

Foreword

What an important book this is. The setting: a unique tropical island, whose fate it is to be used and abused until it becomes Australia's 21st century extinction hotspot. How could this happen? Australians like to think they are protective of their wildlife, with safeguards to protect vulnerable species.

A problem for Christmas Island is that it is so remote, few Australians know much about it. They aren't aware of all the rainforest bulldozed to mine phosphate, about the invasions of crazy ants, wolf snakes and giant centipedes, or about the recent extinctions, which hardly caused a blip in the media. Australians also don't realise the extent to which the Australian Government has whittled down conservation funding, and pulled back from threatened species protection, supported by some conservation movement leaders who believe species can be sacrificed to landscape goals.

I am so glad John Woinarski has given us this insightful book. He is one of Australia's best ecologists, and it shows. He has taken one of the species that disappeared and applied a forensic eye to its demise. John has gone far beyond the biology to write a searing exposé of moral and management failure. He challenges Australians to wake up and take responsibility for their natural heritage.

On my first visit to this island, in 2006, to write an article for *Australian Geographic*, I had difficulty digesting what I was hearing. Biologist David James, who has written a heartfelt contribution to this book, told me the island's lizards and bats were disappearing, for reasons he could not fathom. What made it worse was that those high up in Canberra didn't want to know. My article was meant to be a celebration of islands so I couldn't include what he told me, and he would have been in trouble if I had.

I became a yearly visitor to the island, as an ecotourism guide, and soon came to see David's fears realised. In 2008 I made a rushed 'last chance to see' visit to the Winifred Beach Track at night, assured by a park ranger that if I sat quietly a pipistrelle would flutter past. But none did. The next year I had been on the island for only a couple of hours when the manager of the national park, with emotion in her voice, told me that the last pipistrelle had died the previous week. The Australasian Bat Society team that tried to catch it had just left. This meant the island had just lost the fourth of its five original mammal species.

On that trip in 2009 I saw the first forest skink captured in the hope of creating a breeding colony. Only four were caught before the species vanished in the wild, but there were mishaps in captivity and in 2013 I looked down on the last survivor, nicknamed 'Forest Gump', which died the following year after disturbance from a group of visiting photographers. My failed pipistrelle outing had left me supposing I had missed the chance to see a doomed species, but not so. During the years of my visits two more species – a skink and gecko – went extinct in the wild, although they survive in captivity. The extinctions haven't stopped the island's mining company from applying to destroy more rainforest.

A Bat's End

To bear witness to extinctions is painful, and made worse when hardly anyone knows they took place. By exploring one extinction from all angles, John gives Australians the opportunity to know what transpired on that island and to reflect on what it says about our nation's treatment of its wildlife. He tells a powerful and perceptive story, one that should be taken to heart by every Australian.

Tim Low