

Early days with the Natal Parks Board

*Some personal reminiscences by a former
Principal Scientific Officer*

by Bob Crass

Introduction

In 1997 the Natal Parks Board marked the fiftieth anniversary of its founding in December 1947 and also merged with the KwaZulu Directorate for Nature Conservation to form the KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Board, later renamed Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife.

In October 1997 the former scientific officer of the Natal Parks Board Robert Sanderson Crass – better known as Bob Crass – telephoned John Conyngham, editor of The Natal Witness, to discuss the possibility of the newspaper’s publishing an article on the 50th anniversary of the conservation organisation.

Following the telephone conversation Crass “decided to write down some personal reminiscences and comments”¹ with the intention of sending the article to the Witness. The resulting article was 2100 words long which, as Crass noted in an accompanying letter to the editor, was “probably too much for you to use in its entirety, but perhaps you might make something of what I have written.”²

The article was indeed too long for publication but it was typeset and proved a useful reference for journalists together with Crass’s covering letter in which he provided contact details for a number of “old timers with the NPB”³ in the event a journalist might wish to interview them.

When Crass died on 14 January this year (see Obituary page 103 of this issue) it was decided to give his previously unpublished article a more permanent home within the pages of *Natalia*.

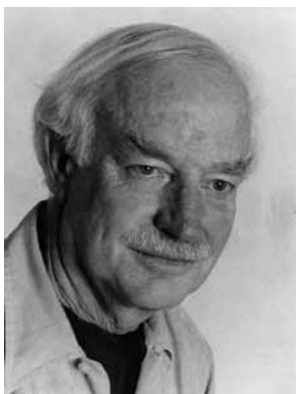
In editing this article for publication I have added a few footnotes furnishing information, where available, on individuals mentioned by Crass. In some instances he did not provide names and, with one exception, I have followed his reticence in this matter.

STEPHEN COAN

FIFTY years ago nature conservation had not yet been invented. By “nature conservation” I mean an integrated policy for the care and wise use of living resources.

The first practical steps towards putting such a policy into effect in South Africa were taken by two men: Douglas Edgar Mitchell⁴ and William Michael Power.⁵ Both were members of the Natal Provincial Executive Committee. Mitchell later became Administrator and then a member of Parliament. Throughout his public life he maintained a strong interest in conservation.

At the time of union, in 1910, Natal retained control over the protected areas north of the Tugela river and in the Drakensberg, notably Hluhluwe Game Reserve, Lake St Lucia, Giant’s Castle Game Reserve and Royal Natal National Park. Umfolozi Game Reserve was to become famous as the last refuge of the southern square-lipped rhinoceros, but in 1947 most of the big game had been shot out in an effort by the government veterinary authorities to eliminate the tsetse



Bob Crass.
Photo: The Witness

fly that carried a fatal disease in cattle.

In addition to the protected areas owned by the province, its administration was responsible for control of inland and coastal fisheries, hunting on private land and care of indigenous fauna and flora. These diverse responsibilities were carried out by various officials without adequate co-ordination. Mitchell and Power saw the benefit of placing all aspects of nature conservation under a single statutory authority. Thus the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board was established, in Terms of Ordinance 35 of 1947, effective from December 1. The board consisted of nine members, with Power as chairman and Mitchell as vice-chairman. The latter’s outside commitments precluded his taking on the chairmanship, but his influence on board affairs continued under successive chairmen. Power was a soft spoken, courteous Irish veterinarian, while Mitchell hailed from the Natal south coast, his character well described by his Zulu nickname – *ubhejane*, the black rhinoceros.⁶

A number of advisory boards had existed to help formulate policy under the provincial administration. These continued to function as committees of the new board, but an absence of any effective staff structure inhibited progress. Administrative duties were handled by the Secretary, W.W. Williams, who was a retired civil servant. He had to attend to all aspects of board affairs including the logistic requirements of the Chief Conservator, Zululand, the Conservator, Giants



*Jack Vincent headed the Natal Parks Board from 1947 until 1963. He was known to staff as The Colonel or simply JV.
Photo: The Witness*

Castle, the Warden, Royal Natal National Park, the Principal Fisheries Officer (coastal), the Inland Fisheries Officer and their respective field staffs. He did his best, but his death in June 1949 may well have been hastened by overwork.⁷ Another retired civil servant was appointed Secretary in an acting capacity, until Colonel Jack Vincent took over the post on 1 October 1949.⁸

Known to his staff as The Colonel, or simply as JV, the new Secretary rapidly stamped his authority on the conduct of board affairs. Born in Surrey in 1904, he had settled in Natal at the age of 21 to take up farming. Vincent's devotion to natural history, in particular ornithology, had led to extensive travels in Africa, until the war years saw him embark on a military career from which he retired as a highly qualified senior officer.

The new Secretary, who was in fact an executive rather than a secretary,

established himself in a small suite of offices in what was known as Old Parliament building (now a parliamentary building once more). Support staff consisted of Miss Jean Hamilton, together with the Inland Fisheries Officer and his typist, Miss Barbara Woods. The next arrival at head office was the Fisheries Research Officer, R.S. Crass, in February 1950.⁹ By that time the IFO had departed for pastures new, to be replaced by another individual who also moved on.¹⁰ It was not until April 1954

that I was able to welcome an Inland Fisheries Officer who was to play a major part in the NPB's development (Natal Parks Board, or NPB, was soon accepted as a convenient contraction of the board's somewhat cumbersome title). This officer was John Geddes-Page,¹¹ who succeeded Jack Vincent as Director.

An early addition to the staff was Miss Phyllis Crosby-Spratt, our telephonist, whom I promptly named Bing-Fish, a sobriquet that remained current for the rest of her service. Perhaps the present generation would not see the connection between Bing and Crosby.¹² At about the same time the board's financial affairs were placed in the capable hands of A.V. Edmondson, ex-Provincial Accountant. This large, genial man was known for his interest in his many friends, especially at the time of their demise. Attending funerals seemed to be his main hobby. A minor quirk was

to save paper by slitting open every envelope he received, in order to use the inside surface for drafting memoranda. I hate to think what he would have thought of the vast quantities of paper spewed out by modern computers.

Edmondson was a great talker and raconteur, a trait he shared with another well-known personality, J. Leslie Smith.¹³ Although not directly connected with the NPB, Leslie Smith had considerable influence in the drafting of laws

relating to nature conservation. He was head of a legal firm and, as a member of the provincial Executive Committee, collaborated closely with Colonel Vincent. Leslie Smith's loquacity was legendary, but so was his capacity for hard work. Addicted to leg-pulling he met his match in JV. Knowing the latter's strong views about those who killed protected birds, Leslie one day asked the Colonel what was the best shot size to use on a heron. The deadpan reply was "Number 4, Sir".

Laws for the control of wildlife exploitation were necessary to bring order into what had been a free-for-all. Enforcement of the law was a priority in the board's early years, although some official concerns seem rather odd today. Inspectors were instructed to patrol river banks, largely to check that anglers were carrying the statutory fishing licence. An entertaining case is recorded of a high court judge, without a licence, being confronted by NPB officer Leslie Acutt. Although we may smile at the judge's embarrassment,



John Geddes Page served as director of the Natal Parks Board from 1963 until 1988.

Photo: The Witness

such a case illustrates how our idea of what is important has changed over the years. In fact a licence is justifiable only if revenue from the purchase of licences is used for conserving the natural resource. Money from fishing licences in South Africa has always disappeared without trace into government coffers. Fortunately Acutt and his colleagues (now known as conservation officers) have played a far more positive role in spreading the message of conservation than merely

looking for unlicensed anglers.

As the board's staff grew, so did its effectiveness. Teamwork and enthusiasm were attributes that ensured progress in what was a pioneering field. Innovation was assisted by the fact that we were all amateurs. Professional qualifications in the field of nature conservation did not exist in those days. I held a degree in chemistry and zoology, with later specialisation in the study of mayflies. Although these insects were an important element in the ecology of rivers, my academic entomological studies were, in fact, of less relevance to the work of the NPB than my practical knowledge as an angler. My brief was to become acquainted with the fish life of Natal's rivers and estuaries, and to devise management actions for the benefit of anglers. Since the long-term interests of anglers must involve care of the natural resource, fisheries management has to be based on sound conservation.

After my own appointment the next research post was that of Ecologist at Hluhluwe Game reserve. C.J. Ward filled this position with distinction, making a lasting contribution to effective management. Claude Hills, one of the original board members, voiced his opposition to the appointment of any research officer who was unable to make a practical input to the work of the NPB. Emphasis on research



George Hughes, director of the Natal Parks Board from 1988 until his retirement in 2001.

Photo: The Witness

geared to the needs of management did, in fact, become firmly established policy as the scientific staff was built up over the years. With regard to my own research on trout and indigenous fish, I was at pains to make information available through newspaper articles and books accessible to the general public. When eventually I became head of the scientific section, I initiated annual report-back meetings at which management staff were encouraged to become involved. In some cases rangers put over their ideas and experiences with a clarity that gave a lesson to the scientists.

As well as close co-operation between the board's own management and research staff, formal links were established with university departments and with the Oceanographic Research Institute in Durban, thus extending the range of professional expertise available for conservation work.

In general, board members were happy to give their staff free rein, under the chief executive, of which the NPB has had only three in its 50 years

of existence. Dr G.R. Hughes took over from John Geddes-Page,¹⁴ who succeeded Colonel Vincent.

Occasionally, some board member would get a bee in his bonnet and press for action in opposition to staff opinion. An example was a decision to spend R10 000 on a scheme put forward by an outside consultant to monitor possible pollution by an aluminium factory at Richards Bay. That

was the only occasion on which I was instructed to take part in what I regarded as a waste of money – as it proved to be.

Scientific programmes designed to produce practical results do sometimes turn out to be a waste of taxpayers' money. Two projects with which I was associated were both funded from sources other than the NPB – fortunately for my peace of mind. The first was an attempt to provide a scientific basis for the physical management of Lake St Lucia. A critical question was whether or not a plan should go ahead for dredging the channel connecting estuary and lake in order to improve access of sea water in time of drought. Certain ecologists objected to the plan in the belief that an enlarged channel would increase lake salinity. A professor from outside Natal said he could develop a mathematical model of the lake system's hydrology that would provide an answer within six months. Dredging was therefore put on hold. Six years later a computer print-out from the mathematical

model, which had finally been completed, vindicated my contention that a deeper and wider channel would have an insignificant effect on lake salinity. By then it was too late to restart excavation that would have given easier access to the lake, both for marine fish and prawns and for tourist boats.

The second project that involved massive funding without benefit to the sponsors was an attempt to develop an electrical barrier to protect bathers against shark attacks. In view of my experience with an electrical fish catcher in rivers, I was appointed to the steering committee to which the researcher reported progress. Initial testing was to be carried out at St Lucia Estuary. The scientist involved made confident predictions that his apparatus would enable him to immobilise sharks and bring them ashore. My scepticism was justified when all that happened, when the electric current was switched on, was a few prawns skipping on the surface. Extensive trials with modified apparatus yielded no conclusive results. Eventually another scientist took over, the project was transferred to the Durban aquarium and optimism returned when sharks caught in an electric field shook their heads in apparent discomfort. The next step was laying a specially constructed cable off Margate beach. My criticism of the planning and execution of the work led to a suggestion by a politician that



*Douglas Edgar Mitchell.
As Administrator of
Natal from 1945 to 1947
Mitchell was instrumental
in the creation of the
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which was established on
December 1, 1947.*

Photo: The Witness

the NPB should censure its representative for interfering with a project of great potential benefit to the tourist industry. When the enterprise was eventually abandoned, no one censured those senior scientists who had persisted in appropriating funds for what they should have realised was an unattainable objective.

Game capture and translocation have made the NPB internationally renowned. This major development in the board's conservation activities involved both scientific expertise and practical capability. It was a field of endeavour in which I played no part. My only attempt at capturing large mammals was soon after I joined the board, at a time when limited manpower meant trying one's hand at anything. A small herd of red hartebeest was to be captured on private land for transfer to a reserve. A hartebeest may look stupid, but the tactical sense and turn of speed of that particular group left its would-be captors gasping with frustrated exhaustion. As in so many other aspects of nature conservation, such amateurish attempts at game capture have been superseded by competent professionalism, backed by appropriate technology.

Over a period of 50 years the NPB has grown from a small organisation to one that not only manages large areas of publicly-owned land, with the dual purpose of conserving natural biodiversity and providing a

recreational resource, but also plays a pivotal role in collaborating with conservation activities on private land, in freshwater ecosystems and in the marine environment.

Amalgamation of the NPB with the KwaZulu conservation authority is a historic development. The new KwaZulu-Natal Nature Conservation Board is poised to re-create Douglas Mitchell's vision of a province-wide organisation to ensure wise use of our resources.

NOTES

- 1 Letter from Crass to John Conyngham dated 31 October 1997. Crass file, *The Witness* library.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Douglas Edgar Mitchell (1896–1988). As Administrator of Natal from 1945 to 1947 he was instrumental in the creation of the Natal Parks, Game and Fish Preservation Board which was established on December 1, 1947. In 1948 Mitchell became a United Party MP for the South Coast subsequently becoming leader of the United Party in Natal. He retired from political life in 1974.
- 5 William Michael Power (1873–1951). Born in Ireland he qualified at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, London in 1896. He practised briefly in Dublin before joining the Natal Civil Veterinary Department in 1899. During the South African War he served as a Lieutenant in the Volunteer Veterinary Corps attached to the Border Mounted Rifles and served through the siege of Ladysmith. After the war he served as District Veterinary Surgeon at Ixopo and in 1905 was transferred to Pietermaritzburg to act as Principal Veterinary Officer. In 1906 he served in the suppression of the Bhambatha Rebellion. In 1907 he was promoted to the post of Principal Veterinary Officer of Natal until his retirement in 1928. After his retirement from Government Service he went into private practice in Pietermaritzburg and took an active interest in politics. He was an elected member of the Natal Provincial Council 1931 to 1933 and a member of Member of the Executive Council in 1933. In 1935 he was appointed Chairman of a commission to investigate the game reserves in Zululand and from 1939 to 1947 was chairman of the Zululand Game Reserves and Parks Board. Power was first chairman of the Natal Parks Board from 1947 to 1950 and from 1951 until his death deputy chairman. Information obtained from <http://www.nda.agric.za/vetweb/History/Vets%20Past%20OP.htm>
- 6 According to his son, Terence M. Mitchell, after his father's birth his "Zulu contemporaries on the farm Bushy Vales on the South Coast called him Little Chief, uNkosana. Twenty years later they dubbed him uBhejane – Black Rhino. Douglas Mitchell would charge with a rhino's impetuosity and disdain for subtlety for what he believed in." *The Witness*, 9 November 2001, p.14.
- 7 "(Williams) assumed duty in March 1948 and began the whole concern with a subsidy of £15 000 and an income of just under £100; interesting figures when compared with the millions of rands which today replace them. Mr Williams did a fine job in getting the conservation body onto a satisfactory foundation. Unhappily, however, he died in June 1949 and, as a report said, 'there is little doubt that the long hours devoted by Mr Williams to the Board's endeavours hastened his untimely end'. He was thereupon succeeded by another retired Provincial Accountant, Mr H.C. Lake, who was appointed in an acting capacity." Jack Vincent, *Web of Experience (An autobiography)*, privately published, Pietermaritzburg, 1989, p.192.
- 8 Jack Vincent (1904-1999). Known to NPB staff as The Colonel or simply JV, after his appointment as Secretary in 1949 Vincent quickly stamped his authority on Parks Board affairs. Born in England he came to South Africa in 1921 under the aegis of the 1820 Settlers Association. He worked as a farm manager in Richmond. He studied and wrote about birds, becoming well-known in ornithological circles. In 1929 he joined Admiral Hubert Lynes on the first of several bird collecting expeditions for the Natural History Museum, London, where he subsequently worked on the bird collection. He became a factory manager in Zanzibar distilling clove oil, then ran a sisal plantation in Tanganyika before coming with his family to Natal prior to World War Two, during which he served with the Royal Natal Carbineers. When the Natal Parks Board was established in 1947 he was appointed to the

- ornithological committee. Vincent made a name for himself thanks to his outspoken, no-nonsense approach and, following the death of W.W. Williams, Mitchell and Power decided to look for someone with initiative to get conservation off the ground in Natal and offered Vincent the job of Secretary which he accepted. Vincent retired in 1963.
- 9 Crass “joined my conservation team in 1950, and I had met him more than 10 years earlier, when he was at Natal’s Michaelhouse School. I had visited there when the headmaster ... had asked me to resuscitate the school’s natural history society. The lecture on trout, which I then heard the young Bob give to his fellow pupils, convinced me that the unusual scope of his piscatory knowledge would be invaluable to the future of Natal’s fishing interests.” Jack Vincent, *Web of Experience (An autobiography)*, privately published, Pietermaritzburg, 1989, p.237.
- 10 One of these is probably Neil Shoobert “whose active work came so sadly to an untimely end ... because of a tragic physical handicap. The Board’s well-organised and scientifically developed division of inland fisheries owes much to his dedication, and to that of his research officer senior – Bob Crass.” Jack Vincent, *Web of Experience (An autobiography)*, privately published, Pietermaritzburg, 1989, p.237.
- 11 John Geddes-Page (1922-2006). Born in Kingwilliamstown and educated at Dale College. Served in the Kaffrarian Rifles during World War Two. After a brief period of employment with the Inland Revenue Service he joined the Department of Nature Conservation in the Cape Province. His employment by the NPB came about through the good offices of Crass: “I had first met John in 1952 and when, in 1954, Colonel Jack Vincent wanted to appoint an inland fisheries officer and asked me if I knew anyone, I told him, ‘the best man in South Africa is John Geddes Page’.” *The Witness*, 29 September 2006, p.7. Geddes Page was appointed head of the Natal Parks Board after Vincent retired in 1963.
- 12 A reference to the American actor and singer Bing Crosby (1903-1977).
- 13 John Leslie Smith founded the legal firm J.Leslie Smith in 1921.
- 14 Geddes Page retired in 1988 and was replaced by George Hughes who served as director until his retirement in 2001.