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# Community Conservation Works!

## A Success Story in Reforesting Australia's Wet Tropics

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Illustrated by Maya Akazawa

**W**hen you think of Australia, it is unlikely that your first thought is a dense tropical rainforest. Still, one-thousandth of Australia's land surface is composed of rainforest. The Wet Tropics, 894,420 hectares of rainforest along the coast of North Queensland (approximately 11.5 times the size of New York City), is a designated World Heritage Site and protects thousands of unique species in some of the world's oldest rainforests. The region, a modern-day relic of the Gondwanan supercontinent that existed some 200 million years ago, hosts high levels of endemism — which in short, are native species that typically require unique habitat conditions. The Wet Tropics also host 576 endemic plants and 11 endemic mammal species. These conditions are representative of the environment ancestral Australian marsupials would have evolved under, and their closest modern relatives remain in the Wet Tropics.

Have you ever heard of a tree kangaroo? Unfortunately, the trees that tree kangaroos inhabit, among a larger body of rainforest, grow best on nutrient-rich soil, which equates to precious agricultural land in the Wet Tropics. Timber or cattle use much of the land in the Wet Tropics; agriculture utilizes 58 percent of Australian land. The clearing of rainforests to make way for agriculture degraded the land, causing dramatic erosion and runoff into water systems, reducing biodiversity.

Since its founding in 1982, TREAT, in partnership with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and private landowners, has provided hundreds of thousands of rainforest trees to restore degraded lands

The Tablelands on the western edge of the Wet Tropics are particularly evident of these problems. Degradation of the land in the area led to muddy creeks and a lack of shade protection. When farmers began to lose cattle to these unusual predators, many thought planting trees along creek beds would help reduce erosion and protect their animals. When they asked the government for assistance, they offered non-native species or those adapted to drier conditions, further disrupting the native flora. As a result, farmers and ecologists banded together and founded Trees for the Evelyn and Atherton Tablelands. Since its founding in 1982, TREAT, in partnership with the Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service and private landowners, has provided hundreds of thousands of rainforest trees to restore degraded lands. A large part of their success is due to a dedicated team of volunteers who participate in planting and maintaining a nursery of rainforest trees.

We, a group of students on an ecology-focused study abroad program, joined this team of volunteers at a reforestation site near Massey's Creek in Ravenshoe, Queensland, Australia.

Massey's Creek lies between Tully's Gorge and Malaan National Parks, separated by previous farming and timber industries. TREAT initiated a reforestation project in 1997 to connect the two parks, known as corridors, and progress continues today. Doing so will facilitate greater movement of wildlife between the parks, improving the health of their populations. Corridors established thus far have found greater movement of native birds, such as honeyeaters and rodents, including bandicoots.

Working with employees from QPWS, we prepared the site by digging holes and laying down fertilizer. Rainforests are among the most diverse ecosystems in the world. To imitate this diversity, we planted an assortment of species and made sure not to plant two identical trees adjacent to one another. TREAT, which operates a nursery that cultivates native plants, supplied the trees for the planting. We had the privilege of visiting TREAT's nursery during our reforestation project. At the nursery, it became apparent that TREAT is not just a conservation organization but a community-building activity for residents of the Tablelands. The nursery prepares an astounding 100,000 trees annually for planting, raising them from seed, and TREAT ensures that any volunteer can help to the best of their ability. Forms of volunteering can include preparing food to share at morning tea, removing seeds from fruits, weeding, sizing different plants, loading trucks to take the plants to reforestation sites, or participating in planting events. We spoke to many volunteers and learned that TREAT members take pride in helping to care for the rainforest, see the benefits of restoration efforts on their land, and enjoy the company of their neighbors as they work. Through conservation, TREAT is building community.

Working again with TREAT volunteers and the QPWS, we completed the planting on a cool and rainy morning. The weather was not ideal for us, but it was perfect for the trees, and spirits were high. With around 40 volunteers, we completed the planting in several hours, planting around a thousand trees. Afterward, we enjoyed a delicious barbeque courtesy of the catering crew at TREAT and talked with some of the volunteers. Some people had worked with TREAT for over twenty years. During this time, many have seen the fruits of their labor. Some have returned to sites they helped plant and found thriving young rainforests. Others cited the return of iconic Australian rainforest wildlife to replanted areas, including cassowaries, a ratite distantly related to ostriches and kiwis. Such sightings indicate that the plantings are aiding in the support of the region's flora and fauna.

Efforts like those made by TREAT are not exclusive to Australia, nor do they need to be as grand as saving the oldest rainforest in the world. Local community initiatives are a powerful tool in the fight for the environment but also for other initiatives. At Oberlin, the Bonner Center represents one option to begin your own search. Sometimes, a cold email and some independent outreach are all it takes. Get out there, meet your neighbors, and make a difference. ● ● ●

