



Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens Inc.
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President's Report 2020

It is with considerable sadness I write this report. I really have enjoyed this task but I am afraid my hearing loss makes it very difficult to chair meetings and so am standing down. Also 2020, which may go down as one of the most bizarre years for the lives of people ever, has been a great disappointment in some ways, not the way to go out. I was really looking forward to the wonderful menu of events we had planned for our 30th Anniversary entwined with those for the 50th Anniversary of the Gardens.

I felt and feel so sorry for the teams of both Garden staff and Friends volunteers who had created these events to mark both the Anniversaries.

But the Gardens themselves keep me going and I know they do for many of you.

And the Gardens are certainly thriving, despite being lashed by drought, smoke and hail! Figures which our Liaison Officer, Megan Menz has given us show that the number of people coming to the Gardens has been in many ways extraordinary. You might imagine with closures due to smoke and restrictions in travel and access due to Covid-19 that our numbers of visitors would be drastically reduced. But no, in fact as has been observed in many places around the world, sites like these Gardens are extremely popular with local people for recreation or 'escape' perhaps but also, solace and hope in these difficult times.

Before I go too far I want to record some appreciations.

I think I enjoy an excellent relationship with many Gardens staff but none more than Executive Director Dr Judy West and General Manager Mr Peter Byron and I thank them most sincerely for listening to my requests on your behalf and my crazy suggestions, on my behalf. Many of their staff have also helped me and the Friends on a regular basis and are a delight to work with. Then there are the people in Friends without whom my task would be impossible. Firstly my fantastic Executive Linda Beveridge, Helen Elliot and Lynden Ayliffe, who not only keep me on the straight and narrow but put in so much time you would not believe. Then there is the Council itself and through the year that included as well as the above, Wendy Antoniak, Alan Henderson, Neville Page, David More and Peter Heaume as well as regular invited attendees Barbara Podger, Tricia Morton, Lesley King, David Coutts and my staunch predecessor Lesley Jackman. It is a truly wonderful collection of skills and energy that keeps the organisation going. On top of that there are all the members and leaders of our multifarious Special Interest Groups, who not only raise money for the Gardens but enrich the lives and understanding of our members and the general community through their work. I particularly want to acknowledge the Newsletter team and the Website team, the Plant Science Group, the Flower Fruit and Foliage team, whose leaflet is highly popular with the increased number of new and regular visitors. I also want to publicly acknowledge on behalf of all Members of Friends the huge amount of work done by our wonderful Membership Team Lesley Harland and Pam Cooke.

Raising and carefully spending funds for the Gardens is a tricky business but essential if we are to see this national focus for the understanding of Australia's native plants thrive. It is all very well to have books and herbaria, records and web sites on the subject of our native flora, but to grow them, to understand them, to protect them into the future, and to share all those things with as many Australians and international visitors that is a huge task.

It is a task that requires more than the contribution of the Commonwealth Government which of course is central to its operations. It requires the immediate and deep support from a focussed group of people who love this enterprise. And that is what the Friends of the Australian National Botanic Gardens comprise. A group of over 2,500 people who have stated by their membership and involvement and direct financial support, "this is an important enterprise"!

Despite the appalling events of 2020 there have been a number of major investments as well as the ongoing support of projects large and small.

During the last 12 months the largest project supported was the wonderful Banksia Garden. This will be officially opened on October 21 and this year we have spent over \$73,000 from Friends funds direct and from the Public Fund ('our' tax deductible arm). It is not only a repository for a very diverse living collection, the interesting and artistic signage and interpretation should leave visitors with a lot of knowledge about this iconic genus.

Another major project was the support for the video wall in the Visitor Centre where an introduction to the Gardens through a large format video sets the scene for new visitors and repeat visitors alike. Two scientific projects of note are support we provide for the research by a PhD student on the flora of Norfolk Island and a study into the Thermal Tolerance of Native Plants. This latter study gets ANBG staff engaged with a wider collective of researchers from a number of institutions into examining the role, and possible management of plants as climate changes, clearly an urgent issue.

Another smaller project but important for enhancing the visitor experience has been the completion of the Find a Plant App which is now live. Purchasing an audio loop to enhance the experience of hearing impaired in the theatrette is a good step forward for many in our community and it is working very effectively.

A diverse range of small expenditures make up the spending this year. They include buying gifts of botanical books for the summer intern program which the gardens runs whereby young botanical science students work for a period during summer vacation to assist the herbarium and other facets of the Gardens. We provided support for the Seed Bank Exhibition as part of our commitment to get visitors to understand the important role of seed banking and inter alia the need for a much improved facility to undertake this work. For the historical record we also supported the publication by Professor Don Beer of his comprehensive history of our organisation.

These are very brief descriptions of the extraordinary diversity of projects supported through funds raised from Membership, from the work of our special interest Groups like Growing Friends, the Botanic Art and Photographic Groups. As well special events ranging from Summer Sounds to Wake up with the Birds and the Thursday Talks, all contribute to the pool of funds given in support of Garden projects. Because all of the people who work on raising, managing and disbursing the funds do so voluntarily virtually 100% goes to the Gardens.

We have also committed major funds to assist projects into the future including the soon-to-be started Tropical Conservatory. This extraordinary building will house a major living collection of

Australia's tropical flora and an interesting new 'system' of interpretative signage will be provided by Friends funding.

I suppose it is because I worked in the private sector and specifically the fund management industry, that I see my donations more as investments. I want these investments to pay dividends long after I am around. It is the test I apply when considering what should we support for the Gardens.

In March just before Covid struck, at a ceremony to announce the 50th Anniversary celebrations well-known local identity Genevieve Jacobs said of the Gardens:

“This place is an ark – a carrier of deeply significant information - but it is also a covenant, a promise to ourselves that the beauty and the infinite variety of Australia's plant life matters at the most profound level. To see it here arrayed in all this sweeping variety and to know that what can be represented here is just a fragment of everything on this remarkable continent should more than make us pause. “

To me Genevieve got it spot on.

This great cultural institution, the Australian National Botanic Gardens plays a role in the lives and emotions of all Friends as we hopefully seek to conserve, display and educate our children and others about the role that our plants play in human survival. Something which many have focussed on this year.

I wish my successor good luck and I look forward to much engagement with the Gardens in other roles in the future and will certainly continue to find ways to contribute. I do so with the profound sense that I am among Friends!

Max Bourke AM

President

15 October 2020