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Creepy crawlies hold key to forecasting climate change

O'Reilly's will once again lend its support to research that is emerging as a key to understanding climate change - all thanks to a host of creepy crawlies.

Leading scientists will converge on O'Reilly's this month for a second round of groundbreaking research aimed at selecting groups of insects that are particularly sensitive to climate variations, making them ideal candidates for studying the effects of global warming.

By studying vegetation and invertebrate species at different altitudes, researchers hope to learn how nature has adapted to even the most subtle temperature variations so they can predict climate change and its impacts on our planet in the future.

30 researchers converged on O'Reilly's last October for the first stage of extensive fieldwork studies and the second round will see teams base themselves at the Rainforest Retreat throughout March.

School students are also lending a hand with the field work, and their contribution, along with the importance of the research, will be recognized when Queensland Governor Quentin Bryce AC makes a special visit to O'Reilly's to observe the project first-hand on March 24th.

O'Reilly's is considered the ideal venue to host the research, located amidst World Heritage listed Lamington National Park. It provides easy access to a diverse range of sub-tropical forest types, as well as rare remnants of cooler temperate forests more than 1km above sea-level, boasting Antarctic Beech trees believed to be several thousand years old.

Leader of what is known as the IBISCA project, Griffith University's Professor Roger Kitching, said the October research had already narrowed some strong candidates from families of beetles, moths, fruit flies and other insects that are highly selective about the climate they prefer, at altitudes between 300 – 1100 metres above sea level.

"It has been a been an involved process, more than 500 species of moths have been collected for example, but the differences we are observing at varying altitudes are quite dramatic so we are confident the theory behind the project will be proven correct," Professor Kitching said.

The world-first approach to multi-disciplinary research will yield a huge amount of valuable biodiversity data in a short space of time.

"We can achieve more than a single ecologist might achieve in a lifetime – while we won't be able to detect climate change, not in a one year study, we hope to establish a universal framework tool that will enable us to monitor change in the future."

“What makes the project so unique is that we have a range of different specialists all working together in the same locations, at the same time, using the same techniques so we can get detailed data from each researcher that can be easily compared and that together forms a snapshot of biodiversity at different altitudes,” Professor Kitching said.

“Basically we will all be training what I call a ‘terrascope’ on Lamington National Park and what we discover will make a significant contribution to dealing with the effects of rising temperatures in sub-tropical regions.”

Among the expert ecologists, entomologists, taxonomists and botanists involved from Europe, and North and South America are representatives from such prestigious institutions as Oxford University, the Natural History Museum in London, The Smithsonian and the Université Blaise Pascal in France.

As ecotourism pioneers and committed environmentalists, the O’Reilly family is pleased to play a supporting role in such internationally significant conservation research.

“This is really important research for our planet and places the world scientific spotlight on the special place that we know Lamington National Park to be,” Managing Director Shane O’Reilly said.

“Through our energy and water saving initiatives, such as purchasing green energy and cutting water consumption per capita by up to 85%, we are trying to do our part to address the problems of climate change, but to be able to play a role in such significant research for the planet’s future is exciting.”

The project also involves Dr Bill McDonald, Principal Botanist of the Queensland Herbarium, who leads O’Reilly’s annual Forest Weekend program and is a guide for the famous O’Reilly’s Bird Week.

IBISCA is a joint initiative of Griffith University, the Smithsonian Institute, the Queensland Museum, the Queensland Herbarium, the Queensland National Parks and Wildlife Service, Pro-Natura International (Paris), the National Parks Association of Queensland and SEQ Catchments.

It receives additional support from the Queensland Government through its Smart State Innovative Projects Fund.

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