



Speech by

**Jann Stuckey**

**MEMBER FOR CURRUMBIN**

Hansard Thursday, 17 April 2008

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## DEATH OF MR D SPITTALL

**Mrs STUCKEY** (Currumbin—Lib) (6.24 pm): The Currumbin electorate lost its own Dr Dolittle on Monday, 24 March when, aged just 56, he suffered a heart attack which claimed his life. This characterisation, used by the *Gold Coast Bulletin* newspaper to describe legendary animal worker Des Spittall, was one of many endearing terms and fond memories shared at a memorial service to honour him a few days after his passing. Along with some 1,000 mourners, I gathered at Des's beloved Palm Beach-Currumbin Alleygators Rugby Union Club in Currumbin Waters to pay tribute to the full life of this gentle giant who was hugely respected by those in the animal husbandry and zoological industries for his knowledge and experience in the handling and care of all creatures great and small.

Des started as a keeper at Melbourne Zoo in the mid-1960s in the carnivore section, which at the time probably boasted one of the biggest collections of carnivores in the world. By the early 1970s Des was head keeper of the section and, to his credit, bred a vast number of these magnificent animals including snow leopards, tigers, ocelots, jaguars, cheetahs and lions. In 1976 Des started his trek north, moving to Taronga Zoo where his big cat experience was very much sought after. Here he also worked with seals, elephants and rhinos. Des undertook the initial zookeepers certificate course at Sydney TAFE in 1977-78 making him one of the very first graduates and, therefore, one of the first professional zookeepers in Australia.

He moved to the Currumbin Valley and, with his flowing beard, was often referred to as the 'Currumbin Valley Yowie', a term that he found endearing. In 1980 Des commenced as a keeper at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary, later taking the position as curator, instigating research on parrot breeding in the research aviaries. A number of koala exports to both Japan and San Diego helped bring capital for conservation programs back to Currumbin. The wildlife hospital at Currumbin became known as the place to bring animals under Des, and this community service continues today. He was involved in Expo 88 in Brisbane where they built a big aviary which was stocked and maintained by Des and his staff.

Des worked well with other people and was immensely proud of his family: partner, Liz, and daughters, Jasmine and Melissa. Another nickname was 'the Bear' because of Des's huge stature. However, he was also a gentle and delicate man who could catch more finches from an aviary by hand than others could using nets.

In 1999 Des started at Sea World and played a key role in the strategic development of the new exhibit Polar Bear Shores, working with bears for several years before moving across to sister attraction Paradise Country. He was articulate in the written and spoken word which came to bear in developing strategies and policies. Des was recognised for his work training keepers and writing of husbandry standards. He was made a life member of the Australian Society of Zoo Keeping last year and more recently edited the zookeepers' periodical *Thylacinus*, which is read by many people around the world.

Des loved his Bundy Rum and a good yarn at the bar with mates. I met him over 20 years ago when I was conducting training in professional development at Currumbin Wildlife Sanctuary. Only a few weeks ago he was ribbing me that he was still my greatest failure. I take that as a compliment from a man who meant so much to so many. Des, you are sadly missed by us all.