

Battle of the beaches rages over coconuts

Alien palms are destroying Australian rainforest. But the tourist industry loves them

Kathy Marks in Sydney – Independent.co.uk News
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Coconut trees spell paradise, and every holidaymaker's heart is gladdened by the sight of a beautiful white beach lined with swaying palms.

That includes the tourists who visit the Cape Tribulation region of north Queensland, where the World Heritage-listed Daintree Rainforest tumbles as far as the sand. But coconut palms are not native to Australia and, in the Daintree, the all-conquering trees are elbowing out the rainforest and destroying swathes of unique vegetation. Conservationists predict dire consequences unless they are uprooted, but face angry resistance from a tourism industry determined to protect the area's tropical image.

Hugh Spencer, a conservation biologist spearheading the anti-palm charge, has been called a "coconut killer", among other things. One tourism operator threatened to send a vigilante group after him. But Dr Spencer, director of the independent Australian Tropical Research Foundation, is unbowed. "The palms are a major pest," he said. "They're crowding out the rainforest and taking over the entire beachfront."

It is the proximity of the rainforest to the Great Barrier Reef, off the Queensland coast, that lures millions of tourists to Cape Tribulation. Indeed, the area markets itself as "Rainforest and Reef". But, ironically, it is the narrow band of vegetation that fringes the beaches that is most at risk from the marauding palms. At one popular beach, Myall Beach, 10 per cent of the coastal rainforest has been destroyed. At remote Cowie Beach, one third has disappeared.

Dr Spencer said the population of adult coconuts in the Daintree had increased fivefold over the past 16 years, "not including the juveniles, which have gone berserk".

So critical is the situation that locals recently formed a coconut discussion group to debate possible solutions. Mindful of the sensitivities involved, they thrashed out a compromise: all adult palms to be left in peace, all juveniles less than three metres tall, with no trunk and a nut still attached to the roots, to be removed. By hand.

Dr Spencer, who deplores the "coconutisation" of the world's beaches, favours more radical action. "They need to be totally culled," he said. "Coconuts don't belong here. They are far more vigorous than the native forest and they're very fecund. Wherever they drop a coconut, a tree sprouts and eventually you get a total thicket ... If nothing is done, we won't have any native forest on our beaches."

His views have met fierce opposition from the numerous Europeans who have made north Queensland their home. "They come here because it's paradise and they think every coconut is sacred," Dr Spencer said.

Among locals opposed to a cull is Kelly Sloane, who works for Mason's Tours in Cape Tribulation. "Most people wouldn't recognise a beach if it didn't have coconuts on it," she said. "If you ask someone to picture an exotic beach, it always has swaying palms."

The local council, Douglas Shire, is considering the proposal to kill juveniles as part of its shire-wide coconut plan. But, despite the influence of a Green mayor, Mike Berwick, few people believe it will grasp the nettle and order the wholesale destruction of palms. Recent council elections made plain how prickly the issue is, with one mayoral candidate pictured in an advert that showed a backdrop of felled coconut trees.

Dr Spencer does not believe the tourism industry would be as badly affected as many fear. "A lot of people come here to see something different," he said. "The Daintree contains the last existing area of lowland tropical rainforest, which is why this is a hotspot zone for world biodiversity. The problem is that everywhere is trying to look like Tahiti nowadays."



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