



down among the daintree

COLOUR ORIGINAL

Nestled within the Wet Tropics World Heritage region is 120,000ha of protected rainforest known as the Greater Daintree.

The single most biodiverse area in Australia, the rainforest, has been studied by scientists, scrutinised by tourists, settled around its fringes and shrouded in controversy.

But despite its notoriety within Australia and overseas, the Daintree Rainforest still harbours surprises for even the most jaded rainforest observer.

HEIDI GIBSON lists eight snippets of little known information from people and groups in the region.

Although thousands travel the thickly forested road to Daintree Village each year, few realise they're passing the site of the old Daintree Mission along the way.

Janice Walker, daughter of traditional owner and elder of the Kuku Yalanji people, Wilma Walker, remembers growing up at the mission as a small child.

"All the families had their own homes on the site," she recalls. "There was a missionary's house, a church and a dormitory for the girls. There was no school house.

"The men worked in a big shed and out in the orchard where they grew bananas and other fruit. The boys left school at an early age to go to work. Most of the girls were expected to become housekeepers.

"I went into the dormitory when I was four years old and lived there until I was about eight or nine. That's when the mission closed and everyone had to leave, around the early 1960s."

While most people know to use warm depilatory wax to remove the painful needles of a rainforest stinging tree, a nurse from Cow Bay in the Daintree Rainforest says the locals have another remedy: "If you're out in the bush and can't handle the pain, apply white sap from the little branches or fruit of a cassowary plum tree to the area stung.

"Let it dry and then peel it off like you would a regular wax treatment to lift out the needles.

"Banana sap works too.

"Sap from both trees cut off the air, reducing the sting and can be peeled off when dry," she said.



Many people know the Daintree Rainforest is arguably the oldest continually surviving rainforest on earth, 140 million years being one estimate.

But Colyn Huber, Daintree rainforest guide and photographer, puts that into a perspective by talking about plant life.

“Just look at the King Fern species,” he says.

“It’s about 300 million years old. That predates the dinosaurs by 50 million years.

The dinosaurs came and the dinosaurs went but the King Fern survived.

We see it today in the Daintree just as the dinosaurs did when they walked the earth.”

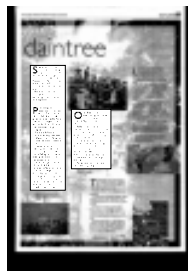


Today we see the Daintree just as the dinosaurs did.



The Daintree's King Fern species is around 300 million years old. Photo courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority.





Some might find the sight of a butterscotch lolly sliding along the ground unusual but rainforests are full of surprises.

According to the Wet Tropics Management Authority: "The butterscotch snail is a flat, yellow litter snail which looks like a butterscotch".

But despite its sweet name, it's a bit of cannibal, eating other snails and preying on soft invertebrates often larger than itself."

Professor Nigel Stork from James Cook University and director of the Australian Canopy Crane says life on the ground in the Daintree Rainforest is pretty static compared to the action in the treetops: "People are blown away when they go up in the canopy.

"It's where the biosphere, the biology of the living earth, meets the atmosphere and in that interaction many important processes take place.

"You see the insect and bird life interacting and learn more about the diversity of rainforest life."

Some findings suggest there are

more mammals using the canopy than realised before.

"Some rodents particularly are feeding there at night. They may also be nesting but we don't know for sure yet. A canopy study in the Amazon Rainforest found that one mammal previously thought to be the rarest was actually the most common. It had been hidden in the canopy. You really get to see life on earth in a rainforest canopy."

On a 300 acre property near Daintree Village the Osborne family continue a tradition of farming begun by Frank Osborne in 1882.

Third generation cattle farmer, Ian Osborne, 70, recalls the drovers driving mobs of Daintree and Peninsula cattle up the main street of Mossman at night. "They'd go through about three or four o'clock in the morning," says Ian. "I think the last mob was taken through Mossman by drovers in the mid 1950s.

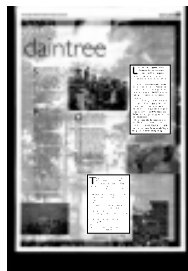
"They'd drive mobs of 20 to hundreds at a time. Some of the smaller mobs were slaughtered in Mossman but the rest were driven up the range to Mareeba.

"We use trucks for transport now. That's been a big change."



The Daintree's canopy is alive with birds, insects and even mammals. Photo courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority.





The generally unseen but hardworking volunteers of Daintree Wildlife Rescue care for between 2000 and 3000 injured animals each year.

"It can be difficult," says president Alex Rietmeyer.

"We always get something different. Many animals belong to little understood, rare or endangered species that come into care infrequently.

"We need a vast range of knowledge. These animals are incredibly sensitive to being in a human environment too. Just the stress of being handled and cared for can be fatal."

The group has cared for such animals as ospreys, goannas, paddy melons, tube nose bats, even a baby cassowary: "If someone finds an injured animal, we'd like them to call us for help on 4098 9079".

Lyn Carr of the Daintree Tourist Information Service says when it comes to the Pacific Highway, Daintree Village is the end of the line: "It's the jewel at the end of the road," she says.

"The post office holds a liquor license too, there can't be many of those around."

Lyn says one of the challenges that not many visitors realise is the difficulties of running a tour operation in a rainforest environment.

"There's flooding in the wet season, we were cut off twice this last summer; the constant mould, rot and little creatures of the rainforest to manage; the challenge of promoting airflow inside buildings during the humidity; and generating electricity for use over the river."

But Lyn adds that the pluses outweigh the difficulties. "You wouldn't live or work here if you didn't have a love for the rainforest. It's beautiful and wonderful just being surrounded and living among it."



Mobs of Daintree cattle were driven to Mossman and Mareeba.

The Pacific Highway officially ends at Daintree Village, where you can buy a stamp and a six-pack at the local post office.



A baby cassowary. Photo courtesy of the Wet Tropics Management Authority.