protected

Magazine of National Parks Association of Queensland

State of the Park 2017

PLUS

Drivers of Unsustainability in Tropical Regions

AND

Girringun National Park

Dalrymple Gap track

Herbert River ringtail possum

NATIONAL PARKS ASSOCIATION OF QUEENSLAND INC.

connect and protect

Issue 14
April - May 2017

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Cover image

The crater of Girringun National Park's domant volcano, Mount Fox, within the World Heritage Wet Tropics in north Queensland.

Photo: Robert Downie.

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FROM THE PRESIDENT

Michelle Prior, NPAQ President

In March, NPAQ conducted the 18th Romeo Lahey Lecture, with former Parks Australia national parks director Peter Cochrane as the guest speaker.

The Association was honoured to have several descendants of Romeo's in attendance.

Romeo Lahey was one of the founding members of NPAQ, its first president, and a leading figure in the early days of conservation in Queensland.

In 1908, when only three national parks existed in Queensland – Barron Falls, Witches Falls and Bunya Mountains – Romeo joined Robert Collins in advocating for the creation of Lamington National Park. This was fortunate, as sadly Robert died in 1913, before seeing his dream of a national park realised.

Romeo advocated for a much larger reserve for Lamington than had previously been proposed; using the parks and reserves near Sydney and in the Blue Mountains as examples. He had an innate sense of the power of education and lobbying – giving lectures in nearby towns, door-knocking, organising petitions, and lobbying local councils and State Government Ministers.

Typical of our early conservationists, Romeo's passion arose from his own experiences in the bush; and while stressing the value of the land for nature conservation, he also touted its value for health and recreation. He knew the importance of connecting people with nature, long before it become a trendy term.

Clockwise from above: *Peter Cochrane speaking during the Romeo Lahey Lecture at the Griffith University EcoCentre; NPAQ's inaugural president Romeo Lahey; and Antartic beech trees in Lamington National Park.* PHOTOS: MARIKA STRAND / NPAQ ARCHIVES / RON OWEN

Setting the scene for the next few decades for NPAQ, Romeo also undertook intensive field trips, to support the proposal for the national park. The power of perseverance paid off in 1915, when Lamington National Park was declared.

Fast track to 1930, a rather momentous year; the planet Pluto was discovered, the Mickey Mouse comic strip debuted, Mahatma Gandhi broke the salt laws of British India by making salt by the sea, Amy Johnson became the first woman to fly solo from England to Australia, the Great Depression commenced and the National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ) was formed.

Aside from Lahey, the initial committee included other famous names such as Goddard, Groom and O'Reilly.

At the time, Romeo stated that there was "no body of public opinion … organised to combat the influences which were operating against the best interests of national parks".

What was most striking at the lecture given by Peter Cochrane was that more than 100 years ago, long before the importance of nature conservation and people's connection with nature was "confirmed" by science, the early conservationists knew this naturally.

NPAQ will turn 87 years on April 15. Building on the passion, perseverance and hard work of the founders, NPAQ has retained intact a vision that was created in 1930 – that of connecting and protecting.

Happy birthday NPAQ!

Thank you to all the people who have contributed to the organisation over its 87 years.

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STATE OF THE PARK 2017

Wade Lewis, NPAQ member

PHOTO: RYAN POCKRAN

Protected's first article exploring the state of national parks in Queensland noted it was "critical" that a new State Government prioritised "the protection of wildlife and their habitat as a legacy to future generations" (Feb-Mar 2015).

Last year, cautious optimism was expressed after noting improvements in protected area management after a period where "national parks in Queensland came under siege" (*Protected*, Feb-Mar 2016).

In early 2017, it can be observed that the State Government appears to be making very good strategic and operational advances in its approach to national park acquisition, planning and management.

This is reflected in the release for public comment of the *Draft Queensland Protected Area Strategy*, which is the first substantial terrestrial conservation document in Queensland for some time.

There have also been several other noteworthy developments worth reflecting on as we consider where the final strategy make take us.

Release of the Draft Queensland Protected Area Strategy

NPAQ regards the draft strategy as a genuine effort to counter the challenges involved in growing and managing the protected area estate in Queensland and welcomes the inclusion of private protected areas. However, there are several components in the draft strategy that are of significant concern to NPAQ.

The initial tone of the draft strategy was disappointing. There was a strong implication that conservation was subordinate to economic growth and employment, and a failure to fully acknowledge the significant role conservation played in tourism, ecosystem services and growth in land management enterprises.

Perhaps the final strategy can draw more on tangible socio-economic benefits of conservation and national parks that are already well understood; then the true value of national parks to regional Queensland can be reflected, as opposed to foregone economic opportunities.

The draft strategy focussed substantially on obtaining alternative funding options for Queensland's protected area estate. However, Queensland's national parks are an economic powerhouse, contributing significantly to Queensland's multi-billion dollar tourism industry.

NPAQ is not of the opinion that developing a legislative mechanism to allow sole management of national parks by third parties is appropriate.

While wary of purely percentage targets for Queensland, NPAQ could be persuaded to support a target of 17 per cent if the right justification and methodology is proposed.

Some additional observations on the draft strategy include:

- Moving from 8 per cent coverage of the state in terrestrial protected areas to 17 per cent by 2035[1] will require a sustained acquisition program. This will need to be driven by the proposed medium-term target, and underpinned by adequate budgetary, organisational and partnership arrangements. Critically, the draft strategy notes that early acquisition efforts of what DEHP call "key strategic properties"[1] will be most cost effective.
- An enhanced protected area estate is recognised as being central to the conservation of biodiversity in the face of climate change.
- Partnerships with the private and non-government sector, with other levels of government (especially local governments) and with individual landholders, continue to be a critical part of the institutional arrangements required to deliver a comprehensive, adequate and representative (CAR) protected area estate. Of interest is the proposal to designate "Special Wildlife Reserves" as a type of voluntary private protected area that would be managed to the same standard as a national park.
- Establishment of joint management arrangements with Traditional Owners, such as those put in place in the North Stradbroke Island area including for Naree Budjong Djara National Park, will continue through a number of mechanisms – for example, IPAs, the CYPAL areas, the Indigenous Land and Sea Ranger program.
- Acknowledgement that as both acquisition and management of protected areas becomes more complex and interconnected with a broader range of stakeholders, new regulatory tools are required to secure "public good" conservation outcomes from private efforts.
- That protected area acquisition and management occurs in a chronically resource-constrained environment, making additional or complementary revenue streams for both state and private managers an essential consideration going forward. This may include adopting successful strategies in place in other parts of Australia.

Key legislative developments

Last May, the State Government passed the *Nature Conservation and Other Legislation Amendment Bill 2015*. This was a far-reaching Bill welcomed by NPAQ that reflected a campaign by NPAQ and others to reintroduce the cardinal principle to nature conservation legislation.

The legislation also enshrined community consultation on management planning, which NPAQ considers essential to contemporary protected area management given the deeply interconnected arrangements in place in Queensland.

Also of note was the tenure resolution and consultation requirements provided for Traditional Owners regarding Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal Land (CYPAL), and upgraded protected area classifications for some of the state's most iconic areas of scientific interest.

Protected area estate acquisitions

The DEHP Annual Report[1] released last September noted that in 2015-16 "the protected area estate increased by 421,449ha", with 11 new nature refuges covering 10,430ha also declared. This included the dedication of 379,759ha of national park (including Biniirr National Park in April 2016[2], part of CYPAL), 11,303ha of forest reserve upgraded to national park and 31,260ha dedicated as regional park. These acquisitions were spread throughout the state, adding to national parks as diverse as Currawinya, Lamington, Moresby Range, Springbrook, Mt Barney, Tewantin and Undara Volcanic.

Other acquisitions later in 2016, also significant in terms of area and conservation value, relied on co-operation between the State and Federal Governments. This included new national parks (Expedition, Littleton and Rungulla) and expanded parks (Girringun, Wondul Range).

Government commitments

The 2016-17 State Budget contained a range of commitments related to the protected area estate, including:

- 31 new park ranger jobs over the next four years across Queensland;
- $35.9 million in funding over four years to establish and manage the protected areas estate.

A report[3] released in December noted the State Government's progress in delivering on its promises, many of which were directly relevant to the protected area estate. Some of these commitments were identified as "complete", with the following noted as "in progress":

- Consider North Stradbroke Island in any national park estate expansion;
- Secure and conserve representative and resilient samples of all bio-geographical regions of the state in the national park estate and move towards the target set through the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The DEHP has indicated the target for the percentage of Queensland's land area to be protected (8.1 per cent) has not achieved due to "a number of impediments not being resolved and delays with NatureAssist negotiations"[1]. While applauding the growth in the estate, the NPAQ hopes these impediments and delays can be addressed as a matter of priority.

Climate change linkages

Both the draft strategy and the *Queensland Climate Adaptation Directions Statement*[4] released for public comment last October acknowledge the need to consider the impacts and effects of climate change in designing a CAR protected area estate in Queensland.

This will play out in myriad ways, including prioritising areas for acquisition by identifying species and habitats that are vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Conclusion

There is reason to be optimistic about the direction that Queensland's protected area estate is headed.

Positive developments include: the release of the draft strategy; further plans to strengthen and expand the regulatory framework; an acquisition program that is funded and targeted; government commitments that target weaknesses highlighted by NPAQ and others in recent years; and a demonstrable effort to link protected area and climate change policy.

NPAQ will be closely watching the draft strategy's finalisation and implementation.

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DRIVERS OF UNSUSTAINABILITY IN TROPICAL REGIONS

Is there space for hope?

Julen Gonzalez-Redin, PhD student, The James Hutton Institute, Scotland

The challenges of the Anthropocene – including climate change, impending resource shortages, demographic change, financial and economic crises – are calling for entirely new answers.

Yet there is no certainty in terms of effectiveness, either in the short term or long term.

This is especially worrying in tropical regions, where more and more forests with high environmental, socio-cultural and economic value are being lost to agriculture. Thus, there is an urgent need to find ways of enhancing sustainability for the good of tropical ecosystems, people and economics.

Main drivers of unsustainability

Under "business as usual" scenarios, forces driving forest clearing for agriculture in tropical regions are usually stronger than those driving protection[1]. This is supported by the larger amount of funding allocated for development compared to conservation, such as the US$60-70 trillion investment expected by the G20 nations on new infrastructure projects by the year 2030[2].

Financial powers and monetary debt are key to understanding the current deforestation rates in the tropics. For instance, private companies operating in various sectors in Southeast Asia – palm oil, pulp and paper, rubber or timber – receive loans in the millions of dollars from overseas banks[3].

Financers of these companies come from all around the globe, including the US (Bank of America), Europe (Credit Suisse) and within Asia.

In 2015, at least $43 billion in credits were loaned to companies linked to deforestation and forest burning in Southeast Asia alone[3]. Interestingly, more than a third of that sum came from American, European and Japanese banks, many of which have sustainably pledges that specifically mention deforestation[4].

Another important factor affecting the conservation of tropical rainforests is the role of governments and their decisions.

Recent quantitative analysis of governance in six South American countries showed that agricultural expansion increased at the expense of forests when the World Bank's indicators for governance – corruption control, rule of law, and voice and accountability – were high[5]. Where environmental governance indicators showed opposite results, agricultural expansion was remarkably lower[1/6].

An exception that proves the rule

There is one singular "sustainable" exception among tropical regions: the Wet Tropics in north Queensland.

In contrast to most tropical areas, protection forces in the Wet Tropics are stronger than development. As a result, around 20 per cent of the land in this region has been protected since 1999, reaching a significant total protected area of 50 per cent in 2015[7]. One key factor to understand this atypical situation is the integration of a multi-scalar top-down conservation governance with a strong bottom-up environmental awareness – the latter originating in the "campaign" during in the 1970s[8].

Clockwise from left: A valley in Girringun National Park, within the Wet Tropics; the cassowary, an icon of the Wet Tropics; the aftermath of slash-and-burn agriculture in South America where deforestation is a major issue.

PHOTOS: TRACEY HARRISON-HILL / SUPPLIED / MATT ZIMMERMAN

Interestingly, like other tropical regions including those in Southeast Asia, forces driving forest clearing for agriculture in the Wet Tropics are also enhanced by financial credits. For instance, one of the main industries in this region – sugarcane – is highly debt dependent, receiving $700 million in loans across the past two or three decades[9].

In contrast to other tropical regions, however, monetary debt of the sugarcane industry does not lead to agricultural expansion in the Wet Tropics, due to different issues inherent to this industry[9] and to the aforementioned protection forces.

In any case, protection efforts in the Wet Tropics should not be considered as a "victory" of conservation over development. In fact, the situation in the Wet Tropics could be indirectly diminishing protection elsewhere in Queensland and Australia.

This idea of public biodiversity discourse centres on society associating increases in protected areas with increasing pro-conservation community sentiments, which creates a public perception that more biodiversity is being protected (in the Wet Tropics) and thereby reduces public discourse about the risk of biodiversity loss elsewhere[1].

Moreover, impeding land clearing for agriculture in the Wet Tropics could be enhancing crop competition for suitable areas for expansion in other tropical areas.

For instance, restrictions on deforestation for oil palm are resulting in a massive conversion of jungle rubber in Indonesia and jungle cocoa in West Africa to monoculture oil palm, marginalising these small-holders and resulting in deforestation for rubber and cocoa elsewhere.

What next? The role of governments in market-driven tropical regions

Government interventions – policies, sanctions etc – are essential in market-driven capitalist systems in order to balance the economic processes necessary to meet the demand on goods with environmental conservation.

Otherwise, forest clearing for agriculture in tropical regions will continue to be stronger than protection forces, with few exceptions such as the Wet Tropics.

Will governments take tough steps required to advocate for long-term sustainability of tropical regions that bear short-term economic costs, for example in relation to grazing in the Great Barrier Reef catchment?[10]

Rather than short-term profitable "end-of-pipe" solutions, we need – more than ever – examples of governments in developed countries that prioritise and invest in far-reaching institutional, technological and financial changes.

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PARK IN FOCUS

Girringun National Park

Lucy Hollingsworth, NPAQ Project Officer

The spectacular Girringun National Park comprises five sections – Blencoe Falls, Dalrymple Gap track, Mount Fox, Princess Hills and Wallaman.

Situated in North Queensland, between Cairns and Townsville and just 50km west of Ingham, it is predominantly (but not entirely) within the World Heritage Wet Tropics[1].

Formerly titled Lumholtz National Park, it was gazetted in 1994 but after a decade of valid negotiations with local Indigenous groups and the amalgamation of Mount Fox, Garrawalt Abergowrie, Lannercost and part of Cardwell forest reserves in 2003, the park was renamed Girringun National Park[2].

The key conservation purpose of the park is to protect cultural and World Heritage values, significant landscape features such as Australia's highest, permanent single-drop waterfall and a high diversity of habitats including some of the oldest surviving rainforests in the world. In addition, the park provides a sanctuary for various native animals.

Key challenges and management focuses within the park include:

- Weeds such as lantana and sicklepod;
- Feral animals, particularly pigs and the remnants of cattle in areas formerly cattle properties;
- Inappropriate fire regimes and forest thickening due to lack of burning.

Fauna and flora

Girringun supports a high diversity of habitats including some of the oldest surviving rainforests in the world.

In addition, the park provides a sanctuary for all six species of Australian gliding mammals, the endangered southern cassowary *(Casuarius casuarius johnsonii)* and the Herbert River ringtail possum *(Pseudochirus herbertensis)* – a symbol of conservation in Queensland as it forms the logo for the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS)[3].

NPAQ contribution

The National Parks Association of Queensland (NPAQ) started advocating for the Herbert River Valley and surrounds to be gazetted as national park from 1935 *(NPAQ archives, 1935)*.

In 1950 it was again a hot topic for NPAQ, with the Association making submissions to the sub-department of the Forestry and Land Administration Board for a major national park covering more than 200,000 acres in the Herbert River Basin *(NPAQ archives, 1950)*.

The park was to be described as the most concentrated scenic area of Queensland, as it would include eight major waterfalls and many lesser ones all in one single national park.

It was envisaged to become one of the outstanding tourist attractions of the state.

It was not until 1963, however, that land within the area was finally gazetted to the protected area estate *(NPAQ archives, 1963)*.

After much further advocating over the following years, still with the thought that the Herbert River could prove to be the nucleus of one of the largest and most-visited national parks in Queensland, the protected area grew to form the Lumholtz National Park in 1991 – named after the Norwegian naturalist Carl Lumholtz, who explored the area in the 1850s.

By 2000, the entire Herbert River was protected under national park status. The Blencoe Falls section gazettal in 2003, along with extensive talks with local Indigenous groups, resulted in the park being renamed Girringun National Park.

Today it protects 278,203 hectares.

A little additional history

The park is regarded as highly culturally significant and as such has areas listed within the World Heritage Area Listing, National Heritage Register and State Heritage Register as well as being recognised for its rich Indigenous heritage under the Aboriginal Cultural Heritage Act 2003.

Since the first European exploration led by Ludwig Leichhardt in 1845, Indigenous Australians have been displaced, causing much violent turmoil between the early Europeans and Indigenous groups.

This turmoil continued especially as the area became commonly sough-after for timber, the mining of gold, copper and tin as well as for cattle grazing[2]. In 1864 the first non-indigenous settlement within the Girringun area was formed at Port Hinchinbrook, now known as Cardwell since its renaming in 1868.

This further allowed for increasing immigration, particularly once the mines began to open – attracting over 20,000 immigrants. Two more ports were constructed by 1878, at Cairns and Port Douglas, further allowing exploration and development of the surrounding area.

Lumholtz, whom the park was named after in 1994, was a Norwegian ethnographer and explorer who came to Australia and arrived in the Herberton and Ingham areas in 1880. There he spent 10 months among the Indigenous people.

Lumholtz's first book outlining his encounters, *Among Cannibals: An Account of Four Years' Travels in Australia and of Camp life with the Aborigines of Queensland*, was regarded highly among ethnographic researchers as he was one of the first to record social relationships, attitudes and the role of women in their society. He was however, later criticised for his lack of respect for the Indigenous people[5].

Interesting walks

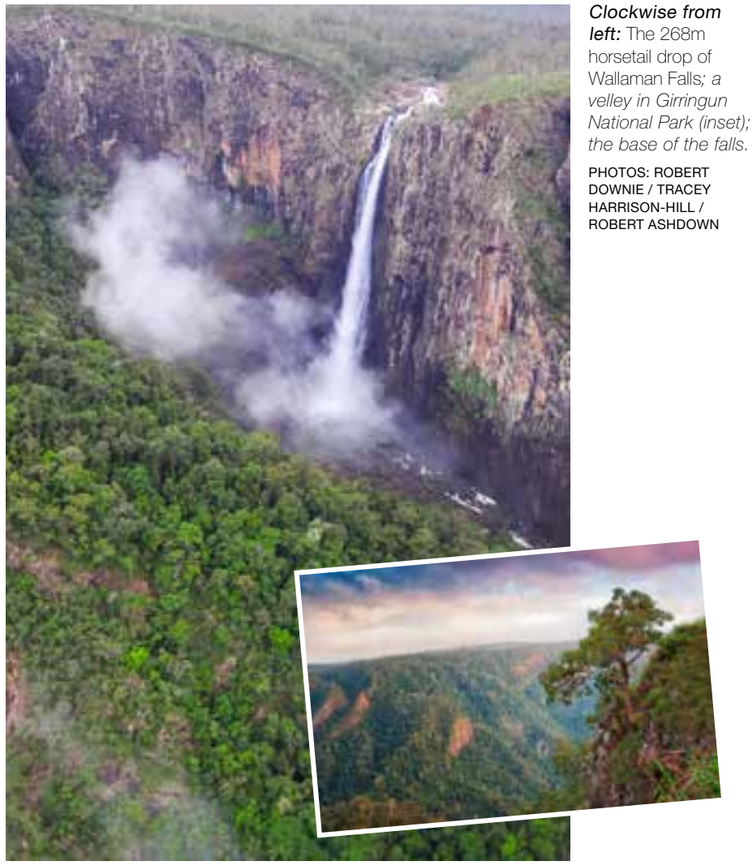
Girringun National Park provides walks to meet a range of abilities.

Of particular popularity is the Wet Tropics Great Walk; extending 110km, it is the longest multi-day walk in Queensland[2]. It is usually completed as a four-day wilderness hike or, of more recent interest, upon a mountain bike. But don't worry! The park houses many easier walks around the Wallaman section, such as the Banggurru walk, or alternatively try the walks up to the Wallaman Falls, Blencoe Falls and Herbert River Gorge lookouts for breathtaking views.

More moderate walks include the Jabali walk, Djyinda walk or the ascent up the dormant volcano, Mount Fox

The park is rich in scenic beauty, Indigenous and early European cultural heritage, and supports areas of wilderness that the everyday adventurer marvels at.

Why not take a trip?



Clockwise from left: The 268m horsetail drop of Wallaman Falls*; a velley in Girringun National Park (inset); the base of the falls.*

PHOTOS: ROBERT DOWNIE / TRACEY HARRISON-HILL / ROBERT ASHDOWN

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FEATURED WALK

Dalrymple Gap Walking Track

Amanda Payne, Hinchinbrook Hiking Gear

Found within the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area in Far North Queensland, the Dalrymple Gap Walking Track is part of one of the oldest continually surviving tropical rainforests on Earth.

Awarded World Heritage status in 1998, the Wet Tropics is home to many endangered species – including the southern cassowary.

Part of Girringun National Park, the Dalrymple Gap Walking Track is just 13km south of the small coastal town of Cardwell on the Bruce Highway between Cairns and Townsville.

The track is 10km one-way, or 20km return, and graded "difficult".

It is recommended allowing six hours to complete this trail one-way.

Due to the length of the trail and the fact that there is no camping allowed along it, or in the car parks, it is not advisable to undertake a full return trip.

To access the trail, you can either self-drive or utilise a drop-off/pick-up service. There is a grassy car park at both ends of the trail, so hikers can decide in which direction they would like to hike the trail.

The most popular choice is to start at the northern end near the Bruce Highway and finish at the south, where hikers can then opt to go to Broadwater picnic area within Abergowrie State Forest for a well-deserved swim afterwards.

Some people opt to walk half the trail and then return to their vehicle if they choose to self-drive, but many arrange to be dropped off at one end of the trail and picked up at the other – or self-drive to one end and get picked up at the other end and returned to their vehicle.

Location

13km south of Cardwell, within Girringun National Park.

Recommended access

Via car park off the Bruce Highway at the northern end of the track. Not wheelchair accessible.

Grade

Difficult. Not recommended for young children or the elderly.

Time allowance

Six hours (one way).

Highlights

Stone Bridge, Cardwell Range, tropical rainforest, Southern Cassowary.

Hinchinbrook Hiking Gear in Cardwell (www.hinchinbrookhiking.com) offers a pick-up and drop-off service for the Dalrymple Gap Walking Track and can also arrange transport to Broadwater with refreshments.

It is recommended to carry either enough water to last the duration of the walk or a water purification system so you can utilise the water from one of the many creeks.

As this walk is graded "difficult", it is also recommended that only people with a reasonable fitness level attempt to complete it. There is no mobile phone service along the trail.

April to November is the best time to complete the hike, to avoid the wet season when high temperatures and heavy rainfall can be hazardous. Of course, it is always advisable to check the track conditions prior to departing, as with any walk.

The Dalrymple Gap Walking Track follows the route of a road built in the 1860s, which, in turn, roughly followed the route taken by Aboriginal people across the Cardwell Range.

The area is significant to the Aboriginal people as they used it for ceremonies and to meet with neighbouring tribes. They also often collected food and resources here.

The Dalrymple Gap Walking Track was named after George Dalrymple, a Scottish-born politician and explorer.

Dalrymple was granted a lease to the Valley of Lagoons on the Upper Burdekin River and proceeded to find a suitable supply route to the coast. The track was cut from the Valley of Lagoons to Cardwell and was heavily used between 1864 to 1870 to cart supplies before easier alternative routes became available.

Clockwise from above: *The heritage-listed culvert at the Dalrymple Gap stone bridge; one of the many creek crossings; fungi.* PHOTOS: AMANDA PAYNE / ROBERT ASHDOWN

Near the top of the Dalrymple Gap there is a handmade stone bridge that was constructed circa 1864-1865.

The oldest remaining stone bridge/culvert in Queensland, still substantially intact and an excellent example of mid-19th century construction in difficult terrain, it was listed on the state's Heritage Register in October 1992.

The Dalrymple Gap Walking Track is one of the most scenic walks in the Girringun National Park. It takes hikers through open eucalypt forest, various flats and slopes, and tropical rainforest – and also includes the summit of the Cardwell Range.

There are multiple creek crossings, so good footwear is essential. Some crossings you can manage to rock-hop on the boulders; others you have no choice but to get wet feet.

The track boasts a wide variety of flora and fauna.

Huge strangler figs reaching well above the rainforest, cassowary plums, lawyer vines and Gympie-Gympie stinging trees are just some of the notable plant species.

The track is also home to myriad animals including the green ringtail possum, coppery brushtail possum, amethystine python and MacLeay's honeyeater in addition to the southern cassowary. Unfortunately there is also evidence of pest species, such as feral pigs and cane toads.

Author's experience

Every time I complete the Dalrymple Gap Walking Track, I cannot help but imagine how difficult it must have been to transport goods between inland towns and the coast. The stone bridge is amazing and it is hard to believe that it is more than 150 years old.

The rainforest is beautiful and I feel so privileged to be able to experience this historic trail. I love sitting beside one of the running creeks, listening to the birds and really taking in my surroundings; thinking how life may have been for those early explorers, cutting their way through the thick rainforest, or for the Aboriginal people gathering food and supplies from the area. This is such a beautiful part of tropical North Queensland.

The Dalrymple Gap Walking track is accurately rated "difficult" and is especially challenging as you make your way to the summit; however, it is an extremely worthwhile hike and the rainforest is a fine example of one of the world's oldest continual rainforests.

I always thoroughly enjoy this walk and I highly recommend it.

The Cardwell area also has other beautiful walks for you to enjoy:

- Thorsborne Trail (32km, four days)
- The Yalgay Ginja Bulumi walk at Murray Falls (1.8km return, 1.5 hours)
- Broadwater Creek Walk (3km, one hour return)
- Attie Creek Falls (1km return, about 40 minutes)

The author has endeavoured to ensure that the information presented here is as accurate as possible. However, they or NPAQ do not accept responsibility for any loss, injury or inconvenience sustained by any person guided by this article.

WILDLIFE FEATURE

Herbert River ringtail possum

Rupert Russell

A well-coloured Herbert River ringtail possum (top), a juvenile (bottom) and the Herbie logo used by Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. PHOTOS: MARTIN WILLIS / STEVE PARISH

In times long past I was allowed to catch native animals on behalf of a national parks zoologist in the newly minted Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service. One night, as I was spotlighting along a logging road in upland rainforest on the Atherton Tableland, I saw a small possum crouched in a thicket.

Already acquainted with the appearance of an adult Daintree River ringtail *(Pseudochirulus cinereus)*, it struck me that this small animal looked exactly like a miniature of that species. This was a surprise, because the Atherton Tablelands were populated by Herbert River ringtails, while the Daintree River ringtail's known habitat was further north in the Carbine and Windsor Tablelands.

Anticipating a claim that this find greatly extended the range of the Daintree River ringtail, I took the little beast home, informed my supervising zoologist that I had an interesting captive and set about rearing it.

The possum fed happily and grew quite fast on a variety of rainforest foliage supplemented by leaves of an unlikely exotic, the Brazilian peppermint *(Schinus terebinthifolius)*. And, surprise, surprise, as it grew, its coat darkened. The classic pale fawn of a Daintree River ringtail was supplanted by more and more dark fur until – within about 10 weeks – it became clear that the possum was a young Herbert River ringtail.

This new information presented a puzzle: did it mean that the original population, both young and adult, were all coloured like the Daintree River ringtail, and did the much darker, distinctively-marked Herbert River ringtails evolve as a new species from the original light-coloured population, or could it have been the other way around?

I don't think the DNA wizards have explored this question.

What I did not know, until subsequent possum-watching enlightened me, was that baby Herbert River ringtails were intentionally left by their mothers.

Female Herbert River ringtails usually produce two joeys each time they give birth. When the joeys are too big to fit in mother's pouch, they ride on her back for some days, but as they grow even bigger the mother "parks" them in order to take off by herself to find her evening meal. The joeys move around a bit, gaining strength and experience. Their reaction to strangers with spotlights can be to speed off, but just as often they try to escape notice by "freezing".

I have been contacted more than once by people anxious about a "deserted" baby possum seen while spotlighting, but mother Herbies will return to them hours later.

Many might consider a possum a relatively stolid animal, but the Herbies' adventurous behaviour is quite impressive.

I recall a surprising finding when a rope bridge was suspended across a bitumen road that had traversed a particular forest for many decades. While expecting possums on each side to have come to accept that their world ended where the road cut through, cameras erected to monitor the rope bridge showed that in just a few days Herbert River ringtails began using the bridge to cross into the forest on the other side – and return at will. Because their markings are quite variable it was possible to distinguish individuals recorded by the camera.

Rupert Russell is an active conservationist who advocates for total protection of North Queensland's forests. Having authored the award-winning book Spotlight on Possums *(1980), currently he is involved in a crowdfunding effort to monitor yellow-bellied glider numbers and improve habitat management.*

Support the fundraising campaign at https://chuffed.org/project/yellow-bellied-glider-census

THE NATIONAL PARK EXPERIENCE

Why national parks should be valued, told through the lens of personal experience in national parks

Athol Lester, NPAQ Councillor

National Parks are the antidote to the hectic lifestyle many people lead – the place to go when the body and mind needs to be refreshed and revitalised.

They are also a repository for all things natural that must endure for the benefit of future generations, especially as our culture moves at a rampant pace into a technological age where our daily experiences are no longer involved with the basics of life and insulated from the source of our food, our natural resources, our clean water sources, flora and fauna with which we cannot continue to exist.

When my family moved to Brisbane from Melbourne, The Gap stood out as a place to live because of its proximity to D'Aguilar National Park or, as it was then, Brisbane Forest Park.

A valuable recreation area in Mt Coot-tha Forest Reserve adjoins D'Aguilar National Park and provides a transition zone to cater for runners, walkers (many with dogs), mountain bikers and picnickers, reducing the demands on the national park for this essential need of the city's residents.

D'Aguilar National Park has a huge variety of land forms and ecosystems and its extent is often not appreciated even by those who know it well.

I really enjoy following up Enoggera Creek through some pockets of subtropical rainforest, fringed by dry eucalypt woodlands, with steep gullies, waterfalls and rocky outcrops. Entering this area epitomises my view of what a national park should be – a well-preserved area of natural environment that can be accessed only by those prepared to revert to walking and navigating in a basic manner. Bushwalking in this area gives me the wonderful feeling of being in a remote area far away from city life; yet it is really quite close to my home.

Boombana restoration site (above) and grass trees at Westridge (top of page) in D'Aguilar National Park, which adjoins Mt Coot-tha Forest Reserve in Brisbane. PHOTOS SUPPLIED

Some areas can be easily accessed by road, catering for the less adventurous or those who cannot walk long distances, such as Jollys Lookout, Boombana and Mt Glorious.

I recall visiting Bellbird Grove many times when my children were younger; they enjoyed watching and investigating birds, lizards, snakes and yabbies, as well as just running around on the grassy areas. I can only hope that these places remain intact for our grandchildren's' children.

I regularly ride within the park, following the fire tracks. I am sure it is this ability to enjoy the tranquillity of the bush that will help sustain national parks as the growth of population continues to press at the edges.

If people can't enjoy it or use it, for many it will have no recognisable value; therefore it is vital people can enter our national parks for recreation, without damaging the environment.

D'Aguilar National Park has attributes ranging from almost inaccessible rainforest to areas revegetated and recovering from logging, allowing for motorised recreation such as four-wheel drives and motorcycles at the northern end near Mt Mee. I have concerns that these latter activities are not sufficiently controlled to prevent substantial damage to the landscape.

D'Aguilar National Park provides for picnics, camping, birdwatching, bushwalking, scientific research, horseriding, trail running, swimming, canoeing, mountain biking, driving and biking, but for me, old-fashioned walking through the forest to enjoy the smells and sounds of the bush is unbeatable. May it ever be so.

SPOTLIGHT
RANGER OF THE MONTH

Insights into the diverse backgrounds and day-to-day activities of Queensland's park rangers

Jolene McLellan, QPWS

Jolene McLellan is a visitor management ranger in Queensland's southwest. Her decision to become a park ranger arose out of wanting to do something worthwhile with her life and a strong desire to protect nature.

PHOTOS SUPPLIED

How long have you worked in national parks?

For the past 20 years I have worked as a ranger based in one of Queensland's iconic national parks – Girraween. My job description includes helping to manage this very popular national park, maintaining services and facilities for more than 100,000 annual visitors, conducting fire management programs across 11,800 hectares of protected area, developing wildlife conservation programs, as well as working on various visitor management and educational projects across the southwest region.

Which parks have you worked in?

While most of my time has been at Girraween, these days I work on various visitor management projects throughout the southwest including Girraween, Carnarvon, Minerva Hills, Bunya Mountains, Main Range, Sundown and Crows Nest.

What has been your most memorable moment?

Nature is unpredictable and continually amazes me. Although I've had many memorable experiences in various parks, I will have to say my one and only close encounter with a common wombat in Girraween National Park takes the cake. Not many people get to see these elusive creatures in Queensland.

Can you describe your favourite national parks experience?

Nature soothes the soul. As soon as I enter any natural area, I can feel my worries subside. I do love a clear night sky too, so camping under the stars in one of our western Queensland national parks is magic.

What is the best part about working in a National Park?

My job is never boring! Where else do you get to participate in a controlled burn, check remote cameras for wombat activity, design an interpretive sign or brochure for an iconic park, conduct a television interview, talk to a group of students, or travel to beautiful national parks working on projects enhancing visitor experiences?

I know I'm lucky to have such a fascinating and satisfying job and I thank my lucky stars that I'm doing something worthwhile.

What is your top tip for visitors to parks for bushwalking?

Whether you venture alone, or with family or friends, use the opportunity of visiting a national park to recharge your batteries, connect with yourself or your loved ones and ensure you leave enough time to delight in the simple pleasures. Be sure to pack lots of water and healthy snacks.

What is your top tip for campers?

Leave technology at home and simply enjoy your nature escape. Keep in mind that venturing outdoors can be unpredictable, so do your research and be prepared. After all, you want your visit to be memorable for all the right reasons!

Oh, and pack the marshmallows!

NPAQ thanks Jolene for taking time to answer our questions and we appreciate the work all QPWS rangers undertake in protecting Queensland's national parks.

queenslandnationalparks.com.au | qld.gov.au/camping | facebook.com/qldnationalparks | @QldParks, #QldParks

WHAT'S ON

NPAQ activities

Day walk at Green Mountain

Saturday, April 1 in Lamington National Park – Albert River Circuit (22km) meeting 7.45am for 8am start at the Green Mountain Information Centre. **Grade:** Medium/hard. **Cost:** $5. **Leader:** Tony Parsons (ajpars@bigpond.net.au).

2017 Easter Camp at Yandilla

Thursday, April 13 to Tuesday, April 18 at Yandilla Camping and Farmstead, Mt Kilcoy. **Cost:** Adults $100.50 ($92.50 for the camp fee and $8 NPAQ Weekend Activities fee (itinerary Fri to Mon only). Under-14s free. **Registrations:** http://bit.ly/2017eastercamp

Vegetation management

Saturday, April 22, meeting at Jollys Lookout carpark in D'Aguilar National Park, Brisbane. **Grade:** Various. **Cost:** Free. **Leader:** Angus McElnea (gus_mcelnea@hotmail.com or 0429 854 446).

Birding on Sunshine Coast

Sunday, April 23 at Maroochy Bushland Botanic Gardens, Tanawha. **Grade:** Easy. **Cost:** $5. **Leader:** Ian Peacock (3359 0318, 0416 943 280 or ianpeacock@hotmail.com).

Social walk – explore Maiala

Wednesday, April 26 in the Maiala Section of D'Aguilar National Park, Brisbane. **Grade:** Easy. **Cost:** $5. **Leaders:** Len & Laurelle Lowry (3355 7288, 0428 335 572 or onthewallaby@live.com.au).

Birding in Brisbane

Sunday, May 21 at Oxley Creek Common, Rocklea. **Grade:** Easy. **Cost:** $5. **Leader:** Ian Peacock (0416 943 280, 3359 0318 or ianpeacock@hotmail.com).

Vale

Our sincere condolences to the families and friends of NPAQ life member Nola Fraser and members Stewart Parker and Colin Wregg.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE
FOR ACTIVITY REGISTRATIONS
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