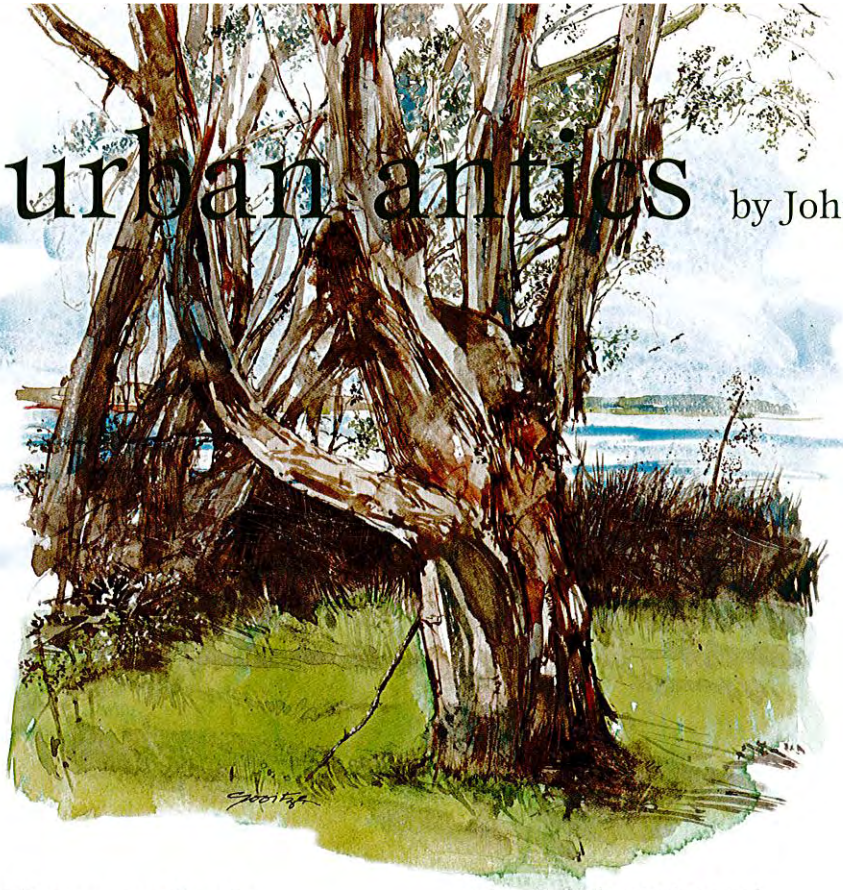


urban antics

by John Hunter



The paperbark forest ...

Dark ominous water stained with tannin from leaf and bark litter, a twilight of grotesque overhanging branches and the dank smell of dirt and vegetation. All this blends harmoniously to make my shrine of remembrance, my paperbark swamp. The pictures in my mind flood back to a collective cacophony of birds, frogs, insects and laughing children—splashing, thrashing, touching and collecting ... ooh, to be 12 years old again.

The melaleuca or paperbark trees throughout the wetlands and swamps of the metropolitan area could hardly be described as of forest proportions, but to those myriads of animals and plants which call them home, the melaleucas and supporting rushes, sedges and shrubs are their breeding sites, their refuge and, if you like, their entire forest universe.

There are three main species of paperbark tree, freshwater paperbark (*Melaleuca raphiophylla*), modong or stout paperbark (*M. preissiana*) and saltwater paperbark (*M. cuticularis*). They are all locally common across the Swan Coastal Plain with the modong and freshwater species providing fine stands close to freshwater swamps, lakes

and wetland depressions and the saltwater type preferring to dominate closer to saline rivers and estuaries.

Paperbark tree groves and their understory of wetland shrubs play a most important role in the maintenance of any biologically balanced and healthy waterway. The presence of fringing vegetation provides sediment, nutrient and pollutant filtering as well as the stabilisation of banks and the provision of food for an entire waterway.

European settlers and their western culture viewed the paperbark swamps as alien places of disease, death and horror, and so did not even mark them on their maps or note their existence in descriptions of the country. Also, in earlier times, it was considered further advantageous to willingly drain and destroy these places in

the quest for agriculture and urban development.

The Aboriginal culture, however, considered (and still does) that wetlands were places of life, death, light and dark, vital and life-giving in times of need for all living things.

The bark of melaleucas is perhaps their most intriguing aspect. Older trees have silky white layers of soft bark which is mostly split and hanging in fibrous paper-like shreds, often magnificently reflected like ghostly galleons over still waters.

Aborigines used the bark as sheaths for carrying tools, tinder for starting fire or as an insulating material. In early summer, a depression in the sand was made, lined with paperbark and filled with water and melaleuca or banksia blooms. This provided a cooling sweet drink.

The 'freshwater' is Perth's commonest paperbark. It is an upright small tree which is tolerant of inundation and used by many species of waterbird for roosting and nesting. The modong grows alongside the aforementioned, but is on slightly higher ground.

Saltwater paperbark, while also tolerant of waterlogging, is found near brackish water or where salt is in the air and soil.

Our stands of magnificent melaleuca paperbarks are now recognised as places of significance, especially to the child with an old jam jar, or in earlier times, a paperbark pouch, that has bothered to 'catch their falling star' for show and tell to others less fortunate.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Isolated swamps are like islands of water in a sea of land and their increasing isolation further endangers species already on the brink in increasingly arid areas.
- For more information about melaleucas see the Department of Environment and Conservation publication *Leaf and branch: trees and tall shrubs of Perth* by Robert Powell.
- *LANDSCOPE* subscribers will receive a free copy of John Hunter's book *Urban Antics* by completing and entering the reader survey form attached to the address sheet.

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