

Art, science and activism: a living legacy

As a student of Justus Jørgensen, artist John Büsst lived at 'Montsalvat' in Eltham in the 1930s, helping create the distinctive buildings of the artists' colony from mud brick and salvaged materials. He brought these interests north with him in 1940, when he built and lived in a mud brick house on what is now the site of Bedarra Island Resort.

Queensland has a history of island hermit artists, but Büsst was no recluse. He loved good company. His extensive network of friends included biologist Dr Len Webb, with whom he shared a love of rainforests. Webb was developing the science of rainforest ecology and both men were deeply concerned by the thoughtless and wanton destruction of these richly diverse and valuable forests.

When Büsst and his wife Alison moved to the mainland around 1960, they continued their imaginative owner-builder approach, this time at Ninney Point on Bingil Bay, using bamboo for ceilings and architraves. The property, Ninney Rise, looks out over the bay and the Great Barrier Reef (GBR) – another of Büsst's growing concerns. In 1966, with ornithologist Mrs Billie Gill as secretary, Büsst started an Innisfail branch of the recently established WPSQ – of which Webb was vice-president.

In 1967, Büsst noticed an advertisement in his local paper for an application to mine limestone from Ellison Reef. He realised the danger this posed not just to Ellison Reef but to the entire GBR should it set a precedent for widespread commercial exploitation – including oil drilling. The Innisfail branch led by lodging an objection, followed by WPSQ's Brisbane-based council and other new organisations, including the Australian Conservation Foundation and the Queensland Littoral Society (now Australian Marine Conservation Society).

Ninney Rise became a staging post in what Judith Wright would call 'the coral battleground'. Büsst could, and did, talk to anyone, inspiring them through his boundless enthusiasm and tireless work. He was already a friend of then-Prime Minister Harold Holt, who had a holiday house nearby. He also talked and wrote to politicians, trade unionists, CEOs of airlines and car rental agencies, local boaties – anyone who could help gather and use scientific evidence to save the Reef.

The evidence was persuasive; the mining application was refused; a crucial precedent for not mining was established. Ellison Reef was reprieved. But, the GBR was far from safe. Already, oil drilling was being proposed. Büsst had walked the rainforest with his ecologist friend. He understood the importance of maintaining whole ecological systems and he campaigned passionately, creatively and intelligently for the protection of the entire reef.

The Great Barrier Reef was declared a Marine Park in 1975 and inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1981 – valuable tools for its ongoing protection that Büsst didn't live to see. While leading the battle for the Reef with such enormous zeal and foresight, he was also battling throat cancer and died in early 1971. Wright

wrote, as a tribute on his memorial, 'John Büsst, Artist and Lover of Beauty, who fought that man and nature might survive'.

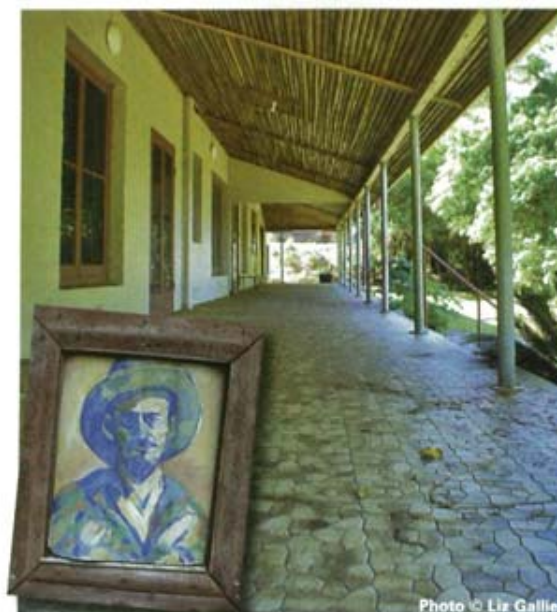
Ninney Rise was bought in 1979 by philanthropist Kate Eisig Tode. Recognising its importance as cassowary habitat, Tode transferred part of the land to the Queensland National Park estate. While she lived on the property, she organised plantings of cassowary food trees and then bequeathed that remaining land to Queensland National Parks and Wildlife (QNPW). When QNPW offered the inherited freehold property for sale, it triggered community outrage at the rebuff to its conservation heritage.

Withdrawn from that sale, the property and memorial have been entered in the Queensland Heritage Register. Queensland Heritage Council Chair David Eades said, 'The outlook from Ninney Rise

takes in the marine environment which is now recognised for the outstanding natural universal values that John Büsst fought to protect during the 1960s before these values had been widely recognised and appreciated.' The state government is in the assessment phase of considering eco-tourism developments, with an outcome expected in the new year.

Information for this article drawn from *The Coral Battleground* by Judith Wright, 1977 (dedicated to Büsst), WPSQ Historical Monograph 2 – *Heart and Mind: The Bulletin*, The Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation Inc, June 2010, montsalvat.com.au/site, bedarrabeachhouse.com.au, www.qldheritage.org.au and conversations with WPSQ patron Margaret Thorsborne.

Thanks also to Daryl Dickson and Liz Gallie for their assistance.



John Büsst made his imaginatively built home, Ninney Rise, a meeting place and centre for the campaign to save the Great Barrier Reef. **Inset:** John Büsst self-portrait, courtesy Margaret Thorsborne.

WPSQ branches represent community interests at local, state and national levels. WPSQ has an active role in the community consultation process on state-wide legislation, strategies and planning decisions. To join, visit the WPSQ website: www.wildlife.org.au