



*Wattle and National Wattle Day -
the journey of a nation and people:
The next steps*

Wattle Dreaming in the Australian Era

"...for when the nation is ready..."

A statement by the Wattle Day Association Inc. on the irresistible progress in acknowledging Wattle and National Wattle Day as symbols of Australia and the Australian people.
The story so far and the future that beckons.

February 2023

Executive Summary

Wattle is both intrinsic and instinctive as a symbol of Australia. It come from this land and speaks of and to both people and place. It quickly became the emblem of colonists who settled in this land from 1788. But long before, it already had a significant place in the lives and societies of Australia's first people, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

Wattle predates us all and because of its presence in this land for millions of years, it has welcomed us all. It unites us in unique and powerful ways and is a bridge between ancient and modern Australia. And as the Australian people begin a conversation on key issues of national identity, the Wattle Day Association senses that the mood of the Australian community is to deal properly with the past, claiming our ancient heritage and creating the modern nation of the future. Wattle has been our companion on the nation's journey to date - it can also be our guide to a united future.

Australians have invoked Wattle in many situations and occasions. Now is the moment that the wisdom of the Wattle symbol needs to be more conscious in our minds and our imaginations. The Association is embarked upon a bold strategy to achieve just that and with it to better facilitate the work of nation building that is before us. This can be achieved by a greater focus on National Wattle Day (1 September) and the creation around it of a major national celebration and festival.

This can be possible by the engagement of the wider Australian community, its political, business and community leaders and the wise sense of the Australian people. It is a path that has been successful in the past and can be again. The invitation is to be part of a unique, nation building project.



Australia's National Floral emblem - Acacia pycnantha – Golden Wattle

Introduction

Authentic national symbols emerge organically from a land, its people and its history. Such has been the story of Wattle in the great southern land – Australia. 1788 marked the intersection point of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures and Western (British) civilisation, following the somewhat fleeting connections of James Cook’s expeditioners in 1770. In 1838, a mere 50 years after the first settlement, colonists in Hobart invoked the blossom of the native Wattle plant as the symbol of their new home.

As the growth of colonial settlements continued, locals turned increasingly to the annually recurring golden blaze of wattle. Leading to and following Federation in 1901, Wattle Day came to be celebrated in different parts of the country on different days. Following a crusade by Wattle enthusiasts, Wattle Day was for the first time celebrated uniformly across several states in 1910. These instinctive celebrations of pride in what a new nation had achieved flowed on to being a statement of identity, prompting Prime Minister Fisher to incorporate Wattle into the new nation’s Coat of Arms, in recognition of its stature among the people. Wattle became the emphatic choice of national symbol. A course was set.

In 1988, the Hawke government announced *Acacia pycnantha* (Golden Wattle) to be the official national floral emblem of Australia. Then in 1992, in response to a concerted campaign by Wattle advocates and with the support of all state and territory governments, the Governor-General proclaimed 1 September each year to be observed throughout Australia as *National Wattle Day*.

In 1998 Jack Fahy formed the Wattle Day Association with the objectives to promote awareness of Wattle as the nation’s floral emblem and National Wattle Day as a unifying day to celebrate being Australian. It is that task that the Association now seeks to take to a whole new level. It does so not just because the Wattle has much to offer the nation as a national symbol, but also because there is a discernible readiness, indeed a willingness, to imagine anew both the nation’s future and its identity in the twenty-first century.

Wattle in Retrospect and Prospect

Over the past 25 years the Association has sought to grow the profile of Wattle in contemporary Australian society. This has taken many forms but essentially the Association has walked the path that the Australian people have taken in seeking to comprehend the meaning and, in some ways, the mystery of a modern nation in an ancient land. We have sought to understand the story of Wattle’s journey in this place, discovering its intrinsic links to the truly ancient story of both the Australian land and its original occupants – the First Nations, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Amidst all that antiquity, it becomes clear that Wattle can illuminate and draw us into key elements of the greater story. Scientific and historical/archaeological records reveal that Wattle has been evolving in our land for at least 30 million years, long after the Australian continent separated from the ancient landmass of Gondwana. Samples of pollen found in assessments of ancient soils have led the Association to explain that Wattle’s story takes us back into our land’s ‘deep time’.

So, the Association has presented Wattle as the great witness to the whole of the Australian story. As a result of this timeline, Wattle has effectively welcomed all of us, Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islanders, colonial, post-war emigrants, and migrants of the current day. This span of years and its daunting antiquity mean that our national symbol unites us all in an especially powerful way. It speaks to us of what is required to survive and thrive in this land – resilience and an ability to adapt. It also reflects the diversity of our cultures with more than 1000 varieties across Australia.

And just as the historical scholarship has drawn out and documented the engagement with Aboriginal peoples and their presence and occupation of the land for more than 65,000 years, so too the Association has come to understand the importance of the usage and value of Wattle in First Nation's cultures and customs. Those many applications and associations help us to learn the rhythm of Aboriginal cultural life that has pulsed throughout this land for thousands of years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people invited Wattle into their lives and societies. It fed and sustained them. It provided shelter, hunting implements and medicinal treatments. Wattle clapping sticks gave music and rhythm to their cultural gatherings. The flowering of different Wattles served as markers of seasonal events – a signpost for the coming of the whales, the emergence of the eels and the fattening of mud crabs. It was and is a cohesive agent in communities.

Considering the impact of these features it is fair to say that no other national symbol says so much about us and our land, Australia. Wattle has been a living thing in the lives of every Australian who has walked on this land. It is for this reason the Association has presented Wattle as a bridge from ancient to modern Australia. It is not just a common feature across Australia, but a deep time link – an astounding yet truthful reality. To be Australian is to have been influenced by the Wattle and its intrinsic messages of the importance of diversity, resilience, and adaptation to survive and thrive in this land.

It is significant that these perspectives have been produced and promoted by a committed volunteer community organisation and are not the offerings of a government policy or publicity unit. They are the considered reflections of a group of engaged Australians and a measure of the hold Wattle has in the nation's imagination and self-image. They evoke times long past and times in which we live. Like so much in the Australian story they do not supplant earlier perspectives and values, such as those that emphasise the early contribution made to the nation's economy by the tanning industry, which was based on the resource of Wattle bark. Nor do they displace the romantic nature-loving aspects about which Wattle enthusiasts of the-Federation era wrote and sang, highlighting the beauty of the Wattle, its blossoms, and its egalitarian availability.

These latter-day perspectives simply underscore the versatility of Wattle and its capacity to renew its own relevance to us as a people and nation. Wattle is capable of doing for itself what each year it reminds us of personally - namely the importance of renewal and a fresh start.

Australia's national colours of green and gold are also the colours of the national floral emblem – the Golden Wattle. In 1984 Prime Minister Hawke formalised the colours, on the

basis that green and gold had long been our accepted sporting colours. That tradition began in 1908 when the colours of the Australian Cricket team were announced as 'gum tree green and gold'. Although officially unstated, the sentiment of the nation has been clear ever since - the gold reflects the gold of the nation's Wattle.

Wattle's power as a unifying symbol is currently under recognised, especially in a community where 52% of all Australians were personally, or have at least one parent, born overseas. Wattle is largely untapped as a cohesive influence in modern Australia. If Wattle has been our companion on the nation's journey to date, it can also be our guide to a united future.

Positioning Wattle

The Association is conscious that it is the contemporary expression of what has been a long and significant social history of advocacy in the Australian community, inspired by Wattle's instinctive connection to our land, its people and the sense of nationhood. That community activism has achieved much during the past 150 years, with points of major development and progress. It believes the Australian community is approaching another of those points of major progress.



Presentation to Governor-General David Hurley for National Wattle Day 2022

For several years the Association has been aware of the Australian community's growing interest in Wattle, its role as national floral emblem and National Wattle Day. This has been expressed by various initiatives that reveal a renewed focus on the importance of our national symbol. Examples include:

- Increasing use of Wattle design features for homewares, jewellery, and clothing;
- Diverse culinary uses of Wattle seed in commercial food and drinks;
- Adoption of golden Wattle decals on the caps of Qantas airline captains;
- Different Wattle species featured in the design of Australia's banknotes;
- Integration of Wattle imagery in AFL & NRL Indigenous round jerseys and memorabilia;
- Lighting-up of landmarks around the country in green and gold for National Wattle Day by councils, state and territory governments and the National Capital Authority; and
- Endorsement and praise by Governor-General David Hurley, for the work of the Association in promoting Wattle, its role as a national symbol and the celebration of National Wattle Day.

As enthusiastic custodians of Wattle, the Association has followed with interest the recurring debate about the suitability of 26 January as Australia's national day. For some years now the

Association has quietly advocated that one way out of this annual distress would be to consider Australia Day and National Wattle Day as days of joint national celebration, on the basis that the days need not compete with each other, rather be considered as the complement of the other. The Association's view has been to position National Wattle Day as an obvious alternative for "when the nation is ready" to deal definitively with this matter.

The nation's democratic transition, expressed in the results of the 2022 election for the 47th Federal Parliament, provides further evidence of a yearning to address the resolution of key issues of national identity. This seemingly has unlocked debate on the challenges of constitutional recognition of our ancient past and the opportunities of a future in which our constitutional arrangements are no longer derivative or expressly tethered to another country/monarch on the other side of the globe, that shares nothing of the antiquity of the Australian story. Instead, there is a wellspring and a willingness to deal properly with the past, claim our ancient heritage and create the modern nation of the future.

While these circumstances are prompted wholly by the judgement of the Australian people and Parliament, the recent death of Queen Elizabeth II has further facilitated the context in which the nation can undertake the discourse necessary to consider two foreshadowed profound constitutional questions: the formal implementation of a Voice to Parliament as recommended in the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the question of an Australian Republic.

The Emerging Moment

It has been said that Australia is at a juncture that marks the end of the Elizabethan Era and the start of what is styled the Australian Era. If this is so, it is critical that Wattle is part of the conversation. The Association recognises that the mood of the nation is changing and believes it is critical that the wisdom Wattle delivers to our national life is appropriately represented in the conversations and conventions that emerge. The strength of Wattle's symbolism can assist in ensuring that such constitutional deliberations and initiatives are capable of successful implementation.

Beyond this however there are possible opportunities and initiatives relating to national identity, its achievement and celebration around which Wattle can play



Acacia pycnantha blossoms

significant roles in making us a distinct and authentic nation that is both ancient and modern.

It is in this overall context that the Association believes that the period ahead will shape whether and how “the nation is ready” to creatively address the challenges and opportunities in aligning both its future and its past. Now is the time to be bold on behalf of the Wattle and to become active participants in the national conversation around such matters. The Association has determined, therefore, to embark on an ambitious campaign of advocacy, public awareness-raising and ultimately nation building. This will involve giving Wattle the chance it deserves, and the nation would appreciate, to be seen and accepted in more prominent roles in the public life of the nation.

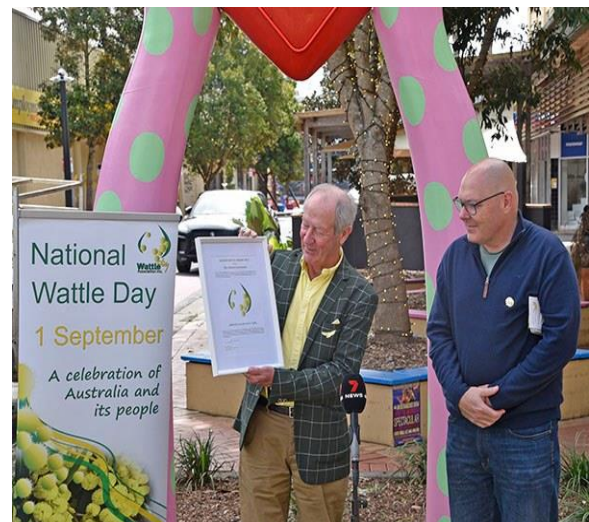
The Association is sustained by the fact that such moments have occurred previously in the story of Wattle. In the years leading to the first celebration of Wattle Day on 1 September 1910, Wattle advocates embarked on a crusade to encourage nationally co-ordinated Wattle Day celebrations on a uniform date. Similar community initiatives preceded the 1988 and 1992 proclamations.

To succeed on this occasion, the Association recognises it needs engagement at the highest levels of government and the wider community. Key elements to achieving this will be the appointment of a suitably equipped and credentialed person(s) as honorary Patron/Ambassador for Wattle and development of a partnership with a major sponsor(s) to underwrite a program of education, promotion and community engagement. Building both these relationships will be critical to ensuring Wattle plays a key part in an unfolding national conversation.

The Agency of Wattle

The greatest attribute that Wattle brings to these challenges is its unquestioned ability to unite Australians. Repeatedly, Wattle has been the symbol to which Australians have turned in times of crisis, trauma or tragedy. But its influence is not just as a balm on pain or suffering, rather its inspirational attributes, its resilience and its beauty grow organically from the land itself. It is always in our lives, flowering somewhere in Australia at any time of the year. It is probably unique among our national symbols as having no cultural baggage. Rather its beauty uplifts us all and its blaze of colour in our landscape each year at Wattle time, reminds us that we can start again and find resolve in difficult times.

The Association therefore is not prescriptive in its vision of the enhanced role that Wattle can play in the life of the nation. There are many ways this can play-out. What is important is that



Presentation of 2022 Golden Wattle Award to the Lismore Community (Lismore Mayor Steve Kreig) by WDA Vice President Mike Gilmour

Wattle as national symbol and National Wattle Day as a celebration of the land and its people, become a greater a greater focus in the lives of Australians and the society that enfolds them.

As part of any educational and promotional initiatives, the Association envisages the development of a national annual *Wattle Spring Festival* in the weeks leading to and from 1 September. This could include various elements such as:

- National Wattle Day (1 September) to be a nationally gazetted public holiday (perhaps replacing the Queens/Kings Birthday);
- Announcement of Order of Australia award recipients and the announcement/presentation of other Australian Honours, Service and Bravery Awards;
- Announcement of the winner of the annual Association-initiated Golden Wattle Award;
- Citizenship ceremonies that include Wattle Welcome addresses in all cities, towns and communities as part of the on-going renewal of a 'Forever Young' nation focus in the most ancient of continents, celebrating the world's oldest and longest surviving culture;
- Co-ordinated lighting-up of key infrastructure around the country in Green and Gold for National Wattle Day;
- Other Spring Festival features, perhaps akin to the Japanese Cherry Blossom festivals, with an emphasis on Wattle related activities such as tree plantings, poetry and drawings, as part of broader community building and celebration of the national Green and Gold colours;
- School curricula, national Civics education and media promotion that focus on *Acacia pycnantha* (Golden Wattle) and its significance as the national floral emblem;
- Celebration of the diversity of the Australian population and its unique flora and fauna;
- An environmental focus prompted by the Wattle's blaze of colour each year than can be seen as reminding us to care for the land, the home we need to protect; and
- Expressions of Australian culture and life, relevant to the many different areas and communities across Australia.

Such a festival and focus would create a bridgehead for expanded awareness of the national floral emblem and engagement in National Wattle Day celebrations. It could be seen as part of the process of community discourse necessary to reach some form of shared accommodation on the question of how and when best to mark the obvious reasons for celebrating Australia and being Australian.

The Association believes there is also the opportunity for a major alignment between Wattle (with its messages of resilience, adaption and starting again) and community groups, such as Rural Fire Services. In previous years the Association has worked with Rural Fire Services in different jurisdictions to raise funds by promoting and selling Wattle Day badges towards the end of Winter and into early Spring, during which period the Fire Services are active in the community encouraging property owners and occupiers to prepare for the coming fire

season. These initiatives have been taken to a 'proof of concept' stage and are scalable with appropriate seed funding, sponsorship, and promotion.

Other similar linkages also exist with organisations such as Open Minds in Queensland, which traces its lineage back to the Wattle Blossom Leagues of the early 20th century. There is scope to build such linkages with various community groups and activities throughout the country, reclaiming important social history while building stronger communities.

Next Steps

The Association is convinced that the time is right to embark on a potentially nation defining campaign to bring the nation's floral emblem to centre stage in the consciousness of the Australian community. There is considerable power in Wattle as a symbol, much of which remains untapped. In seeking to build our multicultural community, cohesively, to become truly a nation that is both ancient and modern will require skilful navigation. It is important that both government and community harness the natural and symbolic resources that this land bestows. The story of Wattle is both profound and inspiring. We should leverage it far more and to its fullest extent.

Engaging with the anticipated discourse on fully discovering our historical and latent national identity will be challenging. It will require careful planning, establishing creative relationships with government, industry and the wider community, and a wise sense of the mood of the people and their disposition. It is indeed a challenge of a character and scale far greater than any that WDA has undertaken to date. It is because the Association recognises this, but also the importance of it, that this document has been prepared as the foundation for approaches to suitable people/organisations whose guidance, support and funding would be required to realise these aspirations.

For those who are invited to assist in various ways, their involvement can best be considered as an opportunity to be intimately involved in a unique exercise of nation and community building.



*A growing trend: Planting Golden Wattle (Acacia pycnantha)
in an ancient earth for a golden future*