

The Nostalgic Naturalist

by Old Timer

Days were, when she was just a pup, that Bess and me would head out of the city for some good bush air and sunshine.

Now there isn't a truer saying than 'a man's best friend's his dog', and Bess the old black lab and me covered some tracks back then.

She'd leap out of the ute, dog smiles all the way up to her ears and her tail going like it was an airplane propeller — like she was going to take off into the air any minute.

Well, off she'd go and me right behind. I could always tell where she was, the bush was shaking, and she was panting, yipping in dog delight with the scent of some creature that had gone to ground only seconds before.

Yeah, we had a great time back then. The whole place to ourselves, virtually. There weren't many people in W.A. then, and even fewer of them wanted to spend their time trampin' through the dusty bush.

Well, Bess and me, we decided we'd head back to an old favourite place last weekend, what with the weather being so unseasonably warm. Threw some food and the eskie into the back of the ute and headed south-east to Serpentine National Park.

It was a long trip, took us a coupla hours to get there in the old ute. I pulled up right outside the entrance, right there by the side of the road, right there by the sign, one of them things everybody can understand no matter where they hail from. A black dog with a fat red circle round it and a fat red slash through it. They didn't want my Bess or anybody else's dog in the Park.

Then over walks this young fellow, wearing a green outfit he was, with 'Conservation and Land Management National Park Ranger' written boldly on the sleeves of his shirt.

Now you could tell this poor bloke had told 23 people already that day that they couldn't take their dogs in, and here I was, just the latest in a long line of dog owners.

'Hello, sir. Did you know that we don't allow dogs into any of the State's national parks?'

I seethed inwardly. If I had realised it, would I have driven all the bloody way down here with mine?

'No, Ranger, but it's been awhile since we've been down this way. I'll keep her on her leash,' I said.

But no, even on a leash dogs aren't allowed in because there isn't nothing that keeps a dog from answering the call of nature, leash or no leash.

And as I was sitting there listening to the ranger, I realised there was a lot more cars and people going into the Park — lots of the cars filled with kids.

And I thought about all those little feet trampling all over the ground. Now Bess is the best of dogs, but

even she does it when she has to, and I didn't want to be the source of ire for some poor mother or father scraping Bess' mess off a shoe.

Not seeming to get any response from me this poor bloke went on to the next reason: national parks were places of international significance because of their wildlife, their plants and animals.

Now I knew and Bess knew that she was too old now to even think about getting close to one of those little numbats or echidnas, but it occurred to me that, sure, all those walks in the bush with Bess were wonderful, but what did I ever see? Nothin' but Bess' rear end disappearing over a log or under a bush in pursuit of some poor creature. Rabbit? Echidna? Mouse? Kangaroo? Sure there was the flowers and trees to gaze upon but my reverie would soon be broken by the nudge of Bess with a slobbery stick to be thrown.

By this time, my poor mate in green, desperately trying to convince this silent old man that he couldn't take his dog into the Park, hit on another reason dogs weren't welcome: many people didn't want them there.

'Bloody well right, too. Who in their right mind would want to bugger up such a beauty of a spot?' I said.

Well, that poor ranger nearly collapsed. He'd been set for yet another storm of abuse from someone who had come all the way from Perth and had to turn back around because they had a dog. And I'd agreed with him without an argument!

Just then something occurred to me. I remembered my days up north with the drover's dog.

'What about out of town then? In some of those big places? Any room for a dog there?'

'I take your point, Sir, that's something that's under discussion at the moment. It may be in the future dogs will be allowed into certain parts of some national parks, but until then, I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to leave.'

Well, Bess and me turned round, just like all those others, and headed home. On the way, we pulled off the road into a bit of pine plantation.

Bess leapt out, those dog smiles all over her face, and that tail going full steam, and crashed off into the bush. It was all the same to her — a place to run and a stick to chase and she was happy, park or no park.

But the wild creatures need just those places we've set aside in national parks to survive. And all those people who go to the parks to see the natural beauty and enjoy the peace and quiet deserve to be able to do it without having to watch where they step, or listen to a barking dog. And me? I'll leave Bess at home next time and bring back pictures of the places we used to go to show her it hasn't changed. □

LANDSCOPE

Volume 3 No. 1
Spring Edition/September 1987

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Executive Editor: Sweton Stewart
Editor: Liana Christensen
Designer: Trish Ryder/Robyn Mundy

All maps by Department of Conservation and Land Management
Mapping Section.

Offset plates by Photolitho-PM.

Typesetting by Printworks.

Printed in Western Australia by the Department of Services, State Printing
Division. ISSN 0815-4465.

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COVER PHOTO:

Stark silhouettes evoke the spirit of our remote
regions. This photograph was taken near
Quairading by Hans Versluis.

EDITORIAL

Public participation in land management sounds like a great idea: the community has a chance to study and comment upon the government's proposals. The scientists and managers can keep their fingers on the pulse of public demand. But sometimes good ideas are hard to put into practice.

Last April the Department of Conservation and Land Management released draft management plans for the south-west forest regions, and a draft timber strategy for W.A. The release of the plans was accompanied by a series of workshops and public meetings, and extensive media releases. Four hundred and thirty-five letters offering briefings and speakers were sent out. Ninety groups responded. Public comment on any aspect of the plans and the strategy was invited.

4070 responses were received. This included 3505 proformas (from 30 organisations) and 565 substantial submissions, some up to 200 pages in length. Many submissions endorsed the plans in their entirety; some rejected them out of hand; others suggested hundreds of minor changes.

How can so many, and such varied, views possibly be integrated simply and sensibly into a final plan? What weighting should be given to the views of different groups or individuals? Who decides what is 'right' when pure value judgements are to be made and values are in conflict? How should one resolve an issue when the views of a large section of the public are quite different from those of a small group of scientists working closely on the problem? These questions represent the sharp end of public participation. It's a relatively new game for W.A.'s land managers, and one in which the rules are still unwritten and ill-defined.

What is certain is that the Department's policy and planning staff have a big job ahead of them, and a job which must be done to the highest possible professional standard. It is important that the final plans for our south-west forests reflect the tremendous thought, effort and interest shown by the community, and it is essential that there are efficient mechanisms for public involvement in conservation and land management, because these processes will be the norm, not the exception in years ahead.

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Published by Dr S. Shea, Executive Director, Department of
Conservation and Land Management, 50 Hayman Road, Como,
W.A. 6152.