



President:
Vice President: Russell Dempster 8983 2131
Secretary: Jane Burford 8985 4741
Treasurer: Marj King 8985 6885
Publicity: Geoff Gaskell 8945 5825
Publications: Denise Goodfellow 8932 8306
Librarian: Sally Jacka 8988 5654
Public Officer: Geoff Gaskell 8945 5825
General Committee Members
Raylene Chandler 8948 8826
Felicity Middleton 8988 1840

PO BOX 135 PALMERSTON NT 0831
<http://tenpsnt.tripod.com>

~ APRIL 2007 NEWSLETTER ~

MEETINGS AND FIELD TRIPS

We meet on the third Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm. Following the TENPS general meeting, the speaker begins at 8pm. Tea & coffee are available during the meeting. The venue is Marrara Christian College, on the corner of Amy Johnson and McMillan drives. All welcome. Bring plants to swap, sell or have identified.

Summary of the last Committee Meeting

- TENPS has purchased a laptop computer and printer.
- Work is in progress on the TENPS database and website. But we need a webmaster (see below).
- Geoff Gaskell offered to be the coordinator for World Environment Day, 3rd June.
- Denise is to seek costings for a fence sign identifying TENPS members.
- We agreed that TENPS should be more involved in education on the propagation of native plants.
- Committee members talked at length of how we could involve others in the cultivation of native plants for stalls at a couple of big events coming up later this year. See next meeting (below).
- Denise needs to receive articles and information for the newsletter ten days before it is due to go out.

~ NEXT MEETING THURSDAY 19th APRIL ~

Ever wondered why the seeds you collect and plant, don't grow?

The effervescent and profound Marj King will share her experience as proprietor of Top End Seeds and give general guidelines about how to collect ripe seed and whether the seed you have collected is viable. So bring along those seeds you have sitting in bags or tucked away in the fridge. This is not a very technical session, so seeds that require a microscope to be seen and grasses will not be dealt with.

~ FIELD TRIP- SUNDAY 22nd APRIL ~

The recently formed group, Friends of Fogg Dam (FOFD) have invited TENPS and Field Naturalists' club members to join them on Sunday 22nd April. We will meet at 10am at the rotunda at the Fogg Dam car park at 10am. After a walk and talk there will be an information session about what FOFD are about and their future plans. This will be followed by a BYO BBQ lunch. TENPS members are happy to share cars.

~ FUTURE EVENTS ~

At some stage, Sue Fraser-Adams, of Ochre Ltd. will talk about native plants in the suburban landscape. As a builder Sue tries to leave native plants in place creating a partly established, minimal-care garden. She will talk about the plants that survive best being run over by bobcats, having cement dumped on them by careless hands, and trampled by big-footed tradesmen.

~ PAST EVENTS ~

At our last meeting on 15th March, Ian Morris talked about his trip along the Fly River last year.

The Gulf of Carpentaria was formerly Lake Carpentaria. The mouth of the Fly River is hard to navigate in the dry season, although it is enormous. There are many small islands at the mouth. The local people are magnificent navigators however, and they know their way through the mouth by day or night.

The beautiful tidal forests are bigger and better than Australian mangroves. Nypa Palms (*Nypa fruticans*) grow along both sides of the Fly River for about 200kms. They grow in a mixture of fresh and salt water.

Tall rainforests covered with vines, grow on the banks on alluvial mud of the tributaries, forming walls of trees to 30, 40 or 50 metres high. Flame Trees give brilliant splashes of red amidst the sea of green.

Lowland forest fruit can be brightly coloured: they include *Cerbera* (Cassowary Plum), *Normanbya*, *Randia*, *Lagerstroemia*, and figs. Red Lacewing butterflies feed on *Adenia* vine.



Lowland Forest Fruit

Sago trees are also present. The men fell these massive palms, then the women chop them up and prepare cakes from the starchy material. The people use it as a staple carbohydrate.

The Single Stemmed Fish-tail Palm, *Caryota urens*, grow along the Fly, along with the tree, *Lagerstroemia acheriana*, which flowers spectacularly in the late dry season. Rosewood is a prized timber tree, used for canoes and carving. It has yellow flowers. Kwila *Intsia bijuga*, another valuable timber tree, grow in large numbers; they are also found at Arnhem Bay near Nhulunbuy.

There are fisheries at Obo on the Fly River. Prawns are harvested as are the Saratoga fingerlings which are sold to Singapore and grown on for selling. Barramundi are caught and Black Bass are highly prized, even more so than Barramundi. Pig-nose turtles live on the river. They are totally aquatic except for the female when she lays her eggs. Beautiful red, blue and black tiger moths are abundant on the Fly River. They also inhabit the Top End of the Territory.

In lowland rainforests, *Neptunia* sp grow; this is a sensitive plant; the leaves close when touched. Pitcher plants *Nerpenthes* spp. are carnivorous plants, the same species as the Queensland specimens, grow there. *Spathoglottis* Orchids grow in acid, salty soils as they do in Arnhem Land.

The flood plains are very similar to ours, with the some of the same species of Lotus, lilies and grasses. At Aisake Lake, people have gone back to their traditional

Meeting the third Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm at 1



ways of living in the past 20 years. They hunt with spears. Black saltwater crocodiles live in fresh water and are a food source. Magpie geese, Spotted whistling-ducks and purple swamphens are also found there.

The edge of the flood plains going into open woodland look just as they do in Australia. *Eucalyptus confertiflora* is a common species, also found in the Top End. There are many other plants common both to the Top End and Papua New Guinea.

Introduced deer live on the Lower Fly plains as do our buffalo. They are plentiful and an excellent food source. Deer hunting is done with cane knives at night. The hunters are incredibly stealthy.

Very tame Crimson finches live along the Strickland River. Small birds are well liked and looked after. Blyth's Thornbill is a beautiful stately large bird, often associated with large Ficus (Fig) trees, and Palm cockatoos, a large black bird, is also found on Cape York. Ian saw these cockatoos feeding on fruit on the ground.

The Angle-headed Dragon, which lives in the canopy, has a phenomenally long tail. The people were initially very scared of it, but Ian convinced them to knock it down from over 20m in the canopy, and after he talked to it and christened it Eric, they came back and were intrigued by it!! The dragons are normally never seen at ground level.

Black-spot Piranha are found in the Sepik River, having been introduced (by the World Health Organisation) there. They are a big problem along with the Mozambique Talapia, another disaster!

Southern Common Cuscus and Spotted Cuscus are very cute mammals and make wonderful pets (Ian bought one that lived on the boat for a few years). They are a food and fur source.

The river is recovering well after being damaged as a result of the Ok Tedi Gold Mine. The local environment is being monitored by scientists now.

Russell Dempster

Field Trip to Charles Darwin National Park: *Nervilea peltata* Survey, 18 March.

With the outlook for rain promising, only three of us turned up to be guided by Dave Liddle in surveying these cryptic plants. As yet no one has seen any flowers, and the leaves are only around in the wet season. It was these leaves we were interested in.

The plants have been surveyed for a number of years and our task was to identify the plants within the plot and if possible relate it to previously surveyed plants, count their leaves, measure the size and state the percentage eaten.

After being shown what to do we split into two groups and managed to survey a total of 10 plots at 2 sites. Fortunately the looming storm passed us by with only a sprinkle and we were able to head home at mid-day. Dave has promised a detailed report at a later date.

Other Matters

Book Review

PLANTS THAT HEAL, THRILL AND KILL
by Wee Yeow Chin, published by SNP International, 2005.

Most of us who have a strong interest in plants are aware of the wide range of properties that plants have, but WeeYeow Chin's book provides a comprehensive coverage of some of the more remarkable properties of some plants. As Dr Wee notes, many plants have 'secret' properties that our ancestors have discovered over the millennia. The knowledge of societies from what are now Egypt, India, China and more recently Europe was independently developed by a trial and error process and often held by special people in these societies such as shamans and witchdoctors who knew the dosages required to produce the desired effect.

Meeting the third Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm at Marrara Christian School Library

Dr Wee (who is an academic at the University of Singapore, author of many articles and books but is a keen conservationist and botanist) categorises plants according to their effects on humans, and provides some fascinating details in the process. For example, in the past the shape, colour and texture of a plant was taken as an indication of its healing or curative properties. This was because diseases were considered to be the work of the Devil and God put signs on plants to counter the evil of the Devil; the Mandrake plant, with its forked root, was considered to resemble the human body, the liverwort with its liver-shaped thallus, the liver, and the walnut, with its brain-like surface, the brain. In modern medicine, a number of plants and plant products are either used directly for healing or used to produce synthetic derivatives.

I was very interested in the 'plants that thrill'; these range from the stimulants (eg caffeine-containing, tobacco and betel and cola-nut), depressants (eg alcohol and kava), narcotics (drugs that suppress the functions of the brain such as opium with its by products of morphine and heroin), hallucinogens (mind-altering drugs that in non-toxic doses produce changes in perceptions, thought and mood, such as 'magic' mushrooms, cacti (producing peyote and mescaline), the drug Ecstasy, cannabis and lysergic acid (LSD).

Then there are the deliriants (hexing herbs such as henbane, deadly nightshade and mandrake) that produce hallucinations and flights into the world of spirits. One particular drug, aconitine, from the plant monkshood, produces a tingling sensation as if hair is sprouting from the skin and its use by 'witches' is thought to account for their claims they could change into eg cats and wolves, and that the use of this drug on sticks on Witches Sabbath accounted for the stories of women riding on broomsticks with the sensation of flying. Plants are often thought to have aphrodisiac properties but there is little evidence of these working.

There is a long history of Man's use of poisons or 'plants that kill'; one third of the world's plant species produce poisonous substances in varying degrees of toxicity. One that many Territorians are familiar with is the resin from the mango that produces inflammation and blisters on the skin. Poisons have been widely used in history for political, criminal, execution, war or ordeal purposes. I was fascinated to learn that the fruit of the Caltrop plant (found in Casuarina Coastal Reserve for example) was used in Africa to kill enemies; the spikes of the fruit were soaked in poison and scattered along the path where the victim walked barefoot; a mere prick from a spike would cause death that the relatives thought was probably caused by snakebite or similar. Another example from Africa is the use of leaves of *Datura* sp to feed to beetles; the dung is collected and used to poison unfaithful lovers!

Man has always been very concerned about the safety of the food we eat and although a number of food plants contain poisons, we have developed ways of removing these poisons. For example, the tapioca or cassava root contains in the root a cyanide-producing glycoside which can be removed by peeling the root or multiple washings in water, depending on the cultivar. Most potato-eaters know that potato tubers that turn green after too much sun exposure are unsafe to eat due to increased alkaloid content. Aboriginal peoples have extensive knowledge of how to deal with poisonous plants that have food value.

Dr Wee's book contains many such gems of information for plant-lovers and is generously illustrated. Although there are few references to Top End natives, it deserves to be widely read and would be a worthwhile addition to the TENPS library.

Dr. Wee's excellent website is <http://besgroup.talfrynature.com/>

Geoff Gaskell
1 April 2007

Top End makes Australian Plant Society News.

Mark Henley, APS Newcastle editor, summarised a couple of articles on ornamental plants and the problems they can cause by Denise for their newsletter. The Australian Plants Society website is <http://asgap.org.au/>

WANTED !
One webmaster

We need a brave and knowledgeable soul happy to work on the TENPS website, in association with a bunch of loveable but largely computer-illiterate plant nuts.

Funding available for Community Groups

The following funding is available for community groups, such as TENPS, to apply for conservation projects. If you know of any projects that you think TENPS could or should undertake or assist with, please put a proposal to the Committee to consider. For further information on these Grants, refer to the websites.

Round 10 of the TSN Community Grants Program opens 2 April 2007

<http://wwf.org.au/tsn>

Managed by the [Threatened Species Network](#) (TSN), the grants program was established to support and inspire communities to conduct on-ground work for the ongoing health of our natural environment, specifically targeting the needs of nationally threatened species and ecological communities.

Funding is provided for activities such as:

- Habitat restoration
- Weeding and feral animal control
- Monitoring and surveying species populations
- Fencing
- Fire management

Australian Government Envirofund

<http://www.nht.gov.au/envirofund>

The Australian Government Envirofund is the local action component of the Australian Government's \$3 billion Natural Heritage Trust. It helps communities undertake local projects aimed at conserving biodiversity and promoting sustainable resource use.

Community groups and individuals can apply for grants of up to \$50,000 (GST inclusive) to carry out on-ground and other actions to target local problems.

What's in flower!

Photo by Sally Jacka

This Rainbow Lorikeet is tucking into the flowers of Golden Bridal Tree, *Xanthostemon paradoxus*.



**SENDER: TOP END NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY
PO BOX 135 PALMERSTON
NT 0831**

TO:

**~SUBSCRIPTION FORM MEMBERSHIP DUE 1 JULY ~
TOP END NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY
PO BOX 135 PALMERSTON NT 0831**

Please accept my subscription/renewal for membership of the Top End Native Plant Society

My details are as follows:

Name/s (Please print all family member names).....

.....

Postal AddressPost Code

Telephone (work)..... (home)

Email address.....

Newsletters are now available by email (Acrobat Reader required to read files).

If you would like your newsletter sent by email please tick the box.

Payment Enclosed \$..... (\$20.00 per member/family, \$15.00 unwaged)

Signature Date:/...../.....

Meeting the third Thursday of the month at 7:30 pm at Marrara Christian School Library