

EXTRA

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AUSTRALIA PUNCHES WELL ABOVE ITS HEIGHT FOR THE WORLD'S TALLEST TREES, WRITES MARTIN NEWMAN



# BEHEMOTHS OF THE BUSH

Three and-a-half metres across and 111 hand spaces around, a solid column of wood, 17 storeys high rises straight up out of the bush above us.

Here in the bird quiet of Myall Lakes National Park, the kids have momentarily shut off Roblox and put their phones down to marvel at the huge old eucalypt. And I have too, craning my neck back, and back ... and still further, to see its top.

At 76m high The Grandis, a 400-year-old flooded gum, is NSW's tallest tree despite having its crown smashed by lightning on a couple of occasions.

Surrounded by numerous other giants of a similar age and diameter, it reigns as the king of the forest at Bulahdelah on the state's Central Coast. And like most of the country's living giants, finding it requires a bit of bush bashing — in this case the gully of big trees takes a long drive down a dirt track off the Pacific Highway.

Since seeing the 1952 Kirk Douglas film *The Big Trees*, about California's giant redwoods, I've been fascinated with the majesty of these ancient colossi.

But not many Australians know that five of the world's 10 tallest trees are in Australia, including the second tallest in the world — Centurion, a giant mountain ash eucalypt in Tasmania's Arve valley — that comes in just under 100m. Only the 115m Hyperion coast redwood in Humboldt Redwoods National Park, California, is greater.

"In Australia there's none of the national pride that Americans enjoy with both the

redwoods and the giant sequoia," says Steve Pearce, 39, of Hobart-based Tree Projects.

"The Americans are so much more enthused by the symbolism of their giant trees than Australia."

Pearce, who with arborist Jen Sanger travels the world researching and photographing giant trees, is among a growing band of tree lovers trying to preserve Australia's old-growth forests.

But height is not the only measure of greatness in trees: age, circumference, spread and historical significance all have their place.

The Huon pines of Tasmania, which can live for 3000 years, and the prehistoric Wollemi pine, discovered 150km northwest of Sydney in 1994, which can live for 1000, are among the oldest in the world.

We talk of "the bush" in Australia, but about 19 per cent of the country's land mass is forested — 147 million hectares of rainforest, melaleuca, eucalypt, acacia, mangrove, casuarina and callitris — with climates varying from alpine, desert and tropical.

Among those zones exist a huge variety of mega-flora, from the karris eucalypts of Western Australia, which can reach 90m, to the boabs of the Northern Territory, which swell to 5m or more in diameter.

In NSW the Old Bottlebutt red bloodwood near Port Macquarie is the largest of its kind in the southern hemisphere, while Middle Brother National Park on the mid-north coast is home to the giant blackbutt trees Benaroon

“When you're looking at the bigger older ones, you think 'they're a survivor'”

Derek McIntosh,



and the Bird Tree, the biggest of their species with girths of 15m and 11m respectively.

Sydney's huge Moreton Bay figs are so plentiful few are considered for historic preservation, sometimes resulting in controversy. Two years ago Randwick's 150-year-old Tree of Knowledge was cut down to make way for the light rail expansion.

And there are the historic trees, planted by early settlers, or engraved with directions, like the Mermaid boab. It was named by English Admiral Phillip Parker King after his ship the HMC Mermaid beached at Careening Bay in the Kimberley. The inscription by the ship's carpenter, marking its name and the year (1820) is still clearly visible 198 years later.

In Carramar, Western Sydney, the Bland Oak is a local institution. Planted by Dr William Bland in 1842 it has just been added to the National Trust's register, which documents and protects more than 2000 significant trees.

Graham Quint, the director of Conservation at the National Trust of Australia,



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From left: The Mermaid boab, a Tasmanian eucalypt, the Hyperion redwood, a boab tree with a 12m girth, and (right) the 400-year-old Grandis eucalypt.



Climbing giant eucalypts in Tasmania. Jan Sanger on the descent (left top), Centurion, Australia's tallest tree and the world's second tallest (left), and a film poster for 1952's *The Big Trees* (inset above).



says many of the country's big trees have been lucky to survive on "road reservations" where the roads haven't been extended. "They cleared the rainforests for the farms and suburbia and these big trees are sort of left there as remnants," he adds. "It is almost impossible to grow another one like that now. They are the remnants of the old forests, some growing

for hundreds of years. If you tried to grow one now without the protection of the rainforest they would never get to that height." The National Trust combines protecting historic streets of trees, such as King George V Memorial Ave's oaks in Tamworth and trees planted by early explorers. "The problem with school playgrounds is the threat of

branches dropping from coral trees and eucalypts in particular, which will just fall over without warning," he says. "It's balancing public safety. And we tend not to list the Moreton Bays because they are so common." He adds preserving great trees in Australia is made harder by the elements. "The bigger the tree the more likely, with white ants and all the problems we've got here, bushfires and high winds, the harder to keep them alive. In Japan, they prop them up." Sydneysider Derek McIntosh, a retired quantity surveyor, started the National Tree Register website a decade ago. "When you're touching a tree, looking at the bigger older ones, you think 'they're a survivor,'" the 77-year-old says. "There's a great depth of love and recognition of trees and their importance." As a child growing up in South Africa, McIntosh developed a love of trees from

**“ People were advocating for urban trees but no one was advocating for older trees ”**  
Jan Allen, arborist



his father who would take him into the Kruger National Park to look at the wildlife. He now documents what he calls champion trees, the biggest of the genus around Australia. "Farmers are the major custodians of our trees and plants. I go to these farming properties and many of them have survived because they've been protected from loggers and urban sprawl," he says. "We have this perception of gum trees being everywhere in this country, but there is a huge variety." Arborist Jan Allen, from the Veteran Tree Group Facebook site, says: "Our main concern has been the loss of older trees within urban areas. We are trying to touch the general populace and get some appreciation for these old trees, to understand their importance." "The old trees are often the biggest and the best in terms of wildlife and being the centre of

an ecosystem. They are often performing very well, even in an urban environment." Allen, who lives in Currumbin Valley on the Gold Coast, started the group as a social club with other arborists six years ago after being inspired by Great Britain's Ancient Tree Forum. "We could see people advocating for urban trees but no one in particular advocating for older trees," she says. "But we also need to ensure new generations of trees are planted and encouraged, and to get to the stage where they provide the right habitat that is missing." Sanger, 34, who runs tree-climbing clinics, says: "Tree climbing is that next level and it can be quite a magical, Zen-like experience getting up there and exploring a tree." Pearce adds: "I don't think a lot of Australians really know the calibre of trees we have." "That's just a fact of modern life and people having short attention spans."