



MEDIA RELEASE

Rain Aids Search for Endangered Plant on Bathurst Island

Researchers recently visited 40 rainforest patches in search of a rare plant and finally found it on Bathurst Island after the annual wet season rains arrived.

Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts ecologist Dr Dave Liddle said the rare *Burmannia* plant has so far only been found to exist on Bathurst Island.

“Bathurst Island is the only place in the world where the *Burmannia* spp is found,” Dr Liddle said.

“*Burmannia* has proved hard to find, a small elusive plant hidden in the sheltered habitat of dense rainforests.

“Little is known about the plants life cycle, even basic information like how long it flowers through the wet season remains a mystery.

“The plant is one of only three *Burmannia* species that grow in the Northern Territory and has a close relative in South-east Asia.”

Dr Liddle said he has been searching rainforests for the *Burmannia* along with other rare plants on the Tiwi Islands since June 2006 with local Tiwi Land Management Officers.

“The plant is listed as endangered with only a handful of populations found, the first two have been known for around 15 years, with the plant first collected by Rod Fensham in 1991,” Dr Liddle said.

“During our survey we found another three populations, so we now know of five.”

Dr Liddle said it is unknown why this plant is only found in the area, but the *Burmannia* has a very specific habitat of spring-fed rainforests, growing mostly in areas near watercourses where the leaf litter is not too deep.

“The flow of water from early wet season storms washing away some litter is important for reducing the thickness of litter and possibly even birds such as the Orange-footed Scrubfowl provide a similar service of disturbing the litter to provide suitable habitat,” Dr Liddle said.

“However the plant does not grow where pigs have disturbed the ground.

“We are concerned about the possible impact of pigs on the plant as the plant does not grow on bare sandy soil caused by feral pig rooting.

“Feral pigs may also upset the flow of spring-water.

“The Tiwi Land Management Officers have set up fenced areas to keep pigs out, along with four unfenced areas so we can return next year to count the plants in the plots and see if the numbers have changed.

“This will allow us to understand if pigs are really having a negative impact on the populations.”

Dr Liddle said that it is vital to know where populations of these rare plants occur because some of these specialised plants may provide an early indication of habitat change.

“Following the population trend of some of these plants with particular habitat requirements can provide a flagship or indicator of the health of the rainforest habitat, like a canary in a mineshaft,” Dr Liddle said.

“If the habitat starts to change, it may indicate broadscale changes such as global warming.

“Research is also important to assess threats to the plants to protect and ensure they survive into the future.”

This is an ongoing collaborative project enabling western scientists to work alongside Tiwi people to learn from each other about different approaches to country.

The project is funded by The Natural Heritage Trust, with funding and support from NRETA, Tiwi Land Council, Great Southern Plantations and World Wildlife Fund.

Caption: Unlike most plants that get their energy from the sun using the green chlorophyll in their leaves, *Burmannia* is a saprophyte, which means it grows off decomposing leaf litter and humus.

Ends

**Media Note – For more information contact Dr David Liddle on 8944 8492.
Photo available on request.**

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