

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

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The RAOU, at the present time, is taking stock of itself. This morning I would like to discuss this, to see if we can find out what the Union is, what its environment is, what its function is, and how best it can function in that environment.

The men who founded the RAOU were keen ornithologists. We are fortunate that we inherited much of the tradition for the study of natural history which was so peculiarly British in the nineteenth century. But these men realized that working on their own had limitations, that they could do more, both in their own studies and for ornithology—its future and its presentation to the community as a matter of importance. So they founded the RAOU. They built up a union of great strength. They lived in a huge land; there were not many of them; the opportunities for ornithological discovery were enormous and they made the most of it. That is why we are here this morning.

This is very simple and I believe it is true. But it does not seem so simple now. Their structure of the Union fitted the structure of society and the comparatively simple demands which the study of birds made upon them at that time. Though the aims of the founders are a heritage of which to be proud, the structure of the Union, which we have also inherited, has not changed nor has it evolved in sixty-eight years. This present structure reminds me at times of a piece of Victorian furniture left over from an age when it fitted its purpose. But now its value, for rarity or as an antique, is very small. I think that we have been, to a certain extent, both blind and dumb. We have not seen or paid attention to changes of scientific thought, emphasis and atmosphere, which have occurred in the past few decades. Nor have we communicated either among ourselves or with the public, as a society with our aims (and may I say, pretensions) should do.

The making of geographical lists of birds, the discovery of simple data, in fact the discovery of completely new species in Australia, is not only possible but is still of great importance because the land is still huge and we are still few. But in recent years there have been other fields of investigation open to ornithologists, amateur and professional. The change is profound. Started by professional biologists, it has been eagerly accepted as a challenge by many amateurs, and has made their study of birds a very much broader and more satisfactory one. There has, at times recently within the RAOU, been an underflow of distrust of the professional by the amateur. I find this distrust quite ridiculous. With the development of ecology, behaviour studies and so on, bird observation is not as simple as once it was. Techniques of recording and assessment are much more sophisticated. Some equipment may be out of the reach of the amateur. The amateur has limited time for work in the field and for reading. The professional, as far as the amateur is concerned at least, must avoid getting too esoteric, should not study the minutiae in such detail that he cannot see the subject in perspective, and should generally make the results of his work available to the amateur both in publication and at meetings such as this. After all he is the lucky one. Sixty or so years ago he would have been the keen and talented amateur. Now with the demand by industry and institutions for

his talent and the opportunity for academic qualification, he can earn his living at work for which the amateur also has both the zeal and the love. I regard them as promoted amateurs. I believe the professional to be of great importance to the Union. The work of the amateur must be good work, and he looks to the professional for guidance, instruction and co-operation. I feel that that is the professional's responsibility to the Union, and welcome their increasing participation in it.

It has been obvious for some years that it is the structure of the Union that prevented it evolving to fit present conditions despite the goodwill, the talent and the hard work of its members. Though its aims are the same, demands on the Union have changed. Membership of the Union is, after all, voluntary, and it must be therefore worthwhile. To be so, it is essential to have a sense of participation. Participation requires communication. Until now the only contact that most members have had with the Union has been to receive the 'Emu'. As the papers in the 'Emu' have (quite properly) become more scientific, most of the members have felt less contact with the Union, and have felt a certain distrust of the professional. It is, of course, not only the professional that writes these articles, but they do tend to get the blame for it. Two of the aims of the Union are the proper study of birds and the publication of the results of this study. As the work done and the presentation of this work becomes more technical, so will papers in the 'Emu', become more scientific. But I suggest that for one who is not used to reading such papers the striving to understand them is a stimulus in itself, and, when understanding comes, then the reward is great.

So that communication between Council and members, and between members themselves, may be increased it is intended that a newsletter be published quarterly and reach members between each issue of the 'Emu'. The Newsletter will contain news of the work of members, the work and decisions of Council, work carried out by the Field Investigation Committee and many matters which are of interest to members, but would not find a place in the 'Emu'.

Field-work is most important. As an organized activity among members scattered throughout Australasia it has been neglected by the RAOU. A Field Investigation Committee, whose chairman is a member of Council, has been set up. This will enable members to work on a common project and to more purpose if they so desire.

In the past, representation of members throughout Australasia has been through representatives in each State or country, they being members of Council. It had become a cumbersome and nearly unworkable Council. At the last count it was forty-nine. On the Review Committee's suggestion, the Council consists of nine members. Representation is achieved by Council selecting and appointing, on the advice of local members, Regional Representatives. The choice is based primarily on the personal qualities of the member himself. It is also based on the RAOU membership in his area and on an ecological and geographical picture of the country as a whole. The appointment is made by Council, and the Regional Representative is responsible to Council. His duty is primarily to keep members in his region informed of RAOU matters generally and to acquaint Council

with the activities, as well as suggestions or criticisms, of the members in his region. It is an important means of communication within the Union. It is presumed that he will be active locally and will help to get people (not necessarily members) into the field where they meet more experienced ornithologists. He can assess their needs, and if he feels that they would benefit by being members of the Union, and if he thinks that the Union would benefit in return, then he should suggest membership to them.

I would like to say a word on youth. I feel it is important, and I stress it. Young members are extremely important to the Union. The Regional Representative should be aware of this and, judging by their keenness, talent and understanding of birds, should urge them to join the Union. For now we have something to offer these young people. We all go out of doors to study birds in our different ways. There are of course many good lectures given and many fine pictures shown in halls and lecture theatres. But these are the consequence of someone else having been in the field. The study and enjoyment of birds starts with finding and observing the birds themselves, for ourselves. And in the field, to get the greatest benefit, we should be with others, whether they know more or less than ourselves. To gain from the experience of others is most stimulating; to give something of our own understanding is well worthwhile. The Union must remember this and never become isolated.

There are, fortunately, many local societies given partly or wholly to the study of birds. With these we should have good liaison. It is in these societies that most of us get our initial stimulus and help. When someone feels that there is more still to be gained by studying and reading about birds beyond the limits of his local society, when in fact he is becoming interested in ornithology, then we should offer membership in the Union in addition to his local interests. The RAOU has no right to, and never should, interfere in smaller or more local societies. We have a responsibility to them to assist them in any way we can.

As I have said, this is a huge land and there are few of us. Nevertheless in many spheres we are making a mess of it. Not understanding truly what we have been given, we destroy the priceless to gain that which can be priced. Most other countries underwent this stage of their development long before the concept of ecology was understood. Australia has no such excuse. The preservation of the natural environment is so imperative that the RAOU must be concerned with the threat to any part of Australasia, however small, and must give full support to any member who feels he must act against destruction of the environment. We must also support through our members local or national movements which promote conservation. However, I do not think we are entirely blameless in this regard. Those opposed to conservation, the protagonists of clearing and utilization (regardless of ecology), are industry and politicians. And industry could not proceed without the blessing of the politician. But do the politicians understand the issue? The conservationist cannot talk (except vaguely and probably inaccurately) in terms of financial benefit. The politician is very naturally ready to listen to such argu-

ment. Until the politician understands our concept of the need for the preservation of our country where it is necessary, then to some degree we have failed. We must continue to educate as well as to fight despoliation.

It is suggested that the Council of the Union consist of nine members. This makes for much greater ease and speed of administration. But Council does not exist purely for administration. It is essential that Council receive information, discussion and criticism from members. Only in this way can it fulfil its true function. We hope that the Regional Representatives will be active in forwarding to Council this flow of thought from the members. It is Council's responsibility to help members, to help them in their enjoyment of birds, and to help them, if they wish it, to do good and satisfactory work which should be published in the 'Emu'.

I have outlined some of the changes which have been made to increase communication and to revitalize the whole of the Council. This I believe will lead to that essential—participation. The present Council has also been charged with drawing up a constitution designed to enable these aims, these concepts, to be implemented. The RAOU's function could not progress with its structure as it was. It has demanded a great change in structure. The election of members of Council and the office which each holds has to be considered both in the light of stability in experience and leadership, and of the need for new ideas to be readily available from its members. It is a surprisingly difficult task. The constitution has to be flexible enough to allow evolution to take place in the future, but rigid enough to form a guide-line which will ensure that in the future the very aims and objects of the founders are not lost. Now, this stock-taking, this turn of events, has disturbed and dismayed some members, I know.

Words that are usually spoken at the beginning of an address such as this can now, in the light of what I have already discussed, be said more meaningfully. They are that I am very deeply sensible of the honour given to me to stand here as President, charged with the duty of bringing some meaning to members belonging to the Union and some purpose to the Union existing in the community. I have been a member of the Union for 33 years, probably longer than any one present here, and almost half the life of the Union. I have known the feeling within the Union for a long time. I cherish that, and I can well understand the dismay of some members. But it is a sound tradition that is based not on form, but on the ideals of the founders, and these can only be handed down from member to member by personal contact and respect. I have no intention that it should die.

I believe that if the present situation, as I have outlined it, is true, and the changes are carried out as they are now, then the aims of the founders will still have meaning. After all they were very simple. Then the Union will have a standing in the community and will have a meaningful existence, more than just the sum of individual members. Then, members will have, as well as their aesthetic enjoyment, the knowledge that they are both developing the understanding of their subject, and conserving their object, the bird.