

A tribute to Dick Perry

Dick Perry is one of Western Australia's greatest living foresters, respected by all who knew and worked with him, and a notable participant in the great pioneering era of forestry in this State. This tribute to him has been prepared by the Institute of Foresters (WA Division) to mark the occasion of his 100th birthday.

Dick Perry was 7 years old when he immigrated with his family to Australia from England in 1909. His father had a small property north of Perth, and Dick's ambition was to become a farmer. But at the age of 14 years (in March, 1917) he was offered a two-year apprenticeship with the Forests Department. He was a member of the first intake of the State's first forester training scheme. This scheme had been initiated by C. P. Lane Poole, the then Conservator of Forests who was responsible for the writing of the Forests Act proclaimed in 1918. Lane Poole, and his successor S. L. Kessell, who replaced him in the early 1920's, were two exceptionally gifted professional foresters. They were responsible for the introduction and practice of formal forestry in Western Australia, and both were powerful influences on Dick.

The Apprentice School aimed to train general forestry staff who would be capable of implementing the Forests Act within the State. It was at Ludlow, one of our earliest active centers for forestry and the location of the first two forests to be dedicated to forestry purposes in WA (State Forests 1 and 2 in the Tuart forests).

As part of his training, Dick participated in the establishment of WA's first pine plantation. This took place at Ludlow in 1918. Following graduation he worked for a while as growing pine seedlings at the Department's Ludlow Nursery, and then moved south to join a "classification team". This work is completely taken for granted these days, but was the basis for the establishment of the forest estate in WA. The work involved the survey, mapping and inventory (called "forest classification") of the whole of the southwest native forests. Large numbers of foresters and surveyors were involved, the work was done on foot out of bush camps, and took many years. The aim was to identify the areas which would be set aside and proclaimed as State Forest and then form the basis for sustained yield management, as required by the Forests Act. Most of the forest was trackless at this time and the classification teams would be away in the bush for months at a time. At one stage Dick worked with a team in the then-uninhabited parts of the karri forest for 9 months without seeing any other person other than those within his classification team. He later described these days in two wonderful stories published in *Leaves from the Forest* and *Echoes from the Forest*.

When Stephen Kessell took over the Conservator's position from Lane Poole in 1922, he required a reliable personal secretary to assist him, in particular to accompany him on his numerous and lengthy field visits. He enrolled the young Dick Perry to do the job and ensured the young man added shorthand and typing to his developing forestry skills. Dick occupied this position through to the mid 1920's. Apart from travelling to every corner of the forest, meeting a wide range of people involved in every aspect of forestry, the job gave Dick the opportunity for personal contact with, supervision and mentoring from both Kessell and his assistant Dr. T. N. Stoaate. These two were giants amongst the men associated with early forestry in Australia and were responsible for taking Western Australia to the status of world class in the practice, planning and science of forestry.

At this time Dick became intimately involved with the planning and establishment of softwood plantations within the State, and along with Dr Stoaate and several of Dick's field staff colleagues, they laid down the basis for the whole plantation scene we have today.

- The philosophy came from Kessell: local pine plantations were essential to avoid the high cost of importing softwoods that were not naturally available in the State but preferred for many construction purposes, and in addition would provide an additional supply of timber to complement that from the native forests.
- The science came from Stoaate: the initial plantations would largely utilize sandy coastal sands considered useless for agriculture and any other land use at that time because of their poor nutrition and moisture-holding capacity. This had been a dream since the first trial plantings of exotic softwood trees near Bunbury in 1896. It followed an example that had seen the satisfactory reforestation and afforestation of

softwood species on similar sandy soils and within a similar climate on the Atlantic coast of France and Holland and within the new colony at Capetown in South Africa.

- The actual work was done by Dick Perry and his fellow field staff officers. This involved the practical business of acquiring seed, growing seedlings, preparing the sites, planting the trees and then looking after them; all of these things had to be pioneered from scratch.

Before too long, Dick was also up to his ears in the science as well.

Early plantation establishment in Western Australian was by no means straightforward. There were many failures and disappointments. Thus a very active period of research and field trials was initiated under Kessell and Stoate. In many cases, Dick acted as Research Assistant, putting in the trials under Stoate's direction. Apart from his interest and reliability, Dick was well-placed to undertake this work, as his "routine duties" involved the establishment of the so-called "metropolitan" plantations (on University endowment land at Somerville, Collier and Scadden) and in the adjacent districts at Gngangara and Mundaring.

In addition to actually planting the pines himself (i.e. in 1928 he was one of those who planted the pinaster pines still standing at the current site of CALM and Technology Park in Bentley, and he raised the seedlings for the first *Pinus radiata* planted at Greystones, near Mundaring Weir), and overseeing planting gangs, he also became associated with the two critical lines of research essential for the success of pine growth in WA.

The first involved the identification of suitable seed (provenance). At the time, the most promising pine for growing on sandy soils in our climate was *Pinus pinaster* (maritime pine). Seed of this species was imported into WA from its native sites in France, Portugal, Italy, Corsica, Morocco and from established plantations in Cape Province. Dick undertook the first surveys and analysis of provenance performance in WA and was able to verify the results of early trials in South Africa. These showed that seed of Portuguese origin was the only source suitable for commercial plantations in the Southern Hemisphere. Most of the plantations of *Pinus pinaster* in Western Australia up to 1940 were of French origin (Llandes provenance), the seed for which had either been imported directly from France or indirectly from South Africa. A large area of the latter was unfortunately planted at Somerville, Collier, Scadden, and Myalup in the 1930's. These plantations were of little value for timber production.

Since 1941 all planting of *Pinus pinaster* in Western Australian plantations has been of the most favorable Portuguese origin.

Dick also carried out some of the first fertiliser trials. These trials, largely at Gngangara, clearly showed that the unsatisfactory growth of most plantings on the coastal sands was associated with a need for superphosphate at time of planting. For instance, pines planted by Dick on the current site of the CALM Headquarters in Kent Street (then known as Collier plantation) in 1928 grew very little until fertilised with superphosphate in 1930. Since then growth has been excellent. This work was done at a time when superphosphate application was still in its infancy in Western Australian agriculture, and was one of the first instances in world forestry where artificial fertilisation became a routine part of establishment for timber crops.

At the time he was doing his research trials, Dick was employed as the forester-in-charge of the Perth Metropolitan area. In this position he was associated with an intensive and difficult era of plantation activity. During the depression years, there was little money for staff and equipment, and then later during the later war years manpower was limited. He also acted as Superintendent of Kings Park during the second World War, in addition to his normal duties.

During the 1940s, Dick became involved with a pioneer program to establish vegetation to stabilize moving sand dunes at the mouth of the Warren River and near Geraldton. He had considerable success, introducing and establishing Marram Grass following reports of experience with the species in South Africa. His "South Coast Adventure" is beautifully described in one of his stories published in *Leaves from the Forest*. This is a story in which the reader not only gains an appreciation of the landscape and the bushmen of the time, but an insight into Dick's lively personality and broad interests.

From 1945 to 1959 Dick continued in his role as metropolitan forester at Perth largely occupied with the developing pine plantations and running a seed store to provide local tree seed for plantation development elsewhere in the State. With the post-war expansion of both the pines and the city boundaries, fire control within the plantations became a serious problem for the metropolitan forester. The pinaster plantations on sandy soils in Perth's climate would burn in almost every month of the year, and arson became prevalent. Fire control was Dick's main preoccupation for most of these years.

However, at this time Dick was also involved with the establishment of a large number of trial plots of *Pinus pinaster* on the coastal plain north of Perth, to ascertain the future for pine planting north of the Gnangara area. These plots were later used by Joe Havel in his famous study linking pine growth to the ecological characteristics of the site, thus allowing the capacity to predict pine yields based on site.

From his early days in the bush, Dick had always been very interested in termites. He became an active collector and worked in consultation with members of the CSIRO Entomology Section in Canberra on questions of termite taxonomy and distribution. Started as a hobby, his interest in termites became a passion and then reached the status of expert. It remained a major private interest for the remainder of his active life.

Dick was also an expert photographer and one of the first to build a comprehensive collection of colour slides of Western Australia's wildflowers. He developed a technique of taking photographs against a velvet background, and his slides found their way into Herbarium and University collections. He was a great friend of the famous Government Botanist Charles Gardner, and the two would go on field trips together, during Dick's holidays and using Dick's ex-Army Blitz truck. A fascinating memoir of one of these expeditions was published by CALM in Landscape magazine in the early 1990s.

Another of Dick's wide range of interests was breeding Cocker Spaniels. During these years he became one of the most highly regarded breeders of this species in WA. Interestingly, his prize breeding dogs did not sit at home in a cushy basket eating creamed chicken as would happen today – they accompanied Dick on timber inspection to remote sawmills and were his faithful companions on soil surveys and other plantation work all over the metro area.

In 1960 Dick was asked to move into the Research Branch and take over a program of silvicultural research in *Pinus pinaster* while the Research Officer (Eric Hopkins) returned to Melbourne University to complete his PhD. Dick and Eric had become great friends, because Eric had found early in his research career that he could depend on Dick for reliable information on pine, gained from his years of practical experience and field observations. The major drive in the new research program was to use genetic selection methods to improve the growth and form of the plantation stock. All the existing plantations were assessed, and superior trees were selected and used as parents to provide improved seed for further planting. There was a problem however: the limited selection potential of mature stands of Portuguese origin pinaster within the state. As a result, Dick and his wife were stationed in Portugal for two years (1964/5) where Dick had the job of identifying and collecting superior genetic stock from across the wide range of the species' natural habitat. This work was completely successful and genetic material from 82 superior parent trees was imported as seed, scions and or pollen for establishment in Australia. To carry out the work, and at the age of 62, Dick had taught himself to speak Portuguese and was still enthusiastically climbing trees to collect cones and scion material.

Dick returned to Perth and prior to his retirement in 1967 was able to see the tree breeding program develop to seed orchard establishment and local testing of progeny from the material he had collected. He was also able to look back on a series of publications in refereed journals or Departmental bulletins describing his research into superphosphate, sand dune stabilisation and the genetic work with *P pinaster*. Scientific publication of work like this was a significant achievement for a man who left school at 14.

Following retirement, Dick was invited to undertake a study of railway sleepers in the Mount Newman railway in the Pilbara. This was at the time when the huge new iron ore developments were taking place, and railway transport of ore was a critical aspect. A serious problem had emerged, with the wooden sleepers being

destroyed by termites. Dick was able to identify the species responsible and prescribe measures to minimise the damage, and keep the ore trains rolling.

During his long career as a forester, Dick's life involved all the other aspects of forestry work: tree marking, fire protection, logging supervision, timber inspection, district administration etc. He was in the thick of it during the most dynamic and revolutionary period of the State's development. He also had a long association with conservation work at Rottnest Island and early reforestation there, and recently seed has been obtained from a seed orchard of *Pinus halepensis* established by Dick on the island for possible use for planting on farms in the drier areas. Dick also had a great interest in defining suitable trees for use throughout the wheatbelt.

Dick took many young foresters under his wing over the years. One of these was the young Peter Hewett and his wife Beverley when they first arrived in WA. Dick and his wife were like grandparents to Peter's children. Others, like current tree breeding expert Trevor Butcher, still refer to Dick with reverence as "Mr. Perry".

In a longer essay than this, we would touch upon the role played by Dick's wife, not only as providing support in his career, and backing his various interests, but in sustaining him during difficult times, and providing that staunch partnership which is such a characteristic feature in the lives of great men.

Dick's notable achievements also include his wonderful published stories and a comprehensive oral history, which is on tape at the State Archives. These have ensured that the human side of our forestry history has not been lost.

Memorial plaques have been erected at both Collier and Ellen Brook to record Dick Perry's vital participation in the plantation scene. On the 27th July 2002 he celebrates his 100th birthday in a nursing home at Busselton. He is the last survivor of his era and able to look back on a most successful life in the service of forestry and his State. The Commonwealth Government awarded Dick the Australia Medal in 1993 for services to forestry and entomology.

Truly a positive, rewarding and fortunate life.

[The IFA thanks Eric Hopkins and Roger Underwood for preparing this tribute]