

*A Step Back Excerpt: Cairns, Australia*

He was in his early thirties, short, stodgy with a pouty face and beard, yet it was always accompanied by a giant endearing smile. "Uncle Brian" was the spirited leader of our tour into the Atherton Tableland, a small interior section of Australia's rainforest. The Atherton Tableland is inland from Cairns and rises to nearly 3000 feet, along with the area's abundant rainfall and volcanic soil provides a true tropical rainforest environment, one said to be the greenest in all of Australia. Our tour took us on a lengthy hike through the rainforest, where Uncle Bri lectured on the elements, the animals and plant life indigenous to the rainforest environment.

After hiking the entire morning, we enjoyed a picnic lunch where we discussed the Cassowary, a timid, flightless bird native to Australia that takes its place on the endangered species list. They are similar to the Ostrich, and it's believed that there are less than 100 left in the world. Uncle Brian shared a story about the Cassowary where just recently at a nearby park, despite signs to contrary, people inadvertently continued to leave food scraps in the park. As a result, the Cassowary attracted by this food source gradually came out of its natural habitat in the forest. Shortly after leaving its reclusive spot, it was killed by a passing car. Now, the food policy is strictly enforced throughout the park; in fact, there are no garbage cans. The point was well taken though, that unknowingly we as humans can completely alter the behavior and habitat of the wildlife, that we take for granted our gifted position, and more importantly, our responsibility here on earth. Even more, we lack the forethought to preserve nature without a horrifying incident occurring first – again, much like war, we need the pain to reinforce our sense of history and judgment, for otherwise we've shown a sharp propensity to not learn our lessons. Sadly, I never gave it much thought previously, and it was another stinging reminder of my ignorance, my resounding imperfection.

Our indoctrination into Australia's rainforest continued the following day with a trip north of Cairns into the coastal area known as Cape Tribulation. Much of the area is accessible only by a 4x4, and the dirt road we followed twisted and wound its way through the dense forest. Occasionally, the road popped open into a clearing revealing the fine white crystals of the beach, the lush green canopy of the mountainous rainforest, the clear azure ocean, and the sparkling blue sky. This surreal vision seduced us into its sinuous hands. This was no single piece of magic; no, it went on and on, mile after mile, isolated, desolate, and brilliantly captivating. It was a revelation of "paradise" if I'd ever seen it. As we bounced along the undulating dirt road piercing our way through the entanglement of the jungle, I couldn't help but reflect back on Abel Tasman Park in New Zealand, where no roads existed inside the park at all. It was a place

where technology seemed in check, where respect for the land and its inherent beauty was permitted to ring true. Here, the road along with telephone lines and some houses being built were a haunting reminder of man once again succumbing to the pressure of convenience at the expense of nature. The knifing pain in my gut returned as Man's destructive inroad into the purity of nature was again so patently clear.

Our aboriginal guide quickly stymied the wondrous views of this "paradise" by offering tidbits of information on the destruction and depletion of the rainforest. We were particularly stunned to learn that almost all of Australia was once completely covered by rainforest. By the time, however, Europeans began settling here, only 1% of Australia was rainforest, and today less than 0.3% is left with more than half right where we are today, the Daintree Rainforest. Most importantly, Rainforest depletion has a devastating impact on the entire surrounding ecosystem. For example, by cutting down only a small portion of the rainforest not only increases toxic greenhouse gases, but it also drastically affects the habitat of the land species. Even further, the natural runoff of the soil into the sea from eliminating the tree roots and underbrush inevitably causes damage to both the remaining rainforest and the Great Barrier Reef and its delicate ecosystem just off the coast. It becomes an unavoidable string of potentially destructive consequences. That is, the "Cassowary effect," where we as humans ignorantly or defiantly strip the natural environment at the expense of other species' habitat. What took millions of years to build we can now destroy in seconds – again with more freedom, more technology, comes more responsibility, not less. Fortunately, after a series of battles over the depletion of the rainforest, and despite the road being bulldozed along the coast, the remaining rainforest here is now largely protected.

We spent the rest of the afternoon slowly meandering by boat up the Daintree River, a river enclosed by mangrove trees and the thick rainforest. It reminded me distinctly of the backwater bayous of Louisiana. Today, we were in search of crocodiles and to take in the prolific birdlife indigenous to the rainforest. We weren't shorted of our expectations either as scores of crocs roamed the shoreline and a plethora of birds constantly swinging overhead. Most of the afternoon, however, my mind was consumed with the environment. I, of course, had heard and read much about the depletion of the rainforest, especially in South America, but it was entirely different to see it, to hear it, to reach out and touch its robust branches. Oh, how the life abounds, it jumps, it hops, it soars, it clings; it's just so full of life. It's zesty and penetrating, and the emotional impact of standing within its grip reminded me of Milford Sound. To physically stand in it and realize the potential harm and devastation to our overall environment we do as a result of our lack of respect for this unique place on our planet, simply pounded on me. I felt so ignorant, so guilty. I could see clearly that our prostitution of the

rainforests for our own near-sighted gain could be understatedly calamitous. It was an eye-opener and profoundly so. For here I stood across the globe from home living out a dream to see the world, in the midst of the most visually stimulating places on earth, and I was hauntingly perplexed by man's utter defiance to the gifts placed at our footsteps. I was given a precious glimpse, within this ecosystem of swirling perfection, into the soul of human beings.

As we bounced along the open road through the forest and stunning strip of endless sparkling white beach running along side returning to Cairns, our tour guide mentioned that the hole in the ozone layer is practically right above us. It's a topic, which for obvious reasons, is much more evident and talked about here than in the States. Here in Oz, there is little doubt that we as humans are contributing to the poisoning of the ozone layer, and it exists in direct contrast with the States where so many still doubt man's devastating impact on the environment. It was one of the few direct clashes I've noticed between life in the States and here in Oz. For me, the more poignant question was, are we humans responsible for the marked climate changes that have been taking place in recent times?

There's just so much more to this story than just additional green house gases causing global warming and a hole in the ozone layer, for the effect is devastating and is apparent already. Global warming has already been altering the world's flora and fauna, sometimes to drastic lengths. Our guide taken with the conversation stopped and took us down onto the beach where he showed a few types of plants and that are vulnerable to extinction with just a slight alteration in their habitat either by man directly (with building roads and buildings), or indirectly, by changing the atmosphere. Some have already become extinct just in the past twenty years. It's truly mind boggling to think that we as humans are contributing so significantly to the pillage of our own planet. I think I remembered reading before I left the States that at the current pace of climatic changes, Glacier National Park will be completely void of glaciers by the year 2030. This single, even isolated event, starting at the very bottom of the food chain will have consequences that trickle the whole way up never stopping until it meets us.

To me, whether our burning of fossil fuels is the direct culprit of the mass of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere which results in global warming isn't completely relevant, right now we must cooperate in finding a solution to this devastating world-wide problem. The interesting part is that as salient as the problem obviously has become, we have still done so little toward finding a solution. In fact, so few of us go much farther than simply acknowledging the existence of such a problem. Remarkably, some still don't even acknowledge that there is a problem. I guess we are just going to passively permit the problem to

escalate, probably until it's too late to save our own planet, that is, to save our own planet from ourselves.

Yet again, I am reminded of the endangered, flightless bird, the Cassowary.

It's not that surprising though. Ironically enough, why would we pay such close attention to the greenhouse gases we ignorantly throw into the air, which corrosively devour the environment, when we don't pay attention to the forces in our own society that eat away at its interweaving fabric. On both counts, it seems we'll wait until it's too late, or at least until the consequences are heart-felt by each one of us. We'll cling to this delusional state of denial until we begin choking with each breath. As we sat in the midst of earth's most absorbing creations, it all smacked Bren and I squarely in the face. We quickly came to the conclusion that we must be personally conscious of our own actions toward the environment. It must be a conscious choice we make to preserve, to become givers, not takers. I couldn't get it out of mind what it would be like for my children or grandchildren not to be able to see first hand this magnificent part of our planet. Not to mention how would I explain to them how I unwittingly participated in its destruction and demise. I just couldn't get that thought out of my mind and having to explain to them how little I really cared.