

Friends of the ANBG: 2015 AGM: President's Report

I would like to welcome all of you to the 2015 Annual General Meeting of the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens, and my first as President. Our purpose is simple - to provide community support for these beautiful Gardens - and I would like to mention what we have been doing in this regard over the past twelve months and also touch on some plans for the future. I will do this in the context of the strategic plan for the Friends, which runs for the period 2010 to 2015 and in fact is now almost concluded. Have we been doing and indeed achieving what we planned? I would say, in very large part, yes.

The first goal in our strategic plan deals with **public promotion and engagement**.

Looking at some high points of the year:

- the Thursday Talks now average around 70 people each week, as the packed Theatre (and café afterwards) testifies;
- Breakfast with the Birds is a much loved feature of the Canberra spring and our outdoor concerts a highlight of the summer. Our involvement in Enlighten with Luminous Botanica was hugely successful;
- work is well underway on the 2017 Australasian guides conference to be hosted at the ANBG, which will be an important opportunity for us to showcase the Gardens to a broader group of guides; and
- very excitingly, two entries from the Friends (through the Seedy Vols) were submitted to this year's New Scientist Eureka Prize for Science Photography. One of these, *Another Planet: Epacris paludosa (Alpine Health), Ericaceae*, was highly commended. Our warm thanks go to those who entered and our congratulations to Fanny Karouta-Manasse for *Another Planet*.

Our highly responsive web team enables all of this. I also value the support that we receive from the Gardens in specialised areas such as media liaison and the increasingly important area of social media. We may in fact have more to report on social media next year.

The second goal in our strategic plan is **partnership with the Gardens**. This partnership is central to what we do, and is close and constructive. We have of course formal liaison arrangements. As well, the Friends and ANBG staff interact in so many areas that I, as President, can lose count.

For the Gardens the big event of the year, and the focus for future years, was the new Master Plan, which sets the agenda for the built environment around here for the next 20 years. The Friends were very pleased to have input into deliberations on the Plan and look forward to making our contribution to its implementation in due course.

To touch on some other areas:

- planning is underway for a new Guides intake for 2016;
- we are working with the ANBG on opportunities for involving interested members of the Plant Science Group to contribute to research activities around the ANBG, including in the Southern annex and an *ex situ* conservation project that is under development;
- we continued to support the annual intake of botanic interns at the Centre for Australian National Biodiversity Research; and

- we value the relationship that we have developed with Sally Barnes. Sally took over as Director of National Parks in early 2014. She has a large and distributed portfolio but knows the Gardens and the Friends well. Sally has addressed the Friends in a Thursday Talk and will talk to us today about the new Master Plan.

Another Goal is to **raise funds** to manage the Friends organization and support the development of the Gardens as the national showcase of Australia's plant diversity

As you know, we engage in many activities, large and small, to fundraise to support the Gardens. We also spend a small amount of money on some administrative support for the Friends, such as a new computer for the Friends Office this year.

The Treasurer will mention many of the ways in which we raised money during the year in her report. I would like to mention some exciting progress in raising corporate sponsorship to support our and the Gardens' activities. This was a joint effort involving the Friends and the Gardens for the 2015 summer concerts. Last year the budget for eight summer concerts ran at about \$32,000. Although a highly popular feature of the summer in Canberra, indeed one of the 100 Best Things to Like About Canberra in a 2013 survey, attendances at these are very weather-dependent. For January 2015 we were delighted to attract two sponsors, Goodwin as the Major Sponsor, and ACTEW Water, now re-badged as Icon Water, as a Supporting Sponsor.

Peter Byron the General Manager and I handled this last year. We are delighted now to receive some professional help - the Gardens appointed a new Partnership Development Manager earlier this year to work on sponsorship - and we will see the benefits of this with the 2016 concerts.

It's important of course to put the money we raise to good use supporting the Gardens. This year we have supported:

- publication of the alpine report distributed at last year's AGM;
- rainforest gully lighting;
- the gift of two artworks to the Gardens from this year's botanical art exhibition;
- a plant collection trip for the rain forest gully;
- the Asteraceae garden;
- a feasibility study for the construction of a treehouse/gazebo in the Melaleuca Swamp that I shall discuss later in this report;
- refurbishment of the Growing Friends area; and
- the purchase of books for the library.

I should also mention that the Friends Public Fund has supported equipment purchases by the Seed Bank this year.

Finally we aim to create a strong identity of being **lively, stimulating, rewarding and dedicated Friends of the ANBG.**

One of the things that we need to do for the health of the organization is retain our existing Friends and attract new ones. Late in our membership year I am very pleased to report that our numbers now stand at 2,138 individual members, comprising 1,572 memberships, a solid increase over last year's 1,536.

Our membership team advises that our attrition rate has been consistent for some years at 17%. On discussing it with a contact with much experience of Friends organisations in Australia and elsewhere, I am told that this is a very good rate. With so many competing attractions in Canberra and around the region, I am very grateful for the continuing commitment of our members. Our Membership Team has been central to our successful engagement with our members and I would like to thank them for their hard work.

We do of course offer a range of services that enable our members to engage with the Gardens. There are many ways old and new:

- Fronds and the regular broadcast emails keep you in touch, as does the website;
- we have membership discounts with Floresco, the Botanical Bookshop and now the Jindii Eco Spa;
- the various special interest groups provide many opportunities to the Friends;
- we have been able to negotiate special parking arrangements for Friends who volunteer;
- we have celebrated our 25th birthday this year in some style, enjoying a special twilight dinner in February, while last week we had a special birthday event, with a second and very successful visit from our Patron; and
- I should not neglect the interests of those Friends who simply enjoy the opportunity to relax in and enjoy this very special place.

How we manage ourselves

One of the things that we have been busy with in recent years is improving how we manage ourselves. This involves good corporate governance, which may be described as the rules, processes, or laws by which organisations such as ours are operated, regulated, and controlled.

At this meeting you will be asked to consider the proposed new Constitution of the Friends. Transparency and accountability are important and we have also been hard at work documenting the way in which the Friends operate, at a level below the Constitution, by developing policies and procedures that capture this. We have also established a new financial management team to share the duties previously undertaken by the Treasurer.

I should add that we had a high turnover in Council last year. As a result, an important priority for us after the last AGM was ensuring that the many new Council members understood the Friends, the relationship with the Gardens, and their roles and responsibilities within that. I would like to thank my Vice-President, Jan Finley, in particular for her considerable efforts in this regard.

Looking ahead

Review of Strategic Plan

We will shortly start thinking about our priorities for the next five years in a review of our strategic plan.

Treehouse gazebo project

One early priority for us is likely to be a project for a treehouse gazebo in the Melaleuca Swamp. Following discussion with the ANBG, in August 2014 the Friends agreed to fund a feasibility study into a site-specific commission by an artist or designer under the ANBG Public Art Policy and Master Plan, developed by consultant Pamille Berg AO.

In essence, the feasibility study recommended commissioning an artist or designer/maker to create a unique, magical, whimsical site-specific 'gazebo among the trees' which would be elevated within the

vegetation or tree canopy level (probably around three to four metres off the ground). Engaging an artist to design, develop and fabricate the proposed treehouse gazebo will allow a highly original, sculptural or singular approach to the gazebo's form and character. The project will allow more than one small group of visitors, more than one family, or several individuals, to enter and spend time within the gazebo. The design brief specifies a minimum 25-year lifespan and associated maintenance requirements to be as low as possible.

The Friends, ANBG and Public Fund are working as partners on the project, with the Friends underwriting the project with an initial commitment of \$100,000 out of a projected cash budget of \$200,000; this is subject to satisfactory conclusion of the design phase. The ANBG has also made a commitment to provide \$20,000 in cash (and \$40,000 on an in-kind basis), and more recently the Friends Public Fund has committed \$30,000 in cash and will providing tax deductibility for donations for the project through the Public Fund.

The initial phase of this project is expected to get underway imminently when the consultant will develop a limited tender. Early in 2016, Council will consider the designs received and decide whether it wishes to proceed with the project. If we decide to proceed, we will embark on a fundraising campaign, inviting our members to make contributions to help us to cover some at least of the gap between the commitments of \$150,000 from the three partners and the final cost. The Friends organisation will cover any remaining gap. We believe that, with our reserves and the spread of this project over two financial years, this is very manageable.

Attracting and retaining volunteers

We do face some challenges, operating as an entirely voluntary organization. Much of what the Friends do to help the Gardens is the work of a smallish group of volunteers. We wouldn't be able to achieve as much as we can without these very dedicated people. We have been discussing in Council what we might do to look after our existing volunteers better and bring more people into the pool of volunteers so the effort is spread more widely. I hope that we may have something to report next year's AGM.

Finally I would also like to thank everyone from the Gardens who makes us feel so welcome. I would like to thank all who support us by becoming Friends, and those who find time to volunteer in the many activities. And today some people are now leaving Council. I would like to thank them for their contributions and look forward to welcoming their successors.

Thank you very much

Lesley Jackman
President

8 October 2015