

AUSTRALIAN CONSERVATION FOUNDATION INC.

TWENTY ONE YEARS OF A NATIONAL
CONSERVATION ORGANISATION

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ORIGINS

The Australian Conservation Foundation came into being in a rather accidental way. Many of you will know that the establishment of the Foundation was prompted by the suggestion in 1963 from Prince Philip that Australia contribute to the ~~World Wildlife Fund~~. Fortunately, the request was referred to Francis Ratcliffe, Assistant Chief of the CSIRO Division of Entomology (and formerly of the Wildlife Division) who felt that there was more need for a national conservation group than a section of an international body.

An inaugural meeting of invited delegates was held on the 21st August 1964. Sir Garfield Barwick became the first President and Francis Ratcliffe the Honorary Director. A constitution was ratified by postal vote in August 1965, the body was ~~incorporated on 12 August 1966~~ and on 13-19 September 1965 the first meeting of the Provisional Council was held. A drive for members was launched in November 1966. Within ten months 1200 had joined. The Commonwealth made an establishment grant of \$1,000 and in August 1966 it approved a grant of \$60,000 spread over three years.

The Foundation modelled its name on the Conservation Foundation, a U.S. body. The Conservation Foundation concentrates on sponsoring and publishing the results of conservation research and on land acquisition. If one looks at the things on which the Australian Conservation Foundation focused in its first few years one can see a similar emphasis on research and education.

The ACF though was fated to become a very different organisation because, unlike the Conservation Foundation constitution made it a membership body with the members in the States and the Territories electing 30 members of a Council which could number up to 49 .

SCOPE

In 1967 the Executive Committee adopted a statement which said that the Foundation would be concerned with the maintenance of the quality of human environment and that its role under this head would be "to advise governments on the basis of carefully collected and analysed information when matters of principle are at stake or when urgent schemes, such as the establishment of reserves, need championship".

It was felt that initially the Foundation should concentrate on making its name more widely known and building up its membership before being involved with conservation projects on an effective scale.

The earliest issues on which the Foundation tried to influence public policy were a number of wildlife matters, such as the protection of the Cape Barren Geese and kangaroos, and some lesser natural area reserve proposals including Norfolk Island, and reserves in the Daintree to Herbert River area.

History however was not prepared to wait for the ACF to build up its strength and in 1967 Peter Sims, Secretary of the Save the Lake Pedder National Park Committee, came from Tasmania to the Annual General Meeting to request Foundation support for his organisation efforts to stop the flooding of Lake Pedder for a hydro-electric power scheme. The issue at first thought by the Foundation to be over in 1967, when the Parliament passed legislation for the dams, reappeared in 1972 when the Executive Committee and the Council resisted requests by the members for a bigger effort.

Ironically the Foundation was already playing a major role in similar issues such as the Great Barrier Reef, Precipitous Bluff, proposed sand mining at Cooloola and Myall Lakes, woodchip proposals in several States, the proposed Kakadu National Park, and the Fitzgerald River Reserve in Western Australia.

As the year of the 'seventies went by the Foundation became involved with countless wildlife and natural area issues, such as whales, Bungonia Gorge, Fraser Island and Lord Howe Island. But its scope widened to include energy issues such as the Newport Power Station, nuclear power and uranium and freeway projects.

In spite of the great demands placed on limited resources by these issues the Foundation was able to produce a lead for developing general policies on matters such as landscape protection, vehicle emissions, environmental assessment, Antarctica, wilderness, fire control, wetlands, World Heritage and rainforests.

Interestingly, population policy was a concern of the Foundation from the early 'seventies.

In the late 'seventies and 'eighties the scope was extended still further to include such matters as energy conservation, employment and peace and disarmament.

ORGANISATION

Council

The changes which occurred in 1973 were the results of the fact that the ACF was set up as a membership body. This major clash over a policy matter between the membership and the government of the Foundation was made all the more violent because of the fact that up until that time the Council had been content to let the Executive Committee have the main say in policy making and management. The Executive Committee, an appointed body, was more conservative than the Council. The outcome of the 1973 dissension was that the Council became the

supreme decision-making body in the Foundation - in practice as well as in theory.

At the same time the constitution was amended so that co-option of Councillors was ended and the Council was now more representative of those voting in the biennial elections.

Members of the Council have the difficult task of developing national policies and programmes. It is a role for which they have no experience or training. What experience they have is largely parochial. This is undoubtedly one of the major obstacles to the development of an effective national society.

Council has decided recently to put to a vote of the membership a proposal to include members of staff on the Council. The initial proposal is for two staff representatives. This has considerable ramifications for the role of the Council as a kind of Parliament of its national members and for the operation of the Secretariat. If agreed to it could create two power systems within the Secretariat. It could also result in any factional difference on Council being extended to the members of the Secretariat.

SECRETARIAT

The Secretariat as a professional body began with the appointment of Warwick Deacock to an office in Canberra in July 1966. The first Director, Dr. Don McMichael, commenced work in October 1968 and the office was moved to Macquarie University. In 1969 the ACF headquarters was moved to Melbourne and there they have remained. The Secretariat advises the Council and implements its decisions. For most of my time as Director since October 1973 I have had a relatively free hand in implementing the Foundation's policies and programmes.

CHAPTERS

The Foundation has had regional committees, branches or chapters from its early days. It has also had members serving on various special purpose committees, such as environmental law, publicity,

marketing, Antarctica, the Wet Tropics, hazardous chemicals and so on. Their advice has been fed to the Director and the Secretariat rather than to Council.

The ACF Chapters, of which there are currently twelve, have been set up to provide a means whereby members in local areas can get together to further the Foundation's work. They have not received a great deal of guidance from either the Secretariat or Council. The Council appears to be too preoccupied with its other concerns to work out how the Chapters or branches can play a bigger role in furthering the Foundation's cause.

MODUS OPERANDI

I have tried to show that the Foundation has largely devoted its efforts to-date to dealing with threats to the environment and particularly to natural areas and wildlife rather than trying to change the nature of the society's relationship with the environment so that it does not have these adverse effects. Such a simple classification of tasks may be unfair because there is no doubt that the arguments about the fate of these areas, resources and species does educate the public and lead to changes in community values. I feel that the Foundation with its publications, its symposia, its campaigns and media statements has been successful in exploiting this approach, although it goes without saying that this is not enough.

How has the ACF tackled the problem of achieving a balance between the different parts of the conservation field and between short and long term issues ?

In the second half of the 'seventies Council introduced a system of policy committees each one covering a major area of the Foundation's work. This seems to have solved the first problem quite well preventing too excessive a concentration on natural areas and wildlife.

In 1973 I endeavoured to find a solution to the problem of the Secretariat being swamped by short-term issues by recommending the setting up of a special section to work on long term policy formulation and analysis. This was not implemented.

Some attempt to move in this direction and also to make the work of the Foundation more systematic was made in 1983 when it approved an overall set of objectives for the following twenty years and beyond and instituted action planning. The latter approach has not worked very well although currently an attempt is being made to breathe new life into planning the ACF's activities.

The question of 'centralisation' v. 'decentralisation' has also been a matter of considerable debate in the Foundation. For many years the Foundation felt that the best use of its limited staff resources was to base the staff at the headquarters, despatching them to trouble spots or moving them to prepare proposals in the field as required.

Obviously good cases were made for Sydney and Canberra being exceptions to this rule. In the 1980's this approach has changed and now it is our policy to have permanent offices in each State assisted by advisory committees of Councillors. So far this is proving difficult to achieve without the assistance of funds from specific projects accounts, such as the rainforest account. The aim of the State offices is the implementation of the ACF's national policies in these States but there is the obvious danger that these officers will be dragged into local issues making it more difficult for the Foundation to stick to its distinctive national role.

I cannot claim that the relationship between the Councillors and the Secretariat has always been good. There have been several periods in the Foundation's history when there has been considerable distrust on either side. Partly, this problem springs from the infrequent meetings of Council, but it is also due to the fact that Councillors find the national policy making role difficult. Instead they develop an interest in administration and tend to duplicate the role of the staff.

Relations with Other Conservation Groups

Being an unitary society rather than a federation and therefore not strictly accountable to the State conservation bodies the Foundation has had to try to earn its role as a leader by winning respect for its actions and even-handedness. There has been some resentment of the fact that having got in first and performed this role the ACF has been an obstacle to the creation of a conservation Council of Councils.

An attempt to clear the role of the ACF with the rest of the movement was made at the National Conservation Study Conference held in Canberra in November 1973. A similar conference is planned for next July. Illustrations of the Foundation's even-handedness are the way it has pressed for funds from the federal government for the movement as a whole, and set up the National Liaison Office, which assists the entire conservation movement. It led the movement in its participation in the development of the National Conservation Strategy of Australia - between 1981 and 1983, and in the establishment of the National South-West Coalition in 1982. In this role the Foundation's work has been enhanced by the close connection with overseas conservation groups, such as IUCN.

Relations with Governments

In any issue the Foundation has to decide whether it should try to play the leading role or let a local or special organisation make the front running. It is an awkward decision to make because the cost of not being seen as the front runner is a lack of acknowledgment and sometimes a difficulty in raising funds. Actually though we have had to recognise that there are strong reasons why it is best to have a FIDO leading on Fraser Island, or a TWS on the Franklin. In the case of more general policies the Foundation realises that its main role is to be a catalyst and get others involved. It cannot do the work entirely on its own.

In its relations with governments the Foundation has played the role of an advocate rather than an honest broker, particularly since 1973. The fact that the Foundation has urged the development and retention of a role for federal government in conservation has adversely affected its relations with State

governments. I believe now though that most State governments have come to understand that it must interact objectively in terms of its chosen role with both tiers, In the case of local government the Foundation like other parts of the conservation movement has yet to develop any confidence. Yet this tier has a considerable potential for stewardship.

Relations with Political Parties

The ACF's involvement with party politics has been even more problematical. Throughout its history the Foundation has participated in this aspect of community life by stressing the policies offered by particular parties and, has never, as far as I know, stressed support for a party for any other reason. In the 'eighties though we changed from displaying the policies with a broad hint on how to vote to a more explicit suggestion that people vote for a candidate or a party because of their policies. Obviously, we lost some support because of this and our image as a body concerned solely with conservation has suffered in consequence.

Although on occasion we have worked closely and successfully with trade unions on such issues as the Great Barrier Reef and Fraser Island, Newport Power Station and the protection of inner Sydney, this alliance no longer exists.

The common ground which there is on the management and utilisation of Australian forests needs to be developed fairly soon.

THE FUTURE

To be successful in its chosen role the ACF has to be good at both thinking and acting. In 1973 at the National Conservation Study Conference I said "the most important job for the Foundation is to devise a blueprint or programme for the Australia of the future". I believe that is even more true today. The ACF has to be able to provide a working blueprint for a conserver society and obtain its public acceptance - a very large task.

The essential steps at the outset are for the ACF to agree on goals and then to organise its limited human resources accordingly. In particular it needs to balance its efforts between working out public policies for the long term and the short term implementation of those policies .

The Foundation's view of its work should be both 'global' and 'local'. It needs both the national long term vision of its elected Council and Secretariat and the organised work of its grass roots.

The situation at the government level in Australia over the last decade has been unfavourable to conservation. The views and actions of the great majority of politicians do not reflect the level of interest in conservation which exists in the community and now we seem to be entering a phase where politicians have lost confidence in the capacity of Australia to manage its affairs successfully. This crisis in the quality of politicians could be seen as creating a political vacuum which we can fill. The present economic problem, for instance, is the outcome of excessive concentration on the export of primary products. One of our challenges is to integrate our conservation concerns into public thinking on all the major issues of the day.

The last 13 years have been exciting ones for me. During that time we have had the satisfaction of seeing certain ACF goals followed through year after year, and step by planned step, to a satisfactory conclusion. The protection of the Great Barrier Reef region is the obvious example, but many others spring to mind, such as the saving of the whales, the battle to set aside coastal areas threatened by beach sand mining and to conserve the rainforests of northern New South Wales.

In other areas the fight is only half won. In the early 'seventies, the Foundation mapped out the boundaries of a major national park in Western Tasmania, a few years later it did the same in the Greater Daintree region of the Wet Tropics. These boundaries acted rather like an action plan. The outcome to-date of the clashes at Farmhouse Creek and Downey Creek indicate that there is a long way to go and that there may be losses, but they also show the need for renewed vigour and the case for working to a definite campaign plan.

The work in the broader field of integrating conservation into economic and social policy is more complicated but the rewards will be even greater if we can build a society in Australia and elsewhere which puts conservation in its proper place.

As it moves into the year ahead the Foundation should take heart from its great strengths. In a country of great distances the Foundation is organised as a truly national organisation. This places it in an unrivalled position to provide policy and planning leadership. In a society where most aspects of life are dealt with in a compartmentalised way the Foundation has a comprehensive approach. It, of all conservation groups, is capable of integrating conservation with economic and social plans. In an era where more and more of us are concentrating on our personal concerns the Foundation is a Society of 13,000 conservation-minded people unified by its concern for the future welfare of the community as a whole.