



# Wet Tropics of Queensland

Inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988

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The Wet Tropics is a hotspot for biodiversity and has the world's highest concentration of primitive flowering plant families.

Hundreds of rare and primitive species are found here, including cycads, ferns, the southern cassowary, several species of gliders and possums, the musky rat kangaroo and tree kangaroos. Distinctive birdsong, frog calls and butterflies fill the forests with vibrant sound and colour.

This is one of the few places in the world where fringing coral reef meets rainforest that stretches up precipitous slopes of the area's misty mountains.

This breathtaking landscape of crater lakes and spectacular waterfalls and gorges is still cared for by Rainforest Aboriginal people.

The Wet Tropics of Queensland was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1988 in recognition of its outstanding natural universal values:

- as an outstanding example representing the major stages in the earth's evolutionary history
- as an outstanding example representing significant ongoing ecological and biological processes
- as an example of superlative natural phenomena
- containing important and significant habitats for in situ conservation of biological diversity.

The Wet Tropics World Heritage Area lies between Townsville and Cooktown on the north-east coast of Queensland and covers an area of approximately 8,940 km<sup>2</sup>.

It is a region of spectacular scenery and rugged topography with fast-flowing rivers, deep gorges and numerous waterfalls. Mountain summits provide expansive vistas of undisturbed rainforests. One of the largest rainforest areas in Australia centres around the Daintree River valley. The association of fringing coral reefs and rainforest coastline in the Cape Tribulation region is not found elsewhere in Australia and is rare in the world.

The Wet Tropics provides the only habitat for numerous rare species of plants and animals. There are 380 plants and 102 animals in the Wet Tropics that are considered rare or threatened. These species include 40 rare animal species, including the northern bettong, the spotted-tailed quoll, the yellow-bellied glider and the southern cassowary.

The vegetation is predominantly rainforest, but includes mixtures with sclerophyll tree species occurring as

emergent and co-dominant species in the canopy. Fringing the rainforests are tall, open forest, and tall, medium and low woodland. A striking and unique feature is the sharp demarcation between the rainforest and adjacent sclerophyll vegetation.

The Wet Tropics rainforests contain an almost complete record of the major stages in the evolution of plant life on earth. Many rainforest species originated when Australia was still part of Gondwana.

These rainforests are floristically and structurally the most diverse in Australia. They include 13 major structural types, further classified into 64 broad plant communities. Mangrove forests cover 136 km<sup>2</sup> hectares. Their floristic diversity is the highest of any mangrove community in Australia and comparable with that of any in the world; 29 'species associations' have been defined.

Of particular importance are the primitive flowering plants in the rainforests. Of 19 families of angiosperms recognised as primitive, 13 are found in the Wet Tropics. Two of these are confined to the area. This gives the Wet Tropics the highest concentration of such families on earth.

The rainforests are important as habitats for the conservation of the plant family proteaceae, in particular the more primitive genera of the family. These genera represent the nearest relatives of the ancestors of the sclerophyll types, for example, banksias, grevilleas, persoonias, that form a major part of the Australian flora.

There is a large number of plant species with very restricted distribution within the Wet Tropics. There are some curiosities, including one of the largest and one of the



smallest cycads in the world. The area has the richest concentration of ferns and fern allies in Australia (65 per cent of Australia's fern species), including 46 species restricted to the area.

The rainforests also contain a number of unique marsupials, including the musky rat kangaroo, which is probably the most primitive surviving kangaroo species.

The Wet Tropics is home to 30 per cent of Australia's marsupial species, 58 per cent of bat species, 29 per cent of frog species, 20 per cent of reptile species, 58 per cent of the butterfly species and 40 per cent of bird species. There are around 85 species of vertebrate animals unique to the area.

Aboriginal occupation of the area probably dates back to the earliest human occupation of Australia (c. 50,000 years BP), and one of the recorded stories appears to describe the volcanic activity that produced some crater lakes (up to 20,000 years ago), when the rainforests were smaller than today.

The district is a rich environment for Aboriginal hunter gatherers. About 18 Rainforest Aboriginal tribal groups occupied the area, and used a range of forest products including several toxic plants that required complex treatment to make them safe to eat. Such intensive use of toxic food plants is not recorded elsewhere.

The Wet Tropics holds great significance for the local Aboriginal communities, which identify as 'rainforest people'.

The management of the Wet Tropics of Queensland World Heritage Area is on three levels. A State and Commonwealth Ministerial Council coordinates policies and funding. The Wet Tropics Management Authority is responsible for general planning and policy development, advised by Rainforest Aboriginal Advisory, Community Consultative and Scientific Advisory Committees. The Queensland Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Natural Resources and Water manage the day-to-day aspects of the Wet Tropics.



**title page:** The spectacular Wallaman Falls near Ingham is Australia's longest single drop waterfall (305m) Townsville Enterprise Ltd

**top strip:** The Babinda Boulders, south of Cairns, hold great significance for local Aboriginal people Tourism Tropical North Queensland

**top:** The rainforest meets the sea on the Daintree Coast - a rare combination in Australia and the rest of the world DEWHA Collection

**above centre:** The bright colours of fruits from rainforest trees attract birds and bats Wet Tropics Management Authority

**above:** The rainforest contains a number of unique marsupials including the musky rat-kangaroo, the smallest and most primitive surviving member of the kangaroo species Mike Trenerry