

# **A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF FORESTRY WITHIN THE ACT**

Oral History Interviews

Transcript of Interview

with

**Ian Gordon**

conducted by

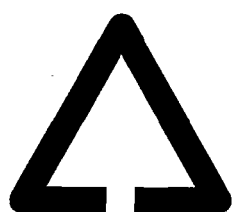
Brendan O'Keefe

at the

Australian War Memorial

on 16 August 1994

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**ACT FORESTS**

*"More Than Just a Pine Forest"*

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

INTERVIEWER:	BRENDAN O'KEEFE
INTERVIEWEE:	IAN GORDON
DATE:	16 AUGUST 1994
SUBJECT:	ACT FORESTRY HISTORY
3 TAPES	2 HourS 10 minutes

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: This is tape 1 of an interview with Mr Ian Gordon conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 16 August 1994 at the sound studio of the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered on this tape are the history of forests and forestry in the ACT. End of identification.

I'd like to welcome Mr Gordon to the sound studios of the War Memorial and start off by asking him how on earth he got involved in forests in the first place?

I started off to be an engineer; I didn't start off to be a forester at all but after a couple of years of that I swapped over to forestry.

Where was this?

That was in Sydney, the University of Sydney.

So you're a Sydney person originally, are you?

Yes, born in Sydney but we shifted up to Holbrook early in World War II. I can't remember quite when. I was quite young and so I grew up in Holbrook and then went to school in Albury - to high school - and then to university in

Sydney and then from Sydney to the Australian Forestry School, as it was then.

Why did you change from engineering to forestry?

It wasn't working out the way I thought it .... It wasn't the sort of thing that I ended up wanting to do. I got much more interested in the biological side of science than the hard mechanical and mathematical side of science that relates to engineering, so I swapped over to forestry and I was pretty happy with that. It was a good choice.

What period are we talking about when you were studying?

That was mid-'50s at university to the late '50s and then 1961 and '62 at the Australian Forestry School.

Who was in charge of the school at that stage?

For the first couple of weeks in 1961 it was Max Jacobs but then he left at that stage to take over as Director General of the Forestry and Timber Bureau of which the forestry school was part. And then Kel McGrath was Acting Principal there for the rest of my time and for a few years after that, prior to the appointment of John Ovington as the first Professor of Forestry with the Australian National University. There'd been a whole bunch of changes in administration for forestry at that time. I ended up, after

graduation I came back and worked as a demonstrator at the school for a while, so we started off as part of a Commonwealth government department and by the time I'd finished there I ended up as being part of the Australian National University staff.

When you were going through the forestry school how did you find the teaching and the standard of courses and so on?

The first thing is the classes were small, thirty or thirty-two people in our year which was regarded, I think, as a somewhat larger than average year. It was a great time. It was a great time. We had, all of us, had part of a degree, at least, completed by the time we went to forestry school because you finished there rather than started there. The accommodation was excellent; it was really quite comfortable.

Were you living ...?

Yes, we lived in that building behind the oval at Yarralumla which is really beautiful and the staff were all helpful. They were quite interested in ensuring that everybody got a top education and went to a lot of trouble. It was quite different from the University of Sydney where at least in engineering you were tossed into a huge class, massive class. You never ever met the lecturer. It was just totally impersonal and pretty bewildering for somebody like

me who'd grown up in a small country town and went to a high school where the largest class .... Well, I ended up in classes with eight or ten sometimes in the final year at high school. I found that very, very uncomfortable.

You've stated exactly my feelings about Sydney University, too, and I came from a suburb of Sydney.

It was terrible. By the time I got into botany, class sizes particularly were much smaller and much more fun and we had the great good fortune there to be lectured by Spencer Smith-White who interestingly was the brother - the twin brother, I understand - of one of the lecturers in mathematics that we had in engineering.

That was quite a coincidence.

Yes, and they were both pretty smart blokes. At that time that's when you started to sort out the foresters in the group, you could start to get to know them, and that's where I started off some friendships that I still have.

What about fieldwork in the course? Did this take you into ACT forests?

Not initially. I was on a Commonwealth Forestry Scholarship which meant that, well, as I could see it at the time, there were some advantages and some disadvantages. If I had accepted a state-based forestry scholarship, the pay was

probably better but you were bonded. There was this business of bonding in those days. You were indentured basically. You had to work for a certain period of time after you graduated, with the people who were paying your way through. I thought that was pretty reasonable at the time but if I could avoid that I would, so I was able to accept a Commonwealth Forestry Scholarship which meant that you still got the same basic benefits. They paid your fees at university. They paid you a living allowance which was adequate but you weren't bonded. You had to work in Australian forestry but it could have been anywhere. It could have been any of the States or it could have been in the Commonwealth and they accepted a pretty broad definition.

Was a stipulation of the Commonwealth award that you had to work in Australia after school?

No, in Australian forestry and I think generously interpreted that could have meant that if somebody wanted - I didn't - but if somebody wanted to go overseas and do a higher degree or something, that would have been acceptable. But that was back in the days when people were crying out for graduates and they were chasing people all over the place. You never had less than a couple of offers of jobs; it was nothing like today. Today's a complete reversal and so we were in a very fortunate position. For fieldwork, we had to do a certain minimum with the State forest services. You had to do a field year mostly. That was a year,

generally at the end of your preparatory university courses and prior to going to the forestry school; for the Commonwealth - I can't remember the exact figure it was but you had to have a minimum, I think, of about twelve weeks of approved fieldwork which meant that you had to have a reasonable variety of different fieldwork. Usually what happens: you'd be put out into a forestry district somewhere. All the State forest services and the Commonwealth cooperated; there was no problem about getting a job. You just assumed that you could work just about anywhere you wanted during vacations, and they paid you which was very nice. You got paid labourers' rates and you were expected to work though. You're not sitting on your backside, you're out there to do a job and you learnt a lot of the basic sort of skills that you would need later on in those situations, and you also broadened your experience generally - you saw different sorts of forest, learnt some basic things about getting on with people in the bush, which is pretty important. Some of us students were pretty brash and full of ourselves. It was a salutary thing for most of us, I think, to meet people whose business it was to live and work in the bush and they pretty soon brought most of us back to earth. It was good, everybody should have that experience.

Where did you do your fieldwork, anyway? Was it ACT or ...?



No, I did some work at Urunga up on the north coast; working in Urunga State Forest. Then at Batlow, down near Tumut and Batlow and that district. I worked at Uriarra with the ACT Forests. This is all while I was at university and then for the summer vacation prior to coming to the forestry school I worked down on Flinders Island, not in forestry but with the Agricultural Bank of Tasmania. They had a big land development project going which consisted of a systematic rape of the island; they just ploughed everything, and I mean everything, and even picked up the sticks and then planted improved pastures so the people who bought the farms that resulted from that could grow fat lambs that nobody really wanted, I think. It was a bit of a pity. Two of us went down there and we found that was interesting for a while, got boring after a while, but we were surprised, I think, that that sort of development was going on. That's the sort of thing you associate with back in the pioneering days but it was certainly not pioneering days by that stage of the game. It was mainly to accumulate some money, I think. I was able to save about 160 or 180 pounds, I think - something like that.

Big money for those days.

Yes, seven and twopence farthing an hour was the basic rate and, of course, we were working as much overtime as we could get. We were sometimes working twelve and thirteen hours a day loading superphosphate into hoppers so they could go into an aircraft. So that was basically the fieldwork plus

with a couple of university excursions. You had geology excursions and botany excursions here and there, so it introduced us to almost .... I hadn't seen any of that country at all, so I saw lots of Australia. While we were at the forestry school, of course, we had some major trips down the south coast, up to Queensland, inland New South Wales and northern Victoria, South Australia. We were all pretty hosed off because the Tasmanian trip was off that year. We didn't actually get to Tassie. It was quite some time before I managed to get down there. So we saw a good bit. Didn't get to Western Australia either.

Yes, I noted you'd omitted that. When you graduated you became a demonstrator at the forestry school.

I didn't have much of an idea really of what I was going to do at all. It was my sort of vague intention to up stakes and head to New Zealand just to see what it was like over there. I could have probably got a job of some sort over there, so I came up here to just see a few people and say goodbye basically and they offered me a job there. They were desperate. They didn't have anybody to organise the basic materials for classes and that sort of stuff, so I took that on and I started out quite hopefully to study for a masters degree as well which didn't eventuate in the end for a whole variety of reasons, but that was good too because I was doing some of the classes again basically because just being in them you can't switch off, you've got to listen, and that reinforced a few things that I'd missed

the first time round. From that point of view it was quite valuable. And again learnt something about, in a mild way, very minor way, how to interact with people that I now regarded as students; me being a fully fledged graduate and how to handle that. So I was there for nearly three years and then I got talking with Mark Edgerley who had recently been appointed to run ACT Forests and we talked about a few things about this and that and the upshot of that was I got offered a job there, so I took that and I think it was the 13 December 1965 I started with ACT Forests.

That's a pretty good memory.

Yes, it's a funny date. It was right at the death. One good thing about it, as I discovered when I retired, that I had continuity all the way through from when I started. When the ANU actually took over forestry school I had employment continuity, so I had an extra year or two of service over and above what I thought which I meant a couple of weeks pay at the end.

Always handy.

Yes, it was good.

So when you joined ACT Forests what were your first impressions? What did you find there?

I already knew something about it because I'd worked there some years previously and with the local field excursions we'd learnt a little bit. It was inevitable that ACT Forests would be a sort of outdoor laboratory for the Australian Forestry School and I believe to some extent it still is. So there were no shocks involved or anything like that. I wasn't put out onto a forest at all. I was in the office in Civic at which time I was operating as a projects officer. There were a couple of ideas that Mark had that he wanted to develop and I did the researching through files and what have you.

What were these projects?

Max Jacobs had done an investigation of the possibility of irrigating pines in Greenhills Forest with effluent from the Weston Creek sewerage works. It was acknowledged that Weston Creek sewerage works was a problem or at least the effluent from it was. Canberra was growing pretty rapidly. Weston Creek wasn't the only sewerage treatment works but it was easily the biggest one and it had a number of problems. The most interesting one was an odour problem associated with Government House. At that stage of the game the Woden Valley was just under construction and there was also an odour problem strangely in the Woden Valley. So one of the early projects that I was involved with was in first of all confirming that it was in fact sewage contaminated air from Weston Creek that was impinging on Government House and up into the Curtin shops. You could smell it up there

sometimes. We had to identify the conditions under which it occurred and that involved the security guards at Government House keeping a smell register. Every time they could smell it they had to note the time and put it in the book. That was quite useful because that identified the times. Then we had to confirm it. We went out one morning, one very cold, frosty morning - it would be very like this morning I could imagine - and we burnt forty-four gallon drums with sewage sludge in them to get a nice smokey trace and then traced that with spotlights to see where it went and indeed it went up to the dam wall - the Scrivener Dam wall - a branch of it went up Yarralumla Creek as far as Curtin shops and indeed it did go over the dam wall and in the Governor-General's bedroom window. So we were able to confirm that it was the Weston Creek works that was the problem. It was the katabatic wind down Weston Creek which wasn't developed at that stage that was the mechanism for it. It was just a little river of cold air that used to run down the Weston Creek valley, through a gap in the pines between the Cotter Road and the sewerage works and then it would pick up the odour from the works, it would continue flowing down Weston Creek. When I say a river, it was only about twenty or thirty feet deep - at the most ten metres deep - and strangely instead of going downstream it had enough momentum, because of the peculiar shape of the last little bit of Weston Creek, to go up the Molonglo River and it had enough momentum to continue up the Molonglo River and that appeared there was the source of the problem. So we ended up, we cut an outlet for it through the trees to see if we

could steer it downstream through the little ridge and that was partly successful. We took some willows and what have you out of the bed of the Molonglo River to try and smooth it a little bit aerodynamically. The wind speeds were quite low so boundary effects were pretty significant in governing those winds. It wasn't really successful, I think.

Development of lower Molonglo was the answer but that was an interesting one.

I'm quite surprised that foresters were involved in this kind of work.

They were involved in a very practical sort of way. Because of the dimensions of the body of moving air it was quite conceivable that thirty to forty metre high trees could in fact channel this in a particular way so we did in fact clear fall a patch of forest there; as I say, in an attempt to give it an outlet downstream. We weren't too concerned about people downstream; they had less votes than the Governor-General. There weren't very many people down there, anyway.

What about the irrigation proposal?

The irrigation proposal failed, not on economics or practicalities but on health grounds. Because of the potential for picking up diseases from the effluent which was another reason why Weston Creek was being replaced; because it didn't do a particularly good final treatment.

The Health people said, no, even though the salt content and the soils and the trees and everything, that's all okay, and the economics of getting it there seemed to be reasonable, you could end up still with potential health problems and they weren't prepared to give it the approval, so that was the end of that one.

And you mentioned there were another couple of projects.

There were a few others. We were attempting to .... CSIRO land use research at the time was attempting to classify land and classify it in a way that would enable people to develop predictions for productivity under various agricultural and other activities - grazing and so forth. They were putting a lot of work in on that. We had, in terms of pinus radiata plantations, we had a particularly good record of productivity on a variety of sites locally and they were interested, too, in extending their understanding from the traditional agricultural sorts of crops that they had a handle on into those areas like pinus radiata plantations - soft wood plantations generally - which were becoming important at the time because of the perceived deficiency in softwood production in Australia. Softwood in particular had already been identified nationally as a major deficiency, resulting in a very large import bill, and there was Commonwealth government incentives to the States being made available to encourage the planting, the establishment of plantations for softwood

production. There was a big expansion in softwood plantation establishment in the '60s and early '70s. There'd been a burst of planting in the '30s, at least in part for relief work for unemployed people. It was an interesting concept. New Zealand did the same thing and they ended up with a very large resource as a result of that and a very useful one. The Australian experience, I think, produced a bit less in total but was still very useful. So all those things were raising the questions of where do you put them and how well are they going to grow? - trying to predict what you were going to get out of it to enable you to get some notion of what sort of a total you might have in the end. It was never envisaged, I think, as an open ended thing. There was always some target in mind which was derived from somebody's, in the end, back-of-the-envelope calculation about how much you were using, how fast you could grow it, therefore how many acres you needed.

What areas was ACT Forests looking at to take over for plantation purposes?

Well, that was the nub. At that time there was a whole area to the south of the ACT which was and still is, [has] got eucalyptus forest on it - hardwood forest - that was being considered for conversion to *pinus radiata* plantation.

What area exactly is this?



This is the area around Boboyan. The area basically through from the southern border; the hilly country, hilling and rolling country from the southern border up to, basically, the Orroral Valley, so starting to get relatively high altitude but in terms of potential to grow, quite reasonable. It would have involved, of course, something which is an environmental no-no today and fortunately it never got that far. But what happened was, this project that Mark Edgerley was trying to get moving involved applying some economic analysis to some of these things. You can grow pine trees in a whole lot of different places. Whether you're ever going to make any money out of it, would be a question that involved practical things like distance to markets, logging difficulty, all those things that the straight biology doesn't recognise at all. So what I started out doing was working on a project that involved both the biological side, trying to predict from our experience so far, and the records so far, trying to predict basically for the whole of the ACT what the growth rate might be for plantations established on them and then going back through the financial records and seeing for a variety of country, a variety of terrains, variety of sites, how distance from market affected the residual value of the stand and how the terrain affected the logging difficulty, and put all that together and come up with a rating for all land in the ACT in terms of its economic performance as radiata plantation. We were able to do that. It was a lot of donkey work on just going back through old financial records. Some of them were in not real good shape but

fortunately businesslike financial records had been put in place just shortly before 1969 and they were actually up and running in real time, I think, in about '69 or '68.

Yes, I was about to ask, was this sort of rigorous economic approach ever tried before or was this the real beginning of it?

No, the rigorous economic approach had been tried before, probably not with the level of detail that had been done for this particular exercise. It was just the fortunate availability of the financial records and the way they were organised which enabled .... We were following the South Australian style of accounting. They were very forward looking and they'd already gone on to venture style accounting; ACT had followed mainly because Mark Edgerley had done all his work, training and what have you in South Australia.

So he was part of the South Australian mafia, as Lindsay Pryor calls it.

We had the records available but more importantly, they were organised in a way that you could use them for this sort of analysis, so I was lucky. Looking at it now, gee whiz, I just sat there and I got callouses on the end of my finger from punching one of these 'you beaut' calculating machines. We started off with a hand-cranked Passap[?] which was the

one that everybody took out to the field; we've still got it.

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BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B

We've still got it, out in a particular building out at Stromlo. They were a great machine. They would add and subtract and multiply and divide and then with the advent of electric ones, not electronic ones but electric calculating machines - they were will mechanical but driven by electric motors, so instead of winding a handle you had a motor that turned the works, just made them a little bit easier - that speeded things up. I can remember when I was doing some of this work a salesman lobbed in with an actual, fair dinkum electronic calculator and, oh gee, was that good! It wasn't programmable or anything. It was a desktop thing, like a big typewriter size thing, which would do what these little or half or less of what these little credit card calculators will do today and much slower and use a hell of a lot more power, but gee, it was an enormous improvement. I persuaded him to leave it so I could really get to understand it for about a fortnight. I did a lot of work in that fortnight. It was running red hot. We couldn't buy it because in those days, of course, even though we were attempting to operate as a separate entity, in fact all sorts of people had fingers in our particular pie. The public service was reluctant to divest itself of any power at all. They were

real centralists and it was a pretty uncomfortable sort of relationship sometimes. It got quite heated. Anyway, we got this massive project done and then I had to turn around and learn how to do the land use analysis that the CSIRO had set up and done, so I did that. They'd already done the Queanbeyan/Shoalhaven district which took in a little bit of the ACT, including a little bit of ACT Forests which was fortunate, and with their help I was able to extend the important - for forestry - elements of their analysis over the rest of the ACT. Drew up all the maps and then applied all that information to come up with a map showing where plantations in economic terms should be put, as well as having them in terms of biological suitability as well.

The CSIRO land use analysis, can you just explain what that consisted of?

It consisted of looking basically around air photo interpretation. You looked at terrain and patterns on terrain and after a while you could home in on particular patterns that repeated - terrain and terrain types and vegetation patterns. And you just drew lines around the edges of those and they were remarkably consistent in how different operators would come up with the same sort of analysis. It was quite useful. And then you went out and analysed systematically-derived samples of terrain on the field. The key to it was that if you recognised a particular pattern in one spot and you went and analysed on the ground, the detail there, if your analysis was good

enough and you recognised the same pattern on the air photo elsewhere you could confidently predict that the same sorts of details would apply in that area even though you didn't visit it, and that was a big step forward because that represented a massive improvement in efficiency and mapping basically and in analysis. It was a real good way of doing it. Nowadays they do it differently. They'll use satellite imagery and what have you to map on single characteristics and you can just pull as many together as you want and come up with any combination you want, but back in the '60s that sort of stuff wasn't available. Air photos were a pretty neat tool and they still are, but air photo interpretation was a big part of it.

So with the CSIRO land use data and your own economic data, you put them together and you produced a map showing where the best locations for plantations were in the ACT.

That's right, and we were able to take that to NCDC who were the Commonwealth authority that was responsible for the development of the ACT. No doubt anybody who talks about Canberra in those days will be talking about the NCDC. They were a big organisation and they did a terrific job - really good - and they had their planners and their landscapers were able to appreciate the logic and the commonsense in what we were proposing and we were able to have incorporated in the land use plan that was being developed in the early '70s, we were able to have our proposals incorporated and as

a result we ended up with the particular target that we wanted. One of the things that I should mention is that in the ACT there was a very specific target in mind for a softwood plantation estate. It was 40,000 acres or 16,000 hectares net of radiata plantation, based on an understanding of - and this is an understanding that Jacobs and Cole and so forth and the old foresters had had - of the likely productivity of the area and an estimate of what a reasonably viable industry might want in terms of input and the area that you would need to get that amount, and 40,000 acres was the target. And so fortunately at that time there was more than 40,000 acres of suitable country, economically viable country, that wasn't going to be built on. Fairly obviously Canberra itself has got top priority in the land use allocation. It didn't involve clearing of native forest.

I was going to ask about that.

That was another reason for looking, but which quite often impinged on what was seen as grazing of the day. So our tensions were here, not so much between native forest and plantation, which was the case in New South Wales where there was large scale conversion of native forest to pines, but at this time in the ACT there was very little native forest being converted, not much at all. The last bit was up Gibraltar Creek valley back in about '67 or something like that.

The map you produced then added up to an area of about 40,000 acres for pine plantation, including areas that were already under cultivation.

Yes, it actually was more than that. The objective was to offer to the planners some alternatives and in fact that's what we did.

How much was under pine plantation?

About a half. I think it was about 20,000, perhaps a little more, so it was the last half to a third. One of the interesting things was though it shifted emphasis from that piece in the south. As soon as you start looking at economics that bit in the south didn't make as much sense as some of the stuff up here, which might well have been of a lower growth rate but because of the reduced transport distance involved, in economic terms made a bit more sense.

So that's what saved the eucalypts in the southern part of the ACT.

I think it would be fair to say that there was already considerable resistance at that time to large-scale conversion and in the ACT it had probably gone further than it had in New South Wales or other places. South Australia, of course, never had a problem. They never had any native forest much that was available for conversion. Whatever forest they had had been cleared for agriculture years

before, so it was just green fields as far as they were concerned.

Did the NCDC follow pretty closely your recommendations as produced in your map?

Pretty well.

There were no major departures?

No, you see we were working pretty closely with them as well and in particular it was interesting the way we interacted with the landscapers. There was a bloke up there called Dick Clough. He was, I think, their first landscape architect and Dick had some particular ideas about landscape which we were able to incorporate in our planning. We started to consciously plan our plantations with landscape implications in mind in the very early '70s. In 1971 the plantation at Kowen was quite carefully laid out with landscape values in mind.

Do you mean aesthetic values?

Yep, the way it would look. The way it would offer opportunities for other uses like recreational uses and how it fitted in with the scale of the country and so on. That was interesting for us.

Was this all part of your work, your project work?



Not so much the broad definition of suitable land but certainly when we got to planning particular plantations it had a very, very big impact. It had an impact on the way we cultivated the land. We moved away from straight lines. If you look at the old plantations, they were laid out very much like orchards. It's easily seen from an air photo. If you look at the old road networks, the attempt was made to impose a rectangular road network - this is true for a lot of other things as well - but on country which really doesn't allow that. It's only when you have really dead flat country, like, say, around Conguroa[?] in New Zealand where you can get a rectangular grid. Some of the South Australian ones worked quite well with rectangular grids. Try that here, you end up with a thirty degree slope in the middle of your road or something like that very quickly and it's just nonsense, but it took a long while for foresters to, I think, incorporate an appreciation of how countries should affect their planning into their business.

Where did the impetus for this come from? Was it through the public pressure or was it from the NCDC?

No, I think we were leading at the time, certainly locally. We actively sought the input from the landscapers as to how to do it and they were very happy to do it and we always had that good relation all the way through. The British Forestry Commission had employed Sylvia Crowe[?], I can't remember just when, but she was a famous landscape

architect. I think it would be fair to say that foresters probably lost the plot a long time ago.

Sounds like a pun.

They were part of the scene at one stage of the game. At one stage of the game the early foresters had an appreciation of what a garden should like and what the whole thing should like, but when they started going for what we'll call 'industrial plantations' there was a little bit of unconcern about how they should look and it was simply a return to a kinder way of looking at the environment that we were doing. I don't think you could say it was new; it was simply a return to where we should have been. There was a period there where you went out and you planted pines; you put them in straight rows up hill, down dale; you pegged them all out and you paced them off, and all that sort of thing.

What do you think brought the change?

I think the teaching at the forestry school was certainly very forward looking. We had some very forward looking people. We were learning about the implications of what's called 'multiple use of forests' as a formal part of lectures back in the late '50s and early '60s. There was just no doubt at all that a forest was much more than a wood producing factory, if it ever was, and we were being shown how to handle the various elements that go to make up all

the productive potential that a forest has got. I think the staff at the forestry school and the tradition there should be .... It's a pretty proud one in that respect. There were other schools around that were doing it. Some of the North American schools were doing it but they certainly weren't lagging here.

Do you think the fact that Canberra and the ACT was the location, was a planned city, do you think that might have impacted or produced this forward outlook that ...?

It certainly was the case at that time, in the late '50s, early '60s and particularly in the late '60s. Certainly the planners were receptive to the notion that .... One of the problems was that people weren't ... landscape in those days meant a nice garden or something like that. The notion that a landscape could be thirty or forty thousand acres of mountainous country was a little bit foreign to a lot of people. We were in the position of being trained to think in those terms on that sort of scale, so on a few occasions, but only a few occasions, we were actually leading the landscapers a little bit in the way they were thinking about country - what was important and what wasn't; large scale things. We learnt heaps from them but I think they learnt something from us and it was a very useful relationship because it led into all the other things: all the recreational use which is so absolutely fundamental and vital in the local plantations around here. I mean, they're

a real hive of activity and at the time I joined ACT Forests they were physically closed and locked, trespassers were prosecuted sort of thing. Well, they were certainly asked to leave, I don't know whether they were ever prosecuted. But it wasn't until '67 that very tentatively and quietly they started to take the locks off at Stromlo Forest and put a picnic area - a picnic area in the middle of the forest! Our colleagues of the day thought we were nuts. They reckoned we'd lose the lot so quick it wouldn't be funny.

Colleagues in other States, do you mean?

Yes, our professional colleagues.

From what you were saying just prior to that it almost seems to me as though the planners had lost sight of the fact that - that's Canberra planners - had lost sight of the fact that forests had something to contribute to the aesthetic quality of the city and its site and it seems like the foresters and the forestry school in particular rediscovered it.

I think the landscapers we were talking to, not necessarily the planners, but the landscapers certainly appreciated the impact that pine plantations have in the local landscape, and indeed all the other exotics and massed plantings even of natives, the impact that that can have. It was a little bit harder to get the notion across to some other parts of the planning complex and certainly it was not always easy to

get it through the other parts of the department of the day; the Department of Interior and so forth. Some of the agricultural supporting groups around found it fairly difficult, not all of them but some individuals found it a bit hard to grasp that notion. That was an interesting sort of time. This was when environmental consciousness was starting to become widespread. It wasn't just a few academics or a few long-haired students any more, it was the whole community. So things like aesthetics and use of public land generally were being questioned and re-oriented and some people found it a bit hard to stay with that. Some foresters found it a bit hard to stay with that.

Who was responsible actually for opening up Stromlo and the other forests, do you know - and why?

Well, the why was not particularly strongly articulated I don't think, the who was certainly the forester in charge of the forest with the support of the supervising forestry officer of the day and that was Mark Edgerley. The who at Stromlo were, I guess, Jerry Cross and I'm not sure, I think Tony Fearnside, yes, I think Tony Fearnside was out there as well at that time, so it was pretty forward looking. It sounds such a small thing now but in those days to .... For a start what it involved was pretty much a conscious decision to contravene the ordinance. We all ran on these blooming ordinances which were introduced pretty much ad hoc depending on .... When they got a problem with people parking their bicycles on the lawns outside Kingston Post

Office, they introduced an ordinance to regulate it and that sort of stuff and the whole thing grew up like topsy. Originally plantations were regarded as an immensely valuable thing and an immensely sensitive thing, so they put a fence around it and you had to have a permit to do anything and then when you couldn't get a permit anyway .... And one of the things was that unless you had a permit and a good reason, you couldn't go in. You couldn't just wander in and enjoy it. So instead of changing the ordinances which would have been pretty much a revolution, we just sort of turned our back on them a bit. We never let legality get in the way of practicality and commonsense. So they were opened very quietly and much of the management of recreational use of public land generally until fairly recently has been of the same sort of doubtful legality. Except in those few areas which were proclaimed as recreation areas, you really had very few rights in this community. Fortunately nobody worried too much about that and we went ahead anyway. But if you looked at the strict legalities, you could have tied all sorts of people in all sorts of knots. It would have become quickly apparent that changes needed to be made, but with the fragmented nature of the administration of the ACT, with every government department around the place seeking to get a bit of the action; this group had their little power base that was built around, say, health; and this other group had a little power base built around something else. It was pretty damned difficult. So on the ground management tended to be

practical, pragmatic, ad hoc rather than something that in places was ...

Rule bound.

Yes. Well, not rule bound necessarily but rule enabled; they had enabling legislation. There was never any of that sort of stuff here. It was all restrictive, you couldn't do this, you couldn't do that. The Cotter valley, for instance, was in principle a prohibited area if you think about it for a good while - very strange.

Do you know how long the forests had been locked up?  
Was it virtually from the beginning?

Yes.

You just couldn't go in there.

No. I can imagine for the first few years that there weren't any ordinances around much at all but early on when they were starting to be established, they were mainly for the townscape. They were an attempt .... They resulted from an observation that certain parts of the ACT were already very poorly managed and particularly degraded. Mount Stromlo, for instance, was rabbit infested and eroding. The surrounds of the Cotter Dam had been very unwisely cleared for grazing and were eroding as a result.

The plantations were originally planted as much for land rehabilitation as they were for production.

That's an important point.

So in a sense I suppose you could say the ACT plantations have always been multiple use. They've always been multi-purpose certainly but they started to get tight with public access certainly in the post-war years and then after that from about '67 onwards, it was starting to open up again. And for a while there we were certainly amongst the leaders in developing recreational use in production areas.

Why did they tighten up just after the war?

I don't know. I think there were probably more people around. I've no idea but it's certainly my impression that .... I don't think the war had anything to do with it. I just think that in the post-war period there were more people around and there was a perception too that there was plenty of other places for them to go: why the hell should they go in and make a mess of the forest? That changed though. That was a bit of an aberration, certainly in the long term from now. From the early '70s onwards any new plantation has had quite detailed planning for recreational use. Some of the later ones at Uriarra, for instance, had campgrounds planned as part of the original planning and access trails and tying in with other parts of the outdoor recreation opportunity that was available in the ACT. So



you just wouldn't contemplate .... Certainly there's always been and still is, there'll always be the notion that you should discriminate against particular sorts of recreation that are likely to damage or can be demonstrated to damage the forest environment as a whole or impact unduly on other users. We've always had that at the back of the mind. So you can imagine the sort of thing. You wouldn't have tanks exercising through your young plantations; that's just crazy. Other forms of army activity, for instance - defence activity - yes, that's part of the routine. They have exercises but so long as their exercises don't impinge on the forest, they're like any other user, they can use it, no problem. But really when you get right down to it there are very few things that you need to keep out of the forest that .... as a result of their direct impact on the forest itself. Usually the uses that you want to keep out of forest or any other environment for that matter are uses which impact on other users. You can't have quiet picnicking with a car rally going through the middle of it. You can't have motorbike riding with horses around or runners; it's just crazy, it doesn't work. We found that out very quickly.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is tape 2 of an interview with Mr Ian Gordon, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on

16 August 1994 at the sound studio at the Australian War Memorial. Topics covered on this tape are the history of forests and forestry in the ACT.

Ian you were telling us about your work on working out plantation in the ACT. How long were you involved in this work? How many years did it take?

I guess it took about, off and on, it took about three years, I guess. It was a fair while.

This would have taken you up into the early '70s, I suppose.

No, I finished the final report in '69 and that was about the last thing I did before I shifted out to Stromlo as Assistant Forester out at Stromlo. I shifted out there in '69.

What were your duties out there?

They were Assistant Forester, so Tony Fearnside was the Forester at Stromlo. He was also the Chief Fire Control Officer for the ACT - Chief Bushfire Control Officer. That had been a tradition in that the Forester at Stromlo was also Chief Fire Control Officer. It was a convenient location, etc. So I had the job of, subject to Tony's direction, basically looking after the day to day and week to week running of Stromlo Forest, which was quite an

interesting sort of place to be because it was the first place in the ACT where we'd consciously done anything about recreation. It also had the nursery. We were centralising our nursery operations at that stage into a central nursery. I also lived out there. We shifted out at that time.

Whereabouts?

I was in the house next to Maurice Franklin and Sam Richardson; in between those two. It was a new house. I'd actually estapoled the floors before we moved in. We had some very happy times out there.

There must have been some interesting varieties of trees in the Stromlo Forest, too, dating from Weston's period, I guess.

Yes, there were. Unfortunately a lot of the early plantings got burnt in '52 with the big fire that came up from Murrumbidgee but there was a remnant. The *Pinus canariensis* up on top of Mount Stromlo - near the top of Mount Stromlo ...

Canary Islands Pine.

Yes. It had been planted in 1915 and about a quarter of a hectare survived. It got burnt but *Pinus canariensis* is a bit unusual in that it can survive considerable defoliation by fire whereas most of the other pines just die, so that

resprouted again. It sprouted again and we were able to keep that on the register and it's now on the register of significant trees and it's quite a feature.

Why was this type of pine originally grown, do you know?

Back then there was no wide experience with suiting particular trees to particular sites. There was a lot of intelligent guessing going on and some well-informed guessing going on. People would match climate and soil and aspect and so forth and suggest that species A should do well on this particular spot because it's a bit like what it was already growing on. But really that's of limited value when you're starting to look at something where absolute growth is quite important. They planted a whole variety of stuff up on Mount Stromlo and elsewhere. We should mention the arboreta, incidentally. On Mount Stromlo there wasn't the variety surviving the fire at least, there might well have been beforehand, but there wasn't the variety that had been developed in other places and while we've managed to hang on to some odds and sods of different species up there, basically Stromlo was a radiata block and that's about it. Some of the other forest areas have quite significant arboreta - that's a collection of trees. The most notable one that is fairly heavily visited simply because people are interested is the one out at Coree; Blundell's arboretum out .... That's a pretty nice place.

Were you involved in running this arboretum?

No, they were originally retained as an interest of what started off as the Forest Research Institute and became the Division of Forest Research at CSIRO but with their contraction in activity and concentration on particular lines, direct management of things like arboreta were outside their interest at this stage so ACT Forests took over management of those again.

When was that?

That was some years ago; probably effectively at least ten years ago, probably a bit more. In the late '70s basically they were starting to get out of it.

Just getting back to the Canary Islands pine, I'm quite intrigued that a pine that comes from the Canary Islands would be considered for planting in the ACT. You imagine that the two climates are just so totally different that I can't see why they would be introduced here.

I would have to say I don't know what the climate in the Canary Islands is like. I suppose it would have to be semi-Mediterranean-type thing. It certainly does well. It doesn't grow as fast as radiata but it seems to adapt very well to the local conditions. Mount Stromlo is not the only place it's been grown. It's been grown around in town in

Canberra. There are other places in Stromlo where it's grown and there are other Canary Island pines as driveway trees and what have you scattered over southern New South Wales; it's quite widely planted.

What do you know of the reasons for choosing radiata then? What do you know of where they come from?

Radiata comes from California basically. Mainly in California I think it has two occurrences, right on the coast and around Monterey; it's called Monterey Pine as an alternate name.

So quite small ....

Yes, very small, very isolated - and three islands off the coast. It's virtually a relict in North America; they certainly don't use it in any commercial sense.

That's interesting. What do the Americans use then?

For timber they use of whole variety of things: Douglas Fir, Western Yellow Pine, that's *Pinus ponderosa*; they use Spruce; they use the southern pines, loblolly and slash pine; they use the white pines, Eastern and Western White Pines; Sugar Pine; various other softwood species as well as their hardwood species which I suppose people tend to use more for cabinet work and the like.

I interrupted you ...

Yes, getting back to why radiata.

Yes, if the Americans aren't using it, it's only a few relict populations, how come ...?

It's not just Australia that's using it. New Zealand uses it. South Africa and East Africa have used it and South America have used it as well; all very successfully, so it's a very strange beast. Because it was just another tree basically that was available for use, it was planted in trial plots along with a whole lot of other species and it became apparent that over a wide variety of sites and quite considerable climatic variation - heavy rainfall variation - radiata pine just outperformed all the opposition. It's a very strange beast. It's got this very isolated occurrence and yet ...

In its native habitat.

In its native habitat and yet its potential is extraordinary. It grows well in Chile. It grows enormously well in New Zealand. There are huge trees there; much bigger than they grow in California.

It raises the question of why has the - this is a scientific question - why has apparently the range of this pine shrunk so much in its native North America

and yet it flourishes everywhere else? What's happened to it do you think?

I don't know. That's a duck out, isn't it?

No, but it's an honest answer.

I don't know is the short answer. You can speculate on all sorts of mechanisms why this should happen. The interesting one is that why it's retained this enormous potential for adaptation to a wide variety of sites and yet the sites on which it's currently occurring are very, very specific and quite circumscribed. Whatever the reasons for what it is we can be very grateful that we've got it because while Australia was reasonably well endowed with forests early on, most of them have gone under dairy farms and other sorts of farms and cities and that sort of stuff; but while it was reasonably well endowed it was always very poorly endowed with the softwoods, and softwoods in general have a much wider utility than our native hardwoods. Our native hardwoods are good for what they're good for but they don't have a wide variety of uses; they're not as easy to use. And so the reason for planting softwoods at all was simply to make up the perceived deficiency in softwoods that this country had. We did have some native softwoods and some of them are still grown on a plantation basis in Queensland and northern New South Wales, but basically there weren't very many. So radiata just popped out of the hat and the same thing happened locally. We had a whole string of trial



plots early on but in particular there are about a half a dozen surviving arboreta which are being maintained for their interest, and radiata is the equivalent of the best of the rest and quite often head and shoulders above the rest in all those things, right up to Piccadilly Arboretum which is right up - getting up pretty high where snow damage starts to be a bit of a problem. That's one thing that radiata doesn't handle particularly well is heavy snow. Some of the others handle it a lot better, so you get breakage and that sort of stuff.

Were any of the native softwoods trialled in this area, at all?

Not as far as I know. There are some examples of native softwoods that have been planted here. There's the Bunya[?] Pine of some historical significance sitting in the top of Kings Avenue somewhere, I think - or is it Commonwealth Avenue? And there are one or two others around. I'm not sure about Hoop Pine. There are other native conifers which grow locally, like the podocarp up in the high country here in the ACT but that's a sprawling vine rather than a tree. But no, they haven't been.

Do you think they'd flourish?

Oh, there's callitris, of course. Callitris, I forgot about that; that's the Cyprus Pine. It grew naturally here on the rocky slopes and hillsides mainly associated with river

valleys and the like or ridge tops here and there. They have been tried but they haven't done as well as the ...

This is the Cyprus?

Well, it's not a Cyprus really. I guess it's in that family or a related family but it's callitris [that's] its generic name. I have to be careful. The taxonomists keep on changing it. I call it 'callitris'; it might not be its proper name now. That's useful elsewhere. It grows pretty slowly and it's not really a proposition. You need fast growth. If you're growing into raising trees for wood production on a economic basis, you need fast growth pretty much regardless of the value of the end product, simply to beat the accumulated interest that it's involved in paying off an initial debt that you incur in establishing a plantation. If you don't get fast growth the sorts of ruling interest rates that you have to pay, just make it not a proposition at all, which is why areas with existing forests have so much economic advantage. They're there, you can start exploiting them straightaway, and the profits from exploitation pay for the costs of establishment straight off and you're not slugged with this enormous interest bill. There are other plantation species in Australia, there are other conifer species but there's a lot of native hardwood plantation being established now the techniques are available, so in future I can imagine there'll be a lot more hardwood plantation being established. It's certainly the case at the moment; there's a certain amount.

Getting back to your own career, you moved to Stromlo.  
How long did you remain at Stromlo for as Assistant Forester?

I was trying to think about that the other day actually; I'm lousy on dates. I went back into the head office again about '73 or '4 I guess, somewhere round about there.

What was that for?

I went back in to take over the assessment area which was basically the stocktaking area. You have to keep a track of how many, how much, how big, how fast, where are they? - this sort of thing.

Who did you take over from?

Bob Cruttwell.

Yes.

So I stayed there for quite some time - quite a while. That was my last experience of direct field forestry - was out at Stromlo.

Was that something to regret that you were stuck in the central office and didn't really get out very much?

Yes, that was a problem although a bit of ingenuity got you out often enough so you still retained some knowledge of what went on. At that stage of the game we were interacting with a whole lot of other government groups and I started to do a certain amount of that. But also, in the mid-'70s .... We had started off in the early '70s a large industry here, Integrated Forest Products, as it was called then; what is now the Brown and Dureau Mill and we needed to ensure that we were able to supply their requirements and to be able to sustain their requirements by adding to the total estate. The sale and the commitment to supply a certain amount of timber to Brown and Dureau, Integrated Forest Products, was predicated on completion of that 40,000 acre or 16,000 hectare target in a reasonable time. At that stage of the game we started to run into increasing difficulties in getting land made available for plantation establishment.

Where was the impediment or where were the obstacles?

It was a problem of not being able to get a decision effectively from some pretty cunning public servants, I think. We were fairly low down the totem pole and even though by the mid-'70s the NCDC had published their land use plan in which they, as part of their future plans, had designated certain areas for plantation forests, it was pretty damned hard to actually get your hands on it. The planning was done by the NCDC. The implementation, particularly, - at least the implementation in the rural, non-urban areas was done by the Department which was ...

Your department?

Yes, our department.

Which was?

The Department of Capital Territory at that stage of the game and that had a whole lot of elements in it which had no particular interest in plantation forestry. There was a very strong agriculture area. There was a whole bunch of other people who really had no particular interest in plantation forestry. We found it very difficult to be able to acquire land that had to be withdrawn from lease and it was difficult to withdraw .... Go back a bit. Because of the peculiar way that land was originally allocated in this district - this is pre-federation stuff - the old boundaries were rectangular and they ran up hill, down dale and they took no particular account of country. Our planning depended entirely on what the country was like: the terrain, the shape of it and so forth. Our boundaries tended to cut across tenure boundaries.

Didn't conform to those old boundaries.

No, they did not, so we might have decided that we wanted, say, five acres off the corner of this block here and there was the difficulty that that might have involved withdrawal of a whole big block because Fred Smith, grazier, could legitimately or sometimes illegitimately claim that he was

going to go broke if he lost this little corner and it was all or nothing, so usually it was nothing. We ended up in that sort of argument quite a lot. We ended up trying to suggest that grazing be rationalised and in those days talking rationalisation for people who were basically free enterprise oriented was just not real good either; it didn't go down very well. So we got into the situation where we - I'm not sure whether they have now, still - completed the total. So in the mid-'70s the problem became one of trying to identify how much we had exactly, how good it was, how much there was and so forth, and to bring the whole thing into a condition where it was making optimal growth. You start off with a radiata plantation usually with a lot more trees than you really want and periodically you thin them out. If you're lucky, you can sell those thinnings and make some money out of them. If you're not lucky, you may have to put them on the ground. Unfortunately in the '60s when we didn't have much of a market for small-size material, instead of cutting the trees down and leaving them on the ground which was other problems - you create a huge fire hazard and so forth - they were left standing. So a large part of the plantation estate, the middle age stuff, was grossly overstocked by the mid-'70s and we had a real decision to make about what we did with those. So that was one of the problems we got involved with. The other thing that we had was massive wind damage in '76, I think it was. We had something like 400 hectares of our ...

'74.

'74, there you are, thanks. '76 was something else. Actually when that happened we'd just completed laboriously an estimate of future availability of timber; I think about two weeks or three weeks - Graham McKenzie-Smith was involved with this - just before that wind throw event and we took it and chucked it in the bin and started again as a result of that. It was just really quite demoralising.

Which forest areas did it affect?

Mainly Uriarra and Pierce's Creek. They were old stands. It was stuff that was our highest value crop and, of course, we had to get in and cut it quickly to avoid deterioration. It took, actually, about two years to get it all out. That was really the bank of high quality material which we were going to just apportion over the coming years to keep the cream on top of the milk, so to speak, that the rest of the forest formed. That radically transformed the way we had to approach logging in the forest.

I suppose the people who were buying the logs would ...

They were perfectly happy.

They could see it all on the ground and they knew you had to get rid of it.

Yes. Well, we had to get it out in a hurry and it was pretty dangerous, certainly early on when they still hadn't

accommodated to their new orientation, horizontal orientation. The interesting thing is that very few of them actually died. They were overturned. They weren't uprooted, if you understand what I mean. They still had roots in contact with the ground which were functioning and their crowns were still functioning. So for two years we were still harvesting quite sound material out of it, whereas if you'd have cut them down in the conventional way and left them for two years, they would have been totally useless. But early on, you could imagine a tree forty metres high, quite a substantial tree, sometimes more, maybe seventy centimetres plus through at the butt with this huge plate of roots holding it up in the air, cutting that with a chainsaw with one end of the tree hanging up and this big plate of roots on the other end, that was pretty 'hairy' business because they used to spring all over the place because you couldn't tell which way the trees were tensioned. They didn't all fall exactly parallel, they were interlocked a bit. They were generally downwind, of course, but not every one fell exactly parallel with the other ones, so there was a real mess. Fortunately nobody got killed.

But there were some injuries.

There were some injuries.

Bad ones?



Not that I can recall. I think there were some bad frights. When you get something like that whizzing past you at a rate of knots because you've just cut it what turned out to be the wrong way, and it misses you, I can imagine the poor people cutting those trees - I wasn't involved in cutting them fortunately. I didn't then and still don't have that skill. Gee whiz, those blokes ....

Were these contractors who were cutting them?

Yes, they were contractors, all contractors.

Did you ever have any other major injuries or even fatalities in the time you worked in Forests?

We had injuries: cuts, bruises, sprains, that sort of stuff. There was nothing that .... We had on one occasion a chap who was in the fire tower had a burst artery in his head - he was only a young fellow - and that was notable for the fact that it was extremely difficult to get him out. He died later but it took hours to get him out because of the need to keep him horizontal and not to jar him around. To get him out of the fire tower was very difficult indeed. We were fortunate in that the ACT Fire Brigade had just, weeks before, taken delivery of one of their new ladder trucks and we were able to get that up to the tower and use it as a sort of a crane to get him out through one of the windows in the tower and then lower him gently down. All that was of no avail because he died; that was unfortunate. There have

been some pretty nasty cuts with chainsaws early on, as you would expect. Issues of personal safety have been addressed long since and the attempt has been made to make the workplace as safe as it can be. Your last ditch is protective clothing but fundamentally what you try and do is to actually train people to operate in a safe and sensible way. The move away from chainsaw falling to mechanised harvesters was a big one in terms of improving safety. Falling trees and cutting logs in the bush has always been a dangerous ....

When did this change occur?

That started ....

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Falling trees and cutting logs in the bush has always been a dangerous ....

When did this change occur?

That started about ten years ago and that made a lot of difference. Our own employees haven't been involved in direct logging for years, quite some time, and so they haven't been exposed to those particular hazards. There's still the hazards associated with fire fighting.

I was going to ask you whether you ever had any problems with fires in your period?

Yes, we have problems with fires; we've had burns. Just before I retired we had a fire actually in April which is pretty late for a damaging fire.

What year was this?

This was - I've got a rotten memory for dates. It was the one out at Pierce's Creek. It would have been '89, I suppose, '88. I'll have to chase that up. It was just shortly before I retired, anyway. I can remember that it was a windy day but nothing particular nasty, but locally, out at Pierce's Creek, the winds were absolute howling gale and a couple of days before we'd done a very carefully prepared and supervised burn, deliberate burn, to clear some debris for re-establishment and a day or two later this howling local wind came up and that damned fire got away and burnt all sorts of high value but young, non-salvageable plantation. We worked out that the replacement cost was going to be about a million dollars which was a lot to lose in a couple of hours.

How many hectares?

It took about close to 1,000 acres, that's about 400 hectares.

That's quite a burn.

Yes, it was the biggest one for a good many years in ACT forests.

And the biggest one you experienced in your time at ACT Forests.

Yes, the biggest one in plantation, yes.

You didn't have any other major disasters with fires or other trees or people?

No, we'd had others. We'd lost plantation earlier on; Majura Pines went back in the early '80s. We lost nearly all Boboyan plantation. They went but the total effect of those was not great. In the Majura Pines case they were pretty much mature and they were going to come down anyway very shortly, so we lost very little money on that. What we became conscious of with fires was the loss in nutrients off the site, which in our case is very important because what we are running are essentially degraded ex-grazing country and the loss of nutrients to the atmosphere in a big fire is quite significant and it really costs money to put them back in.

With fertilizers.

Yes, with fertilizers.

Apart from fires and high winds, what about other problems like rabbits, for example? Did you have much trouble with them?

Yes, we've had trouble with rabbits all the way through. They're just another factor in the environment. When people ask me what should they do if they're going to plant some trees, the first thing I say is get rid of the rabbits because they are sudden death. They really can cost you a huge amount of money because by the time you actually get a plant in the ground you've spent quite a considerable amount of money and if that plant then gets eaten, you're right back where you started from. So, yes, we had trouble with rabbits.

How did you control them in your period with ACT Forests?

Originally you tried to fence areas out with rabbit proof netting and then trap them; you had specialist trappers. More recently, utilising 'myxo'. You'd catch rabbits and inoculate them with myxo. More recently still we've been using a variety of methods: 1080 baiting in some areas; but probably the one that is most frequently used at the moment is to catch rabbits, get the fleas off them and introduce myxo via the fleas by putting the fleas in warrens and what have you. The method involves any way you can. It depends on the terrain. If you've got easy terrain which mostly plantations established in the ACT hasn't been all that

easy, it hasn't been all that difficult necessarily but it's certainly not the flat country. The real flat country is either prime grazing and agricultural land or it's got houses on it, so you don't get that. But generally you can use a combination and keep them under control sufficiently to get your trees up and away and rabbits are open country animals, they're not real forest dwellers, so once you've got your forest established - it doesn't matter whether it's a hardwood forest or a native forest or whatever - you don't get much in the way of rabbits in there. They might be around the edges but not actually in the forest.

Interestingly, they've never had a great deal of trouble with native animals here: wallabies and kangaroos and what have you. They can be a problem in other places, I gather, but we've never had a real problem with them here. Wombats periodically are a problem, not so much because they directly eat the plants but because they're like little bulldozers. They just keep on walking and if there's a fence in the way, well, bad luck, they go straight through it. And what's worse, they quite often don't come back the same way. That's usually only been a problem in those areas which are both rabbit invested and right alongside native forest areas where there's the large wombat populations. In general we've been pretty lucky. Sheep have given us a lot more trouble - stray sheep. Stray cattle. Hares every now and again. Sheep can be a real hassle if you get a mob of them - a hundred sheep in through a break in a fence

somewhere where you're up against grazing land - that can be a nuisance.

Yes, I've seen them wandering around Kowen fairly recently, too.

They're probably on agistment there; they're in by design because you can use them as lawnmowers as well and reduce the fire hazard, utilising sheep. One of the options for the future is to utilise grazing animals, not necessarily sheep but grazing animals, as an additional source of income underneath the forest; sort of called agro-forestry. It's the sort of thing that a lot of private owners are doing but locally here is run at a pretty low level, low intensity stuff, just grazing for the sake of getting rid of some of the competing vegetation but mainly fire hazard. Fine grass fuels which are particularly efficient in spreading fire. That's been a feature of ACT Forests for many years. It was certainly well established when I got here. I think they were using it in the very early days. As soon as the trees are up about one and a half to two metres you can put sheep back in and look after the grass and some of the shrubs, mainly grasses, very efficiently. It's quite useful.

With the losses from wind blows and fire and more particularly the obstruction you encountered from other departments in releasing land or allowing you to take land, were you able to keep up supplies of timber to the sawmill?

It's increasingly difficult. One of the hassles with supplying timber to the mills was that you necessarily have to produce a certain amount of small and rough material which the major industry was originally designed or intended to take.

The major industry being?

Being the Integrated Forest Products that originally was designed to take the full range of produce from the forest. In fact they never did and one of the difficulties was that the emphasis became very much on the medium to large size timber logs. As you would expect these are the most profitable ones to convert, easiest ones. They've got the broadest range of particular end uses and so on. So I think with the delays in getting the full estate established and the emphasis very much on the top end of the log market, I think that there are real difficulties in the long term in keep what's been a traditional supply available. In total, I think, the total's not too bad but I think in the end .... I don't know exactly what the current plans are but certainly I would expect to see a supply of something less than was originally envisaged as an interim measure at any rate, but I know that there are some pretty active attempts being made to recognise more widely the potential of the Canberra industry as a base for a wider district supply of logs. So as far as the industry is concerned a lot of the private plantations that were undertaken in the late '70s and early '80s, some of which are coming on stream now,



they'll be able to bring their logs for conversion into Canberra and that will alleviate the supply problems to the local industry. I think that ....

In this local area how much of the plantations are in private hands? How many hectares would you estimate?

In the ACT, of course, there's very little, almost nil. Outside within reasonable range .... The other player in the game is the New South Wales Forestry Commission. They've had plantations established at Tallaganda and a few other places, mainly Tallaganda, but I think there's about as much again in the district of which probably a good half would be in private hands. There's some large plantations down further towards the coast around Braidwood which were originally private and some of which had been bought by the New South Wales Forestry Commission some years back and there are some private ones still there. But there are other options for those. The other option is export, export as logs, initially, possibly export in other forms later on, so that the local industry particularly for the better class logs will need to be able to compete in terms of price to the producers for those logs, otherwise they'll go to the highest price which is what you'd expect. So it's going to be quite interesting. One of the things that made a difference a bit locally was the closing down of the plywood plant here. That started up in '71 and it finished about '89 or thereabouts.

Why did it close down?

Too many other players in the game. When they started off in '71 or thereabouts, I think there was only one other structural plywood producer in the country. There are now many others and, of course, New Zealand is a very strong competitor, so while initially they had a very good run, it got very tight competitively in recent years and it's old plant, old technology, so I think it became uneconomic to keep it running.

What grade of timber was being provided to the plywood factory?

It tended to be the larger, better logs. They certainly weren't the top of the line logs that you can produce with very intensive culture which ACT Forests has never attempted to produce really seriously because of the very high input involved, but they had a minimum size of, I think, it was about 300 millimetres or something like that that they could peel economically. They could peel smaller than that but it's probably not an economic proposition. They had an upper end as well of about 700 millimetres, I think; that's about the biggest they could handle, and they need to be reasonably straight, reasonably small branched and so on.

What was the relationship between the plywood factory and the Integrated Timber converting plant?

There was a plywood factor and a sawmill and planing mill and kilns and everything all on the same site.

And this was a private concern?

Yes, that was the group came in and started up in '71.

So they're still running but the plywood part of it has ceased?

The plywood part of it closed down. The sawn timber line is still going. The attempt was, as I explained before, to set up an integrated industry, meaning an industry that would be able to utilise in principle everything that the forest produced but, as I say, it didn't work out that way.

They wanted the better stuff because it was more money.

That's not surprising, is it?

Not at all. Getting back to you, anyway. You moved back into central office as Assessment Officer and how long were you Assessment Officer for?

I can't remember that. Isn't that terrible? Because I was never just that, I always doing other things, fronting for ACT Forests with the whole raft of different organisations. There were land use planning organisations. There were groups set up to work on legislation. Everything you can

think of. Contact with the planners, the formal planners, NCDC, that took up a bit of time.

What were relations like with the other parts of the department and with these other organisations?

Not bad, not bad at all. When you're working with other professionals you rarely had any great difficulties. The difficulties arose when people with particular fixed views or particular axes to grind. It's hard to point a finger at anything or certainly at anybody but there were times when it was a bit frustrating because you could see which way things should go and they weren't going that way and the reason they weren't going that way was not of your own doing. It was outside your control. I guess that's one of the difficulties about working in a public service organisation is that at least from the middle you've got responsibilities down the line but the great power that you need, the influence that you need to get it done is usually held onto pretty firmly further up the line. It's changing. It's changing heaps.

And not within ACT Forests.

No, up until very recently ACT Forests was subject to considerable control outside. There were attempts, for instance, just before I retired to set up a sort of quasi board of management. We had a review. We get reviewed regularly which is sometimes annoying but it's not often a

bad thing out and out. It can be fairly unproductive sometimes but every now and again you get something useful out of it. We, like everybody else in the public service, you get reviewed, it's part of the deal. One of the recommendations of one of the more recent reviews was that we had a board of management if we were attempting to run like a business which has been a stated aim and a hard fought for position ever since I joined the organisation. It wasn't me that did it but the organisation had been fighting for this literally for twenty years. We set up a board of management to which the organisation, the managing director equivalent being the Supervising Forestry Officer or the Chief Forestry Officer or whatever he happened to be called, the executive in charge of ACT Forests, would report at regular intervals in the same way that a managing director would report to the board of directors of a company. That was a useful exercise. It was, I guess, the last step in fitting the organisation as a truly business-like entity but it still didn't sit comfortably in a public service environment. In spite of all the noises about accountability and efficiency and effectiveness and so forth that people have made over the years, it's very difficult to get a policy area to operate along those lines. I don't know that it's necessarily the best way to do it anyway, but it suited ACT Forests.

In summary, how would you say ACT Forests managed in its negotiations with the Department or other parts of the public service or other organisations? Do you

think that they generally succeeded? It might have taken some time but did the Forests eventually succeed in their aims or were they generally frustrated? How would you see it?

I'd say they've survived because they're still here and they're still doing it. I think that it's a fact of life that they are a pretty small gun in a big battery and we noticed the lack of powerful people on our team on some interesting occasions where you'd get rolled. Every now and again you'd have a win and it would be unexpected and that would make you feel real good because the odds were the other way. But basically, for an organisation that has been consistently reducing in size through improvement in efficiency over the years - that's in size of numbers - and which has been decreasingly dependent on new funding, it tends to get sidelined a bit. You're not a budget item on anybody else's area of concern, so they're not overly worried about that. We'd have been better if we'd big debtors and big spenders and a lot less efficient than we were; we'd have attracted a lot more attention I think. Maybe that's a bit cynical but you can see some cases around. I reckon they've done pretty well over the years. Given a very tight availability of land, given the influence that purchasers of our material have had with successive governments and given for many years just a complete lack of understanding in other parts of the public service about what a business enterprise ought to be, I reckon the organisation has done pretty well.

On the subject of relations with other organisations, how did ACT Forests fare with environmental groups and, indeed, individuals?

We've had our critics but in general over the years ACT Forests has done remarkably well. It's had very little in the way of adverse criticism. It's had some. It's reacted to that.

What was the basis of the criticism?

Things like: we shouldn't have pine trees, we should be growing native trees, why aren't there any animals around? - that sort of level of criticism. Another level of criticism, which is probably more on the ball, criticising some of our practices. Some of the road work has not been particularly good. Some of it we've inherited from a previous age and it's a nuisance. It's not well located, not well sited, hard to maintain, contributes sediment to at least locals within the forest stream - there's very little comes out; that sort of stuff. Those issues have been addressed. Fundamentally there really hasn't been a lot of criticism of a sustainable nature and that's been the result, I know, of a conscious attempt to, over many years now, involve people's opinions initially, dating back from the late '60s to more recently, just people in general physically in planning and in some sorts of operational matters in the forests. The attempt was made to truly

integrate the forests into the community and I reckon the attempt has been pretty successful.

You said just a few minutes ago that some of the environmentalists wanted you to grow native forests instead of pines. You don't see that as a viable proposition on economic grounds or on biological grounds or both?

On economic grounds. There's nothing wrong with it biologically but it's question of the product that you produce and how much money you can make at it. Those are the two fundamental things.

So the basis of that criticism is that the people want these alien plants out and native species planted instead.

Yes, the same sort of criticism can be argued about wheat, oats, sugarcane, a whole lot of other crops around the place. Initially we suffered the same criticism of everybody else, the biological desert, monoculture and all that. That has not been really sustainable around here because we've never run our plantations as tight and as dark and as dank as some of them can be and they are really biological deserts - they're terrible. Fortunately very little of our stuff is like that.

END TAPE 2, SIDE B



BEGIN TAPE 3, SIDE A

Identification: this is tape 3 of an interview with Mr Ian Gordon, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 16 August 1994 at the sound studio at the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered on this tape are history of forests and forestry in the ACT.

Ian, what would you say were the major changes or the major change if there's only one in your whole period with ACT Forests? There weren't any?

Yes, just which were the major ones? I think a major change fairly early on was the capacity to present plantation forestry in the ACT in a rational, well planned way to other people who were trying to be rational about planning the ACT. That was a change? - yes, it was a change, certainly, but it was also a big step forward. That was quite something that I take considerable pride in because of my part in it. I guess other changes have been less dramatic and less of my own particular doing. The change from planting right to a particular acquisition boundary to planting to a planned boundary, I can take some credit for that one and that was a big change as well. In fact that was one that rang a few bells outside the ACT, as well, and I had considerable involvement in that. I guess forestry is not the sort of thing where you get revolutionary change, I don't think. You can get revolutionary type disasters. It generally evolves. It evolved from more or less an act of

faith in the early days. There was no real conception, I think, that it ought to be or would be an economically sensible investment opportunity for public funds, but it evolved to something where it certainly is an economically viable revenue for investment of public money and private money and that's evidenced by the amount of private plantation that has gone on. The change from the old rule of thumb type approaches to inventory, with no particular concept of precision to an inventory which is statistically based and with a precision that can be calculated and presented in a sound statistical way; that's a big step forward but that's more a result of evolution. Certainly what's evolved over the years has been a move away from walking to work to riding to work in a motor vehicle. Changes from ninety-nine per cent of the work being done by full-time employees to having most of the work done by contracting, has been an ongoing change over the years. But at this stage of the game if you compared with present position with the original position there would be an enormous difference, a big change. I guess the other big change that I can think of is - two other changes of an administrative nature, really. The change from Forestry and Timber Bureau to the Department of Capital Territory administrative is a big change. Another change which was long overdue was the integration into one group of all the land managers in the ACT - managers of public lands. That's City Parks, the reserves and major park type people and forest people and those people looking after agriculture and grazing on leased land. At one stage we all ended up in one

group and then because only ACT Forests was a quasi business another change came about which involved splitting ACT Forests off again, out of those groups with which it is most like into, of all places, the City Services group which was the last change that happened to us while I was there. That was made quite a pleasant change by the group of people that we found ourselves with. They knew nothing whatever about it but they were other professionals. They were engineers and good administrators and very quickly accommodated our peculiar quirks. We ended up with the library, too. The library was in that same group; a very disparate group and personally, from a personal point of view, in recent years they were the best couple of years of my career because they were very happy. Lots of things happened and I didn't expect to like this change particularly but as it turned out, because of the people involved, it went very well.

Looking back over your career can you say enjoyed your career in forestry and you felt you achieved things?

Oh yes, there were times when it was deadly dull and boring and you felt like kicking the whole thing out but every now and then something would happen and you'd find .... You'd think, oh well, I did something useful today, and that was good. One thing I can do is I can look around the ACT now and see my influence on the landscape, which is very satisfying.

Yes.

Just bits here and there, I can say, right, that's mine, that's mine, and likely to stay.

Yes, as you say, it must be very satisfying.

It is.

You have no regrets about retiring, though?

No, well, I'm still doing forestry. I'm in a group of eight people who have a 270 acre, 80 hectare plantation out at the other side of Captains Flat and we're producing high value timber. We planted it and nurtured it and we're pruning it now for production of high quality timber, and that keeps me reasonably busy and active and involved. I'm building a boat out of wood, of course, and that's about three quarters finished and that's all I've got time for at the moment, plus a bit of skiing and so forth.

You retired towards the end of the 1980s, did you?

Yes, 1991.

Did you remain Assessment Officer right up to the end there?

No, in the end I ended up, because of the administrative changes involved the last twelve/eighteen months, I was acting in charge of the group for a while, which introduced

me to another aspect of things entirely. I never saw the forest for weeks at time but I was interacting with quite an interesting group. We had another major review and the mill had closed down, the ply mill had closed down. It was a bit of a traumatic time for Forests but not ... if you had a long view of things it was just another change along the way.

Just to finish off. What do you see as the future of ACT Forests?

I think that providing they can keep the plantations productive and well managed, there's no reason why they can't continue to be a useful part of the local environment. I don't think that .... Privatisation has always been the first thing that people who come in to review ACT Forests think of, but I think it will never be reasonably a proposition for ACT Forests because of the multiplicity of values that they produce. It's not just timber, it's a whole lot of other things as well and they are very much in the public arena and I think they're likely to stay there. They may have other aspects of their operations contracted or whatever but in the end I think it's in the public interest to keep it in the public arena in a way that the garbage collection or the water supply is not. Land is a fundamental value, resource, that the community has got and I don't think in the end you can privatise that to the extent that they have in some other countries and still end up with a nice, happy, comfortable community. It's just too

fundamental for that. The individual services, the individual aspects of it, yes, you can privatise them, that's no problem.

That's a very interesting thought and I think it's probably a very good one to finish on, too. It's quite a good insight there. Anyway, I'd like to thank you, Ian, very much for coming along and sharing your experience, your views and so on. It's been very interesting, indeed.

Thank you, Brendan, it's a pleasure.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW