A photograph of a man in a light-colored ranger uniform and a wide-brimmed hat climbing a large, gnarled tree trunk. He is reaching up towards the branches. The tree has thick, textured bark. In the background, there's a dirt path leading into a dense forest of tall trees under a blue sky with some clouds.

First Ranger

A MEMOIR

Ron Turner

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First published in 2021 by
Ron Turner

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Turner, Ronald Stanley, 1936–
First Ranger: A Memoir
ISBN 978-0-646-83608-9

Edited by Elaine Brown and Geoff Edwards
Typeset in Goudy Oldstyle by Sunset Publishing Services Pty Ltd
Printed by One Access

Cover photo: Ancient scribbly gum (Photo: B. Thomas).
All other photos by the author unless otherwise credited.

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PREFACE

Perhaps I was a dreamer, but my years spent living and working in the mountains of New Zealand's south island provided me with an ideal. Here was spectacular beauty to rival Yosemite, where the national park ideal was conceived. My mind became focussed on the need to protect and preserve natural landscapes for future generations. Pat Comben, the minister responsible for national parks in the Goss government in Queensland, termed this a 'sacred trust'.

I was happy to encourage and advise visitors to enjoy these jewels in the crown and always worked for what I could do to promote this cause, never for what I could get out of it. I saw myself as today's custodian of the nation's treasures who was holding the line until better educated and resourced staff came along. However, I did not last the distance. Years later, I found I was ill-prepared to deal with employees working within the system who did not share those ideals.

In the early years, my role as District Ranger in Queensland was actually a lonely one. There were few departmental mentors with whom I could confide in or reflect ideas or ideals, or discuss issues. At one stage, I was the only District Ranger in Queensland.

Todays society owes a debt of gratitude to many early Foresters who so admirably conceived and managed todays system of national parks.

Across the years many people have suggested I should write of my life working in national parks. More recently, I came to realise todays front line staff are not aware of events as recently as even twenty years ago. I believe it important to have part of the early history of QNPWS documented – in particular that of Cooloola NP – as seen from the perspective of a field worker.

This book would not have been written without the support of my wife, Yvonne, to whom I owe so much, and the on-going advice and editorial assistance of Peter and Bevly Hughes, Dave Batt, Geoff Edwards and in particular Elaine Brown. Many friends, former and current Departmental employees have assisted with encouragement and advice.

I have drawn heavily on my own daily diaries and notebooks, various newspapers, staff magazines, and departmental correspondence supplied to me through Freedom of Information. The records of the Noosa Parks Association, so carefully maintained by Dr Arthur Harrold, have been essential. In drawing together this data I have attempted to accurately portray a part of the history of national parks in Queensland post 1975. Any errors are my sole responsibility.

Many of the photos used are the work of Barbara Thomas. Her 600 photos of Cooloola 1978-84 now form part of the Queensland State Library collection. I thank her and other contributors who are acknowledged alongside their individual photos.

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BEGINNINGS

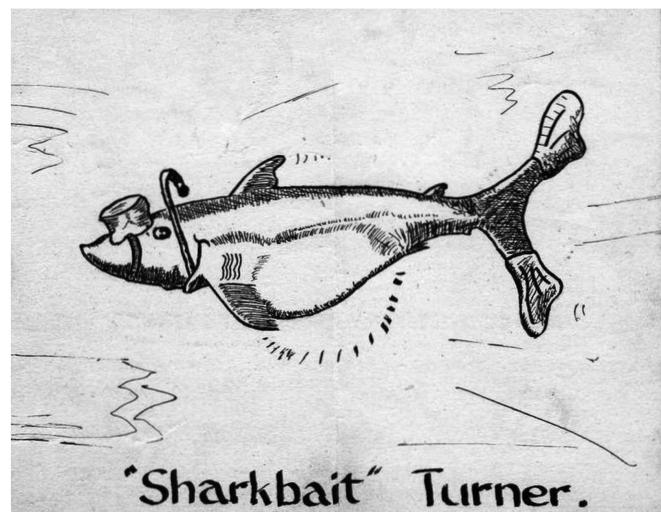
My involvement with national park management was not planned. Born in Geelong in 1936, I commenced school at Ocean Grove while my father was overseas on war service. My fondness for the outdoors was even then evident as, at school, I earned the nickname of 'Wagger'. I became an apprentice fitter and turner, and after completing basic trade training, went on to become a tool maker, taking extra subjects such as welding.

On weekends, I loved to roam the volcanic plains around Geelong on my bicycle, shooting rabbits. When good weather prevailed, spear fishing around the coastline became my favourite pastime, and competitive rowing was a sport in my teenage years.

At age twenty, I left home for national service training with the Navy. As a member of a competitive gun crew, I missed a trip on the aircraft carrier HMAS Sydney from Melbourne to Sydney, but travelled on the English submarine HMS Oberon, spending much of the day submerged at 25 metres, enroute from Sydney to the shore base at Jervis Bay. A trip to Tasmania on the frigate HMAS Shoalhaven, working in the engine room below the waterline, was dramatic. This was its last trip before going to the scrap yards, and at one stage the Petty Officer in charge untied the safety rope to clear an escape route, as the boiler was about to explode.

Shortly thereafter adventure beckoned, and I sailed from Sydney to New Zealand, where I underwent a major change of outlook. Initially I picked and packed apples on a commercial orchard, then headed to the snow-covered mountains, so different from the boulder-strewn plains around Geelong.

I loved the three years working for the New Zealand Forest Service, living in huts in the Southern Alps, with its extremes of weather. The cataclysmic thunder and lightning storms within the steep-sided valleys were awe-inspiring. They would cause the huts to tremble and the rats to scamper along the rafters. The annual rainfall was 14 to 17 metres, and huge floods would roar down mountain rivers. On the West Coast and in other areas of the South Island where I lived, the landscape, sometimes shattered by past earthquakes, was inspirational. I lived a wilderness experience, mainly in solitude, and it changed my life.



Sketch by Graham Betteridge.

I was prepared to move permanently to New Zealand, but, after meeting my best mate's cousin, Yvonne, an important person had entered my life. Returning to Victoria, with an engagement and marriage to Yvonne coming, I tried to settle back into my trade work. Those next twelve months working machinery inside a factory were just awful. I was then successful in obtaining a job as a track man at Tidal River in Wilson's Promontory National Park. We stalled the urgency of the moment, declining a honeymoon at Tidal River in favour of starting two weeks later. Our home for most of the year was two converted horse stables, used by commandos during the war.

At Tidal River, I constructed a 1.5 kilometre benched track at the southern end of Norman Bay, which eventually gave access around the rocky hillsides to Little Oberon Bay. This track was lined through by eye, and took me several months to dig out of the hillside, alone and by hand.

The birth of our first son, Wayne, was preceded by promotion to Assistant Ranger. In 1962, after my appointment as the first Ranger-in-Charge of Fraser National Park on Lake Eildon, we moved to the township of Alexandra. Two years later, a brand new house became available in the park.



Walking track at far end of Norman Bay.



The track to Oberon Bay was dug out of the hillside.

During our fifteen years at Fraser NP, our family expanded with the births of Neale, Mark and Tracey. My task at the park was to bring order to the area and to establish four different camping areas with a total of 365 camp sites, each able to be booked in advance for peak periods. Thirteen different types of revenue were collected and accounted for.

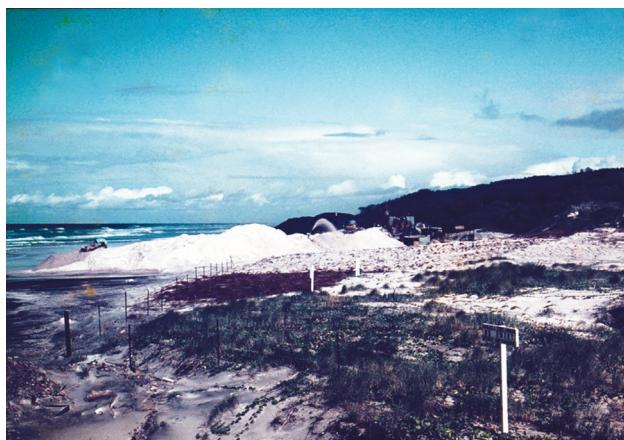
In an interesting parallel with my later experiences at Cooloola National Park, residents at nearby Alexandra saw the national park as their back yard for hunting, fishing and drinking parties,

and they resented control. In Victoria, however, I was responsible to a Committee of Management which, with fee collection, was semi-independent of head office. With hands-on management and new amenities blocks with hot showers, the clientele changed in favour of family groups. Local business people came to see the potential of the park, and a large banner was erected across the main street reading 'Welcome to Alexandra, Gateway to Fraser National Park'.

Victoria, with its strong conservation movement, was some years ahead of Queensland and in the mid-1970s, the Victorian National Parks Service was catapulted into a major bureaucratic expansion. I was transferred and we moved to a large house on the isolated and remote Rotomah Island in the southern Gippsland Lakes, within walking distance of the 90 Mile Beach. Despite earlier promises, after nine months we were obliged to move to a new house surrounded by dirty black sand, with a laundry quite inadequate for a young family. The park was scheduled to be greatly expanded, but land additions were constantly deferred. Senior staff were arguing for managed rabbit and deer harvesting by shooting, and I found myself at odds with their approach. After the complexity of Fraser National Park, the area seemed dead, and I was not prepared to blindly follow instructions from people whose conservation ethics were questionable.

With three children involved in correspondence lessons, Yvonne and I found schooling difficult, especially as our older boys were now at secondary level. The uninterrupted view of the lake, 80 metres from our door, presented a severe handicap to studies. There was unlimited potential for fishing, swimming and yachting. After nine months, the two boys were boarded in Sale, about an hour away.

In 1975, while on a three-month long service break, our family had visited Cooloola, in Queensland. We had been on the road for many days and, after driving our EH Holden station wagon towing a camping trailer through strange wallum vegetation, it was a marvellous spectacle to enter towering rainforest and drive past Freshwater Lake to a camp ground.



Sand was brought from along Teewah Beach.



Sand mining operations at Freshwater Creek.

We entered a mining camp, with a noisy, smelly, diesel generator operating 24 hours a day. On the foreshore in front of the camp was a sign stating 'Cooloola State Forest. No Entry Without Permission'. On the beach front, a sand mining plant was operating, with a bulldozer pushing sand dumped from 6WD Volvo trucks into the treatment plant. The mouth of Freshwater Creek became the location of a modestly radioactive ilmenite dump.

The two older boys and I hiked several kilometres northwards along Teewah Beach to

inspect the grounded *Cherry Venture*, and saw an encampment of huts and caravans in the nearby foredune. After two nights of suffering the generator at Freshwater, we left with many unanswered questions in mind.

I had no idea that my future would lie heavily in this area, but our Queensland holiday had allowed us to think beyond local borders, and we were longing to establish a home of our own. I applied for a position with the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service. A successful interview in Canberra with two senior Queensland officers followed, and we moved to Gympie in April 1978.



Stranded *Cherry Venture*.



View from Fraser NP across Lake Eildon.