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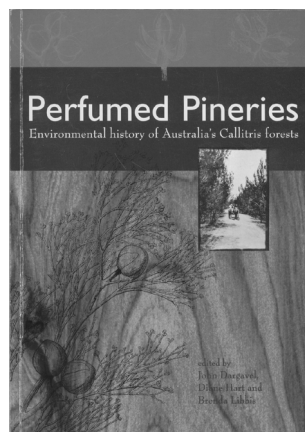


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John Dargavel, Diane Hart and Brenda Libbis (eds): *Perfumed Pineries: Environmental History of Australia's Callitris Forests*. Canberra: Centre for Resource and Environmental Studies, 2001. x + 209 pp., illus., ISBN 086740 524 4 (PB), \$30.00.



Over lunch we decided to drive there. Agnes, my great-aunt, gave the old ute a few sharp revs before it slid from dusty blackness into bright summer light. The motor idled precariously. I closed the wide, heavy doors of these converted stables built almost a century ago of resin-rich, termite-resistant white cypress pine (*Callitris glaucophylla*) beams and weatherboards. Then roast lamb, red wine and rippling afternoon heat carried us across ochre paddocks of wheat stubble, along tracks linking iron gate to iron gate, each almost too hot to hold open as the ute hovered through. Generations back my great-grandmother escaped a sweltering kitchen and trying kids to wander in a breezy, green place, gazing high into shaded spaces of a mature cypress pine forest. 'My mother called this place her cathedral', Agnes tells me. A few sparse columns of decrepit Callitris remain amidst hundreds of grey stumps; their felled timber now milled and nailed into homesteads, cottages, and sheds standing in nearby paddocks.

In *Perfumed Pineries: Environmental History of Australia's Callitris Forests* writers from the physical and social sciences and the humanities speak of the

intertwined histories of Australian people and the fifteen species of indigenous conifers placed by botanists within the genus *Callitris*. These are useful trees. Coloured oils for aromatherapy, Christmas trees for country families, and a termite-resistant timber for durable building. *Callitris* trees are also extremely well-adapted to a varied and variable Australian environment, thriving beside wet tropical forests, on southern coasts, and in the arid centre. In his chapter on the wood anatomy of *Callitris*, Roger Heady uses remarkable images formed by scanning electron microscopy to explain the sensitivity of these trees to seasonal change. Heady also suggests that the trees developed 'wart-like layers' inside water-conducting cells to extend their surface area and thereby maintain water uptake during dry spells. In their analysis of the factors that have disturbed the pine forests of southern Queensland, botanists Mark Harris and David Lamb comment on the ability of white cypress to withstand drought. Cypress seedlings speedily establish deep feeder roots along the upper margins of moist clay subsoils and minimise water loss through a specialised arrangement of their stomata.

Australia's *Callitris* species did not prove adaptable enough when faced with the onslaught of European colonisation. Historian Eric Rolls writes of his desperate attempts to find surviving examples of the cypress pines that gave the name to the town of Pine Creek in the Northern Territory: 'Eventually we found one, a distorted little tree out of reach of fire on the top of a rocky hill'. Rolls tells of over-harvesting of *Callitris* in the tropics. He discusses the replacement of gentle landscape fires ignited by Aboriginal clans during tropical Australia's cool months with more intense and destructive summer conflagrations. These widespread fires lit by pastoralists to induce grass growth eliminated any of the fire-sensitive cypress that had escaped the axe. Across the wide wheat-sheep belt that

extends westward of the Great Dividing Range from southern Queensland into northern Victoria farmers cut paddocks from dense cypress forests that seemed to arise with the end of Aboriginal 'fire-stick farming'. Forest historians John Dargavel and Margaret Kowald describe efforts by foresters in New South Wales and Queensland from the early twentieth century to secure *Callitris* stands from encroaching wheat fields and establish careful forest management. The reserved cypress forests of New South Wales stood within a matrix of railway lines built to haul wheat to Sydney. The steel tracks now carried milled cypress to fuel the city's housing boom.

Perfumed Pineries is the outcome of a conference held in November 2000 by the Australian Forest History Society and groups from the Australian National University and Macquarie University. Organisers carefully chose their conference site: Coonabarabran in northwest New South Wales, beside Australia's biggest *Callitris* stand, the great Pilliga Forest. *Perfumed Pineries* speaks of this grounding in place, reflecting new trends in thinking about relationships between people and the non-human world. Some authors seek new or neglected avenues of communication. Ian Lunt *et al.* ask 'can the forests teach us anything which our books cannot?' in their study of what old stumps can say about changes in cypress pine forests. David Bowman imagines *Callitris intratropica* as 'message trees' in a discussion of ecological change accompanying the European colonisation of northern Australia. Environmental historian Tom Griffiths writes of his great respect for Eric Rolls' classic history of the Pilliga Forest, *A Million Wild Acres*, celebrating its 'democratic recognition of all life' and the book's presentation of 'a speaking land, a sentient country raucous with sound'.

A close study of nature can invoke a sense of awe; a feeling which arose in this

reader as I learned of plant opal in Diane Hart's chapter on phytoliths, and as I discovered the Pilliga's floristic richness in Doug Binns' and Doug Becker's study of patterns in the flora of that vast forest. In response to Rolls' *A Million Wild Acres* and other 'grand narratives', David Bowman cautions against seduction by stories of people and landscape change that claim to know all. The ecological and social implications of colonisation are momentous, argues Bowman, and their complete understanding is perhaps unreachable. Environmental histories of

Australia's Callitris forests tell of massive ecological disruption wrought by European settlers.

A guide to better relations between people and the rest of nature may lie in *Perfumed Pineries*. Finding our cathedrals in forests, we can respect what is unknown and perhaps unknowable in the awe that arises when we listen to the trees.

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