The temperature in Melbourne might have only reached a chilly 18°C on Thursday 19 May, but there was a warm feeling in the air for a very special group of far north Queensland’s Eastern Kuku-Yalanji people. In a first for the Rainforest CRC, staff, researchers and community members of Mossman and Wujal Wujal descended upon Melbourne to take part in the Cooperative Research Centres Association (CRCA) Awards for Excellence in Innovation for 2005.

Following a very successful launch in Cairns in December 2004, the spectacular hard cover Yalanji Waranga Kaban: Yalanji People of the Rainforest Fire Management Book has received rave reviews and has now been honoured with a prestigious national award, one of only four presented each year. The Award for Excellence and Innovation recognises the outstanding contribution the book has made to education, training and public outreach.

For the Yalanji people, the award caps almost ten years of collaborative fire research with the Rainforest CRC. The book explores traditional natural resource management practices used by Yalanji Traditional Owners from the Daintree.
rainforest, part of Queensland’s Wet Tropics World Heritage Area and one of Australia’s ‘biodiversity hotspots’. Fire management in the Wet Tropics is a current resource management issue of growing relevance. In sharing their knowledge of fire management, Yalanji people can provide invaluable insight into traditional approaches and assist sustainable rainforest management.

The book is written by Traditional Owners – it transfers oral history into written words, both in English and, for the first time, in Yalanji language. The passing on of intimate traditional knowledge in natural resource management and culture will make a significant contribution to future generations.

A Plan Unfolds...

Earlier this year, the Rainforest CRC identified a unique opportunity to bring national attention to not only the Yalanji Fire Management Book but also the extensive research and knowledge gained through collaborative work involving Yalanji Traditional Owners and Dr Rosemary Hill of the Australian Conservation Foundation. Also Leader of the Rainforest CRC’s Project 1.5, Rosemary has helped to develop policies, protocols and practical mechanisms for recognising Aboriginal peoples’ values, rights and responsibilities associated with rainforest environments. The Yalanji Fire Management Book was nominated for the Award for Excellence in Innovation in February.

During the filming of the three minute Award video, Birgit Kuehn snapped this photo of a tourist group at Bloomfield Falls. Kuku-Yalanji Dreamtime Walks include the falls in their tour trail.

Dr Rosemary Hill, left, discusses issues relating to Yalanji Country with Traditional Owners. Many regular meetings such as this were held during the production of the Yalanji Fire Management Book (Image: Steven Nowakowski).

Chloe Lucas (left) of Imaginocean Productions with Dr Rosemary Hill during the filming of the three minute video for presentation at the Awards Night (Image: Birgit Kuehn).

Filming of the three minute video was conducted at some of far north Queensland’s most precious places, including Bloomfield Falls, near Wujal Wujal Community, shown here (Image: Steven Nowakowski).

Film producer, Chloe Lucas, with project photographer Steven Nowakowski (Image: Birgit Kuehn).
Success!

By March, the Rainforest CRC had confidentially received the news it had been waiting for – the Yalanji Fire Management Book was a winner of an Award. The next step involved production of a three minute video for presentation at the Award Night in Melbourne, carried out by Chloe Lucas of Imaginoccean Productions, based in Townsville. Chloe had previously undertaken filming with Girringun Aboriginal Corporation and Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service in Cardwell.

With support from the Australian Conservation Foundation and Rainforest CRC, Traditional Owners, researchers and staff flew to Melbourne in May to accept the Award. On behalf of the Yalanji Traditional Owners, Francis Walker said, “It’s not just a book for us, it’s cultural survival, it will keep our language, culture and Law alive.” Senior Traditional Owner, Edward Barney, added, “This book will help government land managers understand our way of running fire management on our country from our Law and culture”.

The Rainforest CRC would like to extend particular thanks to, and congratulate:

- Yalanji Traditional Owners, for sharing their unique knowledge of country and fire;
- Dr Rosemary Hill, for many years’ hard work and determination in seeing the project through to fruition;
- Steven Nowakowski, who took such beautiful photographs of the Yalanji people, effectively documenting their way of life for future Yalanji, Australian and international generations;
- Chloe Lucas, who ensured the professional production of the three minute Award video at short notice; and
- Birgit Kuehn, who coordinated the successful nomination of the Yalanji Fire Management Book for the 2005 Awards for Excellence in Innovation.

Adelaide Baird with the 2005 Award for Excellence in Innovation (Image: Ric Magazowski, Shot on Sight Photographics).