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YANCHEP NATIONAL PARK 50TH ANNIVERSARY
20TH DECEMBER, 1981 - OPEN AIR LECTURE
'NATIONAL PARKS AND THE PEOPLE' BY

HARRY BUTLER

I would like to thank you all for coming to Yanchep, on its fiftieth birthday as the prime National Park north of the city of Perth. The name Yanchep is an Aboriginal name derived from a south west dialect word for the bullrushes that occur in the lakes around this area.

Nearly one hundred and fifty years ago, my namesake Mr. John Butler came through this area looking for stray cattle. He recorded the water and the wildlife, but because the colony was somewhat short on manpower immediately after its settlement, it wasn't until 1838 that Lieutenant George Gray recorded the presence of the caves in this area. They quickly became an attraction for a few of the early settlers, and were generally known through the Swan River Colony and the burgeoning Perth area by the time of Federation.

Most exploration and development was east and south of Perth with outward movement north east and south to settle the colony of Western Australia. The fruitful areas of Yanchep and its surrounds were neglected as being of little value until about 1899 when Mr. Henry White settled in a cottage just south of Lake Yanchep.

Because of his knowledge and exploration of the caves and the recognition of their value to the community, Henry White became an honorary caretaker and guide officially recognised by the colonial government.

With Federation in 1901, a wave of preservation swept through the new nation of Australia, and in 1905 Reserve No. 9868 was vested in the Caves Board for the protection and preservation of caves and flora and for a health and recreation resort.

In those days the Caves Board was very important because of the social values of the south west caves in the Margaret River area and by 1901 it was replaced by another authority, which for various reasons, did not develop the Yanchep area. This state of affairs continued until 1931

when the State Gardens Board with Mr. Shapcott as Chairman, took over the reserve. That is why we have the 50th birthday today (20th December).

It should be stated that prior to the taking over there were certain allegations that Mr. Shapcott regarded Yanchep as his private reserve. Whatever the truth of that story is, in 1931, under his energetic management with a grant from Sir Charles McNess, a sealed road was built from Wanneroo, telephones connected, and a whole range of works were carried out including extending the size of the reserve. Yanchep National Park became a reality.

It must be recognised that Yanchep is only one of the many National Parks in Western Australia. Although our early settlers did their best to change Australia into a facsimile of the lands from which they had come, very early in this colony there was an awareness of the need to preserve original habitat and ecosystems. Soon after the foundation of the Swan River Settlement, the Governor, Sir James Stirling, received instructions from the King of England to set aside recreation and health reserves for the people of towns and villages of the colony.

This was fortified in 1895 with the Parks and Reserves Act which gave the infant conservation areas some security. Because of the vast reaches of Western Australia, and the type of thinking of the day, most leaders considered that flora and fauna heritage would be safe in those areas of the State unsuitable for agriculture and development. The science of conservation did not exist and the awareness of the needs of conservation in terms of habitat preservation were not understood.

It is worth pointing out that despite those concepts, Kings Park was set aside as a reserve in 1872. Although the size of Kings Park has changed in the 150 years, its purpose has remained steadfast - a national park for the people of Perth.

In essence then, national parks here in Western Australia, are areas which are set aside for the preservation of Australian heritage. Australian heritage is one, or both, of two quite distinctive areas which I refer to as the Australian environment and the modern environment.

The Australian environment is that which existed before the coming of the white man. Today very little pure Australian environment occurs, being restricted to a few offshore islands which have never been exploited by man. Mainland Australia contains no pristine Australian environment, although there are many areas which have a large number of original components.

Those national parks which are dedicated to Australian environment are concerned with preservation and protection of Aboriginal heritage, fauna, flora, landform or ecosystems.

On the face of it, national parks attempt to preserve fragments of the once continuous Australian environment. Preservation implies "in stasis" but this is not possible, as living things by their very nature are dynamic and volatile. Even such stable things as landform decline and decay through the natural process of physical environmental changes.

In realistic terms, landform and Aboriginal heritage could be said to be stable in relation to the finite life spans of modern Australians, but fauna, flora and ecosystems, are dynamic even under those short term assessments.

Modern environment is that which contains some components of the original pre European structure, plus other components which reflect European endeavours on the face of this land: Historic, pioneering and modern human endeavour which includes all land development, buildings and similar works, exotic species of plants and animals, both deliberately and accidentally introduced, and Europeanised ecosystems in the form of developed farm lands, urban and suburban regions, transport systems, roads, dams and the like.

All national parks, no matter what they be officially called, have an enormous value in that they preserve for now and the future those things which can be said to be the moulding characteristics of the Australian way of life.

National Parks then are places of space, of civic beauty, of wilderness, of wildlife including plants, or just places of intense public use which are set aside in perpetuity for the communal good - now and in the future.

Ten human generations ago, pioneer Australians settled this country and since then we have to some extent, modified much of the environment outside our park and reserve system. Today's Australians regard heritage as being important and a significant factor in today's society. By definition, heritage is that which is, or may be, inherited. That which is inherited is what we have in the world around us today - the composite modern environment of original and introduced factors dynamically surviving.

That which might be inherited is the ideal for which we strive, endeavouring to ensure that the best examples of what we have left are kept for future generations.

The conflicts which arise from the designation of an area specifically for the preservation of Australian heritage are well known. Many developmental actions are incompatible with preservation and conservation. For example, the building of a dam for the conservation of water is incompatible with the preservation of the bushland which will be drowned by the impounded waters. In the case of such a dam, the government must make a decision as to whether conservation of water or conservation of the bushland is more important - now and in the future. However, the conflicts which beset us in our modern living are rarely as simplistic as that.

All too frequently different opinions on the wisest use of natural resources are the basis of our conflicts. With less than five per cent of the Australian wildlife clearly documented and understood, it must be obvious that any decisions on relative values are at best mandatory, but are much more likely to be biased in favour of a particular facet of immediate value. Thus major conflicts arise from the requirement to use alternate resources in the same piece of land.

Conservation and preservation on heritage through national parks is in its infancy because of the recent awareness of the requirements of national parks. To date the emphasis in Australia has been on acquiring areas of reserve and making them available to the public. The land acquisition has out-stripped the technical and economic resources of the managerial bodies, such as the National Parks Authority.

Too little is known about the biology of the Australian ecosystems to enable management plans to be drawn up with any certainty. Too much invasion of exotic faunas and floras have been accomplished as these invaders may be found in any area, no matter how remote it may appear from the mainstream of urban living.

Too much of our inherited thinking is in terms of straight line land boundaries. This concept is therefore imposed upon national parks, but the excision of a rectangular block of land purportedly for preservation does not take into consideration the contributing factors of the associated environment, such as runoff, water passage, edge effect and so on. Until we consider reserves and national parks in terms of environmental entities, we will continue to have problems of a very serious nature in endeavouring to produce plans of management for the existing rectangular blocks.

If national parks are set aside for public use, and at the same time for the conservation of the various components within the park, then there is obviously conflict of interests. These conflicts are resolved by proper management. For example, in Lake McNess (once Lake Yanchep), there are a wide range of effects deriving directly from human use. These include boating effects, such as wash, turbulence and turbidity, direct contact with shore lines, disturbance to animals, pollution from motors and detergents and sewage. Shore based activities, such as bush walking and photography, include trampling, picnic ground clearing, as well as sewage and other effluent runoffs. All of these things, both direct and indirect, effects from water based and shore based activities, lead to disturbance, pollution and change in habitat, and these in turn lead to redistribution of animal species, to death of some, to migration of others and reproductive failure in yet others.

In Europe, work done on simple factors, such as trampling effect of visitors in national parks, indicates that the natural regeneration of the habitat will take between fifty and one thousand years. In order to determine such a simple thing as visitor frequency effect through trampling on Lake McNess, what would be required would be a study that involves visitor numbers, frequencies and seasons, existing biomass, community structure, population dynamics, reproductive strategies and, of course, the morphology and physiology of the life forms involved.

It is sufficient to say, I believe, that environmental management problems do not remain static even while such investigations are being carried out.

The goals of management are critical. What is management and why is it applied? In the case of national parks, such as Yanchep, there are two quite distinct goals, one is for people use as recreational relaxation areas, the other is as ecological conservation. With the proper inputs and understanding and planning, it is possible to manipulate environmental processes to achieve both management requirements. This is not the only answer, but it is one which we have yet to develop to any great extent in Western Australia.

In Western Australia, approximately 8 per cent of our land is reserved or proposed as some form of conservation area which includes National Parks. The most used of these are logically those which are nearest population centres, thus national parks in the south west get the greatest use by people. This gives rise to the problems already mentioned, of conflict of interests, but also to another problem. Growth and expansion are natural phenomena of all living things including man, thus it is axiomatic that everybody and every organisation wishes to expand. Mankind has demonstrated its ability to expand almost exponentially which implies that the future will have a much greater need for man use of national parks such as Yanchep. This in turn leads to the question "if management tools cannot be found adequate for preservation of the very thing we go to enjoy, what alternatives do we have?" One answer is 'more national parks'. So we can diversify our people use of specific areas.

While everybody applauds the concept of more national parks, one must put into perspective available land and conflicting land use positions. The recent System 6 Study in the south west has endeavoured to resolve some of these conflicts and made recommendations for further national park preservation and people use.

Today, like everyday, we are at the crossroads of our civilisation because today, like everyday, we must make decisions that will affect tomorrow and all our tomorrows. National Parks are generally recognised as "good things" for people. "Good" is a value judgement and immensely subjective, depending on the individual point of view. However, there is sufficient argument to show that national parks are good for the community. Without being tedious the fact that all you people are here today enjoying this park is one demonstration of its value. The fact that tourism is an increasingly important plank in the State's economy as the pressure for open space becomes apparent to the rest of the world. The fact of the conservation values of national parks in preserving intact ecosystems and wildlife forms of both plants and animals. This has a backlash of leading to complacency with people thinking "if it is contained in a national park, therefore, it is safe and conservation is not needed elsewhere". A very dangerous thought indeed.

Inevitably there will be those who ask "what is the cost of preserving that piece of environment?" and this is opposed by the question "what is the cost benefit of developing that piece of environment? All too rarely is the question asked what is the price of those things?

Cost is a very simplistic situation; take for example something that most of you use every day - a plastic bag - Plastic bags cost only a few cents and so are used very widely in our modern society, and as many of you know, they are relatively indestructible, except by chemical change of fire. But the price of the plastic bag when it blocks a water filter and strangles a fish and so pollutes a lake and destroys an ecosystem is far more than the few cents the bag costs. Thus a major problem in indentifying the economic argument of more national parks is this simple difference between cost and price.

In regard to this equation, cost tends to be a purely local issue whereas price has much wider ramifications. It should be made clear that environment is international. What we do here affects everybody in the world because it affects the biosphere in which we live.

In a recent world analysis of environmental issues, the following were listed as highly significant: The decline of tropical forests, the loss of topsoil, the loss of soil productivity, the extinction of wildlife species, drinking water pollution, ocean pollution, ozone destruction in the upper atmosphere and exponential population increase. It is fairly obvious that each one of these has a bearing on national parks and their use.

One last thought perhaps. Conservation and the environment must be thought of as a set of resources which is held, by virtue of national parks and similar reserves, as the common property of the community as a whole. Unlike mineral deposits or timber resources or farming regions, which have defined uses, environmental resources may be used in a multiplicity of ways. The real problem of management and preservation is to decide policy as to how members of the community with equal rights of access can use environmental resources in a national park in what appear to be conflicting ways.

I personally believe that Australians have learned a basic lesson from our short history about the misuses of resource. Today, I find them far more concerned than ever before with the preservation of our national heritage which is the most valuable resource of all. Thus Australians today support, not only the concept of national parks, but the active management and operation of them.

I mentioned our national heritage being the most valuable resource of all. It is this simply because it is not only our national heritage. It is a global national heritage. Our soil, our water, our air and our forests are essential components for continued existence, not only in this country, but across the world.

We have been taught that man is the steward of the earth, but many of us have yet to learn to fulfil our stewardship by disciplining ourselves to live at peace with the earth, while utilising its resources for our survival and wellbeing today and in the future. National parks, such as Yanchep, with 50 years of caring, of management and of resource replenishment, indicate a guideline to the future in this State and thus the nation and the world.

HAPPY BIRTHDAY YANCHEP - AND HAPPY CHRISTMAS EVERYONE.