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A young koala's beach adventure

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May 10th 2012

Getting the butterflies back

It used to be an overwintering or resting place for thousands of butterflies and may one day be that again if the work of a passionate landscape restorer, Tony O'Malley, has his way with a tiny block of 'semi-evergreen vine thicket' - an endangered type of beach scrub which, across Queensland, has been virtually wiped out with just 9% of its former domain remaining.



Tony, who fronts a small body called Geoffrey Bay Coastcare, held an eye-opening talk and tour of the less than 1 hectare site last Saturday and 24 interested locals and visitors arrived to hear from Tony, the Queensland Herbarium's Principal Botanist, Janette Kemp and local landscape gardening contractor, Gary Davies, who were on hand to describe the importance of the block and the challenges it faces.



Gary Davies talks of his struggle with weeds on site

Janette Kemp explained that the vegetation is a dryer type of rainforest, with smaller leaves due to seasonal rainfall. It is particular to sand dunes and alluvial plains but not the same as that found commonly on hillsides.

Until the 1960s, when most of the large tracts of this vegetation were destroyed by chain pulling bulldozers, these vine thickets stretched from northern NSW up through central Queensland all the way to Townsville. Magnetic Island is in fact just about the very tip of the habitat's extent.

There is a larger tract behind Florence Bay and if you wondered why the rangers are so nervous about beach fires then it's worth knowing that these tiny pockets are very susceptible to fire.

On Magnetic Island they are found 'not right on the beach but often on the next swale from behind the beach' says Janette who observed that it is often the swamp moist depression to the rear of these areas which protect them from fires.

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Burdekin plums, paperbarks, mango bark and beach almonds are some of the trees you'd find in these places but native vines, which live in these trees and help block out the sun on the ground mean that there is a very lively "middle storey".



24 locals and visitors attended

Of course fire is just one of the threats. At Arcadia, where one end of the block abuts an informal car dump, weeds are the biggest menace.

Gary Davies, who has been contracted to help restore the site after some clearly serious hard yakka including removing debris left uncollected since Cyclone Althea, said the area was, 'at it's best for decades'. Until recently it was a mass of coral vine, which smothers several trees at a time, along with mother-in-laws tongue - possibly the world's most popular office plant but a scourge on Magnetic Island. Other familiar pest species included lantana and Guinea grass.

Essentially, the work was, according to Gary, about removing weed seedlings and letting natives re-establish. 'Without removing the weed blanket the next generation of natives can't establish,' he said.

Tony O'Malley, who has discussed the history of the landscape with older locals told the group that long-time Arcadia resident, George Aslett had described the thousands of butterflies which once rested at the site and how, until development along the foreshore and McCabe Crescent occurred, the vegetation type continued in much the same way it does presently on the landward side of the road near the old helipad in Nelly Bay.

Tony has been quietly working on a number of projects such as this one in Arcadia since about 1993 when he brought Queensland Herbarium botanist, Rod Fensham to the site. Tony said that Mr Fensham claimed, then, that there were 39 native tree species and that the site was 'very rich - with high conservation values'.

Tony has a clear passion for natural bush land and its conservation and has worked with locals on helping restore a number of sites including Alma Creek in Arcadia - focussing on public land, where, '...after we have got it looking good, there is a fair chance of retaining it with some government help'.

Interestingly, the vegetation of this tiny tract is mapped by the Commonwealth (listed in 2001) and its status under the federal, Environment Protection Biodiversity Conservation Act, is listed as a matter of national environmental significance. This qualified it for weeding funding, but vegetation mapping by the state of Queensland does not record down to such small spaces. From a Queensland state environment perspective, the site does not exist. Importantly, according to Tony, it is

state mapping which councils rely upon and Tony is hoping public events such as last Saturday's walk and talk will give these rare and endangered places some much-needed community support.

Tony's has also been able to garner funding through the Burdekin Dry Tropics - Caring for Country program to pay for the difficult weeding which Gary Davies said had to be done only with light tools as larger machinery would further destroy the ecology.

Tony, who would love to see the butterflies one day return in their thousands to this small but special place, is particularly keen to engage the help and support of neighbours in the area which runs behind Marine Parade from the back of the Bright Avenue shops to near the MI Bowls Club and backs into back gardens of houses along that end of McCabe Crescent.

If you would like to help or know more about Tony's and the Geoffrey Bay Coastcare group's efforts can call him on anthonyomswim@hotmail.com or ph 0437 728 190.

Story and photos: George Hirst

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