



INTERVIEW WITH DEN ROBIN

MATTHEW:- This is a tape of an interview with Den Robin by Matthew Higgins for the National Parks Association of the ACT [NPA] Oral History Project taking place at Den's home on the south coast on the 7th January 2000.

Den, thanks very much for the lunch and also putting time aside this afternoon so we can have a chat. I'm looking forward to hearing some of your NPA memories. Now you were born in 1942 in Sydney and moved to Canberra in 1959, worked with the Canberra Times and the Parliamentary Press Gallery, spent some time in Papua New Guinea and did an anthropology and history degree at the ANU during the 1970s, and worked with the Australian Heritage Commission subsequently. You joined NPA in about 1979/80. Can you tell me, before we actually discuss the NPA period, what sort of influences might have been on your life to lead you into the conservation and outdoors sort of direction?

DEN:- Well, I had a father and a grandfather who were very strongly conservationists. My grandfather was born in New Zealand of Scottish origin and he came to Australia as a young man. He bushwalked all round the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park, the Blue Mountains and the Royal National Park. He and my grandmother, who married in 1905, had a bushwalking honeymoon based at Emu Plains. My father walked and loved the bush as well and took me camping and walking from when I was a tot. More than that, I think, Dad had a sense of how precious and fragile the Australian environment was, and the other thing that's really important to me and been a big influence on my life was his great commitment to the Aboriginal cause. He always told me he brought us up to acknowledge that the Aboriginal people were the prior owners of this country. They were two very strong influences.

MATTHEW:- And before you joined the NPA you had already joined the Kosciuszko Huts Association and the National Trust, I think, during the 1970s. Can you tell me what it was that led you to join those two organisations?

DEN:- Well, the National Trust was an interest in Australian history and there was a very active ACT committee of the NSW Trust in Canberra at that time. The KHA I joined with a very close friend because we had started to do a little bit of cross country skiing and were staying in some of the huts and started to realise the need to conserve them. She went on to be huts maintenance officer. I haven't kept my membership up there.

MATTHEW:- Who was that person?

DEN:- Ann Bennor, she's still an active member.

MATTHEW:- Now it wasn't long after, you joined the NPA or perhaps you could tell me why it was you joined the NPA and at that time?

DEN:- Oh, I can't quite remember. I think I heard that they did bushwalking, camping trips and things. I can't even remember how I went on my first outing but I do remember the first outing. Neville Esau who was President at the time was on it and he discovered that I worked at the Heritage Commission. He was in the process of developing a submission on the Murrumbidgee River Corridor and asked me whether I would like to help him do it. So that's how I became involved very quickly; I mean it was my first outing and the next thing I knew I was involved in paperwork for the Association.

MATTHEW:- Where was that outing to?

DEN:- I think it was the Tinderries.

MATTHEW:- Was it a good experience?



DEN:- It was beautiful, yes and we saw some wild pigs, I remember that.

MATTHEW:- Unfortunately they are still around today. As you just indicated you very quickly got involved with the Committee and you were soon Vice-president from 1982 through to 1984 and that was an important time, particularly in the development of extending Gudgenby Nature Reserve into a national park. Tell me a little bit about how NPA pursued that?

DEN:- When I joined the Committee, the Committee had asked Michael Hodgman, who was the Minister at the time, to go out to Gudgenby Nature Reserve so that they could explain their claims to him, but then the Government changed in 1983. So we soon issued an invitation to Tom Uren. I think 1983 was an extraordinary year in conservation; I mean it was the year of the Tasmanian dams High Court case. I think we ended up taking Tom out there in August which would have been 6 weeks after the High Court case, so conservation at that time in Australia was really riding on a high and, I think, that helped enormously.

MATTHEW:- So you took Tom. Who was in the group from NPA and where did you go?

DEN:- We had a small group that accompanied him; it was Neville Esau, Garth Abercombie, Frank Clements, Bob Story and Ian Currie. It was basically people who were available to take the day off work, all of us were able to do that. Then there was another group with Sheila Kruse, Bob and Phyllis Adams and Cynthia Hook who waited at Orroral campground and made lunch and a billy and lit a campfire for us for when we came back for lunch.

I think it was about two nights before that, that the group had met at my home and we'd done a map of the things we wanted included in a new nature reserve; we wanted the Gudgenby property and all the little enclaves that had been excluded, all the leases we wanted them included, we wanted Mt Tennent, we wanted the upper Cotter catchment area. Frank and Garth did the map.

On the actual day, there were 6 of us and would have been probably 12 Government officials; a great convey of 4WD vehicles; all the Government officials in their little walking boots, it was really very nice. Anyway they got out of the cars at Glendale and Neville put the map over the bonnet of the car and started telling Tom Uren what he wanted. Tom just looked on and took it all in. Neville was very forceful, very passionate, and I was thinking to myself, you can't talk to a Minister like that, it's so punchy. One of the guys winked at me as much as to say it's alright. Tom Uren asked a few questions particularly about the catchment area; he was very concerned about Canberra's water quality and the need to incorporate that in some kind of reserve system to protect the water. He just turned around to John Enfield who was the Head of the Department and he said, "John did you get that, can you do me a submission on that" and they just all nearly fell over because it just seemed he was on side right from the beginning.

But look, I must say at this point, the Canberra Bushwalkers had also been lobbying him and, I think, they had taken him out to the area but I don't know whether it was before or after NPA. Certainly the two organisations were working in tandem there.

The other thing was that the Committee of NPA had been lobbying for this area for something like 20 years and so this was just a culmination of all those other campaigns and events.

MATTHEW:- And then of course in 1984 Namadji National Park came into being. How did you personally feel at that announcement?

DEN:- I couldn't believe it, I was very excited. In fact there is a funny little story, I don't know whether this is suitable for the tape, but the day that we took Tom out there Sheila and all these people were doing so much for lunch that I thought I'd better do something and I made a carrot cake, they were a sort of fashionable thing at the time, as my contribution towards the lunch. When we got back to lunch I noticed that Tom didn't eat very much, I think he might be vegetarian, I'm not sure but he didn't eat a lot, but he did have three pieces of this carrot cake. Then



some weeks later he was coming over to lunch where I worked at the Heritage Commission and I made another carrot cake because I knew he liked it and I watched him again eat about 3 pieces. So the day that Namadgi was declared I quickly ran up a carrot cake and I put a little flag with a gum-nut on the top and Namadgi National Park and we dropped it into his office at Parliament House. Every time I've seen him since he comes up to me and says "Hello, where's my carrot cake?"

MATTHEW:- It's nice to have that sort of personal relationship with a Minister.

DEN:- He's a good guy.

MATTHEW:- Did the NPA mark the occasion at all in 1984, any sort of event do you recall?

DEN:- Well, the actual day of the gazettal, from memory, was the first meeting of the new Namadgi Consultative Committee. This was another thing we had been campaigning for at the same time; we'd actually lobbied the Minister about that as well. We saw the need to have more community involvement on how the park would be managed, so we'd been asking for an advisory committee. He'd agreed to that and in the 12 months set it up. He'd actually written to a number of organisations and asked them to nominate people and then they chose from those nominations a committee. It was initially chaired by Dane Wimbush, the biologist, and Peter Cullen, I think, was deputy-chair. But the day we were sitting at the first meeting, the first meeting of something like that feeling quite excited, somebody rushed in with the proof of the gazettal notice of the park. I don't know whether it was the same day or the next it was actually gazetted but about that time.

MATTHEW:- And you were the NPA's representative on that Consultative Committee?

DEN:- Yes. The function of that committee, as I said it was called the Namadgi Consultative Committee, and we were a bit upset it wasn't called an advisory committee because we thought the word consultative was a bit weaker than advisory, but its main job was to develop a management plan and consider all the public comments and make sure we had an outcome that reflected what the public wanted. It was a balancing act between, say, horse riders and conservationists as to where in the park they could ride and things like that. I think, at the time, the plan was quite well received by the public and it was quite a big job.

MATTHEW:- Do you think the NPA's feelings about the Plan of Management, say on the draft, its comments on the draft, were reflected in the final?

DEN:- Yes, definitely. I think NPA was quite pleased with it. As time went on, of course, there were things that weren't in that plan, you know, things like trail bikes, they weren't heard of then. Although the plan was quite a good plan, I don't think the Service was ever able to allocate enough resources to undertake the work that was involved. So, I think, there was some agony with NPA about some of those things, like pig control or fencing or lots of bits and pieces.

What I was going to tell you about the Consultative Committee, was at the end of the term the Government said, "Look, we found this very useful having this interface between us and the public, and we'd like to extend the terms of reference of the Committee to take in all aspects of nature conservation and outdoors recreation in the ACT". So they broadened it, I think it was then called the ACT Environment Consultative Committee and now, I think, under this Government - it's lasted from before self-government - it's called the Environment Advisory Committee and it's still headed by Peter Cullen.

MATTHEW:- You were on it for a number of years as NPA representative?

DEN:- I was on it for two terms in the beginning and then we moved to Sydney and I went off it. When it was re-constituted later I went on as deputy-chair.

MATTHEW:- Do you remember any other particular management issues in Namadgi that you



recall that were significant during your time on the [Environment Advisory] committee?

DEN:- Well on this committee, one of the very big issues was an acknowledgement of the needs of cultural conservation. When, I guess, we had all been lobbying for a national park, we were thinking of the fauna and flora and habitats and ecosystems and things like that and then as knowledge came to hand we realised that the park actually included a lot of both Aboriginal sites and European cultural sites. There were quite a few heated debates about particularly how Gudgenby property should be managed.

MATTHEW:- Can you tell me what your point of view was on that one?

DEN:- I think I moved to use the property as a field study centre, I supported that. Because it was just a little enclave within our big national park, I didn't really go along with the argument that said it should be run as a working property to maintain its cultural heritage status. I think I had a more middle of the road thing that said protect the relics and make sure it's well interpreted but it didn't worry me if the bush took the property over again. You can imagine the debate, I mean there were people like Jonathan Winston-Gregson and Michael Pearson at the Heritage Commission who were very keen to have it continually run as a working property.

MATTHEW:- A working cattle property?

DEN:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- As far as contributions by other individuals, say particularly in relation to NPA's activities in regard to Namadji National Park during your time, who else do you think was playing an important role?

DEN:- An incredible number of people. I think, the committee I joined was absolutely amazing. There were still people like Bob Story, Charles Hill, Reg Alder, people really actively contributing and leading walks and who had huge knowledge. But then we had coming through at the same time some younger people like Neville Esau, Kevin Frawley, Phil Gatenby (I'm going to miss out names if I try to name them all) but people who were now working in areas where they were really working professionally in conservation and who brought with them a totally new way of looking at issues. I guess they could see the need to work with government and try and do cooperative ventures. I think that was the big change, the ability to work with, and not just anti, all the time and that seemed to come through the committee in the mid 1980s.

I think the other thing that happened during Kevin Frawley's time was they had enough money from government grants and so forth to employ a part-time assistant and to get a permanent office. That then led to a much more professional approach because we had a *[phone]* number we could give people and had someone who could type up submissions. I mean, before it was such a voluntary effort and now we were paying staff. Kevin and Neville *[Esau]* put in some first rate submissions, they'd even paid different experts to do them like Sarah *[name not remembered]*. It was a time of change and, I think, for the better.

MATTHEW:- Well, just about the setting up of an NPA office, how did you acquire that accommodation in that ROCKS area for example, were you involved in any of that?

DEN:- No, I wasn't personally, but I was on the committee. I think it might have been somehow through Babette Scougall telling us that there was space available. She belonged to Photo-Access and they had accommodation there. I think that's how it happened, it was the old Childers Street building and it was a very good move.

MATTHEW:- So prior to that time all the records etc, were just at members' homes?

DEN:- That's right and the committee meetings, up until that time, were always held at Fiona Brand's house and had been, you would have to ask Fiona, but probably for 20 years the meetings were held at her house. She always used to put on a wonderful supper and it was really



lovely to go to her place.

MATTHEW:- I guess that became a tradition in its own right?

DEN:- It did, definitely did, I mean my car would find its way there automatically, even now. Once we got the office, more and more meetings were held there and we had more meetings. We were working people so we tended to meet at 5pm and things like that.

MATTHEW:- So was that office big enough to accommodate a group of people because it always seemed very small?

DEN:- Only small groups and sometimes we would sit outside.

MATTHEW:- Well, if we could talk for a moment about some of the other issues that were addressed by the committee at the time that you were involved. Firstly within the ACT, now the Murrumbidgee River Corridor you mentioned, what were the issues there? There was pressure for development west of the Murrumbidgee I know.

DEN:- Yes, I think there was some kind of Parliamentary enquiry and it was decided we would put in a submission. We actually came up with the idea of a river corridor which was a fairly new idea back then and, I think, the NPA's great contribution was to actually draw boundaries on a map and define a corridor. I don't think it's ended up to be exactly our map but pretty close to it. I think that gave the government a very good starting point to think about it.

MATTHEW:- So the concept of a corridor along the river was actually something generated by NPA?

DEN:- Neville Esau was the first one I heard talking about it, I don't know where it had been before that but certainly he helped draw it on a map. We actually gave evidence at a Parliamentary enquiry.

MATTHEW:- And this is in that period of about say 1983-84, something like that?

DEN:- Yes, in the early 1980s.

MATTHEW:- I noticed in a 1984 issue of the Bulletin you wrote about NPA's submission on the corridor, so would you have helped to write that submission?

DEN:- Yes, I did.

MATTHEW:- And are you pleased personally with the way that the conservation of that area in the ACT has come about?

DEN:- Yes, I think the recognition of the need to do it was fantastic, but it did take a long time to come into effect.

MATTHEW:- As far as other places within the ACT are concerned, Canberra Nature Park, did NPA have much to do with Canberra Nature Park during those years?

DEN:- Yes they did, particularly Kevin Frawley with his 'Woodlands Report'. He identified the need to protect a lot of woodlands and grasslands and as a result they were included, Mulligan's Flat too. It was definitely Kevin Frawley's work there. I wasn't on the committee at that time, I don't think, but I remember going to the launch of it on Mt Ainslie and it is a really fantastic report.

MATTHEW:- Yes, that was about 1991. Were there any other issues within the ACT that you would want to comment on from your experience on the Committee, for example the Lower Molonglo area or Jerrabomberra Wetlands or the Corin Forest ski proposal?

DEN:- No, I think you probably got more detail from other folk. I guess the only other thing that happened about the same time in those early 1980s related also to Gudgenby or Namadgi, was our first tree planting project which Charles Hill organised and we had probably a couple of hundred of our members involved in it. All these people taking milk cartons and growing plants from



seed at their homes and then going out on work parties at weekends planting the trees. I think it taught us how precious the bush is because it showed us how hard it is to grow little trees in the bush. I think that was a very worthwhile project. I mean people put in hundreds and hundreds of man-hours as a result of that project. The other thing was the fires...

MATTHEW:- The 1983 fires?

DEN:- Yes, we were quite upset. I think this was the beginning of a lot of work parties around that period for NPA. During the fires the fire fighters had taken some heavy equipment up over Nursery Swamp and cut a swathe. It was eroding so the Association decided to put in a proper walking track, which is actually now the beginning of the very well-worn track from Orroral Valley to Nursery Swamp. So that was one of their work parties.

MATTHEW:- Did you participate in that?

DEN:- I didn't, but Geoff did. I think I was home with the kids.

MATTHEW:- That's your husband, Geoff Robin?

DEN:- Yes. Also the first Heritage Week after the fires we were talking about doing something as an organisation and we decided to have a walk into the area that's now known as Yerrabi Track, it didn't have that name then,....

MATTHEW:- Boboyan trig?

DEN:- Yes.to show people the effect that the bushfires had had on the environment. Just a few months later the little epicormic shoots were coming out, and it was showing something of the devastation and why you shouldn't light fires but also something about the way the bush regenerates. So that became the beginning of another big project which went on for years, which was the construction of the Yerrabi Track and also the advent of the annual NPA Heritage Walks. So there are two little things that happened about the same time.

MATTHEW:- And how well attended were those annual Heritage Week walks, the ones that you were involved in?

DEN:- Very well attended.

MATTHEW:- Say 50 people?

DEN:- Yes, easily. I remember on the first one being in charge of boiling water; we had to carry water up and gave everybody a cup of tea on the summit.

MATTHEW:- Boboyan trig?

DEN:- Yes, I've got photos of that and there would have been easily 50 people; mums and dads and kids, it was really good.

MATTHEW:- I guess the Canberra public saw that the Canberra community knowledge of what was Namadji National Park was much narrower then, than it is today and you were tapping in to people who had no idea of what was out there?

DEN:- Well, what happened when the park was declared in 1984, then there was a lot of publicity about it. It's a bit of a two-edged sword, because you want to protect the environment but the publicity, of course, leads to more people going out there. So the Association was becoming more concerned about having proper tracks and making sure there are car parks and making sure people went out there who had some idea of conservation, and that all happened at the same time.

MATTHEW:- Were you involved with the construction of the Yerrabi Track at all yourself?

DEN:- I think I might have gone on two work parties or something, but no, a lot of that went on during weekdays when other people were at work; you know, Reg [Alder] was retired, and a lot of those people who were able to go out. They had weekends as well, but what I was involved



with, which was interesting, I helped Reg and Sonja Lenz, the geologist, to put together a draft of a little brochure about the track. It was the first Yerrabi Track brochure, it's been upgraded and improved enormously since then, but I was involved helping to draft that brochure. And I went to the opening of it by John Langmore too.

MATTHEW:- Yes in 1987, quite a big event, wasn't it, lots of cars parked along the Boboyan Road. OK, another major project for NPA within Namadgi was the Orroral Homestead conservation and you were involved in that in certain ways?

DEN:- Well, that was a time during my work at the Heritage Commission. The Association realised that this quite historic homestead was crumbling and unless something was done quickly it would fall down. I spoke to my boss, Max Burke, and he suggested, because the Burra Charter had just come into being at that time, that before you could do any conservation work or get any money - we were applying for a Heritage Grant - you had to have this dreadful thing called a Conservation Plan. He said that we had no resources to do that, so he said why not contact Peter Corkery at the University of Canberra and see if he would like to do it as a student project.

So, for the next year or so we worked with Peter, and he and his students did the measured drawings, and they did a bit of archaeological research. We got other archaeologists in too. At the same time there was an NPA group with Sheila Kruse, Liz Thompson, myself, I can't remember who else but quite a few of us, we did a bit of research on the history of the building. This involved going and talking to some of the old timers who had lived out there, like Bill Bootes and Annie Gregory, as well as going to the archives of the Bank of NSW in Queanbeyan and seeing the deeds. Peter was very determined to try and find out when the project [*building*] started, but it was interesting that after all this research we actually never found an exact date, sometime in the 1880s, but we couldn't actually put our finger on a date. We looked at the births, deaths and marriages at Queanbeyan courthouse and there were children born to the McKeahnies in the 1880s with that address, so we assumed they were occupying it then.

MATTHEW:- Or 1860s?

DEN:- I thought it was 1880s, but could be, could be.

MATTHEW:- Anyway, that's quite a wide range of records that you considered. Was it exciting?

DEN:- Yes, it was good, again we were taking the afternoon off work or a couple of hours here and there to go out, but it was interesting. We also spent time in the National Library looking through all the old NSW gazettes; it's amazing what evidence we did find and also, it showed me how plucky these people were to go out beyond the 'limits of location' and have babies in the bush, you know, 20 km from the nearest neighbour. So that was the beginning of that project anyway.

Then there were several work parties that we would go out on, and there is a video, an early video tape of, I think, the very first one. The first day out there I remember we had to move great bales of hay; they had stored hay in the building and we had to pull all these bales of hay out, and we were worried about snakes.

MATTHEW:- It seems pretty sad that by that stage what had been quite a, well in its own way, a grand homestead in that era, was just used as a hays shed.

DEN:- That's right. The other interesting connection I had with the building is that the woolshed back up on the hill has a great big oregon beam in it that has 'W&C' on it, which is 'Woodgers and Calthorpe', a stock and station agent at Queanbeyan where they must have bought it. Later on Annie Gregory told us how she went to the opening, they had a dance in the woolshed when it was completed. The cars coming up Fitz's Hill had to be reversed up and the ladies in their long dresses had to get out and walk up the hill. Anyway, Harry Calthorpe was my great uncle.

MATTHEW:- So you had a connection with the place after all. I think the conservation works at



Orroral were finally completed and declared open in about 1997, did you attend that event?

DEN:- No, I was living down the coast.

MATTHEW:- It would have been pleasing for you to see the project finally finished?

DEN:- And Ross Carlton, he was the one that started it off. He was later President of the organisation for a while, but it was his baby, he was very keen to undertake the work.

MATTHEW:- And I think that you and he attended a conservation workshop over at Coolamine Homestead in Kosciuszko in 1983 that was, sort of, to get some ideas on how you might work at Orroral?

DEN:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- Was that helpful?

DEN:- It was, there were all sorts of people like Peter Freeman and all those old conservation architects there, and they were interested in it all.

MATTHEW:- As you were saying, it was a particularly busy time around the early 1980s with so many different projects on and obviously an energetic membership and energetic committee.

DEN:- Well, when you think we had the Orroral Valley Homestead, the Glendale tree planting, the work parties, all the business about establishing Namadgi, and at the same time we had a hugely popular walks program going. I don't know whether you were going to bring that up, but if you look back in the *Bulletins* often at weekends there were two events on; there were pack walks, some very, very good pack walks on, and I also did a lot of walking with the organisation at that time. I think that the walking and having fun bonded us all together. I look back and there is no doubt that some of the best days in my life were with NPA and those walks and those activities. I think that because we did these incredible walks together we were then a fairly good force to work together on work parties and so on.

Di Thompson was another person very involved in work parties. I can't remember the dates, I'm probably getting this all out of sequence, but sometime probably the mid 1980s she started convening work parties out in the Budawangs. Because in the Budawangs, particularly from the new entrance in from Wog-Wog, a lot of the track was degrading, and she did a lot of restoration work and the logistics of doing that was huge. She organised with the Parks Service to drop logs and cheeses, as she called them, in by helicopters, and the equipment. Then she would go out and all these people had to walk in about 6 km before they got to the site carrying not only all their weekend food and tents and so on but all the tools that they needed to do it. She did that for, I don't know how many work parties that she organised, but it was probably in excess of a dozen and the work they have done still stands today. That was going on at the same time as all the Namadgi work.

MATTHEW:- And did you take part in some of those work parties?

DEN:- No, I didn't. I think I had my hands full at that time. I went on the walks though, I enjoyed the pleasure of it.

MATTHEW:- About the walks, the pack walks, were they something new in NPA's outings program at that time?

DEN:- No, I think they had pack walks before, but about that time there was a group of people who, I think they called themselves the young Turks, we certainly felt as though they were, they were very fit people and we would go racing off into the Deua or Wadbilliga or Budawangs [*National Parks*]. I did some things I don't think I could do anymore, so I'm glad I did it then.

MATTHEW:- Could you tell me who some of those people were?



DEN:- Well, Neville Esau was there, Fiona [Brand] and Reg [Alder] were still doing very tough walks at that time. I have an enormous debt to Fiona because it was her who taught me how to bushwalk; when I'd be puffing up a hill she said to me 'Den, you just need to learn to plod' and the word plod is a very good word for bushwalking when you are struggling a bit. She has also been a wonderful model, role-model of a bushwalker to all the women who were a bit younger than her as well.

MATTHEW:- Because of what she had achieved?

DEN:- Yes, and how she could get to places; she is still going and doing things. The other people, there was this New Zealand guy called Garth Abercrombie I mentioned earlier, he was very active in the organisation before I joined and another guy called Phil Gatenby and they, well particularly Garth, also did a lot of trekking in the Himalayas and overseas. I think he had climbed Kilimanjaro and the highest mountain in Alaska; you know he was one of these very adventurous people. So they liked to do a walk that was off-tracks. We went up to Mount Bogong behind Canberra, very rough country, not the Bogong High Plains.

MATTHEW:- The Bogong Peaks in Kosciuszko?

DEN:- Yes, we went up there a few times, and Wadbilliga and down to Queens Pound.

MATTHEW:- Queens Pound?

DEN:- Yes, it's down from Wadbilliga trig, that was probably one of the toughest walks I have ever been on. They also went further afield to the Kowmung [River]. I didn't go that often. What I have to remind myself was that it was a period I was just finding some kind of freedom after bringing up 3 young children, my kids were still quite young. In fact it was in those years I introduced them to bushwalking as I used to take them occasionally. I think my son was about 12 and my younger daughter about 9, so occasionally I took them, and they are still great bushwalkers now.

MATTHEW:- So NPA played a part?

DEN:- Yes, and people like Bob Story, Sybil Story, Fiona and Reg, all those people were so encouraging to young families and the kids, it was wonderful. I really appreciated what they did for both me and my kids.

MATTHEW:- Was there much provision within the outings program at that time for younger families and children?

DEN:- Well, they had different levels, the day walks would really be where you took your kids. I remember one walk; as I said we were getting hundreds of people, well our membership at one point somewhere around the early 1980s was round about 700 people, and our monthly meeting would be anything between 70 and 100 people, and I remember one walk we went on, on a Sunday with Reg Alder we had 76 people going up to Sentry Box Mountain. I remember climbing up the mountain and looking back to see this little string of ants coming across the paddock. That was quite a lot for the organisation to manage with the popularity of the program and work parties.

MATTHEW:- So it was an exciting time to be involved with NPA?

DEN:- It was, I'm sure it's still exciting. I wish I were there now, but things change a bit. I think that, that the mid 1980s period was, as I said a minute ago, a very good time for conservation generally as, I think, if you look back there was the Tasmanian dams case and the Australian Conservation Foundation was very active and had some considerable successes in conservation in other States. Some of that sense of an ethos, a prevailing ethos permeated the ACT and, I think, it helped us a lot. We are now, I think, on a bit of an uphill battle sometimes, the climate has changed.



MATTHEW:- Do you think the NPA had a lot of clout at that time, at least within the ACT political sphere?

DEN:- It seemed to have, but I can't make a comparative statement because I don't know what it is like now. Bill Wood who was the ACT Minister for the Environment was certainly very on-side with us and before that, as you know, Tom Uren. I think the Government still listens to NPA, I think it's still a highly respected organisation.

MATTHEW:- That's interesting to think that both Tom Uren and Bill Wood were Labor ministers too. Do you want to offer any reflection on that?

DEN:- No, it's just coincidentally that was when I happened to be there.

MATTHEW:- Another project that I think you were involved in at the end of the 1980s was collecting NPA material for a display at the new Namadgi Visitor Centre. Do you recall what that involved?

DEN:- Yes, we had a little committee, I can't remember who was on it, but it involved going through the NPA records and trying to get some chronology, which we did actually present as a chronology, an update thing about different steps in the campaign for the national park. Where possible we sourced photographs and maps and original submissions. Most of it was from the NPA records, but some of it came from private people. I did a lot of that work or held the work and I handed it all back to the NPA Office. Joss Haiben in the Parks Service actually put together a book that was in the Visitor Centre. I hope it will become more than a book, because I think there is such a good story there that it should be a bigger display.

MATTHEW:- Yes that book, that ring binder, is still there just on the left side as you go in, so I think quite a few people do see it.

DEN:- Yes, it could be more than that though, don't you think it could be?

MATTHEW:- Sure.

DEN:- I think they did it as a book because they also were conscious that there were other community groups other than NPA that had some involvement with Namadgi.

MATTHEW:- Yes, the Canberra Bushwalkers are also mentioned in that folder. OK, perhaps we could talk for a moment about some issues outside of the ACT. Now I know that Jervis Bay was one area that NPA was concerned about, and you particularly led the NPA campaign for Jervis Bay.

DEN:- Only later. Before I even joined NPA they had been keeping a watching eye on Jervis Bay because if you remember it was part of the ACT. I think that they used to have at least an annual camp down to 'Greenpatch' so there were many members that had a very soft spot for Jervis Bay. But then the pressure started to mount again during that period when they were talking about putting the armaments depot and the east coast fleet base there, so that's when we started another campaign.

MATTHEW:- That's the early 1990s?

DEN:- Yes, or it might have been a bit earlier, when Kevin Frawley again was President, I think. He organised a NPA joint publication with the ACF, I think, on a proposal for a marine park at Jervis Bay. It was another of Kevin's initiatives.

At some point, I don't know what date it was, the Committee was reformatted. Instead of just having a General Committee that had a President, Vice-president, Secretary, Treasurer and committee members, they decided that the work load was getting so heavy that they needed people with designated positions. So how they did it was to try and have the other committee members being the conveners of the different committees, for example, the convener of the Conservation



Committee or Namadgi Committee or, I think, they had a Finance Committee. I think, they had a Publicity Committee at that stage too, which probably had the *Bulletin* under it. So the Committee functioned by having a monthly meeting, but also monthly all these other committees met and the convener reported back at the monthly meeting.

Sorry to go into all this detail, but the point of the story was that under the Environment Committee they set up a Jervis Bay sub-group which I convened for a couple of years. The workload was so great, we just had to divide it up according to peoples' interests because just about everyone was working on submissions of some nature. So this Jervis Bay committee put in about 3 or 4 major submissions during that period as part of different consultation processes. I think they were all written about in the *Bulletin* over the years, if anybody wants to look the *Bulletins* up. They were things like: there was one on the original Environment Plan which was for Jervis Bay and its immediate surrounds; there was one that was just the ACT Territory which later became just Commonwealth Territory; there was one on just the marine park. They were all different. We had to put in different submissions all the time, a bit of re-hashing sometimes, a lot of work and we also had to do some field trips, they were fun. Strangely enough that committee turned out to be nearly all female and it turned out to be the youngest of any group in the organisation; had people like Ann Taylor, Jane O'Donahue, Jenny Atton, Debbie Warner, Bernadette O'Leary, I'm sure I've left someone out, but, you know, they were very young, dynamic women who were full of energy and very passionate about protecting the area and very lovely to work for, and we did work well together and put in some quite good submissions in that period, I think.

MATTHEW:- And another part of this activity was the more pro-active one, perhaps, which was a highway march that you were involved in?

DEN:- Yes, that wasn't an NPA activity though, that was the Jervis Bay Protection Committee who decided to draw attention to the need to save the bay and to carry a petition from Jervis Bay to Canberra. A few of us joined in and walked; my daughter Gabrielle came too. That was over a long weekend in October. They actually finished in Canberra on the Tuesday, not the Monday; they actually walked into Canberra when Parliament was sitting on the Tuesday. We were all back at work so we had to leave them at Collector; we walked as far as Collector and then we had to go back to Canberra on Monday night. They marched into Canberra on the Tuesday, Gaby was able to go and join them again.

MATTHEW:- So you had walked from Jervis Bay to Collector?

DEN:- Yes, well actually we joined them in Kangaroo Valley because by the time we drove down on Saturday morning or Friday night, whenever it was, they had already walked a bit of the distance; so it was Kangaroo Valley to Collector. What they did, they had a system where you walked, I can't remember now, so many km and you had been divided into teams and one member drove the car while the others walked; so the cars sort of kept up and stopped. So no one person walked continuously, you had a break every couple of kms.

MATTHEW:- Like a relay?

DEN:- Yes, that's right.

MATTHEW:- It's interesting and, well, pretty sad, I guess, to think that although Jervis Bay has been conserved, at one time in the 1960s it was even considered a site for a nuclear power station.

DEN:- That's right, well the pressure is still not off it, you know. In fact, I'm going to a workshop in Huskisson sometime next month about the development and development pressures in the Marine Park operations, because there is still a lot of conflict there. So the National Parks Service is holding a meeting and asking all interested people to go. So I'm still involved in Jervis Bay and always will be, it's a very beautiful area.



MATTHEW:- Though not now as an NPA member?

DEN:- No.

MATTHEW:- Other places outside of the ACT, well Kosciuszko National Park has always been a favourite haunt for NPA walkers as well as many others, do you remember many management issues there during your association with the NPA?

DEN:- Yes I do, but the person who was more active with Kosciuszko was again Di Thompson, she was fantastic or is fantastic on Kosciuszko. She does a lot of walking up there and she tended to convene the Kosciuszko groups. How it worked, for a while we were very worried about all the 4WDs, you remember there was some quite threatening incidents, and so any NPA group walking in Kosciuszko would, if we saw any intruders, we would report them to Parks. We did a lot of that and Di actually got a couple of successful prosecutions through, and she is still doing that. Neville Esau was very involved in all the ski-tube proposals and the villages. We did put in submissions. I personally wasn't so active there, I guess, I was outside the ACT, very involved in the Budawang, loved walking there and I think it's one of the most beautiful places to walk.

MATTHEW:- Do you remember any particular management issues there that came up?

DEN:- Well, Neville and I when we were President and Vice-president went out one day and had a meeting with the National Parks & Wildlife Service from Braidwood. They took us out and told us about the proposal to put in the Wog-Wog track because the track came in from the property and bushwalkers had been banned from going in there. In fact, the manager at the time was actually threatening people with a gun if they walked across the property. NPA had been writing to the Service trying to get an alternative route, so they came up with this proposal that they purchase a little narrow corridor of land. We went out with some other people and they outlined the proposal and asked if we thought it would be OK. We did and, I think, at that time a guy called Craig Allen was involved in NPA and he and, I think, Julia Trainer, and I'm not sure who else, probably Reg [Alder] went out and actually marked the track in. You know how it's now a well-worn track, well, that was just tags on trees to get that path established. So that was quite a big issue to find another way in from the western side of the Budawang.

MATTHEW:- And so that land was purchased by the Parks to add onto the park?

DEN:- Yes, if it wasn't purchased it might have been Crown land, no I think it was purchased. I'm pretty sure was the little piece that was purchased.

MATTHEW:- Was it purchased from that same landholder?

DEN:- I don't know, sorry, I can't remember. I suspect not, because he wasn't very cooperative at all. They put in the pit toilet and the campground. That was quite a big issue, and also there was talk about not camping in the overhangs and not degrading the environment because there were a lot of people starting to build up in there, and the same pressures still apply there, through the Budawang now. Di [Thompson] was also involved in the Budawang.

The other walk we did about this time, the classic walk is the Ettrema Gorge walk. It's quite difficult and there are many ways in; you can go down Transportation Spur and out Dungeon Canyon or Flat Rock Creek or the waterfall, there are all these different ways in and out. It was one of the highlights on the calendar; you know, if it came up on the walks program you sort of think, are you ready for it. We did that a few times. There was one trip, the last time, no the second last time I did it, we got out to the cars and we had 5 vehicles and they all had one tyre slashed.

MATTHEW:- So there were some people locally who weren't friendly to bushwalkers?

DEN:- Didn't want us going in there.

MATTHEW:- There has been some issue with mining down that way too, hasn't there, and even a libel case against NPA?



DEN:- Yes, the Colong I think, that was before I joined the committee, but Fiona Brand could tell you about that, she was very involved in it.

MATTHEW:- Were there any moves during your time for the proposed Brindabella National Park, it had been mooted as early as 1980, but was anything going on very much?

DEN:- No, I don't think so. Neville [Esau] was pressing for it, he was very keen to get a contiguous park and protect all those ranges. I think he was quite visionary in his ideas of what areas should be protected.

MATTHEW:- Are there any other places outside of the ACT that you think figured in NPA significantly?

DEN:- Well, during this period there were lots of national campaigns to save the Daintree, to get a management plan for Uluru, to protect Kakadu, Fraser Island, all these and of course south-west Tasmania. At our committee meetings we used to get letters from ACF and all the other organisations asking us to contribute, you know, to contribute funds for their campaigns or to write letters of support or put in submissions, and wherever possible we did. It's just amazing the work we did but, I think, as time went on we realised we were overloaded. There is no doubt in the mid 1980s the committee was definitely overloaded, there were some nights we would have a committee meeting that wouldn't finish until 1am, and it was a bit hard to go to work the next day. There was a decision taken that we should narrow our focus to our immediate concerns, I don't know what year it was, but that's when that new committee structure came in. We did try to support other groups wherever we could. We also had links with the NPA NSW and, of course, the NPA was represented on the Australian National Parks Council which had a meeting once a year. They actually dealt with the big issues; I remember one that was quite controversial which surrounded the issue of Aboriginal ownership of national parks and Aboriginal management of national parks. NPA was a leader in trying to get Aboriginal rights recognised and put in submissions, particularly Neville Esau and his daughter Nicky, who worked as a paid officer for us for a little while putting in a submission there. I think that Neville and I spoke on those issues sometimes too.

MATTHEW:- Did she become Nicky Taws?

DEN:- No, Nicky Taws is another person. Nicky Taws did a lot of work. What happened was, when they set up the office and they started doing these submissions they had an office secretarial assistant. Then they decided it would be good if they could have a part-time project officer who could actually write the submissions because the other person was doing secretarial work, so they advertised and interviewed and appointed Ann Taylor, who was very brilliant; she had just got her masters degree and I think was working at the ANU. She was quite young then and had a small child, so a couple of days a week suited her very well. She subsequently, when she wasn't project officer and a paid member, she joined the Association and was active in some of the committees. When she left Nicky Taws did the same, and Nicky again was a brilliant scientist. I came across Nicky a couple of years ago; she was doing a fauna survey of Bowen Island in Jervis Bay or Bowen Island and the Jervis Bay territory. So we were lucky to have those two very bright young things.

MATTHEW:- And the ANPC, the Australian National Parks Council, do you think they have achieved very much, was that a useful coming together for the various NPAs etc?

DEN:- Yes, I think it energised everybody. You know, it made you realise you weren't fighting things alone. But I still couldn't quite understand why it existed as well as ACF, because it served a very similar function. I think it had been set up as a recommendation of ACF because they couldn't handle all national parks issues. I don't know whether it is still running, I've no idea. It certainly was fun to meet the other people, there were some good characters involved in those days.



MATTHEW:- So you attended some of those national conferences as a representative of the NPA ACT?

DEN:- Yes. The other thing that happened during this time, you will have to tell me which year it was, was the Tri-State Alpine Agreement. How that came about again was Kevin [Frawley] and Neville [Esau]. Kevin had this idea that he would hold a symposium which was at the ANU. I think, I chaired a meeting but, I think, I also helped with afternoon teas or something (we all did so many things). It was over two days and it brought together all the organisations that were involved in the ACT, NSW and Victorian Alpine Parks and also all the bureaucrats, all the different levels of government, and also all the scientists who had done research work up there. The theatre where we had it in was absolutely packed, there would have been a good couple of hundred people for the two days and it was a highly successful conference. As a result it was published and most of the recommendations have been picked up by government.

MATTHEW:- Yes, that conference was in 1985 and then the actual government agreement to manage cooperatively came in following that.

DEN:- So that was the brain-child of Kevin [Frawley].

MATTHEW:- Now the *Bulletin*, I guess, that has gone through a few changes over the years. You were involved with one particular one, I think, you and Les Pyke writing the policy for changing the production from within the membership to outer commercial operation?

DEN:- I think, the *Bulletin* is one of those things that was the flagship publication and, I think, it also helped us tremendously with obtaining new members and letting government departments and so on know what we were doing. For a long time it was done by volunteers until the early 1980s, I think, Babette Scougall did it, Reg Alder and I don't know who before that, but it had been going for quite a long time. Then they decided we needed to make it look a little more professional, because not only did we have a lot of members and therefore good subs but the first government grants were coming through. You could get government grants for practical conservation work like the tree planting or the Orroral homestead but you could also get grant money for things like administration and the *Bulletin* and things. So they got a grant to help with the *Bulletin*, and the basis of the grant was they were to issue all schools in the ACT with a copy and all public libraries with copies and a few other outlets as well, and so they decided to see if we could get it done professionally. There was still a *Bulletin* committee but they decided we should have a policy statement that would help us both interview to get somebody who understood the policy, and then that sort of guided Roger Green.

MATTHEW:- And he was a member as well?

DEN:- Yes. I think he did an excellent job for all those years.

MATTHEW:- Yes. Certainly the *Bulletin* took on a new look at that time.

DEN:- Yes, it's still a very good *Bulletin* and I don't think they have had much trouble getting contributors.

MATTHEW:- Yes, it is a good looking *Bulletin* particularly for a voluntary organisation, and you have made the point several times the amount of work committee members and other members were doing was pretty astronomical at times. Do you think that the amount of effort put into community groups like NPA is appreciated at government level, or do they just treat you like another bureaucrat?

DEN:- No, I think it is appreciated. I speak as a former bureaucrat, I suppose, as well. When we used to go along to the first Consultative Committee meetings, what the government appreciated from people, NPA members, was their knowledge, you know, their on-the-ground knowledge. I don't know that that was ever disputed, and that's what organisations can bring to government; you know, the fact that they have walked up Middle Creek or they know where the piggies are doing



the damage, or you know the big to the simple. I think there is a great deal of respect out there and I also think that in many cases the bureaucrats would like to push the government a bit more for conservation, but they can't do it themselves and so, therefore, they appreciate the passion and the strength of the voice of the conservation organisations.

MATTHEW:- Now, there have been other NPA publications apart from the Bulletin. Was there anything further about the Bulletin that you would like to say?

DEN:- No, just that I think the way it's been run is reflecting everybody's inputs. I think every NPA person would have a sense of ownership of the *Bulletin*, which I think is really good.

MATTHEW:- Just in recent years perhaps that sense of ownership has been increased by some of the editorial work at least coming back to the NPA, being done through Syd Comfort.

DEN:- The other thing they have done, there is a whole lot of people in NPA that work quietly behind the scene, and you won't even have heard their names. The *Bulletin* has always been put together, wrapped up and sent out by a committee of people that meet once a quarter at someone's home and do all this work. I think they are the unsung heroes, and that's another part of the bonding process that goes on within the organisation.

MATTHEW:- We were just going to talk about the field guides that NPA has produced, and the tree guide of course was the one that you were most involved with, I think.

DEN:- Just in the planning stages of it. It was done by a committee. I remember a few meetings when they were organising content and who should do the illustrations and the big thing was how to work out the key, my first introduction to following something from a key.

The most memorable part of that was the enormous work that members put in, once it was published, to sell it. Every monthly committee meeting there would be a report on how many copies had been delivered to Kingston Newsagency or the Botanic Gardens. There was a whole band of NPA people who were going around stocking the shelves, keeping the shelves stocked. From the profit we made on that field guide they then went on to the next one. So it was all thanks to this very active group of people, not only those that produced the guide itself but those who marketed it so well.

MATTHEW:- Yes, one of the interviewees has said to me that someone used to go around and make sure that the NPA Tree Guide was up the front of the book shelf.

DEN:- That would be right. Who was that?

MATTHEW:- I don't know, they didn't identify who the person was. Was it you?

DEN:- No, I wasn't involved, again it was mostly done during the day. At that time we had people on the committee who were working and people who had retired, so that band of people were basically people who had retired and had the time during daylight hours to do it.

MATTHEW:- The later field guides, the Bird Guide and, of course, more recently the Reptile Guide; you haven't had any involvement in that?

DEN:- No, but I use them all the time. I've got them over here and they are just wonderful, they're fantastic.

MATTHEW:- The Bird Guide became a bit of a best seller in the ACT at the time.

DEN:- And the reptile one is fantastic. I think, if NPA can keep up that standard of publication it will never have a problem about it being respected by government and so on. Its record, they are fantastic. They had another publication before that, before I joined the committee, I can't remember what it was called, walking in the bush or something.

MATTHEW:- There were a couple, there was Rambles Around Canberra in 1978 and then Moun-



tain Slopes and Plains *back in 1971.*

DEN:- So they had had a long history of doing that sort of thing.

MATTHEW:- Now the general meetings, do you think there has been many changes in those monthly meetings in terms of the number of people who come and the sort of papers that are presented, talks that are given?

DEN:- I haven't been to many in the last couple of years, I haven't been to one for more than 12 months. But the format changed in the period I was going, because once the committee change took place where we had conveners of each of the sub-committees, they introduced a system where those people got up and gave a report at each of the general meetings. That made the whole meeting a lot more participatory, so I think that was good. The scope of the topics has always been very broad and they have had some eminent people speak, I can remember Milo Dunphy coming along. Milo subsequently became a good friend. I met him through work and through conservation activities, and we did a lot of walking with him in the last few years before he died. They have had some excellent meetings and at one stage they had that sub-committee that looked after publicity also organised the monthly meetings and came up with speakers and so on. I'm not sure how they do it now.

MATTHEW:- We talked a little bit about the public events that NPA has been involved with, say with Heritage Week and leading those walks. NPA has also put up displays at Heritage Week activities too, like in the Albert Hall?

DEN:- And in public libraries, at the Dickson Library one year. Anne Robinson did a huge amount of work; Anne actually worked with me at the Heritage Commission. She takes beautiful photographs herself, but has a great eye for display work. She mounted some very, very good displays for NPA, and I think they have still got them.

MATTHEW:- Yes, and more recently the focus of that public activity has the ACT Alive day which is part of the Canberra Day long weekend, but I guess the same sort of thing is being done, you know postulating among the community. Well, finally perhaps we can get to the last few questions. How do you feel your life has been enriched or otherwise by your association with the NPA and Namadji National Park?

DEN:- That's a good question. I think, as I said before, some of the best days of my life undoubtedly were in the company of NPA people on some of the walks. I have always felt bushwalking fulfils a number of requirements for a human being, the actual physical exercise gives you more oxygen and makes you feel better, the beautiful country you go through fulfils your aesthetic needs and the company, the people you are with, give you companionship. I think that is a great activity, and I really think it's a wonderful activity to be involved in, particularly with NPA ACT.

I've left Canberra, so I'm not involved anymore and, I suppose, because I have left I've missed them more than I realised. If I'd stayed there and was still associated as closely, I probably wouldn't be so conscious of the gap in my life now. When we moved here and, because we have officially retired and living on less, we went through all the organisations that we belong to and thought that we couldn't afford subscriptions to these anymore and we were about to let NPA drop, and then at the last minute I can't let it go. So even though we are living on the south coast of NSW we intend to stay members of the ACT NPA. In fact, it's amazing how close they come; at the end of this month Mike Smith is leading a walk to Tuross Falls and we have worked out how we can go on a back road and meet up with them for a day, so we are still in there.

I think, I'd recommend to any person that an activity like this is a very profitable thing for one's life. I also think, that something else I learned and probably learned a bit too late, I wish I learned it or realised I was learning it when I was learning it when I was younger and at work: when you are in a workplace there is a hierarchy of people, you take orders or you give orders



and people work according to their ability. When you get out into a community organisation everyone's equal, everyone's there giving their time voluntarily and you have to accept and appreciate what everyone gives, and I think that was the great learning experience that a community organisation or that NPA taught me. People give what they have to give and they give it voluntarily, and that's what keeps the world going round. So yes, I really think it was a very good thing for me to be involved in.

MATTHEW:- Well, thank you very much, is there anything further you would like to say that we haven't covered so far?

DEN:- No, I just hope it keeps going and goes from strength to strength.

MATTHEW:- Thanks very much, Den.