

REPORT ON MARCH MEETING

(An Appreciation by Joseph Davis)

Our speaker was Anders Bofeldt, Technical Officer, Wollongong, and his subject was the Illawarra Landscape and the changes which have taken place in its vegetation since 1796.

I had previously briefly met Mr Bofeldt back in 1989 when I had written one of the Illawarra Mercury's early full colour features entitled 'How Green was Our Region' (IM, Weekend Magazine, 21/10/1989. pp. 21-3) which was basically little more than a chance to show of some great photographs of Illawarra Trees. Anders then seemed to be a very young man, possibly only a teenager. It was quite a shock therefore to see Anders at our meeting and realise that he was probably in his late 20s and that I was getting very old indeed.

Anders' address was a most impressive affair. Speaking off the cuff, he displayed that fine ability to interest and entertain which can only come from having both a great knowledge and a great love for your subject. Here was someone who has looked both very extensively and very closely at Illawarra and who remains excited by nearly every piece of vegetation he encounters. Someone who, when it comes to fig-trees in particular, enjoys trying to determine whether particular specimens are either post-contact plantings or pre-contact survivors.

The audience were easily carried away with Mr Bofeldt's enthusiasm and knowledge and the very large number of questions he was asked at the end was indicative of the vast amount of interest he had created and the chord he had struck in the hearts of most.

Mr Bofeldt began by remarking that there were considerable debate about how Illawarra might have looked before the white invasion. Was it all rainforest or just some? In Anders' opinion it was not all rainforest but very large areas certainly were.

Anders explained that while all Illawarra can theoretically support rainforest it is the factors of fire and soil which determined what sort of rainforest occurs. He noted that in particular areas, special factors of localised topography and rainfall are occasionally capable of creating micro-climates which would be inhospitable to rainforest plants.

Two of the biggest areas of rainforest in pre-contact Illawarra were the Jamberoo Brush (some 12000 hectares of continuous rainforest and the brush of the Berkeley Hills and Cringila area running down to the lake (some 2500 hectares). The biggest areas of rainforest in Illawarra followed very closely the areas possessing rich volcanic soils.

Mr Bofeldt explained that the Berkeley area, for example, would have looked very much like Gooseberry Island does today - even though the island itself has sandstone rather than volcanic soils - one of the first indication Anders gave of how the forests of the Illawarra and their amazingly salt resistant figs can sustain rainforest plants right down to the sea. Some surviving evidence of this can today be seen in places from Gerroa through Kiama to Shellharbour.

The detail that most surprised me is that Anders feels that the large fig trees in the park opposite the pub at Shellharbour are not nineteenth century plantings but survivors of the original rainforest. Even if the beach extended some 100 metres or so eastwards prior to white settlement of the Peterborough Estate it is still a remarkable testament to the salt-resistancy of Port Jackson and Moreton Bay figs.

From such former sizeable areas, the surviving remnant rainforest in Illawarra is shockingly small. A drive around the Berkeley area near the new Buddhist temple today clearly shows only a handful of (usually lone) giant figs and the odd clump of tall cabbage palms. The reasons the cabbage palms can survive when the other rainforest vegetation has been removed, Mr Bofeldt explained, is that they are a very hardy plant and can also resist fire - unlike the far more delicate bangalow palm which needed the shelter of the rainforest community and hence is today very rare.

The scientific nomenclature of the bangalow palm is in honour of the Botanist Alan Cunningham

who visited Illawarra in October to November 1818 and our speaker recommended that we all read his journal - not just for its insights into Illawarra vegetation but also because it is a very good read. I have not read it and was shocked to hear our speaker say that Cunningham describes porpoises in Lake Illawarra.

Mr Bofeldt also explained that there were natural grasslands in Illawarra but that these almost certainly only existed because the local Aborigines used fire as a land management practice. This constant use of fire kept areas like Bulli Headland free of rainforest (a fact noted by many early mariners). The Aborigines utilised the complex coastal lagoon systems as sources of food and, as they spent much time, here continual burning kept the forest at arm's length and provided the chance for native grasses to flourish which would in turn attract wallabies and kangaroos that would then be far easier for the Aborigines to spear in the open grassland than in the entangled rainforest brush.

When asked from the floor if we have any idea what the pre-contact native grasses were like Mr Bofeldt spoke of the beauties of Kangaroo grass which develops very attractive brownish colourations during the year. But he also spoke of the need to keep the mower away from it and cut it at about knee height which is probably going to make it hard for me to re-grass my lawn with it. I would very much like to start a quest to re-grass the Illawarra with native instead of imported strands. Our speaker said that it's taken him years to convince Council not to mow in the bushy sections of Wiseman Park and that today you can see native grasses growing there thanks to the fact that the mowers have been kept out for a considerable time.

Mr Bofeldt also explained how nearly all visiting artists and explorers were very take by the beauties of Illawarra rainforest and all remarked how different was the landscape from that of the wet sclerophyll forests around the first settlements near Sydney Cove. The height of Illawarra tress was particularly striking and even though there has been considerable debate in the press lately about the height of Australian trees, Mr Bofeldt asserts that even today there is a turpentine tree at least 200 feet tall and 6 1/2 feet in diameter at Mount Keira today (although in making this claim he fully acknowledged the difficult in estimating the height of trees in situ).

In terms of categorisation, Illawarra rainforest is sub-tropical rainforest (usually growing on volcanic soils) and is the southern limit for many species of rainforest plant. The Robertson area has warm temperate rainforest (also growing largely on volcanic soils) and the Illawarra also has coastal rainforest growing on sand. This coastal rainforest growing on the poorer sandy soils (unlike the volcanic soils at Shellharbour) is affected by salt spray and often dwarfed. Puckey's estate was probably originally this sort of rainforest as the early descriptions indicate lush growth within it. One of the main joys of listening to Mr Bofeldt is that he comes across as a very confident and optimistic person and believes that given 50 years or so it would be possible to get



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Puckey's back to its original littoral rainforest state. He suggested that the sort of rainforest that Puckey's originally was would be rather like the dwarfed littoral rainforest today seen at the Minnamurra bends.

Despite his infectious optimism, Mr Bofeldt did point out that we can't even begin to hope to know all that has been lost from Illawarra Rainforests. Nonetheless, we do know that about 4 or 5 species which were identified by explorers and botanists last century are now either known to be (or at least thought to be) extinct. He also mentioned that a beautiful 'Christmas Orchid' with big white flowers has not now be seen for 30 or 40 years in the wild when formerly many people had it in their back yards and some still do. The same is true of plant known as 'elephant ears' that is still often seen in private gardens but is now extinct in the Berkeley Hills. But such is his optimism that Mr Bofeldt felt that he may be able to convince the owners of the Buddhist Temple at Berkeley to bring their land back to rainforest through new plantings.

Mr Bofeldt seemed especially fond of fig-trees and explained that Illawarra is home to the small-leaved fig (there is a massive example - planted in 1903 - on the highway at Thirroul just across from the old RSL building); the deciduous fig which drops its leaves for 2 or 3 weeks in October or November and whose new leaves, Mr Bofeldt explained, are blindingly green: Mr Bofeldt says there are not many of these north of Mt Nebo); the Port Jackson and Moreton Bay figs; and the Sandpaper Fig. Mr Bofeldt noted that all but the sandpaper are salt-resistant. He also explained that they had recently planted some figs at Belmore Basin and although they began to look very sick immediately after being transplanted from their salt-free nursery they have now adapted very well to their new salt-spray location.

Such success is a great beacon of hope for what seems to me to be Mr Bofeldt's sincere desire to re-afforest Illawarra. His optimism was indeed impressive and infectious. For although he described Illawarra as a 'Paradise Lost' what marks him out so differently from other speakers on historical subjects is that he seems pretty confident that it would be possible to get back this lost paradise if only the political and community will is present - and even if it's not one got the impression that Mr Bofeldt would do his best to make sure that we at least got some of it back anyway.

The thing we need to fight against most is unnecessary destruction of habitats and even of individual trees. Anders felt that although the famous fig at Figtree was clearly dying there was absolutely no need to reduce it (supposedly on safety grounds) to the stump it is today for, even though it was not the biggest of surviving Illawarra figs, it was the most visible symbol of original rainforest Illawarra.

Characteristically, Mr Bofeldt is not one to simply moan about its loss. He took seeds from the

tree and has propagated them at the Botanic Gardens and is simply waiting for permission to replant the children of one of the giant remnants of our remarkable native brush.

(I hope I haven't made too many blunders in trying to give readers both a feel for and some details about Mr Bofeldt's address as I openly confess to knowing little about botany and, unfortunately, was away the day they did Science at Bulli High School).