

A SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC HISTORY OF FORESTRY WITHIN THE ACT

Oral History Interviews

Transcript of Interview

with

Tony Fernside

conducted by

Brendan O'Keefe

at the

Australian War Memorial

on 29 September 1994

This project was carried out with the assistance of funds made available by the
ACT Government under the ACT Heritage Grants Program



ACT FORESTS

"More Than Just a Pine Forest"

ORAL HISTORY RECORDING

INTERVIEWER:	BRENDAN O'KEEFE
INTERVIEWEE:	TONY FEARNside
DATE:	29 SEPTEMBER 1994
SUBJECT:	ACT FORESTRY HISTORY
2 TAPES	1 Hour 51 minutes

BEGIN TAPE 1 SIDE A

Identification: This is tape 1 of an interview with Mr Tony Fearnside conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 29 September 1994 at the sound studio of the Australian War Memorial. The topics covered in this tape are the history of forests and forestry in the ACT. End of identification.

I'd like to welcome Mr Tony Fearnside to this interview and the first question that obviously occurs to me is that you are not from Australia originally, I take it.

No, I was born in Yorkshire and in those days we had to do national service and so I spent two years doing national service, some of it in Singapore, and after that I went to university to do forestry.

Which university was that?

This was called the University College of North Wales in those days, part of the University of Wales. And I think quite a few other people that came to Australia at that time were Bangor graduates. The University College is at Bangor in North Wales. But I wanted to do forestry from a very early age ... I think at about fifteen or nearly sixteen when I first wanted to do forestry, and I've been lucky

enough to be able to work in forestry ever since. The Singapore thing was important because it made me feel that I didn't want to work in England and so then all the time that I was doing my forestry training I was hell-bent on working overseas, if you look at it from an English person's perspective.

The Singapore interlude, I assume, was when you were doing your national service.

Yes.

This would have been in the mid-'50s or something like that.

Yes, '53 to '55.

And you went back to the UK then and how long was it before you decided to come to Australia?

Almost straight away. After graduating I hung around for about six months before I got on the boat and came to South Australia.

Why did you particularly choose Australia?

Well, first choice was actually Canada but in those days when I finally graduated the Canadian market was in recession and also the Hungarian Forestry School had been

taken en masse, after the Hungarian revolution, to Canada, so there were 200 of them looking for jobs. And then somebody put a letter on the Forestry noticeboard saying, 'If you're interested in working in South Australia, see me'. So I saw him and signed up. I didn't really care where I went, so long as I went somewhere. So I went to work in the south-east of South Australia.

And how long did you stay in the South Australian Forestry Service?

I arrived there in 1960, January 1960, and worked there until - it was early December 1965 when we came here.

What prompted the move to Canberra?

I got fed up with the South Australian Woods and Forestry Department.

Why?

Well, they didn't seem to be doing forestry as I thought it should be done. It was very much sticking pine trees in the ground and clearing native forests and no recognition given to anything else except production, and it wasn't a really very happy service in those days, either.

So I can assume from what you said that forestry was done in a way - in the ACT - that didn't take into account purely production aspects of

Well, that was the opportunity as I saw it. Not to write down the Woods and Forestry Department in those days because I think their practices as far as what they were doing were very good and there weren't any better practices in Australia. But anyway, one way and another I came here.

What position did you fill when you first arrived?

That's a bit complicated, too. In fact I got the job As a basis, I went to an Institute of Foresters conference in Hobart and during a break in the proceedings I went to the men's toilets and was asking one of the older people in the profession what it was like to work in Papua New Guinea because I'd just seen a job advertised there and somebody else overheard and said, 'Look, don't go to Papua New Guinea, I've got a better job for you in the ACT'. So that was the way it all started, really.

That must have been the most interesting interview you've ever had, I think.

I guess that was a pre-interview, to be fair. And also I had had applied originally for a job with the Forestry and Timber Bureau and I was actually appointed to that one day and promoted the next day to another job, so I had two

entries or three entries in a *Commonwealth Gazette* in successive weeks. Anyway, I came to Stromlo. What I really wanted to do was run a small forest of my own and the inducement was to come to run Stromlo Forest, but Stromlo Forest always had the Bushfire Council linked with it so the jobs went hand in hand.

Who was it actually that recruited you?

This was Mark Edgerley.

This was the conversation in the men's toilet

He was the Supervising Forestry Officer I was talking to Kelly McGrath who foresters will remember.

So you came to Canberra in 1965 and you became immediately manager of Stromlo.

Yes, the ACT Forests, as it's now known, had been reorganised. They had had a review and a Cabinet submission in 1964 and I think as a result of that Mark Edgerley was appointed as a director. He was appointed because they could see they had all these pine trees but they weren't being used for anything. So they wanted someone to come and develop an industry to use the wood that was growing here. I think that was the telling factor in his appointment. So then he had the job of recruiting people. He had a new

staff structure and the chance to replace some of the people that were leaving and to fill some new positions.

From what you were saying it sounds like this was a distinct move into a more production based use of the forests rather than aesthetic or water catchment management or something like that.

Certainly in those days we had two main roles, particularly if you were based at Stromlo, and that was fire protection - and we looked after everything in the rural side of the ACT - and then basically timber production. And in those days we used to lock up the forest. Fences were round the outside of the forests and they were all locked up.

So what did you find when you first arrived at Stromlo? What things did you feel should be done and weren't being done?

In those days we still didn't have the full staff that was being recruited so I actually looked after Pierce's Creek and Uriarra Forests, as well as Stromlo Forest, so in the early days I just ran around and got ready for the planting program. And then I didn't really take over the Bush Fire Council job for another year. A person called Ian Lamb ran it for the next two fire seasons, I suppose. It was 1967 when I became the Chief Fire Control Officer.

And was Edgerley in charge of all of this?

Yes, Edgerley was in charge of ACT Forests from about 1964 right up to when he left; I think it was 1981 when he left.

How did things go for you, particularly in Stromlo Forest in the years ...?

In the very early days it was a sort of 'sweetheart' and I was the 'new kid on the block' - that sort of sweetheart deal. There was plenty to do and I had plenty of ideas from South Australia. The experience I had in running a pine plantation there was very applicable to the sort of things we were doing here.

What sort of staff did you have to work for you?

I guess the most important person - the person who, I think, influenced my life in many ways was Maurice Franklin who was the overseer and also a Deputy Fire Control Officer. He was a mountain man really, and had worked at Bulls Head Forest and then not long before I arrived, he'd come to Stromlo Forest.

He's one of the people that I'm going to interview later as Maurice is on the list.

Yes, Maurice, if you can get him yarning is a particularly good person and he always had a very keen memory for when things happened.

I'll look forward to talking to him as well.

Give him my regards when you do, please.

I'll do that, certainly. You mentioned you were also in charge of Uriarra and Pierce's Creek when you first started. How long did that arrangement last for?

That lasted probably several months until we recruited John Pearson, also from South Australia.

How did you find the forestry practices in those forest areas?

They were reasonable, I think. The big difference between what I'd been doing in South Australia and here was in the roading that had to be done, particularly at Pierce's Creek and Uriarra, because in South Australia it's all very flat, sandy, dunny kind of country, so we never paid very much attention to roading, whereas here roads had to be constructed before the plantations. The logging, I thought, was a little bit amateurish compared to what we'd been doing in South Australia.

The logging was being carried out by contractors, I imagine.

Yes, and I think in those days we still had one horse working in the ACT.

Why were the logging practices amateurish?

I think it's all to do with the size of the industry and what's going on, and so in South Australia we had three big sawmills to supply and when I came here there were just a number of very small sawmills, so there was never any great incentive to perform. In fact if you did perform, you tended to choke up the sawmills with too many logs.

Did that change, though, when the smaller, older sawmills closed down?

Well, in fact they didn't close down. They were allowed to continue but they did bring in this bigger sawmill at Hume - this is Integrated Forests Products, as it's name was. And then of course that changed and we had to get more serious and have more serious logging plans and things. So when I came here we were growing a lot more timber than we were selling and it wasn't until IFP came along that we were able to sell as much timber as we were growing.

I'm interested - just getting back to the small sawmills. I thought they were basically driven out of business or closed down just before the big sawmill opened but you're saying they continued on operating in some sort of fashion for quite some time. Is that ...?

Yes, in fact the agreement was that none of them had to close down. I'm not quite sure whether that was written on

paper but it was certainly a verbal agreement, so all the little fellows were able to keep on And then, of course, it was just a question of scale and market and people getting older or, in one or two cases, poor management and they left as they went to the wall.

How did you get on with the logging contractors? How did you find them?

I got on quite well with them. I've always had a belief with contractors that there are some basic rules that they have to follow. Once they've followed that, you don't make life difficult for them. Really, particularly in logging as it was carried out in those days, and probably nowadays for all I know, you can make a contractor's life very, very difficult if you read in between the lines and apply the letter of the law harshly; it makes a lot of difference to the way he operates and probably influences profits. Whereas I felt I should not go out of my way to make it easy for them but at least to be consistent in things. Like, if you're marking trees, we always used to spray silver paint on the trees and if you put them all on the same side, at the same height, the person who's felling the trees can find them easily, but if they're on the different side he's got to go all around looking and when you're working hard and you're looking for the next tree and how you're going to fell it, it does make a bit of difference.

Who were the contractors when you were there?

Oh, now you're asking me There were quite a lot of Italians. There was the Rosin family who are still around. They were one of the three and there were two other, and then later on Hansen came in as a logging contractor, too. Sorry, I don't remember the names of the others.

You were saying also that when you came the ACT Forest Service was growing a lot more timber than it was actually using, so what was the surplus timber doing? Was it just not being cut?

Yes, just standing on the stump.

And if it's left, what happens?

Well, you can store timber on the stump to some extent but if it's not thinned there's a lot of competition for the available moisture and you get a lot of the dominant trees are surviving but the other trees in the stand are weakened and not so thrifty.

So eventually they'll die. You won't be able to use them or cut them to take them to the mill or anything like that.

You could in the next few years, yes, you could that, and some of the Stromlo plantings that were made in the 1940s were like that.

So when you and the 'new guard' I'll call it came in, the whole system changed around so that you were now supplying more timber than you could actually keep pace with demand. Is that what happened?

Yeah, the problem then became to make sure we didn't over cut.

Where was the demand coming from? Was this purely from the ACT or elsewhere?

Yes, this was once they started this Integrated Forests Products mill, IFP.

Yeah, which was supplying just to Canberra market or they were supplying ...?

No, it was always something that people like me couldn't understand. Canberra market was supplied from Victoria and South Australia and the way things were sold, our timber used to go up to Queensland. But it did have the advantage and the manager of the IFP mill told me on many occasions that it kept the market honest because if they were able to bring logs here and they had to sell them at a price or the sawn timber had to be sold at the same price as it could be produced here. And I just guess the way large organisations market their timber and possibly set up some sort of cartel, informally maybe without a written or even a spoken agreement, they just generally work in a certain way.

It doesn't seem particularly efficient to truck in the logs from Victoria, but timber that's grown in the ACT itself is shipped off to Queensland. It seems a very peculiar way to run an industry.

Yes, as I say, it always puzzled me. But I suppose if a small mill were operating in the Canberra area and decided to sell its products locally against someone who was already established here they could be subject to price wars and things like that. So I guess it was company marketing policy to sell the stuff somewhere else.

Does this system still operate?

I don't know.

My feeling is it doesn't but

Probably not, I think, because there's more timber being produced in Queensland now. But if you look at the way Queensland is operating, places like Cairns are expanding very, very rapidly and I can't see where they're getting the timber from, particularly as the logging in the rainforests has been closed down.

In 1967 you became President, is it? - of the Bushfire Council.

No, the Bushfire Council was a council, actually, and then it employed a Chief Fire Control Officer and a Deputy and eventually we increased it to two deputies, so I was the Chief Fire Control Officer. Now, a person called John Kellow had been the Chief Fire Control Officer for four years. He left to take up a job in fire research with what was then called the Forest Research Institute, and Ian Lamb sat in the chair, not as chairman of the council, for a year and then I took over.

Was this position simply looking over fire control in ACT Forests or was its brief much wider than that?

No, all the rural areas of the ACT.

So what did your duties entail in that position?

I suppose, there's two or three steps in Fire Protection. There's presuppression measures, publicity and then there's the actual suppression of fires and then making sure they don't flare up again afterwards. So, particularly the presuppression activities, making sure the equipment was ready, the crews were trained, fire towers were operated, and the thing that we used to run successfully in South Australia which I introduced here was a readiness according to the day's fire danger, and then we had an automatic standby roster depending on what was the forecast fire danger for the day; so that was one thing we brought in. Another thing I used to do was go around to the small rural

brigades and attend their meetings and see what sort of equipment needs they had and make sure they appointed fire controllers and deputy fire controllers. See, under the Bushfires Act - this is called the Careless Use of Fires' Ordinance - a person like me would have complete charge of any operations on a going fire. Or if I wasn't here the deputy chief would have the same role, or if he wasn't here the controller of forests with their separate fire districts, and if he wasn't there a deputy controller. So in the ordinance there's a sort of pecking order of who would be in charge.

Did you have any major fires to contend with in your period?

I did the job for seven years and it was frustrating for, maybe, four of those seven years - three at least - were very mild seasons.

Frustrating!

Yeah, we'd get ready for a fire and all that would happen would be rain. I guess two of them were severe fire seasons and the others would be sort of average.

Did you have any major losses in the forests with fires?

No, people used to tell me I was very lucky. I'm never sure whether to agree with them or not. I guess it was a certain amount of luck but there was a lot of preparedness and if you did have a fire, you'd plan what to do next, how to move in and make sure you had enough resources deployed to the fire, and then you'd move around the other, so that you covered up any gaps.

Did you feel that the equipment that was available both to you and to the bushfire brigades was adequate to the task?

No, it wasn't and I think everybody realised that. I was told long afterwards that they felt they never got any equipment until I came onto the scene which I think was probably fortuitous. I did make a mistake. When I took over there was a lot of equipment that hadn't been purchased for one reason or another and somehow or other the annual appropriation of funds was twice what it should have been; it had two years appropriation but I didn't ever spot that, so when I did the next year's one I just put the same figure in, so we got a doubling of what was going on. So that gave us a lot more knapsack sprays and as we retired the old vehicles, we passed them on to the rural brigades, and they were always very happy with that sort of approach.

Yes, that's the sort of mistake you want to make often. Who was funding the equipment, because I imagine it was pretty expensive?

That was all funded from Treasury to Bush Fire Council's vote.

You were Chief Fire Control Officer up until in 1974.

Yes.

Were you still during this period managing Stromlo or had you moved on?

I moved on during that period. So I was in charge of Stromlo - I don't know - for five years perhaps and then they reorganised the ACT Forests. It was called Forests Branch in those days or Forest Section. They always changed from one to another. And then they created, I think, the Field Services position which got me a promotion and put me in charge of planting operations and by that time we were responsible for management of the Cotter catchment and a little bit of research that we were doing. Also, by that time, we'd got more in to allowing the forest to be used for recreation.

Yes, I was going to come to that. We might as well keep on with that. How did you feel about this major change in the use of the forests? They'd more or less been locked away and then in the later part of the '60s, I think it was, the people started flooding in.

I don't know if they started flooding in but they started coming ... Stromlo was a place that they started to use and is the obvious place. We got some funds allocated to us to tidy it up and put barbecues in the forest which was sort of anathema to the old guard. They felt very strongly that any increase in public use would bring in a lot more fires but I never felt the same sort of fear. We experimented and opened the gates and devised what we called a 'the forest drive' which went from the Cotter Road through Stromlo Forest to where the Museum of Australia is, around about there, to about Glenloch Interchange.

Did the public use of the forests affect management in any other ways that you can think of?

Yes, the big thing was that we tended to spend more time on grading the tracks and roads. So you only had to do it once a year at the very most to keep them in reasonable condition for normal forest traffic but we found that we had to do them a bit more often.

And the fire hazard that the old guard felt may occur, that never eventuated?

I don't think so. I think it eventuated more from the increase of population anyway. There were more people around and kids would go away and be naughty and light fires in the pines and on Black Mountain. Aranda [was built] close to the Black Mountain and things like that. Surely,

there'd be a few but not very many, not as many as might have been expected.

How did you feel about this recreational use of the forest? Do you think it was a good thing for the image of the Forests Branch or Forest Service?

Yes, I think it was.

I get the impression it had been more or less hidden away and

Yeah, it was never a policy that came from the top. We ever had a Secretary of the Department saying, 'Open your forests and I'll come and have a drive in it. I've been to Europe and I've seen how people use European forests.' It came from beneath and therefore fund allocation and policies and things were never very clear. That doesn't mean to say we didn't do it without other people's knowledge because we certainly made sure that the people who were in charge at a higher level than the Branch knew what was going on.

You also mentioned that you were carrying out some research work, I think in the early '70s. What did this entail and what was the purpose of the research?

We looked at recreation use and how that was affecting the forest. And the other half of it was to do with silviculture and so we had quite a clever thinning trial

that we put in Kowen Forest, and also some work on fertilisers. You see, there was the big split that I suppose - was that '65 or '64 or thereabouts - forestry in the Commonwealth was under one organisation, the Forestry and Timber Bureau, and then it was decided to carve that up into four, so the Forestry School became the Forestry Department of the ANU and the FRI was moved out into a second separate organisation and eventually became the Division of Forest Research in CSIRO, and the policy making group was taken into the Department of Primary Industries and Energy, as it now is, and ACT Forests was put into Department of the Interior. I guess the others were a part of the Department of the Interior and they started to leave eventually.

So why were you doing your own research rather than getting CSIRO to?

Because we needed to get results This was applied research and so we needed to get our results quickly. No one in the FRI was interested if it wasn't part of their program and although some of their programs influenced what we were doing, we couldn't get them to directly work for us and there was no way in those days of funding them to do the research. And also, with a university and a forestry research organisation, you really needed someone to go around and pick the brains; all these fine students who wanted to do projects and fine scientists were interested to do work, so there was a lot of coordination anyway. So,

traditionally the ACT Forests had been getting its research done by another part of the old organisation and that continued to some extent but to pick up some of the things that we were doing that they weren't doing and it was necessary to get someone and we had a person called John Wood come and work with us. Also working with him was John Hicks. That was quite a nice period as we had a lot of problems to solve and we made a lot of progress in the early stages.

What were the problems that you set out to solve?

To know more about recreation use. So we looked at things like when they had car trials how it'd affect the roads that they worked on, visitor surveys and what people thought about the forest, what they liked about the forest.

What did that show up?

It showed that a lot of people like to come to the forest because they have a natural feeling. In fact a lot of people said they liked the forest 'because they're natural' and, of course, they couldn't be less natural.

Because they're an imported species.

I guess what they were trying to say was that they could get away from the city and the built environment and get easily into a smaller less spoilt environment. I think people have

changed. I think the population has changed since then and I think people, if they want to get away, wouldn't go into the pine forest to the same extent; they would go more into the hills nowadays. I guess there was a smaller population and it was more of an adventure to get up into the hills. And then we found out all the other activities that people were doing: walking dogs which is still a very popular thing; jogging; collecting firewood. And we were always surprised to find out how many people were overnighiting in the forest. We always found two or three people who had spent the night in the forest, which we never knew about and we certainly didn't encourage. It really wasn't quite legal that they should camp in the forest or sleep in their cars or anything like that.

The car rallies that were being held in the forests and their effect on the roads. What did your survey find in relation to that?

Not much, it tended to shift the soil from one side of the track to another but that wasn't particularly bad. I think it would be different if the rallies were run in wet conditions but we always told them that if there was very heavy rain they would have to cancel their rallies.

Were these rallies being held in all of the forests or just in a few?

No, they were held in all four forests.

The clever thinning trial that you mentioned in Kowen, what did this consist of and what was the aim of the project?

It was to try and find What we had decided to do was to do a non-commercial thinning, so we never ever had a market for small timber except a very specialised one for posts and poles. So we always had to try and grow our trees as quickly as we could so we could meet a sawmill market. But if you plant radiata pine with wide spacing, it will grow quickly in diameter but also its branches will be very heavy. So what we were trying to do was find the balance between wide spacing with heavy branching or narrow spacing with light branching. The idea was to have a series of plots thinned to different intensities, starting from no thinning at all where it would be planted at eight feet by eight feet spacing and then thinning it down to, I don't know, perhaps twenty by twenty for example. And then a range of thinnings so that there's one strip which started off unthinned and went in a series of plots to heavily thinned. There was a whole series in the middle and then it went down the other way on the other side and so the middle one was half-way between what we were looking at. It fairly quickly gave us an idea of what we should be thinning to.

These results, these became the standard by which you then planted and thinned?

Yes, and that sort of work made us expand our spacing so we didn't plant so closely together and gave us a good idea of how to do this non-commercial thinning and pruning. And when people didn't do it properly - someone who should better remain nameless - did it in Kowen forest. Later on we actually had to clear fell the forest earlier when we planted because it was getting too branchy.

From what you were saying there, that the planting was actually carried out by contractors, too, not by full-time employees of the Forestry Branch, or ACT Forests as they were called?

There'd be a mixture. But really when the planting season comes on you really want to get your trees planted as quickly as you can and that's a good example of a contracting situation, if you can get contractors who will do the job reliably. In the early days they used to let the forest workers take leave and do contracts and then somebody said that's not correct; you can work on a contract basis for your own boss. We lost a very valuable way[?] of people who had a vested interest in planting. If they planted a tree and they all died, fingers would be pointed. We had some very competent planters, I thought, and it was a pity when that happened. Then because we'd always had a contract planting system it's persisted right to this day, I think, whereas other organisations which didn't do that have gone into mechanised planting with planting machines, whereas ACT Forests even now calls contracts.

I think you said you were in charge of plantings from about the early '70s, so you would have been in charge of letting contracts to the planters and so on.

Yes.

No problems with them, generally speaking or perhaps the occasional ...?

No. You always have the hassles of the plants haven't been delivered to the right place on time or if somebody got tired and hid all his plants in a rabbit hole or something like that. I think it's true that the ACT Forests did have a habit of planting its trees well and that, I think, had come from the very early days.

During your time with ACT Forests were you only dealing with radiata or you were dealing with other pine species, as well?

Marginally with other species. We looked at them. When we had the recreation use developing we did try to plant a few other species to soften the impact of so much radiata but it was quite marginal.

And not commercially viable?

Well, some of the species that had been planted, particularly in the wet areas, have been commercially

viable, but *radiata* grows so well compared to all the others that they tend to get forgotten.

What were these other species, just as a matter of record?

There's Mexican pine, *Pinus patula*, which really requires a summer rainfall, whereas *radiata* requires a winter rainfall, so up in the hills it did quite well but often looks very miserable down on the plains. So that was one. We had a terrible legacy from earlier days of having *Pinus ponderosa*. Has anybody else talked about that?

Several people, with mixed feelings. Some have said it was okay if it were planted in the right spot and treated well but I think you've given your quite distinctive impression of it.

The story I heard about planting *ponderosas* When you're introducing a tree species it's terribly important to get the best one and nowadays there's computers and you get matching of climates and very careful collections. But in the '20s when this was introduced - and there's statements, if you look in the annual reports from the Forest and Timber Bureau, they said, 'We're not planting this common *radiata* pine, we're planting really good western yellow pine, this *Pinus ponderosa*.' So the story is that they paid somebody to go and collect seed. And in those days that was a big deal because New Zealand were involved as well as Australia.

This guy was sent out to where this *pinus ponderosa* grew and when he got there, so the story goes, he looked out of his hotel and saw acres and acres and acres of this, lots and lots of it. So he thought, well, I don't really need to get too involved in this, so he stayed in the pub and drank and had a good time whatever. And the day before he left or round about then he thought he'd better gather his pine seeds. So he got it from the nearest small trees and what happened was they'd just brought a bad strain of ponderosa in here. If you look in the arboreta you can find the same species from different places which have grown really well, but they just got this bad lot. It probably grew better than radiata would on the wet patches they planted it on but there's always been a bit of problem to Do we push it down and burn it? If so, what do we do with the mess afterwards, or do we try and find someone to buy it? It's always been a bit of a problem.

You've shed a different light on that. I wasn't aware of this bad strain coming in and being used; it's quite interesting. I was also going to ask you about the arboreta. Did you have much to do with them in your period with the Forests?

Not early on, more recently I've done a little bit with the arboreta and in fact I'm interested now in developing some sort of heritage values. So, the answer is no, in the early stages; in the early stages they will still be looked after by

the Forest Research Institute, anyway, and it wasn't till later on they were handed back to the ACT.

When was that?

That, I guess, would have been in the late '70s. I had several breaks in my ACT Forests career and the first one was in 1972-73 - 1972, I suppose or thereabouts anyway - when I had a nine-months leave of absence to study at the ANU and then I also had leave of absence from 1974 to 1976 to work in Nepal on the forestation project they had. And then I came back here and worked for two years again and then went back to Nepal and worked for FAO, which is the United Nations organisation, on a project then and then came back from that in 1981 and worked for about four years and then took up a contract with FAO from '85 to '88. And then came back, but came back to City Parks and then they had this first round of early retirements, 'golden handshakes', so I took that.

And never looked back.

I don't know if I have, if it's true or not. But I'd always wanted to branch out on my own. Well, not always; I was planning to do it anyway so when this came along it was a good opportunity.

You've had quite a few breaks from ACT Forests over the period. So the arboreta weren't terribly important to ACT Forests in the time you were there?

From the management point of view. Management was done by somebody else.

From any other point of view were they ...?

And then when they handed them, of course, they didn't really hand them over with a pot of money to look after them, so that made it a little bit of a problem. It's not an easy thing to do because they really need to be thinned otherwise they get overcrowded and unhealthy. But logging these days is done on a fairly large scale and these are all small plots so it's very difficult to get the logging contractors to thin them.

Did you find them of any value at all? - apart from their heritage value, I mean.

From the heritage value. I think at least, well, three or four of them are excellent arboreta and are world quality. If you want to go and study conifers that will grown in this climate, there's nothing else like them. Because their role, their scientific role, was finished many, many years ago when they were looking for alternatives to radiata and you know roughly what the alternatives are and how you might expect them to perform. After that, unless somebody comes

up with new species, which doesn't happen very often these days, their role is a little bit different. So it's more an education role, a slight scientific role and something that's there which has been created for a purpose which is no longer so pressing.

How are you going to develop the heritage values of the arboreta? What are you doing on that front?

Oh well, talking at the moment, but the trouble is I'm away so often. I had intentions of applying for a heritage grant but they had to be in while I was away and I just didn't have time to get my act together, and it really does involve talking to ACT Forests. I think a bit of awareness raising is still needed, so that's I think our next step would be to try and arouse awareness of what's there and how wonderful they are and then hopefully we can devise a system to manage them on a slightly different way and perhaps even get some grants so we can get a system running from, say, an ecotourism grant or something like that.

I think to some extent you may have been beaten to the punch because a colleague of mine, Matthew Higgins, is carrying out some historic work on them, including some interviews, but we might talk about that later, anyhow.

Yes, that's the problem of being away so much.

Another thing I wanted to ask you about is native forests. When you were with ACT Forests was there any logging of native forests?

Yes, when I first came there was a little bit of logging. That would have gone on till 1967, I suppose.

Where was that?

There may have been a little bit coming from the Bulls Head area, I'm not sure about that, but most of it would have been coming from Tidbinbilla or the area they were clearing to plant pines, because still in those days they were clearing the native forests to plant trees, and so any loggable material was brought and sold to the government sawmill.

Not a great deal of it, though, you don't think - and it stopped in '67.

Enough to keep the government sawmill running.

Around this period ACT Forests lost control of Tidbinbilla, if I remember correctly. Was this a It may have been just before your time, I think.

Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve must have started about then, it may have been just before. I'm not sure why you say 'lost control of it', but the management of the Tidbinbilla Nature

Reserve, as it became known, was passed on to the Ag and Stock Section - Agriculture and Stock Section - which eventually became As it developed it became Parks and Conservation Service and all the parts thereof.

Had ACT Forests had visions of putting in further pine plantations in the Tidbinbilla area?

It may have done, I don't know for certain. I don't think it ever had What we had to do You see, that Cabinet decision of 1964 was very important because it reaffirmed the policy of establishing 40,000 hectares. The earlier decision was to plant 20,000 and they doubled it but they said, 'You can go on to your target but what's the point of planting all these trees, if you're not going to fell them?' so the target was reaffirmed. So 40,000 hectares provided you established an industry to use the wood that you were going to grow. So that's been the benchmark for the pine plantation activities; 14,000 hectares translates to 16,250 hectares and that's what people talk about these days.

So they're following the '64 Cabinet decision. You come in and this whole new guard come in. Who else was in it by the way? - the new people that came in at this time.

The people who came in at that time were Ian Gordon, Ian McLeod, John Pearson; I think those were the main ones.

People that came in at the Class 2 level, so that people like Ron Murray and John Pearson and myself, and then the people that came at the Class 1 level were Ian Gordon and Ian McLeod and there was another Ian, Ian Currie, who was based at Uriarra.

Were most of these people Australian graduates or was there a sprinkling of overseas graduates like yourself?

I think John Pearson and ... Bob Cruttwell was already here. Bob was an Edinburgh graduate, I think. John Pearson and I were both from Bangor. John was a bit older than I was.

Okay, during this period ...

Just to think about the plantation area, the big thing then was to get NCDC to agree to an area to plant and once they'd found the hectares for us that became our plan.

Which areas did they ...?

Previously they'd done a survey at Boboyan and they concluded that there was 2,000 or whatever hectares down there that were suitable for planting and they continued on the Tidbinbilla side. When they did involve NCDC, the NCDC came up with more areas around Stromlo, so the planting along the Cotter Road, for instance, and some at the back of Stromlo was added to the Stromlo Forest; more area to the east of Kowen was also located. Once that happened we had a

planting target of land to aim for and the land near Tharwa also came in that period.

How long did it take for ACT Forests to move from its 20,000 up to 40,000 target?

I guess that was an overnight decision, but to achieve its target? To achieve its target, that's a good question. I suppose it would be the late '70s when it finally got there and then reached a steady state where any planting would be done on land which had already had one or possibly more than crops of pines on it.

So you're looking at about twelve or more years before the whole

Yes, so we had a fairly big planting program at that stage, for us anyway.

It would work out at a few thousand hectares per year?

Yes.

That's quite a bit. And there were no great problems with these plantings? There were no setbacks? I think you mentioned at one point that somebody planted the pines too close together.

That was historic, I think. In the early days radiata was planted at a ten by ten or twelve by twelve foot spacing and then they appointed Cyril Cole to be the Supervising Forestry Officer and he was a South Australian and he brought South Australian practice which was an eight by eight spacing, so when he came which was around about 1930, I suppose, then there was a change in spacing, so all the older plantation you could see, that were planted in the late 1920s were nice and wide. After that they became eight by eight spacing and then after that we got a little bit interested in what was going on.

And this precipitated that research project of thinning.

Yes, and previous to that we'd somebody called John Way[?] who'd been to New Zealand and had a look and he came back and said, 'We'll have to plant wider and do non-commercial thinning'.

What was the eight by eight spacing based on in South Australia? Was that purely South Australian conditions or was there some other reason for it, do you think?

No, I think they found that they grew ... again the balance between too close and too wide and, of course, they were able to develop a pulp mill, a paper mill, so it didn't matter so much for that.

END TAPE 1, SIDE B

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE A

Identification: this is tape 2 of an interview with Mr Tony Fearnside, conducted by Brendan O'Keefe, recorded on 29 September 1994 at the sound studio at the Australian War Memorial. Topics covered on this tape are history of forests and forestry in the ACT. End of identification.

Just to continue on, during your period with Forests, Tony, did you suffer any major disasters from ... well, we've touched on fires already and you've said nothing major occurred at least while you were Chief Fire Controller, but fires or severe winds or any other problems of that nature that led to significant loss of timber.

Maybe we should go back over the fires just briefly. There were two notable fires: one was the Walks Camp fire and that was way up in the Cotter and we never really established how it started. It probably was an electrical line fault.

When was this, by the way?

If you're looking at severe fire seasons, they run in thirteen-year cycles, so '65 is about that fire season - '78

- so there's one in between, so it wasn't in that particular cycle. I don't know, '69 perhaps, around about there. That was a tricky fire because it really had the I think while I was Chief Fire Controller Officer it was the only what you might call a 'campaign fire' which was going to go on for days and take a lot of people. I think we were lucky that we had had some disaster preparedness training and we were prepared for a big fire, and I think we were very lucky to hold it, and we certainly held it on a day of extreme fire danger but we were assisted because it was on the lee side of the hill. Afterwards Alan McArthur who was the 'guru' of fire fighting research said this was one of the few fires that had been held. Normally if they started up there in those conditions, they finished up out of the ACT on the coast, so I felt really pleased with the results there; but also had to acknowledge we were lucky that it was on that side of the hill. The other one was a fire which would have been after that in Jervis Bay which burnt a lot of the native forest in Jervis Bay and threatened the - when the wind changed I went down there - and threatened the botanic gardens annex down there. We were just sitting there and suddenly Fred McCarroll who was the overseer down there said, 'The winds changed, we'd better do something about it'. So we raced off and I had a vehicle so I got there first. I had these fusees which are matches with a longer and rather bigger head than the ordinary match. We just strike them and throw them on the ground. So I walked along the little track just outside the botanic gardens annex lighting what was in fact a back burn because flames

came up and they just burnt each other out. Possibly I saved the annex, I don't know. That was two major fire stories. There was a Kowen Gorge fire as well.

When was the Jervis Bay one?

That would have been after the Warks Camp fire, I suppose. I think the big disaster we had was the wind blow and there again I can't remember the dates.

I think that was '74.

'74, yes, exactly, because I left to work in Nepal in November '74, so they had the wind blow and didn't seem to be doing much about it when I left, but by the time I came back it was all history. And that was a lesson for how to attack forests in a wind-prone area. They say it's unusual conditions, of course, because it had rained and those soils puddle up and there's nothing for the ... it just goes like porridge and there's nothing for the roots to hang on to. What we'd done, we'd started felling on the windward side, so you get a block of trees, they form their own protection, so what you should start is on the leeward side and that was basically the mistake there. But in the end they salvaged most of the timber and that's to their credit, I think, that they managed to do it. The sawmills had a bit of a bonanza because they got bigger trees than they normally would and it's easier to get a profit out of a big tree than small one. So I was on the periphery of it when it started and

went away to avoid all the hard work and came back to find it was just about salvaged.

Did you ever have any major injuries or even fatalities with people working in the forests or even people using it for recreational purposes?

I don't recall any recreational accidents, certainly not in my period; although in the early stages a lot of - not a lot of people - before we opened the forests they were used for suicides and car stripping. There were certainly a couple of suicides in Stromlo Forest. Our accidents record in ACT Forests wasn't very good in those days and in what? - the early '80s - we seriously looked at ... and Gary Costen was a person who was very influential in this, looked at our accident record and had a long term approach to improving our safety record. And they did very successfully but it took rather longer than I expected.

What was the problem? Why was the rate of accidents so high?

I think it was just working habits, and I think it looked worse than it was because people would go on 'compo' quite easily and recognise the I think one of the problems really was that we had a generation of gangers who weren't safety conscious. The early people didn't need to be safety conscious because they were boys that were born and bred in the bush and they knew all about saws and trees falling down

and things like that. When we expanded our work force we got people coming from the city and they didn't have the same feeling for what's going on. There was one particular bad one where somebody was felling a tree and it fell backwards onto him and instead of stepping aside and letting it fall he tried to stop it and collapsed his spine, and that was a bit of a problem from them, particularly as the guy wanted to keep on working. If he'd been happy to go and spend the rest of his days at home, it probably wouldn't have been quite so obvious. I don't remember any deaths. I do remember somebody dying of a seizure - would it be a seizure? He had a clot on the brain - a stroke. He was in the Kowen fire tower at the time and that was fairly unnerving.

I think somebody else talked about that, and had quite a problem evacuating him from the tower.

That's the sort of thing. There's a history of strokes in his family and I think he realised that probably that would be the way he'd die. His voice on the radio had just said, 'I'm feeling sick' and drained off and then we rushed up to see what had happened. I think in that situation if you get somebody to hospital to a specialist who knows exactly what to do within minutes life can be saved but otherwise it's not possible.

You mentioned a few minutes ago in relation to fires that the bad bushfire seasons were occurring in

thirteen year cycles. Was that just a coincidental ...?

I think if you look at it nowadays people can relate dry periods in this part of Australia to the El Nino effect but in those days we didn't know about that and it's true that, I think, 1913 was a bad fire season and 1926 was and 1939 certainly was and then the next one after that would be '52. That was a bad fire season. That was the year that part of Stromlo Forest was burnt down. That was 5 February 1952. And then '65 was a drought year. We didn't have a bad fire season in the ACT in terms of losses. By the time the '78 one came around I'd stopped being a fire control officer, anyway, but if memory is correct then that was the year that Cliff Parsons, who was then the Fire Control Officer, had a lot of problems.

That's interesting that thirteen year cycle. I wonder how far into the past you could extend it.

I think it gets a little vague if you go back beyond 1900 and 1887; it starts to be a little bit vague after that. But certainly through the first half of this century it seemed to hold true.

That's very interesting, indeed. The reason I'm interested is I read one Lindsay Pryor's early articles on bushfires in this region and he did a study on

snowgums and was able to trace bad fire seasons back to the 1860s, I think, from memory.

John Banks who is someone who has worked on the same sort of things.

During your period obviously you had no real major disasters apart from the wind blow which was the '74 wind blow, so harvesting went on fairly smoothly. What sort of area or what sort of quantity of timber were you felling per year? Can you recall?

Well, the quantity of timber, we were logging, I think, about 180,000 cubic metres which is about the same as 180,000 tonnes, half of which would go to IFP and of that a third would go into the veneer mill and then the rest would go into the various small mills but particularly when it was making tile battens owned by Monier that was the second biggest purchaser.

What was the veneer mill?

That was at IFP, and so they had a plywood factory there - made industrial grade ply.

The pines that were planted when you first started there, when the expansion occurred from twenty to forty thousand hectares, would they be coming up to harvesting time now?

Certainly. Nowadays, of course, we don't particularly have an age - say when they get to an age we must clear fell them. We tend to see how much timber is going to be harvested for a year and work out which area is going to be thinned and which area is going to be clear felled to meet that target, so sometimes it can be as young as twenty-five, particularly in the wetter parts of the ACT we tend to have shorter rotations than in the drier parts.

So some of the pines that were planted when you first started would have been felled in the last few years, from about 1990 onward.

Yes, some of the ones that were planted in the middle and late '60s at Tidbinbilla and a little bit at Uriarra would now be clear felled. In particular we started the Boboyan planting scheme; I think 1966, '66 or '67 we started down there and they never lived up to expectations. I think one of the mistakes they made, they'd assumed that the rainfall was much higher down there than it is really is and, of course, it's colder and drier, and also, at least in some areas, there were problems with boron deficiency which, I think, is a big thing in ACT Forests. And then there was a decision to just grow the pines until they could be harvested and return it to conservation purposes, natural forests, which now is about to happen, I think. So I think that was interesting that we started down there and worked down there. I think people got talked out of them a little bit easily. I think if you're going to decide at the end of

the rotation that you're going to quit, you don't then do nothing to the pines. I think it's still a good thing to do your non-commercial thinning and your pruning and, above all, we should have been treating them with boron, I think, and I think we'd have got a better return out of it, so I don't think, I must say, the best series of decisions were taken in that case.

In the first few years that you were with Forests were you obtaining logs mainly by thinning or was clear felling being carried out or a mixture?

In the early years before IFP started, I think it would be mainly thinnings. I don't remember any clear felling but that would have been on Uriarra and Pierce's Creek forests which by that time was more John Pearson's area of responsibility.

How did you find the quality of the existing pine plantations? You mentioned before, we talked before about they were planted too close together in the early days but what was the quality of the timber produced by the ...?

We've always felt the quality was good because it's fairly harsh climate and and they get a little bit denser wood in this sort of situation, so we've always told people and believe that our radiata pine was a bit stronger and a bit better than other peoples and I've never seen anything to

suggest that that's wrong. I believe the myth, anyway, if it is a myth.

I was going to ask you how did you know?

It makes sense scientifically. It's very difficult to prove it. You've got to go and weigh samples of timber and things like that.

In a way it makes it all the more strange that you import stuff from Victoria and New South Wales and send the local stuff up to Queensland.

Sure, that sort of thing is all about corporate marketing.

Another thing you mentioned and I really haven't touched on this at all in the interview so far is Jervis Bay. It's rated a mention here and there but I would just like to find out what you had to do with the Jervis Bay area and how you felt about it in general.

I think my big feeling about Jervis Bay is its historical importance and the same applies to ACT Forests and this is something that isn't terribly well known. I guess in the '20s radiata pine had been planted around Australia and there was a big backlash against it because some of the plantations in Victoria and New South Wales hadn't succeeded very well; they were planted on the wrong sites, particularly northern New South Wales where they don't have

the winter rainfall. South Australia and the ACT continued with radiata pine plantings and they felt convinced that radiata pine was important, and if you look nowadays at how many hectares - we've got a million hectares of plantations in Australia now, three quarters of which is radiata pine - is correct. And so historically because they could continue their planting in the ACT it proved a point that radiata could be successful and that contribution is something which isn't well known. There's a rather similar state of affairs at Jervis Bay where on those coastal sands some people had grown trees and they'd failed and they found a way or locations at Jervis Bay of growing radiata pine successfully. It grew rather faster than here; it had a milder climate. In some places where the soils weren't suitable, of course, it didn't grow at all but generally speaking we had a nice little operation going down there, but it was never matched by any successful plantations nearby and didn't then become part of a resource for that part of the world which is, I think, a little bit obvious now if you Any timber for house building in that part of New South Wales has got to be imported rather than being grown locally. There was an opportunity to establish a timber industry there which went begging, perhaps because the private operators couldn't take it up. And then of course the decision was to quit those plantations, too. You couldn't really argue with the logic of it because there was no real industry; the plantations weren't part of an

industry at all - stuck out on their own and likely to be not very profitable because of their small scale.

What sort of area was planted with pine in Jervis Bay?

I'd have to guess that. It would be just a few thousand hectares - two or three thousand.

Which part of Jervis Bay?

There are two areas. There's Hole in the Wall area and then the other one I'm not sure of. I'd have to go down there and remember everything.

But I take it there would have been no mill or anything nearby?

There was a small mill at, I think, it's Bomaderry and it was possible to get some of our logs milled there, although in the end that mill was closed down and all the other mills were hardwood mills, so they brought most of the logs to the ACT.

Why were the pines first planted there?

That again was a similar sort of situation - to prove it could be done and that was the important pine; that if you picked your sites carefully, you could in fact grow pines on those.

And what period was this that these plantings occurred?

I guess it started late '40s or early '50s would be when they started.

Were they ever cut in any sort of way or even thinned?

I think there was a little bit of thinning. Yes, I'm sure there was a little bit of thinning and then it was decided to quit, well, I think then there would have been clear felling.

Right, so they're no longer there, at all.

As far as I know they're all felled now and it's been returned to native forest.

I wasn't aware of what had occurred down there. When actually was it decided to get out of Jervis Bay?

I think that must have been one of the periods when I wasn't here, so that could have been in the late '80s.

You've mentioned that you went to Nepal. How did your experience in ACT Forests fit you for work in Nepal or indeed other parts of the world?

I think probably with the Bushfire Council I got in the habit of dealing with people. Most foresters live in their

own forest and deal with their own workforce and their own contractors and don't need to speak to the public. The Bushfire Council was quite different because it had to cooperate with local farmers. I think that helped me, and, of course, the Nepal project in those days was an afforestation project even though we were dealing with growing eucalypts in tubes, polythene tubes, and all our work here is radiata pine in what we call open rooted situations. Afforestation is afforestation so that was the sort of thing. I think the other thing that helped me was not the ACT Forests but the natural forests there, of course, are Indo-European and there are similar types to what I'd been used to in England.

So there was no *Pinus radiata*?

No, we tried it and Nepal has got a summer rainfall and it failed quite markedly.

One other thing I wanted to ask was about pests, for example rabbits and pigs and so on in the forests. Did you have much a problem with these sort of introduced animal species?

Well, we tried certainly to reduce the pig population on the Cotter catchment with pig traps. We felt that we reduced the population. Goats we had and we shot those from an aerial platform - that's another word for a helicopter.

Were there that many feral goats in the area?

Yes, I think a population in hundreds and that upset the Canberra bow hunters who liked to go out and hunt them for themselves which could be rather fun. Horses, we had a few feral horses. I don't know whether you'd call them brumbies or not, certainly the horse lovers did.

Which areas were they in, Tony?

There were some up in the head of the Cotter and some near Gibraltar Flats. People used to like to go and see what they thought of as wild horses at Gibraltar. Then after the Namadgi Park was declared, day to day management was done by the Parks and Conservation Service and its predecessors rather than by the Forests Branch or Section. So they were the main things. Rabbits, during the period that I worked with ACT Forests myxomatosis had been very successful in clearing out the rabbits, so we never really had a rabbit problem in those days.

What did you do with the pigs? Did you just shoot them or ...?

Pigs we trapped and there were other people who would go and hunt them. The Uriarra forestry workers would have good pig dogs which would go and catch a pig and hold it by its ear until you could catch it. So that was always a bit of a sport for

Were they a big problem, the wild pigs?

In localised areas because they tend to eat the underground parts of plants they like which would grow around swamps. So if you're looking at a catchment management or a conservation program, then they can destroy the swamp vegetation and change the kind of hydrology and the under-vegetation. And horses could do that too. They would trample around these upland swamps and, of course, that was the start of this where all the water used to come from and once you'd changed that you'd perhaps get a quicker run-off in the lower reaches of the stream and they'd cut down their beds because the water was running faster.

This relates to the management of the Cotter, in particular.

Yes.

What other management problems were there with the Cotter?

There's always discussion about whether people could enter and use it for recreation. What we did, we introduced a permit system for going in because in those days the Health people said that we should keep it as a closed catchment and we believed that, although if you look at, the risk is very, very low. Waterborne diseases, you can say, in theory somebody could come to one of the overseas embassies and go

recreating in the Cotter and bring typhoid or whatever into the ACT. It's not very likely I don't think but, anyway, that was the strategy that we followed and it was on the advice of what is now the ACT Electricity and Water people, that we followed that policy. Our official strategy policy was a closed catchment but in reality we never prevented people from going there, so again it was a policy which wasn't a good policy and therefore wasn't enforced.

By the time you were involved with the Cotter, I suppose the catchment areas had been forested and there wasn't the earlier problem of run-off of soil and so on into the stream.

Before I came here the problem was sedimentation into the Cotter river because in those days the Cotter Dam was the only source of water for Canberra, and they did bring a watershed management expert from America to have a look at it and he said something which, I guess, in hindsight is very obvious: it was the roads that were creating most of the sediment. And that's true in most situations now - that most of the sediment from logging or forestry comes off the roads and tracks. And so once they got the roads and tracks properly under control it was much reduced.

And what did that entail? How did they get them under control?

It was a question of changing the way you maintain the roads mainly, and the construction to higher standards.

I didn't realise they were so important to

Yes, the Cotter did have a bad reputation for water quality, and partly because of the surrounding geology; it's not particularly good from the point of view of water quality aspects.

END TAPE 2, SIDE A

BEGIN TAPE 2, SIDE B

Yeah, the Cotter did have a bad reputation for water quality, partly because of the surrounding geology, it's not particularly good from the point of view of water quality aspects. So the plantations got a bad name for spoiling the water quality. But when you realise that it was only part of the plantations, roads rather than the trees themselves, then you could at least minimise the fact that it was spoiling the water quality.

Just taking an overall view of your period with ACT Forests, what do you consider where the major changes that occurred in your career with the Forests?

Changes in the ACT Forests?

Changes in management practices and changes in the forests themselves.

Yeah, I guess the milestone would have been that 1964 Cabinet decision and when we successfully got an industrial complex at Hume, which was one of the very earliest things in Hume. In those days it used to stand out just like a sort of oasis. No doubt that changed the whole arrangement. I think ACT Forests had a golden era when we were responsible for bushfires and catchment management and we had recreation and we were aware of landscape responsibilities as well as running a logging operation. So I think we, in those days, had a broad-based forestry and I think it's unfortunate that Australian society seems to think that the only people who can manage forests commercially for timber production are foresters and therefore they argue the converse: that the only thing foresters can do is manage forests for timber production. I think the forestry profession allowed itself to be - and particularly because the spokespeople were the heads of forest services - got themselves boxed in and that syndrome has even now affecting forestry in New South Wales where the New South Wales Forestry Commission adopted a siege mentality and won its political battles but never succeeded or even, as far as I can see, tried to win the hearts and minds of the people so that a lot of people think of the New South Wales Forestry Commission as an enemy of conservation which is unfortunate because the people in it are certainly not enemies of conservation, not all of them. I think the

ACT Forests never got tarred with the same brush and I once spoke to somebody from the Australian Conservation Foundation and I said, 'Why is it that we're not the target of your campaigns'. And they said, 'Well, for one thing, if we ask you a question, we can get an answer' and I think that's credit to people like Ian Gordon and, I suppose, myself that we never took a point of view where we would not give information.

It could also be that you're not logging native forest, too.

Of course, by that time we'd stopped clearing native forests for planting and we weren't logging native forests. We were wholly and solely on the pines.

So you see the transformation into a narrower view of what foresters do as marking the close of a golden age in, to use your own phrase, ACT forestry. Can you date that to a certain period?

I guess the nail in the coffin was when Namadgi was declared and that gave the Parks and Conservation Service a big step forward, so that the catchment management aspect of our work was lost from that time onwards, gradually. I think the move to put the Bush Fire Council into a group that deals with emergency services, whilst it's very logical from some respects, I don't think it was done efficiently in the early

stages and it certainly took the service that we provided away from the Forests.

You see ACT Forests now as essentially being a financial or commercial operation with few other roles to perform.

It's being pushed into that. As I said, it has to be a commercial organisation which runs profitably, and that unfortunately ignores a lot of the reasons for planting the trees. A lot of them were planted as soil conservation and landscape. Stromlo Forest, for instance, if you really wanted to have a profitable forest venture you wouldn't stick a single tree on it, not on that sort of land. And Kowen Forest is an example where another ten inches of rain would make all the difference between an operation which is profitable but one which would be very profitable. So a lot of the time you have to think of why the forests were created and part of it was soil conservation, part of it was aesthetic appearance, part of it was the political thing to prove that it could grow this pine and only as part of all those objectives was the financial side of it important. And then you come along and say, 'Well, it's supposed to be a commercial forest operation, now you must behave commercially' and it's suddenly difficult to do that.

You could almost say that the '64 Cabinet decision was the trigger that set all this in motion in the long term.

It may well have been because then you get a lot of: 'Here, my prejudices are stuffed'. You get a lot of bureaucrats coming along and saying: 'You're supposed to be commercial, be commercial', and that's very difficult to do when actually you're not commercial and without really knowing what commercial is anyway.

Do you see the future of ACT Forests as more of the same or do you think there are prospects for some changes and a return to more broadly based forest practices?

I think possibly, possibly, in that that's the organisation here which is good at broad-scale afforestation. Apart from Greening Australia no one is particularly good at afforestation and they do the small scale stuff. So things like broad-scale planting around new suburbs would be best done by ACT Forests, I think. So it all depends a bit on how the politicians and the upper echelons of the ACT public service see the forests.

They've still got a pretty major role in managing the recreational use of ACT Forests; that's not going to go away.

I don't get much of a chance to judge what they're doing these days but the impression I get is they're doing quite well.

Partly as this project shows there's an interest in the history and the heritage of forests. I wonder if in the period when you were there whether there was much interest in, for example, Aboriginal sites or historic sites that existed in ...

No, not much. I, at least, give credit to Ian Gordon for realising the importance of this and doing something about it. Till quite recently the ACT Forests seemed to have no real direction and Ian was the one sort of person who'd pushed the idea of proper plans for, say, Stromlo Forest, including the recreation basis. He had arranged a market survey on visitor use and he had arranged a survey of heritage and it's due to his efforts - you can't say it wouldn't have happened without him - but I think it was due to his efforts that they happened. Now, I think they've got a strong push to be even more profitable and I think that's the direction that the present director - whatever they call him these days, - Graham McKenzie-Smith is doing. I take my hat off to Graham. He is aware of all these other facets of forestry, too.

When did you finally move out of ACT Forests, and you were away for certain periods?

When I went to Rome in September '85. It was leave without pay but on the understanding that they could fill my position, which I think helped the Department because there was three of us for two positions and I think they were

quite relieved when I left. That left Ron Murray to become the Director of Forests and Brian Pratt could become Director of the Parks and Conservation Service and I was number three. I think I was always number three in that sort of situation and when I went away it made things a bit easier.

Why did you go to Rome, just as a matter of interest?

I just said at the beginning, I've always had an interest in forests in developing countries and that was just I could see that the opportunities here were narrowing, or what I wanted to do was narrowing because I really wanted to stay in forestry, and then an opportunity came up, to go there so I took it.

And you've had no real work interest You've done no real work with ACT Forests since then.

No, not really. I've done a couple of little contracts. One was looking at arboreta. The other one was drawing up a draft management plan for Stromlo. But apart from that I've had very little involvement with them.

Looking back over your career again with ACT Forests work can you single some of the things that you would regard as your principal achievements with ACT Forests?

Yeah, I think the early stages: pressing on with recreation use of Stromlo even though we did it, I guess, rather crudely, I think that was good. I think most of the time with Bushfire Council I was successful and I think getting a research capability in ACT Forests was good at the time that we did it, and then that was lost and then we re-created it to solve some of our problems. I think the other thing I did that was good was when I came here there were four fire towers in the ACT, all in a straight line, on Mount Coree, McDonald, Stromlo and Kowen. They're more or less in the same straight line so that if you have a fire on that line you don't have a good triangulation. I think doing a survey [in] which we got students, during the summer holidays, to draw transects on the contour maps and finding the 'seen areas' of different parts in the ACT and then building a fire tower on the top of Mount Tennant; I think that was a significant thing. So from now on any fires have a got a good triangulation. It also gave a chance to spot fires in the south. I think that was an achievement. The other thing too, I worked with Mark Edgerley and I always had a very good relationship with him and he was perhaps too good a boss, so I could work with him. I think while I was working with Mark as his 2IC, generally we were successful. Sometimes when I was away things seemed to get off the rails and that's perhaps a highly prejudiced opinion, but some of his decisions weren't all that sound. But a lot of his work, he turned it from being a sort of ... I don't know, it's not very serious sort of forestry into something which was good. I think at its best, ACT Forests had nothing to

be ashamed against the background of forestry in Australia at the time.

Are there any other outstanding personalities that you worked with in Forests?

I always had a lot of time for David Fisher who worked more or less the same period that I worked with ACT Forests and more or less made the logging operations a success.

What was his position?

ACT Forests more or less had a split underneath the director - a split into three - so there was what you called the plantations, Field Services, which I looked after at one stage, and then there was the management which is to do with field planning and yield plots which Ian Gordon looked after, and then there was the harvesting operation - harvesting and marketing - which David looked after. I think he ran a very good operation.

How did you get on with the forest overseers
[inaudible]?

I think I got on with them quite well. Maurie Franklin [has] got a strong personality and it will be interesting to see what he says when you ask him the same question. But by and large quite well. The Kowen people are always a little bit different, being an isolated community and being part of

Queanbeyan rather than part of Canberra. But I think I got on well with the Ebsworth people there, and Bill Bates; and Gerald Ritherstone was the Pierce's Creek one; I think I did quite well with them. And, of course, Fred McCarroll was the overseer at Jervis Bay and I've got good memories of dealings with him.

How did you like living in Canberra during all this period?

Canberra was I liked it better in the '60s than I like it now because I like small towns and in those days the population was what? - 60,000 or was it 30,000? In that size of town there's just enough going on to find people who've got the same interests that you have and to be able to pursue those interests without the disbenefits of living in a big city where Well, nowadays if I go to the airport, I never see anybody I know, whereas on the infrequent events, the times, that I went there before, there'd always be somebody that I would know would be arriving; it seems strange. So it was fine. As I said over tea, my wife who came to the ACT with me was a girl from Karoonda in South Australia, which was a very small town, and then we'd lived on these forest reserves in South Australia which were even more remote, so coming to Stromlo was like a move to the 'big smoke' for us.

You were actually living in Stromlo, were you?

Yes, we did.

How did you find that?

That was fine.

Good quarters to live in?

Yes, then we thought they were. By today's standards we might feel a bit small but I thought I was a bit lucky, at least the two elder of the three children could remember and grew up in a rural situation. The younger one was only five when we left there, so he wouldn't have the same memories but his two sisters, I think It was nice to see them growing up in a country environment.

You mean Stromlo rather than country.

Yes.

They had no problems with friends or with

No, they went to pre-school at Yarralumla and primary school at Yarralumla. And they'd go in ... when they went to [school] either their mother would take them in by car or they'd go on, there was a little bus that used to take them down.

The accommodation was all part of the job deal when you came to the ...?

Yes.

You paid rent for the property or something like that?

Yeah, a nominal sort of rent.

How long did you stay there for?

Well, we built a house in '74, so in fact we moved out of Stromlo and lived in the new house for about six weeks before we went off to Nepal.

What did the Stromlo house consist of? You said it was quite small but could you just outline the sort of rooms it had and the facilities that were available?

I guess, think of it as an 'H'. On one side of the 'H' is the living room and there's a kitchen and laundry. The crossbar of the 'H' is a passageway and part of the kitchen and then the laundry itself is part of the lefthand side of the 'H' and then there's three bedrooms and a bathroom and then there was a garage and a rough shed behind that.

Had this been purpose designed or it had grown to this shape?

No, it was a properly designed house, a government house.

There was electricity and water or tank water or ... ?

Oh yes, we were quite pleased to have real water, town supply water instead of rain water tanks and things like that.

How many cottages were there in this Stromlo settlement?

There'd be ten or twelve, I suppose.

All housing foresters or forestry workers.

Yeah, all with forestry workers; it was a little forestry settlement.

And their families.

Yeah.

How many people all up, can you ...?

If you take an average of five per house - would that be right? Perhaps not. No, I think, say, four per house would get it more ... say, you'd be looking at thirty-five to forty people.

Did they intermingle much or was it just like an outlying suburb of Canberra and they'd get into a Canberra a lot? How much of a small community did it constitute in itself?

Perhaps I was on the fringes of it as a sort of boss and perhaps being interested in different things to what the rest of the people there were interested in I think it was a good group and I look back on the Stromlo days and I like to feel that I was part of it. They were friendly people and happy days, I think. I'm not sure how the people there would regard me. I think they tended to have a 'we and they', a boss and workers sort of thing, and I never felt that but I think somehow they often did.

Yes, I could imagine in a small community it would be difficult to throw off the hierarchy of the work.

When it comes down to it, it's a company town or a settlement.

Was there any sort of community hall or pre-school there, or any facilities like that?

No, we were near enough to go to Canberra, whereas at Uriarra and Pierce's Creek they had a Uriarra school - a little primary school and things like that - so they would tend to have their bush dances because the surrounding rural

area would come in, so that was much more of a community than Stromlo.

Okay, is there anything else of note that you'd like to mention regarding your career with the Forests?

I'd like to claim fame for inventing the name 'ACT Forests'.

Good on you.

And we drew a little logo which is still used. I think it's been developed since then but Bill Crowle was our surveyor-draughtsman and Bill's been working for many years with ACT Forests. He drew it up and we used that.

Good. I'd like to thank you very much, Tony, for coming along and passing on your information, your experiences and impressions, and I daresay when the history of the ACT forests and forestry is being written that we'll get back to you with other questions.

Yes, thank you.

Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW