

# Ashley Sewell



Having worked with them all his life, Ashley Sewell knows trees. A local since 1976, he has backed environmental concerns on the hinterland, including the Maleny Wood Expo, held annually in May. In 2014, he is conducting a Know Your Own Trees field workshop for the expo, and according to Dale Jacobsen, it is a subject he is perfect for.



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by Dale Jacobsen

**“T**HE RIGHT TREE grows in the right place for the right reason. Natural forest management needs an holistic overview of the property to maintain diversity of landscape.”

It is this intuitive understanding of ecosystems that Ashley Sewell shares with anyone who will listen. He knows soils. He knows trees. He has worked with them all his life.

Ashley joined Queensland Department of Forestry in 1961 as a fresh-faced cadet and spent the next 47 years battling bureaucracy. “We had such progressive ideas when it came to advising farmers, particularly in the area of farm forestry,” says Ashley, “but there were always layers of governmental approval to go through. In the end, the precious commodity of advice gave way to the almighty dollar.”

Where others would have buckled under, Ashley continued to help people where he could, and does so to this day. “You’ve got to roll with the punches, change as the department changes,” he says.

Part of his brief as Tree Care Extension Officer in 1989 was to facilitate the setting up of Landcare Groups, beginning with Barung, then Maroochydore, Kenilworth, Landsborough and Kilcoy. He kicked off a planting programme for Barung Landcare at Baroon Pocket Dam in December 1989, and sat on the management committee of Barung until 2000.

In 1995, with funding for future viability in doubt, Ashley suggested Barung hold an expo. “I called it *Chainsaw to Fine Furniture*,” he laughs. The name stuck and the event has become a fixture on Maleny’s calendar.

“Barung Landcare and the Expo were born with a strong ethic of remaining local,” explains Ashley. “Grow seedlings, plant out for long-term timber, mill locally, dry locally, put to use with local artisans and craftsmen.”

“This year I am leading a guided tour, *Know Your Own Trees*. A bus will leave the expo at 10am Sunday, and we will visit sites such as Jowarra Reserve and Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve.”

Ashley will focus on geology and its associated vegetation. “People think they can grow a rainforest anywhere. They can’t. What they can grow depends on the soil and climate conditions.”

Mary Cairncross Scenic Reserve is another place close to Ashley’s heart. Together with Jill Jordan, he set up the Mary Cairncross Advisory Committee in 1993, and served for 12 years. “It was made up of seven groups, with the community to have final say,” explains Ashley. “Now, after 22 years, the Council, in their wisdom, want to own it



1996: The original Barung Gang with Ashley on RHS



**opposite: Ashley Sewell beside a NQ kauri pine he planted 25 years ago**

**bove (inset) : Before – Ashley's bare block at Mt Mellum**

**bove: After – Ashley's property after 2500 trees transform into a densely forested corridor**

**ght: Ashley talks wood with Maleny luthier, Doug Eaton**

emselves. Yet more bureaucratic frustration!" During his time with Forestry, Ashley worked on volume 1 *Australian Timbers: Commercial Timber Species of Eastern btropical Australia* – a fantastic resource for timber workers. Few years later, having bought the copyright, he produced second edition of volume 1 with an additional 33 species. "We used all local people, everything from photography, printing, editing and publishing. It was wonderful to work with people such as Dave Kirby, Phil Jacobs, Jan Tilden and the late Meg Barrett." Ashley and Rosemary, a fellow tree enthusiast, have been locals on the Range since buying their property near Mt Mellum in 1976. Their first task was to slash the paddock, sign and built their own house, not surprisingly, all from timber. Over the years 2,500 trees have been planted on their 1.5 acres, transforming a bare hilltop to a corridor of thick forest. A botanical audit undertaken in 2013 found 368 species had been established which provides excellent habit for local fauna. Walking with Ashley through his property is like listening to a foreign language as he reels off the scientific names of every plant and tree we pass. During the 37 years on the hill, he has seen extremes in weather. "This is the driest summer ever recorded here. In 2011, it was so wet we lost two large trees. Both 'drowned'." A shed beyond the house is a woodworker's dream, packed to the roof with timber he has collected over 30 years, all sorted by species. This man does not just work with trees for a living, they are his passion. Everything from a



bread box to a magnificent dining room table fill his home. I am sure sap runs in his veins. When he retired six years ago, he came home with 40 cartons which he is still going through. "I'm the only silly bugger to have kept all the detailed info of the area. It worries me that, when I go, it will all be ditched. Sadly, people don't value the knowledge of the older generation – the culture of local knowledge of species' use is being lost." These days, he conducts botanical information field workshops in conjunction with Paul Daly from SEQ Catchments. As with his workshop for Barung Expo, they educate participants on the relationship between geology and forests. Scratch the surface of any environmental community group in the Hinterland, and you will find Ashley involved at a grass-roots level. This modest but passionate man is responsible for many of the legacies we take for granted: projects such as Baroon Pocket Dam rehabilitation and reforestation across 230 acres. "If you are a public servant, you take it literally," says Ashley. For details of Barung Expo and *Know Your Own Trees* field workshop, contact Barung Landcare – phone: 07 5494 3151 email: info@barunglandcare.org.au