

The Australian Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4890

Craik, Wendy

(1949 -)

Born 19490101, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia

Occupation Chief Executive Officer, Public servant, Scientist

Summary

Wendy Craik has been described as 'a woman of many firsts' (*Wisdom Interviews*). In 1992, she became head of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (GBRMPA) a position she relinquished in 1995 when she created another precedent by becoming the first woman to lead the National Farmers Federation. She was the first female Chief Executive of the Murray Darling Basin Commission (2004 -2008) and has held numerous positions on boards and advisory councils, including President of the National Competition Council (2002), Chair of the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (2000) , Chair of the National Rural Advisory Council, member of the Productivity Commission (2009 -) and chair of the Board of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation (2010 –). In 2000 she worked in private industry as Chief Executive of Earth Sanctuaries Limited – a listed company pioneering a private approach to wildlife conservation. Currently (2013) she is also on the boards of the WorldFish Center and Dairy Australia and is on the Council of the University of South Australia.

Details

Wendy Craik was born in Canberra in 1949 and her early childhood paralleled the post-war development of Canberra. Her memories of a happy childhood in a small town include watching Lake Burley Griffith filling up, and visiting a market garden called Leo's every week to get the family vegetables, on the south side of what is now King's Avenue Bridge. She attended Griffith Primary School, and Telopea Park High School and had what she described as 'a childhood like any other 1950s childhood', growing up with her three sisters in Griffith. (*Interview*) The house was imbued with public service culture, where a focus on education was important. Her father was a federal public servant promoted to the position of Auditor-General, her friends were generally the children of public servants, and her mother worked at the Australian National University as a research assistant once Wendy and her sisters were all in school. Wendy was the only one of them to pursue a long term career in the public service.

After completing school, Craik began a B.A at the Australian National University (ANU) but discovered that tertiary History and English were not as interesting and challenging as she had found them to be at high school, so she switched to studying science. She particularly liked Psychology and Zoology and settled on Zoology because the study of ecological systems – how change in one part of a system can impact upon the whole system – appealed to her. She completed an honours thesis in 1972, a study of a freshwater ecology in a stream running through a Canberra suburb, which set her on a course for postgraduate study. Discovering that she was interested in working in water, and preferring marine environments for their variety, she went to where the expertise existed, in Vancouver, Canada. The Canadian experience was rewarding, but after a while the rainy and grey climate of the Pacific Coast got to her; she knew she needed to live in a place where there was more sun. She completed her PhD and returned to Canberra, where she had a job in the Department of the Environment waiting for her. What started as a three month rotation in the GBRMPA as part of basic training for a Graduate APS trainee became a seventeen year appointment.

Craik began working for the GBRMPA in Townsville in May 1978 and loved the work surveying recreational and commercial fishermen about fish movements on the reef. It was important work designed to establish a baseline of data relating to the reef ecology and to develop maritime charts that had not been updated since Captain Cook had sailed the coastline in the eighteenth century. To be successful, she learned very early of the importance of developing good relationships with stakeholders, so that decisions made to save the environment could be regarded as negotiated, rather than imposed. After a long stint of doing fieldwork, Craik stayed on dry land, working as a research manager who commissioned the field work tasks. Looking to challenge herself, she undertook the Australian Public Service Executive Development Scheme which she describes as a 'fabulous year of professional development.' (*Interview*)

In 1992, Craik was appointed head of the GBRMPA, at a time when the work was at its most rewarding and most

challenging. Chief amongst the challenges was the need to balance protection of the reef against reasonable development, especially by tourism operators. And because there was a lot of job diversity within the authority, she was exposed to many opportunities that developed her leadership skills. But in 1995, after seventeen years in Townsville, she and her husband decided that they needed a change of environment, professionally and environmentally. The position of Executive Director of the National Farmers Federation (NFF) was available and Craik was the successful applicant.

Needless to say, taking on the task of managing the member organisations of such a diverse lobby group as the NFF presented a whole raft of new challenges. There were some important issues to resolve during her tenure, including managing the different philosophical and political attitudes of the members to free trade and native title, and working through the impact of the Melbourne Waterfront Dispute in 1998. Moving to a GST created issues for her members, as did the impact of new technological platforms. Craik freely admits that she did not realise what she was getting into when she took the job on. But there was some important lessons to be learned about the skills required to lead an industry advocacy organisation; first and foremost, the job of an Executive Director is to represent the members, not get ahead of them. By definition, this makes implementing organisational change difficult. 'You can't make it if the members don't want it.' (*Interview*)

After five years at the NFF, Craik was interested in rising to new challenges. In 2000 She moved to Adelaide to take up the position of CEO at Earth Sanctuaries, a publicly listed company that tried to bring together private funding and eco tourism as a way of building flora and fauna conservation projects. The concept was forward thinking in a scientific sense, but difficult to achieve in a commercial sense. She moved on from Earth Sanctuaries after a couple of years, fully supportive of the concept, particular the intention to involve the private sector in the business of conservation. 'I think a lot of people won't take conservation really seriously unless there is some kind of dollar value attached to it,' says Craik. (*Wisdom Interviews*)

Roles Wendy has taken on since leaving Earth Sanctuaries include: Chief Executive of the Murray Darling Basin Commission ; President of the National Competition Council; Chair of the Australian Fisheries Management Authority; Chair of the National Rural Advisory Council and consultancy for AcilTasman. She is currently (2013) a member of the Productivity Commission and chair of the Board of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation.

Craik has never felt that being a woman has held her back in her career, but acknowledges that this is not the case for all women. She has always felt in control of her own destiny and believes that a career characterised by movement has not only been good for her, but for the organisations she has worked for. 'People and organisations need to move on every six to eight years, she thinks. 'Organisations can benefit from new-blood semi-regularly.' She's been fortunate that family circumstances have enabled this sort of portability. (*Interview*) Diversity of experience has helped develop her as a leader.

So has good training, which is why she supports the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation. The APS Executive Development Program helped her to understand that an important key to good leadership is 'recognising who you are, what your values are, how you react in situations and seeing yourself as other do.' Good training programs give individuals the opportunity to reflect on these keys. Another important key is being prepared to take risks. 'Life is a bit boring if you don't take risks,' says Craik and advises women on the leadership track to, 'Beg for forgiveness, don't ask for permission!' (*Interview*)

Published resources

Resource

Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

'The Wisdom Interviews: Wendy Craik, Peter Thompson and Wendy Craik, 2002,
<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/bigideas/the-wisdom-interviews-wendy-craik/3519326>

Site Exhibition

From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg>

The Encyclopedia of Women and Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia, Smart, Judith and Swain, Shurlee (eds.), 2014,
<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders>

Archival resources

National Library of Australia, Oral History and Folklore Collection

[Wendy Craik interviewed by Nikki Henningham in the Women and leadership in a century of Australian democracy oral history project \[sound recording\]](#)

Author Details

Nikki Henningham

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