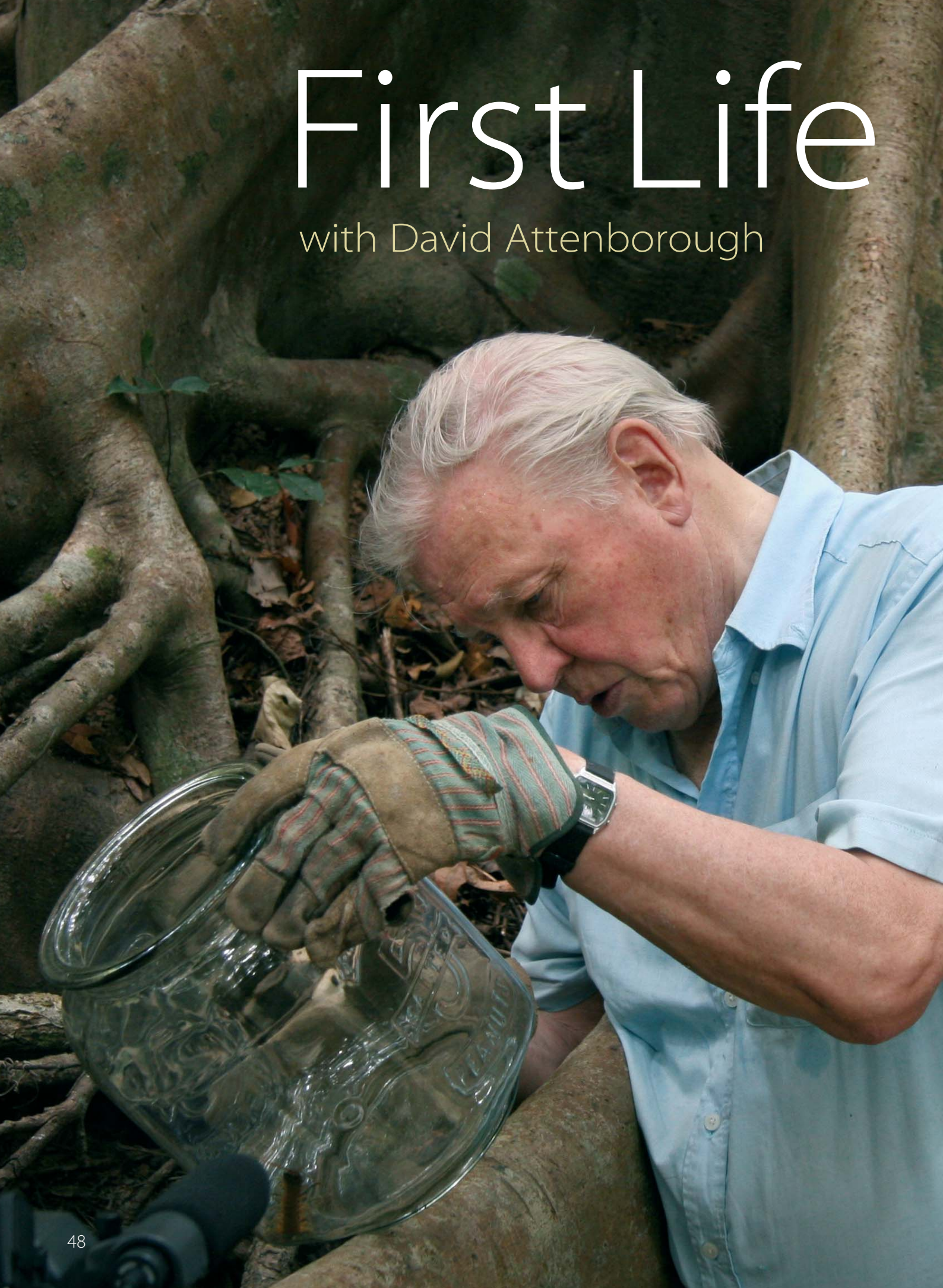


First Life

with David Attenborough



A Personal Encounter

Mungumby Lodge in Australia's Far North Queensland is set in lush primitive rainforest and this year Sir David Attenborough stayed there when he filmed part of his new series, First Life. The series examines the origins of life on earth and the tropical paradise surrounding the lodge provided plenty of clues to help piece the story together. We find out why and discover what there is to see and do in the area.



Mungumby Lodge's unique setting offers easy access to ancient rainforests and wetlands, dry outback and the stunning Great Barrier Reef coastline. It is an area of national parks and primitive rainforest listed by the World Heritage Commission as one of the earth's most unique and valued assets. By his own admission, tropical north Queensland is one of David Attenborough's favourite places.

To chart the origins of life, the film crew needed to examine the earth's earliest fossils and their nearest living equivalents and the unique eco-systems surrounding the lodge provided plenty of information. Fifty million years ago when the earth and surrounding coral sea were being re-oxygenated the peripatus (velvet worm) left the ocean to reside in the rainforest and still lives there today.

Observing the film crew gave Mungumby's Managing Director, Hamish Haslop an insight into the patience involved in shooting wildlife documentaries. "It took six hours to set up a shot panning over Mungumby Creek and the rainforest vegetation. In the end it was a two-minute piece of narration that ended on Sir David."

Although footage of the region's termites, velvet worms, centipedes and millipedes was essential to the series, other visitors may be more interested in the lush vegetation and exotic wildlife of the region's 320-million-year-old forest, the deserted beaches along the coast and the rich Aboriginal culture.

Mungumby Lodge is a private wilderness retreat set in a nature refuge on the northern edge of the majestic million-acre Tropical Rainforest National Park. It's a small, intimate place with just ten wooden bungalows surrounded by well-tended gardens and a pool overlooking the forest.

Within walking distance of the lodge are opportunities to swim in croc free jungle waterfalls, observe exotic wildlife, immerse oneself in the region's Aboriginal culture or relive Captain Cook's history. Thirty per cent of the lodge's estate is virgin rainforest and it protects a variety of endemic species such as the elusive Bennett's Tree Kangaroo, the spotted tail quoll, fluffy glider, northern bettong and the striking cassowary. You may also see the striped possum and numerous species of birds such as the golden oreille and laughing kookaburra.

The Mungumby team have 27 years of local experience and can offer advice on self-guided tours to secret waterfalls, jungle pools and deserted beaches or take guests on fully guided exploration of the surrounding rainforest and the local area. On arrival all guests are given a detailed introduction to the region and its culture and history but a guided tour can offer a far greater insight into the flora and fauna of the area, its geology and its first inhabitants.

Around 70% of the population of the Cape York Peninsula is believed to be indigenous and the lives and customs of the local



Main pic: Giant Centipede scene

Top: Mungumby Lodge

Above top: Sir David with a peripatus worm

Above middle: Orange thighed green tree frogs

Bottom: Hidden Falls



Top: Aboriginal man and grandson, Laura festival
Middle: Hercules moth caterpillar
Above: Striped possum
Below: Sir David Attenborough at Mungumby lodge with Hamish's son Elliot

▶ Aboriginal community are intricately entwined with the plants, animals and waterways of the area. To gain a better understanding of Aboriginal culture, visitors can join a local family to tour Aboriginal communities such as Wujal Wujal where you can learn about bush foods, medicines and the Aboriginal way of life. Alternatively an indigenous story-teller can guide you around the magnificent ancestral rock art sites close to the lodge.

The largest European settlement in the area is Cooktown, named after Captain James Cook who beached here in 1770. Early pioneers came here to mine gold and tin, extract exotic timbers, trade pearl shells and sea cucumbers and raise cattle. The local cemetery and museum provide a fascinating insight into their tragedies and triumphs.

One of the attractions of this region to the film crew was its diverse eco-systems and from Cooktown you can access the fantastic Great Barrier Reef coastline to drive the stunning 4WD Bloomfield Track or visit Cape Melville with its pure white silica sands and amazing collection of endemic palms.

Inland the landscape changes again. Here dry parched earth plays host to a huge range of migrating birds and, when closely observed, many reptiles and other wild species. The crew came here to film the legendary termites and driving back to the lodge they were treated to a spectacular display of lights. "It was the time of the annual burning of land by the

Aboriginal people," explains Hamish "and the surrounding sandstone escarpments were lined with small fires and gave the impression that the Quinkan Spirits were offering an ancient welcome to a very special person."

In many ways this Quinkan region typifies the Australian outback with its spinifex grass, sandstone escarpments, Aboriginal culture and vast river systems. The excellent Quinkan Cultural Centre in the town of Laura helps explain the significance of the local Aboriginal rock paintings, the largest and most colourful in the world. In addition, the town hosts the bi-annual Aboriginal Dance Festival, one of the most spectacular cultural events on the Cape York Peninsula, and a wonderful insight into Aboriginal culture (The next festival will be held in June 2011).

For many though, one of the true delights of the area is just happening upon some spectacular wildlife scenes. For the film crew it happened one night after filming the velvet worm. "It was well after dark when we finished," explains Hamish "we turned around from the rotting logs we had been filming to witness a spectacular dance of the fireflies, which on this warm, balmy evening filled the void between the towering canopy above and the forest floor."

It was an honour for wildlife-lover and eco-pioneer Hamish to have Sir David stay at the lodge. "One can spend their whole life working with nature or in the eco-tourism industry without such a great opportunity," he explained. "I have always greatly admired him, and one evening as we set up a shoot I was left alone with Sir David as the crew went to film the sunset. I was able to ask him all about his long-spanning career. It was an honour. He has enabled millions of people to fully comprehend the unique relationships that operate in nature."

For Hamish and his team it is a quest they aim to fulfil themselves, sharing their expert knowledge and wonderful surroundings with guests from around the world.

FACT file

A 14 day itinerary to Australia including economy flights and a stay at Mungumby Lodge costs from £2,725 per person. For more information please contact our Australia team on 01993 838 810.

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