

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF BIODIVERSITY

AGONIS OIL AND THE CURSE OF POTENTIAL!

IN 1996 when I was working on a bush management project to increase cut flower production on the south coast, I became aware of a very interesting species (as yet undescribed) of *Agonis*. Commonly called coarse teatree, it flowers in late summer and is picked for both fresh and dry flowers, mostly for export. As a field botanist I was most fascinated by the beautiful scent the leaves produced when squashed or rubbed in the hand. The plant was a vigorous grower and was likely to have a fair amount of this oil. I thought, maybe this plant has some commercial **potential** for essential oil. The mobile oil mallee still came to town and I extracted a sample of this lovely oil. QEII Medical Centre tested it against *Melaleuca alternifolia* (eastern states teatree) oil and found it to have an excellent level of antimicrobial ability. It was also analysed at WA Chemistry Centre.

The **potential** was there all right, but how could we transform that into commercial reality?

After finding funds last year to employ a consultant to investigate the potential of this oil, it is now apparent that the road to converting it to a broader market place reality is a long and very expensive one. Only the big pharmaceutical companies may have the capacity to fund product development and TGA (Therapeutic Goods Act) approval. We didn't have enough oil for them to even start to test it (+100 litres). Another obstacle is the vested interest already in *Melaleuca*

By Chris Robinson



Agonis sp. Coarse Teatree.
Photo: C. Robinson

alternifolia oil, which has massive plantations and tax driven research and product development on the East Coast.

Currently the best prospect may be to develop a smaller local industry based on local cultivation, extraction and processing into an innovative range of products that do not require TGA listing such as soaps and other products which do not make therapeutic claims. Already there is a landholder growing this plant as a row crop (for flowers) and at least four south west firms interested in using this oil in a range of products, which can capitalize on its great perfume and antimicrobial character. There is interest too in expanding current distillation

capacity, which could be used for other products.

The challenge for me in 2000 is now to assist that group to explore ways to increase production of the oil through expanded cultivation and distillation and the critical product development.

Maybe this time we can convert the **potential** of a fascinating local species to provide a real option for rural diversity and a contribution to a sustainable environment.

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Do you want to be a part of this?

Do you live from Pemberton across to Manypeaks, and have wet peaty-sand heathlands on your property? Perhaps you already harvest coarse teatree (*Agonis* sp.) or fine teatree (*Agonis parviceps*) for cutflowers? If so, you have the right conditions for this project. You might like to learn more about the potential - ring Chris for further detail. In addition, LFWOs Jenny Dewing, 9761 2318, (for Manjimup Shire) and Sylvia Leighton, 9842 4500, (south coast) have information on managing these two species in remnant vegetation.