

The Tropical Rainforest of North Queen-



John Büsser self portrait courtesy Margaret Thorsborne

Address to the Rotary Club, Tully 2nd March, 1966, by John Büsser

The tropical rainforests of North Queensland are generally known as “scrub”. This is a most misleading term, and is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a tract of country overgrown with low stunted trees”.

It is obvious this in no way applies to the extreme rare and beautiful Rainforests of North Queensland which are unique and of very great scientific interest throughout the world. They are unique not only for the diversity of species, but for the fact that they contain eucalypts in association with rainforest.

This rare combination occurs nowhere else in the world, neither in the vast jungles of South America, nor the extensive rainforests in Borneo, Sumatra, Africa, and to the north of Australia.

During 1965 two teams of scientists, one led by Professor Godwin of Cambridge University, England and another led by Professor D’Aubreville of the University of Sorbonne, France paid a special visit to North Queensland to inspect the rainforests, and were most impressed.

They urged immediate steps to be taken to preserve what little is left of this unique Australian heritage. In November 1965, a team of scientists, sponsored by the CSIRO, Dr Jiro Kikkawa, Senior Lecturer in Zoology, and Mr Ian Straughan from the University of Queensland, carried out what was the first officially sponsored ecological survey in North Queensland and probably in Australia.

The object of the survey was to find and delineate certain areas of North Queensland to

reserve in perpetuity for scientific purposes that is research, only. In other words, to establish, in virgin, and as far as possible, untouched areas of rain forest, open air laboratories to investigate the medical and botanical potential of our rainforests. The report is a brilliant model for all future ecological surveys in Australia.

The alarming rate of destruction of rainforests calls for immediate public action. New sugar assignments and cattle fattening schemes are bulldozing the rainforest completely out of existence. In one particular Shire area alone, no less than 92,000 acres have, in the last two years, been totally destroyed forever. Rainforest, once bulldozed, is not self regenerating. So little is known of it's growth pattern, it is impossible to grow the vast majority of it's known trees in plantations. They can only be grown only in their natural state in shade.

The trees of the rainforest are symbiotic – kill one, the other may die. It takes possibly 5 – 7 different species to mature one Black Bean, Maple, or other variety. Scientific work is proceeding on the problems of re-afforestation, but, at the present rate of destruction, the answer may come too late for us ever to replace what we are so thoroughly destroying.

Recently it was announced that a synthetic compound, Tylocrebine, extracted after many years of work, from Tylophorn Crebrifolra, a plant discovered by Dr. Webb and Mr Tracey, is being investigated by the National Cancer Institute of America as a possible cure for Leukaemia (blood cancer), which disease is also a by product of atomic radiation.

The rainforests offer a potential gold-mine of possible medical drugs and a great deal of, as yet, necessarily unpublished scientific work that has been proceeding over the last twenty years. It is therefore essential that a halt must be called to the alarming rate of destruction of what was once thought contemptuously as "scrub" and now known to be rare, unique in the world rainforests, and essential for the purposes of medical research.

From the point of view of timber production, there a literally hundreds of varieties, as yet, unmarketed. For example the once despised black and sally wattle, formerly used only for firewood, are now commanding top prices in Sydney and Melbourne as veneers. The potential of the rainforest, both medically and commercially is enormous, yet, before we have even begun to master the problem of re-afforestation, the bulldozers are, every day, destroying forever thousands of acres.

The remaining areas of this valuable heritage is already small enough, extending only from Ingham to Cooktown, approximately 200 miles long by 30 miles wide, and at that, only in isolated pockets in heavy rain fall area. It is interesting to remember that possible areas of the Great Kalahari Desert in Africa were once rainforests, before Man turned his attention to them. The object of scientific research is not to preserve the rainforests from man, but to preserve it *for* Man.

From the point of view of Tourism, which is rapidly becoming one of Queensland's most important industries, the beauty of the North Queensland Rainforests distinguish this area from every other part of Australia. Their lush, all the round, greenery is a source of both interstate and overseas amazed delight – nothing like it exists anywhere else in Australia. To quote Dr. L. J. Webb – "On one single acre of North Queensland Tropical Rain Forest, there are more than 100 different species of trees, yet in one acre of eucalypts in Western Australia, there are less than a handful of species".

The need for the preservation of what little is left of our tropical rainforest is therefore both urgent and vital. In the words of the late President Kennedy, "Our economic standard of living arises, but our environmental standard of living – our access to nature and our respect for it deteriorates. The long run effect will be, not only to degrade the quality of national life, but to weaken the foundation of national power".

Rotarian C. Dickinson, in thanking the speaker for his most interesting and informative address, remarked that few people were aware of the fact that, in the rainforests, there were 241 known species of timber and probably twice as many, as yet, unknown.