the Tarkine

What future for a precious wilderness in north-west Tasmania?

STORY BY GABI MOCATTA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOE SHEMESH

FRAGILE WORLD
Adorned with native laurel, the mossy banks of a tannin-stained creek speak of an ancient yet fragile environment. But the 3500 sq. km Tarkine region, which includes Australia's largest temperate rain-forest, faces an uncertain future, with logging of age-old myrtle beech imminent.

ROB BLAKERS

Bathed in golden dawn light, the Tarkine's myrtle forest stretches to buttongrass-clad hills. Tasmania's north-west wilderness is spoiled for vistas such as this, but with little of the rainforest protected, much of it could face destruction. And if this happens, the sound of chainsaws will drown out the sweet melody of native birds in this ancient forest.

I lie on the sun-bleached sand facing a roaring Southern Ocean. Belly down, I absorb the dunes' soporific heat. When I raise my head and look inland, a purple swathe of heathland tumbles seawards from distant peaks. The land is still and baking under a shimmering summer haze. Further down the beach – a wild and unpeopled expanse – a tea-coloured creek winds between wind-sculpted dunes and then spills its waters across blond sand into the racing ocean. The scene is hypnotic, as if the land possessed an additional dimension: a barely audible murmuring of some unseen power.

This place is wildness. Wilderness. This is Tasmania's Tarkine.

That blazing January day was the first of many expeditions to acquaint myself with this magnificent and varied territory in Tasmania's north-west: an environment so delicate, yet so inadequately protected, and so much under threat. There would be icy, silent winter nights beneath the rainforest canopy. Summer days wallowing in tannin-stained creeks. Windswept walks along a jagged coastline. Rivers paddled, peaks climbed. Eagles, gorges, waterfalls. Closeness kindled by remoteness. Evenings lit by glow-worms and overarched with stars.

During a year of discovery I would become entranced by the Tarkine, and with a growing sense of dread, uncover both how little known and vulnerable this priceless place is.

GIANT IN WAITING ***Shooting skyward, the trunk of a young myrtle beech wears a coat of forest lichen. An ancient Gondwanic species, myrtle – with its highly sought-after timber – is the dominant tree species in Tarkine rainforests. Undisturbed, a myrtle can reach 60 m and have a 10 m girth.***

ROB BLAKERS

Frontier land

TARKINE IS SO UNFAMILIAR to the wider world that even the name is controversial. Many people in Tasmania – organised chiefly along political and industry lines – steadfastly refuse to acknowledge that a region such as the Tarkine exists (see *In the name of the fathers*, page 47). What does exist here is, however, indisputable.

The Tarkine is some 3500 sq. km of crown land in the remote north-west of Tasmania. Apart from a handful of holiday shacks, the Tarkine is uninhabited. Bounded partly by two great rivers, the Arthur to the north and the Pieman to the south, and the turbulent Southern Ocean to the west, the Tarkine is an island of land that has survived undeveloped because of its isolation. And extreme weather; the Tarkine bears the full brunt of the Roaring Forties, experiencing wild winter storms with winds of up to 180 km/h; 10 m waves often pound its shores, and the annual rainfall is 3 m.

The environment here is extraordinarily diverse. A jagged western coastline is backed by a complex of shifting dunes that shelter freshwater lagoons and wetlands. Smooth green marsupial lawns are surrounded by fragrant banksia, tea-tree and brightly coloured pigface. Behind the coast, the land rises gently to low coastal heathland and buttongrass





plains where the Norfolk Range punctuates the landscape like a message written in braille. But it's the forest that's the heart of the Tarkine. Some 2400 sq. km of it clothe the undulating country in the region's east. Tall eucalypts dominate the drier areas, but in the wet, secluded hills and valleys are the Tarkine's jewels. Here, mostly untouched by human intervention, and largely unchanged since it was part of the supercontinent Gondwana 60 million years ago, is Australia's largest contiguous tract of rainforest – one of only three remaining temperate rainforests in the world.

"It's one of the last frontiers," says the University of Tasmania's Professor Jamie Kirkpatrick who has spent years studying the Tarkine's varied habitats. "It's outstanding from a scientific and aesthetic point of view."

This temperate rainforest – covering 1700 sq. km – is dominated by myrtle beech, a magnificent tree that grows broad and tall and lives for more than 400 years. Sassafras, leatherwood and celery-top pine are also common, and below the forest canopy, tree ferns flourish, interspersed with native laurel. The Tarkine's river banks are a refuge for ancient Huon pines, perhaps 3000 years old, and in some rainforest gullies the dense tangle of horizontal scrub forms impassable thickets.

Rainforest, eucalypt forest and coastal plains are habitats for a host of vulnerable animal species. The orange-bellied parrot, one of Australia's rarest birds, makes the coastal heathlands its winter feeding ground while the threatened eastern pygmy-possum relies on the dwindling banksia groves. The white goshawk, down to just 110 breeding pairs, inhabits the wet eucalypt forests and Tasmanian wedge-tailed eagles nest in the tallest trees. In the Tarkine's whisky-hued, wild rivers live the primeval giant (up to 1 m in length) freshwater crayfish, dark blue and vulnerable to habitat degradation.

"The Tarkine is the last refuge for all sorts of species that are threatened elsewhere," Jamie says. "Biologically, it's so important, and it's just wonderful country...it's a really significant part of the beauty of the planet – beauty that can never be replaced."

WILD WEST

Buttongrass cloaks a secluded valley on the northern periphery of the Tarkine. Part of the controversy of referring to Tasmania's north-west wilderness as 'the Tarkine' is the difficulty of defining its boundaries. This scene, north of the Arthur River so by some definitions technically outside the Tarkine, illustrates that the unique Tarkine habitat doesn't end where lines on a map do.

Preservation and degradation

FOR 30,000 YEARS, the Tarkine was the territory of Tasmanian Aboriginals. Several groups roamed the north-west corner of this isolated island at the end of the earth. Their world must have seemed an abundant garden, bountiful with a variety of food. In the convoluted rocky gulches along the coast, women dived for shellfish – abalone, periwinkles, oysters and mussels. Seals were caught seasonally and muttonbirds collected from their summer rookeries. Wetlands yielded ducks and swans, the coastal heathland wallabies and wombats, and a wide array of vegetable food.



POWER OF NONE
Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife ranger Lalani Hyatt examines a patch of banksia forest that was consumed in a deliberately lit fire in the coastal Arthur-Pieman Conservation Area. Frequent fires, damage by indiscriminate off-road driving and destruction of Aboriginal sites threaten the Tarkine's coast. But with few rangers to patrol the region, Parks and Wildlife staff face a tough battle.

One bright summer afternoon, I met Lalani Hyatt, a ranger with the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service, herself a Tasmanian Aboriginal and a bush-food expert. Lalani is one of just four rangers who oversee the service's north-west district, and spends some of her time in the Arthur-Pieman Conservation Area, which takes in most of the Tarkine's coastal zone. We plucked native honeysuckle, and sucked on the sweet, musky flowers. "Native spinach...mountain berry...coastal currants...pigface fruit...lomandra grass...boobialla beans," Lalani says as she points out the food surrounding us. "There would have been so much food here. On a day like this, it must have been a paradise."

This natural plenty brought people to the same sites along the coast for thousands of years. They lived, ate, built huts, made art, traded, walked inland to mine ochre for adornment and to find spongolite rock for tools. Along the Tarkine coast and inland, the evidence of this is ubiquitous: enormous shell middens, stone artefacts, hut depressions, pebble pathways, hides for hunting seals, quarry sites, mysterious circular petroglyphs, and even burial sites. So prolific is the human record that the Australian Heritage Commission has called this "one of the world's great archaeological regions" and of international significance.

That day as I walked with Lalani we saw middens carved up by four-wheel drives, pebble pathways in disarray and dunes damaged by vehicles. Off-road vehicles are supposed to keep to established tracks but with little to deter them, they often don't. "I feel gutted to be here and see this all the time...it makes me physically sick," says Lalani. "I suppose as knowledge of Aboriginal heritage grows, so should respect. There's really no excuse now for ignorance of what's here."

Right across the Tarkine's coastal zone, heathland and buttongrass plains, 4WD users still range relatively uncontrolled. When inland tracks become impassable, they make a new, adjacent track. Until that too becomes boggy. The result is a chaotic network of routes that often widens into a muddy morass scarring the landscape.

Vehicle damage is not the only challenge. With increased 4WD activity comes an increase in the incidence of fire – some of it arson – and although this country is fire adapted, it's being harmed by fires of unnatural frequency.

Several farms along the north-west coast also maintain a tradition of cattle agistment during the winter months from April to September. Cattle are driven down the Tarkine coast to graze the heathland, even eating seaweed that washes up on the beach. Cattle trample archaeological sites, disturb dunes, compete with native animals for food, crush the chicks of shorebirds, pollute streams and import weeds. They also spread *Phytopthora cinnamomi*, a soil-borne fungus that causes root rot in native vegetation. Because of cattle, much of the northern coast has been planted with invasive, non-native marram grass for fodder and to stabilise collapsing dunes.

The result is an environment that is increasingly degraded, despite its nominal protected status.

In the case of four-wheel driving, no-one's advocating a total ban. Most damage is avoidable – the result of wilfulness or ignorance. Even cattle agistment is regarded more as a traditional right than a necessity. Both mindsets may take some time to change. But change they must if this unique piece of country and its priceless archaeological record are to survive.



ON THE LAND
On a farm just north of the Tarkine, cattle graze against a Southern Ocean backdrop. Several farms in the north-west drive cattle down the coast each winter to the Tarkine's coastal sedgeland and dunes. But cattle and wilderness don't mix. The result of this practice is dune destruction, weed importation and the degradation of Aboriginal middens. Cattle also threaten orange-bellied parrots, one of Australia's rarest birds.

A MATTER OF FACTS

- **Total area:** 3500 sq. km. 2400 sq. km of forest, including 1700 sq. km of rainforest; Australia's largest temperate rainforest.
- **Recognition:** According to the Australian Heritage Commission, "One of the world's great archaeological regions." Listed on the register of the National Estate. Fulfils seven of 10 possible World Heritage nomination criteria.
- **What's protected:** Savage River NP, 17,980 ha, intended for conservation, not tourism; Arthur-Pieman Conservation Area, 101,775 ha (some outside north-east boundary); Donaldson River Nature Recreation Area, 30,670 ha; Savage River Regional Reserve, 17,680 ha; Pieman River State Reserve 3533 ha; Meredith Range Regional Reserve, 66,920 ha; Tikkawoppa Plateau Regional Reserve, 4535 ha; Heazlewood Hill Conservation Area, 259 ha; Bernafai Ridge Conservation Area, 1282 ha; Arthur River and other smaller forest reserves, 3600 ha; Sumac Forest Reserve 9850 ha. *Source: Federal Department of Environment and Heritage Tas CAPAD 2002.*
- **What's not protected:** Much of the harvestable forest, including the Savage River Rainforest, myrtle rainforest.
- **Threats:** Logging, fire, 4WD damage and grazing-cattle damage to coastal archaeological sites, vegetation and dunes. Tree disease, myrtle wilt from logging, *Phytopthora* root rot, pollution of water catchments, weeds.
- **Myrtle value-adding:** Standing tree, $60 cu. m; log at sawmill, $140 cu. m; processed timber, $2000 cu. m; completed furniture retail, $12,000 cu. m. *Source: Forest Industries Association of Australia.*

Wood for the trees

A MATTER OF TIMBER

A massive stringybark buttress inspires wonder in ecotourism operator Michelle Foale in the Tarkine's northern eucalypt forests. Although the selective logging of myrtle is the controversy of the moment, eucalypt forest has been clearfelled in and around the Tarkine for years. Forestry Tasmania concedes that some 80 per cent of logged timber becomes low-value woodchip, sold mainly in Japan and Europe to make paper products.

FIRE SEASON. A hazy, windy December day and I'm flying with pilot Eddie Jones on a spotter flight over the Tarkine. Fires started by lightning strikes have engulfed almost the entire coastal zone and have spread into the eucalypt forests where they are still smouldering. As we fly, Eddie reports new fire activity to the forestry staff on the ground, and I'm struck by the idea that all this territory I'm seeing for the first time is an integral whole. It's clear to me only now that the land we call the Tarkine is a fragment of what must have been a vast, exquisite wilderness; that the Tarkine is the very last remnant.

"I think about that every time I fly over here," Eddie's voice buzzes through my headset, "how it must have looked."

We swing out to the coast and back over the charred heathlands, just south of the Arthur River. In its upper reaches, trees are clearfelled almost up to the river banks and wild forests replaced with single-species plantations. The forest looks ragged. Debased.

Then we veer south and that's when we see it: an even emerald canopy, cloaking the hilly landscape. No sign of fire, just a jungle-dense expanse. The Savage River Rainforest, they call it, the heart of the Tarkine – a heart about to be broken.

Millions of years ago this area was volcanically active, creating rich, red, basaltic soils ideal for growing trees. Then, this land was part of Gondwana, the great southern continent from which Australia broke off, and on it thrived Gondwanic species – with one of them, the myrtle beech, becoming the dominant rainforest tree in Tasmania. Myrtle timber is highly sought after. Wood from trees that grow on the richest red basalt even more so. Known as deep red myrtle, the timber from these trees reflects the soils that nourish it and, when worked, produces a lustrous ruby hue, as luminous as a gem. Once prolific in north-west Tasmania, myrtle has been greatly reduced by intensive logging and woodchipping. The Tarkine is its last stronghold.

The Tarkine's complex geological past gave it more than just good soil. In the centre of the region (on most maps, not part of the area generally agreed as the Tarkine) are iron ore deposits. In 1965, the Savage River Mine was established here and a slurry pipeline built, stretching 83 km to the Port Latta smelter on the shores of Bass Strait. Beside that pipeline is a track – much of it through myrtle rainforest. That road is now set to provide access for logging the heart of the Tarkine.

"Yes, it's all about myrtle," says Forestry Tasmania's Assistant General Manager of Operations, Paul Smith, when I speak to him in the government corporation's offices at Camdale near Burnie, northern Tasmania. "Fifteen hundred to 2000 cubic metres of myrtle sawlog are needed each year…for furniture and high-value products," he says. More than half of that, reports Forestry Tasmania, must come from the rainforest that surrounds the Pipeline Road, and supposedly, this can be done sustainably. "There is a view that clearfelling is not acceptable in this day and age," says Paul. "So, there'll never be clearfall down the Pipeline track." Instead, with selective harvesting on a 200-year rotation, Forestry Tasmania plans to manage the heart of the Tarkine for extraction of myrtle indefinitely.



"We are not taking pulpwood – no woodchipping will go on here," Paul says. Harvested timber will go to special timber mills like Britton Brothers at Smithton as sawlog and for veneer.

But the forest operation will not be without waste. Paul concedes that loggers will take on average just 50 per cent of each logged myrtle, with just 0.5–1 cu. m of sawlog yielded from a 200–400-year-old tree.

Selective logging of rainforest has been tried elsewhere, such as New Zealand, and banned for the damage it caused. It's fraught with problems, the threat of fire uppermost. Myrtle forest is climax forest in the order of forest succession. Forest made up mainly of myrtle only succeeds eucalypt forest when myrtle seedlings grow into large trees, undisturbed by fire, a process that takes 200 to 400 years. When this is the case, myrtles take over from eucalypts, creating a wetter forest that actually resists fire. But if myrtle forest is opened up, it becomes drier and more susceptible to fire. If myrtle forest does burn, it's more likely to be succeeded by eucalypt forest. Human activity increases fire risk and with frequent fire, myrtle rainforest could disappear altogether. There's also myrtle wilt (*Chalara australis*), a disease that is endemic in intact myrtle forest, but which kills few trees, unless the forest is disturbed. When myrtle ecosystems are partially destroyed by selective logging activities, the disease becomes widespread and can kill all remaining myrtle seed trees in an entire logging coupe. Another threat is root rot, which can be spread by forestry machinery, and, inevitably, there is the problem of weeds.

Tellingly, a report published in 1999 on deep red myrtle, and used as justification by Forestry Tasmania for harvesting myrtle in the Tarkine, is unambiguous on the problems of logging the timber. Above all, the report emphasises the impossibility of knowing whether a myrtle will have the sought-after deep-red colour, or whether it will be entirely rotted inside, until it's felled. This may mean that many more trees than predicted would need to be felled to fill the yearly quota. Contrary to Forestry Tasmania's claims that its planned logging in rainforest would be sustainable for generations, the report claims that the harvest as then planned would exhaust myrtle sources entirely by 2030. Forestry Tasmania has since reduced its volume estimates of myrtle to be logged, but it remains clear that logging myrtle rainforest is of doubtful sustainability.

"Yes, it's all about myrtle. Fifteen hundred to 2000 cubic metres of myrtle sawlog are needed each year… for furniture and high-value products."

Green groups say the proposal to log the Tarkine's rainforest arises from wasteful practices elsewhere. They believe that there's more than enough myrtle woodchipped or burnt after clearfell operations in other parts of Tasmania, especially on the edges of the Tarkine, to supply the 2000 cu. m the furniture industry is said to require annually. There's a fear that so-called selective logging down the Pipeline track is the thin edge of the wedge, and that the aim may be, eventually, to establish single-species eucalypt or pine plantations on the highly productive soil, a claim that Paul dismisses as "complete and utter rubbish". But Forestry does not deny that before value adding, at least, this is hardly a lucrative operation: just $60,000–$100,000 is its estimate of annual royalties for logging the Tarkine rainforest.

Whatever the case, it's certain that logging the heart of the Tarkine will severely degrade it. And logging is set to happen soon.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHERS

'TARKINE' means belonging to, or of the Tarkiner – a local Aboriginal people who inhabited that part of Tasmania for at least 12,000 years before the Europeans came. 'Tarkine' as a name for the region first appears in the early 1800s in the diary of George Augustus Robinson. Robinson was then the (somewhat ironically titled) "Chief Protector of the Australasian Aborigines and the pacificator of the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land". Those who say that "there's no such place as the Tarkine" are also opposed to the notion of it being a protected wilderness area. On the other hand, the Green movement, which picked up the name in the early 1990s, says that 'Tarkine' is already recognised and used by Aboriginal groups, the Australian Government, the Tasmanian Government, the Cradle Coast Authority, and some local councils, and that it's listed on the Register of the National Estate for its important natural and indigenous values.

Tarkine transition

FROM WILD SOUTHERN OCEAN SHORES to ancient myrtle rainforest, the Tarkine's habitats are wonderfully varied. Long isolated, they have also become a refuge for species that are under threat elsewhere. The western Tarkine meets the sea in a tumble of jagged rock and a wilderness of shifting dunes (1), home to bountiful shellfish and seabirds. Between dunes grow banksia, succulent pigface, and smooth green marsupial lawns (2) maintained by grazing wombats and wallabies. Further inland, quartzite – thinly covered by acidic, peaty soils – supports buttongrass moorland and scrub (3), the winter feeding ground of one of Australia's most endangered birds, the orange-bellied parrot. The Tarkine's two main ranges, the Norfolk and Meredith, are shrouded in buttongrass (4) and eucalypt forest (5), habitat for birds endangered in Tasmania, such as the grey goshawk (6) and the Tasmanian race of the wedge-tailed eagle (7). At the Tarkine's heart lies 1700 sq. km of rainforest. Dominated by the Gondwana species myrtle beech (8), the rainforest also includes fragrant leatherwood, blackwood, sassafras and native laurel, as well as a profusion of giant ferns. Between ancient, moss-covered trees and through water-polished gorges run the Tarkine's creeks and rivers.

ILLUSTRATION: MARJIE CROSBY-FAIRALL

SAND AND SHELLS

Bleached by the sun, the remains of a shell midden are testament to a lost way of life. For thousands of years, the Tarkine was the territory of Tasmanian Aboriginals. Its coast must have a been a bountiful garden, teeming with shellfish and bush vegetables. Archeological sites, including vast shell middens, hut depressions, stone artefacts, seal-hunting hides and circular petroglyphs are found across this region.



WILD WILD WEST

A secluded stretch of the Rapid River (opposite) spills through Tarkine rainforest. The Tarkine's wild creeks and rivers, which can swell dramatically after rain, are an attractive playground for canoeists and rafters, and offer several rarely paddled routes. Fishermen (below) try their luck at the mouth of the Arthur River against a backdrop of roaring surf. All tourism that comes to the Tarkine will have some negative environmental impacts. But if increased tourism can bring investment in Tasmania's struggling north-west, it may eventually become more lucrative than industries such as logging.

Developing ecotourism potential

I STOP WALKING for a moment and just listen. Silence so profound, I can almost hear the beating of my heart. The air hangs stagnant around me, not a leaf stirs. It feels as though I've stepped out of time.

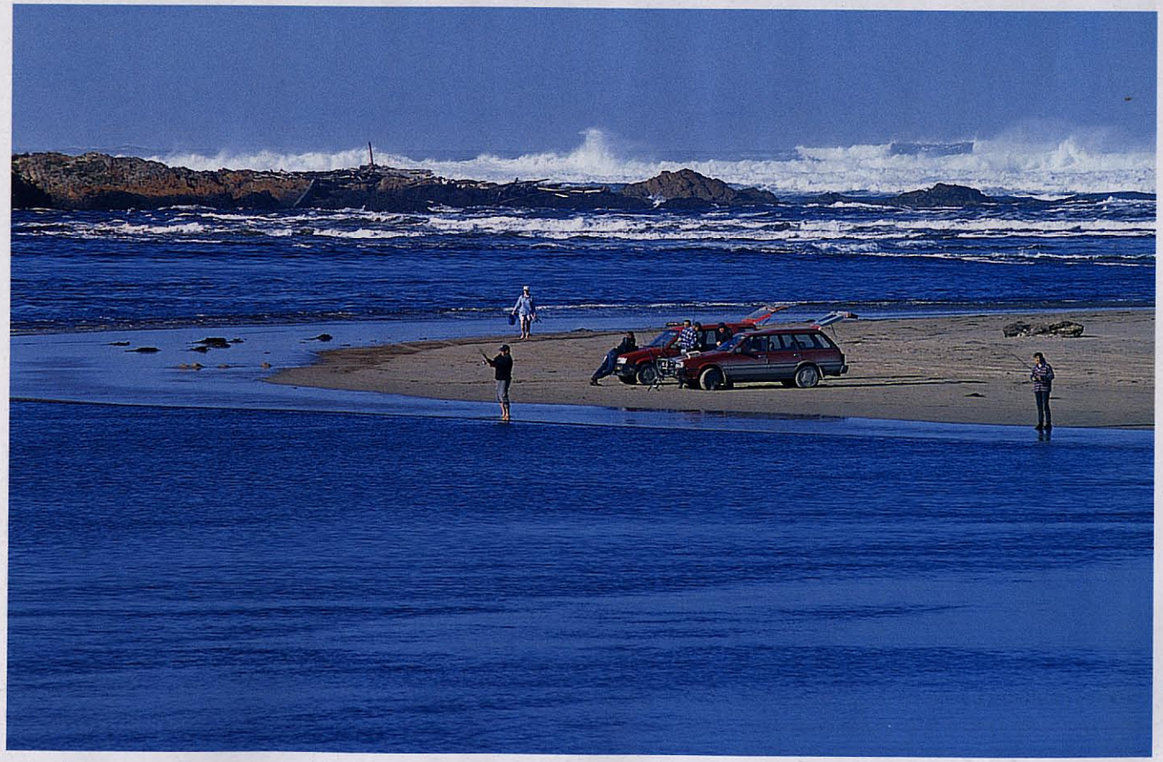
Deep in the forest of the north-east Tarkine, I've been walking for three days under an unbroken myrtle canopy. The forest floor is as open as a well-planned garden, the huge moss-covered trees widely spaced. Mike Thomas, a medical doctor and conservationist, and Rob Fairlie of the ecotourism business Tiger Trails, accompany me.

"I call this deep-forest immersion," Mike tells me with great enthusiasm: here is a man who's in his element. Over the past two years, Mike has spent more than 100 days in the wildest parts of the Tarkine, achieving a vision that will put the wilderness on the ecotourism map. With friends, he's explored and tagged the Trans-Tarkine Track – a journey of some 80 km from the rainforest to the ocean. "It's an iconic route – it should become one of the great walks of the world, like the Milford Track [New Zealand] or the Overland Track [Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park, Tasmania]. It's all in totally wild country."

The route can be partly paddled on the Little Donaldson River, or walked in its entirety. Also marked are several shorter loops and horseshoes in the rainforest section. We're walking one of these now; it's soon to become one of the Tarkine guided walks offered by Tiger Trails, a company which specialises in taking tours to unprotected parts of Tasmania. Five days of myrtle forest, waterfalls, gorges and pristine rivers, it's the consummate Tarkine rainforest experience.

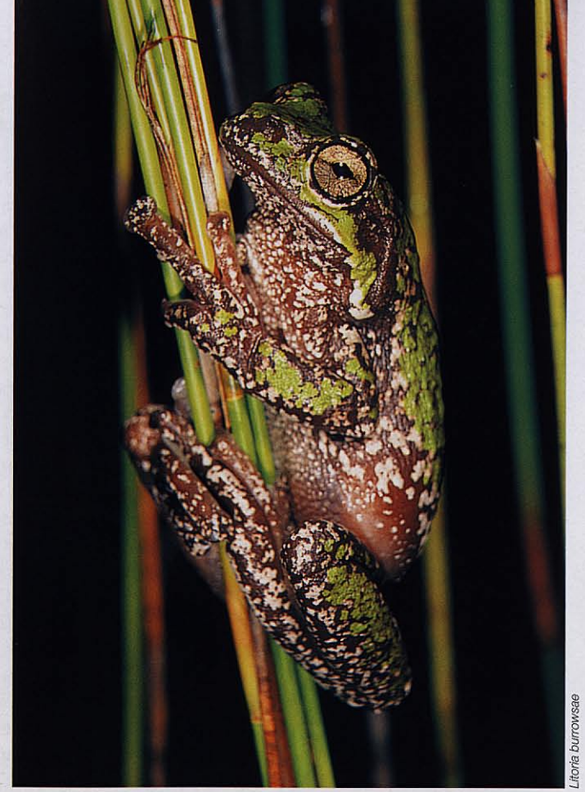
Mike and Rob are two of a new breed of conservationists who believe that getting people into unprotected wild places is the best way to ensure their protection. "There are people who believe that the forest should be completely left alone – but I'm not one of them," says Rob. "How can people know what they stand to lose unless they can get in and see it? We'll bring people in here and just let the forest speak for itself."

One of the difficulties of advocating tourism in the Tarkine has been that, up to now, it was inaccessible to most people. But like Tiger Trails, ecotourism operators are now taking the Tarkine seriously. As well as multi-day walks, there are wildlife and birdwatching tours, giant crayfish-viewing experiences, Tasmanian devil watching, Arthur and Pieman

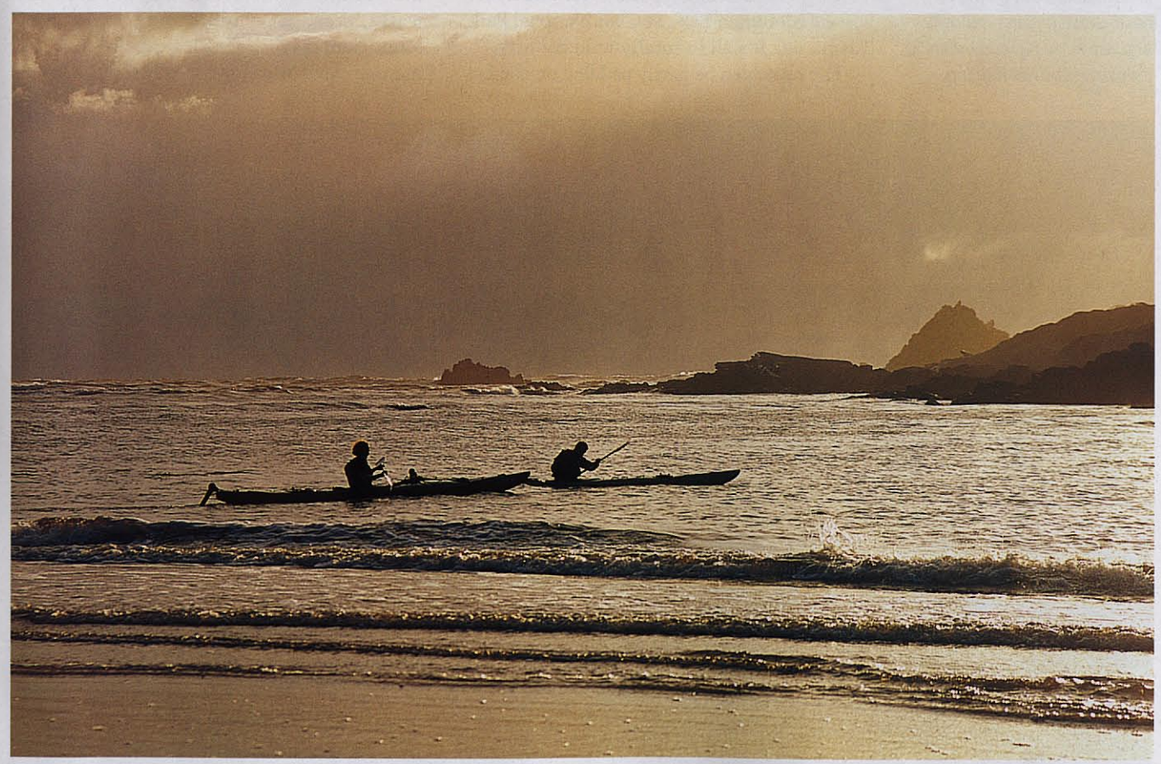




Hygrocybe sp.



Litoria burrowsae



TARKINE RESIDENCE *Fungi on the forest floor (top left) near the Donaldson River and the Tasmanian tree frog (top right): two minute natural attractions of the Tarkine. If the region is opened up to tourism, visitors such as sea kayakers (above) – out for an evening paddle on a calm day at the notoriously dangerous Pieman Head – will have to heed strict conservation rules.*

river cruises and responsible 4WD tours. A Tarkine lodge and a rainforest interpretation centre are being built on the forest's northern periphery, and a self-drive guide steers visitors to unspoilt parts. For adventure and nature-based tourism, the Tarkine's potential seems endless. Wild rivers offer scope for canoeing, rafting, canyoning and fly fishing, old forestry tracks are ideal for mountain biking, and an extensive system of largely unexplored rare magnesite caves could bring speleologists from across the globe. Then there's sea fishing, surfing and windsurfing off a coast with some of the best waves in the world.

Perhaps the Tarkine as a protected tourism icon is just what the economically depressed north-west of Tasmania needs. Recently, a group working to protect the area, the Tarkine National Coalition (TNC), surveyed 500 local businesses to gauge enthusiasm for the Tarkine as a tourist destination rather than a resource-extracting one. "People here recognise the great tourism potential of an intact and protected Tarkine," says Matt Campbell-Ellis of the TNC.

Of course any larger-scale development of tourism in the Tarkine would have to be done sensitively: walking boots spread threats like root rot as effectively as cattle hoofs or forestry machinery. Tourism is not without impact. But many conservationists believe that it's better to construct limited tourism infrastructure and allow controlled access to pristine wild places than to make access difficult and keep those places out of sight, out of mind and vulnerable to plunder. "The Tarkine only stands a chance of survival if it becomes somewhere that's talked about, a place you can actually visit and spend time in," says Mike. "Only then can it offer a viable – and lucrative – economic alternative to logging."



Astacopsis gouldi

TIGERS IN THE TARKINE?

WHEN THE LAST THYLACINE DIED in Hobart Zoo in 1936, many believed this to be the end of the story of this unique animal that early settlers had exterminated as vermin. But since then there have been alleged sightings of Tasmanian tigers, many of them in the Tarkine. A sighting by fishermen at Sandy Cape – the disappearance of a smoked eel accompanied by tracks that appeared to be the tiger's; repeated, high-pitched tiger 'yipping' heard not far from the Salmon River; a sighting of a thylacine with young. Rocky Cape fisherman Craig Garland is often in the Tarkine bush, and is convinced that the tiger is there. "You feel like a nutter," he says, "everyone believes that they're extinct, but we sort of know that they're not." Craig says most of the bushmen of the north-west believe that tigers survive in the Tarkine.

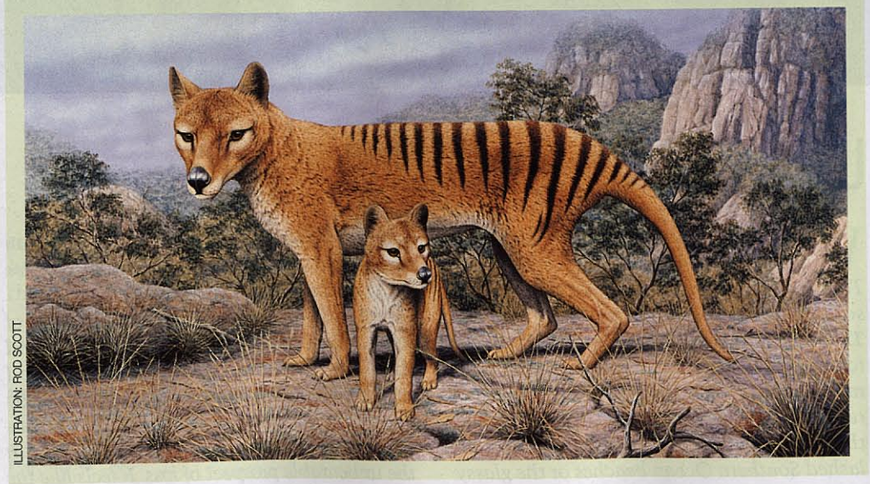


ILLUSTRATION: ROD SCOTT

PRIMEVAL GIANT

Growing up to 1 m in length and living for approximately 40 years, the protected giant freshwater crayfish makes the Tarkine rivers its home. Crayfish were heavily exploited in the last century, but trapping them is now banned. Today, only one licence for crayfish trapping exists and it belongs to crayfish-viewing tour operator Todd Walsh. Todd's relationship with the crayfish has come full circle. "We used to trap and eat them when I was a child. I grew up on them," he says. Now, he carefully returns each animal to the water after showing them to visitors.

Beauty and loss. Inadequately protected, the Tarkine – containing Australia's last remaining intact temperate rainforest – faces certain degradation. Little known or visited, the region's unique environments – beaches, buttongrass plains, myrtle forests – are being destroyed just as visitors begin to discover them. Only a seismic shift in Australia's environmental conscience will help save the precious Tarkine.

Uncertain future

WHEN YOU'RE in the forest, it feels as if it'll go on forever. When you're in the Tarkine's wild places, you feel that there's something in the land that adds to you. Throughout my time in the Tarkine, I've tried to pinpoint that indefinable thing. It's not the moss-green smell of the rainforest, or the glittering of a million tiny myrtle leaves when the sun shines after a storm. It's not the wind-lashed Southern Ocean beaches or the glassy patina of an early morning river, or the human connections made in isolation. It's all of these things, and more.

When I want to try to describe the spirit of the Tarkine, I must be very quiet within. And then, distilled somewhere deep inside me I find a feeling of infinite beauty, matched by one of infinite grief. It feels like an unbearable poignancy of perfection confronted with the unbearable prospect of loss. It feels like the emptiness left by a people disappeared from here. And it feels like the heartbreak of all that's still to disappear.

Beauty, and loss. That is the nature of the Tarkine.



Gabi Mocatta is a Hobart-based freelance writer who covers environmental issues and is passionate about Tasmania's wild places.

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