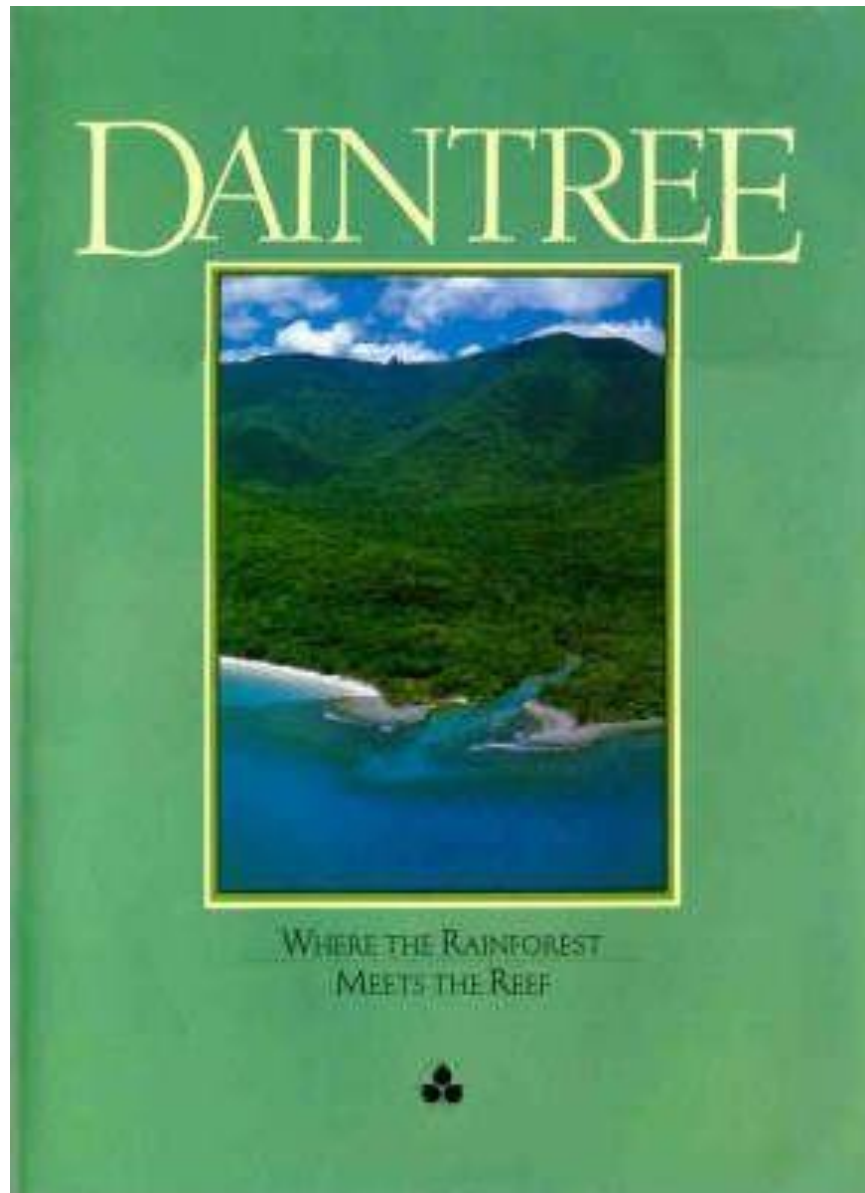


Daintree

By Rupert Russell



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

*Daintree: Where the Rainforest Meets the Reef.
Our Last Paradise at Risk.* By Rupert Russell. Photography by
Leo Meier and Cliff and Dawn Frith.

Melbourne and Sydney; Kevin Weldon and Associates Pty.
Ltd./The Australian Conservation Foundation. 1985. Reprints
in 1986 1988 1989 and 1994 (revised). Illustrated with scores
of coloured photographs and a map. 256 pages.



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This remarkable book was first published on New Year's Day 1985 and public interest in the issue about saving the Daintree was so great that it soon went into several reprints in the later 1980s. A revised edition appeared in 1994. That is the issue reviewed here

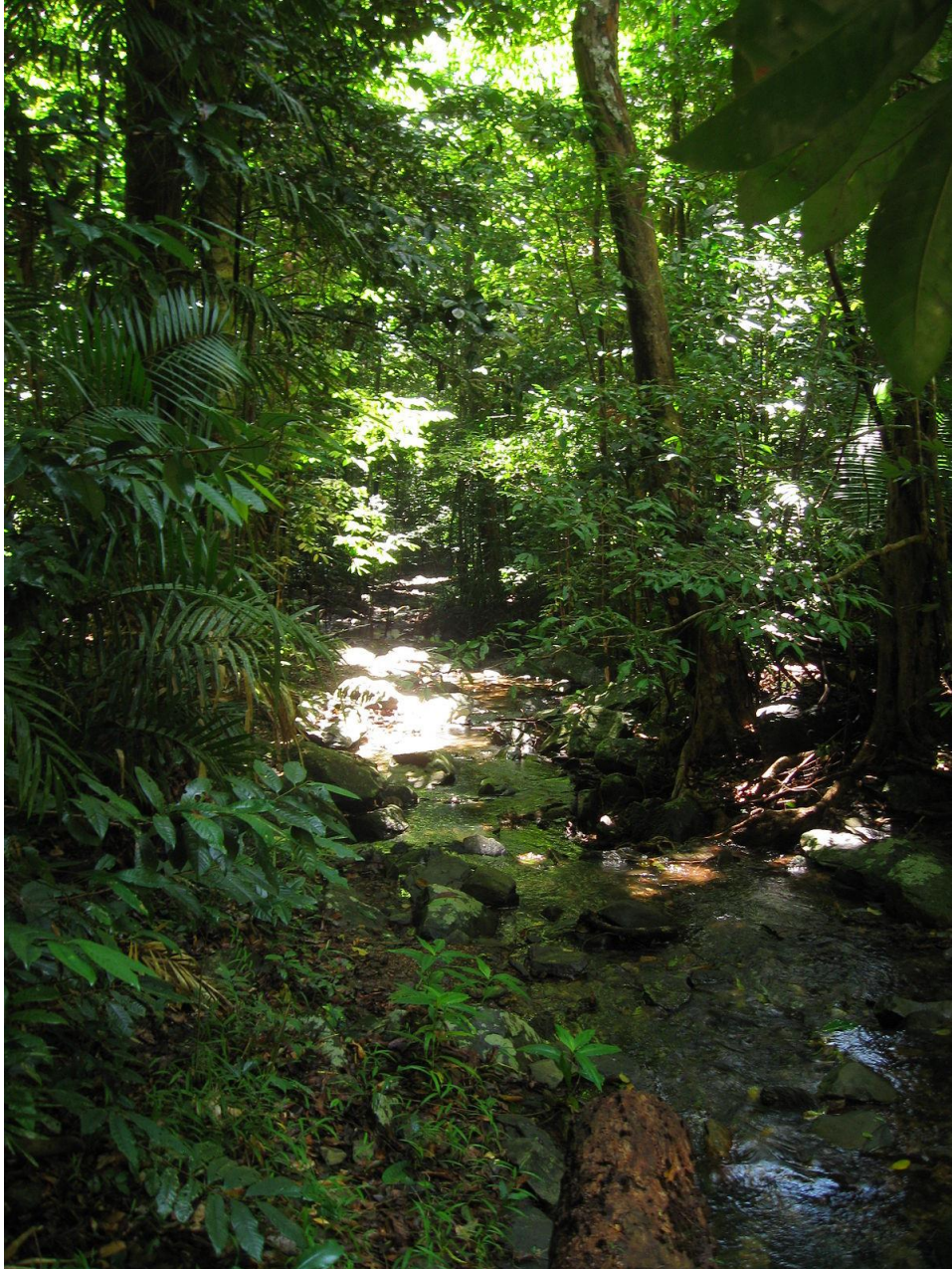
While writer Rupert Russell calls for the saving of the Daintree area, he wisely avoids the frequently simplistic, uninformed and emotive propaganda which this issue generates. By their

nature conservation and development polarize and usually lead to polarizing propaganda. *Daintree: Where the Rainforest Meets the Reef* becomes a rare exception.

Russell avoids this tendency by starting with a combination of description and information about changing climates, landforms and flora and fauna within far north Queensland. He focuses on the wilderness between Cooktown and Kuranda, with the westerly sections of the Great Dividing Range being the enclosing eastern side. Each description comes with scientific information and all flora, fauna, forests and landscapes are located in specific areas with their individual traits detailed. Russell writes cautiously about these things, letting the reader know when the information remains disputed or knowledge gaps exist. This comes as a welcome relief to the usual emphatic statements about ecology. Almost everything mentioned gets a beautiful bright photograph. These photographs and the accompanying text take up over half the book. In that large section a few references are made concerning threats, extinction, government policies and ecology, but only in the book's last third do these issues become the book's focus. This soon appears as wise as the first sections are descriptive and informative about what must be saved and why. The stunning beauty and the uniqueness revealed here show that the loss of this wilderness would be a tragedy. Russell lets the pictures and descriptions show that beauty and uniqueness.

In the book's last third he does go into the ecological dangers; the plans for the area's future and what were the unfolding threats and conflicts in the middle of the 1980s. Russell avoids simplistic viewpoints and tirades and does not lay all the blame on the developers. He reproduces government documents and then soberly explains their obvious and implicit meanings. Why explain the obvious? Because where these obviously stated intentions will lead may not always be as obvious. In the 1980s Government agencies and public servants encouraged developers to continue tin mining and logging. Russell uses his imagination to take issue on why we

need cattle, tin and timber: he rightly concludes that much of our supposed need for these raw materials really goes into processing unnecessary, ecologically devastating consumerist junk.



*Daintree Rainforest. Photographed by Killerscene Permission
Creative Commons CCO 1.0 Universal Public Domain
Dedication. 2011*



Daintree Village. By 2016 129 people lived there. Courtesy Wikimedia

He then gives some positive advice about the Daintree: open it up for sustained careful tourism. Even as he wrote this process was starting with the opening of the international airport at Cairns. By the later 1980s international tourism was really taking off and continued until the advent of covid-19. It was a mixed blessing, bringing prosperity and high levels of employment for many and preservation for several historic and ecologically important sites. This reviewer lived for fifteen years in far north Queensland during the tourist boom, so work and travel took me to many resorts and motels. Without exception they fitted in well with the environment, being tastefully designed. They were also ecologically sustainable. There were also benefits for the tourists. There was the sight of an elderly Danish woman diving on the reef, being led by the hand by a professional diver. She said after surfacing that she had never seen anything so wonderful. When an English tourist at the Cape Tribulation beach burst into tears and was asked what was wrong, she said nothing was, she had been overcome by the sight of something so beautiful. For hundreds of thousands of tourists, sea and sunlight heal depression and

awaken unit dwellers to the delights and powers of nature. Russell was onto something.



The Daintree River

Courtesy of Wikipedia

Although eventually a sealed road from Cairns to Cooktown did go through the rainforest, the other developments were stalled: the protesters had won. Even the road was a mixed blessing and curse: yes it did cause ecological damage, but so did transport ships on the reef and small planes in the air, both more likely to damage the environment with their pollution than the road would ever cause. Reliance on the road rather than these transport modes must have reduced pollution. The road also made the far north economy more reliant on the tourists who used it. Sustaining the environment to keep the lucrative tourist economy rather than



Ulysses Butterfly [Jurgen Otto, flickr creative commons, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)



Cassin's Cassin's Ostrich [James Reed, flickr creative commons, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0](#)

expanding the cattle, sugar, mining and timber industries remains definitely preferable: the roadkill might be the cost. The negative side to tourism is egregious. In Cairns in 1991 the city echoed to pile drivers starting tourist hotel foundations. From before six in the morning to late at night, day after day, the tedious, loud noise went on. When the council and residents complained that this was against regulations the foreign investors threatened to withdraw and a thousand people would lose their jobs. The pile driving continued. So did the basketball players, who avoided the day's extreme heat by repeatedly playing their games in the night's early morning hours. When nearby residents complained the basketball players threatened to murder them. Ice cream vans supplied a need day and night, playing the same tedious tune within the hearing of the same people for up to thirteen hours straight, driving people out of their homes. The police could do nothing, as this was not illegal: indeed the drivers threatened those trying to request them to leave with arrest for harassing them. Meanwhile they continued to feed indigenous children an almost exclusive diet of ice cream, which could only be deleterious.

Indigenous children seem the biggest losers of the tourist boom. Apart from diet, the habit of using them to get lost golf balls out of snake-infested areas comes to mind. There is also the appropriation of their culture. Some European tourists paint up supposedly indigenous art for the tourist trade, while junky imitation artifacts and clothing are imported into Far North Queensland from various Asian cities.

Other more insidious threats, which Russell mentions as developing in *Daintree: Where the Rainforest Meets the Reef*, have become more common in the 1980s. It is very possible (indeed common in ecology) to love the environment to death. Far North Queensland provides a salient example. Russell refers to those who buy blocks of wilderness land (known as blockies, although he does not use that term) and then put down cement blocks, driveways and roads.

Some hippies also rightfully get a blast, although Russell does not differentiate amongst them; some prioritize ecology, some profits. With a great proportion, their secluded marijuana crops planted in the rainforest need sunlight and so they carve acreage out of the forest.

In microcosm the environmental effects caused by farmers, miners, blockies and hippies devastate little areas within their close proximity, but add up all those little microcosms and you eventually have a macrocosm; something little different from the noise, uniformity and general dreariness these people tried to escape from. This was made vividly clear to this writer when travelling by suburban bus from the once isolated, idyllic town of Gordonvale to Cairns through the new endless identikit suburbs. Each house was made of besa block with some tropical plants in the small front garden and a roller door on the garage. Everything on the properties was painted in identikit pastel colorings. Maintaining the uniformity, a distance of maybe two metres, perhaps a little more existed between gutterings. This was shared and divided by a timber or tin fence. Residents also shared the incessant noise from the nearby major highway and a view of the mountain range where those with the money for a bigger besa block property lived.

This sticks in the memory because everything in these suburbs was so identical that a bus driver mistook identical streets and so mistook his bus route out of the rabbit warren. He could not find anything different to use as a landmark and so was reduced to asking the passengers for the way out.

That rabbit warren was built on what had been prime farmland and that farmland had once been primeval rainforest. Will the same happen further north? Apart from the ever-spreading blockies, there is what happened in Port Douglas as an example. A 1970 visitor described that town as a wonderful place - for some developer to wreck very soon. Christopher Skase did indeed turn up and has come in for widespread criticism, much of it for the development or over-

development of Port Douglas. Even so, Skase had his standards. He refused to build on the beach and even about a hundred metres back from where he did build there were no high rises. He insisted on only quality building materials and according to two separate accounts on at least one occasion ordered hotel accessories, (including lighting) to be ripped out and replaced because they looked cheap. Skase installed quality replacements at high a cost. One account came from an eyewitness ordered to do this by Skase. Port Douglas has not been ruined, but it has been gentrified, a paradise for millionaires.



A rainforest canopy track. Courtesy Creative Commons / wikiwand

Unfortunately despite the victories won, developers much worse than Skase are waiting for their chance.

Hopefully the new mood for ecology that has emerged since *Daintree: Where the Rainforest Meets the Reef. Our Last Paradise at Risk* was first published will prevail.

Postscript:

In September 2021 government decisions meant that the Daintree was returned to Aboriginal ownership while keeping its UNESCO rating –for now. Failing to continually meet UNESCO’S four criteria can mean a loss of the protective status which being a heritage site gives.

What has happened at Hawk’s Nest on the New South Wales North Coast might be a legal precedent and is definitely a warning. After a government decision to give Crown Land to the local Aboriginal Land Council, they soon sold some of it for \$600,000 to developers, who intended to make a hundred million by reselling it after building units there. Amongst the developers were two who had been jailed for corrupt land dealings.

While not conclusive, all evidence currently available suggests that the Hawk’s Nest development will be a repeat of the Gold Coast North Wollongong and Shellharbor, places where once relaxed communities in idyllic settings are now overcrowded, expensive, noisy and gentrified. People originally from these places often leave and cannot bear to go back.

Will this happen to the Daintree? If the UNESCO rating fails, almost certainly. Consider how so many of these land returns result in mining leases....



Rupert Russell

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