

# Obituary: Geoff Nicholls Park

## Ph.D. Canberra

### July 1946 – March 2009

*Tim Park*<sup>1</sup>

When walking around our fantastic city, I cannot hide from the influence Geoff has had on it. From Waitangi Park along to Te Papa's Bush City, and nearby where for a while stood Regan Gentry's wire native trees, to the cabbage trees in Civic Square, and out to the town belt where native ecosystems are now replacing some of the exotics. While I recognise he was not solely responsible for these things, his thinking influenced them and how they have come to be and form part of what endures today.

He has left for us an understanding of what value the pieces of nature remaining around us have, and how they really do influence our lives.

All this would not have happened but for the mentoring of Tony and Helen Druce, along with plenty of encouragement and support of his parents and tolerant BotSoccers. He was fortunate to live down the road from the Druces, with good orchid country at their back door in Pinehaven, and the Tararuas not far away.

Two discoveries in his life really made an impact on him on how important it is to understand the complex and interconnected relationship we have with nature. One was the discovery of an old oven pit, high in the remote Tararua ranges, beneath feet of soil and under a forest canopy. The other was the discovery of middens beneath the soil in dense coastal forest of matai, kahikatea and nikau that now is protected as Nikau Scenic Reserve, near Punakaiki. The fact that the forest had literally swallowed the evidence of former occupation struck hard into the mind of a scientist focussed on ecological processes. These separate events thrust New Zealand history into the core of his thinking. He was frustrated that some could not understand the value and possibility of us harmoniously co-existing with nature, but appreciated this did come at a cost, and that some places should remain wild.

Near the end of his life he was fascinated with the thinking that led to the development of conservation today. He was trying to tease out what was happening amongst Muir, Hooker, and others as the concept of National Parks emerged in the United States and collectors based in Europe began

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1 2/9 Hawker Street, Mount Victoria, Wellington—[parkecology@paradise.net.nz](mailto:parkecology@paradise.net.nz)



Figure 1. Geoff, "Waingongoro Valley, Egmont, 10/9/63".

thinking beyond species. He was frustrated that he ran out of time to complete his next book.

Due to his strong passion, his work was almost always a high priority but it did compete with having a good time. It was not difficult for him to enjoy himself and work at the same time.

He was fascinated by the sanctuary movement and how it has captured people's imagination, and he believed that these benefits far outweighed the cost of any fence or eradication effort.

What he leaves for us is the understanding that while we need to manage and legally protect nature, we also need to allow nature to evolve, adapt and coexist with us into the future.

Probably what is most important, though, is that he instilled in many what some call a "quiet urgency" to protect the representative remnants of now shattered lowland ecosystems, while trying to better understand them, their value and how they function.

Not only this, but he emphasised the need for us to understand how we, as a species, are vitally entwined in how these ecosystems operate and that we are their only hope.