

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION LEAGUE, VICTORIA - 1991-2022.

*This history comprises three integrated parts. **Part 1: 'Overview'** provides a contextual summary of major changes since 1991. **Part 2: 'Reflections'** examines the League's history in the 1990s and 2000s based on the reflections of four prominent ex-Board members interviewed in 2012. **Part 3: 'Reinvention'** then examines key events in the League's development in the decade from 2011. It is positioned around the views of two other prominent ex-Board members interviewed in 2022-23.*

*Throughout, the oral histories were supplemented by extensive analysis of the NRCL Board Minutes and Director's Reports as well as newspaper archives and selected secondary sources.*

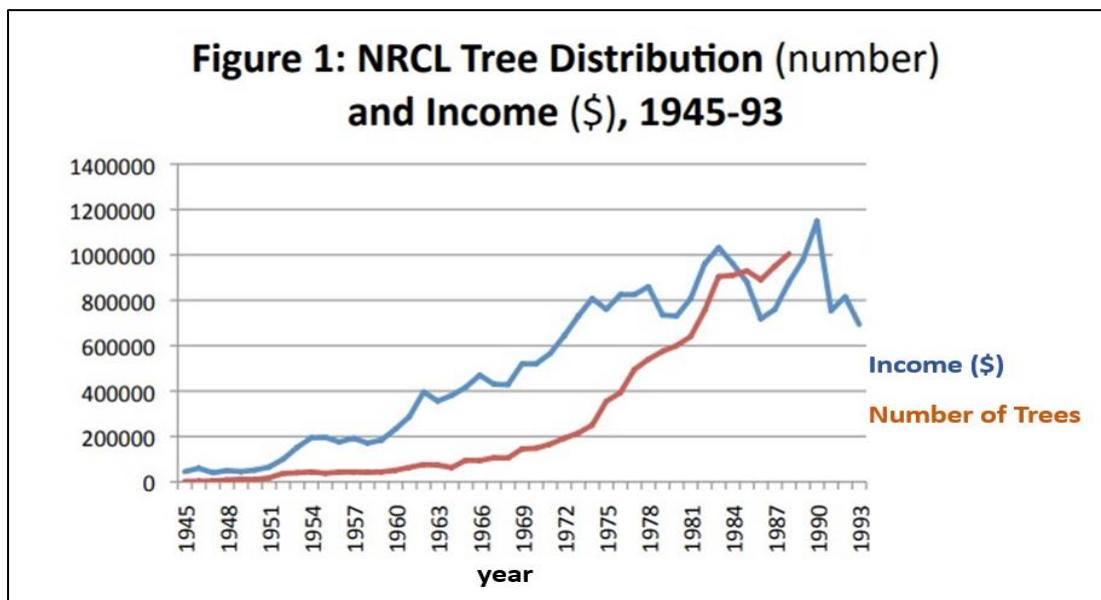
## PART 1: Overview

The Natural Resources Conservation League of Victoria (NRCL) is a not-for-profit conservation organisation that has long been regarded as one of the most durable, distinctive and influential public environmental conservation groups in the state. For over sixty years, the League had a substantial membership that spanned both private individuals and institutions from across Victoria. Those members elected unpaid volunteers to direct the League's operations through an Executive and specialist committee structure. During much of its past, the League also comprised a small but committed group of paid professionals including administrators, field and education officers, clerical and nursery staff.

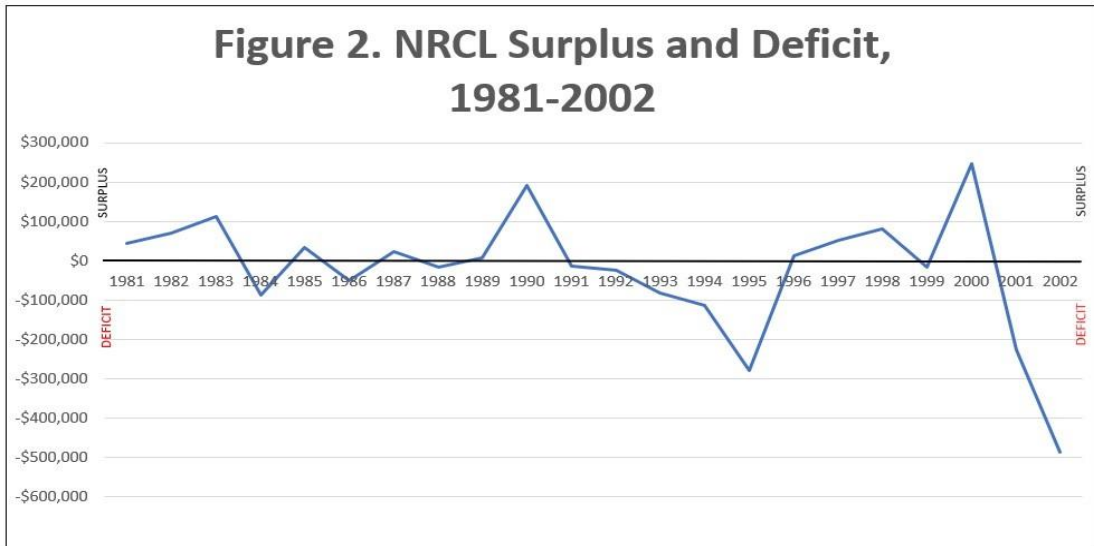
Nearing its half-century, the League instigated three major events. First, in 1989 a fitting 'living tribute' to the League's founders was established in the form of the Cyril Isaacs Avenue of Honour at Cranbourne west in one of the NRCL's four nurseries. Second, in 1991, the League published Libby Robin's comprehensive commissioned history of the League: ***Building a Forest Conscience – An Historical Portrait of the Natural Resources Conservation League of Victoria (NRCL), 1944-1990***. Focussing on context, key participants and events, Robin outlined the League's historical roots and detailed its three major activities during the NRCL's post-war heyday: native tree nurseries, education and conservation. Third, in 1994, the 50th anniversary was celebrated with a commemoration of the 1944 Save the Forests Campaign's first Community Forest planting. This reconstruction involved then current local primary school children from Dandenong and some of the original participants planting an Avenue of Honour and a memorial garden. The League's mission during its fiftieth year was: 'to promote the conservation of natural resources, to encourage the planting of trees by all landowners, to provide seedlings to members for plantings, and to educate the community in conservation issues and the need to plant trees'.

During the decade after the early 1980s, there was a five-fold increase to 10,000 per year in the number of school students visiting the League's Springvale Education Service. Its four production nurseries at Springvale, Cranbourne, Rochester and Wail had by the early 1990s distributed over 24

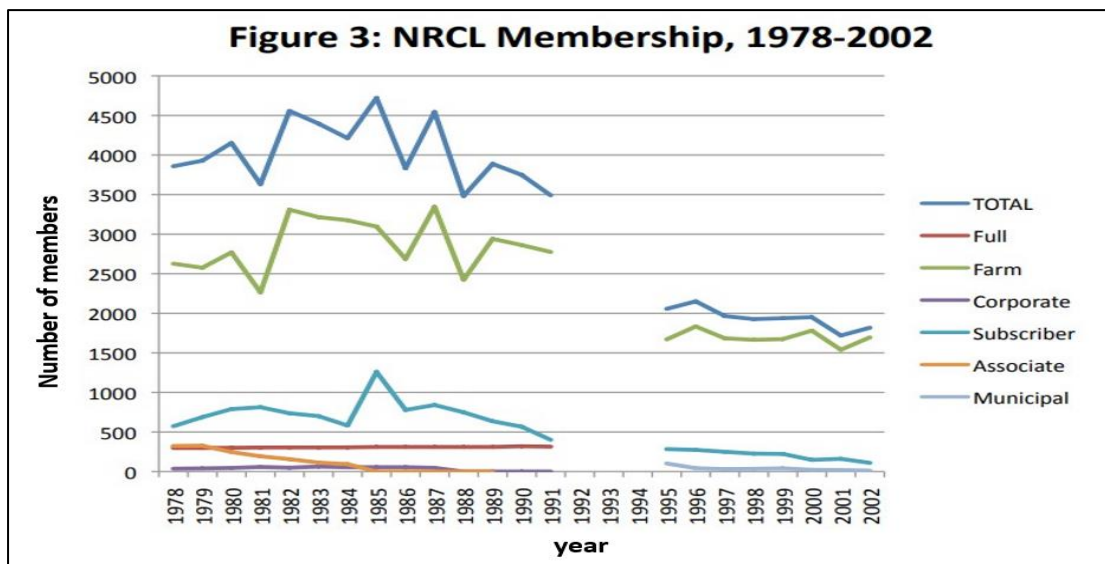
million trees, predominantly to two principal groups. The first group was municipalities of whom 190 local councils, 12 regional committees and the Municipal Association of Victoria were institutional members of the League. The second group comprised 1700 'farm' members many of whom were attracted by the League's informative journal and access to cheap trees. This half-century of remarkable growth is indicated by the rapid increase in both tree distribution and income shown in **Figure 1**. The League had a remarkably successful history of directly facilitating integrated natural resource management particularly for landowners and focussed on the trilogy of conserving trees, soil and water. During the League's 50<sup>th</sup> year celebrations, it seemed that the NRCL was still 'the right organisation for its time'.



But, as is shown in **PART 2: 'Reflections'** (1991-2010) of this historical survey, those times were rapidly changing. In a sense, the celebrations of a confident past marked the end of an era, for then ensued two decades of great change for the League as it responded to a range of major challenges. Some factors brought a steady and serious decline in the League's financial viability. These included persistent drought, local government amalgamation, falling state and federal government subsidies, rising costs and declining revenue in the League's nursery operations, as well as increasing competition from both private and municipal nurseries. This period of increasing financial difficulty from 1990 was described by Chairman Dr Ron Grose as 'a progressive divergence between income and costs', with significant deficits in the early 1990s and from the year 2001 (see **Figure 2**). The NRCL had not faced financial challenges of such urgency or magnitude at any time since the formation of the Save the Forests Campaign in 1944 and from it the 1950-1 establishment of the not-for-profit League.



Other factors forced an increasing struggle for identity. These included shifting public attitudes about conservation and the proliferation of other environmental groups in a cultural and political arena previously dominated by the League. There was also a significant loss of membership from a 1985 peak of 4,500 to less than half of that in the early 1990s (see **Figure 3**).



In response to its rapidly changing situation between 1994 and 2003, the League regularly sought a range of opportunities to ensure its survival. It restructured its large but complex Executive Committee on a number of occasions to a much smaller management Board of Directors. In addition, the Constitution, Memorandum and Articles of Association were rewritten to better reflect 'the relevance of the NRCL in the world of today.' These changes took it from a relatively stable representative organisation, to a Board elected by members. By 2003 the NRCL Board's cost-cutting reforms extended to ceasing the League's state-wide tree nursery operations and ending the publication of the *Trees and Natural Resources* journal (formerly known in 1959-80 as *Victoria's*

**Resources**, and then **Trees and Victoria's Resources** in 1980-85 – see Robin, 1991 p.134). The Board also decided to sell its Springvale headquarters and use the funds to relocate the NRCL's operations to provincial settings in forested areas where there were greater opportunities for field-based lessons on environmental conservation. But after a couple of innovative but relatively short-lived schemes, the League eventually closed its environmental education service in 2007. It also divested itself of its already dwindling traditional membership. Collectively, these were the biggest changes in the League's structure, operations and direction in more than sixty years. But more changes were to come.

As examined in **PART 3: 'Reinvention'**, which traces significant elements of the period 2011-2022, the League continued to innovate and adapt. In 2011, after a major review the year before, the NRCL announced a new 're-imagined' vision for the future. That vision retained and built on the NRCL's legacy of improving land use management and helping sustain rural communities through integrated natural resource conservation of trees, water, soils and, after 1960, wildlife. But the NRCL was to also encompass a new approach to conservation in peri-urban areas using a range of pilot schemes implemented by the League and other organisations to enhance biodiversity and reduce ecosystem fragmentation. That approach was designed to make urbanisation more environmentally sustainable including by showing how innovative urban planning could reduce the ecological footprints of housing. The League intended to face the new century with a new organisational structure, robust finances and targeted funding of capacity-building projects at the grass-roots level. Those grants would help local community groups drive environmental sustainability individually in their own region and cooperatively across Victoria.

## [PART 2: Reflections – the NRCL, 1991-2010.](#)

### [ORAL HISTORIES](#)

In 2012, the League invited four prominent Board members (Don Oberin, Lynn Murrell, Lois Dexter and Barrie Dexter) to recall their involvement during the period 1991-2010. The historical notes that follow are based on the respondents' collective interview responses. These were supplemented where appropriate by other historical records, particularly the League's Annual Reports, items from the League's journal, and selected archival material including relevant newspaper coverage. Their observations are structured around a few key themes:

- **Personal background and attraction to the League**
- **Involvement in the League**
- **Issues, trends and challenges**
- **Influential League members**
- **League's role, influence and legacy**

### [RESPONDENTS' PERSONAL BACKGROUND AND ATTRACTION TO THE LEAGUE](#)

The four 2012 respondents were broadly representative of the League's members, and particularly of the Board. Their backgrounds ranged across local government (as councillors and Mayor and members of various specialist committees including the Provincial Boroughs and Towns Association), the Victorian Public Service (Forests Commission, Education Department and Bureau of Statistics),

and private industry (forestry, farming and tourism). Crucially, all respondents had long experience living and working in rural communities in regional Victoria where forests were an integral part of landscape and livelihood. Each was vitally concerned with conserving natural resources, including mitigating the threat of land degradation and encouraging sustainable land use. Collectively, they had substantial prior experience with a range of administrative and executive roles in other organisations. This assisted their knowledge of procedural matters, policy-making, strategic planning, and managing the general 'real politic' within and between organisations. They had diverse views on the nature and role of conservation but all promoted the leading role private landowners and local municipal councils could have in environmentally sustainable land use. Some respondents identified with what they perceived as a traditional utilitarian, interventionist, 'wise use' management approach; while others aligned with more of an 'environmentalist' philosophy. However, they were unified by a common ecological, integrative, approach to natural resource management and all espoused the urgent need for practical action from the grass roots level. Each respondent was initially invited in one way or another to join the League, but despite their varied life experiences and personalities all soon aligned their own values with the League's vision and mission. In their own fields they advocated or practised conservation before joining the League, and all maintained their conservation interests after leaving the Board. Many were also engaged in other conservation organisations or activities during the time of their membership. All gave of their time freely to the League, often travelling great distances to attend meetings and spending long hours working as members of the NRCL Board of Directors. Theirs is a remarkable story of voluntary civic engagement born from a passion for conservation.

### INVOLVEMENT IN THE LEAGUE

Three of the respondents became heavily involved in planning the League's education service through the Board and its education committees and journal. Two of these, with backgrounds in secondary teaching, were Lynn Murrell with extensive involvement in the design and delivery of Geography curricula and Lois Dexter across music, art, maths and physical education. The third was Barrie Dexter who was a forester with a particular interest in public environmental education. Through the 1990s and early 2000s Lynn Murrell (member from 1973 and President in 1994) was keen to invigorate the League's message with what he saw as a broader and more modern environmental emphasis, a view shared later by others such as Rob Gell and Mike Hill. Later, Barrie and Lois Dexter (with Murrell's and Grose's support) were instrumental in the League's 2004 shift to the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre with its opportunities of close cooperation with the Department of Sustainability and Environment. That venture maintained a balance between the Dexter's strong advocacy of education for wise use conservation based on the League's traditional principles, a view shared by others such as Gross and Oberin, and the environmentalist approaches advocated by Murrell, Gell and others. The Board of Directors, the League's education service, and the respective specialist teachers determined the curriculum balance over the years.

Two respondents were particularly focussed on ensuring more conservational approaches by local government. These were Don Oberin and Lynn Murrell. Don joined the NRCL in 1972, was twice President and later made a Life Member. He was, at different times, a farmer, prominent businessman leading an international motel chain, an Echuca City Councillor, member of Campaspe Shire Economic Development Board and a leader of the Murray Darling Association. Don focussed on balancing regional development and conservation and had particular interests in catchment management and irrigation. Don's interest in forest conservation had been first stimulated by childhood memories of the destruction wrought by the devastating 1939 bushfires, and by an abiding

fascination for the role that trees could play in habitat conservation - especially in the preservation of birds.

Lynn Murrell had, at different times, been a Geography teacher and curriculum developer, Portland City councillor and Mayor, and chair of numerous regional and state-wide environmental management bodies. Lynn had also been a member of environmental organisation advisory committees at the state and federal level. He was later awarded an OAM in 2008 for his wide-ranging public leadership in conservation throughout Australia (including Landcare, coastal and water management). Later a NRCL Life Member, Lynn, had what he called a 'big picture' agenda of strategic planning to use the League to ensure a much stronger engagement than hitherto by municipal councils and state government. That would involve establishing holistic environmental plans, sustainability targets and integrated resource management. He envisioned the League playing a more prominent role in lobbying for wider aspects of improved environmental management, thereby integrating conservation efforts by community, government and industry. Lynn also maintained a keen interest in the nursery business, having developed native nurseries on his Portland farm where he became keenly involved in Landcare. Being born and raised on a farm, Lynn saw himself as 'a natural greenie', whose passion for saving the Earth found an avenue initially in Geography teaching, but then increasingly in practical environmental activism and civic engagement.

Barrie Dexter (appointed Vice President in 2002) had wide-ranging expertise in natural resource management. He was a senior forest researcher in fire ecology, silviculture of native and exotic forests, aerial seeding, and sustainable management of red gum forests. Barrie had, at different times, been Chief Park Management Officer in the National Parks Service, Deputy Director responsible for forest management and research in the State Forests and Lands Service, Chair of the Barmah Forest Dharnya Centre Ministerial Advisory Board, and Executive Director of the Trees for Profit Research Centre at Melbourne University. Barrie had also represented Timber Communities Australia in water management planning for the Murray Darling Basin and been a member of the Parks Victoria Scientific Advisory Committee. Barrie oriented his involvement in the NRCL toward technical aspects of its nursery business and the League's role in environmental education including through its journal. Barrie had a passion for promoting the role that sustainable forestry can play in environmental conservation, and in wise use land management more generally on both private and public land.

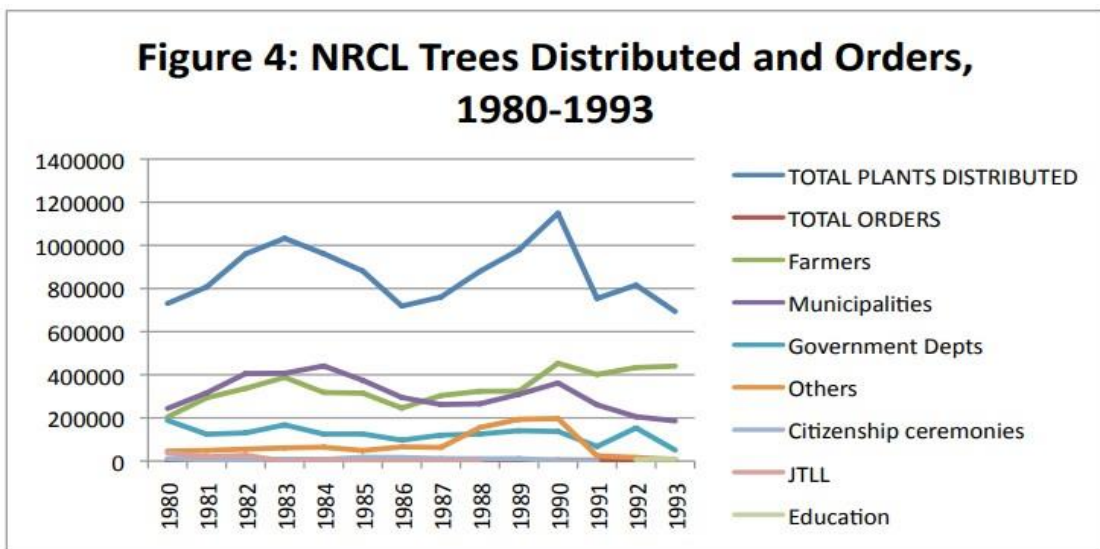
Lois Dexter's strong family links with the forestry profession developed in part from a childhood in Creswick, the home of the Victorian School of Forestry, and included her uncle and husband being foresters. Lois had strong interests in forestry education, agroforestry and the role of sustainable timber industries in supporting rural communities. These communities included those where she had lived and worked in the Murray, the southern Mallee and the central Highlands as well as timber and farming towns more generally. Lois performed the role of company secretary within the League after the move to Toolangi, liaising between the Board and the staff, keeping minutes of quarterly and special Board meetings, preparing correspondence, and having responsibility for overseeing and producing statutory reports. A notable stimulus to Lois' interests in environmental education was what she perceived as the often conflicting and inadequate messages received by her children during their secondary education on the role of forests, forestry, and conservation. Collectively, the four respondents had key strategic positions and enormous experience from which to reflect on the League's history.

## ISSUES, TRENDS AND CHALLENGES

All respondents stated that, during the two decades after 1990, the organisation struggled financially and declined in influence. They identified a range of external and internal factors involved – many beyond the League’s control. There was a remarkable degree of consistency in the respondents’ assessment of the League’s fluctuating fortunes. The various factors are complex and often interrelated but the respondents identified the following six major challenges.

### *Drought*

Crippling drought occurred in many parts of Victoria throughout 1991-2007 and this so-called Millennium Drought continued until the welcome rains of March 2010. Agricultural incomes declined markedly, especially in the 1994-5, 1997-98, and 2001-07 periods with the result that farmers’ expenditure on NRCL tree stocks was severely reduced. Farmers had much less disposable income to purchase and maintain shelter-belts and plantations, and planting was a riskier proposition as fewer seedlings survived the drier conditions. The regular failure of spring and winter rains during the drought was problematic and scarce irrigation or dam waters often made it difficult and costly to keep drought-stricken trees alive. Victoria’s fluctuating rainfall patterns were often shaped by three largely unpredictable regional climate drivers to Australia’s east, west and south: El Nino Southern Oscillation in the Pacific Ocean, Indian Ocean Dipole in the Indian Ocean, and the Southern Annular Mode in the Southern Ocean. Drought periods had often affected the League throughout its history. For example, there had been recurrent drought in the 1950s and 1960s, but at those times there was a smaller market for native trees and much less competition from other nurseries. During the 1980s and early 1990s there was no major decline in the number of trees per order and the League’s nurseries did well to maintain and, in some years, increase its nursery production (**Figure 4**). Nevertheless, given the League’s financial dependence on its nursery business as by far the largest source of discretionary income, the Millennium Drought proved particularly serious. That was especially from the mid-1990s and through the 2000s when profitability declined as the League’s prices were lowered to compete with the new tree suppliers but production costs remained high.



### *Loss of traditional stakeholders*

Local government amalgamations from 1993 saw a reduction from 210 municipalities to only 78 in just six years. This forced a dramatic, two-thirds, loss in municipal government representation on the League's Executive. There was also a de-prioritisation of NRCL representation among remaining councils along with the withdrawal from the League by the powerful coordinating body the Municipal Association of Victoria. Demand for the League's trees fell as some newly-amalgamated councils sought economies of large scale by establishing their own supplies for large tenders for trees. Farmer members, traditionally attracted by low-cost tree supplies from the League, were already shifting their allegiance as cheaper boutique private nursery suppliers proliferated from the late 1980s. The competitors seized the emerging market for local endemic species, often for habitat conservation purposes. This was a niche some of the League's nurseries were slow to respond to, instead maintaining their traditional general species mix. The astounding expansion of Landcare especially from the early 1990s (increasing to 750 local groups in only a quarter of a century) saw many farmers simply substitute their League membership for Landcare. The 1990 agreement between the Farmers' Federation and the Australian Conservation Foundation that forged the emergence of Landcare also marked a shift in farmers' traditional alignments with older bodies like the NRCL.

From the 1990s there was also a marked transition away from support for many traditional conservation bodies as both the Federal and State government realigned their allegiance toward newly emerging organisations such as Greening Australia and especially Landcare. The latter organisation, for example, rapidly came to dominate the Victorian government's land management interface with the public in a way reminiscent of the earlier relationship with the NRCL before 1983. This legitimisation by the government is undoubtedly due to Landcare's excellent work and its preferential reception by many rural landowners, but many respondents lamented the loss of a strategic position previously filled for over sixty years by the NRCL.

Some respondents also highlighted the decline in the League's traditional specialist public service allies such as the Forests Commission, the Soil Conservation Authority, and the Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board. These were amalgamated into a bureaucratic mega-department from 1983 (initially the Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands, and then three other iterations over the next thirteen years). That amalgamation into a bureaucratic mega-department was symbolic of the new technical, political and philosophical foundations within which the NRCL found it increasingly difficult to determine its identity. The shift was seen by some respondents as the beginning of an era in which many traditional 'land utilization' skills and professions long valued by the League had lost crucial public support and political favour. These included some aspects of production forestry, soil management, and control of vermin and noxious weeds. It also involved cultural challenges to previously firm understandings of what constituted environmental 'improvement'. During this period, and arguably as a mark of de-prioritisation, more junior representatives rather than departmental heads were appointed as government representatives to the NRCL. Furthermore, there was a reduced engagement by departmental heads contributing articles to the League's journal **Trees and Natural Resources**. In 1994 the Conservation Council of Victoria, initially founded in part by, and long an important ally of, the League was re-established as a more activist Environment Victoria. The NRCL retained its dominant influence through to the early 1980s, but in the years that followed it became increasingly marginalised in the more radicalised, confrontational and diversified political arena that emerged at both the state and federal level. That was a philosophical shift felt keenly by many of the League's more conservative members.



### *Declining Sales, Profitability and reduced Market Share*

State government financial cutbacks in big bureaucratic departments reduced what had previously been large and regular Public Service tenders for the supply of trees from the League's nurseries. This exacerbated declining sales from rural landowners and municipalities. Furthermore, compared to the larger scale, higher cost more traditional methods employed in some of the League's nurseries, new nursery competitors often had the advantage of lower cost, smaller scale, operations and greater targeting of customer service to individual client needs. Within the remaining larger municipalities there was a shift to in-house tree production and consequently a decline in out-sourcing. Moreover, under expanding economic rationalist policies, the Victorian government's introduction in 1988 of compulsory tendering for at least eighty per cent of all local council business broke the historic ties with the NRCL's nurseries. The League did manage to secure a few of the lapsed contracts in the ensuing years, but these were too little too late.

Significantly, the League's nursery business had, since at least the early-1950s, been predicated on a commitment that as a not-for-profit organisation with a Victorian government annual grant administered by the Forests Commission, the NRCL would not undercut private enterprise. There was no major commercial conflict while native tree supply remained relatively unpopular with mainstream private nurseries until the 1970s, and especially as long as the NRCL remained a preferred supplier for municipalities before 1988. To maintain market share in the new tougher commercial environment, the League attempted to lower prices – however, in a situation of high costs and falling demand, this tended to reduce profitability.

A different thrust came with the League's pilot schemes to secure international markets for Australian trees in China and South-East Asia. Nevertheless, the viability of those experiments was limited by high operational and transport costs along with growing foreign competition. Coming only a year after the League's fiftieth anniversary, the federal government's One Million Trees initiative aimed to plant that number of trees throughout the Murray River basin across Victoria, New South Wales and South Australia. The NRCL was heavily involved planning and coordinating that 1995 project and it managed to supply 100,000 trees from its nurseries. The One Million Trees initiative may be regarded as one of the last occasions that the NRCL operated on this scale and with such prominence – and then albeit with the participation of what had already become its major competitors. Ironically, many of the trees supplied in 1995 later dampened demand for future trees from landowners within the Murray basin.

In 1986, demand for 15cm tube tree seedling stock, for so long the iconic commercial mainstay of the NRCL nurseries, began a decline that worsened from 1993. This decline came in part from increased competition from 7.5 cm tube trees from new nurseries in Victoria and as far afield as Western Australia. There was also a significant shift in demand to larger trees, more likely to survive the drought, and also from the change in state government (DCNR) policy that now encouraged direct seeding. Government tax incentives for Blue Gum planting were removed in 2001. In addition to market differentiation, computerised inventories and more professional marketing, the NRCL made various attempts to diversify stock and modernise the League's nursery production methods. This modernisation included Hiko seedling trays, Springring systems and other labour-saving devices. The establishment of the non-metropolitan nurseries (Echuca, Rochester and Wail) better targeted specialist regional needs especially in the drier north, and a network of regional agents and promoters was introduced. But collectively these changes proved insufficient in the long-term to overcome the challenges. Despite their resilience, the League's nurseries struggled financially from the mid-1990s and especially in 2000-01 as debt mounted from the cost of repairing or replacing outdated equipment. Declining revenue was also implicated in the Board's reluctant decision to

curtail what had become the high-cost publication of the League's informative journal – a move that further eroded the League's public presence as it was removed from newsagents' shelves as well as from direct mailing to members.

### *Competition*

In addition to the emergence of competitors in the nursery business and in the general area of conservation leadership, competition also mounted from other suppliers of environmental education which had been a major area of the League's operations. Traditional conservation organisations like the NRCL and the Gould League had dominated post-war environmental education and largely determined the message. But by now, new organisations and conflicting curriculum had emerged. Increasing sharply in the 1980s and continuing through the 1990s, there was pressure from within and beyond schools to shift the environmental education message away from traditional conservation toward environmentalism. Furthermore, the Education Department reduced and eventually withdrew its funding for Extension teachers outside of schools, and this included the government contribution to the NRCL's teachers. Spiralling costs in schools during the late-1990s and early-2000s meant that there were also widespread cutbacks in excursions for students in relevant subjects (Geography, Environmental Science and Biology at the secondary level, as well as Nature Studies in Primary school). This resulted in dwindling numbers for the League's education service both at Springvale and later at Toolangi. The joint venture with the Department of Sustainability and Environment at the Toolangi Forest Discovery Centre involved predominantly Melbourne-based schools paying for excursions with considerable transport costs and travel time. Although subsidised by the revenue from the sale of the Springvale headquarters, there was pressure on the League to meet demand by lowering the cost of the services delivered on site and reducing the session length to enable students to complete their excursion within school times and on dwindling budgets. This reduced the potential breadth and depth of the experience and dampened an otherwise brilliant opportunity for delivering field-based environmental education in the forests of the Central Highlands. Competition from the publications by other environmental organisations, notably Greening Australia, Landcare, and the Australian Conservation Foundation, as well as the rise of the internet, had also reduced demand for the League's journal *Trees and Natural Resources*. It is simplistic to only portray other organisations as 'competitors' when in most cases they all 'cooperated' and strongly supported the League because of mutual respect, shared heritage and common vision. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to identify some of the tensions that emerged in what became a crowded marketplace for environmental services, an increasingly contested forum for debate on environmental issues, a far more competitive environment within which to compete for public and private funding, and a more polarised arena for political lobbying.

### *Management*

The respondents noted a range of managerial challenges. Some of these related to complex, and what had increasingly become unwieldy, traditional administrative structures that needed, and subsequently received, rationalisation. However, attempts to introduce appropriate modern computing systems in the late-1990s, for example, were protracted and proved technically difficult. In some cases, governance required clearer recognition of, and a more rapid response to, the shifting situation within which the League found itself. The Board was proactive on many occasions in organisational reviews, strategic planning, and business planning, particularly in the critical periods

1998-2003, 2005-8, and 2010-13. And the Board was acutely aware of its various responsibilities to the hard-working staff on staff management and organisational agreements, including addressing some of the difficulties that emerged at Toolangi and later at Warburton. Better marketing was one area targeted by the Board to redress declining market share, not only to seek new and expanded markets and membership, but also to address the prescient issue of the League's role and identity in a changing world. The Board periodically considered changes to the League's name and logo, and the title of the NRCL's journal was changed twice. By the late 1990s the League's very existence was now in question. Having decided on survival, much of the directors' attention shifted to the tension between maintaining the League's heritage and traditional stakeholders on the one hand, and on the other, revitalising the organisation by substantially shifting its direction.

### *Identity and Relevance*

Very few long-lived organisations avoid the need to reinvent themselves, and this is no less true of environmental conservation groups. And it is ironic whenever leading activist organisations in any field, who have for so long championed changes in attitude and action, are later marginalised by the new cultural and political environment they helped to forge. The changes the NRCL Board wrought between 2003 and 2011 were difficult but necessary for the League to remain viable in the Twenty-first century.

It would be misleading, and somewhat romantic, to suggest that the NRCL's first fifty years represent a single cohesive past. Its history during that period was far more complex. Nevertheless, it is true that a coherent image of its legacy emerged and played a crucial role in the League's sense of itself as well as the way it was perceived by others. By comparison, the period after 1990 involved far more intense change and a much less secure sense of identity. Much of this growing insecurity related to contested perceptions of the League's relevance, and particularly its message and operations. The Board faced the difficult task of remaining steady on shifting ground, and the NRCL's declining financial viability made this task urgent and unavoidable. Divesting the League of its nurseries, headquarters, education services and journal ultimately proved financially necessary as debts began to grow, but these operations lay at the heart of the NRCL's heritage. The locational shift from Toolangi to the Warburton Water Wheel Centre in 2008- 10 represented an operational transition to a more tourism-based venture that was arguably too far from the League's roots geographically and philosophically.

In 2011 the Board decided to return more centrally to a mission of leadership in conservation that accorded more strongly with the League's proud heritage of grass-roots community empowerment in conservational land management, albeit in a radically altered organisational form.

### **INFLUENTIAL LEAGUE MEMBERS**

The various respondents noted many influential individuals. Beyond the Board this included staff members with specialist knowledge such as urban arboriculturist CEO and managing editor Dr Peter Yau and director Les Schultz. Peter had expertise in forest recreation, catchment management and urban ecology in Australia and Asia with seven years as League CEO. Les had a sound knowledge of the timber industry and nursery business that began with his earlier 36-year career with AMCOR, later honed over nine years at NRCL. Don Oberin, Lynn Murrell, Barrie Dexter, Richard Anderson and Rob Gell were all seen by the respondents as shaping the League's directions at important times. Two

Board members who were noted as most influential by all respondents were Dr Ron Grose and later Mike Hill both of whom had been voted to lead the organisation as President. Ron Grose had been a long-serving League member joining in 1955, and was appointed Forests Commission nominee to the NRCL Executive between 1986 and 2000. He had earlier been Chair of the Forests Commission of Victoria, 1981-85. On various occasions, Dr Grose was NRCL treasurer, chief editor, Honorary Organiser and President. Ron's presidency in the early 2000s coincided with the period of the League's greatest challenges and some of the most far-reaching responses by which the League attempted to ensure its survival. The respondents also noted the influence of Mike Hill from his 2003 appointment to the Board to his more recent Presidency of the League under which the League has forged its new directions. Mike's extensive experience in senior leadership of various innovative sustainability and environmental organisations and project management experience was mentioned.

### LEAGUE'S ROLE, INFLUENCE AND LEGACY

All respondents had immense pride in the League's heritage, especially in what they perceived as its pioneering role and resilient leadership in conservation practice. This focussed on integrated natural resource management with tree planting as the central element in the trilogy of forests, soil and water. Although 'wildlife' was added in the 1960s and gained particular emphasis through biodiversity conservation from 2011, the symbolic trilogy forged in the 1940s and 1950s received most attention. The trilogy legitimised and emblemised the utilitarian focus on conservation to improve the productivity of the land for future generations. The respondents frequently mentioned the remarkable breadth of interest and involvement in the League (initially about three dozen organisations were represented), and its role as a forum for environmental action and education.

For many respondents, the League offered a unique opportunity for senior government environmental managers to discuss pressing issues. Often this involved departmental heads or their deputies dealing particularly, but not exclusively, with forest, soil and water conservation. At the NRCL Board, they met regularly with representatives of local government and special interest groups as well as members of the wider community. Critical personal communication networks were thereby established and maintained often long after those representatives left the Board. This was partly related to the tradition of NRCL chairs coming in retirement from the Forests Commission (Dr Ron Grose), Soil Conservation Authority (George Thompson) and Vermin and Noxious Weeds Board (Geoff Douglas). Each of those were specialist conservational 'land utilization' organisations with whom the NRCL had cooperated for many decades, but all three were disestablished by legislative change in 1983. There was a heritage of chairs and Board members being linked to preeminent state environmental planning committees such as the Land Utilisation Advisory Council, Conservation Council of Victoria, Land Conservation Council, Coastal Management Board and Catchment Management Board. Productive links were also established during the more recent era of privatised natural resource management with bodies such as water supply companies.

In addition, there were periodic consortia established such as that in 1998 between the NRCL, the Trust for Nature, Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers, and Greening Australia to better service their collective clients with specialist land management services. Strategic partnerships 'with governments, community groups, landowners and private businesses' were explicitly noted in the League's Mission Statement. An example of these partnerships was the 2002 farm forestry initiative between the League, the Victorian Department of Natural Resources and Environment and its Private Forestry Council. Furthermore, there were important links maintained through the League's membership of other conservation groups including Landcare, Greening Australia, the Conservation

Council and the Australian Conservation Foundation. So too, links were forged with natural resource management groups such as the Victorian Farmers' and Graziers' Association and the Murray-Darling Association. Again, the effectiveness of the League's regional forums was mentioned especially in terms of the valuable two-way interchange of practical experience, ideas and advice often supported by, and providing crucial evidence, for science.

The respondents were proud that the League had been so widely respected across the political spectrum. Most respondents distinguished between the League as a conservation group separate ideologically from some more recent 'green groups'. The respondents generally valued what they saw as the League's role in filling an increasing void left as modern environmentalism moved toward a more abstract form of non-utilitarian, urban-based activism emphasising forest preservation over 'wise use'. More subtly, some respondents held something of a stereotypical view that saw League members and other 'conservationists' as 'hands-on activists, often with hard-won practical knowledge, who worked to improve their environment', in contrast to some among the green groups who were seen as 'mainly relying on book-learning and who were removed geographically and conceptually from the most pressing practical environmental issues'. Other respondents dismissed any effective distinction between the two imagined groups, focussing instead on their shared ecological vision rather than any divide between use and preservation. The valuable exchange of ideas and personnel between the various conservation and environmental groups was mentioned.

### *Bridging the rural-urban divide*

All respondents noted with pride the League's pioneering role and transformative impact in forging conservational cultures throughout rural communities, in establishing much needed wildlife habitat, and in using trees to beautify municipal streetscapes and private farmland. The League's long tradition of supplying trees and lobbying for the preservation of roadside verges and riparian trees was also observed. In so doing, afforestation contributed to biodiversity conservation, wildlife corridors, reduced soil erosion and secured water supplies. The League was valued as being remarkably dynamic, responding proactively from within its traditional principles underlain by 'the trilogy' to emerging issues. Thus, in addition to its heritage of agricultural and arboricultural concerns, the League expanded to a long-term engagement with prescient environmental issues. These included: biodiversity loss, tree decline, salinity control, the use of trees in carbon sequestration to reduce global warming, freshwater ecology and wetland conservation, coastal management, national parks, urban ecology, sustainability, fire ecology, threatened species conservation, genetic and biological controls of weed and pest species, and native grassland conservation. All of the respondents particularly prized the NRCL's strong link to rural communities through League membership and the involvement of other institutional representatives. Great credit was given to the NRCL's leading role in bridging what was lamented as an ever-widening gulf between the city and the bush. Traditional rural institutions such as the Country Women's Association had long been actively represented on the League's Executive. Thus, it was perceived that the League bridged a growing divide between so-called progressive brown rural 'conservationist' and green urban 'environmentalist' concerns, especially with the emerging concept of sustainable development from the 1980s. The respondents noted that the League's journal was a major forum for canvassing a surprisingly large range of topical environmental issues, both brown and green, and disseminating technical information to a wide audience. The journal also provided a forum to update members with the League's activities, plans and annual reports.

### *Environmental education*

The journal, field days, thematic conferences, regional forums, and particularly the League's specialist environmental education service contributed to a much-respected focus on environmental education. Historically, this was based at the League's Springvale headquarters. In 2003, after the sale of the Springvale site, the League's education service was shifted to the Toolangi Discovery Centre in a joint venture over the next four years with the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment. The League (assisted by the Victorian Education Department) supplied its own teachers who developed and taught a specialist curriculum focussed particularly at primary school children of an age when environmental attitudes and behaviour were being formed. Wider public education was another important element of the League's activities. Specialist technical advice was also seen as a valuable part of the League's heritage. This advice was disseminated through field services, 14 nursery staff, conferences and publications especially to rural landowners as well as large tree-planting bodies such as municipal councils and government departments. The League's long tradition of coordinating Arbor Day throughout the state received particular mention from the respondents. The League renewed its coordination of what became Arbor Week in 1992 when an expanded NRCL education service was established with the secondment of two specialist teachers from the Victorian Education Service to add to the League's existing offerings. Arbor Week activities symbolised and centralised all of the League's traditional activities and emphases – education, tree planting, and the conservation message of integrated natural resource management. Nevertheless, as was occurring throughout schools and in the tertiary sector during the last quarter of the 20th century, the issue arose of how far to adapt the League's traditional curriculum to the emerging approaches and expectations of modern environmentalism, and what message to impart on activism.

### *Political lobbying*

The respondents noted that the League was initially a political lobby group, having been forged from the Save the Forests Campaign (1944-1950). The NRCL was far from being the first forest conservation advocacy group in Victoria - the Northern District Forest Conservation League 1888-90, National Forests Protection League 1903-04 and Victorian Forests League 1912-1944 long predated it. Nevertheless, the Save the Forests Campaign 1944-52 from which the NRCL grew was an important model for later environmental lobbying by other organisations. The NRCL had lobbied for the National Parks Act of 1956, and it could rightly claim the 1958 Forests Act as one of its major achievements. The League was a consistent voice in conservation in the period from the mid-1940s to the 'new era' of environmental activism in Victoria from the late 1960s and especially from 1980. As a rule, the NRCL Board avoided direct funding of conservation groups although it always responded to lobbyists with advice and occasionally agitated on their behalf on various contentious issues. These included its general support during the 1950s for the Victorian National Parks Association's policies and its assistance with various campaigns from the 1960s to 'save from development' areas such as the Kentbruck heathland, the Little Desert, the Wychitella Forest, parts of the Barmah Forest and Lake Pedder. The NRCL supported the development of a range of conservation bodies such as the Soil and Water Conservation Society of Victoria and the Australian Trust for Conservation Volunteers. It also played a leading role in the establishment of the Conservation Council of Victoria (1969) and the Conservation Strategy for Victoria (1972-4).

The League's directors preferred to work behind the scenes forwarding lobbyist's concerns to the relevant government authorities and acting as a 'moderate voice of reason.' Although there was considerable variation in the political alignments, environmental ideologies and degrees of activism

of the various directors and Board members over the years, the League tried to avoid both ‘emotive arguments’ and ‘critiques devoid of practical alternatives.’ This pragmatic utilitarian approach was reflected in the curriculum developed by the NRCL’s education service, and its occasional small ancillary publications in the form of pamphlets and manuals. It was also indicated by the League’s journal, *Trees and Natural Resources*. Nevertheless, the journal frequently canvassed topical environmental debates and was regularly a forum for conservation groups such as the Conservation Council that coordinated campaigns by many smaller bodies. The journal long maintained its own niche, more wide-ranging and oriented to conservational resource use and land management than its contemporaries such as the more politically activist Australian Conservation Foundation’s *Habitat* (from 1973), traditional natural history magazines such as the *Victorian Naturalist* (from 1880) or the journals of the Wildlife Preservation Society or Gould League (both from 1909). The League’s annual thematic regional ‘forums’ were highly regarded for engaging with local rural communities and landowners. In part, the NRCL’s traditional conservatism meant that the Board resisted support for those campaigns that might alienate utilitarian interest groups within its diverse membership. In addition, the Board generally maintained a degree of allegiance to prevailing government policies because of its dependence on an annual government grant (1955-85) administered by the Forests Commission. It also felt committed, as a not-for-profit organisation, to ensure that its nurseries would not undercut private enterprise.

### *Seeds of decline and renewal*

The respondents reflected on a problematic heritage in which the League’s success at promoting an ecological vision and an impassioned appreciation of native trees ironically bore the seeds of the later decline and sale of the NRCL’s nurseries in 2003. There is some validity in the view that the NRCL was replaced by more recently-established organisations that were nurtured in the ground tended by the League and fostered by successive governments. The respondents’ view was that the League contributed to the growth of the Landcare movement at least by directing attention to the nature and magnitude of land degradation as well the urgency and potential effectiveness of tree planting. The NRCL also indirectly stimulated the proliferation of both competitor nurseries and what was perceived as partially competitor environmental organisations. Most transformational organisations bear the seeds of their own demise through the very acts of transformation that they perform, in this case to encourage more conservational public attitudes, to shape more appropriate government policy and to facilitate more sustainable private land use practices. The links between the NRCL and later organisations can be exaggerated, and the view that the NRCL was the precursor to most of the later environmental or ‘green’ groups is difficult to defend. Nevertheless, it is also easy to dismiss the League’s pioneering vision and its early influence as an environmental lobbyist or to underestimate the importance of the League’s journal as a forum for leading conservationist individuals and institutions.

Some of the respondents noted that for most of its first fifty years, and despite the League promoting a message of self-reliant grass-roots level conservation, many of the League’s clients conveniently relied on the NRCL as the preferred supplier of good quality cheap trees – a situation that suited both the League and its members. However, as clients gradually became more self-reliant and produced their own seedlings, or shifted their allegiance to the new nurseries, the need for NRCL supplies and advice diminished. The respondents portrayed the 1990s and 2000s as a transitional period in the League’s history within which the search for relevance became a pressing issue. But all were proud that the Board managed to steer the League through such a difficult time. The 2003-4 sale of the League’s nurseries funded its search for a new direction and figuratively proved a seed for

the rebirth of the NRCL as a leader in funding for conservation group capacity-building and in peri-urban housing design. Ultimately, it was the commitment of the League's many passionate conservationists that ensured its future.

## PART 3: Reinvention – the NRCL, 2011-2022.

NRCL Directors Ken King (appointed 2004 - resigned 2022, Acting Chair 2015 and Chair 2016-2022) and Sarah Barker (appointed 2012 - resigned 2021) participated in the League's most recent period of substantial renewal and reinvention. They were interviewed a decade after the four respondents in [Part 2](#), but using the same questions. Ken's and Sarah's recollections of the period after 2011 are dealt with separately and form the foundation of the discussion about the League's more recent history in [PART 3](#) below.

Ken King embodied much of the League's traditional values, knowledge and skills. He was born and raised in rural Victoria (Chiltern), and as a child was one of the NRCL's many 'Junior Tree Lovers' as well as a member of the Gould League. Ken's grandfather was a commercial firewood cutter providing firewood mainly for the north-eastern railways and local hospital. Growing up in the bush and helping out on local farms throughout the region's Box-Ironbark and Redgum forests, Ken was enthused about the tremendous value of conserving forests in regional communities and more widely. While a teenager, he was informed by one of the botanically-minded locals of the great prospects of 'doing forestry' after completing his science and technical secondary education. Ken trained as a forester at both Creswick School of Forestry and Melbourne University between 1971 and 1976. As had many before him in the NRCL, he was always passionate about the integrative, ecological perspective of forestry and the way it instilled knowledge of change in both natural and human environments. Later, Ken embarked on a prominent career as a natural resource manager across Victoria. That included senior Public Service positions in forest management (including hardwood and softwood plantations and fire protection) in the Forests Commission and later Conservation, Forests and Lands and its many other iterations. He was also employed in other specialist environmental management roles. Those included senior positions in Fisheries and Wildlife and the Ministry of Conservation reserves systems, in what became Parks Victoria managing Melbourne's parks, and he also worked closely with the Port Phillip and Westernport Catchment Management Authority. These positions encompassed leadership in management, planning and service delivery variously in northwest Victoria, South Gippsland, the Bendigo region, and metropolitan Melbourne. By 2004, Ken was Head of Forest Policy for Victoria in the Department of Natural Resources and the Environment. He was also active throughout his career in governance of not-for-profit community conservation and resource management groups. These included the Boards of Metropolitan Fire and Emergency Services, Country Fire Authority, Phillip Island Nature Park (Penguin Parade), chairing Eucalypts Australia (formerly the Bjarne K. Dahl Trust), growth area planning for the Victorian Planning Authority, and more recently Wannon Region Water Corporation. Ken notes that he was, by background and predilection, a regionalist often working in large, highly centralised mega-departments – and that presented a challenge of balancing urban, rural and wider interests already noted above as pervasive in the NRCL's own history. Ken's operational and strategic planning expertise, including in ecosystem restoration, was of great value to the NRCL when he was asked by Director Barrie Dexter and Chair Dr Ron Grose (both senior FCV foresters) to join the Board in 2004, near the beginning of the League's shift to Toolangi.



Sarah Barker successfully responded to an Australian Institute of Company Directors' advertisement for NRCL Board members. Sarah was appointed as a non-Executive Director to the NRCL Board in 2012, nine years after Ken King's appointment. A self-confessed 'city girl' with little prior practical experience of life in the bush and 'more of a theoretician than a practical conservationist', Sarah was searching for a voluntary community-based position that combined her two loves of law and environmental sustainability. Sarah embodied what, from the early 2000s, had become part of the League's effort to diversify its governance during a period of purposeful reinvigoration. That was to include directors who shared the passion for community-based conservation and valued the NRCL's legacy, but who did not necessarily have the traditional ties to rural locations or primary production. Sarah was then a corporate lawyer with 15 years' experience advising on corporate governance (including Facilitator of Modules in the Australian Institute of Company Directors Course) and had recently completed a Masters of Environment at Melbourne University. Later a Partner and Head of Climate and Sustainability Risk Governance at Minter Ellison Lawyers, at the time of her appointment to the Board, Sarah advised companies, financial institutions, and governments on the financial and liability implications of nature-related issues. The latter included proactive leadership guiding organisations into a world increasingly challenged by climate change. The NRCL had already begun decades before promoting the carbon sequestering advantages of its trees and forests more broadly, as well as educating private landowners, community and government on environmental hazard mitigation and adaptation. Sarah's skills and knowledge aligned well with the League's new vision. Sarah's expertise included identifying risks from natural hazards as well as the transition risks from changing government policy, investor preferences, and technology. Equally important was her strategic planning required to identify and respond to relevant opportunities. Sarah's work was also international in scope, including engagements in sustainability management at Cambridge and Oxford universities, the Bank of England Prudential Regulation Authority, the Commonwealth Climate and Law Initiative, and the United Nations (Principles of Responsible Investment, and Environment Finance Initiatives).

Mike Hill, Ken and Sarah were joined on the Board in 2012 by newly appointed directors trained forester, farmer, ecologist, and experienced catchment manager Hugh Stewart; as well as Jon Hutchins who was a professional non-executive Director with considerable expertise in accounting and finance as well as leadership in Alpine Resort management. Mike Hill (Director 2002-2015 and Chair 2010-15) had joined the NRCL in 2002 and brought enormous experience in local government leadership (including as Mayor of the City of Moreland), energy governance, and community innovation - notably as co-founder of Brunswick's Westwyck environmentally-sustainable community. They replaced outgoing directors Richard Anderson, Peter Attiwill and Don Oberin. The NRCL's management team for the next decade included Executive Officer Dr Anthony Hooper, appointed 2010, whose wide-ranging skills included economics, community and social work, environmental management, and philanthropy. The Board was also ably assisted by Life Members Don Oberin and Lynn Murrell as noted above.

Both Ken and Sarah identified three major highlights of the NRCL's history during their directorships. These were leading the massively complex development of the League's 31.5-hectare property at Cranbourne west as a model for sustainable peri-urban suburbanization; establishing the community-based capacity-building Grants program; and introducing the integrated legal and administrative frameworks required to support the reinvented NRCL. After Mike Hill's untimely death in 2016, these and other projects were guided to fruition under the Chairmanship of Ken King.

## CRANBOURNE WEST

Purchased in 1978, the Cranbourne west property was later developed as one of the League's native tree nurseries. After 2003 the League leased it out on a 15-year contract with the tenant using it primarily as a turf farm. By 2010, the property was a veritable island of semi-rural green in one of Australia's fastest growing outer-suburban areas; but that meant it was also becoming increasingly valuable as a future space for biodiversity conservation. Housing-development companies were already scouring the region for potential greenfield sites – the League receiving informal expressions of interest for acquisition of that land as early as August that year. By October 2010 the NRCL Board was considering various options of whether to retain or sell the property and, if sold, under what conditions and how to use it to foster the League's mission. An Action plan was adopted in December 2010. That included a commitment to develop an environmentally-sustainable community as a model for good peri-urban design under a future Joint Venture Partnership. From January 2011, the intended role of the housing development in regional biolinks was confirmed and work began with other potential partners and specialist consultants. These efforts saw important progress on biodiversity conservation and landscape restoration including with Devil Bend Reservoir (2011-14) and later a Threatened Species Initiative (2016-17). The RMIT Centre for Design was commissioned to investigate options for the envisioned community (July 2011 – July 2012). By January 2011, the Board was formalising its revised Mission, Vision and Strategic Objectives to encompass the focus on sustainable urban design as well as its traditional commitments. Subsequently, on 1 September 2011 at the nearby Cranbourne Royal Botanic Gardens, the League held a public re-launch of the organisation. That re-launch was soon followed (in October 2011, after a Special General Meeting) by the Board's decision not to seek future general membership for the League.

From the outset of the Cranbourne west project, regular close liaison was necessary with the council of the City of Casey within whose boundaries the property was located and regulated. Negotiations over the proposed development increased from late 2012, particularly over the implications of the Cranbourne West Precinct Structure Plan during 2014 and that plan's amendments during 2016-17. The NRCL Board progressively committed to more aspects of the plan including hybrid, staged development (from August 2013), and Eco Hub and Mixed land use (2014-16). It also confirmed additional environmental sustainability items of the planned community such as One Planet Principles (from October 2012) with OPAP credentials completed in June 2014 – conventional housing developments by comparison had ecological footprints requiring the support of Three Planet's worth of resources. Passivhaus energy conservation accreditation and the possibility of zero carbon housing and zero waste were also considered in later years (especially from 2018).

By February 2012, the Board had adopted four key themes for the plan:

*Economic* - Optimise economic returns to enable future conservation projects to be undertaken by the NRCL and to ensure the legacy and history of the organisation are protected

*Urban Design* - Create a demonstration site that will provide leadership in urban design and a viable and influential model of outer urban development.

*Environmental* - Enhance regional flora and fauna including the creation of a node to complement biolinks projects radiating from the NRCL property (particularly the link to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Cranbourne).

*Future Governance* - Create governance arrangements designed to promote a low footprint community.

Delays in progress during 2014 were due to issues in finalising the lease and to risk identification of possible environmental impacts from current agricultural land uses. Additionally, the market cooled as potential buyers weighed the challenges of the location, scale and type of development – aspects far from the conventional rapid greenfield housing development. Negotiations with two prospective Joint Venture Partners in 2016 and 2018-19 were unsuccessful and the scale of the plan was subsequently reduced to fewer allotments in a part sale of 9.2 hectares incorporating a ‘Super Lot’ introduced to the plan in 2016 to add value. A particularly protracted challenge arose over the 1-hectare excision for a nearby highway upgrade by VicRoads, and the resulting application by the NRCL for compensation (2016-19). The latter was crucial in the 2020 funding of the corpus for the League’s new STF1944 as Trustee for the Natural Resources Conservation Trust (established in 2019). The League had already developed charitable status by 2013, and the charitable status of the intended Trust was considered in 2018. Essentially, STF1944 (a name recalling the NRCL’s forerunner, the Save the Forests Campaign begun in 1944) was established to support the Trust’s integrated principal purposes. Those focussed on facilitating community-based forest conservation and related sustainable environmental management.

Throughout key stages of the decade-long planning phase and particularly from 2014, specialist legal advice was sought on risk, due diligence, and land tax. So too, the Board engaged expert real estate and marketing consultants for information; and there were discussions with, and field visits to, other innovative eco-communities in Victoria to learn from their practical experience. Negotiations with the eventually successful Joint Partner commenced in 2020. Further detailed work in that year was with Casey Council over planning regulations, and with the temporary external ‘Special Purpose Vehicle’ organisation engaged to refine the development’s sustainability requirements and complete a detailed land management agreement that secured the League’s continued influence on the design panel controlling housing design. The sale was approved by the NRCL Board in May 2021. Detailed refinement of the Masterplan and Housing Design Guidelines along with discussion with expert consultants and Casey council continued through the first half of 2022 and, after all the critical milestone requirements were achieved, the sale was completed in August of that year.

### **GRANTS PROGRAM**

By 2010 the Board had reconfirmed that, in keeping with its legacy, the NRCL’s future lay in leadership in community-based environmental conservation. The Cranbourne west development was both a standalone peri-urban sustainability project and a broader financial enabler. That dual purpose allowed the League to develop a more substantial Grants program, especially as a charitable institution with a focus on capacity-building for community groups. The new emphasis was on using the NRCL as a hub from which knowledge and skills could be leveraged by conservation groups via the funding program. Funding of the Charlton Landcare Group occurred in 2013 to assist with the protection and enhancement of the Charlton Community Forest (established in 1947 by the NRCL’s forerunner: The Save the Forests Campaign) and the project was completed in 2017. That included working closely with the Charlton community, and celebratory gatherings were held on 24 September 2017 in the Charlton Community Forest and earlier that day at the town’s cinema showing original film of the first tree planting. Throughout 2014, the League developed the process and criteria for its new Grants program and particularly between 2016 and 2018 this was put into effect with the first rounds of five-year funding being made. This included the Threatened Species Initiative monitoring endangered fauna such as the Southern Brown Bandicoot in the Cranbourne and Langwarrin area, and providing data valuable for related initiatives such as the Westernport Biolink.

Major five-year grant recipients included: the *Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network* supporting the sustainable agriculture and remnant vegetation conservation programs of that region's dozen Landcare groups including the 'Women in Conservation Mentoring Program'; the *Otway Agroforestry Network* and its whole-farm planning, landscape restoration, tree propagation, shelterbelt and biodiversity initiatives; the *Bunanyung Landscape Alliance* engaged in landscape restoration across the Moorabool, Leigh and Woody Yaloak catchments; *Grow West* landscape restoration program revegetating degraded farmlands in and around the Bacchus Marsh district to the west of Melbourne; the *Southwest Environmental Alliance* working for biodiversity protection and enhancement in southwestern Victoria; and the *Swamps, River and Ranges* organisation focussed on community driven landscape restoration in north-eastern Victoria. Each of these groups in turn were involved in empowering, engaging and educating their own community alliances and participating groups. Collectively, this engaged dozens of passionate local environmental subsidiaries and hundreds of group volunteers. All of the groups also collaborate with other environmental management agencies and communities. Notable in this collaboration is NRCL's funding, from 2020, of the Landcare Victoria's Community Learning for Environmental Action (CLEA) program that facilitates action research and peer-to-peer learning especially for leaders of environmental groups at the grassroots, regional and state levels.

Many of the NRCL's various Grants program recipient groups used some of their funding to provide what they identified as the relevant technical and managerial skill to their group members, allowing them to best achieve their goals. That was work the NRCL staff had traditionally done more directly before the 1990s through the provision of trees, technical publications and expert advice. The Grants program was additional to the regional and metropolitan forums organised by the League and held during this period, many of them dealing with climate change risks and mitigation.

### **REORGANISATION**

Organisational changes from 2010 included amendments to the NRCL Constitution to incorporate changes to membership (2011). This better reflected the new Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives (2011, 2015 and 2020) and enabled the establishment of the STF1944/Natural Resources Conservation Trust (2019). Two periods of renewal in regard to directorship broadened the managerial skill base of the League. These occurred between October 2011 and February 2012 to facilitate the new vision. There was also development of the recruitment processes and criteria in February 2017 to February 2019 as a direct precursor to the establishment of STF1944/Natural Resources Conservation Trust that eventually increased the number of Board members from five to seven in 2019.

### **INFLUENTIAL LEAGUE MEMBERS**

The lengthy period of reinvention from 2010 involved extraordinary commitment and huge workloads from the League's various internal specialist Working Groups and Reference Groups advising the Board. But both Ken and Sarah made special mention of two individuals who progressed the League's work during that transformation. The first was Mike Hill whose knowledge of, and passion for, ecologically-sustainable community life was instrumental in fostering the NRCL's new vision of leadership in peri-urban development. Mike's chairmanship was crucial in guiding the early stages of both the Cranbourne west project and the renewed Grants program.

The second influential individual was Dr Anthony Hooper who was part-time (0.5 FTE) Executive Officer during 2010-2021. Anthony's leadership as well as his ongoing support and mentoring was significant across a wide range of the League's most successful recent projects. That included activities that fostered community involvement, facilitated capacity-building, developed organisational networks, taught effective methods for future funding application and brought to the fore the themes of climate change mitigation, biolinks and sustainability. Anthony brokered many partnerships with organisations and initiated projects under the NRCL's grants program such as helping to initiate and develop the Devilbend Foundation project from 2011. In 2013, Anthony co-convened the 'Trees in the Landscape Forum' with the Bjarne Dahl Trust, organised the 'Back to the Future' celebrations in Charlton to commemorate the 1947 establishment of the Charlton Community Forest, and he was instrumental in developing and coordinating the five-year Grants program. As noted above, those grants helped finance the Otway Agroforestry Network, Victorian Landcare Council, and the Mornington Peninsula Landcare Network. In February 2016, Anthony helped organise, with the Australian Meteorological and Oceanographic Society, the well-attended 'Post Paris Climate Change Forum' at Melbourne's Federation Square. Following his organisation of the 2016 Narmbool 'Impact of Climate Change on Rural Landscapes' workshop, Anthony also played a pivotal role in 2017 in establishing, and later supporting, the Bunanyung Landscape Alliance. During the decade-long development of the League's Cranbourne west sustainable peri-urban housing scheme, Anthony meticulously prepared many of the key discussion papers and plans, led complex, difficult and prolonged negotiations with stakeholders, and kept the Board strategically informed of progress. Throughout his tenure, Anthony effectively became the face of the organisation and contributed significantly to the positioning of the NRCL as an innovative, strategic and reputable organisation.

**Dr Stephen Legg**

**2023.**