

Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat

At Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat a once degraded dairy farm has been transformed into a rainforest paradise. The property has undergone significant revegetation and the focus is now on educating visitors on the importance of our natural environment and sustainable use of resources. The property also provides visitors with the opportunity to offset their travel emissions by participating in a tree planting project. Last year, this resulted in the property having carbon credits of 325 tonnes.

Since 1994 when Jon and Peta Nott purchased the site of what is now Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat, they had a goal of converting the once degraded dairy farm into a rainforest paradise. The couple wanted to put into practice their strong environmental values and they have been more than successful in this pursuit. Over the past 15 years they have developed Rose Gums Wilderness Retreat into a successful ecotourism accommodation provider. They have planted over 20,000 rainforest trees which sequester over 400 tonnes of CO₂ from the atmosphere. They actively engage their guests in their passion through education and carbon offsetting.

GETTING STARTED

With the aim of revegetating the property and building new accommodation facilities, the first step was to clear 60 acres of declared noxious weeds to allow for reforestation. Having completed this, the first 5,000 trees were planted in 1995 and the first treehouse for guests was constructed in 1998. Since then, an additional 8 treehouses have been constructed in what were formerly weed infested areas. The treehouses have been constructed from timber sourced from sustainable forests and are over 100 metres apart; offering guests privacy and a rare opportunity to enjoy the serenity and beauty of the natural environment.



MAJOR INITIATIVES

Since these first steps have been taken, other major initiatives have included:

- Passive solar design in the buildings;
- Installing gas hot water units using 5-star instantaneous units and cooking facilities;
- Implementing waste recycling; and,
- Installing eco-efficient lighting and appliances.

The property also underwent a full eco-footprint audit by an independent consultant in 2007 and continues to monitor energy, water and waste where possible.

Characteristic of Rose Gums is the sharing of knowledge and passion between the staff and guests. Jon and Peta love the uniqueness of the ecology at Rose Gums and share their knowledge and experiences with all who will listen. At Rose Gums, guests also have the opportunity to partake in carbon offsetting by planting a rainforest tree on the property. The carbon credits that result are awarded to the guest who also receives a certificate detailing their carbon credits and a yearly report on the property's tree plantings.

KEY OUTCOMES

The benefits of the sustainable initiatives at Rose Gums are immense. Not only has the property and native vegetation been restored, but cost savings have also been made. For example, when bookings at Rose Gums increased by 30% over a 12 month period, energy use increased by only 5%. Between 2007 and 2008, further savings were made and the property reduced their energy costs by close to \$5,000.

For the year ending December 2008, the property also had carbon credits of 325 tonnes. This was achieved through the presence of 20,000 native tropical plants on the property which sequestered 460 tonnes of CO₂ while the property itself only emitted 135 tonnes (including those resulting from guests travelling to and from the property from the entry points of Cairns and Townsville). As part of their service to humanity and the environment, Rose Gums gives these carbon credits back to the planet to help offset carbon emissions elsewhere.

MAJOR CHALLENGES

The road travelled has not always been easy at Rose Gums. Major challenges for the owners have included:

- Exotic grass regrowth around new saplings in the tree plantations;
- As both solar and wind energy is not a viable option for the property (due to the lack of sunny days and high winds) the owners have needed to be more creative in their approach and look at energy saving appliances and design techniques; and,
- The high level of energy used in pumping water out of the underground bore and the prices attached to alternative technology.

ADVICE TO OTHER OPERATORS

Owners Jon and Peta Nott stress the importance of measuring and assessing your eco-efficiency and seeking the help of independent auditors. Jon and Peta also encourage operators to integrate environmental and economic goals and recognise the skills of current employees, who are likely to have valuable input.

NEXT STEPS

Next steps on Rose Gums' pathway to sustainability include:

- Re-guttering the shed roof and using the water (untreated but filtered) for operating the retreat laundry which uses 160,000 litres per year.
- Investigating a ram system to pump water from the creek which is 700 metres away and 100 metres lower than the water tanks.
- Replacing the older hot water storage units with 5 star units.
- Establishing their own tree nursery for the propagation of rainforest trees for further onsite rehabilitation and to be a source of reasonably priced trees for others doing reforestation projects in the surrounding community.

A FINAL WORD FROM THE OPERATOR...

"The whole concept from the beginning was to put back the natural environment in this special part of Australia"

Peta Nott, Owner/Manager/Host