

# RISING FROM THE ASHES AND A MOUNTAIN OF WOE

JAMIE WALKER

They thought it couldn't happen, that the rainforest would always save Binna Burra mountain lodge from burning.

Now, five years after the beloved Gold Coast hinterland retreat was destroyed in a harbinger of the 2019-20 Black Summer bushfires, the full story of what took place and was learned can be told.

The reborn hideaway atop Mt Roberts, 115km south of Brisbane, turned an important corner this week when work started on the new lodge, the heart and soul of the 91-year-old Binna Burra operation.

It was a bittersweet moment for those who lived through the traumatic events of September 8, 2019 – due reward for all the hard work, hope and cash invested in the rebuild, but also a reminder of how much was lost when the old tallowwood structure was reduced to ash.

“It was like having your own house burn down,” said Leighton Pitcher, 29, who grew up on the mountain and went to work at Binna Burra in his teens.

“To see everything gradually come back has been amazing. But it's taken a whole community of people to get here.”

The rainforest, part of the World Heritage-listed Gondwana reserve, has returned to its verdant best, green and tangled with barely a visible trace of the damage wreaked by the ferocious bushfire.

The Binna Burra blaze and eruptions in rainforests elsewhere over Black Summer raised concern that climate change had tipped the natural balance and unleashed fires capable of overwhelming the lush habitats' inherent firefighting qualities.

NSW's Environment Protection Authority reported that more than 300,000ha of rainforest – 37 per cent of the estate – was destroyed when the continent burned from one end to the other, at a cost of at least 33 lives and thousands of lost homes.

In fact, the rainforest at Binna Burra largely did its job, and suppressed the flames that “trickled through” from a buffer of wet sclerophyll vegetation with the fire-prone eucalypt woodlands.

Research led by ecologist Rod Fensham of the University of Queensland, concluded that even the extreme fire conditions in the early spring of 2019 were generally insufficient to incinerate the forest canopy. It “seems that the fire-retardant qualities of rainforest dampened the fires”, the recently-published study found.

Professor Fensham told The Weekend Australian that true rainforest – that is, habitat undisturbed by past logging or tree clearing – was more robust than experts including him had believed.

“At the time, there were people like me saying this was a catastrophic event and we lost a lot of undisturbed rainforest as a result of the fires,” he said. “In fact, that did not happen. Yes, we lost some rainforest. But not nearly as much as we first feared. It turns out the rainforest did its job ... it is brilliant at putting out fire, even big, dangerous fires like the one that hit Binna Burra.”

His findings were backed by Southern Cross University fire and vegetation ecologist Andrew Baker, who investigated the destruction of 6000ha of the Nightcap rainforest in the northern NSW reach of the Gondwana World Heritage Area.

Dr Baker said combustible wet sclerophyll forest containing both rainforest and eucalypt species had been wrongly classified as rainforest, skewing the reported losses.

“Over the years the definition of rainforest has been extended out to include these transitional ecosystems that have probably had fire for 1000s of years if millions of years,” he said, referring to wet sclerophyll forest.

“So we’re now in a situation where we’re getting fires that may well have been happening for millennia, still following the same pathways, but raising alarm bells that our rainforests are burning.”

The chief ranger of Queensland’s Lamington National Park taking in Binna Burra, Wil Buch, said the lessons had been absorbed one by one. On the day, nearly everything that could go wrong had gone wrong in terms of the fire conditions. The area had received barely half its average annual rainfall and was baked by unseasonal 36C temperatures combined with single-digit humidity, giving rise to the highest Forest Fire Danger Index on record in Queensland.

From nearby Sarabah Valley, the conflagration took the only known fire run that had not been secured by hazard-reduction burns. Compounding this, a critical section of fuel-laden bush directly below the Binna Burra compound had been left for decades to grow over, turbocharging the fire when it roared up the escarpment and engulfed the lodge and adjoining cabins.

Fortunately, most of the concrete-skinned Sky Lodge apartments were relatively undamaged, along with the first building raised on the site in the 1930s, Groom's Cottage.

Ahead of a long-planned precautionary burn at Binna Burra this week, delayed by the early heatwave in southern Queensland and parts of NSW that juxtaposed jarringly with Victoria's wintry gales and record flooding in Tasmania's Derwent Valley, Mr Buch said rangers had moved away from confining hazard reduction to the traditional spring window.

"In 2023, we went burning in January, we went burning in February, March, May and July. Then we burned in September and October as usual," Mr Buch said. "The idea is that you burn when there's good soil moisture so the vegetation can recover more quickly. As a result, it's healthier and more resilient to the next drought or the next fire."

While Binna Burra chair Steve Noakes maintained from the day the lodge went up that it would be rebuilt, he confessed he didn't know at the time where the money would come from.

An insurance payout of \$3m was barely enough to refund the forward accommodation bookings and keep on a skeleton staff while the site was cleared and readied. The single-lane road up the mountain, wrecked by rockslides and subsidence during the fire, took more than a year to be repaired at taxpayer expense.

Among the first to reach out after the fire was Queensland Treasurer Cameron Dick, who helped set up an intergovernmental taskforce to get the recovery under way. The state went on to kick in \$18m to finance most of the lodge reconstruction.

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