

Morwell National Park

While we were still living on the farm at Yinnar South in 1950 I had heard mention of orchids that grew in the bushland further upstream on Fosters Creek. Nobody mentioned any particular orchid, but the whole district had formerly been rich in terrestrial orchids and many were still there for the finding each season.

It was not until we were settled in Leongatha and had contacted another member of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria in the person of Eulalie Brewster that we learned about the tree orchid, *Sarcochilus australis*, in a gully on private property below the old Brewster homestead. Enquiries revealed that this delightful little arboreal orchid had been known of and exhibited at local flower shows for years past. It had apparently never entered anyones head to do anything about preserving its habitat. After all, there was still plenty of bush around.

We were quite shocked about this. Something must be done and the sooner the better. The Butterfly Orchid had once been widespread but was now reduced to scattered and very rare colonies. The land must be bought. The owners were willing to sell it but where was the money to come from? Their 341 forested acres was, at that time, surrounded by wide buffer areas of similar bush. The hobby block boom had not then begun and Churchill town, so close to it today, was yet unborn. In the years following I had to watch the block logged on two different occasions.

Submissions were sent to all relevant authorities, Shire of Morwell, National Parks Authority, National Parks Association, Nature clubs and leading naturalists of the day. Some of them came down and were shown round. They visited, they admired, heard about the purchase price. The verdict was , as they looked at me sadly, "Just a pipe dream, my dear!" Throughout the fifties and into the sixties we battled to interest people in my pipe dream but money was scarce and governments did not then give handouts for such airy-fairy schemes. On a dreadfully hot day in Leongatha Eulie and I appeared before a perspiring committee of V.I.P.'s on behalf of Winifred Waddell's Native Plants Preservation Society. We discussed other projects but stressed the values of a certain orchid-laden property at Yinnar. Meanwhile we visited the property as often as possible listing the plants, the birds (foremost among them the lyrebirds) and even camped there one weekend. The property had no neighbours and was quite deserted.

In my new district of Woorayl Shire I began to study native pants in earnest and to grow them instead of the usual exotics. Shelter belts and a garden were urgently needed. Native plants and plant nurseries were almost unknown at that time. Boddy's Nursery at Geelong offered one hundred natives free to anyone prepared to grow them. As my plantings prospered I began to display natives at district shows and one such foray was to the Morwell Horticultural Show. There we met several country members of the Field Naturalists Club of Victoria who had been known to us only by name. There were other interested people and we suggested that the show in future have special sections for Australian plants. Morwell did better than that and the next year they held a special show devoted to natives. From this gathering of enthusiasts grew the Gippsland Field Naturalists Club, its name changed later as other clubs were formed to the Latrobe Valley Field Naturalists Club. The time was ripe and the club prospered. Excursions led by Jean Galbraith and other very knowledgeable naturalists were well attended and much enjoyed and we covered most of Gippsland. The year was 1960.

In the new club the battle to save the tree orchids in Fosters Gully was taken up with enthusiasm and unity is strength. Authorities were personally lobbied, much publicity arranged and meetings with local people convened. The idea of a local National Park caught on. It was more than ten years since the idea was first mooted. The key to the situation was finance. Dr Smith, Director of the National Parks Authority, was enthusiastic about the possibilities of the land as a Park. He taped the bird calls there and played them back to the interested Shire Councillors. Finally, late in 1965, with a government grant to the Shire of half the purchase price, N.P.A. to supply the other half, what had been only a pipe dream became a reality, but for the necessary act of Parliament. In due course, a house was bought and a ranger installed. Meanwhile, the block fronting Jumbuck Road had been sold for housing development, A.P.M. had acquired all the forest at the back and the large area of private land to the west had been completely cleared.

We were gratified that this small block of land was given the status of National Park but dismayed when the Land Conservation Council recommended later that it be demoted to a Flora and Fauna Reserve. Our cries of horror and outrage evidently fell on receptive ears, for the security of a National Park is far superior to that of a Reserve which would not warrant a ranger.

The remedy was to enlarge the Park and bring it up to the required standard. To this end an exchange of land with A.P.M. was arranged and the Governments bought the adjoining valley of Billys Creek, bringing the Park area up to 500 acres. With its great variety of habitats, its tall Mountain Ash and lyrebirds, extensive plant and fern lists, some of the latter very rare now, the Park has proved immensely popular. Situated as it is so very close to large centres of population the Park is in danger of being loved to death and steps are under way to make other picnic spots easily available in an effort to relieve some of the pressure on the orchid gully.

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