

Editorial

I pick up the thread I started at the end of my editorial in the last issue of *Northern Territory Naturalist*. That was the idea that conservation of the natural environments in northern Australia starts at a local scale and that this ought to be a matter of concern for everyone who appreciates, and spends time in, the ‘bush’.

Today, the media has an appetite for ‘good news stories’ about flora and fauna, such as the discovery of new species. One might conclude, perhaps cynically, that these ‘stories’ are intended more to raise the profile of the discovering organisations in the eyes of their funding agencies than to promote awareness of the new species and the environments in which they occur. In effect, these ‘stories’ deliver the message that all is well within the rest of the known natural world.

The reality is that all is not well with the known natural world on many levels. At the local level ‘development’ is eliminating some long-known, familiar species from parts of their range and the unfortunate message for conservation is that these species can and will be quietly eliminated by our indifference to their absence. No media outlet would report that species were *not* discovered during biological surveys.

The Australian subspecies (*albescens*) of Indian Lantern Flower (*Abutilon indicum*) is one such example of a plant threatened with local extinction. It is a woody shrub with large, soft, heart-shaped, grey-green leaves and showy, bright yellow flowers with a red ring deep inside (Figure 1). I liken the flowers to giant buttercups. There is no more glorious sight than a plant in full flower. *Abutilon indicum* grows at low elevations, mostly on coastal dunes and sea cliffs. Its growth is astonishingly rapid; by cultivating it, I have discovered it can grow from a seed to 1.5 m shrub in a single wet season. Flowering and seed-set is even more rapid – all over in a mere three weeks in the early dry season, although there may be more than one flowering cycle in a year.

Abutilon indicum has many uses in traditional medicine and it contains chemicals that can kill larval mosquitoes. Northern Territory ethnobotanist Glenn Wightman informs me that Indigenous coastal people use the wood for firesticks, children make toy spears out of it (the fibrous, pliable wood will not cause too much damage) and its flowering coincides with the time for harvesting tern eggs (so it is a ‘calendar plant’).

During my beach forays when I first came to Darwin 23 years ago, I was enchanted by the healthy colonies of *Abutilon indicum* at Bullocky Point, Dripstone Cliffs, central Casuarina Beach and Lee Point. Today they all are gone except for a dozen remnant plants at Lee Point. One could say its ecology predisposes *Abutilon indicum* to local extinction like this. As mentioned in the article by Deborah Rich and colleagues in the last issue of *Northern Territory Naturalist*, it is a pioneer species adapted to exploiting light gaps at the edge of, or inside, coastal forests. Individual plants live for only one or two years. Thus both its habit and habitat render it prone to local



Figure 1. Six month old cultivated plant of Indian Lantern Flower (*Abutilon indicum*) in full flower. Tiwi, Darwin, April 2015. (Neil Wright)

extinction. The causes of its extinction around Darwin are fires lit by humans and application of herbicides to ‘beautify’ coastal sites. *Abutilon indicum* may be an opportunist, but it cannot persist in the face of these annual man-made ‘catastrophes’.

Both activities – annual fires and regular application of herbicide – are very concerning in a coastal context. Concurrent with the loss of *Abutilon indicum* I have observed the change from woodland to grassland in the coastal flora fringing Darwin Harbour. The

policy of keeping the foreshore vista open for unimpeded views of the sea involves applying herbicide during the wet season to kill fast-growing introduced ‘weeds’. I oppose this policy as it also kills native plants. The herbicides enter seasonal streams killing mangroves and the red algae that grow on their muddy ‘ankles’, and end up in the sea killing seagrasses and green algae. The irony of this policy is that the introduced ‘weeds’ targeted for removal (such as grasses and scrambling smothering legumes) have reservoirs for growth underground, so they quickly resprout. Therefore, in many places (such as the Casuarina Coastal Reserve), herbicide is applied more than once a year.

The purpose of this editorial is to make Field Naturalists’ Club members aware that some of our prettiest ‘iconic’ plants have already vanished locally. Moreover, I would like members to note occurrences and abundances of *Abutilon indicum* during their excursions and tell me about them – even mention them during the ‘recent sightings’ segment at the start of the monthly Club meetings. I can collate these sightings into an article that can be published in *Northern Territory Naturalist* where it can serve as an indicator of one of the ways our environment is changing.

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Chief Editor