



INTERVIEW WITH IAN CURRIE

(NPA President 1974-77 & 1983; Life Member 1985)

REG:- This interview is being carried out by Reg Alder with Ian Currie at his residence in Red Hill on Saturday 3 August 1996 for the purpose of recording Ian's involvement in environment protection and in particular his role in the organisation of campaigns for the National Parks Association of the ACT (NPA).

I'll commence, Ian, by asking you when and where were you born?

IAN:- Mackay, Queensland, 1924.

REG:- What schools did you attend?

IAN:- Moved to Canberra and went to Ainslie Public School, Telopea Park Intermediate High School, then to Perth to Wesley College, then to the university in Perth and then the university in Melbourne to study dentistry.

REG:- I imagine than none of the courses had any emphasis on the environment?

IAN:- No, but I was involved with the cubs quite a lot in Canberra in the 1920s and '30s and my father was a rover scout leader and I used to go out with them sometimes.

REG:- You have made quite a number of visits out into the bush? Whereabouts in Canberra would you have gone then?

IAN:- I climbed Mt Coree when I was nine years old, clambered all over Mt Ainslie as a cub, camped out at Tidbinbilla when it was a private property, and various other locations such as the Cotter River.

REG:- Did your parents have any interest in the environment other than sending you off to the cubs?

IAN:- Well, I suppose so. My father was brought up on a farm in Scotland, he got his degree in agricultural science and spent quite a lot of time out in the field in Queensland, around Canberra and NSW generally.

REG:- Getting back to the cubs, did you go on to the scouts?

IAN:- No, I went on as an assistant cub leader.

REG:- Were you taken by your parents on any picnics in a bush environment?

IAN:- Not a great deal, occasionally, but not a lot because dad seemed to be busy a lot of the time.

REG:- Where did you go on your annual holidays?

IAN:- Down to the south coast, but quite often with other people. We used to camp down at Mossy Point, Broulee area, sometimes six weeks at a time over the school holidays. They were marvellous times in the bush.

REG:- Did you think that being in the cubs had any great influence on you in later life?

IAN:- I don't remember so, but maybe it did. I enjoyed fishing afterwards, trout fishing in the mountain streams around Canberra.

REG:- Do you think your parents had any influence on creating an interest in the environment apart from getting you to join the cubs or was it to get you out of their hair for a while?

IAN:- No, I think that dad particularly did care for the bush a lot, and probably that rubbed off on me, but I don't remember.

REG:- What was your first job?



IAN:- My first job was as a milkman's boy in Perth, just to earn a few extra bob.

REG:- *Did you have to take on other work while you were studying dentistry?*

IAN:- No.

REG:- *Were you self employed once you got your qualification?*

IAN:- No, I went back to Perth and I worked in the School of Dentistry there for a short time, then went into a private practice in Swanbourne in Perth for 12 months. There was a job advertised at the Canberra Hospital, so I applied for that and got it and came back here in 1948 and I have been here ever since. I worked at the hospital for 6 years, then went into private practice until I retired in 1988.

REG:- *Did your work have any influence on your environmental interest because I imagine you had a large number of patients who could have had some influence on you?*

IAN:- Yes, being in the position I was, I think I had more influence on them than they had on me. But to get away from the enclosed environment of dentistry, I think, was a great deal of help and I thoroughly enjoyed getting away into the bush. As I said, trout fishing occupied my time for quite a while before I joined the NPA, and we camped quite often with the fishermen.

REG:- *Did you join any other association apart from the NPA?*

IAN:- Not environmental, no. Just the dental association.

REG:- *When you joined the NPA, when and how did that come about?*

IAN:- My wife had gone off to Tasmania for 2 years to help train dental therapists, leaving me at home with the kids. When she got back she had been involved with the Hobart Walking Club, and when she came back to Canberra she wanted to get out into the bush also, so we thought of Canberra Bushwalkers or the National Parks Association and we were persuaded to join the Association by Francis Ratcliffe who wrote *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand*, if you have read that. We have not rued that decision at all. The Canberra Bushwalkers we felt was a bit too energetic for us and we learned a lot more with the NPA.

REG:- *So you haven't joined any other similar organisation?*

IAN:- No.

REG:- *What interested you most to become involved in environmental matters? You probably had a number of friends that once you joined the NPA would have had some influence on you?*

IAN:- Yes. When I joined the NPA Nancy Burbidge was President and she was a very, very strict environmentalist. She was followed by Julie Henry who was more of the active walking environmentalist, both of whom I thought were marvellous people. Bill Watson was persuaded to become President because of his interest in the environment from working in the Department of Environment, and he persuaded me to take over when he resigned from the job. Other environmental influences, I think, were just my enjoyment of getting away out into the bush.

REG:- *You didn't say what year it was you joined the NPA can you remember that?*

IAN:- 1970, I think.

REG:- *When Bill Watson got you to come on the committee was that as a committee member or straight in as President?*

IAN:- No, on the committee for a while before that. I think Julie Henry was the one who persuaded me onto the committee, not quite as quickly as our friend Brian Lee who came along for his first meeting and was persuaded to be on the committee at that time.

REG:- *Did you hold any office on the committee prior to becoming President?*



IAN:- No.

REG:- Can you remember any particular issues or so on you might have been involved in on the committee?

IAN:- No, my memory is not good. I remember lots and lots of meetings privately and committee type meetings with Julie Henry and Bill Watson and others, but specific issues are not clear.

REG:- Bill Watson prevailed upon you to become President: how long were you in the President's position?

IAN:- Once again my memory's not clear.

REG:- Can you remember any particular issues while you were President?

IAN:- There were many issues, but my memory just is not good enough to specify.

REG:- Did you have much involvement in Gudgenby being declared?

IAN:- I think that was almost cut and dried by the time I came in onto the committee, but we were certainly involved for one or two years after that with Doug Anthony and the declaration but not much of my involvement.

REG:- What about with the Franklins?

IAN:- The Brindabella ones? We met with Janice Franklin at the Dowlings' place in the Brindabella Valley and managed to pacify the young lady, but understood all their concerns, and there were lots of them. Four or five of us went out and talked generally on "Friends of National Parks" and on their concerns. There was a great deal of concern at one stage about mining in the Ettrema area and we became involved in a court case which was finally resolved without any great fuss. But the NPA was named as one of the people to be approached.

REG:- It caused some problems with the litigation and the damages that could have occurred about your own home?

IAN:- As President I was named and could have been involved in a lot of litigation but luckily it just fizzled out in the end.

REG:- It fizzled out in the end because the chap who was the litigant died, and his wife was not prepared to carry on with the case.

IAN:- It was not a particularly strong case and we were named amongst many other organisations.

REG:- It still hung over your head for years, didn't it?

IAN:- It did.

REG:- Were you involved at all with the tree planting at Gudgenby?

IAN:- Yes, that was one of our more domestic arrangements, but it was great fun. With Charlie Hill and Reg Alder and Brian Hammond and many, many others. We enjoyed that thoroughly; planting 600 odd trees I think.

REG:- With your work on the committee, I think you had most of the meetings here in your own home, when you became President?

IAN:- We had many of them, yes. It was much easier and more friendly, I think, to meet here than in a bare room and we did not have any offices at that stage.

REG:- Did marrying Jean have any influence on you with the environment? Did she bring some kindred interest to you other than what you said after she had been to Hobart?

IAN:- No, not before that; she had been very much a city girl.



REG:- *She had been a great support to you though in your offices of the NPA?*

IAN:- She all along and luckily enjoyed the outdoors, as did both our children when we managed to drag them away.

REG:- *You had Sheila Kruse as Secretary for quite a while?*

IAN:- That was one of the main reasons that I accepted the job as President because there was a very efficient Secretary, and Sheila has been a great support and is still a friend.

REG:- *Whilst you were in your more active role with the NPA did you lead many bushwalks or weekend camps, or such things?*

IAN:- I think so; yes, quite a few and one or two of my contacts through the [dental] practice were very useful. We gained entry to private properties that way like Manning Clark's and people down in Araluen and so on.

REG:- *I remember one occasion down the coast when the ABC came along on a survival course in which you led us down there and you had to remain quiet for a while.*

IAN:- They had their survival course going on across the creek but I'm afraid one of our members got a bit involved, wandered over and inadvertently got into the middle of their filming and was told to shove off very rapidly.

REG:- *I remember they weren't meant to survive entirely on the bush, but they came down with a great plastic bag full of oats, rolled oats to supplement their diet. Later on you saw it on TV.*

IAN:- We discussed it over the dinner table once, who we'd like to be stranded with amongst the NPA members, it was quite interesting.

REG:- *Prior to your presidency job, I presume you led some of these weekend camps and walks. Did you think that gave you some preparation to becoming President, and through them get to know people?*

IAN:- They were very useful, I think, and at that stage we managed to get quite a few families involved in the weekend camps. I hope they enjoyed them all as much as I did. We covered a lot of territory from the mountains to the sea with our camps.

REG:- *Did you contribute to the Bulletin at all with articles apart from President's messages?*

IAN:- No, I know at one stage we were asked to write leader's reports on walks and camps but whether they ever appeared in the *Bulletin*, I can't remember.

REG:- *Do you think that the Bulletin plays an important role in creating public interest and also a vehicle to convey concerns to the Parks Service?*

IAN:- It is certainly very useful in contacting members and keeping them informed.

REG:- *Have you been to any seminars organised by the NPA, I remember one at the National Library which either you or Bill Watson organised?*

IAN:- Public lecture that was, I think we only had two of those. The one at the Library, Frank Fenner talking about population and people and effects on the environment. I think there were only two of those.

REG:- *These were subsidised by government grants weren't they?*

IAN:- I can't remember that. Certainly the NPA bore the cost originally but whether that came from the government or not, I can't remember.

REG:- *I think it was a grant that they got and that was one of the ways of using the grant.*

IAN:- One of our problems was getting it.



REG:- In your role as President, I imagine you led some delegations to the Parks Service?

IAN:- We dealt with the Parks Service and with the various authorities planning in and around Canberra, most of whom in those days were quite willing to listen, but there was not the rapport there seems to be at this stage. I don't think the NPA had as much influence then as it does now with their reports.

REG:- Bryan Pratt would have been one of the main ones at that time to deal with?

IAN:- Bryan was very interesting. He would listen, but usually it was off the record.

REG:- Do you think your membership of the NPA with your children growing up, has been a great influence on them, an interest in the environment or a liking to going out in the bush?

IAN:- My son certainly, but my daughter, who is a nurse, has been away and been to various other countries overseas, has never really become interested. Now that her own children are growing up, she is far more interested in going out in the bush and camping than she was before. My son certainly has a great deal of respect for the environment and its inhabitants; mainly birds.

REG:- One of your main interests is in birds?

IAN:- Yes. As a result, I think, of the NPA membership, my wife and I joined the Society for Growing Australian Plants and the local ornithological group with whom we have been on various excursions and camps, but it is all part of the environment.

REG:- In retirement you go on a number of enviro tours as they are known today, do you find them a great joy now?

IAN:- I think it is always useful to go off with somebody who knows what they are talking about. I like to listen to people who know their subject.

REG:- Is there anything more you would like to say about the NPA or the management of Namadgi or what the future might be for the NPA?

IAN:- I worry about the future of the NPA at times but like all organisations, I think, it has its highs and lows and I think one of the problems is that the NPA did what it was created to do; it had Namadgi declared and then had to find a slightly different direction. Whether we still have the interest and the ability to follow up environmental issues I don't know. There are so many other organisations in the ACT now that have become involved that we are spreading a bit thin, although the Environment Centre has taken over the leading role in a way, it's not a completely cohesive group.

REG:- For many years the membership of the NPA was static and towards the end of the 1970s it dramatically rose to twice what the membership had been previously and now it is in a slight decline. I think this may be as you just mentioned, conflicting interests with other organisations.

IAN:- That, I think, was partly the fact that Namadgi was declared and since then it has had a watchdog role but as I said, too many other organisations.

REG:- We have had a watchdog role in things like Yankee Hat carpark and various other things which have happened. Orroral Homestead has been quite a thing for the NPA.

IAN:- I think Ross Carlton initiated the restoration of the Orroral Homestead and at the time it was greeted rather dubiously, but I think it has been a very useful and an ongoing interest.

REG:- It is fortunate that we can now report that the work for the time being is completed. Is there anything more you would like to say before we conclude?

IAN:- Many, many things, but I can't think of them.

REG:- Anyway thank you, Ian, for your contribution and patience in carrying out this. I'm sure it will be a valuable adjunct to the Association's record of its pioneer members.