

Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area – remnants of our primeval past

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The Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area (Gondwana Rainforests) is a serial cross-jurisdictional property comprising the major remaining areas of rainforest in southeast Queensland and northeast New South Wales. It is located largely on the Great Dividing Range and eastern escarpment, extending from Main Range National Park in southeast Queensland to Barrington Tops National Park in northeast New South Wales.

The property comprises 41 reserves (or parts thereof) with a combined area of some 366, 500 hectares. Almost all of the reserves are within the protected area estate, primarily managed by the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and the New South Wales National Parks and Wildlife Service.

The Gondwana Rainforests was inscribed on the World Heritage list as it contains natural heritage of outstanding universal value representing outstanding examples of major stages of the Earth's evolutionary history, ongoing geological and biological processes, and exceptional biological diversity. A wide range of plant and animal lineages and communities with ancient origins in Gondwana survive in this collection of reserves. The Gondwana Rainforests also provides the primary habitat for many threatened species of plants and animals which find sanctuary in the rugged high rainfall ranges and deep valleys.

The property was first inscribed in 1986 when sixteen rainforest reserves in New South Wales were listed as the Australian East Coast Subtropical and Temperate Rainforest Parks World Heritage Area. More key areas in Queensland and New South Wales were added in 1994 under the name of the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia World Heritage Area. The name Gondwana Rainforests of Australia was adopted in 2007.

The Statement of Outstanding Universal Value provides further summary information (DSEWPaC, 2012).

Snapshot of achievement

Establishing the arrangements for cooperative management for this serial cross-jurisdictional property has been a significant achievement. In 1993, a Coordinating Committee comprised of on-ground



Waterfall in the New England Group of the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia. Photo © Colin Totterdell, Commonwealth of Australia



Rainforest Glade Picnic Area in Dorrigo National Park, NSW. Photo © OEH

managers from the respective state agencies and the Australian Government was established to facilitate the cooperative management of the property at an operational level.

In 2000 a *Strategic Overview for Management for the Central Eastern Rainforest Reserves of Australia* (now Gondwana Rainforests) World Heritage Area was published. This overarching document is a major element in guiding cooperative management by the three Governments in relation to the identification, protection, conservation, rehabilitation and presentation of the Gondwana Rainforests. A steering committee of senior agency representatives work together towards agreement on matters of policy and funding as outlined in the *Strategic Overview for Management* (DEH, 2000).

A Technical and Scientific Advisory Committee and a Community Advisory Committee, both established in 2002, play a key role in providing advice about the management of the property. This cooperative engagement has proven to be effective in providing technical and scientific input into management and supporting community engagement. The recent publication developed by the advisory committees, *Remnants of Gondwana, a natural and cultural history*

of the Gondwana Rainforests (Kitching et al., 2010), is a key example of the initiative, energy and skills brought to the management of the property by these advisory committees.

Recent projects funded under the Commonwealth Caring for Our Country program highlight the cooperative nature of management approaches. Threat mitigation actions were identified by the Coordinating Committee in consultation with advisory committees, then joint submissions were prepared and after funding was secured a number of the successful threat mitigation projects have been managed cooperatively. These projects include on-ground management of weeds and pathogens, along with research and monitoring to support the adaptive conservation management of key World Heritage values, including rainforest communities and relict frog and mammal species.

Challenges

Management challenges for this property are similar for all protected areas across Australia with a number of additional aspects requiring innovative approaches. Key threats to the Outstanding Universal Value (OUV) of

the property include inappropriate fire regimes, weeds, pathogens and ecosystem imbalances, including overabundant native species. Threats which operate on a more localised scale include impacts from recreational use (DSEWPaC, 2010). Threat management is undertaken by both the New South Wales and Queensland managing agencies. Funding is augmented by grants from the Australian Government under the Caring for Our Country program for specific threat mitigation activities.

Additional challenges arise from the fragmented nature of the property, both physically and administratively. Many of the key habitats within the Gondwana Rainforests have contracted over millennia, resulting in the fascinating patterns of speciation that contribute to the OUV of the property. The popular management approach of enhancing connectivity through cross tenure corridors does not necessarily address these isolation issues as linking areas of native vegetation does not equate to linking habitats. For example, the Hip-pocket frog has very specific habitat requirements and cannot travel through the intervening landscape and hence remains in isolated populations.

Action to address the threat posed by inappropriate fire regimes is challenging in light of the need to balance community concern regarding the impacts of wildfire risks on life and property with the ecological requirements of different species and vegetation communities. Research is underway to assess the potential impacts of fire on Cool Temperate Rainforest communities. In addition New South Wales is monitoring the impacts of prescribed burning on vegetation communities, including outcomes for biodiversity values and the effectiveness in reduction of risks associated with wildfire.

Recent work investigating pathogen management, funded by the Caring for Our Country program, has investigated the distribution of the root fungus *Phytophthora cinnamomi* across the property. The pathogen has been confirmed as widespread across the property and quarantine and other hygiene measures are now under review. The critical need for cross-tenure coordinated management of weeds and pathogens has become increasingly clear, particularly following the recent outbreak of myrtle rust which has profound implications given the number of rainforest species which are vulnerable.

In order to address the impacts of these threats in a strategic manner, monitoring of key indicators and ecosystem processes is needed. Cross-jurisdictional reporting has been achieved through combining Queensland reporting data into the NSW State of the

Parks database enabling collation of information for the 2010 Periodic Report. Queensland and New South Wales are investigating data collation models that will allow for the effective measurement of both the state and condition of values and trends in their conservation.

References

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Biography

Tricia Waters, B.Sc. M Nat. Res. is currently the Executive Officer for the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia World Heritage Area undertaking a diversity of roles including the provision of executive and secretariat support to both management and advisory committees for the WHA. She has a strong background in operational management of protected areas having worked as a National Parks and Wildlife Service Ranger in a variety of locations in northern NSW including the Ramsar-listed Macquarie Marches Nature Reserve, the National Heritage listed Warrumbungle National Park and parts of the Gondwana Rainforests of Australia WHA including Barrington Tops National Park. Particular areas of interest include adaptive, strategic management; enhancing community appreciation of heritage; and strengthening community participation in conservation management.