
Australia's tree champions

Three years ago DEREK McINTOSH established the Australian National Register of Big Trees.

The root cause of my interest in trees was my father's love of all the trees that we grew up with in South Africa. He was a member of the Dendrology Society, and was financially very generous to all who shared this interest and were promoting the knowledge of trees. One of the great projects at that time, c. 1955, was the palm-sized National Tree List that listed all the indigenous trees with a unique number. On selected trees throughout the Kruger National Park, and in all rest camps, numbers were attached. For the first time ever, the general public were able to identify and compare trees. Following in his footsteps, I spent many thousands of dollars donating tree name tags to game lodges, parks etc. throughout Africa.

Sharing the knowledge and enjoyment of trees with the general public has been my fundamental goal ever since. A key component of this is having accessible trees that can be easily found.

Living in the USA during the late 1970s, I discovered the American Forests' National Register of Big Trees. It is a Register of their amazing big trees and has been in existence for 75 years. There are thousands of enthusiastic tree lovers in the USA that find and measure trees. Being the Nominator of the Champion Tree of a species is a great honour. Inspired by this, I established the Australian Register, having settled in Australia in 1981.

American Forests developed a formula that scores trees on the basis of this formula that gives a holistic Points score, and allows for objective¹ comparisons. Trunk circumference [inches] + height [feet] + $\frac{1}{4}$ average crown spread [feet]. [The Register includes metric and imperial measurement details.] Trees must be single-stemmed at 1.4m above ground where circumference is measured. This fact creates many unresolved issues when measuring certain trees, and certainly for the many *Ficus* species we have in Australia. Buttressed trees are another headache.

In Australia there is a pervasive belief that every indigenous tree is, 'some sort of a gum tree'. This perception is also prevalent amongst visitors to the country. Arriving in Australia I had the expectation that tree life would be gum-dominated; but how wrong I was. It is populated with the most incredible variety of trees; from the tropical rainforest giants, the sky-touching Tasmanian and West Australian forest trees, to the gnarled gidgee trees in the deserts. As important, was the enjoyment at finding the large variety of alien trees that are planted in the gardens, streets and parks of all communities. The

¹ There are conflicting views on the validity of this formula, but for the largely uninformed tree loving public that the Australian Register targets, it is a method that allows for easy measurement and comparison. Possibly tree enthusiasts in other countries will consider this formula so that we have an international standard for comparison?

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Eucalyptus melliodora, yellow box, Upper Lurg, Victoria.

Register records indigenous and alien trees.

What makes all of this possible is the internet. I would never have been able to fund the accumulation of tree data and then produce a printed Tree Register. Even if produced, who would know about it or buy it? The internet allows me to publish the Register on the website: www.nationalregisterofbigtrees.com.au, every few days, and be viewed by thousands around the world. More important than the cost of the production, is the zero cost of access for the viewing public. Most incipient tree lovers will



Above *Ficus macrophylla*, Moreton Bay fig, Wauchope, New South Wales.

Right *Eucalyptus viminalis*, manna gum, Halls Gap, Victoria.

visit a website like this at no cost, but would never subscribe and pay.

The information in the Register can be sorted by common name, scientific name, state, town, and points. This makes it easy for Register visitors to locate trees in specific areas. In the Tree Data section on the website, a document can be downloaded that lists full details of all trees on the Register.

The Register records the national champion, the state champion, and, within Queensland & New South Wales, the regional champion. This should create a vibrant rivalry between the states and regions. It has a practical application too; tree lovers can nominate, and visit, their



regional and state champions without travelling across Australia. Australia has an area of 7.69 million square kilometres or 2.97 million square miles, with only 23 million inhabitants.

I remember when I first heard the names of the iconic Australian trees, and wondered where the Australian Champions were growing? Here are some of them: river red gum (*Eucalyptus camaldulensis*), 658 points [Watervale, SA]; alpine ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*), 1087 points [Geeveston, TAS]; Norfolk Island pine (*Araucaria cunninghamii*), 400 points [Gerringong & Raymond Terrace, NSW]; Bunya pine (*Araucaria bidwillii*), 385 points [Bunya Mountains, QLD]; tallowwood (*Eucalyptus microcorys*), 615 Points [Dorrigo, NSW]; bloodwood (*Corymbia gummifera*), 874 points [Wauchope, NSW]; flooded gum (*Eucalyptus grandis*), 652 points [Bulahdelah, NSW.]; ironbark (*Eucalyptus paniculata*), all ironbark species champion 319 points [Baulkham Hills, Sydney]; Moreton Bay fig (*Ficus macrophylla*), 912 points [Bellingen NSW].

I plan to create an incorporated association or trust that will ensure the Register remains accessible to all supporters. I do not have a horticultural background, and rely on a group of expert supporters for advice on all matters botanical. Dean Nicolle, an internationally recognised authority on eucalyptus trees, is the principal expert I rely on. Without the tree climbing skills of Brett Mifsud, the heights of many of the enormous Tasmanian and Victorian trees would remain unverified estimates.

