

ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF BIODIVERSITY

AGONIS FRAGRANS ESSENTIAL OIL – AN UPDATE!

Chris Robinson

WAY back in the April 2000 edition of *Western Wildlife*, regular readers may remember an article I wrote, 'Agonis oil and the curse of potential!'. Essentially I was looking at a 'where to now' situation for the commercialisation of an essential oil from a south coast native plant species.

Well, there have been some interesting developments since then.

Firstly the species which was undescribed and commonly called coarse tea tree was formally described by Department of Conservation and Land Management botanists, Judy Wheeler and Neville Marchant, early in 2001 as *Agonis fragrans* in *Nuytsia*, 13(3). This publication was funded by AGWEST's New Industries program and the Great Southern Development Commission. Having a legal scientific name will allow precise identification of this species in the commercialisation process.

Secondly, shortly after the article appeared in *Western Wildlife*, I was contacted by John Day of Perth. John and his wife Peta have a partially cleared paper bark bush block on the coastal plain west of Harvey, registered with *Land for Wildlife* and are readers of *Western Wildlife*. There they are growing *Melaleuca alternifolia* (eastern Australian tea tree) for the production of oil, which has recognised therapeutic properties. John (an industrial engineer) explained that he had built a large commercial still and had already produced a commercial quantity of tea tree oil, which they hoped to market in the near future.



He also indicated that in the longer term they were interested in expanding their range of essential oils and as a consequence of reading my article in *Western Wildlife* had rung to express his interest in *Agonis fragrans* oil. I saw that the Days may be able to take a role in the commercialisation and marketing of Agonis oil.

Soon after the call I headed to Harvey loaded up with 700 kg of mulched cultivated *Agonis fragrans* leaf material to run through John's still. It is extremely efficient and distilled about 5 litres of oil in about 75 minutes. This was a reasonable return as the material was relatively woody. We later supplied some of this oil to an industrial chemist to create a range of prototype cleaning products.

The Days have had great success in value adding to their tea tree oil, marketing under the Paperbark

Company label in small 25 ml bottles and are interested in producing their own Agonis oil to add to their range. Consequently, early in 2001 we established a trial planting of 5000 irrigated plants on the Days' property at Harvey and another 5000 plants were established on irrigated effluent at the Water Corp's Albany tree farm (see pic). These plantings will allow commercial quantities of oil to be produced in the next few years.

Introduction of *Agonis fragrans* oil to the market in this way may facilitate market familiarity and acceptance and eventually see a demand for greater commercial volumes.

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