

Record keeper for timber giants

By GAIL THOMAS

FROM when he was a teenager, Derek McIntosh has been a lover of trees, and is now fulfilling his dream of creating the National Register of Big Trees for Australia.

As the register coordinator, Derek said there are currently 462 trees on the register.

"My goal is not to own it, but to create an incorporated association, or similar legal entity that will own the register, and subscribers to this association will be determined as the project develops," he said. "I do not have a horticultural background, so I have a group of expert supporters who advise on the botanical aspects of the nominated species.

"Once the register is populated with a large number of trees, a nominated expert will coordinate the nominations on a regional basis."

The project began in May 2009, and started with the Sydney Botanic Gardens with 18 trees listed when Derek launched the website.

He then gathered more from around the area, then travelled to Queensland, Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia.

"The principal expert who provides invaluable help is Dean Nicolle, an expert on eucalypts from Adelaide, and in addition, he is a major nominator of trees," Derek said. "Dean is the author of many tree books and publications. Brett Mifsud is the nominator of many of the big forest trees in Tasmania and Victoria, and his tree-climbing skills make height measurement of these trees possible and accurate."

Australia's largest trees of each species are recorded in the register, with points awarded on the basis of a formula that includes circumference, height and crown spread. The points allocated to a tree will be based on the formula used by American Forests and it is: Total points = trunk circumference (inches) + height (feet) + ¼ average crown spread (feet).

Significant trees have all sorts of subjective criteria, so Derek has stuck narrowly to the definition of a big tree by having these three measurements, with only the biggest one listed or co-champion one per state.

"The register is an integrated list of Australian native trees, and naturalised exotic/alien trees," he said.



ABOVE: This Jeffrey pine is at Leighton Gardens, Moss Vale, NSW.

FAR LEFT: The register covers the entire country, with tree details measured and posted online.

LEFT: Register coordinator Derek McIntosh checks a Tasmanian blue gum in Nannup, Western Australia.

"It is constantly changing as people nominate trees they have found. The register is not only about big, big trees. It covers all the wonderful garden, pavement and park trees we have in our communities and wilderness areas.

"On the website, the register will present the national champion, the state champion, and the regional champion (within NSW and Queensland).

"The objective is to archive the records of the two largest specimens of each tree species in the Queensland and NSW regions, and to archive the records of the three largest specimens of each tree species in the other states.

"We want to promote the preservation of big trees as impressive examples of tree growth, natural beauty, valuable genetic resources, and inspiring symbols of conservation.

"Many of our big trees are situated on privately owned land. Recognition of big tree preservation is a significant contribution to conservation on the part of the landowners, and is an intrinsic element of the project.

"We also want to work closely with all federal and state forestry departments, environmental departments, and national parks, and this close cooperation and website linking will extend to all shire, regional, city and town councils, Greening Australia, botanical gardens and the National Trust of Australia.

"A specific goal of the register is to link to and support all local authorities and organisations that have records of significant trees. The reciprocal linking of their websites to the register is an important component in this process."

Derek has also compiled listing conditions so when trees have a points score that is within 5% of each other, they are co-champions.

If a nominated tree is closely outside of this margin, it could be listed for a period to let visitors know about the tree.

"At times, trees that are not the champions but have significant features will temporarily be included for reasons of interest and reference. These trees may also be attached to the national champion of the species," he said.

"Botanical gardens often have the champion trees, but in some instances other runner-up trees outside the gardens will be listed so that tree enthusiasts have a wider geographical range of trees to visit. Some trees are nominated and their locations are a nominator's secret, or are on private property and not viewable by the public, or are inaccessible. In cases like this, the tree will be on the website, but the next highest points tree of the same species that can be seen by the public may also be listed."

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