

Apiarist a dedicated man of nature

Geoffrey Winston Cotton

Apiarist and conservationist

Born: November 3, 1940; Naracoorte

Died: August 27, 2005; Keith

GEOFF Cotton was an apiarist who dedicated his life to conserving the natural world around him and helping other apiarists to develop successful businesses. Geoff's discovery of Mundulla yellows, a tree dieback disease, and his subsequent fight for research into the disease may be one of the most significant contributions to conservation in South Australia. As a quiet achiever, he did not seek any recognition for his efforts.

Geoff was born in 1940, son of Lucy and Ron Cotton, brother of Anne and Dennis. He was educated at Naracoorte school until the age of 14.

During his early years, Geoff engaged in some reckless pursuits.

One, involving dynamite and fuses, cost him his sight in one eye and, as a result, he always said he was blind in one eye and could not see out of the other; but the truth was that he could see environmental issues clearly and always sought solutions with an indefatigable fervour.

When a local beekeeper worked on the family property, Geoff's lifelong fascination with bees began. From then on, he started catching swarms and seeking work experience and information on keeping bees.

One of these hives showed signs of a disease so Geoff put the box on the handlebars of his pushbike and went to get it diagnosed by a beekeeper. The disease was American foul brood (AFB). From then to



his death, Geoff campaigned strongly for tough controls on hives infected with AFB. His efforts were often not appreciated by either beekeepers or government agencies but with his trademark tenacity he continued to campaign, through his membership in the South Australian Apiarists Association, to bring about strong disease control policies through regulation.

At 16, Geoff started his career as a travelling wool and skin buyer for Owen Dixon of Naracoorte, but in 1964 a partnership was developed with Alexander "Sandy" Mathison in a beekeeping business. This partnership was to last for 29 years. During this time, 25 years ago, Sandy

and Geoff noticed a tree disease in the Buckingham area, near Mundulla, SA.

Over the next 20 years, Geoff fought to have the condition recognised and for research into a solution. We now know this dieback disease as Mundulla yellows. With the help of highly regarded scientists such as Dr David Paton, Dr Frank Podger and many scientists at the Waite Institute and in Victoria, a basic understanding of the cause, the extent and, it is to be hoped, the control of this disease is being realised.

Other environmental issues which Geoff fought strongly for included stringy-bark dieback in the South-East, prosecution for illegal vegetation clearance and preservation of isolated trees in paddocks among many others.

Geoff was the foundation secretary of the SA Apiarists Association (South-East branch) which is now the largest group of beekeepers in the state.

He also served on the association's state executive council, the National Parks and Wildlife SA Apiary Industry Consultative Committee and the Ministerial Apiary Industry Advisory Group and was a respected and active member of the SA branch of the Conservation Council. Over his lifetime, Geoff saw the beekeeping industry change from relative commercial infancy to what it is today; and he became recognised as a master beekeeper, a major producer of honey whose knowledge of flora and beekeeping was unsurpassed.

Geoff is survived by his wife, Margaret, and children Allan, Debbie and David.

Darrell Lawrence