



EPILOGUE

DEATH OF A GIANT

As this book was being prepared for publication, we received the sad news that the Smuggler's Tree had died. It had suffered very badly in a cyclone in 2006, and many of its branches had been removed. Yet the last time we saw it, it had sprouted new leaves and seemed about to burst back into life. Apparently the fungus that had been slowly gnawing away at the trunk, and the huge shock of the cyclone, were just too much for it in the end. Our first reaction was one of disbelief – how could such a magnificent giant, a stalwart of the Iron Range rainforest, die? Where would our best performing female *Eclactus* parrot, the one that produced so many young in the 'bat hole' 30 metres up the trunk, lay her eggs now? Where would the hundreds of starlings build their nests, and would the slatey-grey snake survive without its annual feast of fallen nestlings?

The Smuggler's Tree gave many individual animals an extraordinary break as they struggled for survival in a dangerous and competitive world. While the tree thrived, so did its occupants. After its demise, the strongest will probably find new homes while others will perish. At the very least many will have left behind large numbers of descendants thanks to their time there. Life in the rainforest is not a level playing field and few animals get access to a resource as rich as the Smuggler's Tree. Dotted around the landscape, such canopy emergents provide habitat of enormous importance to the rainforest wildlife. For our part, it has been an incredible privilege to be able to climb the tree and research and photograph its inhabitants. It is with a sense of awe at the dynamic nature and raw power of the rainforest to reclaim its own that we bid this giant farewell.

Top: The sun goes down on Cape York. Photo: K. Watson

Opposite: The Smuggler's Tree stripped of foliage after a cyclone. New leaves are just starting to grow.