

# From fjords to eucalypt forests: Bjarne K. Dahl's journey

At the age of 30, Bjarne Dahl left behind the dark firs and snow covered mountains of his Norwegian homeland to immerse himself, for the next 30 years or more, in first assessing, then planting, eucalypt forests in Victoria.

Over his long career as a forester in Victoria, Bjarne developed an affinity with eucalypts, marvelling at their vitality. He came to admire, in particular, Silvertop Ash, a vigorous, fast growing species of eucalypt that dominates Gippsland's lowland forests.

Bjarne enjoyed marriage to his wife Ann, but they were to have no children. So, at the end of a long and fruitful life, it was the eucalypts he loved that were to become his legacy. On his death at the age of 95, Bjarne left the whole of his substantial estate to advance the cause of eucalypts. In 2010, his vision was realised with the launch of the Bjarne K Dahl Trust.

Bjarne Dahl arrived in Australia in March 1928, one of three Norwegians to be employed by the Victorian Forests Commission as forest assessors to map the forest estate as part of the Commission's forward planning. It was an arduous life spent in crude camps based for months in trackless bush, with supplies brought in by packhorse.

With the declaration of World War 2, timber quickly became a critical commodity. Ironically, loss of men to the armed forces contributed to a chronic lack of staff and, in 1942, it was decided to suspend further forest assessment. In 1944, with the end of war in sight and an expected boom in housing construction, money and personnel were once again invested in forestry. By this time Dahl was Chief of the Forest Assessment Branch and, in early 1945, he started an assessment school near Toolangi. The young foresters attending the school found Bjarne Dahl a very quiet and private man who let little personal detail slip. His wife Ann, whom he had married in 1932, impressed the young foresters as an attractive and personable woman, far more outgoing than her husband. On his resignation from the Forests Commission in August 1948, Bjarne Dahl left behind a fine record in both training and forest assessment.

Dahl's new job was for Australian Paper Manufacturers (APM), where he was employed to create a private forest estate for the company to shore up its supply of pulpwood. He set to the task with vigour, purchasing abandoned farmland in NSW, Queensland and Victoria at low prices. In cases where APM decided the land did not suit its purposes, Dahl sometimes bought the land himself, paying for the outlay in the first thinning of the forest, then profiting from the sale of the timber plus the capital gain on the land. In this way, along with investment in shares and property, he built up a considerable fortune.

In 1961, Dahl retired from APM, almost his last task being to plant a Mountain Ash seedling, the thirty millionth tree planted by APM. Tragedy was to strike in late 1976 when Bjarne's beloved wife Ann was unexpectedly killed in an accident. Ann's death profoundly affected Bjarne Dahl, and he became ever more reclusive. In 1979 he visited his brothers in Spain, hoping to find a new home for his final years close to his relatives. The trip was, however, a disappointment. He realised the place he felt most at home in was Australia, acknowledging in a letter: *"how much I owe to Australia which ... helped me to stay alive and prosper with the loving help of dear Ann."*

In July 1988 he made a new will leaving his entire estate to the Forests Commission of Victoria, now absorbed into the Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE). Dahl recalled that *"I was once a Chief Forester, and I owe [the] Forests Commission of Victoria a great deal of gratitude for giving me in 1928 the opportunity to make good in my profession."*

When Bjarne Dahl died in October 1993, his estate was professionally managed and grown by Perpetual Trustees, as directed in his Will, but the establishment of the Trust was a more complex matter. In 2007 an Order by the Honourable Justice Hansen in the Supreme Court of Victoria clarified the Trust's Objects and administrative structure and enabled formation of the Bjarne K Dahl Trust, independent of the Department of Sustainability and Environment.

Background image: Map by the Forests Commission of Victoria showing APM's sphere of influence in Gippsland. VPRS 11563/ P1 unit 485 file 60/0001.

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Overside image: By the time he arrived at APM, Bjarne Dahl had advanced from the days of the packhorse to the latest tool of a modern forester assessor – the helicopter.

*Image courtesy APM archives via HVP Plantations, Bjarne K Dahl Trust collection*

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