

## NEWS

# A wild life and legacy

## 50 years on from the death of a pioneer

BY SANDY POWELL

**I**N RECENT years Tasmania has branded itself as a destination for those seeking adventures in the wild.

From the mainland, and internationally, the state is seen to be a haven of breathtaking scenery, unique landscapes and strange creatures.

This is not by mistake, and is a reputation which was forged over many decades both by those seeking to make it true as well those perhaps hoping to capitalise on the notion.

It is a notion that was conceptualised long before by Lithuanian-born Olegas Truchanas, a man whose name is synonymous with the conservation movement in Tasmania.

Environmentalist Bob Brown believes a quote of Truchanas's should be inscribed above the entrance to the state's parliament house.

"Is there any reason why Tasmania should not be more beautiful on the day we leave it, than on the day we came?" Truchanas said.

"If we can revise our attitudes towards the land under our feet; if we can accept a role of steward and depart from the role of the conqueror, if we can accept that man and nature are inseparable parts of the unified whole, then Tasmania can be a shining beacon in a dull, uniform and largely artificial world."

### A LITHUANIAN IN TASMANIA

Fifty years ago, on January 6, 1972, Olegas Truchanas drowned on the Gordon River aged 49-years-old.

He had spent the previous 24 years of his life in Tasmania documenting the vast wilderness of the state's west and south-west, much of which had never been photographed.

He was a "master photographer", Max Angus wrote in his 1975 memoir *The world of Olegas Truchanas*.

But not only did he photograph parts of Tasmania many, even now, had never seen, he did so with conservation in mind.

"He is a guiding light for conservationists in Tasmania," said former Tasmanian Greens Senator

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Tasmania can be a shining beacon in a dull, uniform and largely artificial world.

Olegas Truchanas

Christine Milne.

"Through his photography and philosophy of protection of the wild, he introduced Tasmanians to a new way of seeing our own state."

Indeed, in a story in the pages of Angus's memoir, Truchanas was understood to be one of the first people in modern times to kayak from Lake Pedder, down the Gordon River and into Macquarie Harbour, landing at Strahan.

"[The journey] remains an epic," the memoir reads.

"A few weeks later he presented a collection of colour slides of his Gordon river voyage to an audience that overflowed the Hobart Town Hall."

His images would become a central feature of the national campaign to save Lake Pedder from being dammed by the Hydro Electric Commission.

### CONSERVATION BY DOCUMENTATION

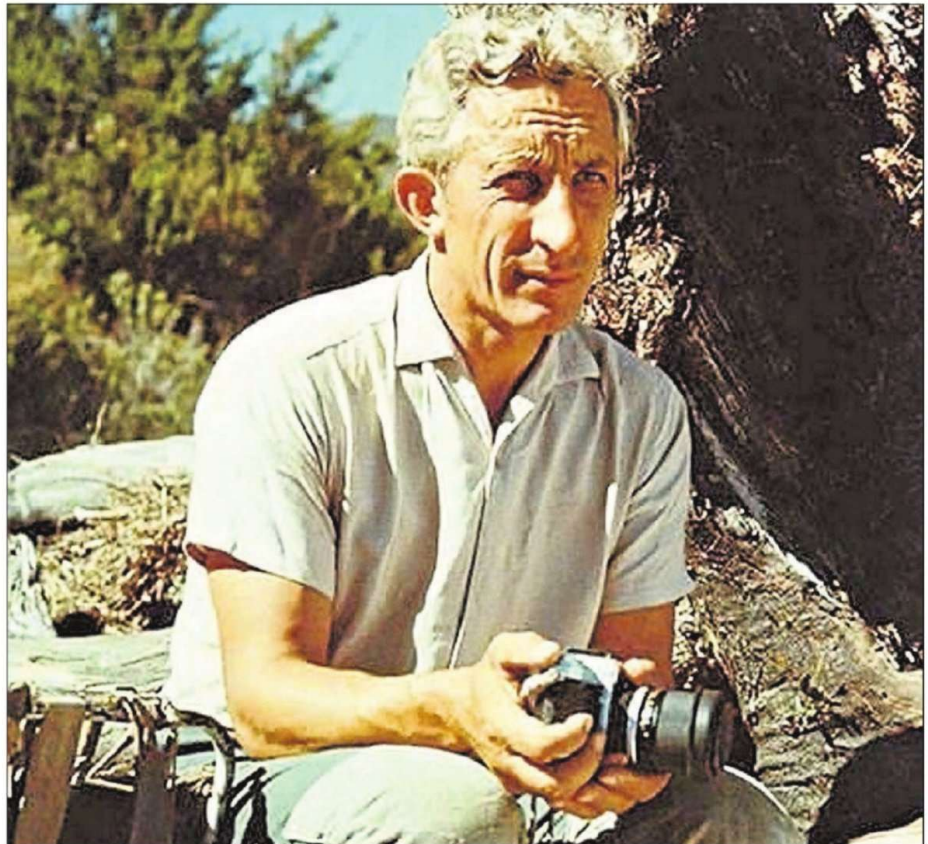
Olegas fled Lithuania with his family when Russia invaded and began university in Germany, where he also developed his passion for photography.

When he arrived in Tasmania in 1948 he brought that passion with him, and used it to introduce Tasmania to the vast tracts of wilderness which had been unexplored since European settlement, and certainly never photographed.

Ms Milne said Truchanas must have seen wanton destruction of ecologically significant places in Europe before coming to Tasmania and developing his conservation ethic.

He came to Australia on an immigration program and was assigned a "menial job" at Hobart's zinc works, which Ms Milne said inspired him to escape to the state's rugged wilderness areas.

"He was surprised to discover many Tasmanians



**LEGACY:** Photographer and naturalist Olegas Truchanas died in the Gordon River on January 6, 1972. Many say Tasmania owes its conservation reputation to his efforts to save Lake Pedder. **Picture:** Truchanas Family Records



**ADVENTURE:** Olegas Truchanas kayaking in Tasmania's south-west. **Picture:** Olegas Family Records



**DAMMED:** The original Lake Pedder, which Olegas Truchanas fought to preserve. **Picture:** Elspeth Vaughan

knew very little about the south-west," she said, before adding that a tourism campaign at the time described it as a "no-man's land", and that it would still be foolish to venture there unprepared. Landscape photographer Scott Gelston said that to be a wilderness photographer in the mid-20th Century presented unique and perilous challenges.

"The Overland Track is essentially a highway compared to the wilderness they were exploring," Mr Gelston said.

"Fifty years ago these

people were essentially bush-bashing, with compass and map, counting their steps to know if they'd gone a kilometre.

"It is hard to fathom quite what they would have gone through to get the images they got."

Mr Gelston said while Truchanas's work was seminal, with a "timeless" body of black and white work, it was also accessible and achievable for modern photographers.

"It is nice to have heroes you can aim for," Mr Gelston said.

### LAKE PEDDER LEGACY

Truchanas is a hero to many for his work on the campaign to save Lake Pedder from being dammed, and though that ultimately failed it led its surviving campaigners to the successful Franklin blockade.

"The loss of Lake Pedder saved the Franklin," Ms Milne said.

"I was one of those people who determined that after we lost Lake Pedder we would never let that happen again."

And that mentality lives on in those who have

followed, including current Tasmanian Greens leader Cassy O'Connor, who said his memory will be honoured by their ongoing efforts to protect Tasmania's wild places.

And though the campaign failed 50 years ago, Ms Milne said there remains a concerted effort to have Lake Pedder restored to its former glory.

"Post COVID Tasmania needs a big new idea. If Tasmania were to restore Lake Pedder it would put us out there as the beacon Olegas dreamt we could be."