



RAINFOREST RETREAT

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## 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary for Queensland's first major national park

It took a 20-year-fight to establish Lamington National Park 90 years ago, but in the process Queensland's system of national park conservation was born.

World-Heritage listed Lamington remains a jewel in the crown of Queensland's 223 national parks, with 160km of walking tracks winding their way through the largest sub-tropical rainforest remnant in the world.

Thanks to untiring efforts of dedicated nature lovers before and after the declaration on 31st July 1915, we can now enjoy and cherish this great reserve that almost wasn't.

Whilst the much smaller reserve of Witches Falls on Mt Tamborine took the honour of being the first National Park in Queensland (in 1908), the lengthy battle to create Queensland's first major park was so hard-fought, that victory ensured the very future of national park conservation in the state.

Inspired by a visit to the Yellowstone National Park in the US, grazier Robert Collins entered state parliament in 1896 with the express purpose of seeing green areas like the Lamington Plateau preserved – although his original idea was for a much more modest 'health reserve'.

Others joined him in the fight, calling the area the 'Blue Mountains of Queensland', but it was Collins who rightly earned the title 'Father of the National Parks system in Queensland'.

Collins was so enthusiastic he secured a visit to the isolated area by then Queensland Governor Lord Lamington, after whom the park was eventually named - somewhat ironically.

Lamington reportedly disgraced himself in the eyes of the lovers of nature when barely out of the sound of applause from locals, he stopped and shot a koala out of a tree!

He is recorded as having said later in a state of remorse, '... its dying cries were terrible. They haunted me for years afterwards...'

Collins was finally able to get the 'State Forests and National Parks Act' passed in 1906, but sadly didn't live to see his dream of protecting the rainforest of the McPherson Range which he held so dear.

Fellow staunch proponent Romeo Lahey took up the battle, even delaying his enlistment in the army in World War I until he'd won the fight for Lamington.

Ironically Lahey was the son of a saw-miller and it was this lust for timber in the virgin rainforests that almost lost the battle.

In those pioneering days, the Green Mountains were also thought suitable for dairy farming and the O'Reilly boys were brave enough to carve out a living in the dense scrub.

They arrived on the mountain in 1911, having paid 35 shillings per acre for their eight 100 acre selections, only to have their isolated piece of paradise completely surrounded when Lamington National Park was finally declared four years later.

Mick O'Reilly returned from WWI to take up a position as Queensland's first official National Park Ranger, with other O'Reilly family members acting in a voluntary capacity.

Romeo Lahey continued to fight the bureaucrats in Brisbane from the trenches of France, to ensure the park's flora and fauna were protected. He went on to co-found the National Parks Association of Queensland in 1930 and Binna Burra Resort in 1933.

The O'Reilly's had established their famous guesthouse in 1926, effectively pioneering eco-tourism in Australia and helping generations to appreciate the beauty and biodiversity of the rainforest.

Through both wars and the Great Depression, powerful timber companies lobbied unsuccessfully for permission to remove hoop pines and other timbers from within Lamington. But despite their efforts and cabinet infighting over the issue, governments held firm: no timber would leave the park.

Many kilometres of tracks were built through the park in the 1930s, partly funded by the O'Reilly's and the owners of Binna Burra. Workers took great care not to cause undue damage, even camping on the newly made sections of track. Soon leaves formed a carpet underfoot, disguising the cuttings. The track system established is widely regarded as one of the best.

Proposals to release trout in the park were fought, and some Tasmanian black possums were introduced. Koalas were introduced in 1936 to supplement the park's dwindling population.

During World War II, Australian and American army units on jungle warfare training littered Lamington with rubbish, shot wildlife, started bushfires and cut vegetation.

Fearing the park would be damaged beyond repair, outraged local residents and rangers made strong protests to the authorities, resulting in stricter controls over training units.

Access to the park was difficult in the early days, with a rugged horseback journey up Stockyard Creek track the only means of access to O'Reilly's. In 1935, Laheys Ltd built a road up the mountain to the edge of the park, reducing the horseback journey to four miles.

Proposals for roads running through the park were always knocked back. In 1947 Mr P.M. Fitzgerald of Beechmont campaigned unsuccessfully for a bitumen highway to link the resorts of Binna Burra and O'Reilly's, to allow the elderly and infirm access to the park's features.

Objection to such proposals strengthened the concept of what National Parks should be, both in the public and government's eyes.

Until 1975 the Park was managed by the Forestry Department, and in the years after World War II rangers and their families camped out in isolation with only the bare essentials of the early pioneers.

Isolation was always both a blessing and a curse – no more so than when the Stinson aircraft crashed in rugged, inaccessible bushland – Bernard O'Reilly's daring rescue of the two remaining survivors is local, and indeed national legend.

O'Reilly's wasn't connected to mains power until 1967 and it was 1978 before a radio telephone link replaced the Duck Creek party line.

1978 also marked the first year for O'Reilly's famous Bird Week – celebrating the commitment of the family to conservation of the park's abundant bird and wildlife, through a program of special interest weeks and conservation activities, including annual frog and mammal weeks.

In 1980, thanks to a unique form of fundraising from Beaudesert Shire businesses and locals, 4WD access from the Kerry Valley to O'Reilly's was established along Duck Creek Road, with sections of the road and key vantage points auctioned off to the highest bidder.

In 1987, the famous Tree Top Walk, the first eco-tourism attraction of its kind in Australia, was opened, thanks largely to the vision of second generation O'Reilly, Peter, and the work of the Green Mountains Natural History Association.

Lamington National Park was given World Heritage status in 1994 as part of the Central Eastern Rainforests Reserves Australia World Heritage area.

The park now covers 20,600 hectares and rises to more than 1100 metres on the crest of the McPherson Range, straddling the Queensland – New South Wales state border.

The very tops of the mountain range are covered in cool, wet temperate rainforest with stands of ancient Antarctic Beech that are thought to be several thousand years old.

Abundant in wildlife, the park boasts up to 120 species of birds, spectacular waterfalls and stunning mountain vistas.

To mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary, O'Reilly's is offering a special rate for locals to come and explore their beautiful 'backyard' as well as running special walks and hosting a BBQ on the anniversary of the declaration, Saturday, July 30<sup>th</sup>.

Visit for the day, or for just \$125 per person, per night enjoy an indulgent break, including full buffet breakfast (offer is valid until September 30, 2005).

A five-day program of 'On the Beaten Track' walks will run from August 1-5, in celebration of the anniversary, taking participants on some of the best tracks through Lamington, including the iconic walk along the Border track to Binna Burra.

Winter is also the perfect time to enjoy the warmth of O'Reilly's Rainforest Retreat, with all the comforts of home from a family that has been serving up their special brand of hospitality for almost 80 years.

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