

Editorial

The bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*) is an icon of the natural and cultural heritage of Queensland and one of an elite group of trees that is admired and studied around the world. Endemic to Queensland, the bunya's majestic height, unique silhouette and dark green foliage set it apart from other trees of the Australian bush. Revered as sacred by its Indigenous custodians, the bunya's prolific seasonal harvests of edible nuts provided the catalyst for ceremonial gatherings of thousands of people, many of them from hundreds of kilometres away. To this day the tree retains a significant place in the spiritual life of Queensland's Indigenous peoples. Early colonists were entranced by these spiritual connections and they wove together tales of mystique and romance that still shape our imaginings and continue to inspire novelists, artists and historians. The bunya's ancient lineage, with links going back in time to the age of the dinosaurs, adds to its air of mystery. A host of treasured personal and community memories envelope the tree. The nuts have provided a novel seasonal treat for generations of Queenslanders and the heavy seed-bearing cones are the subject of countless yarns about narrowly missed injury to persons sheltering beneath its branches. Many are the families who spent their summer holidays in the bunya forests, away from the sweltering heat of the coast. Others have links to the early timber-getters who attempted to make a living by pitting their axes against the bunya's massive trunks. Today a new host of entrepreneurs – ecotourism operators, craftspeople and 'bush tucker' chefs – are attracted by the tree's economic potential. The unique botanical features of the tree – many still being researched – have fascinated natural scientists in Australia and overseas since the first reported European sightings. Nineteenth century horticulturalists vied for specimens of this exotic 'beauty tree' and planted thousands throughout Australia and around the world, many of which survive to this day.

These many intersecting themes are the subject of this special edition of the *Queensland Review*. The edition is an outcome of *On the Bunya Trail*, a joint project of Global Arts Link (GAL)¹ and the Queensland Studies Centre (QSC).² Established in January 2001 with funding from Queensland Heritage Trails Network,³ the project was initiated and conducted by Associate Professor Anna Haebich, who was inspired by family memories of farming at the base of the Bunya Mountains. The aim of the project is to make the bunya pine visible in our cultural landscape, thereby to encourage a sense of connection with landscape and environment and with people, places and stories of the region. The papers presented here grew out of discussions and presentations at the Bunya Symposium hosted by GAL and QSC at Griffith University's Eco Centre in April 2002.

The project adopted a multi-disciplinary approach to explore all possible aspects and meanings of the bunya pine. Research was conducted into a diverse range of

topics including environmental and natural history; Murri culture, language, history and on-going connections; European settlement, the timber industry, silviculture, horticulture, food, crafts and folklore; recreation and tourism; and representation of the tree in literature and the visual and performing arts. All major interest groups were consulted and representatives participated in the Bunya Symposium at Griffith University in 2002.

The major outcome of the project will be an exhibition to open at GAL in 2003 and then travel to select venues in Australia and possibly overseas. The exhibition will present varied perspectives on the bunya's place in the history and environment of the region by weaving together natural and human histories and ecological and cultural perspectives. This information will be linked to local tourist sites and heritage trails. Indigenous artefacts, historical objects, botanical materials, Murri and non-Indigenous voices and photographs will be combined in innovative ways along with artworks, a video, multimedia interactives and a web site based on the exhibition.

This edition of *Queensland Review* draws together for the first time the various perspectives of Indigenous custodians, natural scientists and palaeobotanists, historians, art curators and literary analysts. Also included are contributions from contemporary Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, a poet and a nutritionist, as well as colonial artists. The journal begins with a statement from Paddy Jerome, senior elder of the Jarowair people and a custodian of the Bunya Mountains. Then follow papers by John Huth, Genaro Hernandez-Castillo, Dr Ruth Stockey, Ian Smith and Don Butler introducing current research by botanists, palaeobotanists and ecologists. Historians Dr Thom Blake and Associate Professor Raymond Evans respectively provide challenging new perspectives on events surrounding the scientific naming of the bunya pine and patterns of colonialism, racism and violence that characterised race relations in the bunya forest regions. Papers by art curator Glenn Cook and literary analysts Associate Professor Pat Buckridge and Dr Belinda McKay explore artistic and literary imaginings about the bunya pine.

This interdisciplinary approach reflects the aims of the project as well as the eclecticism of contemporary environmental history. Museum curator Matt Trinca writes that environmental history is about:

... tracing change: it is about examining human cultures and their relationships to environments; it is intensely interested in chronologies that include the present, and by implication, the future; and it represents a conjunction of different investigative strategies spanning sciences and the humanities.⁴

This 'conjunction of strategies' is evident in the writings of geographer, ecologist and *literateur* George Seddon⁵ and the work of innovative art curator Vivonne Thwaites, whose exhibition on the river red gum, *karra/karrawirraparri*, was an inspiration for the *On the Bunya Trail* Project.⁶ In line with environmental historian Tom Griffiths, the journal integrates social history with the 'deep time' perspectives of palaeobotany, palaeogeology and Indigenous myths of origin. While the journal seeks to give equal recognition to Indigenous and scientific knowledges, much

Indigenous information remains within the community, inaccessible to non-Indigenous researchers. Important issues of knowledge, power and respect are involved here, as well as practical matters such as native title claims and community interest in reviving the bunya festivals; but this is Murri business and Gubbas⁷ will have to await the outcomes.

By integrating varied disciplinary perspectives and related new research material, the journal has endeavoured to avoid the pitfalls of much non-Indigenous writing about the bunya, which draws exclusively on the limited and, sometimes, imaginative records of early colonial observers such as escaped convicts, free settlers, missionaries, explorers and government officials. These records have been interpreted as direct eye-witness accounts and used uncritically to construct what we know about the 'past' of this tree, especially in relation to Indigenous peoples. In fact, like all such documents they have been filtered through European lenses reflecting contemporary beliefs about Indigenous peoples and their culture and colonial agendas of possession of the land and economic progress. This is evident in the language, metaphors and logic of their discourse. There are also gaps and omissions in these texts so that it is not surprising that points of disagreement abound in publications about the bunya pine and that many questions remain unresolved.

This is particularly evident in the many published accounts of the bunya festivals. As archaeologist Hilary Sullivan⁸ notes, 'the main problem in dealing with such a well known event is that the details become exaggerated with every repetition of the story.' What is certain is that the bunya pine was held to be sacred and that its seed (nut) was a ceremonial food that enabled hundreds and even thousands to gather together to take part in important ceremonies and to trade, arrange marriages, settle disputes and generally socialise with each other. While the mythology surrounding the bunya insists that festivals were held only every three years when harvests were most prolific, annual harvests also permitted gatherings, albeit smaller in scale. The bunya festivals lasted as long as supplies of nuts and other plant and animal foods allowed, usually from one to three months. They were not unique events as many writers suggest; rather, in South-East Queensland they formed part of wider cycles of ceremonial and social gatherings.⁹ The use of the bunya nut resembled the 'winged harvests' of Bogong moths in the southern highlands of New South Wales and the harvests of processed *Zamia* nuts in North Queensland and Western Australia.¹⁰ Similarly, amongst the Indigenous peoples of central and southern Chile, the monkey puzzle tree (*Araucaria araucana*) a relative of the bunya tree, while not used as a ceremonial food in this way, nevertheless held profound spiritual and symbolic significance and required special rituals to ensure good harvests of 'pinones' – the edible seeds contained in its cones.¹¹

In 1842 the bunya became the subject of a proclamation prohibiting the issuing of licences for the occupation of land or the cutting down of banyas in districts in an area north from Brisbane to the Maroochy River and west to the Great Dividing Range. This was in recognition of its significance to Indigenous peoples; it was also intended to prevent conflict arising from settler interference with the trees. While the proclamation was never fully honoured, it nevertheless served to limit commercial exploitation of the bunya. In 1860, soon after Queensland was declared a separate

colony, the proclamation was rescinded and over the next 60 to 70 years bunya pines were ruthlessly felled for timber. Stands in the Bunya Mountains were protected after 1908 when the area was declared a National Park. However, vast areas of the Blackall Ranges were denuded and Baroon, the traditional gathering place of the coastal and sub-coastal Aboriginal communities of South-East Queensland and Northern New South Wales, was submerged under Baroon Pocket Dam.

Surviving natural stands of the bunya pine are a very important part of Queensland's natural heritage. We hope that this collection of papers and the subsequent exhibition, by spreading knowledge and awareness, will help to ensure the survival and preservation of this majestic tree.

Anna Haebich

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Notes

- 1 Global Arts Link is the award winning regional art gallery and museum in Ipswich that combines art, social history and new technologies to explore the region.
- 2 The Queensland Studies Centre promotes research about the state through projects, seminars, conferences and publications, notably the *Queensland Review*.
- 3 The Queensland Heritage Trails Network is a joint initiative of the Queensland Government and the Commonwealth Government, established in 2000 through the Federation Fund and working partnerships with local government authorities and local councils. The \$110M funding allocation has been used to create and link 43 heritage experiences celebrating the state's unique history, culture and natural features.
- 4 M. Trinca, 'Representing environmental pasts', in A. Gaynor, M. Trinca and A. Haebich (eds.) *Country: Visions of Land and People in Western Australia*, (Perth: WA Museum and UWA Centre for History, in publication).
- 5 See for example, G. Seddon, *Landprints: Reflections on Place and Landscape*, (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- 6 Curated for the 2000 Telstra Adelaide Arts Festival, *karra/karrawirraparri* featured artists Agnes Love, Jo Crawford and Chris De Rosa and writers Eric Rolls, Martin O'Leary, Stephanie Radok, Murray Bail, Dr Rob Amery and Les Murray.
- 7 Gubba is used by Murri people to refer to non-Indigenous people. 'Murri' encompasses the Indigenous peoples of South-East Queensland.
- 8 H. Sullivan, 'Aboriginal gatherings in southeast Queensland, with special reference to the exploitation of Bunya nuts', unpublished BA Hons Thesis, Australian National University, 1977: 17.
- 9 Sullivan op.cit., 1977.
- 10 J. Flood, *Archaeology of the Dreamtime*, (Sydney: Collins, 1983).

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- 11 D. L. Aagesen, 'On the Northern Fringe of the South American Temperate Forest', *Environmental History*, 3 (1) (1998): 64-85; Indigenous resource rights and conservation of the Monkey-Puzzle Tree (*Araucaria Araucana*, *Araucariaceae*): a case study from Southern Chile', *Economic Botany*, 52 (2) 1998: 146-160; personal communication T Herrmann, School of Geography and the Environment, Oxford University.