

Conservationist in Profile Series – December 2023.

This new series is being introduced as a way of celebrating and acknowledging the incredible contribution PICS volunteers have made to conservation on Phillip Island over many years through sustained, hands-on involvement in working bees, and campaigning to save fragile environments such as at Saltwater Creek from inappropriate development. It is important in our 55th year that we remember and celebrate their stories and legacy of conserving the island's natural environment that we all love and enjoy today

Interview with Greg Johnson: a valued PICS member since 1984, now in his 40th year of volunteering!

In our first interview for the series with Greg Johnson, a tried and true conservationist, you can really hear Greg's voice and his love of nature and strong commitment to conservation on Phillip Island comes through clearly!

It also highlights the effectiveness and importance of 'people power' in standing up for nature against inappropriate development to ensure that we protect and save our natural environment as a liveable habitat for our native flora and fauna!

We thank Greg for his 40 years of conservation volunteering on Phillip Island and the real difference he has made.

Meg: What is your association with Phillip Island and what is your work background?

Greg: *I worked for the MMBW and CSIRO in technical assistant positions then was a secondary school teacher for 25 years. I remember coming down to the island with my family as a child to see the penguins in the 1950s, sitting in the dunes with torches and a blanket.*



My next island experience was as a teacher on a school camp in 1983 and soon after, in 1984, my wife and I decided to look for a cheap holiday shack somewhere on the coast where I could sail my dinghy. Having scoured possibilities from Sandy Point to Cowes we came across a little fibro place in Sidford St, Ventnor with a backyard full of pine trees. At \$20,000 it was a steal! We made enquiries about whether the Island had a conservation society and attended our first meeting at the Heritage Centre one Saturday night. Our lives suddenly took on a new dimension.

Meg: How, when and why did you get involved with conservation issues at Saltwater Creek and Red Rocks?

Greg: *I'd become interested in growing native plants while living in Eltham, where the local community was influenced by the natural environment, due to its treed nature and artistic tradition. We'd also holidayed at Wilsons Prom and had taken up bushwalking, so we loved the bush. Wanting to protect it was an easy step. Joining PICS was a natural step for us!*

Saltwater Creek: *In late 1984 early 1985, it was rumored that a huge canal development was planned for Saltwater Creek which would affect the beach that we'd just fallen in love with. In late 1987, PICS set up a subcommittee (made up of Sally Bowtel, Ross Lloyd and Greg Johnson) to start serious planning for resisting the canal plan.*

In early 1988 the Ventnor Progress Association (VPA) called a public meeting to consider the canal proposal which was publicized by the local paper after the council advertised a planning scheme amendment for the development which had undergone an Environment Effects Statement (EES). We all attended the crowded public meeting in Cowes. Halfway through, I moved a motion which was overwhelmingly supported to set up an action group to stop the development and Saltwater Creek Action Group (SWAG) was created and while responsible to the VPA, PICS members had majority representation on the committee. We started organizing by distributing an excellent 'objectors guide' prepared by John Eddy and Christine Grayden.

Each member of the SWAG group was given a role including fundraising, public relations, media liaison, technical aspects etc. I became the spokesperson for the group.

*Our focus was on ‘**a beach worth saving**’, and we were aware the dunes surrounding the creek mouth contained ancient middens of great cultural/historic value mentioned in planning documents.*

Red Rocks: *My Red Rocks involvement came later at the end of 2001 when a subdivision was advertised for the property now known as 'Toscana Rise', 4.3 hectares adjoining the foreshore at the western end of Settlement Road. A beautiful property zoned for residential development but containing a wetland and 1.6 hectares of Banksia/Melaleuca coastal vegetation which would have been destroyed, council nevertheless approved the subdivision application. PICS decided to appeal that decision at VCAT. I organized and appeared for PICS at the subsequent hearing in early 2002. VCAT found in our favour insisting that the 1.6 hectares of coastal vegetation which was found to be highly significant for Phillip Island, must be protected with a modified subdivision plan and environmental management plan imposed. Rather than have their application refused, the developers accepted the need to redesign their subdivision to meet VCAT's ruling.*

Meg: *In this regard - what has been your greatest achievement and what are you most proud of re conservation work?*

Greg: *While the defeat of the canal proposal was a community victory given that council received 506 written objections (a record for South Gippsland!) which led to council dropping the amendment; the subsequent resolution for the land's future of a permanent rural 'green wedge' in the valley with a new crown land creek reserve permanently protecting Saltwater Creek, resulted from my and Ross Lloyd's efforts.*

We pressured and negotiated with state govt officers, council officers, the land owner and state conservation organizations to achieve a satisfactory result. I'm equally proud of the Toscana Rise outcome where I argued our case at VCAT with the support of other PICS members and got

an alternative subdivision design accepted. As a result a large area of coastal vegetation and habitat has been retained.

Meg: What have been the most significant environmental changes you have observed over time at Saltwater Creek (and Red Rocks)?

Greg: *The significant environment changes at Saltwater Creek are: the excellent community plantings which are transforming the creek towards something which surely resembles its natural condition with wildlife now plentiful. Each year it gets better and better. For many years the area had been a grazing property with cattle free to access both sides of the creek down to the water's edge. Only patches of creek-side vegetation were managing to hold on. Toscana Rise at Red Rocks is now fully developed with minimal damage to the Coast Banksia woodland, wetland and swamp scrub which continues to host bird life and native fauna. Positive environmental benefits.*

Meg: What do you most enjoy about being involved with RRSWC Coast Care and PICS?

Greg: *Working with like-minded friends to enhance/protect key features of our coastal and rural landscape for long lasting benefit for wildlife, people and the environment.*

Meg: What do you think needs to be done to continue the strong legacy of conservation work that has happened since you got involved with PICS?

Greg: *All the great hands-on physical work of propagation, re-vegetation and weeding etc. needs to continue of course. On a Google Earth satellite view of the Island it is still pretty denuded despite the years of voluntary work put in so far. In addition, I think there is a huge planning challenge if the Island is to be moved toward a sustainable tourism future as a 'whole-of-Island wildlife sanctuary' of the sort Jeff Floyd convincingly spoke about on page 3 of The Advertiser, Sept 20th. It requires council to work closely with the State Government on an agreed strategy, with tough decisions needing to be made to seriously protect the natural environment of Phillip Island.*

The recent DAL (Distinctive Areas Landscape Protection strategic work) may be the start of this co-operative approach?

Historical photos of Greg's work with VPA and SWAG



1988: A crowd of supporters line up along proposed canal walls across Anchorage Beach - later featured in TV news that night!



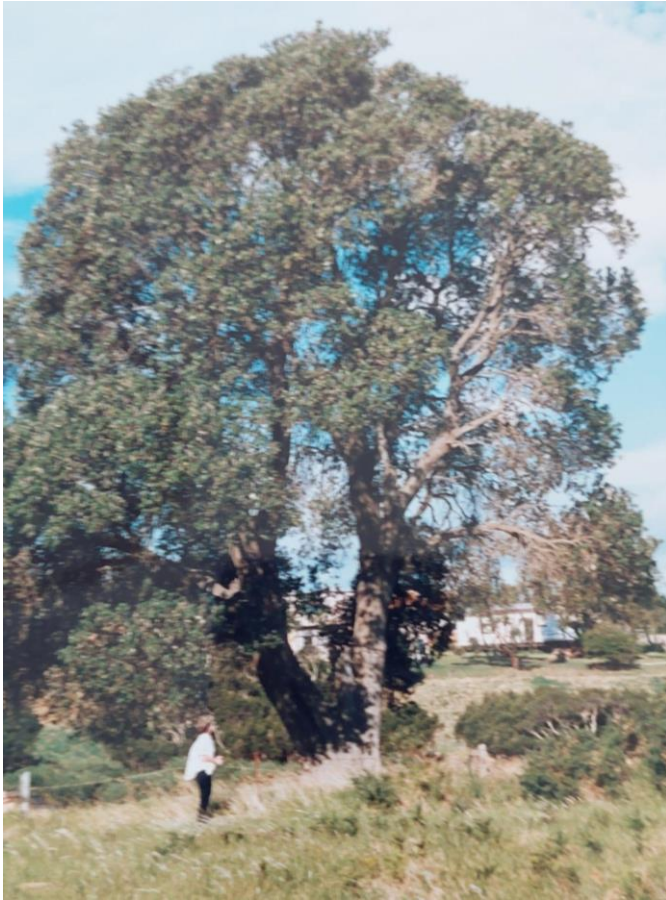
13 March '88: The day of the rally on Anchorage Beach - the 'Rabble Rousers'



13 March '88: Greg Johnson, John Anderson and a reporter, standing beside the SWAG campaign tent on the day of the beach rally.



1988: From Settlement Rd, looking south along the course of linear wetland parallel with Red Rocks Rd



1988: Mature Banksia near southern boundary of Settlement Rd, looking toward linear wetland



13 March '88: Overcast day of the beach rally - supporters walk towards the mouth of Saltwater Creek, with Penguin Rocks in background.



1988: Helicopter from TV studio lands on Anchorage Beach on day of rally.

Recent photos of Greg assisting at working bees - still going - nearly 40 years on!



June 2022: *Greg (foreground) with other volunteers planting in sand dunes at Red Rocks*



July 2022: *Greg Johnson and other volunteers including Ross Lloyd (background), planting at SW Creek.*



June 2023: *Greg planting in Red Rocks foreshore reserve*



July 2023: *Greg (centre) with planting team at SW Creek - many hands make light work!*