

## DAINTREE DELUSIONS

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Although I have a background in science I am not speaking here solely as a scientist. The matter at hand involves much broader issues and I am speaking as a concerned resident, a resident not just of the Daintree but of Australia. Despite a widespread belief that the Daintree is threatened with serious environmental degradation we would do well to keep in mind an important lesson from history. Most people most of the time are wrong. Much of what is accepted as unquestionable truth at any given time is later looked upon as ignorant nonsense or even wilful evil. A few centuries back we were burning people at the stake for witchcraft. A little over a century ago we were still keeping and breeding other human beings as an form of domestic animal. In our own century we have seen genocide on an unimaginable scale for the sake of various righteous political ideologies. Minor irrationalities are too numerous to mention. All that is past. Thank god, we live in more enlightened times, has always been the thinking while blindly engaging in the current irrationalities.

Now let's consider the Daintree. Before we enter into specifics it may be best to back off a bit and get a general perspective. The population of Australia today is about that of the United States in 1850. If we moved the entire population of the country into Cape York from the Daintree River north we would have a density similar to that of Florida where over half the state still remains as undeveloped forests and wetlands. Of the thousands of species of life in our rainforests, the total number believed to have been exterminated due to man is .....zero.

Our area of tropical rainforest totals about 7500 km<sup>2</sup> almost all of which is government owned and protected as a World Heritage. The area generally referred to as the Daintree Wilderness comprises the rainforested area between the Daintree and Bloomfield rivers, about 40 km in N-S extent and extending inland from the coast for about 30 km. Much has been made of this being the only significant remaining area of lowland rainforest.

Lowland is a relative term not clearly defined. To the uninformed and those opposing occupation and usage of the freehold land in the area, lowland has been equated with the more or less level area along the coast. This is roughly coincident to the freehold land. To a biologist, and more importantly to the forest itself, lowland is the community of similar plants and animals throughout most of the entire area below about 300 m elevation. Only a few isolated peaks reach heights sufficient to impose changes in the makeup of the biological community due to altitude.

The freehold land in the area consists of a narrow belt adjacent to the road from the Daintree R. to just past Cape Tribulation, about halfway to the Bloomfield R. It amounts to about 2.5 % of the region and of this something less than half is actually rainforest, the remainder having been cleared in earlier decades. About 1/3 of the available blocks are now occupied. Owners of forested blocks have in most cases, by free choice, retained as much forest as possible clearing only where necessary for road access and house sites most of which are located out of sight from the road. The most realistic perspective of all this comes from an aerial view. From the sky only occasional signs of human habitation may be seen adjacent to a barely visible thread of road beyond which a vast area of uninhabited wilderness stretches as far as the eye can see. If the

current pattern of development continues until all of the remaining freehold land is occupied it is clear there will be little change in either the appearance or the actuality of the area and the amount of rainforest thus affected will in the end total some small fraction of 1%.

While virtually everyone agrees that the Daintree is beautiful and should be preserved, when it comes to specific problems and possible solutions opinions vary widely. Among local residents the majority, for the most part gainfully employed, can't quite understand what all the fuss is about. They simply want to get on with their lives and be free to earn a living without undue government impositions over what often seems to be phoney issues. A vocal minority, mostly un- or part time employed and living on the margins, are opposed to roads, power lines, tourism and any further development or productive activity. They would like to prevent others from moving in and favour voluntary or mandatory buy-back of freehold land. So long as it isn't theirs.

Further afield the Daintree has become an icon for environmental activists. In addition to those who are genuinely concerned with the many and real environmental problems we face, the environment has also become a rallying point for extremists. To some it fills a spiritual vacuum, a sort of late twentieth century form of nature worship embraced with all the wild eyed fervour of a true believer. In their eyes if you fail to totally agree you are not simply wrong, you are wilfully evil. Then we have the legions of the righteous sniping at the establishment. In past decades they would have been social activists but with the demise of socialism as a trendy philosophy their avowed concern has switched from their fellow man to the birds and bees. Their real agenda however, remains the same, claiming the moral high ground and if possible punishing the successful. Behind their facade of moral outrage lurk the daemons of self righteousness. These are the people who in the past have brought us witch burnings and pogroms. Fortunately, we have made some progress in enchaining such demons but one has only to attend a few public meetings on these matters to see them straining at their bonds in impotent fury to know they are still with us.

Beyond the residents and activists lies the general public, viewing the matter through the media. Unfortunately the lens of the media has an inbuilt distortion. Its existence depends upon capturing our attention amid a chorus of competing claimants. Carefully presented facts and reasoned argument won't do it nor will a report that there is no problem. Something more dramatic is required. When an issue of public interest arises it is the extremes that are reported. A handful of protesters no matter how ill informed receives the full attention of the media creating the appearance of major public concern. Conflict, controversy and calamity are the media's mainstay. Claims of imminent disaster, no matter how unfounded always get reported. Facts and reasoning are never aired and qualifications seldom questioned. In fact if the source of a dramatic opinion lacks any real qualifications the media bestows the honorary title of "expert" to lend impact and credibility. When events take their course and predicted disasters don't take place this is non-news and never reported.

Consider the Daintree in this respect. Over the years we have been presented with a litany of claims regarding environmental problems in the area. When the Cape Tribulation to Bloomfield road extension was begun we were told that breaking the forest canopy would cause the forest to dry out and die back being replaced by invading weed species. This process would spread like cancer creating untold destruction. That this

had not occurred with the already existing road nor with any other roads in the region was ignored, hypothetical disaster being preferred to less dramatic reality. It was also claimed that this was the only place in the world where coral reefs and rainforest meet. Erosion and siltation from the roadwork's would destroy the adjacent reefs. Either the "experts" quoted were ignorant of the existence of thousands of kilometres of reef fringed rainforest shores throughout the SW Pacific, Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and elsewhere or they were lying. No matter, their false claims received widespread public credibility via the media. As for erosion and siltation, natural rates in hilly rainforest terrain is high, there being little actual ground cover beneath the canopy. Although the roadwork undoubtedly resulted in some temporary increase in siltation whatever there was was immeasurable in follow up monitoring using sediment traps above and below the road. The natural level from undisturbed rainforest was high enough to mask any contribution from the roadworks.

As for the reefs, there are clear water coral communities growing in oceanic conditions and susceptible to siltation and there are others comprised of silt resistant species which grow in turbid lagoons. Our nearshore marine environment is blanketed in meters of silt accumulated over thousands of years. During windy weather wave action stirs up this silt and the coastal water becomes extremely turbid. Only corals which can tolerate such conditions grow there. Again the disaster mongers ignored the existence of perfectly healthy reefs off the previously existing road. Subsequent ongoing monitoring of the shore reefs off the Cape Tribulation - Bloomfield coast has revealed no detectable degradation subsequent to the road extension either. This of course is not worthy of media attention. Ironically enough, a few years ago a late wet season and extended periods of calm weather from November well into February resulted in unusually clear coastal water conditions. Some coastal corals were unable to tolerate such strong sunlight. There were widespread incidents of coral bleaching and even death up and down the coast. Rather than being killed by silt they died because of a lack of it.

Currently we are being told that certain rare plants exist only in the Cow Bay area and that they are threatened with extinction by development. This is almost certainly untrue on both counts. The species involved have only recently been discovered. Most species are naturally known at first only from where they are discovered. Subsequently, with few exceptions, they are found elsewhere. Those involved here are members of ancient groups that have survived for over 100 million years. That they have survived for so long with such specific ecological requirements as to be unable to exist outside of Cow Bay despite the absence of any natural barriers to their spread elsewhere does not make biological sense.

Recently a CSIRO botanist visited our property which is on the Daintree River at Humbug Reach some 10 km from Cow Bay on the other side of the Alexandra Range. In a cursory look around he saw *Ideospermum* and several other primitive plants supposedly restricted to the Cow Bay - Noah's Creek area. He also saw a tree by our front gate that is probably an undescribed species. At the moment it is known from the one specimen but it doesn't require a PhD in botany to expect that there are more elsewhere.

The fact is that only a tiny portion of the Daintree has even received a cursory look botanically speaking. In the absence of a reasonably extensive survey, to assume

that certain newly discovered species only occur where by chance they have been discovered is more a demonstration of biological ignorance than scientifically based probability. In the meantime a simple protection order for the few specimens on private land seems far more sensible than elaborate and expensive management and buyback plans based largely upon ignorance.

A few months ago the report on a CSIRO conducted cassowary survey was released. The study areas involved portions of the Cow Bay and Forest Creek Road areas. The survey found an estimated population in the study areas of some 54 birds. It indicated this was somewhat higher than expected and made no suggestion that the population was in decline. Suddenly, however, the cassowary entered the activist consciousness. At a public meeting in Cow Bay at that time it was suggested by some of them to adopt the cassowary as an emblem of the fight to save the Daintree. Now we are hearing that the cassowary is an endangered species with the Daintree as one of its last strongholds. It is claimed to be a lowland species and as such the 54 birds in the study areas are the total population of the entire region. It is said to be under threat from development, tourism, domestic dogs and even power lines, though the rationale for the last boggles even the most fevered imagination.

The reality is somewhat different. The cassowary is not and has never been on the list of endangered species. It occurs from just north of Townsville to well onto Cape York in both montane and coastal rain forest. Its population in Australia would be in the thousands and the same species occurs throughout New Guinea and various surrounding islands. As the study area represents only a small fraction of suitable cassowary habitat in the Daintree the total population for the area must surely be at the least many hundreds. As for dogs, tourists and other threats the cassowary has coexisted with men and dogs actively hunting them for thousands of years. With its habitat now secured through the World Heritage listing of our rainforests, with nearly a million acres into most of which few humans even go occasionally and no longer being hunted, it is probably less threatened than at any time in recent millennia.

Whenever rainforest is mentioned the words delicate and fragile usually accompany it. The imagery is that of a delicately balanced house of cards with every element playing a crucial role in the whole and the entire structure susceptible to collapse with the slightest nudge we might give it. This conceptual model is worse than just wrong. It is exactly the opposite of reality. In recent years the study of complexity itself has emerged as a distinct field of scientific inquiry. Complex systems in nature do not exist as intricate elaboration's of simple systems in which every element plays a unique and vital role. In such a case the multiplicity of possibilities for failure makes the system too delicate and fragile to even exist in the real world. Complexity takes the form of interchangeable elements fulfilling a limited range of functions which may be assembled into elaborate arrays. Such systems have a great deal of redundancy and flexibility.

The thousands of species in rainforests play a limited number of vital roles. Each role has a number of attendants each with its own requirements and capabilities. If conditions are not right for one there is another to take its place. It is not important who does the job, just that it gets done. The species composition of rainforest thus varies greatly from place to place and time to time. Such communities are extremely flexible and adaptable enabling them to survive intact for tens of millions of years. They are

anything but delicate and fragile. They are among the toughest and most robust of natural ecosystems.

In all of our misplaced concern for the imaginary problems regarding our rainforests we are failing to recognise its greatest threat, the imbalances we are developing in our own ecology. These threaten not only the well being of rainforest but of all life on the planet, most especially our own. Our exploding population, consumption of resources, land degradation and pollution are immanent ecological problems on an unprecedented scale. Locking up more and more of our natural environment to save it only puts more pressure on available resources exacerbating the imbalance. What we do not get from one area we must make up for by increased activity in another. What we must do is utilise all of our resources but only within their ability to sustain our use.

Like it or not we live in a highly competitive world economy and we must earn our place. Unspoiled natural environment is becoming a scarce and valuable commodity in our world. Our greatest tourist attraction is our natural environment. Of all our other major sources of national income, agriculture, mining, livestock, manufacturing, none has less impact on the natural environment and no other yields as much return. The Daintree has already become an important element in our national tourism enterprise. To restrict any further development of the area would be incredibly stupid especially when intelligent development of the right kind could greatly increase the earning from tourism with minimal real impact on the environment. The naive idea that our visitors will be satisfied with crowded hurried day trips in which they spend six hours riding to briefly visit a few unremarkable roadside attractions reflects sensibilities somewhat less sophisticated than those being judged.

Beyond the economics of the situation lies another matter. As a culture we seem all too willing to impose controls and restrictions on others if we perceive a benefit to ourselves. True democracy involves more than simply imposing the will of the majority. It also involves the protection of certain basic rights of the individual regardless of the majority. Whenever we restrict the rights of others we lay the ground for the same to be done to us. Our freedom to live our own life as we choose is a rare privilege born of millennia of struggle. To degrade this right for petty selfishness is inexcusable.

Our leaders could also do well to start leading instead of following public opinion generated by media airing of the views of an ignorant and radical minority. Good rulers seek the company of scholars. Poor scholars seek the company of rulers. We need to actively seek wisdom in our decision making instead of simply acting on received information and opinion polls. A consensus of ignorance does not equal wisdom.

The Daintree is a non-problem detracting from the many and real problems we face as a nation. There are however, some real and positive steps we could take for the area. First and foremost is a change in management philosophy from a reactionist prohibitionist approach to a positivist proactive one. The small amount of freehold land in the area should be retained, and development along current lines encouraged. There is no reason why we cannot live harmoniously with our rainforest. In fact we are already doing so and limited development is essential to any significant realisation of the area's economic potential.

Mains power should be put through in the Forest Creek, Cape Kimberley and Cow Bay areas. This will improve the quality of development and avoid the idiocy of

running inefficient, noisy, air polluting diesel generators to save the environment. Prohibitively expensive and unworkable schemes for renewable energy and underground or aerial bundled cables should be abandoned. Ordinary high tension lines can be installed with minimal impact or visibility simply by using concrete poles high enough to be above the forest canopy thus requiring no clearing. To placate those of selective sensitivity who may be offended by their neighbours power line but not their own houses, cars and roads; the lines can easily be sited where they would be for the most part not visible. The pain of knowing the neighbours have power would, one would hope, be mitigated by not having to listen to their generator, but maybe not. Selective sensibility is a funny thing . We can only do so much. Life's a bitch. Then you die. In the meantime some things one just has to put up with.

The Douglas Shire Council could begin to put our rate money where their mouth is and put something back into the area instead of treating it as a cash cow to be milked for use elsewhere. They might also consider creating a real environmental incentive in the form of a rebate for the forested portion of private land. For those who may not be aware the council has created an extortionate and discriminatory rate category for residential land in the Daintree. This category of land has the least impact and makes the least demand for council services. Two thirds of it is in fact unoccupied making zero demand on the council.

Daintree residential land currently pays over twice the total rates of the entire cane industry in the shire. My own forested block pays nearly as much in rates as the marina at Port Douglas with its hundred or so boats and cars. Unlike the marina however, my council services consist *in toto* of a poorly maintained dirt track. Until about a year ago our garbage service was effected by taking our tins and bottles to the bins at the ferry crossing. The council however upon discovering this use by residents north of the river removed the bins.

If I were to put a bulldozer through my property and run a few cows on my land my rates would be reduced to about 20 % of their current level. Such is the Douglas Shire Council's real idea of equity and environmental management. Their stated concerns and development plan seem little more than an attempt to as far as possible hold back development and with it demand for services while continuing to milk the cow.

The Federal and State governments could assist in two important ways. Instead of squandering millions on an unjustified and counterproductive buy back scheme redirect the money into a comprehensive environmental audit and provide some badly needed basic infrastructure. The audit might be co-ordinated by the Wet Tropics Authority and involve various government agencies such as CSIRO, universities, private consultants, and even volunteer organisations such as Earthwatch, depending upon the expertise and needs of various aspects of the survey. Such a knowledge base is essential to any effective management. The present anecdotal, *ad hoc* approach is worse than useless.

The other major need is a loop road. This could go inland from Cape Tribulation around Mt. Thornton and thence south to the CREB track into the upper Daintree. Constructed to maximise scenic and environmental values and provided with picnic areas and walking tracks it would greatly enhance the Daintree experience for visitors while simultaneously increasing capacity by several times over with even less crowding than at present. At the same time development of the existing freehold land to provide

accommodation, meals, guides and other services should be facilitated. At its completion the total area of forest actually affected would be minuscule and the economic gain immense. In the end almost all of the area would remain in appearance and actuality much as is now, untouched pristine rainforest seldom even visited by humans. It is difficult to imagine anything we might do elsewhere which might yield so much with so little real adverse environmental impact.

At the beginning of this century Australia had the highest standard of living in the world. Today while our overall quality of life is certainly close to the top our position in economic terms has slipped to something like 26th place. Our economic difficulties are in turn beginning to erode our quality of life. With our wealth of resources, small population and general lack of entrenched social problems we should be first in all respects. All that stands in the way is ourselves. We can't escape our own ecology and will only have what we produce. We can't save our environment by locking it up. Poverty has scant concern for that. In the end our leaders must lead, stop pandering to vested interests, media propagated extremism and public misinformation. We need rational, well informed, balanced decisions, not political correctness. Our national well being depends on it.