



INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BANKS

(NPA President 1979)

MATTHEW:- This is an interview by Matthew Higgins with John Banks, taking place in Canberra at the ANU on the 23rd December 1999 for the NPA Oral History Project.

John, thanks very much for putting some time aside this morning in your busy schedule to speak to me. Now, just to talk very briefly about your life prior to joining the NPA in the early 1970s: You were born in Ballarat in 1942, went to school in Queensland, studied forestry which included a time at the Forestry School here in Canberra during 1963-64 and you worked in the Forest Research Institute prior to coming on to the ANU. Can you tell me some of the influences, I mean, obviously working in forestry you would have been learning about conservation and the outdoors, would you like to speak briefly about that era?

JOHN:- Yes, Matthew, I guess there were many influences that took place right from my very early childhood that have exposure to forests, to countryside. My father during my school years was the mines inspector in Queensland, and we used to go around the mines through much of northern Queensland during school holidays. I would tag along and developed an interest in and a love of the forest, a love of country, a love of the wild. We had holidays on places like Magnetic Island, and we saw the first trails being put in when the first national park was developed there and that was, I guess, the very first time I really became aware that such things as national parks existed. That was long ago. We had travelled to New Zealand, and I guess, the next national park I saw was Tongariro National Park in central North Island; fascinating, another trigger in one's life. Really it was the education days in the Australian Forestry School where, although there was an emphasis on wood production in forests quite naturally, there was also quite a strong influence on conservation issues, on national parks and one could see the competing interests and influences between production forestry and conservation in forest areas. Of course, conservation extends way beyond forests into other landscapes.

Following that it was really my brother-in-law who got me interested in NPA, that's John Shunky. He'd been associated with the NPA in Canberra here for a number of years and knew Nancy Burbidge and others and he enticed me to come along, and so I did. Eventually I joined up on the committee as a committee member and that set the ball rolling to eventually taking the position of President for one year, later on. There's a potted history. I guess, I've missed a few points but there's a long linkage there, I believe, to seeing many parts of Australia, many parts of Queensland which a lot of people my age and period would not have seen. So there we are.

MATTHEW:- Thank you. Now as we said, you joined in the early 1970s and at that time, of course, the Association was campaigning for a national park for the national capital. It had been underway for a decade and it still had a few years to go until 1979 when Gudgenby Nature Reserve was declared. Could you tell me how that campaign was being prosecuted at the time that you joined and in your early years there?

JOHN:- Well, when I first joined I became aware that people like Nancy Burbidge and Lindsay Pryor had taken a key role in getting a national park or similar reserve area established in the ACT, and through the linkages as explained to me in those days the only area that was possible was around Mt Kelly, so that had been proceeded with. During my period, of course, that had expanded to what became known as Namadgi National Park. Conservation, I guess, in those early days of the 70s was beginning to get on the crest of a wave, and there was considerable interest and moves for a major park in the ACT at that time. So, yes, it was an exciting time to see these things happen and be part of it although as a committee member one wasn't right in the middle, but you were certainly right there with the committee.



MATTHEW:- Were there other organisations in Canberra, and I'm thinking of for example the Canberra Bushwalking Club, who were also calling for a national park?

JOHN:- As I understand they were, but the NPA was in the driver's seat as far as the amateur bodies were concerned in getting that park eventually declared. I might add, it was interesting at one particular meeting to have an essay presented to us from what was then the CCAE, now the University of Canberra, with the name Namadgi on it, a proposal for a Namadgi National Park. I'm not sure whether that was the first time the name had been used, but there it was for the first time we had actually seen it and, of course, that was another feather in the cap as it were for getting the final declaration of the park.

MATTHEW:- Were you personally involved say as either Vice-President, a position you held a couple of times, or as President in 1979/80 with deputations say to the Minister or to government?

JOHN:- Yes, there were deputations to the government at the time. In my mind there was always a conflict between preservation and conservation, and one of the things I was looking at as a minor voice was the Gudgenby station which was the only viable property down there in an enclave in the park area. I would have liked to see that maintained as a living example of European heritage in the area but, of course, in those days in the 1970s, European heritage generally didn't count, it was preservation, preservation, preservation, let's go back to pre-European and of course, my desire was submerged and lost in the exercise.

MATTHEW:- Was much use made of the media, say the newspaper or radio in Canberra to get the NPA message across?

JOHN:- In my recollections, no. I think we could have made a lot more use of radio. There were letters in the paper but it was seen very much between NPA and the appropriate government organisation to get our message directly to the 'powers-that-be'. As I recall there wasn't a great effort at building up a public interest behind us; I may be a little wrong there, but that's my impressions at this stage.

MATTHEW:- Now, you were also on the Gudgenby Sub-committee of the Association for a number of years through the 1970s. John Shunky - was he also on that committee?

JOHN:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- Can you remember others who were involved?

JOHN:- Now you are trying my memory. Apart from Ian Currie, no I haven't looked up the records to be quite honest, no I can't recall.

MATTHEW:- OK, well as far as the work of that committee goes, was it a matter of just maintaining contact with the government and maybe sending in a letter every so often saying you know what's going on with our proposal, what was the intercourse like between the Association and government?

JOHN:- It was fairly frequent and it was of that ilk, it was one of maintaining a contact, keeping the issue alive to keep it on the top of the pile and looking for the appropriate time to really push very hard for the national park to be eventually declared and that, of course, eventually did happen. With the success that was going on or the success that the committee felt they were having, the need to bring together large public support through radio and other media was seen as not being a major priority. I guess, had we been battling against a brick wall of bureaucracy then things would have been approached slightly differently, and there would have been a greater call for public support.

MATTHEW:- So there was a level of sympathy there at government level?

JOHN:- Yes, and basically I think this going on, as I understand it, right through from the days of Richard (Lindsay) Pryor, they were high-profile professionals and their views, I would imagine,



have been respected right from the beginnings of the idea of a national park, and that had followed through. This wasn't some silly idea from a little amateur organisation but rather had a lot of professional support behind it. It moved progressively and steadily towards a final solution.

MATTHEW:- During the years prior to 1979 when Gudgenby Nature Reserve came into being did you go walking in the area which became Gudgenby as such, so say Orroral or Gudgenby itself, Gudgenby Valley down that way?

JOHN:- Yes, I can recall two particular walks we made, one to [Mt] Kelly, Bryan Pratt actually came with us on that one, and that was an exceedingly exciting exercise. We saw some of the aboriginal stone patterns up there on the ridges, it was a very cold and wet day too, as I recall, as we passed Yankee Hat but it opened up vistas of the landscape that I hadn't seen before. I was at the time working towards my PhD which involved mountain walking at that time, basically in the Brindabellas, but I also got down to Booth Hill. We actually organised an NPA outing there on one occasion which again showed a reasonable cross section of the area. I had travelled right to the southern end on my own looking and thinking about "what was this piece of land really worth for a national park". Yes, I had seen some of the landscape but certainly not a lot. We had the air photos of the whole area here back in Forestry and so one could say we'd seen it from the air in a sense, but there's nothing like being on the ground.

MATTHEW:- Was there much of a relationship between yourselves, NPA members, and the landholders who were down there and who'd soon be or even then in the 1970s in the process of being resumed?

JOHN:- I personally had no contact, but I believe some of the other committee members did. That's all I can say at this point, my memory is a little vague on that.

MATTHEW:- I'm just wondering whether it was like a national park in the sense that you could go walking there anyway, even though there was still grazing going on. Did you have a sense of freedom of being able to go wherever you liked?

JOHN:- Through the forest area, yes, I guess that was right. That's the feeling of Australians generally, if that was forest and unfenced, access was free and available but, of course, that's not always the case these days.

MATTHEW:- Now that trip up to Mt Kelly that Bryan Pratt participated in, I'm interested in that: could you give me a bit more details, like who else went and maybe the year if you recall and just what the trip was like?

JOHN:- The trip was quite early, that would have been in the summer of 1970-71, and it was really organised through my workplace here in the Department of Forestry. It was a group of us from here who went into that part of the world, as we were involved at that time in a resource and management survey of the Cotter catchment. Of course, Mt Kelly is right on the border there and we'd been working our way through the catchment in its entirety mapping vegetation. The Mt Kelly trip was really just another part of that exercise but to me, part of wearing two hats, it was part of the national park, NPA's pair of eyes; the survey for the Cotter pairs of eyes. Yes, there were about eight of us, I think, went up on that particular day's exercise.

MATTHEW:- And you think Bryan was impressed by what he saw, too?

JOHN:- Yes, Bryan was impressed. Actually Bryan's main interest was, or one of his interests, was a small enclosed catchment there, it is a dam or a lake, and he was interested, from a fishing point of view, could it be used as a fish breeding area. When we saw it, it was obvious by looking and thinking about it, it was more of an ephemeral small drainage area, but quite an interesting one. I'm sure these days, if one was interested in aquatic life, both plant and other, there's a lot of interesting things to be explored there. I guess it's only about half a hectare in size.

MATTHEW:- That's that little one between Kelly and Scabby which comes and goes?



JOHN:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- Great, OK. When Gudgenby was declared in 1979, what was the reaction for you personally, and also for the NPA more widely?

JOHN:- For me it was something which NPA and the committee at the time were quite excited about, it was a goal that had been achieved. I personally saw it as a start of the declaration of reserves or additional national parks which would link up with Kosciuszko. In other words, through the Cotter and the Goodradigbee through to Burrinjuck which would help to bring that forested area and those mountains all with Kosciuszko into one unity. Of course, that has eventually come to pass. I saw it as one step in a logical sequence, given the interest in conservation that was growing through the 1970s and 1980s; the need to conserve representative eco-systems and to get larger areas in single units that conserves which had very many other advantages, fire control, animal habitat and the like.

MATTHEW:- Yes, it's interesting to hear your comments about the wider conservation movement; the community feeling so it would seem that the NPA was to some extent a child of its time, but also given the fact it began in 1960, I guess there it was a little ahead of its time, then time caught up with it.

JOHN:- Yes, that's a fair comment. I think also when it began it began in an atmosphere of: if land wasn't worthy of exploiting for timber, agriculture or other resources then, well, what are we going to do with it; well, perhaps a national park may be a useful way of disposing of it. We were in that transition, at the time when I entered in, where times were changing; where we were looking and perceiving that representative landscapes and representative eco-systems needed to be added to national parks and similar areas throughout Australia. So we had that wonderful opportunity for representative samples given the very short time of European presence in this continent; the chance of capturing examples of the landscapes either in pristine, or as close as possible to pristine, condition. No other continent really has that opportunity today that we did. I always felt that was exciting and, of course, today in the 1990s those things have been cemented in legislation.

MATTHEW:- You also made the point a moment ago about Gudgenby, and hence Namadji, being part of a larger area with Kosciuszko etc and, of course, during the 1980s that progress towards cross-border management of these high country areas was codified; and the NPA played a role in that with the conference on the Alps cooperative management in 1985. Now, I know by that stage your involvement with the Association had declined but nonetheless shortly after that the tri-state arrangement between Victoria, NSW and ACT for the Alps was brought into being, so obviously that would have been something pleasing to you?

JOHN:- It certainly was, in fact I have been involved with the Alps committee and have maintained an interest right up until last week when we had our first Australian Institute of Alpine Studies meeting which obviously brings together the three States, the tri-state set of parks. So yes, while my contact with NPA has weakened, has been broken in a sense, my continuing interest in conservation in the high country has continued and will continue into the future.

MATTHEW:- At a more administrative level I note from the records you were on the NPA's constitution committee in 1978-79. Was anything significant worked on or determined by that committee?

JOHN:- I haven't checked the notes on that, but that was a brief interlude into looking at the constitution and seeing whether it needed any updating at that point in time, again given the changes which we were going through in the evolution of time. What did take place at about that period was the first meeting of the NPA associations from around Australia. We met up in the CSIRO offices one weekend. That was quite an exciting time, to get people of similar ilk together from around the States. On the other hand we were a somewhat, if I may suggest, disparate



group in that each group had its own band-wagons to follow. But there were common ideals and that's where the collective interest came together. It was an interesting interchange of ideas and concepts and seeing people face to face was much better than other means of communication.

MATTHEW:- And I think the idea for that Australian National Parks Committee or whatever it was called, ANPC, the impetus came from the NPA of the ACT didn't it, do you recall?

JOHN:- As I understand, yes it did. I guess we saw ourselves as a very small group with a very small piece of the landscape to wander around and through in the ACT. We had had a long period of contact with the Sydney people, NSW NPA, and out of that grew the idea, why not a network taking in all the States which would build strength to the arguments of NPAs and would help to engender a greater enthusiasm between individuals across States. Yes, I guess you are right, it did have its beginning right here with the NPA of the ACT.

MATTHEW:- Just a look now for a little while at issues in the ACT other than Gudgenby or Namadgi. In the 1970s certainly there was quite a debate over Black Mountain Tower: do you recall that?

JOHN:- Oh yes, that was one of the many issues we've seen around Australia at that time where conservationists, or perhaps we should say preservationists, were determined to be anti any development whatsoever. I can recall one of the issues that was raised with the tower was it was going to change water channelling off the hill and the great fear of the *Phytophthora cinnamomi*, PC, the root rot disease, caught the imagination of some who could see all the trees dying on Black Mountain and so forth and so on. But it was basically a change in the landscape, the visual landscape, which attracted various members of the NPA. I wasn't particularly against it as long as it was a sound and reasoned argument as to why there should be a tower on the hill; and I guess that brings forth the point that not all NPA members, not all committee members were always of the same ilk, there were differences of opinion within. The tower didn't rank high in my own arguments for conservation. I saw other issues, particularly back in the high country, as being more important.

MATTHEW:- Another one in the early 1980s was the proposal for development on the western side of the Murrumbidgee and there were concerns about the integrity of what has become the Murrumbidgee River Corridor. Do you remember the NPA making much of an input there?

JOHN:- We had some input into that. At the time it was of concern in that whilst there were some very nice landscape drawings being made showing bridges and in fact a university campus down at Pine Island and so forth, our river systems are very precious. I guess that's self evident today but at that time developers certainly had a greater free hand, I guess, than they do currently. We were opposed to development going across because we saw the integrity of the river corridor was going to be broken and the need to maintain natural vegetation and natural eco-systems through there, although it's modified today by past grazing activities and mining activities incidentally from higher in the Numeralla area which had filled the river with sand. That's another story which I could talk about. We were against development across the river because we saw the integrity of the river corridor would be broken.

MATTHEW:- Well just very briefly, that mining activity up the Numeralla, what sort of mining activity was it, sand mining or gold mining?

JOHN:- That was gold mining, back in the heydays of alluvial gold mining. It literally filled the Murrumbidgee with sand or sand had moved down, and it had come off the land in other places too. I was involved in the EPA of the NSW review of the Murrumbidgee River, quite an exciting one there, several years ago. One of the things that came out very strongly, if you take the Tharwa Bridge, downstream the river is literally clogged with sand and to get fish migration, so I've been told, you need deep pools at more frequent intervals and we virtually haven't got that. Wearing other caps I've pushed for the need to re-open the dredging of sand out of the river for



that reason but, of course, the ACT Government has a ban on any sand removal from the river system. It doesn't hurt to put forward these ideas from time to time.

MATTHEW:- The area that has subsequently become known as Canberra Nature Park and the various elements within it, was NPA involved in any campaign there?

JOHN:- That really took off post my involvement with NPA, but it was inevitable that the reserves around there or, as I saw it, the reserves around the city would come under some unified management system, and Canberra Nature Park, of course, gave the umbrella for that to take place. Yes, that was basically beyond my time with NPA.

MATTHEW:- One submission you were involved in, I think, from looking at the records, was one on recreation use of the ACT reservoirs and catchments. Do you recall being involved in that sort of submission?

JOHN:- In a small way yes, we were looking at, as I recall, the Bendora and Corin Dams which essentially were no-no for on-water recreation, of course. There were submissions for going down on the Murrumbidgee River itself. Having not seen those notes for some time I can't recall a great deal more than that. But yes, it was an area, recreation was an interest that NPA took on. NPA was, if you like, a polyglot of a number of professionals, non-professionals of varying interests from the preservationists, to the conservationist, to those who were interested in wildlife per se, to those that were interested in recreation.

Recreation was seen increasingly, certainly post-Namadgi, as becoming a more important issue which we should take an involvement in. When I say recreation, water activity was one, bush-walking another, 4WD activity and the cross-country motorcycles that was becoming, late 70s early 80s, a very important issue as people wanted to get out and go bush and, of course, roads and tracks were suffering as a consequence.

MATTHEW:- You used the terms preservationists and conservationists quite a bit, and I'm interested in you giving a working definition of the difference, because most people just talk about conservationists and I'm interested in the differentiation.

JOHN:- OK, I see quite a strong demarcation between the two. Preservationists are those that want everything preserved as is regardless; there is no compromise. Conservationist, if you take the straight definition of conservation is the wise use of land and so multiple use of which, if you like, the conservation of biota, the conservation of landscape can take place; but also you can have, by carefully thought-out argument, planned use of an area, be it for recreation or coming back to Namadgi, my initial thoughts of Gudgenby Station could have been kept, or one concept, could be kept as a working station of how grazing has taken place 100 plus years and could have carried on into the future. Gold Creek at the northern end of the ACT, I was involved in the land management planning of that in another arena, and we saw the same thing that Gold Creek could well have been kept as a working property; and to some degree that has taken place where school children can be taken and see how things function in a rural landscape.

I'm always concerned in that arena of Australia being such an urbanised population, urbanised society that we, the urbanised people, are so divorced from the rural development, what goes on in the country, where the wealth is generated. Where does wheat and coal, meat and milk, etc come from? I remember talking to a graduate who I'd met many years later overseas and asked what did he like about Canberra for the two years that he was here. I expected, when you talk to people who had gone back to the tropics, "oh the change of seasons that was great, the autumn colours" but this chap said to me doorstep milk. He couldn't get fresh milk in the tropics, this was in Malaysia, he had no idea where milk came from but whilst he lived here for two years milk bottles appeared overnight at the doorstep. That little exercise just brings forth again the very real need; we need the urban generation, the young kids to appreciate what goes on out in the landscape, and a living farm close on our doorstep can help to play that role at least in some small



scape, and a living farm close on our doorstep can help to play that role at least in some small way.

MATTHEW:- OK, we might just step outside the ACT for a little while to look at issues you may have been involved with in the NPA, for example Kosciuszko. Did NPA show much concern for the management issues in Kosciuszko during your time?

JOHN:- There were various issues that were raised and raised through NPA of NSW. We had issues brought to our notice through the Huts Association of the ACT, of course, which is a single purpose organisation: issues regarding fire and issues regarding the development of ski concession areas. These were of concern to us, of course, because many members of the Association and Canberrans generally know Kosciuszko and use Kosciuszko and so we had a real interest in what is going on there. Kosciuszko was going through some fairly rapid changes in ideas on conservation of the area.

MATTHEW:- You were just saying that Kosciuszko was going through some pretty big changes too; this was in the 1982 Plan of Management for example, so NPA had an input.

JOHN:- That's right, we had a sub-committee to look at the Plan of Management. Issues of public access of the huts and of ski concession areas were all raised. Again, if you like, we have had this argument between conservation and preservation.

MATTHEW:- Another park, I think, where there may have been a submission made was in regards to Deua National Park. Do you recall what the issues were there, or what sort of interest NPA had?

JOHN:- NPA did take an interest and we did put a submission forward for part of that landscape. What we saw is what was potentially achievable for the Deua-Tuross Park. In fact, in the end it resulted in a much larger area finally promulgated as a national park. Yes, we did take an interest there and some of the field outings had taken parties of NPA people into that area so it was known to us, it wasn't just a patch on the map. So our activities weren't confined just to the ACT; we were certainly looking at areas in the immediate surrounds of NSW; not to compete with NSW NPA but in fact to provide a supporting interest in the relevant issues as far as we could, particularly given our closer access to the Commonwealth Government.

MATTHEW:- Now as far as actual work done by NPA members on the ground in assisting activities within nature reserves and national parks, one activity was the 1983 tree planting project at Glendale. I understand you were involved?

JOHN:- Yes, there was a small group of us, once that idea had been promulgated, to get tree seedlings underway. I recall a group of us went out to the site once it had been agreed we could plant trees there. We collected seed. We got, would you believe, milk cartons together as substitute for plastic pots and I raised the seedlings here in the glasshouses. Those then went out, were handed out to members who were interested to raise those on to plantable size tree seedlings.

MATTHEW:- So that's the glasshouse here at Forestry ANU?

JOHN:- Yes, it wasn't a big job but it's nice to actually have some hands-on and get the seeds raised for them. Then we grew those on and eventually took them out at the appropriate time and planted them out.

MATTHEW:- And how successful was that operation?

JOHN:- In the early years it was quite successful, but I honestly haven't been there for a number of years. I must go back to see what's still surviving and how big the survivors are. But I believe it has been reasonably successful.

MATTHEW:- OK, now the outings program: your name came up every so often in leading walks,



Westbourne Woods and Pierces Creek Falls or Booth which you mentioned and the Blue Range Arboreta. Would you like to talk about some of those places and what you think you were trying to achieve in leading walks for the NPA?

JOHN:- OK. I felt at the time that I certainly had the expertise and knowledge that I could use for those particular field excursions, as did others as there were other expeditions. If you had an individual on the committee or in the Association who had an intimate knowledge of an area then they were obviously a person who could lead a party on a day trip or a weekend trip, as the case may be.

It was an interest to take them to the arboreta looking at some of the European history of the area, these were real things that were imbedded in the Brindabella Range and the Cotter catchment area. There were some 26 arboreta altogether in the ACT and most people have no idea that they exist perhaps, the exception being the Westbourne Woods Arboretum which is now home to the Royal Canberra Golf Course. But it's valuable, I think, to see what our European history is and the landscape, and see that in a holistic way along with the aboriginal peoples in a natural landscape. It did concern me that so much of policy with national parks per se was to ignore the European influence, let's go back to pre-1788 etc.

MATTHEW:- Are you aware that in 1994 the objectives of the NPA were changed to include cultural heritage?

JOHN:- Yes.

MATTHEW:- That must have brought joy to your heart?

JOHN:- I was pleased to see that come, it had to come and, of course, it's had implications in the way we view the landscapes both here and beyond.

MATTHEW:- You mentioned there Westbourne Woods too, were these walks part of the maintenance of the public's right to enter that arboretum since it had been taken over by the golf club?

JOHN:- Yes, I became aware when I first came to Canberra of the great argument that had gone on pre my time regarding the golf course and Westbourne Woods, the argument that it had been developed with public money and was now going to be taken over by a private organisation. There had been a strong move to ensure public access and, of course, today Ken Eldridge has played a major role for many years in having a public walk every month, once a month. It was also a teaching area which we used for teaching pre-botany, years ago when forestry was actually right next door at Yarralumla. We had continued to use that briefly when we moved to this side of the campus. So I had some knowledge of the area of course and, hence, I was interested and keen to take NPA members for a walk through the area to show them another part of Canberra which is not generally accessible to the general public except by invitation.

MATTHEW:- A much wilder part of the ACT would be Pierces Creek Falls, that was another place you visited.

JOHN:- Oh yes, Pierces Creek Falls, it's not an easy place to get to actually, but in our mapping of the Cotter catchment Pierces Creek Falls was one place I'd visited previously. I was keen to take a team in there in that it is not well known, it is marked on the map, of course, and we had an exciting time in there. There's actually the largest Kurrajong tree that I'm aware of right at the base of the falls; that was our goal to have a bite to eat under the shade of a Kurrajong.

MATTHEW:- So that's the biggest one in the ACT?

JOHN:- It's the largest that I'm aware of in the ACT. Of course, in this part of the world we're right at the eastern edge of the geographic boundary of the distribution of the Kurrajong.

MATTHEW:- OK, now the Bulletin. That's gone through a few changes during NPA's life, and I see about the Bulletin, I think, in your notes there. Were you involved in assisting in its production?



JOHN:- Only minimally, there were others who were keen to work on the *Bulletin* and to keep that rolling. It acted as a very important tool both to let our members know what was going on, what the committee was feeling. It enabled members to report through small articles of their own expeditions into national parks both here and overseas. It also played, I believe, a very important role in being freely available through libraries and elsewhere, and into government departments as a voice which would attract new members perhaps, but was also important for those who were watching from national parks' organisations, conservation organisations both State and Commonwealth, as to what our interests and what our feelings were. So the *Bulletin* played a very important role as the voice of the committee, the voice of the Association.

MATTHEW:- Now there were other publications put out as well, the first one that NPA put out in 1971, Mountain Slopes and Plains actually published by the Department of Interior; well, you had only just joined so I guess you didn't have a role in that, but I think you mentioned to me that it was later redrafted or to be redrafted for a proposed revised edition, was that correct?

JOHN:- Yes, that's right. Nancy Burbidge, I believe, did most of the work for the first publication and a number of us were involved in preparing for a second edition which the Department was prepared to fund and eventually publish, but for reasons unbeknown to me at this point in time it never surfaced. I guess it just kept on being put back on the back-burner until eventually it has fallen off. There would certainly be scope for republishing or putting out a new edition of that text sometime in the future. I'd like to see that. Our knowledge of the landscape from its biota, plants and animals, its European influence and aboriginal activities. Perhaps there is too much data for a book. I guess the short term was to come down to a tree book which eventually came out with Alan Mortlock and others pushing that one, but it would be nice to see, I think, an update of that book sometime in the future.

MATTHEW:- Alan Mortlock helped, well co-wrote Rambles Around Canberra. Were you involved with that?

JOHN:- Yes, I was involved in that. We made it open to the Association for various walks, rambles, around the ACT, what should we include, who would like to draft out the initial walks that had been agreed to. So there was a sub-committee formed and that book went ahead fairly quickly. There was only one piece that I put together and that was the walk around Blundell's Flat: it again took you through the old apple orchard; it took you through some of the native forest; some of the re-growth forest and, of course, down through the arboreta there as well. It really was a collection of a range of things that you could see in one afternoon circuit walk around Blundell's Flat.

MATTHEW:- So you didn't write up Booth Hill or some of the wilder pieces?

JOHN:- Not in that instance, no. We could have made the book twice the size, I guess, very quickly, but given the guidelines that were set down for the size of book and the number of walks wanted we had to pick those which we felt were congenial both for a family walk and for those who were the more adventuresome into wilder areas. But you're right, Booth Hill didn't make it.

MATTHEW:- Just going back to Booth Hill, it's an area that even today doesn't attract a large number of walkers, at that time it would have been considered pretty adventurous to go into there at all, I imagine?

JOHN:- I guess you're right, at that time with the work that I was doing through the high country locally, places like that didn't seem to be far away for me, but sure it was the first time NPA had been into Booth Hill. I'm not sure that they've been back there again.

MATTHEW:- We have had walks up that way but as I say, not that many. The next book that came out was the Field Guide to Native Trees of the ACT in 1983. Now I know that your involvement was starting to decline but, nonetheless, as a forester were you involved in that book?



JOHN:- I had some involvement in it, but dare I say it was relatively small at the time. It was a timely book to come out and, of course, has been printed and reprinted a number of times and is almost a standard on bookcases these days for anyone interested in the local native tree species. At that time I had spoken with Lindsay Pryor and we were working on, beginning to work on, the trees and shrubs in Canberra, the more urban area, so I did have a finger in both pies, but only very minor in the NPA tree book.

MATTHEW:- So you think that that book filled an important role in the NPA mission to make the wider community aware of the natural heritage?

JOHN:- Yes, and I'd like to see more of that activity because it's through that way that people pick up, public pick up a book of that ilk and will say, who published it, who's NPA? It's another venue by way you can get the name of the Association out there in the open. I mean, after all you've got to keep on attracting new members in and younger members in to keep the organisation viable and alive and with public perceptions and concepts of the time.

MATTHEW:- What was the membership like during your period of active involvement, in terms of age group and background, and did it seem a healthy level of membership?

JOHN:- Certainly enthusiastic, it wasn't a big organisation in numbers. As I said a moment ago, to keep the name of the NPA in the public arena, to get younger people into the system because there's a large proportion that were retirees or getting towards that age group and if an organisation of that ilk is to be viable, to be dynamic, to be active it needs a cross section of both age, class and education, people. You need some professionals who have an interest in NPA, but you also need the general public's input as well, the voice of the people, the voice of the large [community]. You have got to have that mix and if you tend to go one way or the other it's like ending up in a cul-de-sac, I dare say, in the end.

MATTHEW:- Now, as far as the general meetings of the Association were concerned I know that you were a speaker on several occasions, giving a talk on the Cotter catchment in 1975 and a talk on fire in the Brindabellas in 1983. It's obvious you were drawing on your expertise there, so were you trying to do the same thing that you were doing with your walks in using those opportunities to assist this process of educating the membership and other members of the community who might come along to one of those meetings?

JOHN:- That's always a goal of all the leaders, not to be a show-off and say, "look what I know and you don't", but rather to talk to and to encourage an interest, and to put on another pair of glasses when you are in the wilds and forest or grasslands or wherever. I had many years of teaching in university and so there is a real knack in enthusing an interest, in getting people to take an interest in what they see around the world. I love that concept of peripatetic teaching coming from Aristotle, of course, it's teaching while you are walking, learning while you are walking, opening other peoples' eyes while you are walking through the landscape. It's far better than working at a blackboard.

MATTHEW:- We are starting to get towards the end of the questions that I had in mind, but before we go through those last ones are there any points you would like to raise from the notes you have got there that we may not have covered so far?

JOHN:- Yes, I'd like to raise one of our weekend day trips we did. We went out to Micalong Swamp, across the range over in NSW. That to me has really brought together this question of conservation versus preservation, and the range of land use issues that can be all on one site. Micalong Swamp is a peat swamp, because from a time frame point of view it is of great interest because you can take samples out of the peat, look at the pollen analyses, look at past vegetation, past climate and so forth, so from that point of view it's a very valuable site. In fact, the day we went out we had Geoff Hope who works in that area. He came out and took cores from the swamp and showed us how this was done; that was really exciting. In the broader issue, Mica-



long Swamp today is surrounded by pine plantation right to the border and at the time we went out there were also interests in alluvial gold reserves which may or may not exist beneath the peat and whether those were going to be exploited or not. There were aboriginal artefacts around the site, so it was a site of some importance, some significance to the aboriginal people of times past.

There was also a site where Hume and Hovell first passed through in one of their expeditions down through this part of the world, and they write in their documentation of meeting numbers of aboriginal people who were there at the site. So it's got a mineral question-mark input, there's a story in the peat, there's the aboriginal input, there's the human/European input of Hume and Hovell and other grazing interests that have worked in that area, and today you have a pine plantation sitting on it. How do/what do we do in preserving that area for the future? To call it a national park you would have just a few hectares of a swamp enclosed in pine, the pine planting has disturbed the site because it's ripped for planting, it's a very disturbed site from that point of view, it's got many elements all focussed on those few hectares. It's always one of the areas that we see around Australia where there is essentially no simple answer to how we go forward in preserving or conserving what that site contains, but the first instance is to recognise the history and the biota, etc that's in a particular area.

Micalong Swamp is a real conundrum in my mind.

MATTHEW:- Micalong Swamp! OK, are there any other points you would like to raise from those notes? I think I see Sheila Kruse's name at the bottom there, is there anything there?

JOHN:- Yes, we always enjoyed Sheila Kruse's company. She with her background in the secretarial work was the real powerhouse behind keeping the organisation, as far as the paperwork goes, keeping us on track. You know, you would come into a meeting, an evening, monthly meeting, and Sheila would have all the paperwork laid out, she would have an agenda organised. It was almost second hand to her, no problem, but to us it was great to have someone in control of the paperwork and of what needed to be done, when things had to be done and preparing and promulgating minutes of meetings so we had a record of what we did that night, and what we were supposed to be doing before the next session. It was with great pleasure that we put Sheila up for an award, I forget which year that was now, it might have been 1980, she went up for an Order of Australia merit and it was with great pleasure that a small group of us put the arguments forward, and we were just so delighted when that was successful, she really did earn it.

MATTHEW:- Any other points that you would like to raise?

JOHN:- No.

MATTHEW:- Well, we are pretty close to the end. I guess the last thing I would like to ask you is what do you think Namadgi and Canberra's mountain backdrop has given you personally over the years?

JOHN:- A lot of pleasure. I guess I've seen it go through quite a rapid transition in terms of its status and management these days. We live in the Woden Valley and I look out every morning across the mountains and the mood of the mountain, as the saying goes, it is never the same in its appearance from day to day. It's that link when you are living in the middle of suburbia; it's that visual link with a rural landscape, in this case a forested landscape.

So much of Australia is flat, you get out in the middle of the Nullarbor and it's like sitting on a billiard table; wonderful skylight at night-time but there is something about hills and mountains which add another grandeur to your visual impression, it's almost a spiritual link. I've seen many mountains around the world, I've been very fortunate, I've been up in the high mountains in the Himalayas, I've been in Siberia and other places, and there is something about mountain terrain that is uplifting.



MATTHEW:- If there is nothing further you would like to add we might finish here?

JOHN:- Perhaps a couple of reflections, if I may at this point. My time with NPA was small, I had a small input into it but it came at a time when we were in that great transition, I think, in the idea of national parks both in Australia and worldwide. As I said earlier, it moved from a time when national parks were seen as an end point in land use, if it couldn't be used for anything else so OK, what about giving it to national parks. We have moved from that through to today a very different perspective, parks have many other roles to play, notwithstanding perhaps the most important is to conserve segments of or representative samples of all our eco-systems in the landscape and we in Australia have that opportunity, perhaps greater on this continent than any other in the world today. We've seen that happen in the span of thirty or forty years.

Now, that's really great to see that we have come that far so fast. We've seen a need to accept European heritage within park systems. When I first heard of the National Parks in Kosciuszko destroying the huts, and on reflection there were good reasons for taking some out of very fragile areas, but they were to be taken out at a time when, I guess, there was very little acceptance of the cultural heritage of those. Today that cultural heritage, both Aboriginal and European, is given some credence. In the future we are going to need increasingly more information on the biota, on plants and animals, taxonomists are still promulgating new species both by redefining existing and developing new; look at the Wollemi Pine exercise that's been exciting in more ways than one, the tree of the century perhaps.

I see the NPA having a role to play in the future, a very important role: it acts as a watchdog; it acts as a means of public input into government. I look forward to it growing and not only taking on the conservation role but also getting people out into parks and reserves and enjoying the landscapes which are now green dots on the map.

MATTHEW:- All right John, thank you very much for your time this morning.

JOHN:- You are welcome.