

Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland

HISTORICAL PAPERS

Catalyst for action: Formation of a conservation society

***‘Meeting called
to form wild-life
preservation
society.’***

*‘Perhaps the most
hopeful of recent
suggestions for
remedying the
growing vandalism
and ignorance of
Australia’s unique
flora and fauna is
to educate people
to conserve wild
life.’*

Judith Wright, Kathleen
McArthur, David Fleay,
Brian Clouston, (1962),
Courier-Mail 6 Sept., p 2



Courtesy of David Fleay Trustees

David Fleay
1907-1993
Scientist, Author



Courtesy of Dalby Herald and
M. McKinney

Judith Wright
1915-2000
Poet, Author

1962



Courtesy of Kathleen’s daughter

Kathleen McArthur
1915-2000
Wildflower painter, Author



Courtesy of Dr Beth Clouston

Brian Clouston
1925-
Publisher

THE FOUNDERS

This is the story of four passionate, influential people who shared a genuine concern for wildlife (fauna and flora) and its habitat that was radically ahead of their time. By 1962 the emergent problem of expanding use of resources and consequent wildlife destruction was increasing. Words like ‘conservation’ and ‘ecology’ were rarely used and Rachel Carson’s seminal work, *Silent Spring*, had only just arrived on the scene.

Out of their friendships was born the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland, a society which has come to be synonymous with the conservation and protection of nature throughout Queensland.



'Between 1952 and 1987, he [Fleay] wrote weekly, for Queensland's Courier-Mail... Fleay's unique self-perpetuating approach drew a wildlife-indifferent public to their natural heritage.'

Steve Van Dyck (1993),
'Flying with the eagles',
Wildlife Australia 30:3 p 3

'What is not recognisable will not be saved. So, with great urgency let us get to know our wildflowers and it will follow that we will love them and desire their preservation.'

Kathleen McArthur (1959),
Queensland wildflowers: A selection. Brisbane:
Jacaranda Press, p 1

'This book ought to show us that our own flowering plants and trees are unique and are well worth our attention and care.'

Judith Wright (1959),
Queensland wildflowers: A selection, Kathleen
McArthur, Brisbane:
Jacaranda Press, foreword

Make nature study what it is – an appreciation of the absorbing real life happenings all around us. David Fleay (1962), 'David Fleay's Nature Notes', Courier-Mail 4 July, p 9

DAVID FLEAY was a trained scientist, zoologist, author, photographer and a great communicator. Long before WPSQ started he was a trail blazer, bringing 'many Australians closer to their wildlife heritage',¹ breeding and studying wildlife, drawing attention to the life history and the plight of many species often through his regular newspaper columns, letters in newspapers throughout Australia, scientific articles and his many books. His first book was *We Breed the Platypus* (1944). He started Fleays Fauna Sanctuary in 1952 at Burleigh on the Gold Coast and he received numerous awards for his scientific work.

Lack of a true appreciation of things essentially Australian is widespread... David Fleay, West Burleigh; Judith Wright, [Mt] Tamborine; Kathleen McArthur, Caloundra (1962), *Courier-Mail* 24 July, p 2

JUDITH WRIGHT was one of Australia's most influential poets. She was also a successful writer, environmentalist and Aboriginal rights and reconciliation activist. Her many books included *The Coral Battleground* (1977).

By 1962, she had become increasingly concerned at the destruction of native wildlife and their habitats. As WPSQ developed, Judith Wright successfully encouraged others to develop and fight for a deeper kind of belonging and broadening of the understanding of the Australian natural environment. She had an immense influence on the fledgling conservation movement, 'both on philosophy and down-to-earth practical campaigning'.²

KATHLEEN McARTHUR, a wildflower painter and author, was passionate about wildflowers and their habitats. From the early 1950s she actively nurtured others to develop a love and recognition of Queensland wildflowers and the environment through her exploring and painting of native wildflowers and the native plantings at her Caloundra home, 'Midyim'. By 1962 she had spoken out on environmental matters such as wildflower appreciation, beach protection and national parks.³ Her lunch hour theatres, regular articles in the local papers, wildflower festivals, field outings and books, including *Living on the Coast* (1989), were highly successful in arousing people's awareness of their environment. She was also an active leading campaigner for the environment.

Wright, based at Mt Tamborine, and McArthur, based at Caloundra, developed a deep and lasting friendship which created a nurturing environment for their mutual concerns. In 1951 they started an extensive lifelong correspondence (much of which still exists today) and later became friends with the Fleays.

The magazine would cover a variety of natural history subjects.
Judith Wright, Kathleen McArthur, David Fleay, Brian Clouston (1962), *Courier-Mail* 6 Sept., p 2

BRIAN CLOUSTON founded the groundbreaking Jacaranda Press in 1954 in Brisbane to produce educational books and material about Queensland, Australia and the natural environment. Before the society formed, he knew all of the other founders, having published David Fleay's *Talking of Animals* (1956) and Kathleen McArthur's *Queensland Wildflowers: A selection* (1959), which helped to promote and broaden public interest in native wildlife.⁴

THE CATALYST FOR ACTION

Noting the widespread lack of knowledge and concern about Australian native wildlife and believing that education was the way forward to help alleviate this problem, David Fleay wrote in his regular newspaper column:

New plan needed to save wildlife. David Fleay (1962), 'David Fleay's Nature Notes', *Courier-Mail* 4 July p 9

Next Fleay instigated writing a joint letter to *The Courier-Mail* with Wright and McArthur.⁵ The letter called for the need for greater education about Australia's native fauna and flora to prevent its destruction:

We earnestly feel that the only effective check on widespread vandalism resulting in the destruction of native birds, animals, trees, and flowers lies in the growth of a true Australian sentiment in schools. David Fleay, West Burleigh; Judith Wright, [Mt] Tamborine; Kathleen McArthur, Caloundra (1962), *Courier-Mail* 24 July p 2

In response Brian Clouston offered to produce a magazine if an organisation was formed to back it. Fleay, Wright and McArthur agreed that Clouston's offer, 'could not be put aside'⁶ even though they were all heavily committed in their own fields and would have to find contributors to work for free. Clouston's offer proved to be the catalyst for the formation of the society.

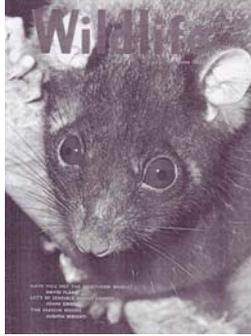
The four colleagues quickly began to plan, writing to find supporters for such an organisation and in an era with limited communication technology implemented their plan within six weeks. The name of the new group drew upon that of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Australia.⁷

THE FORMATION OF WPSQ

Thus the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) was formed on 6 September 1962. At the inaugural meeting, about 120 people attended and Judith Wright was elected as president with a large committee.⁸ Wright, a driving force in the society's development, remained as president until 1976. WPSQ filled a new niche in nature protection, committed to a new wide scope of general education on wildlife conservation at a local, regional, state and potentially Australian level; the first such group in Queensland. The society wanted to cover the whole spectrum of conservation and actively sought experts, particularly in the newly emerging science of ecology. Within two months of the inaugural meeting, ecologist, Dr Len Webb, eagerly joined them.⁹ The early focus was on developing the ambitious magazine but the organisation's influence soon spread with branches springing up throughout Queensland. WPSQ proved to be a leader in the development of the conservation movement in Australia.

The aims of this newly formed group as decided at the inaugural meeting remain the cornerstone of the society today:

That a society be formed with the object of promoting the preservation of all forms of wild life, both flora and fauna and the education of children and adults in the principles of wild life protection and conservation. Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (1962), inaugural general meeting minutes 6 September



Front and back cover of first edition of the magazine, *Wildlife* 1:1 published June 1963

'They (the other co-founders) were "go-getters". The need was urgent. We looked at ourselves as "aggressively Australian".'

Brian Clouston (2006), pers. comm. 11 February

WHIRLWIND OF ACTION IN THE SIXTIES

The energy of the founders and the many members and supporters of WPSQ created a whirlwind of action resulting in:

- **Magazine** – *Wildlife*, the wildlife conservation magazine began in June 1963, was renamed *Wildlife in Australia* by the second edition in September 1963, and continues to be published today as *Wildlife Australia*.
- **Branches** – WPSQ Branches were formed throughout Queensland. The first, the Caloundra Branch, was founded by Kathleen McArthur in March 1963. The newsletter to members began in September 1966. Today the branches have continued to give strength to the society with their local knowledge and enthusiasm while the newsletter is still in publication.
- **The Experts/Scientists** – Whilst always basing its campaigns on scientific fact, the society has successfully combined both ‘heart and mind’ to enthuse and inform the public. Dr Len Webb, eminent rainforest ecologist and a vice-president of WPSQ, was very influential in expanding the range and understanding of ecological values for the society. The Binna Burra Spring Schools of late 1960s and early 1970s used experts to engage interest, understanding and concern for our complex environment. Today the society continues to work closely with experts in both the private and public sector to more effectively manage the conservation of our environment.
- **Campaigns** - Initiated by John Büsser, president of the Innisfail branch, and followed up in Brisbane by the society under the leadership of Judith Wright, and others, the successful 1967/68 campaign to prevent limestone mining of Ellison Reef off Innisfail laid the cornerstone for the conservation movement in Queensland. The major state wide ‘no oil drilling’ on the Great Barrier Reef campaign followed soon after.¹⁰ The successful major campaign to save Cooloola (a magnificent sand mass area of wildflowers, wallum, lakes and coloured sands in the Upper Noosa River region) from sand mining was fought, with others, beginning soon after the society was formed. Kathleen McArthur was very active in this campaign, initiating in 1969 the first ‘postcard campaign’ in Australia. Today the main focus of the society has shifted to wildlife and habitat management and participation in community consultation to help preserve our priceless environment.

In March 1967, WPSQ had three branches; Caloundra, Gold Coast and Innisfail.

In March 1969, WPSQ had fifteen branches, 1156 members and the magazine had a subscriber base of 4450.

Judith Wright McKinney (1969), ‘Sixth annual report of the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland 1968 – 69’, *‘Wildlife’ Newsletter* 20 p 2

‘The reef is now an issue: in fact, a hot issue ... public feeling is engaged.’

Judith Wright (1970), ‘Conservation as an emerging concept’, *Australian Conservation Foundation occasional publications* 2, p 6

References

- ¹ Glen Ingram (1988), ‘David Fleay in the eighties’, *Wildlife Australia* 25:3/4 p 3
- ² Judith Wright McKinney (1987), Editorial comment. ‘The question rests with you’, *Wildlife Australia* 24:2 p 5
- ³ Kathleen McArthur (1989), *Living on the coast*, Kangaroo Press, p 32
- ⁴ Brian Clouston (2006), pers. comm. 11 February
- ⁵ Kathleen McArthur (1989), p 32
- ⁶ Judith Wright (1984), ‘Wildlife in Australia – How the journal began’, *Wildlife Australia* 21:2 p 29
- ⁷ Judith Wright (1984), p 29
- ⁸ Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (1962), inaugural general meeting minutes 6 September
- ⁹ Len Webb (1962), telegram 24 October
- ¹⁰ Judith Wright (1977), *The coral battleground*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, p 27

Invitation to comment: WPSQ welcomes comment on and input to its Historical Papers Series. If you would like to contribute, please contact WPSQ Head Office, 95 William Street, Brisbane Q 4000. ph: +61 7 3221 0194, fax: +61 7 3221 0701 or wpsq@wildlife.org.au

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