

Director of Regional Services opts for consultancy role

IT would be impossible to outline all of my experiences during my 32 years in the public service—especially in the field of forestry and nature conservation—so I'll just take you through a few of the major episodes on the roller-coaster ride that I call 'my career'. It begins gently enough, but hang on to your hats!

I started off in pine forestry at Mount Gambier in South Australia, when I did practically all there is to do in pine forestry—and I thoroughly enjoyed it.

I also really liked the south-east of South Australia, which surprises many people because it's relatively flat and, like the Swan Coastal Plain, very sandy, but it's much greener through the summer.

In fact, it drizzles most of the time, as I recall, and I'm reminded that Perth has, without question, the very best climate of any I've ever lived in.

Marvellous mentors

I was very lucky to have Dick Woods as my first boss at Mount Gambier. He was a wonderful mentor and coach. There's nothing more anyone could ask of a boss when starting out in one's career than to have his kind of help.

I'm only sorry that, so far, I haven't had the chance to give young people the same degree of attention that Dick gave to me.

Eventually, however, I realised that it was time to move on.

I'd originally wanted to go to New Guinea, but by that stage it was becoming more difficult for Australians to get secure employment there.

I had also developed an interest in

working with Aboriginal people.

The truth is I really thought that I could make a contribution to their 'development' and so in 1969, Elizabeth, our baby daughter Julia and I went to Darwin.

The joke was on me!

The joke about wanting to help in the development of the Aborigines is that it turned out to be the reverse—they developed me!

The work in the Northern Territory was wide and varied, but there's a fundamental problem. The forests don't produce much timber.

There was a great fuss about this that eventually led to a House of Representatives Committee of Inquiry.

I was one of those who had real problems with the government's forestry policy, and I finally came to the conclusion that my days as a forester may have been over.

By this stage, Liz and I and our two little girls, Julia and Sarah, moved to Maningrida in Arnhemland, where I'd been invited to become the community forestry adviser.

Although our families were quite apprehensive because of health concerns and a lack of communications, we had two years there during which I feel I learnt everything there was to know about life.

Heavy toll on family life

It was at once an incredible and exciting time, but also one that was very tough on family life and it certainly took its toll on all of us.

Hard as it was, I wouldn't exchange that experience for anything, and we developed some great friendships with some of the most

tradition-oriented Aboriginal people in Australia.

The experience left me with an expert knowledge of Aboriginal fire use (on which I was able to publish quite a bit later), and reasonable fluency in one of the major languages of Western Arnhemland.

When we left Maningrida I'd had enough of the Northern Territory, but the emotional upheaval of leaving such wonderful people led me to think I should try working on a consultancy basis while settling back into life in Adelaide.

I had intended to set up a forestry contracting business in Adelaide, but thought that some consultancy work in Arnhemland might help ease the sadness of leaving Maningrida altogether.

Off to Canberra

But, almost immediately I was invited to apply for a job with the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service, and very soon we were bound for Canberra, where for a year I was the project officer working on the establishment of Kakadu.

It's often been said that if you gain experience that's unique there'll eventually be a market for it—and believe it or not, twelve months later we were back in the Territory again, and another turbulent year—again enormously exciting, and again very hard on us as a family.

At once we were immersed in the implementation of a complex land management plan—the establishment of a big national park (where I was the first superintendent), coupled with recognition of Aboriginal land rights and the beginnings of the Ranger Uranium Mine.



Chris inspects a crop of *Stirlingia latifolia*, a species keenly sought by WA wildflower enthusiasts in Japan and Holland. Photo by Alan Briggs.

We lived in a caravan for most of 1979, but no sooner was our house built than another one of my mentors, Mike Hill, was promoted to Canberra, and I went back to Darwin into the project co-ordinator position that Mike had occupied.

Our youngest, Tim, was born a few months later—so being in Darwin was good from that point of view.

That job gradually expanded and eventually included responsibilities for the Commonwealth nature reserves and Uluru National Park (Ayers Rock).

In our last year in Darwin I seemed never to be home, so when I suggested moving to Perth my family chorused a resounding "yes!"

So, in the middle of a Perth heat-wave in February 1985, I was interviewed for CALM's Director of National Parks position.

It was a lot cooler when I got back to the Darwin monsoon, and I was relieved to start work in Perth (as one of CALM's first directors) in balmy April weather.

CALM policies development

My initial responsibilities were the development of policies for the State's national parks, recreation on CALM-managed lands, and the overseeing of special projects.

One of these projects was the establishment of Purnululu (the Bungle Bungles) National Park and the Aboriginal ranger-training scheme at Millstream.

Another was the complete revamping of the ranger career structure.

The hours in those days were particularly long, and I always felt that I was sailing into uncharted waters.

An atlas at my elbow

Not surprisingly The Traveller's Atlas was the most frequently consulted book in my bookshelves, as I struggled to find my way around Western Australia and get to know a lot of new people.

I was determined to travel often and extensively, because I believe there's no substitute for being on the spot when it comes to knowing exactly what's happening.

Now, I probably know more of the State than most Western Australians.

But I was lucky—and enormously impressed—by the goodwill and friendliness shown towards such 'a new kid on the block' by staff at all levels.

Because of my previous experi-

ence, I received many referrals on mining issues and the involvement of Aboriginal people in all areas of CALM's operations.

This continued throughout my career with the Department, and among my most satisfying experiences is seeing how many CALM officers are involved with Aboriginal groups and issues nowadays.

In my first year in particular, staff would ring me and say "There's a group of blackfellows here. What do I do?"

Now, everybody expects this as normal part of everyday activities, and the futures of Aboriginal people and nature conservation become increasingly and inextricably intertwined.

Tackling toughest tasks

On reflection, I think I was always happy to tackle tough jobs that other people baulked at, or maybe lacked the confidence to do.

I've also been very lucky on two fronts, first in Liz who was always supportive and prepared to live in some difficult situations.

Secondly, I had a number of wonderful mentors: Dick at Mount Gambier, Mike in Darwin, and I shouldn't forget Hugh Waring at the CSIRO in Canberra.

Hugh provided me with wonderful support and sound advice while I worked at the CSIRO after Cyclone Tracy.

Many people have observed that CALM is not an appropriate acronym, and I've certainly had some exciting moments as well as difficult tasks to tackle, but I guess everything is relative! Certainly, by comparison with our earlier years, life in CALM has been calm.

Without doubt, I would value more than anything the work we've done in providing facilities in parks and reserves.

I'd like to take some of the credit at least for the assembling of a highly competent team of people in our Recreation and Landscape area, but then there are also all the other people who work around that team to provide the great visitor experiences in our natural areas.

World leader status

Another highly satisfying experience was putting together the beginnings of our market surveys of visitors, which has now blossomed into 'world leader' status.

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Chris at his desk, keeping the seat warm for his successor. Photo by Verna Costello.

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In the last few years I've been preoccupied pretty well with finance and staff issues.

I'm pleased to have worked in this area at the end of my formal career, and to have put in place some processes which I hope will make life easier for my successor.

It was also satisfying to become involved in forestry again. There was a time when I doubted I'd ever be welcome in forest management again; but then the South-West and the Northern Territory are like chalk and cheese.

I see a great future for the balanced and sensible use of our native forests, and for the exciting new projects CALM is doing, combating salinity and restoring the critical weight range animals through fox and cat control.

These are bold projects which will in my opinion make Syd Shea one of the greatest visionaries of our time. It's been an extraordinary privilege to work with him.

I'm looking forward to the next phase of life when I'll be

able to undertake some projects for CALM, pursue some business interests, get back into languages and writing, and eventually to travel a bit more.

We'll probably stick to the South-West for quite a while, and, in fact, I may not get more than a few kilometres from Fremantle, which is a great place to live.

Although Julia is now in Sydney and Sarah in London, we've made WA our home, and I thank you all once again for making us so very welcome.



