

What draws you to the Far North of Queensland, and what makes it so compelling?

Many people I know who grew up within the Wet Tropics and moved away have described a kind of haunting; involuntary memories that arise from early intimate encounters with that landscape, distinct from a more conscious form of nostalgia. It seems the climate and environment of the Far North have a way of permeating every aspect of your being.

I grew up at the head of the then sparsely populated Freshwater Valley, in Djabugay Country, where the landscape was my constant companion. The waters of Freshwater Creek coursed through most facets of my life and not infrequently through my dreams. The boulder-strewn banks of that creek were fringed by grand, tenacious water gums, gallery rainforests and half-hidden tributaries that formed a shifting zone of associations suspended between place and imagination. My early experience of that landscape was undoubtedly instrumental in shaping my view of the world, as well as many of my abiding interests.

Despite the ravages it has endured at the hands of settler culture, this ancient landscape remains one of the most biogeographically complex and ecologically critical zones on Earth. It has been a refuge for complex angiosperm-dominated rainforests for close to 100 million years. Numerous Indigenous nations have meticulously managed many of its ecosystems for over 5000 years.

The region is also one of the most internationally significant areas in the fields of modern rainforest ecology and tropical rainforest regeneration research and practice.

The deeper I delve, the more consuming my fascination with the region becomes.

Could you describe a childhood memory on the river bank?

I have so many childhood memories associated with Freshwater Creek that it is difficult to isolate one in particular. That whole riparian landscape functions as a theatre of memory within which an array of surreal, magical and occasionally shocking encounters and experiences seem to play out for me again and again in endless variation.

One particular memory, which often comes back to me, involves floating down a flooded Freshwater Creek in a rubber tube on my own around the age of 12. I drifted into a large 60-metre-wide stretch of waterhole where the rushing white water slows down to a broad surge. It was the peak of the wet season and the rain had been coming down heavily all week. On this day in particular it was unusually intense.

As I entered the waterhole the creek canopy gave way opening up to an expanse of dark rain clouds that filled my field of view. There I was floating along on the swollen waters with my head back, suspended between surface and space with the full force of a tropical deluge bearing down upon me. That image and its poetic associations is one that I will probably carry with me throughout my life.

How does it feel to photograph the Stockwellia?

I first visited the grove of Stockwellia trees on the western base of Mount Bartle Frere in Ngadjon-Jii Country with my father around 20 years ago. At the time we discussed their natural history and relatively recent Western scientific discovery as we wandered amidst the 500-plus-year-old giants.

I was awestruck and haunted by the appearance and stature of this unusual community of trees, as well as the distinctive atmosphere that seemed to characterise the Gondwanic refugial zone within which they have persisted since ancient times.

Ever since that first visit I've dreamt about returning to photograph the Stockwellia with an 8x10" view camera, and earlier this year I finally found an opportunity to do so.

Once again, I travelled with my father who guided me during the 30-minute walk through the forest, while I lugged 30 kilograms of photo gear. Upon arrival I reacquainted myself with the site and spent time with the many mature Stockwellia there. Each tree was individually quite distinct in appearance and character, and it took me a while to commit to exposing my first sheet of film.

When I finally came to making an exposure, the low light level, low iso values, film reciprocity failure and the necessarily small aperture settings frequently demanded that the shutter stay open for 20 minutes or more to achieve an adequate exposure on film.

That slow absorption of the scene, coupled with the intimate attention that the process encouraged felt particularly significant within this context. These trees, some of which were close to 1000 years old within a landscape they evolved in close to 50 million years ago, seemed to demand that the process itself took a lot longer than usual.

My father and I sat and observed the trees and the ever subtly shifting play of light and movement during the different individual exposures. At times we would talk about the landscape and at other times politics, most of the time we both sat in quiet reverie. During one of the exposures, a little musky rat kangaroo emerged from a hollow in the roots of one of the larger trees to graze. It had likely been waiting some time for us to leave and had finally lost patience.

It struck me what a remarkable privilege it was to sit there quietly with my 82-year-old dad deep in the rainforest, making slow photographs while the oldest remaining ancestor of the kangaroo shuffled around beneath one of the oldest remaining ancestors of the eucalypts.

Has your father, a pioneering ecologist, influenced your ways of seeing the wet sclerophyll forests of your childhood home?

My father's 60-year career working as an ecologist in the region has undoubtedly influenced me in the way I make sense of its unique landscapes. Over the last decade in particular, our conversations and travels together throughout the region have given me insights into the ecological provenance and conservation status of its threatened Wet Sclerophyll forests. From the Indigenous stewardship, which shaped the evolution of those Sclerophyll ecosystems

throughout the Holocene, to their broad-scale transition from open grassy forests to simple rainforest in many areas over the last century, better understanding of those environments has shaped the evolution and scope of my photographic work here.

It is now scientifically and historically well established that the landscape that Europeans first colonised in Northern Queensland in the late 19th Century was the product of meticulous customary Indigenous land management over many millennia. Central to these management systems was the regular, deliberate and varied use of fire to serve many different purposes.

The European disruption of these ancient regimes in the Wet Tropics over the last century has led to rapid changes in many parts of the landscape. Over the last 40 years alone I've observed changes in many landscapes that would have previously taken many millennia to occur. Due to these unprecedented rates of change, the species that long occupied those fire-dependent ecosystems have been unable to evolve fast enough to cope with their new environments. Many now face imminent local and, in some cases, global extinction.

How has this Far North landscape shifted in your time of knowing & photographing it?

Many of the landscapes within the Freshwater valley, as well as the broader Wet Tropics region, have changed dramatically in the time since I first arrived here. Some have undergone profound human-aided regeneration, while others appear to have lapsed into a terminal process of attrition.

The withdrawal of Indigenous fire regimes has caused significant biodiversity loss in some areas.

What's more the hot burning fires introduced for agricultural and railway line maintenance pushed the original rainforest vegetation boundary back high upon the slopes of the Freshwater Valley.

These fires were lit annually over a period of more than half a century, but their withdrawal in the mid 80s has been a positive for the rainforests. Natural succession and the dedicated work of people restoring the landscape has seen bare hillslopes dramatically transitioning back to rainforest.

There have also been many inspiring success stories relating to environmental rehabilitation throughout the Wet Tropics too. The work undertaken by the Wet Tropics Revegetation Project, as well as community organisations such as TREAT, have achieved many world-leading outcomes for rainforest rehabilitation and vegetation corridor establishment over the last four decades.

The important work being undertaken by Indigenous Ranger groups throughout the Wet Tropics has also resulted in significant benefits to the ecological health and appearance of a diverse mix of landscapes.

