

Botanical sale of the century

Wollemi pine auction

Chris Callaghan



Above, the Sir Joseph Banks Collection of *Wollemia*'s grossed nearly A\$150,000.

Below left, Chris Callaghan of the Australian Bicentennial Arboretum before an unsuccessful bid for a Wollemi pine wiped the smile off his face. **Below right**, the helical and tetrastichous leaf arrangements of the trimorphic *Wollemia nobilis*.



At last the day many tree enthusiasts had waited 11 years for had arrived, with the chance to acquire one of the world's rarest trees, *Wollemia nobilis*, the third and most recently described living genus in the Araucariaceae.

With 292 First Generation Collector's Edition Wollemi Pines, ranging from 0.7m to 2.25m in height, being auctioned in 148 lots to raise funds for conservation of the wild population and other threatened species, I and an

arboretum colleague went along in the hope of adding this special tree to our arboretum's conifer collection.

It was a brilliant sunny day following a few days of rain which thankfully are becoming more frequent since the breaking of Australia's one-in-one-hundred year drought, and our spirits soared as did the bidding later.

Along with other potential bidders, we had previewed, in the preceding week at Sydney's Royal Botanic Gardens, the largest collection of Wollemi Pines outside of their secret native habitat in a remote gorge within the Wollemi National Park, north-west of Sydney, part of the larger World Heritage listed Greater Blue Mountains Area, where these ancient conifers had found their last refuge and were discovered as recently as 1994 by David Noble.

All of the pines for auction were propagated by staff at Mt Annan Botanic Garden (a satellite garden of Sydney's RBG) during 1999/2000 from cuttings taken from 15 parent trees selected from less than 100 mature trees occurring in the wild. They were now being auctioned by Sotheby's this afternoon the 23 October 2005, ahead of general release to the public in April 2006.

By the start of the auction at 3pm, the number of bidders and spectators had swollen to more than 400, the early arrivals seated under a large marquee erected on a lawn near to the Royal Botanic Gardens' Herbarium, the remainder standing outside at the back. Down the right open side of the marquee were the world's press covering this historic event for posterity, while along the opposite side sat representatives of Sotheby's to take overseas phone bids and place absentee bids.

The atmosphere was electric as the first bid for Lot 1, a single tree propagated from "The Bill Tree", at 38.5m tall – The King of the Wollemi, opened at A\$1,500 and rose quickly with successive bids to go under the hammer for A\$6,000 including buyer's premium. This was to be one of the highest bids for a single tree and no doubt motivated by the desire to be the first private owner of a Wollemi pine.

This set the tone for the auction, and bidding for the 147 remaining lots was just as spirited, with the auction concluding within three hours and resulting in a 'White Glove Sale' where all lots were sold on the day, being only the second time this has occurred at a Sotheby's auction in Australia.

Those present were astounded when the agent for a client bid A\$135,625 (excluding 10% GST - goods & services tax) for the Sir Joseph Banks Collection of 15 Wollemi Pines! (one from each of the 15 selected wild trees – see photo).

According to a report in the following day's Sydney Morning Herald, this same agent bid on behalf of his client in the vicinity of A\$230,000, including buyer's premium and GST, for a total of 47 trees!

Other highlights included two trios of pines at A\$13,200 each, A\$21,600 for an avenue of 20 potentially identical clones from the one parent tree, A\$31,050 for a grove of five trees, with a later grove of another five trees going for A\$18,000 – proceeds from this grove going to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew.

The auction realised A\$1,059,165 including buyer's premium and GST, averaging A\$3,627 per tree, and this without any American bids because trees

above 18 inches (0.5m) height are restricted from importation into the US.

The highest and lowest prices paid for a single tree were A\$7,800 (2.21m high) and A\$1,680 (1.54m high) respectively, that for a duo between A\$9,000 and A\$2,280, a trio between A\$13,200 and A\$3,900, while the six groves each of five trees sold for between A\$31,050 and A\$13,200 according to the official Sotheby's auction results (these include buyer's premium but not 10% GST). While tree sizes influenced prices paid, there was a general trend of falling prices as the auction progressed. For instance, a successful bid for one tree of \$5,400 near the beginning of the auction would have secured two trees before the middle lots were reached and three trees by lot 108.

A news reporter with a camera crew from one of the Japanese TV networks predicted to me that the auction was likely to precipitate huge interest in the Wollemi pine in his country, where hundreds of millions of conifers are sold annually.

While unsuccessful in acquiring a Wollemi pine at the auction for our arboretum, we could console ourselves that when sold internationally in 2006, they will retail in Australia for A\$55 and A\$95 for 40cm and 60cm trees respectively. At these prices, one can grow a mini forest of prehistoric Wollemi pines for the price paid for a single tree at auction.

One suspects that at least some IDS members are among the successful bidders, and I hope that I have conveyed some of the excitement of this unique event to the others.

Footnotes

1. A reprint of the scientific paper naming *Wollemia nobilis* as a new genus and species appeared in the 2000 IDS Yearbook.
2. Fellow members may be interested in contacting Sotheby's at www.sothebys.com to check whether the Wollemi Pine Collector's Edition Auction Catalogue is still for sale. This 64 page booklet contains much interesting information and many beautiful colour photos of the Wollemi Pines in their native habitat plus close-ups of the leaves, unique bark, cones, etc.
3. While the fossil record for *Wollemia* goes back 92 million years ago to the Late Cretaceous (Turonian) based on fossil pollen of *Dilwynites*, it is intriguing that no macrofossils of undisputed allegiance have been determined to my knowledge, unlike the "living fossil" *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, whose lineage of at least 97 million years has an abundant macrofossil record.
4. I would be interested in acquiring for the arboretum's library any cuttings or copies of newspaper items concerning the Wollemi Pine and/or the Auction. These may be emailed to Callaghan_aba@yahoo.com.au or mailed to my address in the member's directory. My thanks in advance.

For full information on where Wollemi pines can be bought in different countries around the world visit www.wollemipine.com.