

The wonders of the Kimberley

A glimpse at its unique environment – ‘The jigal tree’

(by Brian Kane)



Aunty Doris Mathews glowed as she recalled her childhood bush fruit adventures. The jigal tree was one of her favourites. She and her eager young friends used to compete with the ‘honey sucker’ birds for the beautiful nectar contained at the base of the flower pods. Paul Foulkes, a fondly remembered conservationist in this region, referred to it as the ‘Kimberley Turkish Delight’ because the sap which is often found oozing from the trunk and branches is chewy and when eaten with the nectar resembles this sweet. The tree is also known as the Kimberley Bauhinia but more formerly by its scientific name ‘*Lysiphyllum cunninghamii*’.

The tree has a wide range of habitats in the Kimberley, doing well on black soil, sand, stony ground, along watercourses as well as in pindan. It is up to six metres tall, usually having a short, stout trunk and its outer branches hang down giving it a characteristic weeping appearance which provides a popular shelter for wallabies and other animals during the heat of the day. It’s hollowed out limbs are a favourite nesting site for bush honey bees. Unlike eucalypts which often have a sterile area, void of other plants beneath them, bauhinias allow other shrubs and grasses to grow happily in the mulch-enriched ground beneath their canopy. The seed pods are large and reddish brown, becoming darker as they mature. The leaves are high in protein and are relished by many grazing animals, especially cattle.

The leaves have two lobes which are joined like a butterfly’s wings. This back-to-back positioning of the leaves gives rise to the Aboriginal name of ‘Jigal’ tree. Jigal means mother-in-law and according to Aboriginal custom the mother-in-law and son-in-law must not directly face each other.

Maybe next time when you travel out ‘bush’ you might like to examine this tree more closely and then boil the billy because it produces excellent firewood and burns hot with little smoke. You may also come to experience some of the same pleasure Aunty Doris found while collecting bush fruit.

Further information: BK's Kimberley nature web site:
<http://www.stmarysbroome.wa.edu.au/home/nature/aaopen.html>

