

TERANIA TERRORS

By Berwyn Lewis

A FEW weeks ago I had the chance to take a walk through a rainforest at Terania creek about 40 miles northwest of Lismore. To someone like me from the "big smoke" this portion of what was once The Big Scrub is like walking into another world. But it's a world which will soon disappear for the next 1000 years if the Country Sawmillers Association or Standard Sawmilling Co Pty Ltd of Murwillumbah (the mill whose current quote includes Terania creek) get their way.

We had walked through thick, tall clumps of lantana, past 20 to 30 feet high kentian palms with only smatterings of sky coming through the canopy of green overhead. The darkness of the jungle highlighted the brilliance of the dark blue and black parakeets and the yellow/ruby/green/blue bellied four to five inch long butterflies.

At first it was all a bit freaky — plucking off the ubiquitous leeches, dodging the "lawyer vine" (also known as the "wait-a-while vine") so called because of its habit of wrapping its long and tentacle-like hooked arms around you when you brush against it. I had several brushes with this little delight but luckily I was wearing a thick, long sleeved shirt so it didnt get a hold of my flesh.

Sometimes we were climbing steep slopes, sometimes walking through rotting branches of fallen trees or scrambling across a slippery floor of dank vegetation which gave out crushed spearmint and tomato smells. Some of the tree trunks were frilled with spongy fungi which looked exactly like the skin of rotting human bodies. It was cold, wet and flabby and intricately filigreed with a raised surface of white "vein" tracings. One piece looked exactly like a human ear and smelled like a mushroom. There were sprays of wild orchids cascading down the sides of dead, old tree trunks being taken over by the strangler fig roots which grow downwards from the boughs of the host tree.

Inevitably it started to rain and inevitably we got lost several times. My friend left me standing on the six feet high trunk of a fallen tree while he set off to search for a familiar landmark. Every now and again a leaf bent under the weight of the rainwater it was holding and the water crashed to the ground. Each time I jumped thinking it was a snake leaping out of a tree towards me or some sort of forest yeti coming to get me. I was surrounded by a cathedral like 80 feet high wall of green which completely blocked out the sky and daylight. It was too wet to light a cigarette. I wasnt sure if my friend would find his way back and began to make mental adjustments about where I was going to spend the night. Luckily I lived to tell the tale but will the rainforest live to tell its?

It turns out that the decision not to log the Terania creek rainforest section was made by the state government without consulting Standard Sawmilling. They're a bit pissed off and have stated that they propose to lobby the minister for conservation and water resources, A. R. L. Gordon, to have this decision reversed.

On 17 january 1978, Gordon stated that the forestry commission "still strongly believes that logging of this type of rainforest to a 50 percent canopy retention is usually justifiable".



If this happens the results of a three year battle with government and private organisations will be lost. The struggle has involved the Terania Native Forests Action Group, NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service people who have assessed the area and recommended that it be turned into a national park, and the Australian museum which conducted a bird count and came up with 26 species of rainforest dependent birdlife and three new sub species of mollusc.

On a recent trip into the forest with Alex Floyd, research scientist from the forestry commission, they found a huge scattered stand of red cedars in excess of 300 years old and 35 metres (120 feet) tall. Floyd was impressed and said: "Scientifically there's still a hell of a lot to know about rainforests."

Some time later ornithologists from the Australian museum played "come on" call tapes of the seldom seen log runner bird in the rainforest. The ornithologist operating the tape was staggered when log runners appeared from everywhere. He'd never seen one before.

In one section of the rainforest there is believed to be

the biggest white beech in NSW, possibly in Australia. It stands 150 feet tall and is eight feet wide across the base of the trunk. It won't be there for much longer because it is slowly being absorbed by a strangler fig. It's possible to climb right up inside this tree by the web of fig roots inside the hollowed out beech trunk which looks like a macrame pattern of roots and provides perfect hand and foot holds. On reaching the top you can climb right out on to its branches and look over the sea of motionless green waves which is the rainforest canopy.

Strangler fig seeds are spread by bird shit which is dropped on to the boughs of host trees. Gradually the fig grows down, roots first. "There's nothing you can do about it. It's part of the evolution of the rainforest," said my friend who is a member of the action group.

One of their aims is to oppose the logging of Terania creek basin and the use of Terania creek road as a logging road. The basin is spectacularly beautiful with over 400 acres of untouched rainforest. The group believes that "it is in everyone's interest to preserve our native forests, to establish new ones, so that our children and the generations to follow can enjoy the beauty and benefits of our natural forests".

Another threat to the rainforest is the burning or clearing of its natural buffer zones of blackbutt and eucalypt and stands of brushbox which is a changeover stage between rainforest and eucalypt. It is limited and it is being rapidly felled and is not being regenerated. It is not yet known how the rainforest will respond to this in the long term or how the remnants of the original wildlife will be affected as so little is known of their range and requirements.

Gordon's letter of 17 january also states that "as the logging will be on a selective basis and will be confined to the brushbox and blackbutt stands, with no rainforest being logged, and as Terania creek road will not be used, I believe the Terania Native Forests Action Group should agree that there is now no reason to object to this proposed logging operation".

It has been estimated that after logging 50 percent of the rainforest it will take about 150 years to recover and about 800 to 1000 years after total clearing. In spite of this it is intended that these forests be logged again in 30 to 50 years.

Another point being made by the action group is that the logging trucks will increase traffic hazards on the inadequate Terania creek road. The forestry commission considers these claims "exaggerated" . . . "However, in order to avoid any of these hazards, arrangements are being made for log hauliers to avoid using the Terania creek road." In other words, they'll simply use another one.

Looking around the rainforest at the vines, staghorns, orchids, ferns and pines it was hard to understand and believe that it could go the way of the surrounding countryside which was once part of the original rainforest but is now one of Australia's most depressed rural areas with its erosion, weeds, overworked pasture and croplands. And all this for a timber reserve which will be exhausted after 14 years but would, in the meantime, wipe out a forest which took millions of years to evolve and thousands of years to regrow.

