

## **A Tribute to Peter Hitchcock**

**By Dr Joan Staples. November, 2022**

Peter's phenomenal career spanned work in NSW, Tasmania, Queensland, the Northern Territory and internationally.

By coincidence, my career path took me to the areas of Australia in which he worked at much the same time. Occasionally, my work overlapped with his. I would like to share some memories and emphasise the national significance of some of his contributions.

Peter's most significant contribution is the protection from logging of hundreds of thousands of hectares of Australian forests - the NSW Gondwana Rainforests and the Tasmanian forests, all of which are now World Heritage. Peter was also responsible for the first attempts to respectfully include Aboriginal people in the management of the Wet Tropics in Queensland. He made a significant contribution to the campaign which stopped Jabiluka mine in Kakadu, and was probably the first person to officially warn of the danger of global warming to Kakadu. This is my story about Peter.

### **NSW Rainforests**

Werrikimbe was the part of the north coast subtropical forests that meant the most to Peter. He knew and loved this area from his time as a forester, and having grown up not far south of here.

For a number of years prior to the NSW government finally announcing its decision to cease logging, I was the Chair of the NSW North Coast Conservation Council - a coalition of the North Coast groups campaigning to save the forests. My local forests were based around Hastings/Werrikimbe. I did not meet Peter personally until just after the NSW rainforest decision, when I welcomed the opportunity to join a small party he led in December 1982. We spent 5 days walking into the forest and following the Werrikimbe River. We were in the heart of Werrikimbe. The forests were magnificent and the river magical. Peter read aerial photographs to guide us through an area, which few, if any, non-Indigenous people had ever seen. He was able to tell us, "Around the next bend we will see an amazing emergent giant of a tallowood!" And we did. In fact, the emergent eucalypts in mixed forest were some of the largest I have ever seen.

At the time, Christina Wilcox was finalizing her film, *A Voice for the Wilderness*, about the Werrikimbe campaign. She asked Peter to take a camera and capture some of our hike. Peter agreed, despite the camera being huge – about 60 cms long and 20 cms deep - and weighing many kilos! Peter conscientiously took footage for a couple of days, until somebody noticed that the lens cover was still on the camera! I can still see Peter's face as he realized! He may have felt foolish, but we all overwhelmingly felt so sorry for him, given the effort he had made. However, footage was obtained in the last two days and some of Peter's work can be seen in the final film.



*2 Dec 1982 in the heart of Werrikimbe on a 5-day hike following the river. L to R. Joan Staples, Murray Borrell, Ian Cranston, Peter Hitchcock, Bruce McKenzie, Mark Robertson, Flora Graham.*

Peter himself can also be seen in the film. He is dressed in a suit in the NSW Land and Environment Court, while Murray Wilcox, Christina's husband, is addressing the court representing the plaintiffs. Peter is sitting near Murray Wilcox. The remarkable thing is that the environment groups were taking the NSW Forestry Commission to court for not following their own management plan and Peter, as head of the NPWS, was providing technical information on the case to Murray. So, we had one state government department against another. The film has been preserved by the National Film and Sound Archive. I have a copy purchased from them.

Subsequently, Peter took a second group of people who had a specific interest in Werrikimbe, on a 5 day trip following the river. On this second occasion, we had the wonderful company of Murray and Christina Wilcox, and Hal Wootten, the distinguished jurist who chaired ACF. Again, the forests and river were magnificent. I also had the pleasure of exploring the upper reaches of the Forbes River near Spokes Mountain with Peter and his son. Although the lower reaches were logged and farmed, the forests we hiked through were beautiful. Remember that name Forbes River, because it appears later in my story.

Many of you know much better than I the inside story of how Peter and the NPWS worked within government for the successful outcome, and it has been recorded elsewhere. During the campaign, Peter also was cognizant of the work those of us outside government were doing to pressure for the change. Peter Prineas at the National Parks Association was the key link between us, because Peter Hitchcock trusted the discretion and political understanding of Prineas. The appropriate timing of various actions and knowledge of whom to lobby were important for the strategic effectiveness of our public campaign. Peter Prineas was able to provide great guidance with Hitchcock help.

There is no doubt that protection of 366,500 hectares of NSW Gondwana rainforests and their listing as World Heritage is one of Peter Hitchcock's greatest legacies.

## **The Helsham Inquiry into Tasmanian Forests**

From northern NSW, I found myself representing the ACF in Canberra from 1983 as their National Liaison Officer. It was a difficult gig at first. The new Hawke Government thought they had done enough on the environment by stopping the Franklin River dam. It was hard to get them to act on forests, because doing so meant confronting antagonistic state governments. It was during this time in the early 1980s, a decade before he went to Cairns, that I had the opportunity of personally introducing Peter to some forests in the Wet Tropics. The Commonwealth Environment Department responded to the pressure about the logging of these forests by holding a conference for rainforests scientists in Cairns. I attended as ACF representative, and Peter, who was still at the NPWS, also chose to attend. ACF provided me with the resources to take a group of attendees, whom we wanted to keep informed, for a day tour after the conference ended. Peter quickly accepted my invitation to come along. I think this was his first organized tour of the Wet Tropics, an area that became important in his career a decade later.

In Canberra by 1986 the government's stocks were slipping, Graham Richardson entered parliament as Hawke's 'numbers man' and I began talking to him. I was initially very disappointed that I could not get him to act on modifying the 1986 Tasmanian woodchip quota. However, he promised me he would visit and actually gave me a date. The story of that visit has been told by many as supposedly Richardson's 'conversion'. It did mean that we were able to persuade him that the environment movement might be able to influence the next election if the government took significant action. We gained access to Hawke's office and I began speaking regularly with Craig Emerson, who became Hawke's environment person in the office. It was a good working relationship. Craig later became a Minister in the Gillard government, but at the time he was a young economics graduate who had just won the ANU University medal.

I was present at the interdepartmental meeting that planned the setting up of the Commission of Inquiry into the Lemonthyme and Southern Forests or Helsham Inquiry as it became known. After the meeting Craig asked if I had any recommendations for Commissioners. What could I say? The obvious person was Peter. I was not the only person who recommended him. The staff of the Minister for Environment made the same recommendation, which was no doubt the deciding factor. However, Hawke's office knew from my recommendation that Peter had the support of the environment movement whom they were trying to reassure.

At the invitation of Bob Brown, who was a Tasmanian MP, I went to Tasmania in late 1987 to lead a campaign to take the balance of power by standing Green Independents at the next state election. There was no Green Party at the time. My arrival in Hobart coincided with the first few weeks of the Helsham Inquiry. It was a buzz to walk into the Federal Court Offices in Hobart and see Peter sitting formally with the other two Commissioners taking evidence. However, there is no way it could be known publicly that we knew each other! Peter needed to show total independence in conducting a Commonwealth Commission of Inquiry and I worked for the radical environmentalist MP, who had been calling for the Inquiry. It was strange to run into Peter at Salamanca Markets or in restaurants and have to show no sign of recognition. Although the Inquiry started well, as it progressed the environment organisations became more and more disillusioned because of the attitude of Commissioners Helsham and Wallace. The tone of the Inquiry was so dire that the environment groups began discussing withdrawing in a show of protest. I felt I needed to talk to Peter about this. I was wary about using the phone in Bob Brown's parliamentary office where I worked, because it was sure to be bugged. Instead, I went to a public phone box and called the Commission asking to speak

to Commissioner Hitchcock. I got through to his office, but was told he was out and was asked would I like to leave a message. I was not prepared for this. What should I say? I could not give my name. I wracked my brain for something that might jog his memory to think of me. *'Tell him Forbes rang and could he call me,'* I said. Fortunately, Peter worked out who the mysterious caller was and he phoned me at home that night.

### **The Dissenting Report**

Peter was disturbed at my news of a public withdrawal by the environment organisations. It was then he confided that he had been working discretely on a Dissenting Report for some time. His concern at a withdrawal by the environment groups was because it would undermine the credibility of the whole Inquiry reporting process, including his Dissenting Report. That gave me the difficult task of persuading the environment organisations to stay involved, but without the ability to let them know that Peter would deliver a Dissenting Report.

Fortunately, the environment organisations reluctantly continued, but with many grumbles. It was important they did so and did not undermine the Inquiry, because subsequently the Dissenting Report played a huge political role. The Helsham Report recommended only 8% of the forests under consideration be protected, whereas Peter's Dissenting Report recommended that 70%, or 282,000 hectares of the Lemonthyme and Southern Forests were worthy of protection by World Heritage nomination. Bob Brown took up the fight to have the Commonwealth implement the Dissenting Report. He was successful in getting the support of Graham Richardson, who was by then the Environment Minister, and of Hawke. Getting Cabinet to agree was another question. The Cabinet debate raged for a long 14 hours – definitely the longest Cabinet debate for the Hawke Government, and probably the longest for any Australian Government. The outcome was a win for Richardson and Hawke with further significant areas of the Central Plateau Conservation area and the Walls of Jerusalem added to the huge area proposed. The protection by World Heritage status of hundreds of thousands of hectares of Tasmania's forests is thanks to that Dissenting Report written by Peter.

### **The Wet Tropic Management Authority**

Once Bob Brown and the Green Independents took the balance of power in Tasmania in 1989, I was exhausted and took a break from Tasmanian politics. I moved to Torres Strait for a few years and then to Cairns where I worked at the Cape York Land Council. By then Peter was heading up the Wet Tropics Management Authority and also living in Cairns.

The Land Council thought Bob Brown's support would be advantageous for a project I was working on, and I was given the task of getting Bob to visit and taking him for a day's flight around Cape York. Both Bob and Peter were enthusiastic when I suggested Bob also put aside a day after our flight to visit some forests of the Wet Tropics with Peter. Neither had been able to meet or talk when Peter was in Hobart and it was a great joy to see them together sharing their love of forests.



*Peter and Bob Brown during tour of the Wet Tropics, June 1995.*



*'Where rainforest meets the reef' was the campaign slogan when we fought for protection of the Wet Tropical Rainforests in the 1980s. Peter wanted to show us some significant rainforest trees growing down to the beach in the Daintree. Photo of Peter and Bob on their way to those trees, June 1995.*

One memory I have of Peter at the Wet Tropics Management Authority was his reaction the first time he spent a day with one of the traditional owners who was an Aboriginal elder with knowledge of the forest. My recollection is that it was a traditional owner from the Kuku Yalanji of Mossman Gorge. The old man had taken Peter for a walk and they had each exchanged their knowledge of species and what they were seeing. Peter was very emotionally moved,

even as he told me about it later. Clearly, he and the old man had found a connection because of the exchange of knowledge, which had been from two very different cultural/intellectual bases, but from the same love of the forest.

Peter was also the first Director of the Authority to appoint an Aboriginal person to head up the Indigenous Department of the Wet Tropics Management Authority. His appointee was completing study in Canada but Peter was prepared to hold the position for six months while somebody else acted. I had recently finished work at the Land Council with our Cape York Land Use Agreement in place. Peter offered me a consultancy for 6 months until the new Director could return to Australia. The most significant thing I dealt with in that 6 months was a final report that my predecessor had commissioned from an overseas expert on how the Wet Tropics could be World Heritage listed for its Indigenous cultural values. I was dismayed when the Report crossed my desk that the overseas expert said we should not do anything until Australia established an Indicative List of World Heritage properties. Such a list was not possible in an Australia where World Heritage had become a political hot potato! Peter of course agreed with that view and the expensive report commissioned by my predecessor was binned. It was back to the drawing board to find Indigenous management proposals that did not involve an Indicative List.

Others can give more detail of Peter's time at the Wet Tropics but I know it was difficult, especially after the election of the Howard Government in 1996. There were repeated attacks on Peter and the Authority and attempts to allow inappropriate development in the WHA. Some of the attacks were felt very personally by Peter. He was definitely familiar with briefing politicians, but visits from unsympathetic politicians dismayed him. I particularly remember his reaction after Bob Katter paid a visit and sneered at much of Peter's carefully worded presentation.

Today there have been Indigenous people on the Board of the Wet Tropics Management Authority and the Chair is currently an Easter Kuku Yalanji woman. However, it is significant that thirty years ago, Peter was the first Director of the Wet Tropics Authority to understand and act on this issue of Indigenous management. His attempts to respectfully include Aboriginal people are for me an important part of his legacy.

### **Kakadu: World Heritage in Danger**

By 1998, I had left the Land Council and Peter was no longer at the Wet Tropics Management Authority. Peter was asked by a coalition of environment groups to develop a report on the threats to Kakadu's World Heritage as part of the campaign to stop mining at Jabiluka in Kakadu. Although development of the mine had commenced, there was a significant protest taking place at Jabiluka led by the traditional owners and supported by environment organisations. Asking the World Heritage Committee to act was part of that campaign and the Committee was sending representatives to Australia to investigate. Peter asked me to collaborate on the report, because of my political and on-the-ground knowledge of Kakadu.

I think it is an outstanding document written almost entirely by Peter. One thing that stood out for me at the time was Peter's insistence on including a paragraph describing the threat which global warming posed to Kakadu. The Howard government was ignoring the issue, after the Hawke Government had taken some tentative action on it. I feel sure Peter's report, *Kakadu: World Heritage in Danger*, was one of the first official reports on Kakadu that recognized this threat. The Report referred to '*dramatic increases in the magnitude and frequency of extreme meteorological events*' and expressed concern about the management of uranium tailings in

such conditions. As we experience, dramatic floods in NSW and Victoria, it is interesting to note that twenty-five years ago, Peter was writing on this issue.

### **International Consultancies**

Others are better equipped than I to tell of Peter's international consultancies and his World Heritage work in a number of countries. It is appropriate that his story includes his love of the forests of the world. From the cedars of Lebanon to the rainforests of Indonesia, he was always curious and full of wonder at the life he found in these environments. He had a great love, not only for the environment of Indonesia, but also its culture.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, Peter's most significant achievement for Australia is the protection from logging of hundreds of thousands of hectares of valuable forests mostly in NSW and Tasmania – forests that are now listed as World Heritage because of his work. This is a HUGE legacy.

I have outlined just a few of Peter's achievements in other areas of which I am aware, but there are many others. Those I personally experienced include that Peter was responsible for the first attempts to respectfully include Aboriginal people in the management of the Wet Tropics in Queensland. He also made a significant contribution to the campaign which stopped Jabiluka mine in Kakadu, and was probably the first person to officially warn of the danger of global warming to Kakadu.

Peter Hitchcock – a good man, a good friend and a great lover of the forests. He is sadly missed.

Dr Joan Staples