

What was Happening

with State Conservation Legislation when Bird Queensland formed?

During the 50th year of Birds Queensland (Queensland Ornithological Society Inc.), I will prepare newsletter articles reflecting on the achievements of the Society as well as events that may not have had a conclusive outcome but do add value and interest to the role of the Society. The series will complement the 35th, 40th, and 45th anniversary booklets compiled by David Niland. I will source information from the archives and conversations with current and past members of the Society. Any contributions or feedback are openly welcomed, and I would like to apologise in advance for omissions or misinterpretations from the archives.

The Presidential Message in the very first Newsletter November 1969 stated that the Society would “promote the scientific study and conservation of birds, by all means possible, with particular reference to Queensland”. This would appear closer to the “impossible” on the impossible-possible spectrum as the following demonstrates.

At the General meeting June 1970, Mr Doug Sherrington (1914-1999), MLA referred to conservation legislation as “unenlightened legislation” and it was the greatest hurdle faced by conservationists in Queensland. He added that “if one looks back over Australia’s past,, if it stands chop it down, and if it moves shoot it”. The “unenlightened legislation” becomes apparent in the diversification of control: The Minister for Lands controls National Parks; the Minister for Primary Industries controls fauna conservation; the Minister for Local Government controls anti-pollution laws; and the Minister for Mines controls mining and has virtual power of veto if the area contains minerals. (The Mines Department drew up the initial boundaries for the Cooloola National Park which failed to include Ground Parrot and Emu Wren habitats, but that’s a story for another day.)

The State Fauna Protection Act (at that time) divided fauna into three categories: permanently protected, protected and pest fauna. Mr Sherrington believed there was no scientific grounds for the inclusion of species in this list and the policing of the Act was totally inadequate allowing “the wanton destruction of wildlife.”

The following further demonstrates the continuing absence of scientific grounds in decisions and assumptions made by government at the time. The guest speaker for the March 1973 General Meeting was from the DPI Fauna Conservation Branch. He said 250,000 ducks were shot each year in Qld. The influx of ducks was a result of the draining of wetlands in Vic and NSW and this influx posed a threat to the Burdekin Duck (justification for the annual massacre). The DPI was also assessing the Golden-shouldered parrots but thought it “too difficult in the country they inhabit” and suggested instead that “the rarity stories might just be a myth to keep prices of the bird up”. The birds were selling for £3,000 each in Belgium. (The standard house price in Brisbane was \$16,000 i.e. less than the price of three Golden Shouldered parrots in Belgium.) The speaker said that “Without adequate data on a lot of species, faunal requirements at the moment are little less than guess work”. Once again BQ was faced with the frustrating dilemma that legislation was based on guess work and influenced by self-serving parties.

By February 1972, although all bird species had been removed from the Open season List, lobby groups could have any species seasonally moved to the Open Season List as ducks and quails were at that time. The Wedge-tailed Eagle remained on the Pest Fauna List while all other birds of prey have been removed.

In December 1972 the Department of Primary Industries (DPI) invited BQ to submit its feelings on bird legislation covering protection, dealing and keeping. This was only after the DPI had received its responses from the Bird Dealers Association and the aviculturalists. BQ's response had two basic principles: all birds were to be protected, except for scientific study and controlled harvesting where they have become a pest; and no monetary gains from existing aviary stocks. Although most BQ points were accepted at a Joint Parliamentary Committee Meeting, apparently the aviculturalists claimed they needed to sell birds to sustain other stock and that BQ had been quoted as supporting this. BQ refused to tolerate profiteering by the aviculturalists resulting in a delay to this section of the Act.

Keeping in mind that this was a time when there were no electronic records, no emails, no internet and the concept of stakeholder consultation was years away. The shooters, bird dealers and aviculturalists appeared to have a direct two-way line of communication with government. The Duck shooters had a very powerful lobby and apparently were privy to changes to the Open Season List. The DPI press releases failed to include these changes. BQ realised that government departments were not about to freely volunteer information and that BQ would have to approach the head of the DPI to find ways to lobby the government regarding conservation matters. By Sept 1973 BQ had approached the DPI to discuss DPI policy on conservation, open seasons and to identify avenues for BQ to offer suggestions or information to the DPI. BQ had to find its voice with the State government against a backdrop of obstacles or "hurdles" as Mr Doug Sherrington MLA would say.

BQ achieved much during these foundation years, while tackling both federal and state issues. It was soon realised that sound data was needed to put forward and argue cases if they were to successfully promote the scientific study and conservation of birds. The many goals set in the first meetings laid the foundations for success in achieving the aims of BQ: Field Outings; Nest Record Scheme (adding to RAOU records); Bird Banding; Bird Photography; Sound Recordings; Junior Members; and Society Journal.

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