



# NATIONAL TRUST MAGAZINE (NSW)

John Neish: new leader, new future

Annual Review 2007-08

Parramatta Park celebrates 150 years



*Currawong in 2001, Photo: Friends of Currawong; Eveleigh Locomotive Workshops in the 1890s, showing the Wheel Shop. Photo: NSW Government Printer; Catherine Hill Bay; Photo: Patrick Kenny. Three key sites the Trust is currently campaigning to save.*

## new leader at the helm

John Neish, the new executive director of the National Trust of Australia (NSW), speaks to Annemarie Jonson about his vision for the future

**Annemarie Jonson:** Could you start by telling us a little about the path that led you here to this key leadership role at the National Trust of Australia (NSW)?

**John Neish:** My background spans the not for profit, private and local government sectors, in urban and rural settings.

More specifically, my most recent position was as General Manager of Parramatta City Council with 900 staff and a budget of \$135 million. Prior to this I was Head of Performance for the southern region of the UK Audit Commission, with quality assurance responsibility for the 175 local authorities in the southwest of England. I led performance assessment of councils, giving me an understanding of how to diagnose organisations' capacities and the elements of their success.

Previously to this I was the Director of Library and Community services at Parramatta City Council. We established the Parramatta Heritage Resource Centre, and restored some of the key heritage items in the city of Parramatta as part of the Parramatta Heritage Development Strategy which still has currency today. This was preceded by 5 years at Ku-ring-gai Council managing Community Services, and before that, Glen Innes.

In Glen Innes, we reinstated historic building colour schemes and developed heritage-appropriate public works, a scheme which boosted tourism and local opportunities for the long term unemployed and continues today. At Glen Innes, I developed a real understanding of how the bush works, how generations of rural communities have enormous pride in their local places. NSW is blessed with such communities. It's the fabric that makes the Trust what

it is today. I believe this experience can be applied to an organisation as value-driven as the Trust.

■ **AJ:** What to your mind are the goals of the Trust and its key values at this time in its 63 year history?

**JN:** The Trust's goals can be summarised as Advocacy, Conservation and Education (A.C.E.) of our built, natural and cultural heritage. The other operations of the Trust are about supporting this central mission. Our commercial operations such as bush regeneration, merchandising, venue hire etc, generate revenue to advance these frontline activities. Our challenge is to generate revenues at adequate levels to deliver our goals for current and future generations.

Our members expect us to manage an organisation as professionally and efficiently as possible within

*(continued page 3...)*

# John Neish: new leader, new future (continued from cover)

our means. This will be another of our goals so that we can be entrusted to manage and deliver our core programs of Advocacy, Conservation and Education in the best possible way.

It's funny to think that in 63 years, the Trust's values are not clearly articulated yet I am sure for many people they are clear. For this reason I strongly believe that our values must come from a bottom up process, where our grassroots committees and staff are engaged to clearly articulate our core set of values which define our culture and the things we believe in.

Once we are clear about our values we must also nurture and protect the Trust's brand - a professional, reliable brand that is able to independently and fearlessly articulate when "enough is enough" (such as with the destruction of Catherine Hill Bay). Having said that we should always be willing where possible to find workable and sustainable solutions to difficult problems around heritage conservation.

## ■ AJ: What do you see as the key challenges facing the Trust?

**JN:** Advocacy is an immediate challenge in that the changes to the NSW Planning Act and the Heritage Act put us in an environment where properties are now more under threat than they were a short time ago. We are one of the last independent advocates for heritage conservation left standing. One key challenge is to build coalitions with likeminded and grassroots groups such as the Friends of Catherine Hill Bay and be a strong advocate at this time when the need for effective advocacy is greater than ever.

The second major challenge is being able to properly present and conserve our properties and collections. Not just the literal conservation of the properties and the important collections but to really make them sustainable in the social and economic sense as a cultural hub important to local communities. We are currently unable to adequately fund the maintenance and the conservation of our properties and collections. This is why we have our special appeals such as the latest one for Saumarez Homestead which is helping to overcome this, but we still have a long way to go to become truly financially sustainable with our properties and collections.

The third challenge is getting our story straight, our educational capacity strengthened, so that we can relate to a broader audience including our young

people and those from other cultural backgrounds.

The fourth is building organisational capacity – being very clear on our priorities and building our internal capacity to be able to realise our aspirations. Capacity building which supports the three key goals: Advocacy, Conservation and Education.

## ■ AJ: What are your immediate and longer term priorities for your tenure?

**JN:** The Trust does not yet have a clearly articulated strategic plan with priorities for action and this is where I and the Board would like to begin. For this reason I am planning to get out and about to meet every committee, visit every house museum and talk with as many of our volunteers as I can over the next few months.

The results of this consultation will be brought together and go back to the Board, which will use this consultation to devise a strategic plan for the future. That's when our values and priorities will be set. Once set, we will communicate our plan back to our members and get on with implementing it.

■ AJ: The Trust is supported by membership, benefaction, corporate sponsorships, partnerships and so on. Given trends such as a slowing economy, demographic changes and stiff competition, how do we make a case for community and corporate support?

**JN:** I liked our campaign, "I love this place". Communities are passionate about their place. Who do they turn to when they are disenfranchised? Who's left standing? It's us. The black clouds of our current planning regime help to remind people how important the activities of the National Trust are. Grassroots organisations exist because people believe in them and feel passionate about their goals; our membership really believes in the Trust. That's what we've got to tap into.

Many years ago, Jack Munday proved that by tapping into grassroots networks great things can be achieved. Where would Sydney be today without The Rocks? Places like Kelly's Bush in Hunters Hill and the QVB? Sydney would be a different place. Tapping into the groundswell of support for places that communities value is what the Trust needs to be good at, positioning ourselves in that space. Catherine Hill Bay, Mudgee Shopping Mall, Eveleigh Rail Yards, Wollongong Town Hall and Ku-ring-gai Conservation zones are real examples of this. They make sense to local people who feel connected and passionate about the places where they live.

Much of our future is about galvanising people around such causes, and the support of the community expressed through membership is vital to the Trust. It's what makes politicians sit up and listen. But I don't think membership should be our only sign of success.

Revenue should also be generated through our enterprise wing. This includes bush regeneration, merchandising, venue hire, cafés, etc. We will always leverage some money from grants and so on. But the more we take care of our own business, the more independent and vocal we can be.

With big business, sustainability is the defining concept of the 21st century. Some property developers understand that sustainability is the way of the future and some of the good development in this city is sustainable and respectful or heritage. I think we should keep acknowledging those that do through our awards etc.

Whilst working towards environmental sustainability is simply something we should do as responsible citizens of the 21st century for future generations, it will also be important to cultivate corporate support. This must be done judiciously, so that we partner only with those corporate entities who share our values and can add value to our brand.

In other words, we must keep the membership strong, but our reliance should not be solely on membership – we need to develop commercial opportunities which strengthen our brand. Taking responsibility for our own economic sustainability is a way of honouring the support of our members and their investment in us.

## ■ AJ: What do you see as the future of the Trust in 5-10 years from now? Paint us a word picture.

**JN:** I envisage a Trust that is progressive, independent, sustainable, connected, owned by stakeholders, strong, indispensable, and with a culture that is united.

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