



DAINTREE DELIGHTS

Northern Queensland is the only place where two UNESCO World Heritage sites co-exist alongside one another – Daintree National Park and the Great Barrier Reef

Kathryn Curzon finds hope when she meets the locals working to restore the ancient rainforest of far north Queensland. Photos by **Nicholas Curzon**.

Walking in the Daintree Rainforest, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd stepped back in time to millions of years ago. This lush green forest is a tangle of old trees and vines, with bromeliads nestled in the crooks of old branches. Azure blue butterflies fly overhead, adding to the mystique of this special Australian destination.

The Daintree Rainforest covers about 1200km² of hilly terrain that makes up the northeast coast of Queensland. Stretching down to the edge of the ocean in places and fringing remote white-sand beaches, this impressive rainforest is part of the UNESCO-listed Wet Tropics of Queensland and part of the largest continuous area of tropical rainforest in Australia.

The Wet Tropics Rainforest is also the oldest continually surviving tropical rainforest in the world, thought to be about 10 million years older than the famous Amazon Rainforest. Walking through this ancient landscape, my



Daintree is home to 3.5% of the world's mangroves that help protect the Great Barrier Reef from harmful sediment run-off

aboriginal guide is quick to point out the Daintree may even have re-seeded the Amazon after the most recent ice age.

Despite covering just 1% of the landmass of Australia, the Daintree Rainforest contains a mind-boggling array of species, including nearly a third of the frog, reptile, and marsupial species of Australia. The rainforest also hosts 90% of Australia's bat and butterfly species, more than 12,000 species of insect, and the increasingly rare cassowary. It doesn't take long to also discover the huge saltwater crocodiles lounging bankside at the Daintree river and mangroves.

This exceptionally old rainforest provides a wealth of ecosystem and human services. As well as being important in mitigating the impacts of climate change and maintaining the biodiversity of Australia, the rainforest provides modern pharmaceutical products and has a rich cultural heritage.

Aboriginal guides, descended from the original inhabitants of the rainforest, undertake smoke ceremonies with visiting tourist groups at Daintree's Mossman Gorge, blessing their safe passage and giving thanks to the rainforest.

The gorge and surrounding rainforest, alive with the sound of rushing water and excitable tour groups, was originally home to the aboriginal people of the Kuku Yalanji tribe, who lived there for about 60,000 years. The tribe has a respectful relationship with the rainforest and successfully made their homes there for many years, with the rainforest providing more than adequate food, medicines, and spiritual support.

Yet despite this rainforest's obvious ecosystem and cultural significance, the Daintree has a troubled and exploitative past that threatens it today.

Driving along the highway towards Daintree's

mangroves, you pass numerous sugar cane fields and old farmland, both of which have pushed back the rainforest from the beaches, removing an important wildlife corridor for species that once foraged at the shoreline.

While it was the Gold Rush that originally bought people to Queensland, sugar cane and forestry industries quickly followed, as did beef and dairy cattle ranches. Great swathes of rainforest-covered land were cleared to support those industries.

So much so that more than two-thirds of the rainforest has been destroyed in the last 150 years.

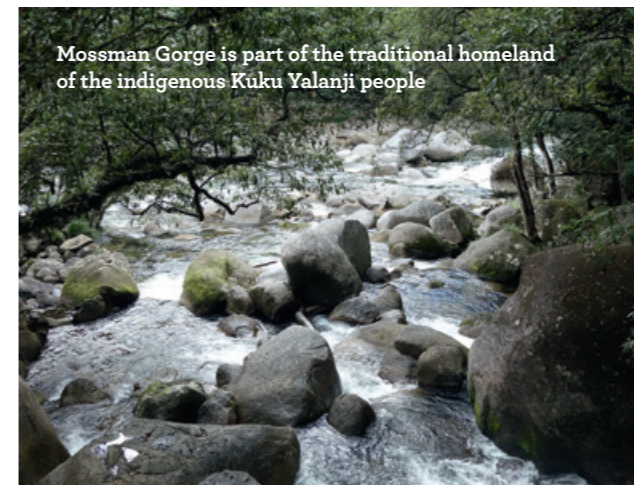
Parts of the old logging route from Daintree are still visible among the mangroves today. Being too big for Australian timber mills, the trees were sent to the UK for processing, where they could handle huge red cedars up to 10m wide across the base.

As a UNESCO World Heritage Area, you would assume the rainforest is now fully protected, but only part of the Daintree falls within the World Heritage boundary. Other areas are still at threat from deforestation and are impacted by sugar cane land use and associated run-off.

Another threat to the rainforest today, in stark similarity to New Zealand, are introduced pests, most notably omnivorous feral pigs with a huge appetite for Daintree's species.



Local guides come from tribes whose ancestors lived in the rainforest and were sustained by Daintree's many natural resources



Mossman Gorge is part of the traditional homeland of the indigenous Kuku Yalanji people



Saltwater crocodiles are protected and eat feral pigs found along the mangrove banks

All is not lost though. Conservation rangers are hard at work, with replanting programmes under way throughout the rainforest, where areas of cleared land are slowly being reclaimed as rainforest. The focus on conservation education is also evident, with self-guided walks and educational boards dotted along the walkways at Mossman Gorge.

This ever-popular tourist attraction is making the most of passing minds to educate and inspire positive change. Tour guides tell their groups what they can do at home to minimise their carbon footprint, impressing on them that their actions have a far-reaching impact on ecosystems such as at Daintree.

Walking by one enthusiastic tour guide, I ask if he has hope. He raises his fist and smiles. "Always man! One day at a time, we can do this!"

While pest control is being tackled, it was clear that more needs to be done to eradicate introduced predators and protect Daintree's vulnerable species. As in New Zealand, this is a difficult issue to solve, but at least the crocodiles are doing some of the work.

In a recent mangrove flood, which saw the water level rise a staggering 9m, the feral pig population on one of the mangrove islands was wiped out by the rising waters and hungry crocodiles.

Taking one last walk under the rainforest canopy, I am reminded there is always hope, sometimes quite literally. Hiding there was an unassuming palm-like plant with large glossy leaves. It happened to be an example of one of the earliest plants known to man – Hope's cycad.

Only found in Queensland, this species first appeared about 180 million years ago and is still surviving today, its fruit eaten by cassowaries. Staring at what looked to be a relatively small example, I learned from our guide it was already more than 600 years old.

This rainforest is every bit as ancient as it seems. Having survived for millions of years, it may yet survive the impacts of modern times.

GETTING THERE:

To find out more about Daintree, including where to stay, see www.destinationdaintree.com. For more about rainforest conservation in the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area, go to www.wettropics.gov.au.