



STATEMENT FROM LES PYKE

(NPA President 1990-91)

I was an easy recruit to the National Parks Association ACT (NPA). In May 1976 I was doing a coach tour of the two Islands of New Zealand with my wife Margaret. I met another passenger from the ACT - a tall strong man with white hair who went by the name of Reg Alder. We talked about the NZ scenery and the walks we did from the bus. I soon heard about walks being done by the NPA. It struck a chord with me. I was age forty-eight, holding a very senior position in the Commonwealth Public Service, and feeling the pinch of bringing stacks of work home and long hours in the office. Moreover, I had led a rich outdoors life in my home State of Tasmania. We had a tremendous advantage there compared to those in the big mainland cities. We had quick access to wonderful scenic places. My teenage years coincided with the 1940s, the first five years of which covered World War II. Car travel was difficult because of tight petrol rationing, but that did not stop us. We used pushbikes with camping gear on the handles and our backs. We often slept out with no tents.

Tasmania is a decentralised State with towns and small cities of varying sizes, most of which are on estuaries of beautiful rivers. I had relatives and schoolmates who lived on farms. This meant visits to those properties to provide cheap labour, but we also had opportunities for fishing and, dare I say it, hunting. A friend of mine was the national fly-casting champion of Australia.

My grandparents had a farm with its back paddocks merging with a white ocean beach and red granite rocks. They lived well; the main protein supply came from crayfish caught off the rocks, kangaroo tail soup and kangaroo patties. Kangaroo skins provided rugs for beds, and wombat skins for floor rugs. Use of such skins was very typical - part of the culture of those times.

On the bedroom wall above my head, horizontally placed, were seven guns of various types. Cruising and sailing on the Tamar and Derwent Rivers were also part of my outdoor activities. Outings with the Hobart Bushwalking Club were a feature after I transferred to Hobart to go to university.

I should mention that in 1945 when I was sixteen I was interested in perhaps becoming a surveyor. I was employed by a large timber company in Circular Head doing much exploration work with others between the coast of Circular Head and the Arthur River to the south. This is beautiful timber country and the company wanted to know more about its reserves in the remoter parts of its leases. There were no helicopters at that time, so we were employed to go out across swamp country cutting survey lines to find our way in and out and make some sort of assessment. To this day I have vivid recollections of horizontal scrub which was a cool temperate jungle; before you knew where you were going you'd be often travelling up into the air. When it rained too much, which was often, I would work in the sawmills in Smithton. I should add that this was long before woodchipping. World War II was still on and we were producing timber for civil construction for the war effort and making packing cases for sending food supplies to the Allied forces in the South-West Pacific.

Margaret and I joined the NPA in 1976; we well remember our first general meeting. The President Ian Currie went out of his way to make us feel welcome and so did Fiona Brand who was then a secretary or membership secretary. My main purpose in joining was to experience the walks, particularly the overnight backpacking. Conservation matters were not then in my mind. My early mentors were Reg Alder, Charles Hill, Dr Bob Story, Ian Currie, Neville Esau, Fiona Brand and Babette Scougall. The first three had one thing in common. They were not only very experienced in the walking routes but were also up to every trick in the book in carrying appropriate and lightweight gear and food. This was at a time before the heavy importation of lightweight tents and camping gear.



Reg was a superb and strong, experienced walker and a well-known black and white photographer. I do not recall doing a walk which he had not done before. Charles was a long experienced walker including a Victorian background. He referred to the cool mountain streams as "nectar". Bob was very experienced and also a highly qualified botanist. He gave sharp cryptic comments and had a mischievous sense of humour. He was noted for carrying a memorable sort of drink. Its name I think started with capital R with two letters after it. It caused much wassailing. Ian was a great success socially and in organising walks and car camps. Warm gluhwein was never far away at social functions. I particularly recall leading a backpack to the Sentry Box area with an important guest when on return Ian and a party were waiting with drinks and snacks for us. Neville had good knowledge of routes and he alerted me to conservation issues. Fiona who was then a strong walker fascinated me in her ability to cook up ample camp meals from limited supplies. She encouraged me to take an interest in leading walks. Babette had a detailed knowledge of the pioneering families of the settlements in the valleys of what is today Namadgi National Park. There was also the magic of her camera. These people were the first influences on me. Over the years there were of course many others I could mention who taught me.

So from 1976 to 1986 I was very much an outings person participating in the outings sub-committee. I was then approached to become Treasurer involving also becoming an office bearer on the General Committee. I was in this role for three or four years when in 1990 key members of the General Committee decided to retire leaving only a rump. I realised that the NPA was not regenerating itself. Everywhere one looked there were ex-office bearers. I finished up recruiting six members to become members of the General Committee. These included three future presidents plus two future other office bearers. In all cases they operated for years.

Throughout the ten years of concentrating on outdoors activity I did part-time courses in bush navigation and survival, advanced first aid for remote areas, Australian prehistory and earth sciences (particularly landscape formation). Prominent in my outdoors memories are the spectacular views of the Budawangs which we loosely called almost any part of Morton National Park; and the cool nights and camp fires of Namadgi.

Field projects that I was involved in at various times were renovating Orroral Cottage, the Tennent Homestead, buildings at Gudgenby; and developing the Yerrabi Track, modifying the track to Nursery Creek after damage to it during the 1983 bushfires, on Charles Hill's tree planting project near Glendale Crossing and on track restoration in the Budawangs organised by Dianne Thompson with the NSW park authorities. Prominent figures in all this were also Reg Alder and Syd Comfort. I did not play leading roles; I was just a pair of hands with many other willing helpers. One can go on and on mentioning names, especially for over the years. I am really covering about 17 years ago.

During my year as President I was very busy in assisting others on work associated with producing the NPA booklets — the 2nd edition of *The Field Guide to the Trees of the ACT*, and the 1st edition of *The Field Guide to the Birds of the ACT*. My contribution was organising the liaison and contractual arrangements between the parties directly involved. It should be noted that our bird book was due to the sponsorship and generous financial donation by our member Alastair Morrison. I took special pleasure in participating in background and consultative assistance to Kevin Frawley in his preparation for the NPA of the report on the *Conservation of Remnant Woodland and Native Grasslands in the ACT*. Up to that time at least it was in my view the most timely and relevant document we had issued. It was publicly launched by the Chief Minister, the late Trevor Kaine. Another area of special interest was trying to jazz up our recruitment of new members. This was mainly, but not only, by photographic exhibitions at special places and events. In this I had the indefatigable assistance of Adrienne Nicholson.

On the conservation side there seemed to always be a draft management plan on Namadgi from the authorities sculling about for comment. In my time there was also one on the Murrumbidgee



River Corridor. But I was becoming increasingly interested in a part of conservation that the NPA was not picking up — the protection of native wildlife. Our national parks and reserves are riddled with feral animals — foxes, wild dogs, wild cats, wild pigs, rabbits and so on. In my day I can recall seeing wild goats. To protect native species we should deliberate on some sort of enclosures policy. Now note that I did not say where or how big. In other parts of Australia there are such policies and practices by public authorities and private investment, with successes and failures. All I am saying is that the NPA should have a check on elsewhere and a proper deliberation.

In my days I was fully aware of two schools or factions — I had friends in each — get rid of structures in the parks or try to preserve them as heritage. We had cross membership with the Kosciuszko Huts Association. I must confess that I could not see what all the fuss was about. For Namadgi most of the structures were near the park's boundary within a stroll from a public road. The further in you walked the more 'wilderness' it got except for the odd old brumby yard.

To me the Australian landscape is a moveable feast. At what point in time do we want Namadgi National Park to emulate? For example, I read somewhere that the Orroral Valley was originally a marsh which was drained by Europeans to make the present river. Therefore should we now dam or block the river to re-create the marsh? Another angle — why not release the Tasmanian Devil into Namadgi — they were here once and still are in another part of Australia. The dingo is supposed to have driven them and the Tasmanian Tiger out. The dingo, an Asian dog, has not been here long; therefore is it a native animal or a feral pest?

Les Pyke