

# Assimilating the bunya forests

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The fate of the bunya forests is a compelling story of assimilation and survival. The forests' significance for local Aboriginal people stretches back over the millennia but with colonisation they were assimilated into European systems of scientific, economic, environmental and horticultural knowledge and practices. The forests have survived into the present although their range is greatly diminished. Aboriginal people today continue to revere the bunya tree and it remains one of an elite group of trees admired and studied around the world.

The bunya pine is endemic to the South-East of Queensland with small, related stands in the north of the state. During the bunya season from January to March the trees produce vast numbers of cones bearing edible nuts, with bumper crops occurring on a roughly three year cycle. The forests were imbedded in Aboriginal systems of environmental knowledge and classification of the natural world and efficient management of their resources. Local groups were bound to them through custodial obligations and rights. Early colonists recorded their profound cultural and spiritual significance for Aboriginal people as expressed in mythology and religious practices centred on large seasonal ceremonial gatherings. The bunya nuts provided a food resource sufficient to support gatherings of hundreds, some say thousands of Aboriginal people over a period of months to harvest the nuts and feast together. As the harvest time approached messengers were sent out by the forest custodians to announce the coming festival and some people travelled hundreds of kilometres to congregate at specific sites in today's Blackall Ranges and the Bunya Mountains. There they joined in ceremonies, settled disputes, held fights, arranged marriages and traded goods until the season drew to a close and they returned to their home territories.

With the advent of British colonisation in the Moreton Bay area in the 1820s, colonists also staked a claim to the forests. The bunya pine's majestic height, unique silhouette, dark foliage that was so different to the dull green of the eucalypt bush, unusual botanical features, Indigenous associations and potential as commercial timber drew the interest of a wide range of colonists including artists, natural scientists, entrepreneurs and gardeners. First reports of the tree came from escaped convicts and then free colonists such as Andrew Petrie who collected samples on a trip north with Aboriginal people to the Glass House Mountains. Explorer Ludwig Leichhardt who visited the Blackall Ranges in 1843 enthused in his journals over the 'remarkable mountain brushes, out of which the bunya-bunyas lift their majestic heads, like pillars of the blue vault of heaven' (McKay and Buckridge 2002: 66). Accounts of Aborigines' fierce protection of the trees led to an official proclamation in 1842 prohibiting settlers from cutting the trees. However the bunya forests were progressively felled for timber and cleared to make way for cultivation.

Despite their 'fierce and actively hostile tribal resistance' Aboriginal groups were gradually driven out of the forests and by the end of the nineteenth century their spectacular festivals had become a thing of the past. (Evans 2002, 59). However, their importance was kept alive through Aboriginal oral tradition and continued practices of harvesting the nuts. At the same time in colonial folklore, and in writings such as Cornelius Moynihan's ballad *Feast of the Bunya*, the great

ceremonies were reduced to events of primeval barbarism and the facts of Aboriginal resistance were erased by prevailing Social Darwinian beliefs of Aborigines' inevitable demise.

Empty landscapes left by the retreating forests came to symbolise the vanishing ceremonies and dwindling Aboriginal populations of South-East Queensland. While surviving Aboriginal groups were swept into centralised reserves and settlements from the late nineteenth century, so too the bunya trees were cordoned off in 1908 for their own protection in Queensland's second national park at the Bunya Mountains. A visiting ornithologist observed in 1920 that the remaining trees appeared as if 'in mourning over their vanished kin-spirits, the original Queenslanders who held high revel at the Feast of the Bunyas' (Chisholm 1920, 208).

Ironically, at the same time as the bunya was disappearing from its natural habitat, it was making its way along the networks of empire into the centres of nineteenth century botanical research and into public and private gardens around the world. In the process it became assimilated into European systems of environmental knowledge and horticultural practices and scientists and gardeners assumed custodianship of the tree.

In 1843, after a brief visit to Moreton Bay to investigate the bunya pine, botanist John Carne Bidwill returned to England with dried and living bunya specimens, which he presented to Sir William Jackson Hooker at the Royal Botanical Gardens at Kew. Later that year in the *London Journal of Botany* Hooker announced the tree's scientific classification and nomenclature as *Araucaria bidwillii*. In this way the tree was incorporated into the grand system of botanical classification and nomenclature invented by Swedish botanist Carl Linnaeus in the early eighteenth century, which was based on particulars of plant morphology and sexual distinctions. In keeping with botanical nomenclature Hooker honoured Bidwill in naming the tree, despite its various recorded Aboriginal names and the colonists' naming of the tree in honour of Andrew Petrie.

The bunya was cast into a vast network of new relationships spanning time, space and cultures which provided new explanations of its origins and nature and new human connections. The bunya now belonged to the primeval class of gymnosperms—plants without flowers—and the order of coniferates—woody cone bearing plants—the forests of which had covered the ancient continent of Gondwana in Jurassic times when dinosaurs roamed the earth. The tree belonged to the family of Araucariaceae and the genus *Araucaria* whose 18 member species are found in parts of South America, islands of the South Pacific and the east coast of Australia. The family and genus names were derived from Indigenous terms for a tribal group and region of Southern Chile where Europeans first observed the monkey-puzzle tree, *A. Araucana*, whose edible nuts are still harvested as a food staple by local Pehuenche Indians.

Knowledge about the tree spread out through the empire along the conventional scientific pathways of publications, exchange of specimens, and botanical representations of the tree. During the late 1850s from his base at the Melbourne Botanical Gardens, Baron Sir Ferdinand von Mueller forwarded seeds to the Kew Gardens in England and to botanical gardens in Australia and New Zealand. Bunyas grown from these seeds were listed at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens in 1857, and in 1876 Walter Hill, Director of the Brisbane Botanical Gardens, sent in a further specimen. In 1863 Kew Gardens boasted a bunya tree of four metres that, ten years later, was reported to be bearing massive cones. Botanical artist Marianne North's drawings and paintings recorded during a visit to Queensland in 1880 and 1881 still hang in the Marianne North Gallery at Kew Gardens.

Scientific interest in the tree spilled over into the worlds of commercial nurseries and public and private gardens. Like many other botanists, John Bidwill combined his scientific interests with entrepreneurial activities seeking out exotic plant species in the colonies for the firm of Luscombe, Pince and Co. in his hometown of St Thomas in Exeter, which had plant collectors operating in Mexico, Brazil, West Africa and Australia during the 1840s. The bunya pine's symmetrical shape, domed crown, straight trunk, height, and exotic origins fitted well with fashions of nineteenth century landscape gardening, making the bunya and its close relative the monkey puzzle tree ready favourites with the gardening public of Victorian England. In particular, the Gardenesque style,

promoted by John Claudius Loudon (1873-43), which dominated garden fashions from the early nineteenth century, ‘emphasised the use of exotic plants, which were placed in specific settings in the landscape so that the individual colour and form of the tree could best be appreciated’ (Cooke 2002: 85).

These fashions were also evident in the Australian colonies. By the early 1860s bunya plants could be purchased in Melbourne nurseries, while circulating nursery catalogues offered gardeners a variety of Araucarian species. The bunya’s design qualities of good definition with height and dark green foliage rendered it highly suitable for large open expanses and the trees were used extensively for landscaping in public gardens and on country estates in Victoria where they stood as testimony to the status and wealth of their owners. Arranged in groups or as feature trees they were also used to adorn large public institutions such as the St Vincent Orphanage at Nudgee in Brisbane and the Goodna Mental Asylum (now Wolston Park) on the outskirts of the city.

With the development of nursery plantations in Queensland from the early twentieth century large quantities of cheap plants became available for civic plantings around Australia. In Perth bunya trees were planted at Raphael Park, Queens Park, Beattie Park, Hyde Park, Kings Park, Perth Zoo, Karrakatta Cemetery and in the grounds of the University of Western Australia. The bunya’s presence in such civic settings also reflected its emerging symbolic meanings in settler culture of commemoration and the expression of Australian nationhood. This was evident in plantings to mark out cemeteries, as in the Toowong Cemetery in Brisbane, and war memorials erected in many country towns after the First World War. In 1927 the tree represented Australian nationhood at a ceremonial tree planting by the Duke of York to commemorate the opening of Parliament House.

The bunya forests were also of interest to the timber industry. Despite controls lasting into the 1860s and preference for other local timbers such as kauri, hoop and red cedar, cutters, sawyers and bullock drivers were already cutting a swathe through the forests when the Bunya Mountains were thrown open for selection in 1878. This unleashed a tide of destructive felling of stands of bunya and hoop pine to provide soft wood timber for commercial use in furniture, floor boards, fences and so on. In 1890 a government report recommended preservation of the forests through reservation and controlled management and ten years later a forestry branch was set up in the Department of Public Lands manned by an Inspector of Forests and two rangers required to control forests throughout the state. In the 1920s the government turned to the development of silviculture with the establishment of commercial hoop and bunya plantations. Meanwhile reduced saw-milling persisted in the Bunya Mountains into the mid-1940s and cutting down on private land continued on an unrestricted basis.

Bunya plantings for civic and private purposes declined dramatically from the 1930s. However, many trees are still standing in such far-flung places as the botanical gardens in Trinidad, Singapore and Naples, in the grounds of the University of California, the Sarasota Jungle Gardens in Florida, and at numerous sites in New Zealand. Bunyas still found in Australian cities now constitute an aging population of trees. Often perched precariously close to busy thoroughfares their continued existence is subject to the economies of local council budgets. Some have become the subject of bunya paranoia—the fear of bunya cones (which can weigh as much as ten kilograms) crashing from a great height onto pedestrians in public parks and other open spaces. This fear has posed a new threat with frequent demands for the trees to be chopped down. Less radical solutions include programs to cull the cones during the fruiting season, safety nets to catch the cones, and prominently displayed warning notices.

Meanwhile the bunya forests and plantations are becoming an increasingly valued resource, not for their timber but for the tourist and native food industries. The Bunya Mountains is now the centre of a thriving tourist industry and elsewhere ecotours take visitors to view remaining stands of the tree. Recipes using bunya nuts are offered on restaurant menus and the nuts are also commercially available. In 2005 the bunya nut was added to the Slow Food movement’s Ark of Taste and the bunya nut was included in a session, ‘Taste of Slow’, at the 2005 Melbourne Food and Wine Festival. Alternative food sites on the web encourage cultivation of the tree for personal

use. A new interest in the monumental amongst landscape gardeners has rekindled interest in ornamental use of the tree in Australia and overseas. Conservationists are propagating the tree to ensure its preservation and some gardeners continue to plant the tree for sentimental reasons. The Queensland Government is now supporting a move to add the Bunya Mountains to the World Heritage list.

Until recently Aboriginal voices have been largely absent from public discussion of the forests and their management. This does not signify a lack of interest on the part of Aboriginal custodians; rather, as Marcia Langton reminds us, the general absence of Indigenous people from environmental planning and debates represents 'not just a lacuna, but a comprehensive flaw in understanding the role of human presence in Australian landscapes' (Langton 1998, 72). Over the many decades of colonisation Aboriginal people retained their devotion to the tree and attempted to maintain their obligations of custodianship. A large tree still standing at the site of the former Deebing Creek Mission on the outskirts of Ipswich is believed to have been planted by Aboriginal families removed there from the Bunya Mountains in the early twentieth century. In 1931 Jenny Lynn, an elderly Aboriginal resident of Barambah (later Cherbourg) reserve near Murgon, protested to J. W. Bleakley, the Chief Protector of Aboriginals, at the cutting down of 'the best part of the Bunya trees', which she and other residents continued to harvest for their nuts. A note from the reserve superintendent on her letter indicated the futility of her quest:

Old Jeannie [sic] spoke to me about this. I told her not to be silly. Of course it is serious in the Natives eyes. The Forestry dept, are cutting down the trees (Evans 2002, 59).

To this day throughout South-East Queensland during the bunya season Aboriginal families join together in harvesting and eating the nuts. Recently groups have adopted the settler practice of commemorative plantings as a way of formally honouring their people and cultures. In Canberra in 2001 Aboriginal people joined others at the Peace Park adjacent to the National Library in planting the bunya pine as the 'International Tree of Peace', reflecting the significance of the bunya ceremonies in creating peaceful relations between local groups. In the same year the Purga community near Ipswich began planting a commemorative avenue of bunya pines on their property to honour their elders.

Aboriginal people are now beginning to publicly assert their custodianship of the bunya forests through public meetings with environmental and other planning authorities, native title claims and plans to revive the bunya festivals and to establish related economic enterprises. The reopening by Aboriginal custodians of channels of sharing and exchange remains a guarded process given continued appropriation of resources and knowledge by non-Indigenous groups. This story of the survival of the bunya forests ends with the reclaiming of Aboriginal custodial rights. This was the powerful message delivered by Paddy Jerome, Jarowair elder and custodian of the Bunya Mountains, to a symposium on the bunya pine held in Brisbane in 2002:

Now we are trying to keep all of our ways alive. It is very important that we revive the bunya festivals and our people are talking about this. We are already reviving the initiations. ... But first we need to reconcile with our Aboriginal ancestors. ... My people believe that every living thing on this earth was linked spirituality and each and every one of us must respect the earth and each other as equal. ... My ancestors walked through this land, the land speaking to them ... We belong to this land, the land is our Mother. We are part of a spiritual structure. That's Aboriginal culture. That is Boobarran Ngummin, the Bunya Mountains, our Mother (Jerome 2002: 4-5).

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