

## The Big Four meet the Eurong Weed-busters

*A John Sinclair children's story from K'gari inspired by the Lantana Attack in October 2018*

Big four of the biological agents controlling K'gari's Lantana were conferring. It was on a hot sunny day when they heard a commotion. That was unusual because most of the loud noise around this K'gari lantana patch came at night from the nearby back-packers' camp. This regularly happened when the backpackers were partying inside the dingo proof enclosure.

This new noise and fuss though was coming from a group of weed-busters just down the track from the backpacker's camp. The weedbusters were busy unloading their tools and equipment to attack lantana while getting their instructions.

The weed-busters leader said that the group would need to fight their way through the prickly Lantana to reach the Cocos palm that they could just see the top of above the lantana. He said that flying foxes were spreading Cocos seeds from the mature trees in Eurong and were spitting out the seeds after chewing. This cause many palms to grow within flying fox spitting distance of Eurong.

*"Cocos Palms are a serious weed problem and if we aren't careful they could become as serious weed for the island as lantana has been,"* he explained.,

The Big Four biological agents immediately felt threatened that this group of weed-busters was moving into their territory and was going to take over their job and make them redundant.

They soon relaxed when they heard the leader go on.

*"If we can thin out this thicket of lantana, it will give the biological agents a change to help us clear up this site"* the Fearless Leader announced.

*"How many biological controls are they working on Lantana,"* queried one of the weed-busters.

The Leader went into a long explanation. *"There have been 32 introduced but many have failed to cope with the Australian conditions and the many hybrid lantanas that grow here. Seventeen of all of the introductions are still slowly working with mixed success.*

*"The objective of the Bio-controls is to reduce plant viability and prevent lantana's further spread by stressing plants and reducing seeding processes.*

*"On K'gari these bio-agents have caused significant lantana die-back. 5 bugs, 5 moths, 4 beetles and 3 flies are progressively weakening the plants. In addition rust is now also working. That is why we now have a chance to bring lantana on K'gari under control,"* he told them.

*"Wow!"* exclaimed another weedbuster. *"And this is happening just through the efforts of all of these insects without us being aware!"*

*"They aren't all equally effective. The Big Four are a leaf sucking bug, (Teleneia scrupululosa) or "Scruples" for short. It was introduced in 1956 and is the best card in the pack. A leaf-mining beetle (Uroplato giardia) comes in second. Then there is the seed eating fly (Ophlomya lantanai) that lays its eggs on the green lantana seed and its caterpillars then eat out the seeds. The other big one*

*is another leaf-miner, a beetle (Octotoma cabriponis). These four achieve more than the rest of the other bio-controls combined,"* the weed-buster leader told the group.

Hearing that praise swelled the Big Four's pride almost to exploding point. During the morning the Big Four watched the weed-busters progress with special interest as the weed-busters sweated and toiled under the hot sun.

One weed-buster recounted, *"In no time at all we had the measure of the enemy – divide and conquer was our winning strategy. We worked in teams of two cutting out patches of Lantana leaving the remaining isolated stands vulnerable to the onslaught of follow up teams"*.

The group destroyed three palms and freed a valiant banksia, a few small wattles, midyim bushes, Alphitonia and Snake vines as they worked through.



**The volunteer weed-busters attacked the lantana by uprooting where possible. Where they couldn't they used a cut and paste technique on the lantana stumps. They made great inroads on one of the worst infestations on K'gari.**

Finally as the weed-busters were almost ready of knock off, they made a surprising break-through. Like Alice entering Wonderland they entered a lantana free area. One Weed-buster described the breakthrough, *"Our final assault to the enemy was to connect our cleared paths to a stand of Banksia integrifolia which were single-handedly were retaining an island of weed free tranquillity – soft grasses, Dianella and Polyscias with extensive crab burrows and bandicoot diggings in the sand. It was a privilege to widen the buffer between the Banksia and the battlefield."*

The weed-busters were tired after their heavy effort but exhilarated by their achievement. They packed up and returned to their base for showers and a well-earned lunch.

As they were leaving the Big Four heard them say that there would be more weed-busters returning soon to continue helping the Big Four chew their way through the lantana thicket. That left the Big Four feeling very happy.