THE ROYAL NATIONAL PARK: A BRIEF HISTORY

● By Dr. C. PETTIGREW,
Interpretation Officer,
N.S.W. National Parks and Wildlife Service.

and Dr. M. LYONS,
Director of Graduate Studies,
Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education.

The Royal National Park, 14,944 hectares of land on the southern outskirts of Sydney, was dedicated on 26 April, 1879. Known until the 1954 Royal visit as simply the National Park, it was the second area of land in the world to bear such a title. It differed considerably from the first, the United States Yellowstone National Park created seven years earlier, in that it was on the outskirts of a rapidly expanding metropolis (Yellowstone was 1500 kilometres from a city of comparable size). In some respects it was more closely related to parks such as Hampstead Heath created on the outskirts of the burgeoning London, but Sydney's national park was forty times their size. It was, as one newspaper observed at the time, "like no other park in the world." The National Park thus posed a unique challenge to those charged with managing it.

From its beginnings until 1967, the National Park was managed by a trust: a group of citizens appointed by the government for the purpose. In 1879 this was the common administrative arrangement, sanctioned by the Public Parks Act of 1854. Under that Act, trusts were appointed to "hold, manage and protect" land set aside for parks in perpetuity; subsequent vacancies due to death or extended absence were filled by government. Trusts could make and enforce rules and regulations for the use of the land and protection of flora. Their autonomy was restricted only by the defined purposes for which the land was dedicated, usually "health, recreation, convenience and enjoyment" (under both the 1854 Act and 1861 Crown Land Alienation Act by which the park was actually reserved). Following dedication, it was usual to grant formally the land to its trustees. The deeds of these grants usually spelt out the uses to which the land could be put, and specified that permission for certain actions, usually connected with fund raising, required government approval. The National Park received its deed of grant in 1887.

In the nineteenth century, colonial governments were not prepared to undertake the management of parks, believing it to be outside the function of government. Government ensured that the public interest was served by providing land for parks, but avoiding involvement in day-to-day management. This principle applied to many other services today readily acknowledged as government responsibilities. It represented an expression of then fashionable

'It is nothing short of criminal,' wrote the Trust in 1907, 'that the privilege of gathering a few wild flowers has been so abused.'
Mitchell Library.

"liberal" ideas. These ideas were strongly endorsed in the Australian colonies, although practise here was more flexible than in England, the home of liberalism. In the colonies for example, unlike England, major undertakings such as railways were built and managed by government. It was easier to apply liberal principles to parks, but even so, they were sometimes compromised.

In theory, trusts would raise whatever was needed to maintain parks by their own activities after some initial expenditure. In practice, the government continued to make substantial annual grants to the management of the National Park. In theory, too, trusts were left free to interpret the public interest within the limits imposed by the deeds of grant. By the early twentieth century, there were an increasing number of citizens who doubted if such management arrangements were in the public interest.

The next section of this article outlines the management of Royal National Park under the trust. The final section briefly examines the growing controversy about the suitability of trusts as managers of large parks, particularly where arguments centred upon the Park.

Management

The government which reserved the National Park and appointed a trust to manage it provided no instructions to that trust. However, the man responsible for the reservation of the park ensured he was appointed to the trust and he was subsequently elected chairman. That man was Sir John Robertson.

Robertson had been a leading politician in the colony since the 1850s, and premier on three occasions. In the 1879 government he was outranked only by the premier, Sir Henry Parkes. Robertson had thought about creating a park from the large tract of vacant land to the south of Sydney for several years. By 1879 his ideas were reasonably clear. The park was to have three major purposes:

- it would meet some of the recreational needs of expanding Sydney;
- it would enable the preservation of large tracts of natural bush; and
- it would provide a venue for quasi-scientific activities, particularly acclimatisation.

Robertson's views accorded with popular opinion, as might be expected of a skilled politician. The first and third objective were designed partly to satisfy the demands of two influential groups; the public parks movement and the recently formed N.S.W. Zoological Society. All three objectives were endorsed warmly by the press. At the time they were seen as complementary; later, conflicts were to emerge.

Robertson had been alerted to the existence of the land that became the National Park in the mid-1870s, when, as premier, he had mapped out a rail route to the Illawarra. At that time nothing further was done, but popular pressure for a route continued and could not be ignored. The government set aside funds for it in 1881 and by 1886 it was delivering the first of large and increasing crowds of visitors to the National Park. Knowledge that the new railway would soon make the park readily accessible to Sydney's residents provided a spur to the trust during its first few years.

The trustees' initial task was to arrange an accurate survey. Once this was completed the park could be fenced, a considerable task in

Picnicking has always been what you want to make it. Mitchell Library.

itself, even though the size of the park and the nature of its terrain probably did not warrant fencing. A main camp was established on the only reasonably flat land close to permanent fresh water. It was called Audley. From there roads reached out, giving access from the Illawarra Road and linking Audley to several points on Port Hacking and the ocean. A road across the high coastal heathland linked Garie, then at the southern border of the park, with Jibbon on Port Hacking to the north. The highlight of these developments was the road along the east bank of the Hacking River. Opened in 1886 by Lady Carrington, wife of the Governor, it was named after her. The Hacking River and Kangaroo Creek were made navigable to small craft for several kilometres upstream and a hireboat business was established.

A visitor amusement of a different character was the deer park. Established on a peninsula, Gundamaian, jutting into Port Hacking, it was easily isolated by fencing. Undergrowth was cleared and grasses planted. Several varieties of deer were introduced; of these only the small, hardy javan rusa survived. On Loftus Heights above Audley, 80 hectares were completely cleared. Here in 1886 the Colony's military forces held their first Easter encampment and attracted over 30,000 visitors. Easter camps continued until 1914 and thereafter the Army held intermittent bivouacs until the 1960s.

Elsewhere in the park, mainly around Audley and at picnic spots along Port Hacking, undergrowth was cleared to create a more "parklike" appearance. Thousands of exotic ornamentals were planted and other improvements made so that "the charms of landscaped treatment could be added to the beauties of wild nature." Nevertheless, where clearing took place, care was taken to ensure that handsome native plants "christmas bushes, waratahs, gigantic lilies and other plants and shrubs of an ornamental nature" were left. Small though these measures were, they reflected a certain conservation consciousness on the part of the trustees. Other visitor facilities were added around Audley. Bathing areas were established, ornamental lawns and gardens planted, and rudimentary accommodation provided. The last was upgraded and expanded in later years, when accommodation was provided also at Warumbul.

Some endeavours were made to give the park a scientific purpose. The causeway at Audley not only provided access to the eastern side of the Hacking River; it also dammed the river, making it fresh water above that point.

Motor cars revolutionised recreation and brought increasing numbers of people into the park. Government Printer, 1931.

This made it suitable for the acclimatisation of introduced fresh-water fish such as trout, perch and tench (red fin). Several large aviaries, to house native and introduced song birds, were also built.

Most of the park remained free from "improvement." Probably because they readily conformed to the current romantic imagery, the tall forests along the upper reaches of the Hacking River were preserved. Rangers were employed to protect the park's fauna, both native and introduced, and prevent the plunder of popular ferns, palms and Christmas bushes.

Robertson died in 1891. Without his drive and inspiration a certain inertia beset the trustees. In its first 12 years of operation the Trust had created a pattern of development which would change little during the next 20 years. Even today most of the built features of the park are where Robertson's trust determined they would be.

After World War I, the trust devoted most of its attention to providing facilities for recreational use with little attempt to control that use. Conservation and quasi-scientific objectives were not entirely ignored, but became distinctly secondary. Building the Scientist's Cabin for ornithologists of the Zoological Society in 1924 was little more than a token gesture.

By the 1920s motor cars were a major problem, as more and more came to use the roads of the park for scenic driving. Other recreation patterns changed. Surfing became popular and led to the opening up of ocean beaches. An increasing number of people built holiday shacks, in the park on permissive occupancies. The trust had no objection to these, although the adjacent Sutherland Shire Council claimed they were a health hazard and newly emergent nature conservation groups attacked them as private exploitation of the public domain.

In the late 1930s and after the World War II recreation objectives became even more dominant. Bowling greens, tennis courts and a dance hall were provided at Audley and changing facilities, refreshment kiosks and club houses at the beaches. Sydney's post-war growth, with its encroaching suburbs, saw an increasing use of the park as a dump for rubbish, stolen cars and unwanted pets. Little attempt was made to control visitor usage in the interests of nature conservation. For most of this time only one ranger was employed to protect the park's flora and fauna. In 1967, the management of the park was taken over by the National Parks and Wildlife Service and an attempt was made to restore some balance in the park's original objectives.

Resources

Most of the work carried out in the park was undertaken by employees of the trust. To engage its own work force and supply equipment and materials the trust received an annual government grant, which increased periodically. It was $6,000 during the 1880s and reached a peak of $30,000 between 1953-1959 when J. J. Cahill, MLA was both chairman of the trust and premier. For most years the

In the 1890s cycling became a rage. It continued to be a popular form of recreation until the universal availability of motor cars.
Sutherland Shire Library

government grant was not sufficient to allow proper development; but then, governments did not intend that it should.

From time to time other government agencies undertook specific projects in the park. Between 1887 and 1889 considerable clearing, planting and road work was undertaken by Casual Labour Board. In 1887 alone, they unemployed men supervised by the short lived were calculated to have completed work to the value of $45,000. Unemployed relief labour was again used in the 1930s. During World War II, the American Army refurbished the visitor accommodation at Audley, intending to use it as a hospital. It was small recompense for the damage the Australian Army was doing elsewhere in the park. During the 1950s, a number of projects were undertaken by the Public Works Department; Cahill had been the Minister for Public Works before he became premier. In 1939 the Department of Main Roads took over the maintenance of the park's two major roads, relieving the trust of a heavy financial burden.

According to liberal theory, the park should have been able to exist without recourse to government funds. On several occasions in the early days, Robertson persuaded trustees and their friends to donate money and even labour towards projects in the park. In accord with the theory the trust constantly strove to raise revenue itself. One method was by visitor entry charges, another was by charging for the use of park facilities (such as boat hire) and by the sale of refreshments. Sometimes the trust managed these directly; for other periods facilities were leased on a franchise basis. Neither method was particularly remunerative. A third method of fund raising was by the sale or lease of certain of the park's natural resources. These included clay (for bricks), gravel (for roads), timber (for firewood and pit props), herbage (for grazing) and even oysters. Coal mining was permitted but although tenders were twice called for, disagreement over recompense to the trust meant that mining never took place. Overall, these endeavours raised very little money and in some cases the physical damage to the park was enormous. The reputation of the trust fared little better.

Criticism

The management of the park by the trust did not escape criticism. Beginning in the early 1900s criticism was often strongly voiced during the following four decades. Criticism was was not only of the National Park Trust, but of park trusts in general; the National Park Trust was often singled out as the prime example of the failings of this form of management.

Essentially, controversies centred on different conceptions of appropriate national park use. The trustees saw the park primarily, even solely, as a place for recreation. Their critics thought conservation values should take primacy. There were two groups of these conservationists. There were naturalists, concerned that native fauna and flora were not adequately

Several large aviaries were built in accord with the quasi-scientific purposes of the park. This one was removed in the 1950s.
N.P.W.S.

protected, even within the National Park. Then there were the bushwalkers, who pressed for the preservation of "primitive" areas, or reasonably large areas of natural bushland. They objected to the further opening up of the national park by roads and other vehicle tracks. Each group wanted the creation of more national parks but argued that these parks should be administered by a single state authority. Trusts, composed of businessmen, local luminaries and others nominated by politicians were not directly accountable to the public in the same way as a government authority was, via its minister and parliament. Implicitly, they criticised the liberal principles that proposed management by trusts. Because trusts were independent of government they were notoriously starved of funds, and thus forced into money raising ventures not in the best interests of the areas they held in public trust. Several of the most ardent critics were themselves notable and conscientious public servants: J. H. Maiden, W. W. Froggatt and David Stead.

Peaks of criticism occurred during the early 1920s, when the trust allowed a coal company to establish a sawmill and cut and prepare timber for pit props; the trust was forced to withdraw the contract. In the early 1930s the proliferation of shacks in the park was the subject of a powerful but unsuccessful campaign. In 1938 an attempt by the trust to upgrade existing visitor facilities and thereby attract more revenue, was attacked as further reducing the conservation value of the park. This time the conservationists had a small victory. The trust painted the roofs on its building green, the better to blend with their environment.

After World War II the naturalists achieved many of their objectives with the establishment of the Fauna Protection Panel. During the 1950s the campaign for a single national park authority reached a climax, without much reference to the (now) Royal National Park. In 1967 the new state Liberal government, prompted by Tom Lewis, the Minister for Lands, established the long-awaited organisation and brought fauna and flora protection under its authority as well. The new National Parks and Wildlife Service took responsibility for the Royal National Park and the trust was reconstituted as an advisory body. ●