



# Australia's Tropical Rainforests

## WORLD HERITAGE

### F A C T S H E E T

## Windows in Time

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*Australia's Tropical Rainforests are the oldest continually surviving tropical rainforests on earth. It is a living museum representing all the important stages of the earth's evolutionary history.*

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### **The World that Was**

Australia's Tropical Rainforests are similar to those that once covered the ancient supercontinent of Gondwana.

Over millions of years Gondwana split into a jigsaw puzzle of pieces which became Africa, South America, India, Antarctica, New Zealand and Australia. Some Wet Tropics life forms have their nearest relatives in distant parts of South America or India, a family tree which dates back to those ancient times.

For more than 30 million years Australia rafted northwards towards the equator with an ark of plants and animals. The green rainforests of Gondwanan times gradually gave way to an arid landscape, except for small refuges of rainforest on mountaintops and in deep, moist gullies. Some plants adapted to the arid conditions to produce fire-tolerant Eucalyptus and nitrogen-fixing Acacias which can survive on some of the world's poorest soils.

The rainforests have survived many dramatic events over millions of years - the breakup of Gondwana, the long drifting journey northward in a drying climate, and then the arrival of the human species.

The descendants of many ancient Gondwanan plants and animals still

survive here. Some plants have barely changed since dinosaurs roamed the earth over 60 million years ago.

### **Breathtaking Beauty**

Rainforest-clad ranges, spectacular gorges, volcanic lakes, waterfalls and fast flowing streams make this an area of exceptional beauty.

The coastal drive between Cairns and Port Douglas takes you past green hillslopes, sandy beaches and the azure blue of the Coral Sea.

### **Shaping the Rainforest**

Cultural traditions of Rainforest Aboriginal people and dramatic natural forces have shaped the Wet Tropics landscape.

For example, Rainforest Aboriginal peoples' use of fire has contributed to forest diversity.

After heavy wet season rains, wild rivers carve their way from the mountains to the sea. In the dry season, bushfires regenerate the open forests.

### **A treasure trove of species**

Covering less than 0.1% of the Australian continent, the Wet Tropics shelters an amazing variety of plants and animals, including many rare and

endangered species. The Area represents the most species diverse region within Australia, which is recognised as one of the seven "megadiverse" countries in the world, along with Brazil, Colombia, Mexico, Zaire, Madagascar and Indonesia, which between them contain 54% of all species on the planet.

One of the unusual features of the Australia's Tropical Rainforests is the high numbers of species which are found nowhere else on the planet. They are known as "endemic" to this region. Much of the world's tropical rainforests are of relatively recent origin and their levels of endemism are surprisingly low. However, the long isolated areas of New Caledonia, Madagascar and Queensland's tropical rainforests have exceptionally high levels of endemism. For instance, more than 240 fern species are found here, the richest concentration in Australia. Of these, 46 are found nowhere else in the world.

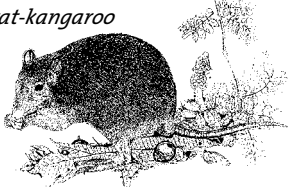
The Wet Tropics rainforests have more plant and animal species with primitive characteristics than any other area on Earth, and 75% of them are the only representatives of their genus (that is, they have no close relatives).

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*Millions of years in the making. Protected forever.*

# Did you know Australia's Tropical Rainforests...

- are home to one of the largest birds in the world - the cassowary
- have trees more than 3,000 years old
- have the highest diversity of rainforest mammals in Australia including the musky-rat kangaroo, the most primitive surviving kangaroo species

*Musky rat-kangaroo*




- have at least 66 animal species and more than 700 plant species that are found nowhere else in the world
- although they represent less than one-tenth of one percent of the land surface of Australia, they have the highest diversity of species on the continent

*pink flowered eudodia*



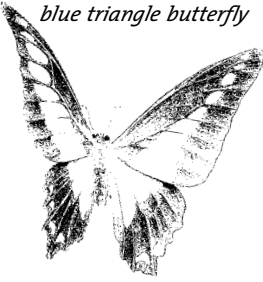
- more than 500 rare and threatened plant species are protected within the World Heritage Area, and 330 of them are endemic (found nowhere else in the world)
- the Wet Tropics is the oldest continually surviving tropical rainforest on earth with some plant and animal species more than 100 million years old.

**With only 0.1% of Australia's land mass, the Wet Tropics is home to:**



58%

of Australia's  
bat and butterfly  
species



*spectacled flying-fox* *blue triangle butterfly*



30%


of Australia's  
marsupial  
species



*red necked pademelon* *mahogany glider*


20%

of Australia's  
reptile species



29%

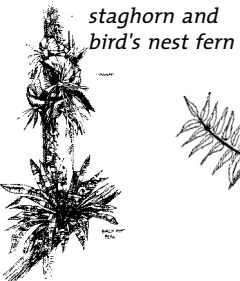
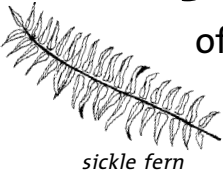
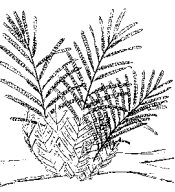
of Australia's  
frog  
species



*lace monitor* *wood frog*

65%

of Australia's  
fern  
species.

*staghorn and bird's nest fern* *basket fern*  
*sickle fern*

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