

'Greenies' lost battle but won the war

By NATASHA BITA
12:00AM JUNE 10, 2014

UP to their necks in mud and mayhem, the “greenies” who blocked the bulldozers in the Daintree were at the frontline of Australia’s last big-scale environmental crusade.

They failed to stop the Bloomfield Track, bulldozed from Cape Tribulation to Bloomfield, north of Cairns, in 1984, but four years later the Wet Tropics was inscribed on the UN World Heritage List, making the primeval Daintree rainforest off-limits to loggers and developers in perpetuity.

Mike Berwick, one of the conservationists arrested during the Daintree blockade, confesses now that the protesters never expected to stop the road. “It was a theatrical event from our point of view,” he said yesterday from his rainforest retreat at Diwan, north of Port Douglas.

“We got protesters from all over Australia and the world, and it was very successful in the sense of bringing into people’s lounge rooms what was happening to the rainforest. It was a turning point for World Heritage listing.”

The Daintree protests were carefully staged: the job of the carpenter-cum-conservationist, then 34, was to “talk to the coppers ... Every day I’d tell them what we were going to do, and the local coppers were great.” Even so, he was arrested for standing in front of a bulldozer, although he was released without charge.

[1984: Power to the individual](#)

Mr Berwick also scoured the local op-shops for the protesters to “dress up” in conservative outfits to avoid alienating mainstream Australians watching them on the nightly news.

“We wanted to have people who looked like tradesmen and doctors, not a bunch of people with long hair and beads and sarongs,” he said.

“There were a lot of sarongs.”

Another conservation warrior of the 1980s, Rainforest Conservation Society president Aila Keto, recalls the rowdy blockades and protests “bought time” for conservationists to build political support behind the scenes.

“The road went ahead, but the greatest function of the protesters on the ground, in the long term, was in drawing political attention to the issue,” she said. “A lot of people want instant results, but you need persistence and must be prepared to be there for the long haul. It took us 10 years-plus.”

Douglas Shire Council, which wanted to build the road to open the rainforest to more housing, had the backing of long-time Queensland premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen, whose appetite for development was matched only by his disdain for the “greenie” dissenters, but during the 1987 election, he launched his disastrous “Joh for PM” campaign against sitting Labor prime minister Bob Hawke, who campaigned to “save the Daintree”.

Mr Hawke won, and his new environment minister Graham Richardson, who faced down angry loggers on the back of a truck, nominated the Wet Tropics for a World Heritage listing.

UNESCO, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, inscribed the Wet Tropics on its World Heritage List in December 1988, in recognition of its “outstanding universal value” and “rich and unique biodiversity”. In 1989, Wayne Goss’s Labor Party swept to power in Queensland, ending three decades of conservative rule and burying any resistance to the World Heritage listing.

The Australian and Queensland governments now jointly fund and manage the protected forests.

The Wet Tropics traverse 450km of north Queensland’s coastline, with nearly 900,000ha of tropical rainforest sheltering the relicts of the primeval Gondwanan forest that carpeted Australia 50 to 100 million years ago.

The forests cover less than 0.2 per cent of the continent, but harbour 30 per cent of Australia’s species of marsupial, 60 per cent of bat, 40 per cent of bird, 60 per cent of butterfly species and 65 per cent of fern species.

Mr Berwick went on to edit the local newspaper, the *Port Douglas and Mossman Gazette*, before becoming Mayor of the Douglas Shire Council that he had once waged war against.

“That tells you the local community did care about the environment,” he said.

“I always said it would do more for the shire to be bringing in the tourists than to be clearing it and subdividing it.”