

Up Close and Personal with Exotic Australia and Its Lifestyle

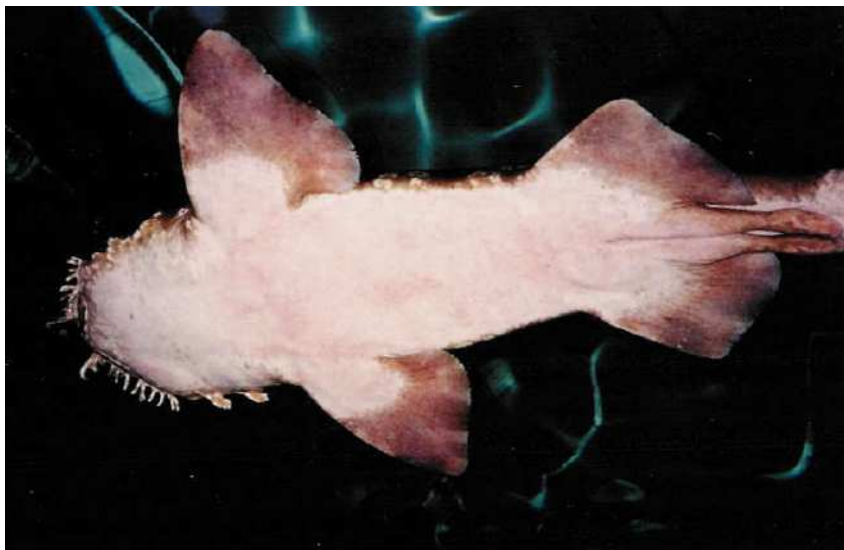
By Dr. Jharna Chatterjee



My long fascination with the continent of Australia and my dream of going there someday was fulfilled rather unexpectedly in July 2000—I was asked to attend a conference in Canberra, on restorative justice. Who cared if it was winter in Australia? Not me!!! Some relevant homework resulted in an interesting personal itinerary, as a wish-list or a guideline to follow. In this article, I am going to share with you the way we saw much of the vegetation and animals, or some of the unusual 'human-nature interface' in Australia (since the functional definition of culture states that "Culture is the way humans solve problems of adapting to the environment or living together." See article "A Short Discourse on Culture."). The 'environment' in this context includes the vast and unique biodiversity, of course.

Our first stop was the enchanting city of Sydney. We took a ferry from the 'Circular Quay' near the world-famous Opera House, across Sydney harbor to the Taronga Zoo (a typical zoo with many unusual animals), and then took a cable car to the top of the hill that housed a variety of animals. For the first time, we saw kangaroos from such close proximity and a wombat and had our pictures taken with a very reluctant koala, who unabashedly ignored us and kept on munching eucalyptus (they call it "gum" tree) leaves, hiding his face from the camera to the best of his ability. Did you know that actually they are extremely unsociable animals, and not at all the cuddly types that they appear to be? We were told that there are 360 varieties of Eucalyptus trees in Australia, but koalas eat only 10 of them. And you think I am fussy about food? Later, we had another chance to see koalas in a much larger number and had a better view. We also saw several kinds of Australian birds. I remember seeing just so many varieties of parrots, of dazzling bright colors and wide-ranging sizes! We were told that there were 55 varieties of just parrots in Australia.

We took another ferry to the Darling Harbour Aquarium. Here, we, the spectators were in a glass tunnel under a miniature, open sea, where sharks, stingrays, and a wide variety of colorful fish were gliding above and all around us. In addition, of course, we saw numerous other marine animals, platypus, crocodiles, various kinds of corals (in a 'Reef' Section) and all their natural associates, eels, and a wide variety of marine animals, small and large. We saw children touching all kinds of little squirmy marine animals in a small reservoir—a marine version of a petting zoo



Stingray at the aquarium (upside down) – Photo by author, from inside the glass tunnel with the marine animals swimming overhead

Next, we flew to Cairns, a small seaside city in the North-East shore of Australia—closer to the equator. On the first day in Cairns, we boarded the Kuranda Scenic Train, acclaimed by the brochures as one of the top 12 train journeys in the world. We traveled for an hour and half through craggy mountains covered by giant trees reaching up to the sky, clingy creepers and other plants of the rainforest, dancing rivers, gorgeous gorges, and pretty waterfalls. We climbed up to Kuranda village, a touristy place selling all kinds of touristy articles like *didjiridoo*, a musical instrument made of a hollowed out piece of bamboo, decorated with painted Aboriginal designs. Many artifacts told the 'Dreamtime Stories' that pass on traditional spiritual beliefs from one generation to the next. Different tribes have different "Dreamtime" stories to describe the creation of the universe by the spirits of their great ancestors. Most importantly, for the current widespread concern about the environment, these stories also teach how to live in harmony with nature and the land.

As we returned from Kuranda by sky-rail, we had a bird's eye view of the rainforest. Kuranda Skyrail opened in August 1995, and was said to be the world's longest gondola ride (and I tend to believe it), gently gliding over the canopy of a magnificent, mysterious rainforest from Caravonica Lakes to Kuranda. We could see several epiphytes sitting atop branches on tall trees in search of sunlight, and a surprisingly bright blue butterfly fluttering like a tiny helicopter at a dizzying height. We got off at a midway station built at midheight of the tallest trees, to see the rainforest from a board walk. We saw many large trees, among them a few majestic kauri pines, and then took another gondola ride back to Cairns.

We drove north from Cairns toward Cape Tribulation (the name says it all!) through the lush, dense, dark, tropical Daintree Forest of Queensland, a World Heritage Area—the Noah's Ark for ancient plant species that were previously believed to be extinct. Near the beach, there were warning signs about deadly poisonous box jellyfish, and the importance of seeking first aid immediately in case of an unanticipated contact. Here we took an open steamer cruise on the Daintree River to see crocodiles in their natural habitat. The river marked the boundary of the rainforest and the rest of Queensland, and was lined with mangrove trees, their roots visibly reaching into the water. I also admired (with a greedy, jealous heart!) a gardenia plant that was taller than me—full of off-white, fragrant flowers, right in front of the visitors' information center. On our way back to Cairns, we suddenly saw a couple of cassowaries (they looked somewhat similar to Emus, but smaller) foraging in the forest.



Photo by the author

We went for a tour to the Great Barrier Reef on the following day. The Great Barrier Reef, “the eighth 'natural' wonder of the world—a World Heritage Site, is by far the largest single collection of coral reefs in the world and supports the most diverse ecosystem known to human beings. It has evolved over millions of years on the north-east continental shelf of Australia.”

About two hours after leaving the harbor at Cairns by a large steamboat, we set anchor at Fitzroy Island. Its shore and the paths were completely covered with dead, broken, white staghorn coral shells. We were sternly warned against taking even a single piece of coral or leaf or flower or fruit from the island as a souvenir—violation would be heavily fined. We took a 30-minute-long guided, ecological tour where the guide explained to us the names of various trees (such as ‘bread tree’) and how the Indigenous people used them. Then we continued our journey to the outer Great Barrier Reef, to a pontoon (a man-made open, but roofed floating structure, weighted down with cement, sitting safely on the continental shelf, I would like to believe!) where we got off the boat.

There were a few options for viewing the reef: snorkeling and scuba diving for swimmers, and glass-bottom boats and semi-submersible boats for everyone. We went out three times in each kind of boat to see as much as possible of this great, wonderful underwater garden. I did some snorkeling as well, within the safe reach of a guide. Our enthusiasm was well rewarded: we saw what we had never seen before! Staghorn corals make up the largest proportion of coral on the Great Barrier Reef and provide shelter to fish (we saw many schools of fish) and other marine animals, such as shells and giant clams, living for thousand of years in symbiotic relationships with other species and the corals. Lace-like ferns, huge lumps of brain coral, corals that looked like gigantic flowers or enormous leaves, or other vegetative mysteries adorned the outer edges of the reefs. We saw a great variety of corals in many shapes and colors, some moving, some stationary, with fish of all varieties, colors and designs, and giant clams, star fish, sea cucumbers (not a vegetable) and plants co-existing among them.



Photo by the author (colors are less dramatic due to interference of the glass bottom, still allowing an idea of the wide variety of shapes)

From Cairns we were on our way to Melbourne. Melbourne straddles the Yarra River, and is the second great metropolitan city of Australia, as well as its industrial, financial, and commercial heart. We utilized Melbourne’s excellent network of tramlines to see its many interesting places, such as the Victoria market, primarily an open air market consisting of a large number of stalls that offered fresh exotic tropical vegetables and fruits, cheap souvenirs, winter clothes, meat (in an enclosed building), cheese, bakery items, and such. Melbourne was cold, even for Canadians who were unwise enough not to pack adequate winter clothing. So

the market was quite helpful in that respect, especially for our next trip to Phillip Island at the edge of the sea (South Indian Ocean) separating Australia from Tasmania.

Phillip Island is located about 45 miles Southeast of Melbourne. Tourist buses or cars bring literally hundreds of people there everyday, to marvel at the spectacle of "Penguin Parade," the nightly parade of fairy penguins, as they return after a day's fishing at sea to rest in their cliff-top burrows, where their babies wait to be fed. These duck-like birds with a maximum height of one foot are the smallest of all penguins, and walk very much like toddlers in diapers. Expert swimmers, they feel safe at sea where they spend the entire day catching and consuming fish. At or soon after sunset, with their bellies full of fish for their own and their youngsters' sustenance, they start their journey home. One by one they glide out of the surf and wait for their companions at the edge of the illuminated beach. Once a critical mass (5 to 10 or more) is achieved, they waddle up the beach on their way to the surrounding hills, towards the safety of their burrows.



Photo purchased at the Visitors' Center

We waited there on the cold, wet cement bleachers with hundreds of other curious spectators of all ages—*very* quietly, patiently—and in an hour we saw about 150 to 200 penguins return to the shore in batches of 5 to 30. They looked so incredibly cute, huggable and vulnerable too!!! If for any reason, one of them felt scared and swam back to the safety of the sea, others immediately followed, and the group made another effort to come back to the shore a little later. This 'safety in numbers' principle was observed for their fear of many predators, such as the fox and nocturnal birds of prey. Once they crossed the open beach, they started walking in a more relaxed manner along the path through rocks, mostly under the bush, sometimes quite a distance, perhaps one or two km. This ritual is said to be thousands of years old, and the national park rangers made sure no one intruded on these delightful birds with their cameras or even videos, or touched them. Taking photos of any kind was strictly prohibited—and the rule was strictly enforced.

On our way to the "Penguin Parade," we had stopped at a kangaroo farm, and fed the kangaroos some bread. We were astonished to hear that there are 50 varieties of kangaroos, and they come in all sizes, from the size of a domestic cat to that of a human! They looked funny when they hopped on their hind legs, but they were quite friendly creatures, unlike the koala bears whom we saw at our next stop from a high boardwalk allowing us a closer view of these solitary animals. They are said to need at least 21 hours of sleep every day—like forever teenagers! Their waking hours are almost always spent in eating! This is where I was able to take a reasonably good photo of this funny animal. There were other uniquely Australian animals such as dingoes (wild dogs), wallabies, wombats and wild ass in this farm as well.



Photo by the author

Melbourne is called ‘the city of gardens,’ and its 102.5 acre Royal Botanic Gardens shelters 12,000 plant species, some of which are descendants of those known to have existed in the ancient Gondwana-land. Geological studies tell us that about 250 to 210 million years ago, there was a super-continent known as Gondwanaland, which eventually began to break up into Australia, Antarctica, India, Africa, South America, and Arabia as the tectonic plates kept moving, and the sea levels kept rising after the last Ice Age. The process was completed only 40 to 60 million years ago. This geological history accounted for the relative isolation of the Australian continent—separated from the rest of world by the Pacific Ocean on one hand and the Indian Ocean on the other for a very long period, allowing many ancient living species, both animals and plants, to survive there unaltered and unknown to humans for millennia. Understandably, the Australian Government zealously protects its entire collection of precious flora and fauna from possible contamination, and for this reason, does not allow *any* food item (not even a package of unopened cashews acquired on the flight as a snack) or vegetation past the Customs.

On our last day in Melbourne, we went to see the Botanical Gardens. There were amazing trees with huge trunks; it would take perhaps 15 people to join their hands around one of them. These trees were called Moreton Bay figs, and had hundreds of figs on their branches. We also saw grass palms, cabbage palms, many types of ferns typical of shady rain forests, soft tree fern, huge blossoming bushes of camellia, Bird of Paradise plants, so many types of Eucalyptus trees, and many more plants and flowers that (alas!) I didn’t have the time to find out about.

We were sufficiently charmed by Australia to go there for a second trip the following year—this time during North American winter, therefore, late spring over there. The jacaranda trees with a profusion of rich blue flowers, the blazing red gulmohar (Royal Poinciana) trees and hundreds of other vibrant plants and flowers of every possible color stole my heart once more. Another interesting experience was to see mango trees laden with fruits, some dropped on the sidewalks like apples in Canada. We tasted one, oh so good! These mangoes looked very much like one of the familiar Indian varieties, and we found out from our Australian acquaintances that in fact mangoes originally came to Australia from India. Well, that was a pleasant thought to come back with—an ancient intercultural connection through a fruit!

I consider myself fortunate to have had the opportunity of seeing at least some parts of this remote continent and enjoying its unique natural assets. Honestly, I can say that my fascination with Australia has been proven justified, twice, and I understand why tourism is one of the major commercial commodities there.