



Cliff Winfield

Many early European settlers, used to the lush green meadows of England, thought their new land strange and repulsive. They felt a need to tame and clear the land to make conditions hospitable. To them, the value of the land was purely economic. The local fauna often ended ignobly in a dinner pot, or else its very existence was threatened when the natural habitat was cleared to make way for introduced animals or farm crops.

Time changes everything, however, and efforts are now being made to re-purchase privately owned areas of high conservation value. Alex Errington talks about...

BUYING BACK THE FARM



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The uncleared Wongamine Reserve and its gaunt powderbark trees (*Eucalyptus accedens*) provide a sharp contrast with the surrounding farmland (top).

The graceful honey-myrtle (*Melaleuca radula*) is one of many attractive species found in the Wongamine Nature Reserve (above).

When the Swan River Colony was founded in 1829 under Captain

James Stirling land grants were made to a number of settlers, including Thomas Peel and his immigrants, who arrived later that year. In all, some 525 000 acres of land were granted in the colony's first year. The colony's population at the time was only 820 strong.

Many early allocations had Swan River frontage. Canning and Helena River locations were also prized. Land releases continued as the colony grew, and in 1848 pastoral licences began to be issued. Naturally, the early settlers sought out the most fertile, valuable land. Less attractive,

difficult-to-develop areas were not pursued to the same extent and remained vacant Crown land.

After a hundred years of European settlement more than five and a quarter million hectares were privately owned, and eight hundred and sixteen million hectares were held under pastoral lease. Attitudes towards the natural environment, however, were gradually beginning to change. Whereas in the past people had prized land primarily for its agricultural value, they now began to see it as having some intrinsic value.

In 1958, 130 years after the Swan River Colony was founded, the

Australian Academy of Science established sub-committees in each State of Australia to determine what had, was and should be done to have adequate land set aside for national parks and nature reserves. In W.A., the sub-committee's report in 1962 proved to be a valuable catalyst and guide to developing conservation policies.

In 1971 the Environmental Protection Act was enacted, which, among other things, established the Environmental Protection Authority (EPA). An early and very important EPA initiative was the establishment of the Conservation Through Reserves Committee (CTRC). The CTRC was to review national parks and other significant reserves and consider proposals for further reserves.

A number of regions or 'systems' throughout the State were reviewed by the CTRC, and a series of reports were issued for public comment and endorsed by Cabinet.

Although these reports dealt mainly with Crown land (elsewhere in this issue, we describe the reservation system in the karri forest which developed at the time), they drew attention to areas of privately-owned freehold land of considerable conservation

It's surprising that this delightful golden-hued flower *Waitzia acuminata*, found at Moresby Range, has no common name (right).

The Moresby Range Nature Reserve is a verdant island, in a sea of undulating farmland (below).



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value and recommended its purchase as and when it came onto the market. As a result, in 1976 the EPA established a Parks and Reserves Committee to advise on the purchase of freehold land to add to or create national parks and nature reserves.

The establishment of the Parks and Reserves Committee saw the full turn of the wheel from 1829, with the State now actively looking to buy back, for conservation, land released in earlier years.

The Parks and Reserves Committee met 19 times from 1976 to 1983 and determined the purchase priorities of a large number of properties acquired with the \$2.5 million placed at its disposal. No funds were made available to the Committee in the 1983/84 financial year, and it met for the last time on 16 June 1983.

With the amalgamation of the State's three major land management agencies to form CALM in March 1985, the Conservation Lands Acquisition Committee was formed to take over from the Parks and Reserves Committee. The new Committee first met in October 1985. In the three years of its existence it has been involved in a number of very important conservation land acquisitions. These include:

Benger Swamp

Benger Swamp, 2 km west of the South West Highway between Harvey and Bunbury, is one of the most important wetlands in the South-west. An important waterbird breeding and feeding area, it is one of only seven South-west breeding sites for the endangered Freckled Duck, and has the highest number of Australasian Bitterns recorded in the district. It is also an important seasonal wetland for a wide range of other waterbirds, such as diving ducks and waders.

The Swamp was intensively subdivided in 1914 and 1929, resulting in a mosaic of more than

Pollen-laden tufts of pink on this undescribed *Melaleuca* species provide a dainty meal for the local insect and bird life at Wongamine Reserve (below).



150 blocks as small as 2 ha, which were mostly used for growing potatoes and other vegetable crops up until the late 1960s.

Since the early 1970s progressive acquisition of the privately-owned blocks has taken place. Only 13 blocks now remain in private hands. Overall, it is a great success story; obtaining ownership of Lot 44, however, proved a great challenge.

The owner died in 1979, and left the block to his three sons, but the legal transfer was never completed. In 1983 the son who was appointed executor of the will offered the land to the State, but no funds were available and the sale did not proceed. In 1984 that son died, and left no will.

Negotiations with the family resumed in 1985, but there were complications. It was only a 2 ha block and all the family's proceeds from the sale would have had to be used for the legal costs of transferring ownership. As a result there was little incentive for them to sell.

A breakthrough eventually came. Legal advice suggested the option of compulsory resumption of the land under the Public Works Act. This would ensure that the family received the equivalent of the full purchase price in compensation, without having to pay the crippling legal fees. The family agreed to this, and the State's first 'agreed resumption' of conservation land took place.

Moresby Range

In its 1976 System 5 Report, the EPA drew attention to the scarcity of conservation reserves in the Geraldton area, and the scenic attraction of the Moresby Range. It recommended looking out for suitable land, so that if any came on the market and funds were available, a national park could be established.

Unfortunately, there were no areas large enough to warrant national park status, but a few isolated, uncleared blocks have since been acquired as nature reserves.

One of these purchases is notable. In the mid-1970s a conservation-minded family who lived in the area purchased one of the uncleared blocks. The family had the foresight to maintain the 43 ha block in its original condition to protect its conservation value - especially its native flora.

This block has a dense, blanket-like cover of woody evergreen shrubs. Its vegetation is immensely rich and diverse, with over 300 species of flowering plants and ferns. Over 55 bird species have been observed, as well as an abundance of mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects.

All these species were documented by the owner, who had a lively interest in natural history.

The owner described his objectives in buying the block, which he called the 'Howatharra Hill Reserve' in the following terms: "to personally own such a virgin habitat, PURELY for the satisfaction of knowing that it has been rescued from eventual destruction, and simply to maintain it as a 'retreat' or natural area to which [those]...who appreciate such things...can go, always knowing that it will still be there - not to return some months or years later only to find it bulldozed under."

Eventually, when the family moved permanently overseas, the Department negotiated with them. Agreement was reached and the block was purchased by the State. It is now a valuable nature reserve.

Wongamine

Wongamine Nature Reserve is situated about 12 km north-east of Toodyay. It was originally set aside in 1901 as a 'Water and Stopping Place', which was extensively used by goldfields' travellers. In 1944 it became a timber reserve because of its valuable stands of wandoo (*Eucalyptus wandoo*) and brown mallet (*Eucalyptus astringens*). In 1975 it was made a nature reserve, following a suggestion from the Toodyay Naturalists' Club.

The reserve contains both wandoo dominated woodlands, which characterise the hills region of the central part of Toodyay Shire, and salmon gum and York gum dominated communities, which are more typical of woodlands of the wheatbelt.

Botanically the area is very rich and the diversity of the flora is increased by the sandplain heathlands near the northern boundary. It is also an important fauna refuge for mammals, and a large number of bird species that might otherwise be absent from this part of the shire.



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Department of Land Administration - LEE

Powderbark and pingle contribute to the dense vegetation at Wongamine, viewed from nearby farmland (above).

The large irregular section outlined in green is the section of the farm that was 'bought back' to add to Wongamine Reserve (left).

In 1985 the Naturalists' Club advised the Government of an area of uncleared, privately-owned land adjacent to the northern boundary of the reserve. It formed part of the adjoining farm which was up for sale. CALM officers negotiated an agreement to subdivide the uncleared area from the balance of the farm and add it to the reserve.

The irregular boundary of the area purchased reflects the division between the arable and non-arable land.

Everyone involved was happy with this deal; the farmer was able to sell the uncleared area which was of limited value to him, and the

nature reserve was enlarged by the addition of 86 hectares of adjoining land, enhancing its conservation value.

CALM's bid to buy back our natural heritage continues. It is often a long and complicated process, but, in the final analysis, worth the exertion to ensure that some of our remaining unspoilt areas are preserved for future generations.

Alex Errington is CALM's Divisional Manager, Administration and Finance, and Chairman of the Conservation Lands Acquisition Committee.

29 DEC 1988

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

LANDSCOPE

EDITORIAL

It is difficult to remember a time when our daily news did not feature some environmental controversy. To people involved in environmental research and management, the popularity of 'the environment' is a mixed blessing.

Greater public consciousness of environmental issues has meant increased funding and, to some extent, greater prestige. But many scientists working on ecosystems are uncomfortable when their work is placed in the political spotlight.

The knowledge that a scientific observation that once would have been tucked away in a scientific journal to be read only by a few colleagues could become the centre-point of a political controversy is daunting.

Retaining objectivity in any research area is difficult. For those engaged in research on the natural environment it is even more difficult. Unlike the physical sciences in the natural sciences the truth is often camouflaged by interactions between factors which vary over time and space. When the results of this type of research are placed in the political arena, the mixture is often volatile and the truth a casualty.

To enable scientists to better seek the truth and communicate it, the scientific community has adopted what has been called "the scientific method". The scientific method is a code of conduct with rigid requirements. An offshoot of that code is a set of rules which scientists must follow, at least in reputable scientific journals, if they are to have their research published. Unfortunately, a byproduct of this is that scientific articles are not the easiest to read and are often plain boring.

Given that the environment has become a major political issue, it is important that those involved in the debate are fully informed. But scientists are faced with a dilemma. They need to popularise their work to reach a wider audience. On the other hand, they cannot afford to lose objectivity.

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NATIVE CREATIONS



Nouvelle jardins, multiculturalism or laissez-faire; which garden fashion will you choose? Turn to page 22.

WILD MARRON



Do our wild marron have a future or will local gourmets keep catching them to the point of extinction? Find out on page 4.

KARRI MAGIC



What is really going on in the karri forest? On page 32 we take a look at the system of conservation reserves that have been established to preserve this awe-inspiring forest.

STRANDED!



Relive the euphoria of the Augusta whale rescue on page 18.

BACK TO BASICS



With today's massive land boom it's hard to imagine that the State once couldn't give land away fast enough. Now the government is buying back our valuable conservation areas. See page 43.

DESERT GEM

The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve covers over 1.8 million hectares. It is a desolate but subtly beautiful landscape. Read about this unique area and the management problems it presents on **page 48**.



SNAKES & ADDERS



Slim and active snakes have emerged hungry from their winter hibernation. But they're not all venomous. See **page 51** for tips on living with snakes.

AFTER THE FOX



Foxes pose a major threat to native mammals and other fauna. Can we outfox them? See **page 12**.

A SIGHT TO BEHOLD



'Its pouch can hold more than its belly can', goes the popular rhyme. Find out more about this awkward but graceful bird on **page 39**.

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Cover Photograph

One of our natural wonders - the beaches of Hamelin Pool (Shark Bay) consist of billions of small shells.

Photo by Bill Bachman.



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