

Vincent Serventy:

THE STORY OF AN
AUSTRALIAN ICON

BY LORNA CHARLTON

The late Vincent Serventy's passion for nature sparked a lifelong campaign to promote and preserve the wonders of the natural world.

In Dryandra Woodland south of Perth, a peaceful haven for wildlife and humans alike, an interpretive tribute to an acclaimed environmental educator and naturalist was recently opened. Justly called ‘the father of conservation in Australia’, Dr Vincent Serventy (1916–2007) played a critical role in conserving this piece of bushland and countless other natural places for our delight and that of future generations.

Born in Armadale, Western Australia, Vincent was the youngest of eight children of migrant parents. The family lived on the edge of the Darling Range foothills at Bickley for his first five years, and in rural Cannington for the next seven. From his earliest years, Vincent “soaked up the rapture of the bush”. He fondly recalled the smell of the Bickley earth after the first rains, the essences given off by the plants scenting the wind and vivid images of sky blue leschenaultia, the butter yellow of ‘bacon and eggs’ and a myriad of other wildflowers that appeared on the slopes every spring and summer. Even when the family moved to the city, they lived within 100 metres of Kings Park, which became Vincent’s bush haven.

The wonder of it all

As a student at Perth Modern School, Vincent also developed a keen interest in geology, which he never lost, and a deep appreciation for the



few teachers who stimulated students to follow their own interests as deeply as they desired. He graduated from The University of Western Australia with science and teaching qualifications and taught in several local public schools.

Vincent was a dedicated teacher and put much effort and innovation into his classes to inspire his students with the wonders of nature. The essence of his method was that students should observe and experiment for themselves, not be talked at by teachers. This treasured tribute from a Northam High School student embodied his approach to teaching: “When I go over sea and water, I just go over sea and

water. But when I go with Vincent Serventy I see the wonder of it”. Vincent’s interest in natural history and environmental education ultimately led him to a position training other school teachers in environmental programs and developing a new science curriculum for primary schools.

Footloose for a while

While teaching, Vincent pursued his twin loves of conservation and writing. He penned numerous newspaper articles, radio scripts and short stories and soon developed a reputation as an authoritative naturalist and author. In his mid thirties, he took time out from teaching to travel and gain valuable field experience.

His adventures took him to the Abrolhos Islands off Western Australia’s Coral Coast, where he studied sea birds and took on the duties of a scientific beachcomber—an experience

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Main Vincent climbing in Stirling Range National Park.

Above Broadcasting from the *Perth Wild Life Show* in the 1950s, an event created by Vincent Serventy with the assistance of his close friend and fellow teacher Stan White.

Photos – Courtesy of Carol Serventy

Left Interpretive signage at Dryandra Woodland pays tribute to the life and work of Vincent Serventy.

Photo – Lorna Charlton/DEC





Above A 1991 Australian Geographic Expedition in the Recherche Archipelago followed the path of Vincent Serventy's 1950 expedition to the area.

Photo - Jiri Lochman



Above right Dryandra Woodlands Ochre Trail.

Photo - Marie Lochman

Right In 1965 the Serventy family set off from Perth across Australia to film Australia's first television wildlife series *Nature Walkabout*. From left: Catherine, Natasha, Matthew, Vincent and Carol.

Photo - Courtesy of Carol Serventy



that brought back the happiest of memories. Home was a wooden hut with a shell-grit floor and a view of the green and blue of the lagoon of Half Moon Reef—an idyllic existence. On these low islands of sand and limestone, myriads of sea birds, which nested in the mangroves or on the sand flats, poured out to sea every morning “like a living wind” and returned in the late afternoon with food for their mate or chick. One memorable evening Vincent watched in awe as “millions of sooty terns appeared seeking a suitable nesting island... spread over the night sky, their white breasts shining in the moonlight, they circled the island calling incessantly only to disappear by sunrise”.

More island adventures

In the 1950s, Vincent departed the Abrolhos to join the Australian Geographical Society as the zoologist

on an expedition to the Recherche Archipelago off WA's south coast. During the expedition, the party had the daunting task of landing on Termination Island, one of many granite and gneiss domes rising abruptly from the Southern Ocean. Staring at its steep, barnacle-encrusted flanks and forbidding cliffs, the expedition leader, John Bechervaise, declared: “Right, Vin. You're not married. It will be your job to get ashore with a rope so we can land”. Resolving to get married before any more such adventures, Vincent wound the rope around his waist and stood on the bow.

Don Mackenzie, an experienced boatman in these waters, said, “Now, Vin, when I say jump, you jump. Don't ask, do you mean now? Just jump”.

For 15 particularly long minutes they watched the sea, waiting for the swell to ease. Then Don yelled “Jump!”. Vincent went through the water and over the rocks like a mountain goat. Relieved that he had survived the ordeal, he secured the rope to a solid rock and helped the others ashore. Vincent's work in the archipelago produced scientific reports and various articles, and years later inspired his first children's novel *Crusoe Boys*.

The story of an Australian forest

The 1960s was an important decade for conservation. Vincent had returned to Perth and was married with a young family. His growing awareness and understanding of environmental issues



Left Vincent Serventy inspired a generation with his passion for nature.

Below left Vincent and Carol Serventy with entertainer and good friend Rolf Harris, celebrating Vincent's achievements on the television show *This is Your Life*. Photos - Courtesy of Carol Serventy

Vincent spread his conservation messages to a wider audience through much-loved TV documentaries, radio programs, letters, lectures, articles and more than 70 books and publications. This substantial collection of work played a major role in the development of conservation interest in Australia. Many Australians took up environmental science as a career, or joined conservation groups, because of his influence and wonderful example.

Vincent was in turn inspired by many notable naturalists, writers, poets and artists who became life-long friends. These included Sir Peter Scott (co-founder of the WWF-Australia), author Dame Mary Durack, poet Judith Wright, artist John Olsen and photographer Axel Poignant. He was also inspired by many friends and colleagues who were amateur naturalists, whose passion and encyclopaedic knowledge contributed much to nature study and conservation. Closer to home, his sister Lucy, a tireless worker with the WA Naturalists' Club, and brother Dominic, an eminent Australian ornithologist, also provided great support to Vincent's causes.



led him to write *A Continent in Danger*, the first modern work on conservation in Australia. This was soon followed by another important book that was the product of years of nature study at Dryandra Woodland, the family's favourite camping spot. Located two hours' drive south of Perth in WA's Wheatbelt, its bushland offered Vincent a great outdoor laboratory in which to study plant and animal life.

In 1970, a company owned by media tycoon Rupert Murdoch bought land which included Dryandra Woodland, planning to mine it for bauxite. Vincent wrote to Murdoch and enclosed the book he had just written, *Dryandra—The Story of an Australian Forest*. The book sent a clear and urgent message: "In a piece of untouched

bushland, cut off from the burden of a sophisticated civilisation, we can find that refreshment of spirit that only the wilds of nature can offer... We must, before it is too late the world over, see that places like Dryandra are kept for this vital purpose". After reading the book, Murdoch agreed that mining this forest would destroy a place of great value and as managing director he instructed the company to relinquish any mining claims. Dryandra is now a nature reserve with an environmental education centre that continues Vincent's studies and passion for this woodland environment.

A shared vision

Originally a significant figure in environmental education in WA,

Environmental champion

Vincent was a strong advocate of doing rather than talking and was one of the leading figures in conservation battles in Australia, both large and small, for many years. These included the Great Barrier Reef, Tasmanian south-west forests and Shark Bay region, all of which later became listed as World Heritage sites. In Perth, he played a major role in the Kings Park and Swan River conservation work and with others helped to save Star Swamp, which he regarded as "a patch of green to soothe the spirit".

Vincent assisted many hundreds of community associations as a speaker and adviser, and belonged to many



Above Karri forest such as this in Walpole-Nornalup National Park left Vincent Serventy “overwhelmed by its sheer beauty”.
Photo – David Bettini

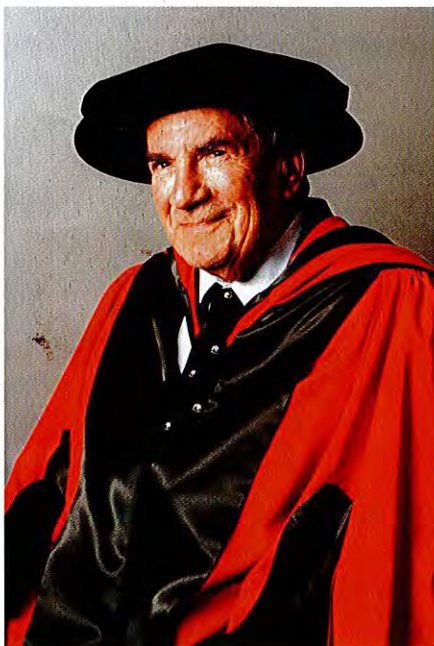
organisations as a founding member and office-bearer during his long career. These include the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia, the WA Naturalists’ Club, the WA Gould League, National Trust (WA) and the Tree Society (WA). He also served on the first Australian Heritage Commission and influenced politicians at both State and Federal levels. As distinguished Indian environmentalist Kailash Sankhala said, “he gave a voice to the voiceless” in our community. Vincent’s last campaign was

for an Environmental Bill of Rights to complement the 1948 United Nations Bill of Human Rights.

In recognition of his tireless work in education and conservation, Vincent received an Australian Natural History Medallion and an honorary Doctorate of Science from Macquarie University. He was made a Member of the Order of Australia and awarded a Dutch knighthood by Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands for his services to international conservation.

Below left Vincent Serventy was awarded an honorary doctorate at Macquarie University, New South Wales in 1998 in recognition of his service to the advancement of natural history and science.
Photo – Macquarie University

Below Vincent Serventy presenting one of his books to Prince Bernhard and Queen Juliana on being awarded a Dutch knighthood.
Photo – Courtesy of Carol Serventy



We have a dream

*Of a world where as part of nature we
live in harmony within it*

*Of a world which lives within its
resources, not taking all from the past, nor
leaving a disastrous legacy for the future*

*Of a world which accepts a natural
balance, using the energy from the sun for
our needs*

*Of a world where we control populations
to the numbers which can be nourished in
dignity with the fullest development of all*

*Of a world where we repair the mistakes
of the past to create new beauty in places
laid waste by ignorance or greed*

*Of a world where we accept we did not
only inherit this Earth from our parents, but
are trustees for our children, to enjoy the Earth
and hand it on enriched to those who follow
That is our dream.*

Vincent—one that celebrates a lifetime of extraordinary achievements.

The fight goes on

During the 60 years of his environmental work in Australia, and internationally, Vincent worked to realise his vision of a world where people understand that we do not own this Earth, but are trustees for its future, and that we should live in harmony with nature. All of his work, even his children's fiction, was created to change attitudes.

As a young man, Vincent decided that we either work out our own guidelines for life, or follow those put forward by those who inspire us. One of his most enduring beliefs came from the words of revered nineteenth century naturalist and philosopher Henry David Thoreau: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover I had not lived ... in wildness is the preservation of the world".

Vincent never retired and never stopped fighting for his ideals. Even in his ninth decade, he was still campaigning for the environment. He leaves behind the hope that everyone will become a conservationist for "only by community effort will we build a brave new world".

Above Vincent Serventy loved spending time in nature.

Left Vincent and Carol Serventy planting a wollemi pine in Darling Harbour, Sydney (June 2006) as part of a dedication to their contribution to wildlife conservation.

Below right Filming in the Snowy Mountains.

Photos – Courtesy of Carol Serventy



The lure of the west

Although Vincent moved to New South Wales in 1965 to further the environmental movement, he always considered himself a Western Australian and returned every year. He fought hard to see WA become an environmental leader. His battles were many and varied and his foes often formidable. But the threats to Australia's wildlife and environments spurred him on.

In the foreword to a native forest campaign booklet he wrote, "I will never forget a bush camp I made in

a small clearing in karri country, the glow from the fire lighting giant karris that soared into the darkness above with a glimpse of stars in breaks in the canopy. The next morning as I lay in my sleeping bag and looked up around the wall of magnificent tree boles reaching upwards to a green roof of leaves, I felt exhilarated. It was one of those rare occasions when one is overwhelmed by sheer beauty. Surely wisdom resides in keeping such areas for all time, for all people, unspoiled".

In 1981 Vincent read his "dream" for the first time at the Perth Town Hall where a packed audience had gathered to protest the loss of jarrah forest in the south-west. His presentation helped to raise tens of thousands of dollars for the fight. Twenty-seven years later, one year after his death, the words of his dream were repeated amid the white-barked wandoo of his treasured Dryandra Woodland. Janet Holmes à Court read the poem to a large audience at the opening ceremony of the interpretive tribute to



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