

Awarding Honorary Life Membership of Friends of Grasslands

Prepared by FOG Committee 15 July 2017

Summary

Friends of Grasslands, or simply FOG as it is more affectionally known, has been very privileged over many years to attract the talented people who have dedicated a huge amount of time and energy, extraordinary in many cases, to promote the cause of biodiversity. Today we are awarding honorary life membership of FOG to two such people.

Normally life membership is awarded to someone for many years of outstanding service, and this is true of Naarilla Hirsch. However, our other recipient Edwina Barton and FOG's first convenor made an extraordinary contribution in a short time. Between them they encompass the history of FOG and so it is fitting that both are awarded life membership today.

Neither possessed a strong professional scientific link to biodiversity, but each in her own way had a love of biodiversity and found grasslands fascinating. Each brought a range of other skills and experience that served FOG and, without them, FOG would not exist today or be a very different organisation.

FOG was extremely fortunate to have Edwina as its first convenor¹. She demonstrated what a community group might achieve, through having a deep appreciation of biodiversity and the aspiration to conserve and ultimately restore an ecological community crucial to that biodiversity. Her model of a community group with a strong advocacy and education role. Her advocacy approach was non-confrontational, based on sound science, evidence and reason, drawing on practical on-ground experience, and appealing to people's sense of valuing the region's natural resources and biodiversity treasures. Her communications and networking skills abounded and her sheer ambition and drive underscored her efforts. Interestingly, she committed twelve months of her time and kept that commitment. Her time as convenor set the benchmark for FOG's practices, setting standards of communication and cooperation, and FOG's reputation as a clear-headed, dispassionate advocate for grassy ecosystems. Her's is an example of what conservation-volunteers may achieve.

Naarilla has demonstrated single-mindedness, thoroughness, energy and drive, combined with a deep love of nature and science. On numerous occasions she has stepped into the breach taking on particularly difficult challenges. When the organisation has faltered or more hands are required Naarilla has picked up the ball and has excelled at every task. She has been arguably the most organised and thorough of all FOG committee members, and her attention to detail is uncontested. In FOG's early days she played a key role in organising FOG meetings, acting as secretary, preparing submissions, writing material for the newsletter, assisted in organising FOG conferences and producing conference proceedings, and contributing substantially to FOG's constitution. More recently, she has been outstanding in her role as Convenor of the Advocacy Group. Her initial concerns, that she was not experienced enough to make recommendations, were completely dispelled by her outstanding ability to identify the main issues, ensuring submissions covered all matters relevant to FOG, were delivered on time and are accessible for all to see on FOG's website. She has also represented FOG on various official advisory bodies.

¹ When FOG commenced it was the fashion to have a convenor rather than a president.

Some background

Now we take it for granted that our natural temperate grassy woodlands are to be treasured and, to the best of our ability, protected and restored. Many now have a vision that our efforts may see these remnants, and the rare and threatened flora and fauna they contain, extend and flourish on a landscape scale, functioning as they did at the time of Invasion/Settlement.

However, we could have lost these grasslands and woodlands. Thankfully, by the early 1990s there was a strong interest in identifying and conserving grasslands remnants, particularly in Victoria, parts of NSW and the ACT. At that stage, there was very little understanding that naturally treeless grasslands existed, let alone that they were important components of biodiversity and were threatened with extinction, in ACT mainly due to development and ignorant destruction.

In 1991 in the ACT, the Conservation Council held a conference on grasslands . That conference led to the successful application by the ACT Government for a major grant from the Commonwealth Government to undertake recovery actions for Canberra grasslands and to make suitable recommendations about their future conservation. The grant initially provided funding for Sarah Sharp and Don Driscoll to prepare a review of information and for the preparation of a Grassland Recovery Plan. One of the actions identified in the 1992 Recovery Plan was the establishment of a 'Friends of Grasslands' group, to lobby for conservation of grasslands.

The grant for the next stage was successful, and subsequently was used to employ a Grassland Project Officer (Sarah) with ACT Government to implement the plan, which involved undertaking research, liaison, advocacy and providing funding to facilitate a range of other studies to find out more about the status of grasslands and grassland dependent species. A Grassland Management Working Group was established to oversee the implementation of the grant. The working group represented a wide range of stakeholders, including Commonwealth and Territory environment departments, Government land managers and members of the community.

Self government for Canberra was a recent event; the ACT held its first election for self-government in March 1989. Early governments of various colours showed a preparedness to support the grassland initiatives. Strong support for ACT grassland and woodland conservation by the ACT Government continues to this day.

The Management Group agreed to provide 'seed' funding to support the establishment of a Friends of Grasslands group to lobby for conservation of grasslands, an action identified in the Recovery Plan. The Grassland Project Officer, Sarah Sharp, expressed the opinion in our beloved Canberra Times on 24 January 1994 that "ACT grasslands need a saviour" and in that article introduced the proposal for the establishment of a Friends of Grasslands Group.

This was the background in which FOG emerged.

Edwina Barton

In May 1994, Sarah Sharp talked to the Council of the Society for Growing Australian Plants Canberra Region (SGAP) about the potential for SGAP to support the establishment of a FOG group. Members of SGAP were aware of the importance of ACT grasslands and the request was met with amazing enthusiasm. Edwina Barton, then SGAP President, who was on a break from full-time work and was standing down from the SGAP presidency undertook to devote a one-year full-time working with others to establish FOG.

Luckily for FOG and Canberra conservation more generally, Edwina brought a passion for conservation, a strong background and lengthy experience in lobbying and law enforcement, a good sense of strategy, an understanding of what was practical, humility and resourcefulness. She combined an ability to take a helicopter view of organisation and potential to make change and to plan tasks in detail.

In June 1994 she prepared a paper for the Grassland Management Working Group setting out a framework for FOG. In her view, FOG should promote awareness of grasslands, educate the public and gain support for the conservation, disseminate information, and promote the use of grassland species in landscaping from seed collected by FOG members. She saw an independent non-profit community organisation, which in the longer term would become a national body acting as an umbrella group formed from regional FOG groups. Essential elements of FOG were a newsletter, regular meetings, field trips, on-ground work, providing training and helping with field work. She also envisaged FOG undertaking conferences, special projects and more.

The first step was to build an organisation. Edwina believed in a big bang start. Geoff Butler, then President of the Conservation Council ACT Region, recalls going regularly to small meetings at Edwina's home to plan the establishment of FOG.

FOG's launch was held at the Yarramundi Reach museum site (now the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Cultural Centre). Edwina pulled out all stops sending out numerous invitation to politicians, scientists, journalists, and active members of conservation groups. The ACT Grassland Recovery grant was obtained by SGAP to finance the launch and to produce a brochure.

The launch took place on 12 November 1994. The Master of Ceremonies was Michael Hissink, Environment Centre Manager. Bill Wood MLA, Minister for Environment, officially launched FOG, and Geoff Butler, Sarah Sharp and Kruno Kukolic (both Wildlife Research Unit), and Ted Edwards (CSIRO, Div of Entomology) were speakers. Champagne flowed and strawberries and cream were consumed (although as an early newsletter pointed out the grant did not cover the cost of champagne and strawberries!). Wining and dining was followed by guided walks in the Yarramundi Grasslands led by Sarah, Kruno and Ted. By year's end FOG had 80 financial members; including organisations, and FOG had produced its first two newsletters (22 Nov, 12 Dec). In its early months, FOG remained a protege of SGAP.

FOG first general meeting, held on 26 November, was chaired by Geoff Butler. It was a brain storming session on FOG's future and at meeting's end, it elected a committee consisting of Edwina (Convenor), Mary Anne Highfield (Secretary) and Sandy Kay (Treasurer). This may have been disappointing as few people were keen to take on onerous positions (nothing new in this). Even so, Edwina with the committee managed to get FOG up and running and influence grassland conservation outcomes.

We now turn to some of her practical achievements.

She saw good governance as essential and training and delegation as essentially, especially if FOG was to have a future. She forged ahead with her ambitious committee structure. At the second general meeting, 12 April 1995, a new superstructure was introduced. The committee consisted of office holders and other committee members as well as representatives of each of the four sub-committee, namely, Conservation with its own remnants' sub-committee, Education including a poster working group, Landscaping and horticulture, and Constitution. Some twenty-four people were involved in one or more of the committee and sub-committees - this must have taken some

persuasion. Edwina took on the role of Acting Convenor as she was determined that someone else should take on that role.

Governance remained a priority and Edwina pushed ahead with getting the governance structure in place, thus laying the groundwork for FOG's future constitution, organising FOG's finance based on paid membership, and organising the grant for FOG's first conference that was later held in November 1996.

Advocacy was a particular strength and she led FOG's first advocacy campaign to influence Queanbeyan City Council (as it was then called) planning decisions so that development would take place on areas largely devoid of biodiversity value; she advocated that high value conservation areas be permanently set aside for conservation. This involved persuading members of FOG and the wider group of stakeholders that FOG should attempt to prepare a submission particularly on the Poplars, appearing before a hearing, and lobbying experts and other councils. She also worked with the then ACT Commissioner for the Environment to include material on grasslands in his State of the Environment Report. She participated in commenting on the then developing ACT grassland and associated species action plans and alerted FOG to the impending NSW native vegetation regulations.

On-ground work was seen as an important component of FOG's efforts - learning by experimenting and doing. SGAP and its early influence on FOG brought experience in gardening and horticulture. Edwina at her home had developed an indigenous garden including use of a range of grasses and forbs. FOG began to experiment with seed collection with the aim of making plant material more widely available and became to advocate for using grassland plants in public landscaping and roadsides. At the then Environment Centre, FOG created Canberra's first grassland garden. Field trips to local grassland sites were another early feature of FOG's activities.

Communication was another key platform. Edwina was very successful in raising awareness of the grasslands by Canberra decision makers and getting the grassland message out there through excellent media coverage of the launch. She also ran a series of public stalls. Edwina produced the first five editions of the *News of Friends of Grasslands* which combined serious material on grassland issues, advocacy, activities, on-ground work and governance in a chatty style that was easily read. She also produced the first FOG brochure. The newsletter and other material, as she rightly saw, was FOG's key way of communicating with FOG members and the wider community.

Naarilla Hirsch

Naarilla became aware of FOG in late 1994/early 1995. Her interest in grasslands was sparked at a FOG stall. At the FOG general meeting of 12 April 1995, Naarilla became a member of the Conservation Committee and the General Committee. She started to play an active role from the start, and well before year's end, she was firmly entrenched in organising FOG's meetings, organising agendas, recording minutes, and arranging filing. At the 26 November general meeting, Sandy Jones was elected as President, but Naarilla, whose organising abilities were well recognised, was given the title of Convenor and she continued organising meetings, recording minutes etc.

Naarilla considered herself, unlike many other FOG enthusiasts, lacking in knowledge of grassland ecology. In her university studies, she was attracted to study ecology, but health considerations ruled out the option of a career in the great outdoors. Nevertheless, she had a great desire to learn about and support grasslands and played a support role wherever she could.

In 1995, she worked closely with Graeme Evans in drafting FOG's first constitution which was adopted in early 1998 in modified form. In 1996, FOG sole focus was the organising the very successful *Living Grasses Conference* that was held on 9th and 10th of November. The organising committee consisted of Susan Theron, Jan Gough-Watson, Sandy Kay and Naarilla Hirsch, each putting in a huge effort.

Exhausted, the members of this committee did not stand for the incoming committee elected on 5 December 1996. Nevertheless, Naarilla flagged that she was prepared to assist and by September 1997 she was a member of the core group to resurrect FOG. On 8 November 1997 Naarilla was elected as Assistant Secretary and thus began again her key role in the deliberations of the committee, serving as vice-president in 1998, and secretary in the following three years. Her knowledge of FOG's history and her methodological approach to administration were a major contribution to FOG's smooth functioning. She was involved in organising FOG's 1998 conference and she and Art Langston prepared and edited the proceedings of the conference. Naarilla also undertook significant work in FOG's advocacy work and in preparing regular reports for the newsletter.

In 2000 Naarilla formed the Fisher Parkland Group responsible for recovering a grassy ecosystem site at Fisher Parkland. Like many members of FOG, she demonstrated the art of integrating on-ground work with education, advocacy, communication and governance activities.

Illness forced Naarilla to stand down from the committee in 2002 and to backpedal on many activities. Also, the emerging need to care for her beloved Gerry and his death also took a toll. Nevertheless, she regularly attended FOG field trips and workshops and, freed from more formal responsibilities, she had the opportunity to learn more about plant identification and grassland ecology, bring her sharply trained scientific mind to the task.

During her absence from the committee, her role as secretary had been admirably picked up by the likes of Ros Wallace, Cathy Robertson, Janet Russell and Bernadette O'Leary. In August 2007 FOG ran a workshop on *Future Directions* and following that placed a strong emphasis on strengthening its advocacy role. Under the leadership of Bernadette O'Leary the advocacy group formed in 2008 and Naarilla became an active member of the group. Naarilla took over the role of Advocacy Coordinator when Bernadette stood down from that role in 2009. Naarilla rejoined the committee about that time and from time-to-time assisted in the Secretary's role when Al Gabb was unable to fulfil that function. In 2012 Kris Nash was elected secretary allowing Naarilla more time to being Advocacy Coordinator.

That role has involved: coordinating FOG's overall advocacy effort; writing many of FOG's submissions; negotiating with other organisations, especially the Biodiversity Working Group of the Conservation Council, where a multi-group submission was involved; and attended regular meetings with Canberra International Airport Group on its various development plans (involving the destruction of some grasslands) and management of their remnant grasslands. She has and continues to be involved in representing FOG on Murrumbidgee to Gogong Pipeline Working Group. The advocacy role requires an in-depth knowledge of legalisation, policy and administration, and the role of other groups.

FOG has become highly respected for its work on advocacy. During its history, FOG has observed dramatic changes in our understanding of biodiversity and its most appropriate management, particularly in relation to grassy ecosystems; a growing complexity of the science and the issues to be considered as well as the technology that supports this; a huge increase in the number of players involved; dramatic changes in the role of government, biodiversity and native vegetation

legislation, and administrative arrangements in several jurisdictions (those of the Commonwealth, the Australian Capital Territory and NSW being those most directly relevant to FOG); stop, start and constant changes in funding arrangements and coupled with a general withdrawal of government interest and even hostility to biodiversity funding. Responding to all this requires a great deal of adroitness and adaption which Naarilla has demonstrated. She has also embraced FOG ethic of our advocacy based on sound science, dispassionate argument and a non-confrontational approach.

The issues addressed in these submissions have included: the evolution and monitoring of the biodiversity offset into highly complex conservation tool; changes to the legislative and administration arrangements associated with the Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act; the review and changes to the NSW Biodiversity and Native Vegetation legislation and associated regulations; various strategic assessments including the Eastern Broad Acre Study and the Gungahlin Strategic Assessment; the future of NSW Travelling Stock Reserves; and numerous ACT planning issues that impact on grassland and woodland remnants. Most of these issues have been protracted as has FOG involvement with the Canberra International Airport and the Murrumbidgee to Gogong Assessment.

Naarilla has recently stood down from the FOG committee and her role of Advocacy Coordinator but is still very actively involved in preparing FOG's submissions. Naarilla's counsel on any issue is always highly valued.