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**GENETIC DIVERSITY AND DIVERGENCE WITHIN AND
AMONG NATURAL POPULATIONS OF *ARAUCARIA* IN
EASTERN AUSTRALIA.**

Thesis submitted by

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in March 2005

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in the School of Biological Sciences

James Cook University

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Paul Gadek, for your help, guidance and support throughout the candidature of my PhD. Particularly, I thank Prof. Gadek for allowing me to explore a novel topic, both in terms of my previous knowledge of the field, but also for allowing me to re-address an important lack of knowledge in our understanding of this remarkable genus.

I am also very grateful for the following scholarships and competitive awards that I received throughout my candidature. These include funding for the project from the Rainforest CRC, as well as internal grants from the School of Tropical Biology, James Cook University, Cairns.

Personally, I thank the following for subsistence funds during my candidature: the Australian Postgraduate Award, Rainforest CRC competitive Top-up scholarship, and the Completion scholarship and Doctoral Merit Research Scheme provided by James Cook University. For the direct funding of project costs I thank the following: Rainforest CRC for supporting this project through two competitive research grants, the School of Tropical Biology, James Cook University, for providing both competitive and other grants for to ensure the completion of the project. These include competitive Internal Revenue Account Supplements, and the Doctoral Merit Research Scheme.

I would also like to thank the QPWS staff of the Bunya Mountains for their assistance during my stay there, as well as the staff of Lamington National Park.

For molecular assistance I would like to thank Michelle Waycott for insightful discussions on optimising the RAPD technique, as well as providing me with a large range of ISSR primers to trial. I thank Garth Nikles for allowing me to access the enormous quantity of data and knowledge he has gathered from over 50 years of study of *A. cunninghamii*.

I would also like to thank Lynne Jones for her assistance in running some of the numerous agarose gels required for this project, Stuart Worboys, for assistance in collecting some populations of *A. cunninghamii* in North Qld; Mark Harrington and Darren Peck for our numerous discussions on population genetic

markers and their associated theory, and Dr Brad Congdon for helpful discussions on the statistical evaluation of population genetic data.

Finally I would like to thank Prof. Chris Quinn for insightful comments on earlier drafts of this thesis.

ABSTRACT

Historical and contemporary fragmentation of natural populations has resulted in many species being confined to disjunct isolates. An understanding of the underlying distribution of genetic diversity and divergence within species is critical to informed conservation and management practices, yet for many species this information is lacking. While many plant species have been substantially exploited over the past few centuries in Australia, thus potentially exacerbating any genetic effects of historical fragmentation, little is known on the effects of these practices on the genetic diversity and divergence of their extant populations. However, for most plant species, the genetic effects of historical fragmentation prior to exploitation are unknown. Any meaningful interpretation of contemporary genetic impacts must be viewed against an historical background. The genus *Araucaria* (Araucariaceae) has undergone dramatic range reductions and population size fluctuations throughout its history on the Australian continent and is now represented by two extant species: *Araucaria bidwillii* and *Araucaria cunninghamii*. The historical effects of their dynamic histories are examined using two independent neutral molecular markers, RAPDs and ISSRs, and is discussed in terms of extant population size, isolation and historical microfossil records. For both species, these markers proved to be highly congruent in the amounts of diversity they detected and how that diversity was spatially partitioned among populations. High diversity characterised all but one of the populations sampled and was accompanied by high divergence among the populations

sampled. Discrepancies in the amount of variation these markers attributed to regional and populational divergence is discussed and emergent trends noted. The results cast some doubt on some of the earlier, simplistic rainforest refugial hypotheses that have been proposed for eastern Queensland. Furthermore, the results have allowed for a more detailed dissection of the *Araucaria* microfossil record in eastern Australia, which until now could only provide static evidence and indicate the relative regional importance of the genus. When the present results are reviewed in association with the available microfossil evidence, the high diversity and high divergence detected in both species among the populations sampled suggests substantial periods of isolation in the absence of gene flow, yet the maintenance of diversity appears to be the product of the longevity of these species and/or recent population size reductions.

Finally, the implications of these results for both the ongoing conservation and management of extant populations of these economically important and iconic Australian species is discussed with reference to their historical genetic associations. Given the quantification of their historical genetic signals, future research directions are suggested that are imperative for the maintenance of the evolutionary potential of these species.

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