



# THE FINAL CUT



**Tim Low** sounds the alarm on a new threat to Australia's unique Christmas Island.

Christmas Island is so special it manages to have its own species of booby and frigatebird. That says a lot, since the world has only five frigatebird species and seven boobies. Abbott's Booby is the rarest of all boobies, the only one in its own genus, and the only one to nest high in trees, from which it barks loudly, as if there are seals up in the canopy. Originally breeding in the Pacific and western Indian Ocean, Christmas Island became their last outpost more than a century ago. The island also has its own species of pigeon, owl and white-eye, and a goshawk likely to be declared a unique species in the near future. There is also a remarkable golden form of the White-tailed Tropicbird, known locally as the 'Golden Bosun'. Land crabs, including the famous Red Crabs, as well as Blue Crabs and enormous Robber Crabs, emphasise the point that Christmas Island is globally unique.

Yet for all its natural wonders, Christmas Island has seen more extinctions in recent times than any other part of Australia, losing a bat, a shrew and two lizards. The island has been undergoing death by a thousand cuts. It is an invasion hotspot, with giant centipedes, Asian Wolf Snakes and supercolonies of crazy ants. And Christmas Island's plight is set to worsen, with a company hoping to mine phosphate under tall rainforest supporting endangered Abbott's Booby nests. The island's administrator has endorsed the mining proposal as vital for the island economy. Extinct animals can't be brought back, and the island's invasive species aren't likely to be eradicated anytime soon, but this proposal can and must be stopped.

Phosphate mining has a long history here, with a quarter of the island already cleared for mining. The island presents disturbing vistas of tropical rainforest alternating with former minefields, now desolate areas of rubble and weeds.

Mining is always bad for rainforest but on Christmas Island it is diabolical because what is taken by phosphate mining is the soil, leaving bare limestone fit only for weeds and ferns. On the mainland, topsoil that is moved aside early on in the mining process can be returned for revegetation. On Christmas Island, every shipload of soil

takes with it the potential to restore acres of rainforest. Replacement soil can't be brought in because it may harbour insect pests and microbes. Parks Australia, which manages the Christmas Island National Park, is attempting to rehabilitate old mine sites with a one-metre layer of soil that it has been able to scrounge. There is only enough soil to restore very small areas.

The phosphate ends up fertilising oil palms in Indonesia and Malaysia, implicating it in rainforest destruction in South East Asia. The island has, in some years, provided up to half of Malaysia's phosphate needs. In 2011 the mine company, Phosphate Resources Limited, expanded into oil palms, buying a plantation and mill in Malaysia. Two of its largest shareholders are Malaysian companies and three of its directors have backgrounds in the Malaysian oil palm industry.

Phosphate is the reason the island was developed in the 1890s, relying on a Chinese and Malay labour force that was harshly exploited in the early decades. The mine became uneconomical and closed in 1987, then re-opened as a new entity in 1991, focused on reworking old mine stockpiles. It was agreed then that mining had a limited lifetime, and no more rainforest would be cleared.

The original mining company was probably the first in the world to fund an environmental study, when one of its founders, the visionary scientist Charles Murray, brought out a British biologist to study the island as mining began and then a decade later, in 1908. Charles Andrews found that the island's two native rodents, plentiful on his first visit, were extinct by his second, from a parasite imported with ship rats. He saw giant centipedes and weeds coming on ships serving the mine. So began the unravelling of the island ecosystem. The centipedes, plus the Asian wolf snakes that arrived in the 1980s, are implicated in the lizard extinctions.

The harm caused by the mine became a global concern in the 1960s when British biologist Bryan Nelson came to study Abbott's Boobies. They nest atop very tall trees because their chick, on its maiden flight, needs a long drop-off to engage its

**From top:** Phosphate mining has devastated the rainforests of Christmas Island—and because miners take the topsoil and do not replace it, only ferns and weeds grow back. Photo by Tim Low

Abbott's Boobies need high rainforest trees so that their fledglings can successfully engage their wings when they first take to the air. Photo courtesy Parks Australia

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wings. The tallest trees grow in soil rich in phosphate. Nelson was told that substantial numbers of booby nesting areas were slated for clearing. Many boobies died, until the destruction was stopped.

Awareness of the island's many unique species grew, and in the 1980s, 63 per cent of the island was reserved as national park. But large areas of rainforest remain as crown land, and the company wants some of these. It obtained a new exploration licence in December 2015. An article in *The Australian* reported that only seven hectares of rainforest will be cleared, but this is altogether misleading, representing the forest to be removed for prospecting. Anyone who studies the mine's proposal with GIS software can see that mining will destroy about 145 hectares of publicly owned rainforest. Birds that will lose habitat forever include the endangered Christmas Island Goshawk and vulnerable Christmas Island Hawk-Owl. The impact on Abbott's Boobies will be greater than the 145 hectares lost, because the forest close to cleared areas will become unsuitable for nesting due to disturbance from the mining exploration process.

In September the mining company asserted that its prospecting does not qualify as a controlled action (one requiring environmental assessment under the Commonwealth EPBC Act). This implied there will be no significant impact on threatened species. The company said it will not drill within 30 metres of known Abbott's Booby nests. While the

prospecting application states that they will not actually drill closer to nesting Abbott's Bobbies than 30 metres, there is every likelihood that the bulldozers could clear along the drill lines much closer to the nests than this. BirdLife Australia argued that a 30 metre buffer is manifestly inadequate and called on the Australian Government to declare the prospecting a controlled action. Fortunately, the Federal Environment Department has now done so and the company has to explain how its prospecting will affect threatened species.

In 2007 the then environment minister, Malcolm Turnbull, rejected a bid by the mine to clear rainforest, and when the company appealed, the next environment minister, Peter Garrett, quashed their hopes. The current application shows that the rainforest remains at risk—any ensuing mining will have a much wider environmental footprint. The rhetoric has also changed. The earlier exploration bid was portrayed by the company as something that would assist "a planned and rational transition to the Island's post mining economy." Ecotourism has long been viewed as the island's only viable future, one handicapped by the continued presence of the mine—any visiting birdwatcher soon notices all the mine infrastructure and trucks roaring along roads.

In the decade since then almost nothing has been done to prepare the island for that post-mining future, and further mining is no longer depicted as transitional.

The company says on its website that "we continue to constantly seek new ways of expanding and improving on our operations." If it receives 145 hectares of rainforest it will expect more in future, whenever the employment card is played. The island's woes will never end. Islands are extinction hotspots because their animals have small and vulnerable populations. More rainforest destruction will further compromise Christmas Island's unique animals and plants. It has lost four of its five mammal species and most of its reptiles. It should not be condemned to lose Abbott's Boobies and other bird species as well.

*Tim Low is an ecologist and author of Feral Future and Where Song Began.*

**To have the mining proposal qualify as a 'controlled action' requiring an environmental assessment of its impact is a small win. However, should the mining be approved, we will need to fight for the Abbott's Booby, Christmas Island Goshawk and other endemic island birds. By supporting our work, or by becoming part of BirdLife Australia's Conservation Action Network you can help us in our battle for the birds—sign up today at [bit.ly/BirdLifeVolunteer](http://bit.ly/BirdLifeVolunteer)**

The Christmas Island Goshawk is one of the forest birds under threat from the proposed mines. Photo by Rohan Clarke

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