

# 21

## THE BUFFALO WARS

A cryptic sentence in my 1987-88 annual report reads, 'Two herds problem buffalo eliminated from district', but this lengthy drama reminds me of Tom Ryan's early advice: 'Have nothing to do with wildlife, and as little to do with Wildlife Rangers as possible!'

From 1976 to 1992, keeping water buffalo was subject to a permit under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act* and the *Fauna Conservation Act*. In my district, there were three herds of water buffalo, one on the property of architect Simon Reed close to the western boundary of Elanda Plains, another on a well-secured farm just north of Gympie, and a third on another farm just south of Gympie. These animals were part of a herd that had been maintained by the Department of Primary Industries at a research station in western Brisbane. With research completed, the herd was split into at least three mobs and sold to local graziers.

I found Simon Reed pleasant to deal with, but he was not a farmer. His aim was to sell buffalo meat to attract custom to a local hotel, and it was his buffalo that escaped and created serious local problems.

Early on 24 July 1985, the telephone rang. Paul Sheehy, the wildlife officer in Maryborough, advised that a herd of water buffalo had been seen wandering north along Teewah Beach adjacent to Cooloola National Park. This was a fauna matter, but he insisted that Elanda Plains was my responsibility.

Most of the buffalo had crossed the Noosa River near Lake Cooroibah, and walked through Teewah Village, alarming the residents. Heading north as far as King's Bore, they were turned back by QNPWS staff. At 7am a large bull buffalo had wandered through a service station in Tewantin, others had been seen walking along the Tewantin-Boreen Point Road, and two had wandered as far away as Kin Kin township. Simon Reed hired stockmen, who returned most of the buffalo to the home property. He also hired professional shooters, who flew in a helicopter and shot the remaining animals in swamps near the Noosa River.

Under pressure from a senior wildlife officer in Brisbane, Paul Sheehy organised a government helicopter to fly him from the Teewah airstrip. He did not get approval for me to fly, so I was left standing on the airstrip minding the vehicles. After the flight, he advised me that eight dead buffalo were seen on land owned by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service near the big bend



Farmed buffalo (photo David Hibbert).

in the Noosa River. Soon afterwards, Kevin Bade and I, after inspecting a fuel reduction burn around Teewah Village, drove to Teewah airport and hiked through heavy swamplands during a hailstorm. We searched the area and located the eight dead buffalo.

Channel 7 television heard that buffalo had been shot from a helicopter in the Sunshine Coast hinterland, and requested video footage. I flew with them from the Maroochy airport for 1¼ hours, but no buffalo were seen. I mentioned the problems for QNPWS if the buffalo became established as a feral herd.

The situation quietened down, and there were no more reports of buffalo off the home property. In September 1985, however, Paul Sheehy contacted the Army to fly a helicopter over the Cootharaba area to look for buffalo. For this he needed a guide, so we both flew from Freshwater to Lake Cootharaba without seeing any buffalo outside their home area.

A year later, Simon Reed applied to extend the permit to keep his remaining 22 buffalo. Late winter, with dwindling grass, cooler temperatures and little or no rain to promote growth, is not a good time for stock in the Cootharaba district. Simon's property was heavily overstocked, and hungry buffalo were beginning to walk through fences to graze the surrounding countryside, splitting into small groups. I inspected the fences, and Simon agreed to carry out necessary repairs and install electric fencing.

As the dry weather continued, hostile complaints came in from Simon's neighbours. The buffalo were roaming the district, looking for pasture, tearing down fences and terrifying the neighbourhood.

In Brisbane, the senior wildlife officer pushed the threat of uncontrolled stock disease such as brucellosis and tuberculosis with the Department of Primary Industries, warning of the risks if a feral buffalo herd became established. Legislation was changed, and water buffalo became Prohibited Animals, as defined in the *Fauna Conservation Act*. This meant that all buffalo in Queensland – including the domestic farm stock around Gympie – had to be destroyed, which imposed a heavy penalty on other buffalo owners.



Escaped buffalo on Teewah Beach (photo Queensland Government).

Official pressure was then applied to destroy the Cootharaba herd. Simon procrastinated. He sent some buffalo to the knackery, and I was instructed to follow them and ensure no fudging of figures. The remaining buffalo again broke through the boundary fences.

An instruction came from Director Herb Bonney that the Department of Primary Industries should share responsibility for control of the animals. He issued another instruction: 'If the animals are found on national park, use Regulation 308'. (This meant using a .308 rifle to shoot them.)

I called at Simon's property soon afterwards, and used my volt meter on the electric fence near the front gate. It read only 1000 volts, which showed that the fence was inadequate as a stock barrier. Simon, however, appeared supremely confident that his fence problem was fixed. Knowing there were only 1000 volts in the live wire, I invited him to touch it. When I took hold of it, he was horrified! Walking along the fence, we found that an off-cut piece of barbed wire was shorting the electric wire.

I suspected sabotage. I couldn't conceive that any reliable contractor would leave a new electric fence without using a volt meter to satisfy himself it was operating properly. I also doubted that any fencing contractor would leave an off-cut piece of wire where it might fall across and short out wires. Short pieces of wire on the ground can be ingested by stock, with fatal consequences.

Simon advised that he was going to get a private shooter to dispose of the herd. However, some of his neighbours decided to take direct action, and a fusillade of unauthorised shooting was heard near his property. The animals then split into smaller groups and scattered far and wide.

Two dead buffalo were noticed on an adjacent property. Following a complaint from Simon, the Noosa police became involved. Photographic evidence was taken and a veterinarian conducted an autopsy on the carcasses, but the matter never came to court.

Overseer Dave Batt wrote an article about the buffalo for the QNPWS staff magazine *Brushtale*. Regional Director Noel Dawson was not amused, and the senior wildlife officer (who was definitely not amused) decided to take remote control of the situation. He demanded action and sought daily updates of events.

An unknown number of buffalo were living in the Australian Paper Manufacturer's adjacent, extensive pine forests, grazing on their well grassed fire breaks. As part of a plan to eliminate these animals, I obtained written permission from both Simon and the manager of APM forests. I was then ordered to seek assistance from the Police Stock Squad to use horses for a round up. After a brief inspection, they advised they weren't available for a fortnight and suggested the Police Special Weapons Anti Terrorist Squad with a helicopter. I took this to mean they weren't interested. Their role is to investigate stolen stock and these animals weren't stolen.

On 8 June, officers from the Police Tactical Response Group inspected the area with me and an evening ambush was to take place on Simon's property. At the request of the police, I asked for an ambulance to be stationed nearby, and I notified all neighbours, telling them to stay away. My vehicle was to be used as a shooting platform and control centre.

Those poor tame buffalo came out of the scrub back to their home territory and into the waiting ambush. In the still evening air, it seemed as though World War 3 had broken out. After the 'cease fire', the officers claimed to have hit five buffalo, but there were no dead animals. Next day, I realised that the police had used military ammunition, designed to disable, instead of sporting ammunition, designed to kill.

There was no money to hire a helicopter to finish the job from the air. I borrowed my son's .303



rifle, and, complete with soft-nosed sporting ammunition, entered the heavy woodland and swamp country. Splashes of blood on vegetation confirmed my fears: many animals were wounded.

Simon was understandably upset at the fusillade of shooting and the disastrous result. He advised he would not have the police on his property again, and they declined any further involvement.

The senior wildlife officer ridiculed my son's .303 rifle and soft-nosed ammunition as 'useless', and sent two of his wildlife officers from Brisbane, equipped with rifles, to resolve the issue over my head. Years earlier, I had sat public service entrance examinations with one of these men. He informed me he was taking over, and said that, if Simon got in his way, he would arrest him. I then had the ignominious task of showing these men around the area.

Returning home well after dark, I telephoned Noel Dawson, protesting at this development, and especially the threat to arrest the owner. I told him I was disgusted, and wanted nothing more to do with the matter, refusing to have my name associated with what would be a potential embarrassment.

Next morning I received a brief message from Paul Sheehy. The wildlife officers would be withdrawn, but there was still no money to hire a helicopter. At Cootharaba, I was offered a .308 rifle and appropriate ammunition by one of the wildlife officers. Paul Sheehy then approved my use of a helicopter, and on 19 June I was finally authorised to shoot the buffalo.

Three days later, an Army helicopter was scheduled to visit the area to bring engineers to assess the proposed bridge across Kin Kin Creek. As they flew, they said they would love to be involved in the eradication of buffalo, and flew a wider loop around the district than they needed. 'Any further worries, just let us know,' they said. However, Noel Dawson rejected my request to involve the Army.

I then approached Jim Campbell, the pilot of the helicopter with whom I had flown on fuel reduction burns in Cooloola. He agreed to assist, even though we had no money to reimburse costs. I could, however, obtain (on next year's budget) two 200 litre drums of Jet A1 aviation fuel.

Our initial aerial search ranged far and wide. Despite official misgivings that I had never shot from a helicopter before, I flew twice, shooting on each occasion. The second occasion cost us two more drums of fuel, and my son Mark volunteered to guard the very expensive helicopter door which was removed for the shooting. This aerial campaign added to my previous, extensive, shooting experience.

On the ground at Lake Flat Road, I waited in ambush and shot the last two animals. I had finally resolved the matter my way, but I really felt sorry for the buffalo. The herd had been eliminated without adverse publicity, though an interesting letter in the local newspaper advocated the hunting of big game animals in local swamplands to attract tourism. QNPWS, said the writer, should 'leave the buffalo alone, and let them breed!'

I presented Jim Campbell with 50 of our coloured wildlife posters, and he passed these on to the Nambour Hospital, where they were displayed on the walls.

The buffalo saga moved south of Gympie, where a property owner had not destroyed his animals, and now wanted to keep them for dog food. He estimated it was going to take more than two years for his dogs to eat that amount of meat. I told him that Wildlife Rangers had called on him two years earlier and told him to obtain permits from both the QNPWS and the DPI, but he had not complied. I had given him plenty of time, but the matter was out of my hands and an official legally enforceable order was now being prepared. I allowed him three months to destroy the animals.

After all three herds of buffalo in the Gympie district were destroyed, I received letters of thanks from two of the buffalo owners and two of the complainants. In September 1986, Simon Reed wrote:



'I am extremely grateful for the obliging assistance given to me by ... Mr Ron Turner.' In August 1987, after the final destruction of his herd, he wrote again: 'I would like to stand strongly in defence of your Mr. Turner, who has often had an unpopular role to perform yet has been extremely diligent and tactful. I am only one of the large silent majority in this region who consider your Mr Turner to be a credit to your Department.' Another buffalo owner wrote: 'All buffalo have been removed or destroyed. Thank you very much for your consideration.'

The buffalo wars involved me in a sensitive area of animal control, and I made some enduring enemies. These people had long memories! At Moggill, five years later, I discovered a memorandum, blaming me for the buffalo saga, which had 'more chapters than the episodes of the ABC radio series Blue Hills'.

I believe that Queensland lost a budding rural industry. Time has moved on, and with the restoration of common sense, the current Department of Environment and Science now allows buffalo to be farmed in Queensland under the *Nature Conservation Act* (1992), with a permit fee of \$1,475 for more than one year .



Lake Poona. QNPWS and DPI were alarmed at the prospect of feral buffalo roaming in the swamps and forests of Cooloola (photo Queensland Government).

# 22

## HERBERT F CAT – THE FERAL CAT

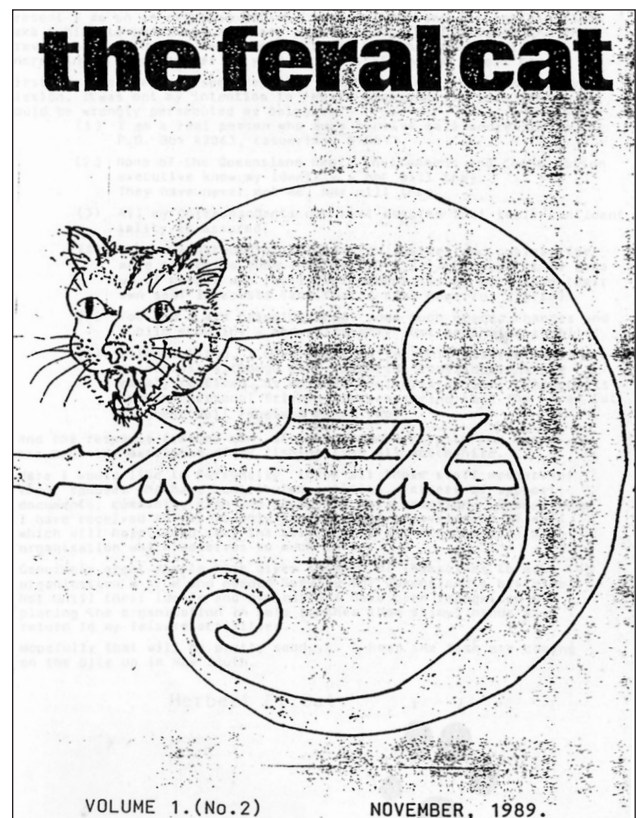
In 1989, the year when political tensions resulted in the Fitzgerald Inquiry into police corruption in Queensland, an earthquake rocked the QNPWS. It came in the mail in the form of a mysterious publication that didn't provide any information about who had compiled or printed it. *The Feral Cat* created shock waves that reverberated across the State as the Departmental grapevine sprang into action.

In 1988, after the death of our first Director, Graham Saunders, certain upwardly mobile senior bureaucrats, supported by the incumbent Minister, Rob Borbidge, forced a restructure of QNPWS. New offices were opened across the State, some were expanded, and many new positions were created. This restructure was forced on field staff, resulting in 110 applications for 71 positions. Statewide, twenty-two staff lodged appeals, and I was one of them.

The arrival of *The Feral Cat* during this period of uncertainty and dissatisfaction was a revelation. It listed the scores and postings given to applicants for regional positions, and it was obvious that information had leaked from head office. From positions of relative obscurity, people were being promoted multiple levels, to mid-level managerial responsibilities. Others suddenly found themselves as supernumeraries, or were posted to some far-flung outpost of the State. One noticeably favoured area was the Wildlife Section, where staff with little or no experience in park management, rural nature conservation or managing volunteers suddenly found themselves in managerial roles.

The old head office senior staff had totalled nine persons. *The Feral Cat* listed the names of the now 38 senior staff, their positions and salaries. In addition to these 38, there was an unspecified number of Corporate Services staff. This huge increase in staff positions was not reflected in operations in the field.

Various articles appeared in newspapers, including *The Courier Mail*, calling for an inquiry into the restructure. *The Port Douglas-Mossman Gazette* of 2 November 1989 reported





‘allegations of a purge of the green element and widespread dissatisfaction within the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service’. This publicity led to a call by Don Martindale, General Secretary of the Queensland Professional Officers Association, for an open enquiry into the department following the restructuring. He referred to:

*... widespread discontent within the service. An underground newsletter circulating among staff alleges the restructuring is designed to destroy the ethics and efforts of the old QNPWS ... people who did well in the interviews were not given positions, whereas many with poor scores have been rapidly elevated. There were an enormous number of transfers, seemingly without regard to areas of expertise. The controversial appointments have resulted in 22 appeals.*

Rob Borbidge distanced himself from the discontent among staff, saying he was not responsible for the shake-up, which had been initiated during the term of his predecessor, Geoff Muntz.

*The Feral Cat* made me realise that I was not alone in being pressured to achieve more and more with less and less. In 1989, my tenure within the Department was shaky, and my future looked bleak. It was no consolation that many other field staff were disaffected.

Of particular interest was a letter from H S ‘Syd’ Curtis, printed in the second edition of *The Feral Cat*. Syd was a principled, efficient, charismatic leader, who had been responsible for national parks in the old Forestry Department. I believe, however, that he was either apolitical or not of the correct political colour. According to *The Feral Cat*, the restructure had pushed Syd, the Director of Management and Operations, into obscurity. In 1983, after an earlier re-structure, Syd had written to staff:

*We could not have survived but for the dedicated efforts of you people, our field staff, who ultimately perform the task for which the Service exists. The Service is living off the substance of those remaining ... unless you do so the Service must surely fail.*

Syd sent a fax to the Editor of *The Feral Cat* saying:

*... the National Park concept was one of mankind’s finest ideals ... if Queensland changes its government to one that understands and respects the Westminster system of democracy, the public service may rise above its present problems, and again serve the wider community and not merely the political ends of the favoured few ...*

*The feral cat’s list of job applicants includes a number of excellent officers with appropriate training and experience for National Park administration (qualities lacking, one suspects, in the interviewers), and the National Parks and Wildlife Act though imperfect could provide the basis for sound administration and management, if properly implemented by a Director allowed to accept the responsibilities given him by Parliament in that Act.*

When Syd retired, my liking, trust and respect for him was such that I made a special dash to Brisbane from work in the Kilkivan area for his send off.

In my opinion, Herbert F. Cat, the editor of *The Feral Cat*, was close to the mark when he wrote:

*There are a few good people rightfully promoted to more senior positions. But they are very thinly spread among a top heavy mess of managers, many of whom are frighteningly inexperienced in either new responsibilities or staff management ... Notably absent from the picture are most of those often long-serving, always dedicated, and frequently outspoken staff members who had reputations for being straight and caring in environmental and conservation matters ... Their past efficiency,*

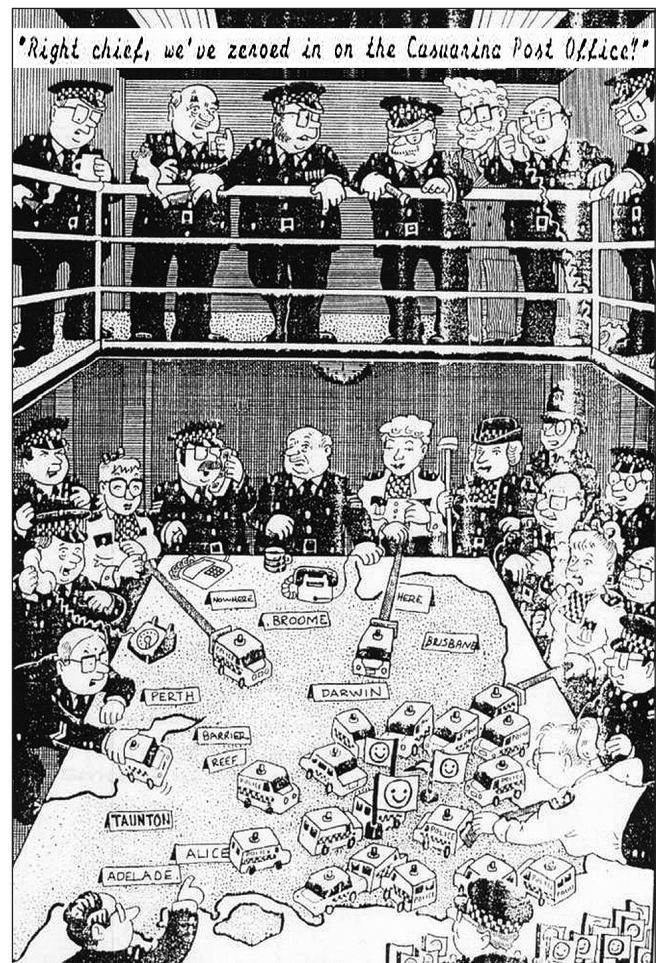


effectiveness and productivity apparently didn't rate at positional interviews against such vital qualities as salesmanship, bullshit, and pseudo-innovative systems, alternatives to good old fashioned hard work that actually achieved results.

In one instance, I took exception to an unfair article in *The Feral Cat*. I confess a degree of guilty pleasure at seeing an exposé of some senior bureaucrats, but I was uncomfortable with comments about field staff I knew. The article that drew my ire concerned an ex-Forestry employee at Noosa, whom I respected. I sent a letter to the Editor's address at Casuarina, Darwin, saying that the man was a hard worker, and I would prefer to have him beside me while fighting fires than many others I knew. My letter was reproduced verbatim in the next edition.

I never found out who produced *The Feral Cat*. Perhaps there was more than one author, for someone with sketching abilities devised many satirical cartoons about events and senior people in the department. The last edition of which I am aware published cartoons depicting the various methods by which head office was attempting to locate the editor at the Darwin address. It seemed

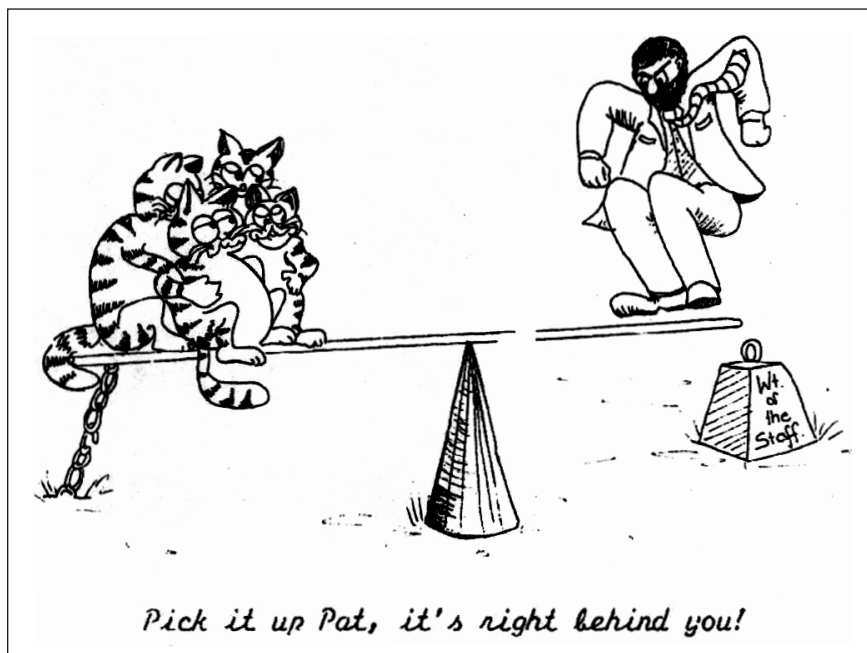
that the Editor had skipped out of town, with a blowtorch behind him! The multiple issues that led to the publishing of *The Feral Cat* were certainly real, despite attempts by senior staff to ignore complaints. This was a sad period for the environment in Queensland.



A new dawn arrived with a change of government in 1989 and the appointment of Pat Comben as our new Minister. Within a few years, many of the senior staff who had manipulated the system to suit their personal ambitions found themselves out of favour or were leaving QNPWS. Their legacy, though, was the loss of caring, hard-working staff and a general air of disenchantment in the Department.

A prevailing attitude was demonstrated at Moggill, by a person senior to me with many years experience. When asked when he was going to retire, he would consult his watch, calculate, and respond along the lines of:

*In two years, five months, two weeks, three days, five hours and twenty minutes from now.*



# 23

## BETRAYAL

Chill winds blew through the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service during the 1980s. June 1982 was a turning point in my 35 years of national park and wildlife management. While tension between field and head office personnel is the stuff of legend in any organisation with a decentralised workforce, in my case, a newly recruited member of my staff whose credentials I accepted at face value collaborated with senior managers to undermine my position. The resulting machinations eventually made it impossible for me to dedicate my time and energy to my vocation.

Staff management in any organisation is a result of personal factors distinctive to the individuals concerned, and system-wide features that endure beyond personalities. My own case illustrates both. In 1988, QNPWS lost the steadying influence of its competent Director, Dr Graham Saunders. My situation deteriorated after his untimely death.

Every public servant is conscious that their conditions of employment include an obligation not to publicly criticise their department or its policies. Public administration would become unworkable if disputes about personnel or park management were played out in any public forum. Caring officers almost invariably suffer their loss of morale in silence.

However, there is a serious downside to the public service's veil of anonymity. It means that system-wide shortfalls can go unremedied. The undercurrents of self-interest that keep a department from bringing the best out of its staff continue to fester. Perpetrators of unjust treatment remain uncorrected and conscientious staff are torn between loyalty to their vocation and obedience to their supervisors. They commonly leave and are lost to the service. Further, the public interest is betrayed. Parks staff are paid out of taxation revenue and the public is entitled to expect that the department is run efficiently, effectively and professionally. A shortfall in these criteria ripples through into sub-optimal management of the parks. And of course, parks matter.

After a great deal of personal pain I used all my sick leave then quit the department in 1995. I have written a detailed account of my betrayal at the hands of senior managers who had been entrusted with the welfare of the staff under their supervision. This account is important to me, as it rounds out the history of my career from its beginning to its untimely conclusion. It is also important for posterity as 'primary history', a chronicle of the state of personnel relations in our public service in the period leading up to the managerialist reforms of the 1990s under the newly elected government of Premier Wayne Goss.

However, the fresh air that managerialist reforms promised from 1983 onwards, after being introduced at a national level, gave way to rounds of budget cuts and restructures that cut short numerous careers and left remaining staff disillusioned.

In this chapter I outline the way that adverse comments about individual officers can gather



momentum without any process for confronting concerns and laying them to rest. I have received advice not to publish the details of my experiences, even though I hold extensive supporting documentary evidence. A more detailed, unpublished account with names and dates has been lodged in the Queensland State Library's manuscript section and will be available for researchers investigating public administration who can demonstrate their bona fides to the Library. Here I will mention a few milestones

The saga began with deceitful actions by one of my staff members. Much later, I realised my reputation had been undermined, resulting in an effort to move me out of the District. I was told in February 1987 I was to be transferred to Moggill as a Wildlife Ranger. No reasons were given and the matter remains opaque to this day. My wife Yvonne successfully appealed to Dr Saunders on compassionate grounds for us to remain in Gympie, due to the recent death of our son Neale. This request may have created resentment among senior staff.

An incident involving some staff net fishing from the QNPWS boat in a prohibited zone of Lake Cootharaba didn't help. Instead of being credited for upholding national park regulations that protected wildlife, my informants and I were portrayed as whistleblowers. It became clear that certain other staff members enjoyed protected status!

On my return to the Gympie office in January 1989 after a period of leave, I was shocked to find that another person had been appointed to my job as District Ranger. I was given no reason for being sidelined and no allegations of misconduct were put to me. According to new Regional Director Terry Vowles, there were 'no allegations, just generalisations' against me. 'You are a marked man with a powerful enemy,' he said.

Under the 1989 Departmental restructure, I applied for jobs as Area Manager or District Ranger at Gympie. I was not successful, but was appointed Technical Officer (Wildlife) at Moggill, though I had not applied for this position. I saw this move as punitive.

A testimonial dinner was held in Gympie at which 100 people attended. An apology from the Minister, Pat Comben, was relayed in person by Regional Director Noel Dawson. Among the guests were two Shire chairmen and the local Member of Parliament. Two of our treasured possessions from the evening are a family portrait by a professional photographer, and a watercolour painting of our favourite wildflower by a local artist.



Fraser Island creeper *Tecomanthe hillii* (water colour by Bevly Hughes).

For the next five years, I commuted weekly to Moggill. During this time I made repeated appointments to examine my personal files, including one stated to contain confidential matter not held on normal personal files. I found no documents that outlined negative assessments. In fact my personal files contained 64 positive letters of thanks from within the QNPWS and from local Councils,

public servants, universities, individuals, and church and conservation groups. In August 1985, while recommending a promotion, Director Graham Saunders had written:

*Mr. Turner has discharged his responsibilities in a highly satisfactory manner and has sufficient experience to perform and is capable of performing all classes of work required of him as a Senior Ranger.*

In 1989, Len Stephan, the Member for Gympie, wrote, 'The Farming Community have shown willingness to co-operate with him when necessary, with many instances of positive action for the benefit of the community.' The Chairmen of the Maroochy, Noosa, Kilkivan and Murgon Shires wrote separate letters to praise my 'outstanding' liaison with and 'significant assistance' to their Councils.

Being told at an interview for a position with QNPWS that I was 'not good enough for any job with national parks' weighed heavily on my mind. To be told at an appeal that I was 'well meaning' and 'had not performed well' was devastating. To be described as a 'little Hitler' was derogatory and offensive.

In November 1990, I lodged my first worker's compensation claim, an application for medical expenses. In February 1992, the General Medical Assessment Tribunal determined that the matters alleged in my claim constituted an injury, and workers' compensation paid those expenses.

In August 1993, I tried to have my unfair and dishonest treatment by senior officers resolved internally by lodging an official public service grievance claim. In the three-stage interview process that followed, I received no satisfaction, apart from the second interviewer saying he was struck by the 'minimal evidence supporting assertions made by several officers in files made available' to him. I retained a barrister to act on my behalf, but QNPWS delayed providing the documents as subpoenaed, and did not act on the Appeals Commissioner's recommendations. Documents that I knew existed and could substantiate my case were either not provided or could not be found. An appeal to the Supreme Court failed due to the statute of limitations.

Having exhausted all avenues of enquiry and available appeals, I continued to seek the rationale behind the hostility of senior management by contacting the Queensland Ombudsman. The Ombudsman took my complaints seriously and secured statutory declarations from three of my tormentors. None of these substantiated complaints about my service, but they did reveal the trail of deception that had occurred.

It was clear that my reputation and career prospects had been irrevocably damaged.

# 24

## THE PERILS OF WILDLIFE

My position at Moggill had been advertised as co-ordinating wildlife activities across the whole Southern Region, covering the area from Fraser Island to the New South Wales border and west to the Northern Territory. I found it interesting to work with a variety of other QNPWS employees, such as researchers, scientists and administrators.

During 1990 and 1991, Gympie office staff contacted me many times about routine wildlife work. For example, I hand delivered permits to Underwater World at Mooloolaba for Paul Sheehy. However, I did not accept his requests to take over a difficult wildlife matter at Boreen Point, or go out of my way to Toogoolawah on my way home in my own vehicle to attend to a matter that was his responsibility. After discussing with Peter Lawson the repeated attempts to pass routine Gympie wildlife work onto me, I heard little more from Paul for a while.

A small group of staff at Moggill handled wildlife complaints, aviary inspections and fauna care volunteers across the metropolitan area, and occasionally more serious matters such as fauna trafficking, but I was not involved with this group. Two members of the Police Fauna Squad were also based at Moggill, but were often absent handling complex wildlife issues across the State.

Vernon Hanson, another conscript to Moggill, was the wildlife enforcement officer. He would occasionally seek my support when other staff were unavailable. I had known him for years, and was always happy to help him. Peter always approved of Vernon's requests for my support, and I was glad for an excuse to get out of the office.

At times, if wildlife staff were unavailable, I would be drawn into handling telephone complaints. I was amazed at how paranoid some city dwellers could be regarding native fauna. Living in suburbs with traffic noise, they would demand action to stop frogs croaking in a neighbour's pond, or whip birds calling.

One complainant demanded that I 'do something' about cockatoos that were chewing timber on a house under construction, while one bird called out, 'Pretty cocky!' 'White cockatoos are protected,' I advised.

Of greater concern were calls demanding action against beautiful birds, such as king parrots that were damaging bananas, or black and gold regent bower birds that were pecking pawpaws. People would complain about the noisy, caged native birds next door, while owners suspected that neighbours had let their birds out while they were absent.

Kangaroo harvesting was subject to public scrutiny, and part of my paperwork was to co-ordinate and summarise the numbers and the sex of the animals being shot. When suspected illegal kangaroo skins were discovered in an old warehouse, I needed to move across Brisbane to track down their



source. This brought up the unworkable restrictions that had been placed on me not to leave the office, and Peter began to allow me greater flexibility of movement.

A file relating to the Bureau of Sugar Experiment Stations landed on my desk. It contained a summary of permits to destroy native wildlife that had been issued to cane growers. I was surprised to see that the Director of QNPWS had extended his legal powers under our Act to the Bureau. While native rodents were the main problem, increasing numbers of permits to shoot kangaroos were being issued. Field staff believed that this related more to a cheap source of dog food than to real crop damage. I recommended a meeting with Bureau officers, and QNPWS staff became directly involved in issuing permits.

On one occasion, I was asked to prepare a permit for Forestry to use 10-80 poison on wildlife. Native rodents were ring-barking the roots of plantation hoop pine. I advised that such action, involving the most toxic poison, would be illegal in State Forests, which are sanctuaries. I gave my interpretation of the legislation, but I never heard any more. Apparently, poisoning had been a common Forestry practice for years.

Our Minister, Pat Comben, had heard of the gun culture within QNPWS, and recognised the need for a stocktake of confiscated weapons, guidelines for their use, and safety training.

Dave Batt, having completed his teaching secondment at Gatton, was transferred to head office to develop a State-wide training program in firearm use for field staff. He attended a military re-enactment at historic Fort Lytton, near the mouth of the Brisbane River. This site was controlled by QNPWS, and he was horrified to see the number of old but operable firearms, ranging from rifles to cannons, that only needed a projectile to be deadly.

At Moggill, two well-dressed men, with an air of authority, entered the office unannounced and strode past my room into the office of Terry Vowles, who followed them to the armoury that contained confiscated firearms. The questioning eyes of lesser mortals followed, wondering what was going on. In the armoury, there were discrepancies in the listings of confiscated weapons, and some were missing. Later, Terry explained that the Director General had seized seven pistols from a safe in head office, and the person responsible for firearm control was rather embarrassed.

The Director of Field Operations, Jim McEvoy, was noted for his use of firearms in national parks. A 1985 edition of *Brushtale*, the QNPWS staff magazine, reported him saying:

*I wouldn't want you to think we're a bunch of Greenies in Head Office. Most of the serious conservationists in there are also keen shooters.*

In 1986, *Brushtale* reported on McEvoy's inspection of the proposed Thruston National Park and posed the question:

*What is old and valuable, long and thin, and at selected moments can engulf the surroundings in clouds of black smoke and makes the following noise 'pop..crunch..roll..roll..roll..plunk'?*

The answer was:

*Jim McEvoy's Snider black powder rifle when used to fire cannon sized projectiles with a secret formula black powder.*

(The Snider was an 1850s breech-loading military rifle firing a projectile of almost 16 mm diameter.)

Minister Comben was also unhappy about a proposed duck hunting open season. He threatened to permanently close it, but stayed his hand in favour of a test to gain a duck hunter's licence. Applicants had to correctly identify various waterfowl from photos of birds placed before them.

I was involved in the development of this test, and prior to the impending season, instructed many wildlife staff. I then became the main person testing aspiring hunters. Occasionally, I would tell an applicant that he had just shot a freckled duck (one of Queensland's rarest) or some other protected species, and would have to say, 'You have failed the test. Come back in twenty four hours.'

In July 1991, Paul Sheehy telephoned twice to advise that some Gympie police had failed their test. The next day he phoned in a panic to inform me that these police intended to shoot at Somerset Dam on the opening day of the duck hunting season, although they knew it was a sanctuary. They had told him to stay away. He wanted me to 'take the matter over'? I told him to contact the Police Fauna Squad or the Kilcoy police. When he asked for my assistance, I passed him on to Peter Lawson with the objection that I was booked to accompany Vernon Hanson to Boonah for the opening day of the duck season.

Alan Don, a respected senior officer at Moggill, became involved in the issue, and it was decided to support Paul by saturating the Somerset Dam area with staff and radio-equipped vehicles. I was instructed to go to Kilcoy immediately to join other officers on the opening day of the season. Alan surprised and pleased me by attending in uniform. At dawn next morning, there was a lot of shooting inside the Somerset Dam sanctuary. Wildlife staff intercepted many of the shooters and took their details, but only one prosecution resulted.

I never knew what was coming with native wildlife. I was not favourably disposed towards an application by hunters to have an open season declared on crested pigeons. I had to agree with the proponents that the birds were common and abundant, but recommended against their request.

An application to farm bandicoots initially seemed quite odd. They spread ticks, I thought. The focal point of the application was to farm them, complete with ticks, and then to obtain and sell serum containing anti-bodies to treat stock. What next?

Involvement with interstate wildlife personnel was interesting. At one stage, some illegally kept fairy wrens had to be seized and moved. It appeared that no aviculturist in Queensland had the expertise to look after these delightful birds, so I located a venue in New South Wales and handled the paper work to ensure a legal transfer. I then bought meal-worms to feed the birds and took them to the airport for rapid transit.

A file containing an unresolved allegation that a bay-side property developer kept illegal wildlife hit my desk. The Police Fauna Squad were refusing further involvement. Their normal practice was to involve a QNPWS officer to identify the fauna. Alarm bells started to ring! Why wouldn't the police wish to see the matter resolved?

As I turned the pages, the situation became clear. On the day of their last visit, the police had found that by the time they returned to Moggill, a complaint had passed rapidly down their chain of command, and they had 24 hours to respond. I visited their office to discuss the matter. The issue was not a major one, but the high profile of the developer made it sensitive, and, in the absence of a staff witness, I wondered if my involvement could be a deliberate set up.

Calling at a huge private home, I walked past staff through an office, then through a large trophy room adorned with dozens of heads of wildlife from African safaris. Outside, in a quiet area, there was an aviary, containing many uncommon and expensive birds. Over coffee with the developer,

I outlined the various issues, sought his point of view, and suggested a compromise which involved payment of an appropriate fee. He agreed, and this was later endorsed in the Moggill office.

Not long afterwards, I was surprised when this man asked me to call at an office near the city. Returning to Moggill, I told my supervisors I had just been given a bottle of wine in appreciation of the way I had resolved the matter, and asked what I should do with it. I was told drink it and enjoy it, which my wife and I did!

That matter was simple, compared with the issue of a major wildlife preparator, who was making models of wildlife from frozen specimens. As I reviewed the file, the alarm bells rang loudly, and I again wondered why I was being involved.

Townsville QNPWS had loaned this man specimens of rare fauna, and these had not been returned. The Police Fauna Squad had visited him and now refused further involvement. The Townsville items however, paled into insignificance compared to the scores of other creatures, which he had stored in many freezers, often with multiple specimens of the one animal. These included Permanently Protected wildlife, such as platypus, koalas and echidnas, which, under QNPWS legislation, were afforded the strongest protection at law and attracted heavier penalties for interference or possession.

The file record showed visits by different wildlife officers over several years. Some inspections had resulted in a recommended prosecution, for the man had increased his holdings of wildlife after each visit, despite warnings to desist. A Regional Director had previously threatened him in writing with legal action if he persisted, but he again increased his collection. The current recommendation was to wipe the slate clean and start again, so the man would be allowed to keep the specimens for personal gain. I believed that QNPWS was not living up to its charter to protect wildlife, and recommended asking police to handle the issue.

Des Boyland and I received instructions to attend a head office meeting with the preparator and his manager. Moments after the introductions, Noel Dawson, now Director of QNPWS, withdrew. The matter was not resolved to my satisfaction, and I stated I had no desire for any further involvement. A bad smell was attached to it.

Shortly after this, in July 1992, my position as Technical Officer (Wildlife) came into question. My supervisor told me that I had never been legally appointed and my position had ceased to exist. To this date, I had been recognised in official correspondence and on my delegation of authority as a Technical Officer (Wildlife), so I saw this move as a further attempt to pressure me to resign. In spite of this advice, I continued to handle wildlife matters for another 13 months.

I remembered a poem in *Brushtale* that described my situation (at right):

***Wildlife Ranger's Lament***

*Never mind the fauna  
None of it can vote.*

*Do as you like with fauna  
The Act is just a joke.*

*Never mind the fauna  
Just do not rock the boat.*

*Do as you like with fauna  
Admin. wears another coat.*

*The only thing of importance is  
Ever demanding folk.*

*Do as you like with fauna  
The Ranger's in a yoke.*

*Never mind the fauna  
He's now a powerless bloke.*





A large blackbutt along the Pettigrew Railway, protected by direction of District Forester Reg Doggrell.



An ancient scribbly gum along the Cooloola Way (Photo B. Thomas).



The impressive buttress roots of a large blue quandong.



The largest kauri I know of in Cooloola's forests.



# 25

## RURAL NATURE CONSERVATION

In 1993, my wildlife responsibilities ceased, and I was allocated work in Rural Nature Conservation, without any change in status or pay.

Staff within QNPWS realised that the protection of wildlife needed the support of landholders, who controlled most of the land in Queensland. While I was District Ranger at Gympie, a Rural Nature Conservation program had been developed as a sub-branch of Wildlife, but I was already over-committed, and had neither the finance nor the experience to take on more work.

However, as I talked to landholders, I developed an interest in the interactions between primary producers, home orchardists and wildlife. I had purchased different wildlife exclusion nets and trialled them in my own orchard. I had installed contour banks and planted trees for timber production and wildlife corridors, and was able to discuss what worked and what didn't. I am indebted to many honest farmers, who told me about the ways they had tried to avoid conflict with wildlife.

At Moggill, the opinions of some staff – even within the wildlife section – that there is no such thing as pest or problem fauna, surprised me. In their opinion, any conflict with native fauna demonstrated that the farmer shouldn't be farming that crop at that location! They had a right-to-life attitude, and objected to issuing Crop Damage Permits to enable applicants to destroy wildlife that affected their livelihoods.

In my new role, I was asked to review the fauna sanctuaries in the Brisbane area and adjacent Shires that had been declared over a long period of time. A land owner's desire to control shooting on private land was never a proper reason to gazette a sanctuary, but it certainly occurred. Sanctuary status was also used to keep the public out while the owners and their friends hunted.

I was given a degree of freedom to inspect fauna sanctuaries. With maps in hand, I found these areas, inspected the land, and discussed sanctuary status with the owners. While ascertaining whether this status was still valid, I found that many of the gazetted areas had been cleared and were now grazing properties, and recommended revoking their protection. Although it was outside my jurisdiction, I argued for the revocation of the whole of the Widgee and Noosa Shires, because a total ban on wildlife control presented problems for genuine farmers who wished to comply with the law.

The management of flying foxes was always an issue. I advised orchardists not to use overhead high voltage electric wires as a control method for these animals, despite their controversial use elsewhere. A Section 25 Permit could be issued under the Fauna Conservation Act to destroy a specified number and type of problem fauna, but electric wires indiscriminately destroyed many species of wildlife.

At Moggill, I sought approval to become involved in flying fox issues and was allowed to extend



my knowledge by talking to researchers such as Dr Les Hall and Peggy Eby. Peggy had used radio transmitters to track grey-headed flying foxes, which could travel over 80 kilometres each night. I also inspected various net exclusion practices in southern Queensland and New South Wales, discussing with owners the efficacy of different systems.



Woodend flying fox colony.



Briefing notes about a flying fox colony at Gympie, to be provided to Minister Comben for a proposed visit, were passed to me for review. After correcting the name of the species, I was instructed to go to Gympie immediately, present the notes, and accompany the Minister and District Ranger Paul Sheehy on their inspection.

The issue of a large flying fox colony beside the Bremer River at Ipswich featured in newspapers. Two sisters, who owned most of the land the colony utilised, loved having them there. Across the gully, an elderly widow lived on another property, hated the noisy, smelly bats, and just wanted to live in peace.

I discussed the matter with Gervaise Pender, from Ipswich council, and we both saw value in having the site managed for tourism with some form of interpretation. During a few visits and over many cups of tea, I exchanged ideas with the widow. Then an opening appeared. She would be really glad to move away, she said, but no-one would be silly enough to purchase her property. I discussed the matter with Gervaise, who ascertained that partial funding was available from council to purchase her property. Its attractive brick home could be used as a live-in, interpretive centre.

Having previously obtained necessary Ministerial permission to attend a flying fox seminar at Coffs Harbour, I sought approval to take a government vehicle, with Gervaise as a passenger, to visit an actively managed flying fox colony in suburban Sydney. During this five-day trip, we visited Wingham Brush, inland from Taree, to discuss management of their flying fox colony and methods of controlling the serious environmental weed Cat's Claw.

Not long afterwards, Minister Comben was scheduled to visit Moggill with Des Boyland. I kept to my own office, and an hour later wandered into another room and met the Minister's driver. Engaging him in conversation, I told him about my interest in flying foxes, in particular the colony at Ipswich. To my astonishment, Minister Comben became part of the conversation. He must have had acute hearing, for he had been following our discussion from behind. He was interested in flying foxes, and quickly ascertained the shortfall of funding needed by Ipswich Council. Turning to Des Boyland, he asked about some unexpended funds. Boyland then instructed me to prepare a memorandum, seeking \$10,000 for the project. Explaining the background to this unusual action to my supervisor, I asked him to endorse my memorandum and return it to Boyland. Minister Comben, who was waiting on the application, approved the funding on the spot.

Several Moggill staff were upset that I had got \$10,000 for 'dirty, smelly bats', while their special interests missed out. Months later, I was invited by the son and daughter-in-law of the elderly widow to accompany them to dinner in Ipswich. They expressed their gratitude and relief that I had encouraged this gracious lady to leave her home, overcoming their worries that she had been living alone.

The *Fauna Conservation Act (1992)* enabled property owners to have their land managed for wildlife as a Fauna Refuge. I inspected many properties, but what became the *Berlin Fauna Refuge*, south of Laidley, stood out for the quality of its vegetation and the variety of its wildlife.

During negotiations with the Berlin family, who were sincere country people, draft agreements would be returned to head office with my suggestions for improvements. Head office would see the need for amendments and develop new management principles, then send the document back to me to discuss revisions with the owners. The *Berlin Fauna Refuge* was the first to be declared in the State, and at the official opening, the owners publicly thanked me.

Shortly after this, friends near Gympie sought to similarly protect their property. I could only

advise them unofficially, because the QNPWS boundaries had changed again, and Gympie was now administered from Rockhampton. This meant that an officer from Rockhampton had to drive to Gympie for a number of visits, to negotiate with them. This property became the *Hughes Nature Refuge*.

Dr Mary Bomford of the CSIRO sought information on problem fauna and where and why it was a problem. My interests were well known, and my multi-page response became the department's reply.

My involvement with the farming community allowed me to gain experience of the different methods used to combat problem fauna. In 1993, I proposed to sponsor a seminar, with contributions from flying fox researchers, Department of Primary Industries Officers and an officer from the Rural Bank of Queensland. A committee was formed, and we proceeded steadily towards holding a public seminar at the Big Pineapple, near Nambour, in May 1994. Writing to possible speakers, including an interstate fruit grower who used netting, involved a lot of paperwork.

Other staff assisted me to produce a booklet that was made available on the day. Although it contained information for 'back yard' growers, its main thrust was to present the latest information on protecting orchards and aquaculture ponds by showing that netting was the best option. My presentation included a prediction that society would increasingly oppose destruction of wildlife as a means of protecting crops. The economics of netting was discussed in detail by an officer from the Rural Bank, who outlined the low interest loans available. Local manufacturers explained the many types of netting and offered their recommendations. The proceedings of this seminar were printed in a 63-page booklet, *Bird & Bat Control for Horticulture and Aquaculture*. Presentation of my paper at the Big Pineapple, giving an overview of the various methods of crop protection, was my last official duty.

In June 1994, I returned to my home in Gympie and went on sick leave, which was extended for a year. When this leave ran out, my doctors recommended that I should not return to work, and I applied for Social Security benefits. The home I had never wanted to leave, with its beauty and wildlife, became a source of solace and inspiration.

In 1996, I received the Queensland Ombudsman's report, which clearly revealed the origins of my fall from grace and the Public Service cover-up that obstructed my attempt to obtain legal redress.

In the decades since leaving the Department, I have been active, not idle. In 2002, at the age of 66, I walked the Kokoda Track, carrying a 20kg pack. With the planting of 500 macadamia trees, maintaining and harvesting my orchard became a dominant occupation. My wife and I have travelled widely in Australia and New Zealand, re-visiting and writing about places where I previously worked.

I have become a pharophile, researching and writing the history of lighthouses, and caretaking at the Bustard Head and Double Island Point light stations. Volunteering as a researcher in local history, I wrote a booklet about a school that once existed on my property and the district around it. Learning to cope with modern technology, I have scanned and indexed thousands of slides and written articles and books related to local and Victorian national parks.

As a believer in the national park concept, I adopted the personal philosophy of considering myself a temporary custodian of the nation's treasures. For 35 years I had faith that better trained and resourced personnel would take over from me. I always worked for what I could put into national parks, not for what I could get out of them, and I always derived pleasure in assisting visitors.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We knew no one upon arrival in Gympie from Victoria, in 1978, as the first national park ranger appointed to the region. The early kindness showed to my family and I by Peter and Bevly Hughes, and soon after by Geoff and Elaine Brown and their families developed into long term friendships. It is due in no small measure to them and their enthusiasm for the environment, together with many other supportive friends and colleagues, that this book has been written.

In the early years, my role as District Ranger in the new Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service was actually a lonely one. There were few departmental mentors with whom I could confide in or reflect ideas or ideals, or discuss issues. At one stage, I was the only District Ranger in Queensland.

In recent years, many people have suggested I should write of my life working in national parks in Queensland. I believe it important to have part of the early history of QNPWS documented, in particular, the 35 parks I was involved with. More recently, I have come to realise today's front line national park staff are not aware of events as recently as a mere twenty years ago.

This book would not have been written without the support of my wife, Yvonne, to whom I owe so much, and the on-going advice and assistance of Peter and Bevly Hughes, Geoff Edwards and Dave Batt and, in particular, the editorial assistance of Elaine Brown. Many friends, and former and current departmental employees have assisted with encouragement and advice. From experience, I decline to name these people, but they will know of whom I speak and I thank you all sincerely.

The strong support of Dave Batt in Southern Cooloola during my early years helped determine its future management to keep the area in its near wilderness condition. The late Lindsay Pringle also deserves mention. He was an exemplary member of my field staff caring for fourteen national parks in the Blackall Ranges area.

I have drawn heavily on my own daily diaries and notebooks, various newspapers, QNPWS staff magazines, and departmental correspondence supplied to me through Freedom of Information. The records of the Noosa Parks Association, so carefully maintained by Dr Arthur Harrold, have been important. In drawing together this data I have attempted to accurately portray a part of the history of national parks in Queensland post 1975. Any errors are my sole responsibility.

Many of the photos used are the work of Barbara Thomas. Her 600 photos of Cooloola 1978-84 now form part of the Queensland State Library collection. I thank her and other contributors who are acknowledged alongside their individual photos. Maps and brochures are credited to the Queensland Government. All other photos are my own.

Today's society also owes a debt of gratitude to many early Foresters who were instrumental in the setting aside and management of national parks in Queensland before 1975.

Ron Turner joined the newly formed Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1978, after 17 years as a National Park Ranger in Victoria. From his lonely base in Gympie, he became the first ranger for 35 national parks in south-east Queensland, overseeing the early stages of their control and development, and also taking responsibility for environmental parks, wildlife and rural nature conservation.

In *First Ranger: A Memoir*, Ron records the difficulties of confronting the inevitable resistance to changes in land use, especially in the Cooloola, Fraser Island and Noosa National Parks. Taking control was slow and often hindered by indifferent visitors and unhelpful councils, but Ron made an enthusiastic effort to involve the community and establish a positive image for the QNPWS.

Ron was part of the exciting early years of this new government department, which operated with limited finance and few field staff, but was led by supportive officers, who encouraged staff to use their own initiative. As time passed, he witnessed the introduction of a top-heavy, bureaucratic administration, within which some employees lacked basic environmental ethics. Ron's career suffered as a result.

In retirement, Ron has continued to research and write on historical and environmental subjects, including the eBooks *Lighthouses of Australia* and *Cooloola and its Hinterland* and the peer-reviewed journal article "Cooloola National Park – Another Perspective on the Bjelke-Petersen Government".