



## Friends of Parks Inc Volunteers working for conservation

### **FLINDERS FORUM 2008 OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE**

Good morning special guests, Friends and supporters

I acknowledge the Adnyamathanha people the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today,

Putting this presentation together the first words I typed were "I have a dream today". Immediately fear of being too presumptuous made me stop and think. Martin Luther King's message was far too weighty to be lightly mimicked. After all I'm just an ageing tree-hugger talking to a group of fellow enthusiasts in what must be one of the most beautiful spots on earth. What could we possibly have in common with the Reverend King and his disciples on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in the 1960s?

Different country, different times, certainly; different issues, definitely, but nevertheless both groups confronted by challenges with implications of a global nature and that seriously impact on the lives of generations to come. How many of us here today do what we do not so much for ourselves as for our grandchildren? It's a continuing struggle that requires energy, passion and above all collaboration. Only with volunteers working in close partnership with agency officers and with support from a range of public and private sector sources can we expect any success. Our Vision for the Future must be positive and based on mutually beneficial partnerships; partnerships that recognise knowledge, energy and commitment and that are sufficiently robust to benefit from the occasional difference of opinion.

We are in challenging times. Despite the best efforts of many, time, human interference and declining resources for stewardship have degraded much of our natural and cultural heritage. Governments generally have been slow to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and to be honest much of the population at large has either not been bothered or had other priorities. Whatever the causes, sufficient to say that, apart from a visionary few (some of whom are here today), it is only relatively recently that there has been widespread recognition that the situation is critical. Nowadays, South Australia at least has a No Species Loss policy and NatureLinks program that form part of the State Strategic Plan. Nevertheless the extinction debt continues to grow, species are threatened, heritage assets continue to deteriorate; despite the best efforts of the converted more clearly needs to be done and we need some fresh approaches.

But in adopting new approaches we must not jettison the work of our predecessors. Our Vision for the Future must build upon foundations already laid and embrace the best aspects of the relationship between Friends of Parks and the Department. Neither should we forget in our pursuit of excellence and an ideal world that Friends of Parks is a volunteer organisation. We give our time willingly and freely but, in doing so, gain fulfilment, comradeship and enjoyment.

In short we have some fun in the process of getting things done, hopefully without too much recourse to bureaucracy. Long may that philosophy continue.

In a sense what we have here at Footsteps in the Flinders could be considered a snapshot of Our Vision for the Future. The word "Our" was chosen deliberately. It isn't just My Vision, or the Friends of Parks Vision. I'd like to think that it's the Vision or common objective of all of the stakeholders present at this particular Forum. It's member groups; conservation and recreation, nature conservation and cultural heritage, marine and coastal, metropolitan and country plus a swag of affiliated and special interest groups. It's government representatives and departmental officers whether in suits or field uniforms. It's volunteers of all ages working together with adequate training, resources and support towards a common objective. And last and by no means least it's the corporate sector in its various guises with its financial and other in-kind support that can make such events possible and is increasingly wanting to get involved. The Vision for the Future must be one of collaboration.

There's nothing radical about this vision. What we are witnessing over this weekend, however, needs to be a template for the way we operate, communicate and collaborate every week of the year. Partnerships are only as good as the partners but to remain strong they rely on mutual respect, trust and feedback. My judgement is that the partnership between DEH and Friends of Parks has become just a bit jaded over time. Some of the sparkle has gone out of the romance. I have a dream that together we can bring back that sparkle and I genuinely believe that there are serious signs that this is happening.

Member groups go about their business from meeting to meeting and working bee to working bee and long may that continue. Frequently they receive excellent support from their liaison rangers but sometimes they don't receive enough. Whilst in my view DEH does a difficult job in increasingly straitened circumstances, availability of resources remains an issue; despite the welcome introduction of Volunteer Support Rangers and the efforts of existing staff the parks and reserves system remains woefully understaffed. Without volunteers some parks would rapidly decline and some cultural assets be forever lost. But this is not just about numbers but also about quality. Our volunteers deserve improved access to training opportunities and Friends of Parks has a challenge to broker and support those services on behalf of member groups.

Each year our volunteers contribute more than 80 full time equivalents which compares with a ranger complement within DEH of about 90 FTE's. I'm in no way suggesting that our volunteers have the same level of training and expertise as professional rangers nor that rangers are the only DEH personnel carrying out on-ground work. Nevertheless the figures are an indicator of the extent to which the government relies on Friends of Parks to deliver its services. This is a message that we need to market not in a negative nor whingeing way but constructively and creatively, as a means of attracting more support from within and without government. How much value do we add to the environment and heritage cause? I'm not sure but know that it's considerable and we need to be able to quantify it more accurately. This remains a challenge for us as advocates for our cause and the state's future. Friends of Parks can be an engine room for community engagement and we must be able to sell that capability to government. Friends of Parks is currently working with other NGOs, the Conservation Council and all of the NRM Boards to precisely that end.

Reference has been made at these proceedings to the DEH corporate plan. Planning is as much about the process as the final plan. I have a dream that Allan Holmes rings me and says "David can I come to your Board and discuss how to engage your members in a review of the DEH corporate plan?" Then I might begin to believe seriously in the agency's stated intent to engage the community. I have a dream that Regional Conservators will as a priority seek to meet with groups of Friends to hear first hand what the issues and priorities are at the community level and provide some serious input into the NRM process. I have a dream that Friends of Parks will be seen as an equal partner and not as a bit of an afterthought. Extra involvement at the beginning of some policy and planning processes will save a lot of angst and tidying up further down the track. Such dialogues have begun to take place with benefits for DEH, member groups and the final outcomes. My dream is that increasing and continued use will be made of the vast intellectual capital that resides in our volunteers.

Don't get me wrong. This is not me simply taking a few free kicks at departmental expense, nor is it intended to undervalue the professionalism of DEH personnel. Anyone who has dealt with me knows the lengths to which I will go to hand-out plaudits when they are deserved. In that context DEH has already committed to the In Safe Hands health and safety initiative and is progressively appointing volunteer support rangers to regions to the benefit of staff and volunteers alike. I sense a renewed willingness to embrace volunteers. Friends of Parks in our turn have to earn the respect of the department, the government and the wider community. Only when we have will be regarded as an equal partner and an organisation worth going to bat for.

As individual groups we score pretty well but as a collective whole we punch well below our weight. An organisation of some 140 member groups and several thousand members should have more influence than currently we do. Somehow we need to improve our ability to flex our collective muscle and add some real value to the political debate. I have an ambition that our views will be sought both by government and the public sector on a more regular basis than hitherto even though we may have a different point of view. This is a major priority and challenge for the Board of Friends of Parks on behalf of the membership and will hopefully form part of a revised MOU.

That resources are scarce for delivering on-ground services and maintaining our asset base is undeniable. I'm not going to enter into the politics of budgetary allocations other than to say that in my view they hardly reflect the political rhetoric or the priorities of the State Strategic Plan. That aside, however, Friends of Parks must endeavour to attract funding from a wider variety of sources. As a volunteer organisation we will hardly get rich from our membership fees. Individually and collectively we have managed to attract increased grant funding over the past decade but when measured against the size of the collective work program it's a drop in the ocean. This applies as much to cultural heritage as it does to nature conservation. Indeed we need to work closely with DEH to optimise opportunities for external funding and partnerships. As a specific example we need jointly to embrace the NatureLinks initiative of government and assist DEH identify private sector and land holder interests. It's interesting to note that involvement of the private sector is a key feature of the Rudd government's Caring for Our Country initiative.

Grant processes in the environmental sector remain hard work and most groups don't have the time, expertise or inclination to subject themselves to the process. This applies especially to Natural Resource Management funding and its Caring for Our Country successor. This is an area where the Friends of Parks Incorporated Board must find ways of improving the level of assistance and expertise available

to member groups whilst at the same time arguing the case for simplified processes. Friends of Parks has a voluntary part-time position of Grants Facilitator but my experience elsewhere tells me that managing grants and seeking sponsorship are best done by paid professionals. Considerable work in this regard has been done in recent years in cooperation with the Volunteer Support Unit but not nearly enough and this is an area where we need to lift our game to supplement the declining departmental budgetary appropriation.

In closing I'll attempt to summarise the features of Our Vision for the Future. Over the next two to three years we must work together to achieve:-

- Credibility and coherence that warrant the respect of the government, the public and private sectors and the community at large
- Improved partnership models and ways of communicating and working together that optimise and leverage the energy, knowledge and skills of all parties
- Improved training, welfare and safety for all volunteers to enable them to optimise their contribution and self-fulfilment
- Continuous education and improvement opportunities for our members utilising a range of sources including the inherent skills and expertise of our members

We must work together to produce an organisation that is:

- Attractive to a wide range of members from a variety of backgrounds and age groups
- Creative and flexible in offering a wide range of volunteering models and opportunities and markets itself accordingly
- Capable of articulating views on terrestrial, marine and heritage issues which are sought and valued by government and the public sector even when they are critical

And finally but realistically we need to pursue:

- More entrepreneurial and adventurous ways of attracting financial and other support from a range of sources including grants and corporate sponsorship

It is my view that only when we have achieved a level of coherence and credibility of this kind that we can even begin to contemplate greater autonomy and independence. Our immediate future is in my view bound inextricably with that of DEH and our shared vision must embrace a mature, robust and progressive partnership. That is why the current revision of the Memorandum of Understanding or, as we in Friends of Parks would prefer to call it, Partnership Agreement between Friends and the Department assumes such importance.

Thank you for your attention this morning and for your dedication to this important cause.

David Mitchell  
**President**  
**Friends of Parks**