

# Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland

## **HISTORICAL PAPERS**

### Heart and Mind: WPSQ Finding Directions in the 60s

#### **Background**

In 1962, before the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland (WPSQ) was formed, Brian Clouston, founder of Jacaranda Press, felt that efforts to raise awareness and appreciation of our flora and fauna by eminent Queenslanders, Judith Wright, poet; Kathleen McArthur, wildflower artist and David Fleay, scientist/ naturalist, were vitally important but were 'piecemeal and lack(ed) a concerted drive'<sup>1</sup> Brian's letter offering support to publish a wildlife magazine galvanised them to form the new conservation group, WPSQ (see *Catalyst for action: Monograph 1*).

Initially the primary focus for WPSQ was the establishment of the magazine *Wildlife in Australia* with its educational content to raise awareness and knowledge about our native fauna and flora. However there also were concerns about widespread slaughter of kangaroos, sand mining, chemical spraying for pests and clearing of Brigalow at a time when little was known of the status of species and habitats in Queensland. However these concerns had not yet gelled into campaign mode.

#### **Introduction**

The three-way relationship between science, nature and society embodied in the triangle of Judith Wright (poet and WPSQ inaugural president), Dr Len Webb (scientist and long term WPSQ vice-president) and John Büsst (artist and inaugural president of the Innisfail WPSQ Branch) formed the basis and shape of WPSQ's actions. The empathy and ability to communicate of these three people helped change the direction of the society from a loose idea of individual conservation endeavours to group, focused, campaigning for conservation issues. The Great Barrier Reef campaign that started in 1967 had its beginnings with the WPSQ and was the first big conservation campaign in Queensland.

#### **Importance of Science**

From the beginning the society founders recognised the importance of science, actively seeking experts who shared their Australian perspective to further their common goal of awakening the community to see, love and protect the unique Queensland environment.<sup>1</sup> Dr Len Webb, the only rainforest ecologist in Australia at that time, was soon contributing to their efforts as the society's ecologist and vice president through his scientific standing and his unique ability to make intellectual, philosophical and social connections.



Dr Len Webb, 1993

Photo from 1993 Rockhampton White Pages® directory, reproduced with the permission of Sensis Pty Ltd.

*What is a tree? Is a tree just a lump of wood crowned by leaves? A tree is truth with a nail in its side, beauty built out of air and stones – mellow in death, lively in spite of human foolishness. Trees adore wind and birds, sunlight and sweet air, kookaburras and cows, raindrops in quiet evenings. Nobody but a plant can dine so noiselessly, and on such strange foods as the invisible carbon of the air and the harsh minerals of the ground. Nobody but a tree can grow so huge – not even whales and dinosaurs. Nobody but a plant has green blood to capture the energy of the sun. Trees have no blood banks to succour them after fire and mutilation, yet without the green stuff of their sap, there would be no redness in animal blood, no sun's energy and no life for us who cannot dine on dust. A tree is a magic creature, whose ancestors are lost in the mists of time...*

Len Webb (1963), 'Trees are your friends', *Wildlife Australia* 1:3 p10

‘Dr Len Webb –  
livewire capable of  
starting the most  
sluggish engine over  
his rainforest’

Judith Wright (1984),  
‘Wildlife in Australia – How  
the Journal began’  
*Wildlife Australia* pp29–30

‘We (Webb and  
Tracey) felt very  
proud being able to  
use our science for  
looking after the  
environment’

Geoff Tracey (1999), quoted  
in ‘The Field Botanist’,  
*The People’s Forest*,  
Gregg Borschmann p220

(Geoff Tracey was Webb’s  
associate from 1950 until  
Webb’s retirement from  
CSIRO in 1980. He was also  
a fellow WPSQ councillor.)



Dr Len Webb (1982)  
enthusing students at Tully  
State High School  
Rainforest Reserve Opening

## Len’s expertise

When Dr Webb heard the newly formed society was looking for an ecologist he eagerly offered his services through a telegram<sup>2</sup> which Kathleen McArthur, co-founder of WPSQ, sent on to Judith Wright with the hand written note,

*Will you please pass this on – if you think it important.*

Little did Kathleen realise the significant role Dr Webb was to play in the development of the society.

When Dr Webb joined WPSQ he was an eminent CSIRO scientist with extensive experience as principal research officer in the north Queensland rainforests, initially as a biochemist investigating chemicals from rainforest plants during the 1940s. Then during the 1950s he became an ecologist, starting CSIRO’s rainforest ecology section, because ‘he had experienced the scientific challenge and mystery of the rainforests, which had kindled the desire to understand their nature and environmental relationships.’<sup>3</sup>

## Significance of the partnership

In November 1962 Judith Wright wrote to Kathleen McArthur,

*One thing I am pleased about, getting a really good letter from Dr Webb; an unexpected bonus is that he is also interested in poetry.*

*I’m quite looking forward to meeting Webb!* Judith Wright (1962) pers comm to Kathleen McArthur 20 Nov

The meeting of Judith Wright and Dr Len Webb proved to be most fortuitous for WPSQ. They shared a unique understanding at a powerful intellectual and philosophical level. Wright, with her standing as one of Australia’s most influential poets, her ability to nurture and inspire and her intuitive grasp of science for a non-scientist<sup>4</sup> and Webb, with his scientific standing, his communication skills and networking ability helped establish WPSQ’s directions. Reflecting on their friendship at the memorial for Judith Wright at Mt Tamborine in 2000 Webb acknowledged his admiration for Wright and the influence she had on him. He spoke about referring unfavourably to ‘sentiment’ in connection with resource management when speaking on ecological science at a Summer School at the University of New England in Armidale in the early 1960s. Wright drew him aside and quietly observed,

*That I should not be ashamed of ‘sentiment’: ‘It’s a good word – look it up in the dictionary!’ Which I did – Thought tinged with emotion, feeling bound up with some subject or ideal.*

Webb attributes this moment as ‘a foundation stone in developing his insights into emotional intelligence’<sup>5</sup>. ‘How can science help us to reintegrate the human process with the earth process?’ is a question posed by Webb in the book he co-edited, *Australian Tropical Rainforests, Science-Value-Meaning* from the 57<sup>th</sup> ANZAAS Congress held in Townsville in 1987.

‘We need to exploit the body and facts of science to provide new myths to inspire a wiser attitude towards our precarious environment’

Dr Len Webb (1990)  
*Australian Tropical Rainforests: Science – Values – Meaning*, eds LJ Webb and J Kikkawa p115



Two mates, Dr Len Webb and John Buisst late 60s  
Photo courtesy L&D Webb.



Self Portrait by John Buisst  
Photo courtesy Margaret Thorsborne.

He (Buisst) was a humanist with an immediate and relaxed ability to communicate with young people, bureaucrats, professors, Prime Ministers; domestic animals, coral studded seascapes and hills with sombre trees...

Len Webb (1971), ‘To drop quietly from a twig’,  
*Wildlife Australia* 8:2 p57

## Science and the Society

The society developed with Judith Wright as inaugural president always insistent that policies, campaigns, educational material, press releases should be grounded on relevant scientific knowledge. Similarly Dr Webb had enormous standing as an ecologist because according to Geoff Tracey<sup>6</sup>, Webb’s long-term associate,

*Len’s attitude was always to stress the fundamental importance of field work and experienced field biologists, given a sound basis of taxonomy, without which ecology would become sterile.*

In 1960s sound scientific information was often not available so the society members had not only to seek out scientists but also, at times, actively searched for the needed information themselves.

This insistence on accuracy meant that Webb’s many scientific contacts, his ability to network with others; scientists, timber cutters, cane farmers, engineers and the cosmopolitan range of people of north Queensland proved to be very valuable for the society. Particularly Webb’s relationship with John Buisst, north Queensland artist and nature’s friend, was to play a very significant role not only in WPSQ’s efforts to protect the tropical rainforests but also in their fight for the Great Barrier Reef.

## Another side to the triangle

Webb knew John Buisst from his early rainforest work in north Queensland long before WPSQ commenced and they, along with Geoff Tracey, shared mutual concerns for the future of the rainforests. Buisst was a man of great humanity who had many local and political contacts and he knew how to successfully lobby for action from behind the scenes.

## Personal relationship impacted political outcomes

1965 was a defining year for rainforest conservation. In January Webb presented the first listing of Queensland rainforest habitat types that should be preserved.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile Buisst was continuing his enthusiastic efforts to protect the tropical rainforests which were being rapidly cleared for grazing and sugarcane expansion in the early 60s. In November, Webb led a CSIRO scientific expedition to the North Queensland lowland rainforests with the objective to identify representative rainforest habitats. This expedition had been expedited by Buisst who, after much pushing suggestions, exhorting and supporting during the later half of 1965, convinced the head of the CSIRO to fund such an expedition, conducted ‘under top level Federal orders and the Queensland government blessing’.<sup>8</sup>

## The push for the rainforest – the start of campaigning

This CSIRO rainforest expedition data resulted in a paper written by Webb which made major recommendations for the preservation of 20 representative habitat types on the wet tropical lowlands ‘below 1000 feet’ (304.8 m). This was the beginning of the push for the protection of north Queensland’s rainforests. WPSQ distributed 100 copies of this paper as a reprint from the Proceedings of the Royal



Robin Elks, Judith Wright and John Büsst (mid 1960s).  
Photo courtesy Meredith McKinney



John Büsst (L) and Littoral Society scientists (1967)  
Photo courtesy L&D Webb.



*John Büsst*  
*Artist and Lover of beauty*  
*Who fought that man and*  
*nature might survive*

Tribute by Judith Wright on  
Büsst's memorial at Bingil  
Bay, North Queensland

Society of Queensland<sup>9</sup> to organisations and persons likely to be influential in the making of reserves. In the 1966/67 WPSQ Annual Report president Judith Wright wrote,

*As the first report of its kind we hope it will give rise to many more such detailed scientific surveys of areas in need of protection and conservation.*

Ultimately the rainforests were declared a World Heritage area in 1988.

## The first campaign: The Great Barrier Reef

By the time the society was confronted with the Great Barrier Reef issue it had developed the expertise in the science, the understandings of nature conservation, the people and contacts to be ready to address this enormous issue.

The Innisfail WPSQ branch formed in 1966 with John Büsst as its first president. In 1967 he noticed the first application to mine limestone on the Great Barrier Reef, at Ellison Reef, just off Innisfail. Büsst immediately enlisted the help of WPSQ in Brisbane and had to find and support scientists to go to Ellison Reef to prove and testify in court that it was a significant living coral reef and so should not be mined. The Littoral Society joined with WPSQ in this battle to prevent a precedent allowing mining of the reef.<sup>10</sup> Their efforts resulted in the application's rejection in 1968. Following this the very public campaign to protect the reef from oil drilling was set in motion, with Büsst and Wright again playing a leading role. The Great Barrier Reef was declared a World Heritage area in 1981.

## Conclusion

The times, the people and their relationships changed the society's role and shaped conservation in Australia. Judith Wright's role in the conservation movement is well known but along with her, two unsung giants of rainforest and reef conservation in Australia, Dr Len Webb and John Büsst, married science and passion for successful conservation outcomes. Their heritage is the World Heritage status of rainforest and reef in far North Queensland.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> Brian Clouston (1962), to Kathleen McArthur, pers. comm. 24 July
- <sup>2</sup> Len Webb (1962), telegram to J Galletly, Caloundra WPSQ member 24 October
- <sup>3</sup> Geoff Tracey (1988), 'Len Webb, Pioneer in ecology of the rainforests of Australia', *Australian Science Mag.* 4 p68
- <sup>4</sup> Len Webb (2000), 'Reflections of a friend', Judith Wright McKinney memorial at Mt Tamborine 17 August p2
- <sup>5</sup> Len Webb (2000), p3
- <sup>6</sup> Geoff Tracey (1988), p68
- <sup>7</sup> Len Webb (1965), Appendix to 'Ecological perspectives for wildlife conservation in Australia Part 1'. *Wildlife conservation in Eastern Australia, Proceedings of UNE Seminar*, Armidale January p68
- <sup>8</sup> Larry Foley (1965), 'Hope for mankind in north's rain forests', *Cairns Post* 16 Nov
- <sup>9</sup> Len Webb (1966), 'The identification and conservation of habitat-types in the wet tropical lowlands, North Queensland', *Proc. Roy. Soc. Qld.* 75, pp59-86.
- <sup>10</sup> Judith Wright (1977), *The coral battleground*, Melbourne: Thomas Nelson, pp5-14

**Invitation to comment:** WPSQ welcomes comment on and input to its Historical Papers Series of monographs. If you would like to contribute, please contact WPSQ Head Office, 95 William Street, Brisbane Q 4000, tel: +61 7 3221 0194, fax: +61 7 3221 0701 or [wpsq@wildlife.org.au](mailto:wpsq@wildlife.org.au).  
WPSQ History Working Group contact – Carol Muller. Every care has been taken to acknowledge copyright, direct queries to WPSQ