan.*

*ALASTAIR:- Boboyan, yeah. We met him out there, they were bringing sheep in or something and we had a long talk with him. Very kind and helpful.*

*MATTHEW:- Was there any awareness, do you think, on the part of the landholders at that time that what the NPA was striving for might eventually see them removed from the ACT?*

*ALASTAIR:- I would have thought that it was more what the government was going to do. It wasn't particularly focussed on the NPA. That was my impression, but I may be wrong. Mr Bootes was very kind, we went through his property on several occasions and he was always very helpful.*

*MATTHEW:- Was the NPA proposal one which tried to make a way out for the graziers not to see them removed, or was it early recognised that a national park would see the cessation of grazing on a large scale?*

*ALASTAIR:- I think that the policy makers in NPA expected a cessation of grazing. I personally didn't have that view. I thought that some grazing enhanced the beauty of the scene and also helped to manage the area. That was particularly the case in Gudgenby. I thought it was a pity to run everybody off the area. I had some arguments with members of the NPA on that subject.*

*MATTHEW:- When you say that it assisted the management of the area, in what way?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well, it kept it open and there was less likely to be grass fires and that sort of thing. Of course what actually happened is that the kangaroos have proliferated to such an extent to take the place of the cattle which were there. As far as grass fires are concerned they could hardly take place because the kangaroos have eaten all the herbage. At least, that's my impression.*

*MATTHEW:- Did you see much evidence of feral horses, brumbies?*

*ALASTAIR:- We used to meet them at Smokers Flat. I had rather a soft spot for them. There weren't very many that I remember, and we occasionally bumped into them. I thought they were rather attractive. I didn't have any strong feelings. I was sorry when they were all shot. I didn't think they were doing any grave damage.*

*MATTHEW:- In 1983, early 1983, of course was the very big bushfire which swept through large areas of the, then, Gudgenby Nature Reserve. What were your feelings, and Hedda's and say the NPA membership's feelings about this massive bushfire in this reserve which the NPA had such a close relationship with?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well, it was a terrible disaster. Except that in some ways it made walking easier, so much of the undergrowth went. When we went up Mt Booth sometime after the fires, I remember Hedda and I drove up to the base of Mt Booth (you could drive, you could drive between Brandy Flat and Gudgenby at that time) and walked up and it was quite open. I've been back since and you're pushing through scrub the whole time. So, I'm not a zealot in matters of returning everything to nature.*

*MATTHEW:- The, as we've said, Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared in 1979, and then it was expanded to include the upper Cotter catchment in 1984 and became Namadji National Park. Can you tell me what the feeling of the NPA was like with those two decisions? Was there a great sense of elation?*

*ALASTAIR:- I wasn't in close touch with a great many members because, as I said, we didn't go to many outings and only rarely to meetings, but I'm sure that there was great satisfaction.*

*MATTHEW:- The decision to add the Cotter catchment in 1984 - had you, for example, personally, been to the upper Cotter itself much, prior to that time?*



ALASTAIR:- I haven't had much experience of the upper Cotter. I've been up to the Cotter Hut on one or two outings. That was the sort of thing we would go along on, because gates would be opened and you could go. I really don't have an intimate knowledge of that.

MATTHEW:- *You didn't have any contact with Tom Uren, the minister, for example?*

ALASTAIR:- No, I think he was very helpful.

MATTHEW:- *Right. With the on-going management of the park since 1984 and the creation of Namadgi, there have been various issues which have come up from time to time, some of which NPA has played a role in, and you may have perhaps watched from the sidelines, not being on the committee. Do you recall any particular management issues which you'd like to comment on, for example it could be access, or feral animals or just management of the park generally or ecotourism, the management of the wilderness area, the Bimberi Wilderness Area?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, I was very happy when, I can't remember the name of the lady who was in the Assembly who'd just in time signed the notice about the wilderness area, the Bimberi Wilderness Area. What was her name?

MATTHEW:- *Was it Annette Ellis?*

ALASTAIR:- No, she was the wife of that little Italian.

MATTHEW:- *Oh, Eleanor Grassby.*

ALASTAIR:- Yes, well she, I think, signed on the dotted line just in time, which was a great achievement, I thought.

MATTHEW:- *I recall that in a 1986 issue of the NPA Bulletin, just after the NPA had celebrated its jubilee, 25 years, you wrote an article called "After the Jubilee", and it was really a warning, a gentle warning to NPA members to not rest on one's laurels but to keep an eye out to the issues that would come up in the future, especially with the then imminent imposition of self-government on the Territory. Some of the comments you made there included the points that with the management of these places passing from, say, the Commonwealth Government to self-government some of the politicians, local politicians, might not necessarily have the long-term nature conservation view uppermost, but there could be short-term economic decisions being made, and that those seem to be rather pressing and comments given more recent emphasis on tourism in some of our nature reserves. Would you like to comment on some of those issues?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, I thought it was bound to happen that with the growth of Canberra and this very large area, there would be proposals for commercial activities in the national park which one wouldn't necessarily agree with and also some of the access activities. I think that 4WD and horse riding activities are ones which have to be watched, though I suspect that the 4WD lobby will prove to be a very strong one. I mean, it didn't arise in those days and it certainly arises now, that the commercial use of areas of Namadgi would probably increase if it is totally handed back to the Aboriginal community, because that large expanse of ground won't bring them any benefits unless there's some commercial activity associated with it. I think this would appear to be likely to happen, even if the Department seeks to retain the right of actual management. They will be under more pressure.

MATTHEW:- *There has often in the past been something of a conflict, I guess you'd say, or rivalry, between the conservation of what we call natural heritage and the conservation of cultural heritage on the other hand. Do you think there have been examples of that in the ACT and in the NPA's own decisions on aspects of Namadgi?*

ALASTAIR:- I think the NPA has played a very honourable role with that reconstruction of the homestead at Orroral and certainly it's an interest for many members. I wouldn't have thought there's any need for conflict there. It's a great pity that the Boboyan homestead had to be pulled



down because of vandalism. That was before, of course, it became a part of the park. That is really regrettable.

*MATTHEW:- Can you describe for me what that homestead was like when it was still standing? Did you know it very well?*

*ALASTAIR:- I've tried to recollect. We went up there, I think, shortly after it had been pulled down and it was the first time we got there. In those times you could, if you were bold and brave, drive through from Gudgenby to Boboyan. I remember the first time we made it, that it was a wonderful trip though we nearly got stuck in one or two places. At that time you could see the remains of a very substantial building. It must have been one of the most impressive homesteads in this whole area. I think it was something of a transit point, wasn't it, on the way to the gold-fields and into the mountains.*

*MATTHEW:- Well, certainly that Old Boboyan Road, the one you would have travelled on, that was the main route through for a century or more, until the present road was rerouted through.*

*ALASTAIR:- And there's tracks up beyond, which we walked up. They showed signs of very considerable use and well revetted corners and things. So it must have been very important. It was a real tragedy that that homestead was taken down.*

*MATTHEW:- Yes.*

*ALASTAIR:- I think that Mr ---, what was his name?*

*MATTHEW:- Luton, Maurice Luton.*

*ALASTAIR:- Yes, of course. Well, he told us that he was very sorry he did it, but the place was being used and vandalised by inconsiderate members of the public, and so they just took it down.*

*MATTHEW:- As far as individual members of the NPA are concerned would you like to comment on some of those who you think have made a major contribution, say, to that campaign for the national park, and more generally to the Association in the thirty years you've been involved in it?*

*ALASTAIR:- The initial impetus came from a group of old timers some of whom are no longer with us, and I think it was never a project that was really objected to, but it was very well promoted by, well, people like ....*

*MATTHEW:- Bob Story?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well, Bob Story and .....*

*MATTHEW:- Nancy Burbidge?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well, she was, of course, the main instigator of it all and...*

*MATTHEW:- Julie?*

*ALASTAIR:- Unfortunately I suffer from nominal aphasia and the names of people I know extremely well, they just disappear from the screen when I want them.*

*MATTHEW:- Fiona, Fiona Brand?*

*ALASTAIR:- Yes, Fiona and...*

*MATTHEW:- Julie Henry?*

*ALASTAIR:- Yes, Julie. Julie was a powerful force. I saw her once clash with Derek Freeman which was really funny, two powerful personalities in conflict, when Derek didn't keep up in an outing.*

*MATTHEW:- Reg [Alder]?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well, Reg came in later and he's a great enthusiast and he's contributed a tremen-*



dous amount of drive and push to anything associated with the NPA.

*MATTHEW:- And you had a shared, especially Hedda and Reg, had the shared interest of photography?*

ALASTAIR:- The main interest as photographer was Reg himself and he's a very good photographer, and we knew him well and his wife. We first met on an outing to, was it Dingo Flat? A man called John Schunke had a property out there. Then we saw a lot of him over the years.

*MATTHEW:- And, of course, John Schunke was on the NPA committee for a number of years, too, in the 70s.*

ALASTAIR:- That's right. He was very active.

*MATTHEW:- Were there some other names there that you want to mention?*

ALASTAIR:- I can't remember names, that's my main problem. But the President who largely instigated the restoration of ...

*MATTHEW:- Orroral.*

ALASTAIR:- of Orroral ...

*MATTHEW:- Ross Carlton?*

ALASTAIR:- Yes. He's left. He was back here a couple of years ago on a visit. But he was very active, very positive.

*MATTHEW:- And Ian Currie. Was that one you were going to mention?*

ALASTAIR:- Of course, Ian Currie. Yes, Ian Currie was an institution. I think one of the unfortunate things is this, that nowadays, well probably for a good many years, there've been a few very active people, like Reg and Fiona .....

*MATTHEW:- Just continuing, you were saying that apart from Reg and Fiona for example, the generality of the membership....*

ALASTAIR:- They enjoy the outings and take part in them in an active way, and go to many of the meetings. But there isn't the same sort of fire in their bellies as was the case earlier on, and the more active younger people join the Wilderness Society, the Greens or the more energetic movements which have sprung up and didn't really exist originally. Which I think is a pity because, as far as I can see, there are not very many younger people playing an active role in the NPA. That may be the case for the new committee, but that I'm not in a position to comment on.

*MATTHEW:- OK. Just thinking for a little while now about other nature reserves and natural areas within the ACT that NPA had any sort of role in fighting for, for example, do you remember much about the struggle over Black Mountain during the 1970s in regard to the communications tower?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, that was very actively fought. I was involved in that. But the main activity came from a group of academics who had a considerable talent in organisation. I don't remember the NPA being so active in that. They were certainly involved but the principal figures were academic figures, some of whom may have belonged to the NPA as well.

*MATTHEW:- You said you were involved. What sort of involvement?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't remember being sort of particularly involved in demonstrations or anything of that sort, but I strongly supported the idea. I may have written letters and that sort of thing.

*MATTHEW:- Was there also something of a campaign in regard to Gibraltar Falls in the 1960s?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't remember.

*MATTHEW:- That may have been before your arrival. The Molonglo Gorge, do you remember*



that?

ALASTAIR:- It was before my time, but I think the NPA was instrumental in getting that reserve. Unfortunately they couldn't control the development along the crest of the ridge and some of those houses should never have been built.

MATTHEW:- *Why is that?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, they obtrude on the natural scene.

MATTHEW:- *The Murrumbidgee corridor, certainly in the early 1980s that was quite an issue as to whether Canberra's development should extend beyond, to the western side of the river. Do you remember being involved in that at all?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't remember being involved, but certainly the NPA played a very valuable role in that.

MATTHEW:- *Jerrabomberra Wetlands is probably an area that's highly prized by you for its bird-life. Do you remember having much of an association with that prior to its reservation?*

ALASTAIR:- I knew the area and, I think, that members of the Canberra Ornithologists were very active in that. I don't think that was primarily argued by the NPA. I think that COG was very active in that.

MATTHEW:- *Would you like to comment on any of the national parks and other natural areas outside of the ACT, but still within our region, for example, Kosciuszko National Park. The NPA has from time to time contributed submissions to the management of Kosciuszko and expressed concern over development pressures. Have you been aware of some of those issues?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh yes, and I support any opposition to this over-commercialisation of Kosciuszko, and I only hope that it doesn't extend any further. It's obviously going to extend now in the principal, central area but obviously, I think, other areas could be developed in the future if it was allowed. I was thinking more of the sort of Jagungal area, further down there. Not that I can claim to have been up Jagungal, but I know the geography and I would have thought there was enough high country there to be of interest to potential development.

MATTHEW:- *What about some of the coastal national parks, for example Jervis Bay? Was there much concern about Jervis Bay?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't remember the NPA being active there. It may well have been, but my personal, particular interest was in the Currockbilly.

MATTHEW:- *The Budawangs?*

ALASTAIR:- The Budawang area down to ..... - oh dear - you know, originally you would go into the area of, from .....

MATTHEW:- *Was it Wog-Wog?*

ALASTAIR:- Wog-Wog. We knew the man in charge of developing Wog Wog Station, where the owner was a very liberal and decent fellow and who was very sympathetic towards people going through. Unfortunately, he went broke and the present owner, I think, is very unhelpful. In that area along there I think is marvellous. We used to spend quite a bit of time there, and we often went up Budawang itself. We knew the people living at the base. We spent quite a lot of time there, and we went up Currockbilly two or three times. Further along the ridge it's very interesting, as the ridge is quite flat topped for a long area. A beautiful, beautiful area. One could have a track running all along that crest, I think.

MATTHEW:- *Coming back to inside the ACT again and Namadji and in actual work NPA has done on the ground. Now, for example, the Yerrabi Track was a major NPA undertaking, opened in*



1987, and I think the idea of that track was originally yours. Was that correct?

ALASTAIR:- Yes, I was involved there. Hedda and I coming back once from, I don't know where, noticed the trig point from the road and we decided on the next weekend or whatever that we'd walk up to it, just taking a compass bearing. I thought it was wonderful.

I took Reg [*Alder*] up. Reg and Doris [*Alder*] came up. Then Reg set to work and, of course, found a much better track up than the one going straight across. It was used as a focal point for a couple of heritage outings, if I remember rightly.

It was proposed as a contribution by the NPA for the Bicentenary.

In the meantime I'd actually tried to get the Department to build a track. I wrote in to the Department, at that time it was Pratt, and several, you know, good cases were put to have a track built. I got a very pompous reply sort of thanking me for my interest and saying it wasn't felt it was quite the right time to start on this because the line of the road hadn't been fully settled. Anyway, nothing got done.

The funny thing was that when something was done by the NPA, some of the staff were quite hostile and indeed some of the committee in the NPA were by no means helpful. It was largely Reg's push that saw that thing through. I mean, he and a number of other people were all for it, but Reg was the prime mover.

MATTHEW:- *What was the basis of the hostility amongst other committee members do you think? Was it felt that NPA should not be making marked walking trails?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't know, but certainly the then President, Frawley, certainly didn't play an active role in it. I think there was a certain amount of opposition to Reg as he is rather a forthright character and some of it may have been personal. It wasn't by any means a uniform NPA project and indeed, some of the senior members of the committee never took any interest in the building of the track, never came out, never participated. That was one where I did participate quite actively.

MATTHEW:- *What sort of work did you do?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, just a very simple clearing job, following as far as possible natural lines, minimum clearing, and trying to avoid having, sort of, lines of track that would act as catchment areas for drainage. Very simple, I thought it was very well done and well thought out.

MATTHEW:- *And when it was opened in 1987 it was quite a big crowd I believe?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh yes, it was a great opening. We all assembled on that great flat rock down below, which I hadn't even noticed, at least I suppose I'd seen it, but Reg explored it and was a great enthusiast for that rock area. We had a really, really fine opening and the Federal member turned up ...

MATTHEW:- *John Langmore.*

ALASTAIR:- Yes, and was very good. Of course everybody turned up then. Oh, it was really good.

MATTHEW:- *And I understand that when those heritage week walks were first led, which must have been, say mid 1980s, 1985 or thereabouts, the route was marked with tape run through the trees. Was that how it was?*

ALASTAIR:- That sort of thing, yes.

MATTHEW:- *And I think Reg and others, maybe yourself, took water up to the top, or hot water for making tea for people once they got there.*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, yes. Water was carried up and billy tea brewed. They were nice occasions.

MATTHEW:- *Were there any other actual work parties similar to that, or other sorts of work that you were involved in, in Namadgi, for example, other tracks? After the 1983 fire, for example,*



*there was revegetation work done along the bulldozer fire trail up to Nursery Swamp. Were you involved in that revegetation work?*

ALASTAIR:- No. I know what you mean. I've walked up there, but I wasn't involved.

MATTHEW:- *What about the work parties to cut down wilding pines and briars also in the Gudgenby area?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, that was very praiseworthy, but I was surprised that it went ahead fairly quickly. I thought the trees would be allowed to mature before they were taken out. That was just a personal thought, I mean, I was all for them going.

MATTHEW:- *That's the pine forest itself at Gudgenby?*

ALASTAIR:- Well a lot of that, I mean, quite a bit of that is gone, isn't it?

MATTHEW:- *Yes. Now you mentioned that you did some outings with the NPA and then you and Hedda tended to go out more on your own. Can you describe for me a little bit what those NPA outings were like, I mean, in terms of the numbers of people that went, were they big outings, were they adventurous sorts of walks or fairly tame?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, some of them were quite long, but they were well thought out. People assembled, drove out and they had a cup of tea and then they started walking. We didn't like it because they tended to start so late. When we went out we always went out first thing and those late starts we didn't like at all.

MATTHEW:- *Can you give me an idea of the numbers of people involved in some of those trips?*

ALASTAIR:- I've only been on a limited number of them but I can remember on one there must have been 30, maybe more. Really quite well attended and generally very well organised. There was always a whipper end to see that people didn't stray and couldn't find their way out. It was well done.

MATTHEW:- *No-one ever got lost?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't think so. Not to my knowledge, anyway.

MATTHEW:- *Would you just like to tell me now, just to describe to me some of the more memorable trips that you did, say you and Hedda, and some of the favourite places that you went to?*

ALASTAIR:- Well, particularly in the Budawangs that was a favourite, that was really a favourite area. We went out there and we spent quite a number of days trying to find our way down to Currawan Creek and Currawan waterfall, quite a nice little waterfall. We went through the property of a really nice old timer, champion axeman, and he used to make eucalyptus oil. He distilled eucalyptus oil. Hedda took photographs of the process. Spencer Green, a wonderful man. His property was quite near another property where a delightful old couple lived. I don't remember their names but they were related to the owner of one of the petrol stations in Braidwood. We used to go out and see him quite often and walk through his property. You know, you go through his property on the way up Budawang.

MATTHEW:- *I guess they had a fairly basic life style there?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, it was really a very old building. Yes, I would say it was fairly turn of the century.

MATTHEW:- *Was there no mains electricity?*

ALASTAIR:- I don't think so, I don't recollect that. They sat in that room with a big fire and cooking all by - what do you call it, - a bush ...

MATTHEW:- *Camp oven?*

ALASTAIR:- Camp oven sort of thing and they were great. I think they're dead now.



*MATTHEW:- Now, what about within the ACT, what sort of places come to mind, in the Brindabellas or elsewhere?*

*ALASTAIR:- We would go out to the Brindabellas, and Mt Gingera was the great place from our point of view. We loved Mt Gingera. The first time we went out there we stopped at Pryor's Hut and walked up to the top of Mt Gingera, up the slope facing Pryor's Hut, quite open then, and along the top past those stunted snow gums to the trig point, and then came down the flanks. We went there quite often after that. On several occasions we spent New Year's Eve at the base of the mountain. You could drive through then beyond Pryor's Hut to another gate which was kept locked at the far side of Mt Gingera. We used to sneak out there on New Years Eve and have the place to ourselves. It was a wonderful place, and that's why I wanted Hedda's ashes scattered on Mt Gingera. It was a very favourite place of hers.*

*And at one time there was a suggestion about having a ski run on Gingera which I thought was outrageous and I wrote vigorously to the Canberra Times on that subject. I had a talk to one of the proponents. He came and saw us. Luckily, that didn't get anywhere.*

*MATTHEW:- When would that have been?*

*ALASTAIR:- I'd have to research that, it was ...*

*MATTHEW:- The 1970s?*

*ALASTAIR:- Late 1970s, I think. It was rather funny because when the gate was put in at ...*

*MATTHEW:- Mt Ginini*

*ALASTAIR:- ...at Mt Ginini I objected to that because it was too far for Hedda to walk on to Mt Gingera and come back. I objected to that as vociferously as I could and had an interesting correspondence with the Department, who claimed that it was essential to preserve the purity of the water in the Cotter catchment. I thought what a load of cock, but that was the reason trotted out for retaining that bloody gate.*

*When the proponents of the ski run on Mt Gingera came, of course, I was able to quote all this, saying, you know, it would be very harmful to the purity of the water going into the Cotter, which was a fairly valid argument I suppose. So that gave me some pleasure.*

*MATTHEW:- There was just after that the proposal to put in a ski development on the Corin Road which did eventually take place. The Corin ski area, Corin Forest.*

*ALASTAIR:- Yes, that was argued about, but we lost out on that.*

*MATTHEW:- Did you have much of an opinion on that, that particular site?*

*ALASTAIR:- I don't remember being personally particularly involved, but the NPA certainly was.*

*MATTHEW:- Just going back to the gate at Ginini. Once that gate was in did you and Hedda ever get to Mt Gingera again once the gate was in?*

*ALASTAIR:- Hedda, never. I don't know, I suppose I could have got special permission to go through, but I never did. But it remains one of our happiest memories of the ACT.*

*MATTHEW:- Did you notice many changes at Pryor's Hut over time, either the condition of the building or the furniture inside, whether people were treating it well? Pryor's Hut, did it change much during all those years that you were going in there?*

*ALASTAIR:- Well not noticeably. Well, we'd usually go out in fine weather, so we didn't make any use of the hut, but it seemed to me to be pretty well as it was when we first saw it. I mean, I've been there quite recently, couple of years ago.*

*MATTHEW:- You commented on how the ascent of Mt Gingera, going up that north side was quite open, so you have noticed quite a change in the vegetation on Gingera during these years?*



ALASTAIR:- Oh, yes. There's considerable undergrowth development. You could see that it was fairly open going up the ridge and that's what we tried to follow. Then we came back down the flanks.

MATTHEW:- *The NPA Bulletin, of course, has been going for many years now. Have you noticed many changes in the Bulletin over your years of membership?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, it's developed enormously. It was a very simple amateur operation originally, you know, duplicators and that sort of thing, at least, I think, it was. Then it started developing and Reg [Alder] played a part in a much better format. He was a very good editor although he'd had no experience of that sort of thing, but he became very proficient. He was also a fairly strong minded editor and I think he may have upset people sometimes. He made no charge for his work, but later on it was decided to get it done professionally, which it was for a long time until recently. This was quite an expensive operation. He's contributed a large proportion of the photographs.

MATTHEW:- *Yes, it's very noticeable, looking through the Bulletin, how many of the photos have been Reg's.*

ALASTAIR:- That's right.

MATTHEW:- *I think it was only in about 1974 the photos started to appear in it anyway, because prior to that there'd been no photos. Maybe the NPA had no ability to actually reproduce them.*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, initially there were no photos at all. It was duplicating paper. You can put photographs on that, but it's not good and it wasn't done, as I remember.

MATTHEW:- *Do you think the Bulletin has played an important role both in helping to maintain the Association's cohesiveness and membership and also as a form of communication with the outside community about the NPA's aims?*

ALASTAIR:- Oh, I think it played a very valuable role and it's the sort of the face of the NPA. I think it plays a particular valuable role in, say, relations with government and that sort of thing.

MATTHEW:- *The NPA's relationship with government, I guess, has changed during the years, sometimes good and sometimes not so good. Would you agree in terms of its lobbying role and writing submissions, or has it always had quite a good relationship?*

ALASTAIR:- I thought that it always had quite a good relationship. Some things got knocked back, but I can't think off hand of particular examples there. I think on the whole it was quite a good relationship, and if there was a public event it's usually been supported by the relevant minister and so on.

MATTHEW:- *Moving on from the Bulletin. There have been other publications that the NPA has brought out, and of course, you've played a key role in the two most recent, The Field Guide to the Birds the ACT in 1993 and I think also the reptile book more recently. With the bird book in 1993 you very kindly financed that. Would you like to tell me about that?*

ALASTAIR:- I'd always had a secret ambition to have a bird book under my own name. I mean, I've been, you know, interested in birds since I was a small kid. I joined all the right societies, I've been a member of the British Ornithologists Union for God knows how long. They don't even charge me now, for sending me *The Ibis* which I hardly even read. So I had, not a professional, but a fairly well developed amateur interest and I'd always had an ambition to write a book on birds. So I thought I'd write a book about the birds of the ACT, but quickly realised that I didn't really know enough.

I negotiated with McComas Taylor who was very helpful, and he took over the writing, the management and the organisation which meant that I practically had nothing to do except take a general interest. We got Nicolas Day to do the plates. Then, as far as publication was concerned,



I had no financial interest. I thought, if I could get the NPA to publish it, it would be down to their credit, and I could finance the thing with a gift to the Association which would in any case be tax deductible. And that's what I did. The NPA agreed. They didn't interfere, they were very good because I explained the proposition and it was very sympathetically received, and McComas really had a free hand. It had the support of the Association because it appears in their name, as it should do. I don't know what I would have done if they'd said, "No, not likely".

In some ways it might have been more appropriate to do it with COG, but I knew that if it went to COG, the first thing they'd do is form a committee and birdos are all such bloody enthusiasts that there'd never be full agreement. People would spend their time arguing and I didn't see any great prospects. Furthermore, COG didn't have tax deductibility. So that's how that originated. It's done very well, it's very professional.

*MATTHEW:- Yes, you were just concluding there, that the end product was a very good one, and the relationship with NPA and with McComas was a good one.*

*ALASTAIR:- Oh, it was a most harmonious arrangement. The result is that the proceeds from sales go to the NPA, so it didn't cost the Association anything, and the proceeds help build up their capital resources. Of course, some of the expenditure wouldn't be repeated, for instance the cost of the plates was a considerable proportion of the total expense.*

*MATTHEW:- That's the colour paintings by Nicolas Day?*

*ALASTAIR:- The paintings by Nicolas Day. That doesn't have to be repeated.*

So, as I said myself, I was very pleased with that arrangement. It seemed to me that it helped the NPA in providing them with an example of the sort of work they were able to get done, and also provided some capital resources. I think the result was to build up the reserves of the Association, which is always very helpful because anything that is done nowadays usually involves money.

A bit later, I had thoughts of doing something small and simple on frogs. Hedda [Morrison] loved frogs and I always liked them, so I thought a little small handbook with a tape of all the calls of the local frogs would be an interesting one to have, especially since frog populations have declined so catastrophically.

With McComas, we looked into it, but there were difficulties because I think a substantial work on the frogs of NSW, I don't know whether it had been produced or was being produced or was planned, and it looked as if there'd be some overlap there. So the idea of doing it for all the reptiles and the amphibians in the ACT came about. We were able to enlist the help of Ross Bennett who was extremely good and he took on the writing side. It took a little time, it didn't proceed quite as quickly as I thought it might do, but went very well.

One particularly interesting thing I thought was the way the illustrations were produced. I'd originally wanted artwork, but it was clearly impossible to get the artwork done locally in a satisfactory way fairly quickly. I think there is a very good reptile artist in NSW, but we didn't get round to that. Ross Bennett was able to get a colour photograph of every species in the ACT and the designer, Mariana Rollgejser, showed extraordinary ingenuity, I thought, in weaving these into the text. They look like paintings actually, they looked like artwork, and I was very pleased with the way that was done.

It was done on more or less the same basis as the bird book. It was published by the NPA who agreed to the whole project before it started. Of course, it wouldn't quite have the popular appeal of the bird book, but I think it's done quite well.

*MATTHEW:- Yes, both books have helped to educate the Canberra community about these aspects of our wildlife.*



ALASTAIR:- Hopefully. The position was that if someone was interested in reptiles or their children were (quite a lot of children are interested) there wasn't much to go for. Birds are a much more popular subject, and there's far more material available in the handbooks which have been published, the popular handbooks which are very good. But to have a small compact little illustrated work which you carry round with you is obviously a help for identification.

MATTHEW:- Yes. When the bird book came out it was just before Christmas in 1993 and I remember that, during the Christmas period, for a couple of weeks the bird book was listed in the Saturday Canberra Times in Dymocks' top ten list.

ALASTAIR:- Yes, that's right. It did very well to begin with; it was an obvious Christmas present.

MATTHEW:- Yes, it was very good marketing to have the book launch at the time.

ALASTAIR:- We made it just in time.

MATTHEW:- We're getting towards the end of the questions that I had in mind, so just the last few, Alastair. The general meetings of the organisation - now I know that you and Hedda perhaps didn't go all that often to meetings - but just looking back over your time with the NPA have you discerned much of a change in the general meetings either in the way that they're run or in the types of speakers, and I guess in some of the things that are said at meetings, how issues have changed over the time?

ALASTAIR:- I think there've been a lot of very good speakers. I mean, I can't off-hand say I particularly recollect this, but I think the standard has been very good. When we used to go they were well attended meetings too.

MATTHEW:- And do you think that your experiences in the ACT and the Budawangs, I guess, as well have helped to give you much of a sense of place and a sense of belonging in this region?

ALASTAIR:- Oh, we had that the whole time. You attach yourself to an area when you go there. It was the same in Sarawak: we attached ourselves to Sarawak in a very keen way as soon as we got there. It's certainly enabled me to understand the things that are going on in this area because we covered so much of it and usually understood what the implications are.

I was very sad that Buchannan, or whatever his name is, got hold of Wog-Wog, because that was a natural entry point [into the Budawangs] in both directions. The present entry point is not really very satisfactory. A much more interesting one was from the bottom end of Wog-Wog where you were walking along the escarpment. You could drive down to the bottom where the creek comes down. There's a good camping area and you could walk up from there. There was an old track people used to drive their cattle up from there.

MATTHEW:- Just to finish then, Alastair. Well, if I haven't covered things that you'd like to comment on - is there anything that I haven't asked you about, which you think is significant, which you'd like to mention?

ALASTAIR:- Can't think of anything off hand.

Of course, so much depends on the individual, really a lot in the NPA has depended on, or been stimulated by, the energetic and very strong personality of Reg Alder. He's really been devoted to the Association in a way few other people have - Fiona [Brand] too. Reg has certainly done a remarkable amount to forward the activities of the Association and get things done. He's a perpetual volunteer, which is something quite rare, and he's a very good organiser.

That was one of the sources of friction, I think, with some of the rangers. Reg's responsibilities in the navy, you know was director of refitment or something, he'd have to take over the whole process of renovating a warship. He has a very keen eye for detail and getting exactly what he wanted. I think it was a bit overwhelming for some of the staff, though he has a very good relationship with them all now, but there was some friction then.



*MATTHEW:- He runs a very tight ship, one could say.*

*ALASTAIR:- On, he's very good and of course, he has a real eye for detail. Some of the rangers their eye for detail is sloppy in the extreme.*

Working on that track from the old Orroral homestead running down to the crossing, the department was going to provide material and all necessary support; they produced the material but no nails or something stupid like that. That sort of thing is rather painful for a first rate organiser like Reg. That's all personal, I mean, he's certainly played a very valuable role in the ACT.

*MATTHEW:- OK. Well just to finish on, do you think the ACT, today's ACT community, owes something to the NPA? Is it a richer place for the NPA having existed?*

*ALASTAIR:- I think it has and I think it still has a part to play, and it's listened to. But I'm also afraid that commercial interests are going to be a real problem. Horse riding in the area, a certain amount is permitted. People like to think, "Oh well, that's just going back to the way things were", but of course it isn't. Horses were used in the old system of settlement but they were kept on a property and they were fed on a property. They didn't convey weeds from one place to another. If it's allowed to develop as it has done in Kosciuszko you can get 30, 40 horsemen, mostly youngsters and two or three carers, going along en masse. That's very destructive. I've seen them and I'm not impressed at all. It's not just a matter of having the odd individual on horseback traversing the country but having them all. Obviously, commercially they want as many people as possible and they're not necessarily very considerate to others.*

As for 4WDs they horrify me. I had a 4WD and you can see the uses for it in getting into places where you can do something. But the 4WD outings I've seen, they're just driving steadily in each others tracks, and they end up by having a camp, a jolly party and on they go. They're not really learning anything about the countryside. I have a considerable horror of that. Some of them are considerate and they'll clear up afterwards and that sort of thing. I think, particularly if the Aborigines are able to run it [*Namadgi*] themselves, the first thing that would happen is that people would be allowed to drive almost where they pleased in *Namadgi*, and that wouldn't just be individuals, it would be little groups of people.

There's an extraordinary example of what can happen if a thing is overused by 4WDs. I don't know whether you know the place, from Blundells Flat there's that Forestry plantation, an interesting run and you go a bit further on and there's a track running up to the flat below [*Mt*] Coree. When we first saw the top of that it was quite a passable flat and track, it hadn't really been overused and the creek crossings were still clear flowing and that sort of thing. Well, it's some years since I was there, but the last time I was there I was horrified, you'd obviously got people coming up there and plunging into a creek crossing and everybody sort of doing the same thing, and it's a horrible mess.

*MATTHEW:- Yes, it was horrible. There has been a lot of work there now to restore that and vehicles have been kept off the worst part of it, so it is looking quite good again, but, yes, it was looking very bad for a number of years.*

*ALASTAIR:- Shows what can happen if there's overuse.*

*MATTHEW:- OK, is there anything further you'd like to say before we close?*

*ALASTAIR:- Not really. I'm a fairly passive member, I mean, I belong to a whole lot of bodies which do things which I support, but I can't claim to be very active in these matters. I'm afraid that there aren't enough young people coming up, coming forward to take over from the old timers.*

*MATTHEW:- All right, shall we leave it there then?*

*ALASTAIR:- OK.*

*MATTHEW:- Thanks very much, Alastair.*