

## The Norman Wettenhall Foundation journey

By Gib Wettenhall, Chair, NWF

To start at the beginning... in the second half of the nineteenth century, my great grandfather Holford had a large sheep stud to the north of the Grampians, which included a 300 acre drought refuge in Halls Gap. He had seven sons so my father, Norman, grew up with large numbers of relatives with whom he holidayed in the country.

Norman inherited an insatiable curiosity and collecting gene, both of which he brought to bear on Australian landscapes and, most particularly, on Australian birds. From an early age, he collected Australian natural history books when most people's attention was still facing outwards to lands other than our own. He joined bird observer clubs and went on to become a pillar of many of Melbourne's environmental organisations. But his chief love was Birds Australia and in his twilight years he knocked on doors nation-wide, raising millions of dollars for the encyclopaedic cataloguing of Australian and New Zealand birds in the seven volume HANZAB series.

### First steps

So, setting up a philanthropic foundation focused on the Australian environment, with a particular emphasis on birds, was a natural extension of his environmental web of activities. The initial funding arose out of the sale of his natural history book collection. By the time he had reached 80yo, it had filled several rooms including departing children's bedrooms. None of us four children wanted to take on the daunting task of managing the collection, and we encouraged him in his declared intent of selling it and setting up an environmental organisation from the proceeds.

The sale of the natural history collection led to the registering of the Norman Wettenhall Foundation as an environment organisation under section 78AB of the Federal Environment Act in mid 1996. This gave the foundation tax deductibility for any donations received and also, just as importantly, meant the foundation could give to any environmental project, regardless of its tax status. It was one of the first philanthropic foundations targeted on biodiversity.

The initial corpus was \$1 million, with the aim of building this to \$2 million. Jumping through all the bureaucratic hoops took one and a half years. This, my

father and the initial trustees thought, would only be worthwhile if we set ourselves a goal of creating a big enough corpus as a platform for making a meaningful long term contribution. In the first two years, the trustees proceeded cautiously only handing out \$11,000, with funds granted averaging \$50-60,000 in the four years prior to my father's death in the year 2000.

In an interview he gave to *Philanthropy Australia* in 1997, my father believed one of the key aspects of a foundation's success was its trustees. "In choosing them, I was influenced very strongly by the Felton bequest," he said. "Felton chose five of his friends who knew what he wanted. I've tried to do something similar."

Dad had some pretty high powered friends and the first board was stacked with them - with my exception as the eldest son and family rep. Trustees included Peter Wilcox, CEO of BHP; John Landy who went on to become Governor of Victoria; Ian Sinclair an accountant and senior partner in Ernst and Young; and the formidable Pat Feilman who was the executive officer of the Potter Foundation.

As chairman, I have taken the same route, selecting trustees who I know well, while seeking a balance of scientific and environmental expertise with people who can bring financial skills to bear.

## **Accountability**

From the outset, the foundation adopted a set of guidelines - although perhaps inevitably the first donation was made to Birds Australia. We believed that if you are handing out public funds, you have a responsibility to pursue all those contemporary buzz words of accountability, transparency and equity - something which in this ethically challenged, post GFC era is likely to become even more critical to shoring up philanthropy's store of goodwill. I must admit to agreeing with Paul Keating that where a philanthropist is granted tax deductability, it is effectively "tax revenue foregone" on the government's part.

The Potter Foundation's offices in Collins St formed the NWF's administrative base from the start, sending out submission guidelines and collating responses for quarterly board meetings of the five trustees.

My father built a support base of people and organisations who were sent an annual report. To those who fear inundation by submitting hordes, I would argue that their secrecy opens them to a far greater burden - that of acting in an arbitrary and ad hoc manner, which could ultimately lead to an accusation of autocratic decision making.

In recent years, the Norman Wettenhall Foundation's annual reports have been expanded to include a financial profit and loss report, summaries of a representative slice of distributions, as well as reports from the chairman and the executive officer

on what we're trying to achieve. And in the interests of accountability, we have established a website – although like the annual reports, the website serves other equally important purposes.

First, these two communication tools spell out what we stand for and exactly where our focus lies. As a great gardening friend of my father, Tommy Garnnett once said: "I believe that all wisdom consists of caring immensely about a few right things and not caring about the rest."

Second, the website in particular means we can reach a wide audience cheaply, relatively effortlessly and without bugging the environment. It provides us with a contemporary profile so we look like we're part of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And it offers us flexibility. So when a trickle of submissions for school water tanks threatens to turn into a flood, we can tweak our guidelines to throttle them back, and post the changes for all to see immediately on our website.

Another means we have used to lift our profile and build a larger supporter base for the foundation is to hold an annual environmental lecture on a topical big picture issue in the salubrious surrounds of the Melbourne Museum. We have cemented alliances with Birds Australia, Trust for Nature and the Museum as supporters of the lecture series – all of them organisations with whom my father was critically involved.

### **Moving from reactive to proactive**

In our ninth year of operation, the Foundation decided to move from being reactive to proactive. Aided by a booming sharemarket, we were distributing over \$150,000 per year. Some of this was for multi year grants for long term environmental programs, like the Regent Honeyeater Project, but most submissions we received were limited in scope and ultimately unsatisfying. We decided to carve out our own area of interest.

In 2006, the Foundation held two strategic planning workshops facilitated by an NRM researcher Digby Race and with philanthropic sector input from Steve Mathews from the Mullum Trust, Trudy Wyse from the Melbourne Community Foundation and Brian Snape, former Chairman of Trust for Nature. The hard part in any planning exercise is ranking, of actually making the hard choices about what, in the end, you are prepared to commit to doing. But the alternative of failing to focus, can – similar to being unaccountable – lead to paradoxically unintended consequences. As I'm fond of quoting, if you don't know where you're going, you may end up somewhere else.

Out of the workshops, we developed a work plan identifying a preferred investment area, which was to take a proactive approach on large scale landscape restoration in

south-east Australia. We decided to start with what we knew and loved and work within our own patch. Our work plan follows the classic strategic planning approach of, first, defining objectives; second, drawing up strategies aimed at meeting those objectives; and third, putting in place a monitoring process so you can adapt your strategies when you find they're not achieving your objectives. This third crucial step is often missed, so the trustees agreed at the outset to review the work plan annually at half day workshops.

To implement the work plan, we decided to employ an executive officer, complementing the admin function handled on a contract basis via the Potter Foundation. We cast our net widely, finding *seek* and NRM websites yielded the most suitable candidates. What were we looking for as a small foundation? Organisational skills, computer literacy including website management, an ability to work without supervision, but most of all enthusiasm, passion and knowledge about the environment – all of which our chosen EO Beth Mellick has in spades.

Serendipitously, she lived near Castlemaine, which presented the opportunity to relocate the Foundation's offices into the heartland of the very landscapes that we were intent on restoring. She also lives near Geoff Park, a NWF trustee and biodiversity broker who has acted as a wonderful mentor in what otherwise might have been a lonely role. He is an award-winning scientist who can bring environmental expertise to bear like a number of trustees, such as Sarah Ewing, a geographer specialising in catchment management.

As the foundation diversified, we thought it made sense to expand the number of trustees from five to nine, so that trustees could be given delegated responsibility in specialist areas of expertise, as well as for different regional restoration projects as they came on stream. Two of our strategic plan contributors Digby Race and Brian Snape were brought into the fold.

Digby has added a new program to our armoury, the funding of three year Landscape Restoration fellowships. A workshop we held with landscape restoration groups from around the state had identified fostering leadership in the field as a top priority.

Our finances are now in safe hands. Brian Snape has been appointed chairman of our finance committee, which includes stockbroker John Bate, and a businessman with marketing experience, Peter Howie.

Most of the trustees live in the country and bring extensive rural networks as well as relevant expertise, such as new trustee Trish Kevin, a community engagement officer with DSE, and one of the founding trustees, Western District grazier Bill Weatherly.

Embedding the foundation in rural Victoria has opened up niche opportunities for leveraging. We have, for instance, formed an alliance with the Ross Trust, whereby

they grant us \$50,000 per year, which we give out through a small grants program. They're taking advantage of our extensive rural networks, while their funding tops up our traditional, reactive grantmaking stream, which continues to run in parallel to our large scale, multi year landscape restoration projects.

So far we have funded four landscape restoration projects, starting with the Connecting Country project in the Castlemaine shire of Mt Alexander. Our goal as country people ourselves is not to remove people from landscapes, but to facilitate them to collaborate and create visions of a future where they begin to live more sustainably within those landscapes. We start from the premise that before you can connect landscapes, first you have to connect the people.

Most rewardingly, Connecting Country not only brought together over 30 groups to prepare their own biodiversity blueprint, but in the last few months it has succeeded in justifying Beth and Geoff's faith and initiative, in particular, by magnificently leveraging the foundation's \$80,000 input. Connecting for Country has succeeded in gaining \$1.4 million over three years from the Federal Government's Caring for Country program so they can start implementing their vision for a more sustainable future. That's the sort of result that makes philanthropy worthwhile.

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