

A new method for dating tree-rings in trees with faint, indeterminate ring boundaries using the Itrax core scanner



Heather A. Haines^{a,*}, Patricia S. Gadd^b, Jonathan Palmer^c, Jon M. Olley^a, Quan Hua^b, Henk Heijnis^b

^a Australian Rivers Institute, Griffith University, 170 Kessels Rd, Nathan, Queensland 4111, Australia

^b Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation, Locked Bag 2001, Kirrawee DC, New South Wales 2232, Australia

^c Palaeontology, Geobiology and Earth Archives Research Centre, School of Biological, Earth and Environmental Sciences, University of New South Wales, New South Wales 2052, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Dendroclimatology
Araucaria cunninghamii
 Southeast Queensland
 densitometry
 Brisbane
 D'Aguiar National Park

ABSTRACT

Eastern Australia is known to experience multi-decadal periods of flood and drought. Subtropical Southeast Queensland is one region where these devastating extreme events occur regularly yet a full understanding of their frequency and magnitude cannot be determined from the short duration (< 100 years) climate data available for the region. Tree-rings are a potential source of long-term (> 100 years) proxy rainfall information but locating suitable forest stands is difficult due to extensive land clearing by European settlers. Another factor deterring the use of trees as proxy data sources is that longer-lived species frequently contain anomalous rings, particularly faint rings, hindering their use for paleoclimate study. Here we present a method which overcomes the problems of identifying faint ring boundaries in trees by using X-radiographs and density patterns developed on the Itrax core scanner. We analysed 39 tree cores from 20 trees at a site in D'Aguiar National Park located just north of Brisbane city in Queensland, Australia. Each core had a 2 mm lath cut perpendicular to its rings which was then passed through an Itrax core scanner. The tree-ring boundaries were identified on the image by both the visual features in the radiograph and the change in density observed between rings. From this information we developed a tree-ring chronology. The chronology was checked using bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating on five trees to confirm the annual nature of the rings, and to correct dating errors in the chronology due to false rings which are common in this species. Climate response function analysis showed Austral annual rainfall (June–May) was the dominant environmental variable driving tree growth. Finally, a 69-year statistically significant reconstruction of Brisbane precipitation was produced showing that this non-destructive Itrax ring identification technique together with age validation by bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating is useful for dendroclimatological studies of trees with faint ring boundaries.

1. Introduction

Many tropical and subtropical regions of the world lack long-term (> 100 year) climate records. These regions are known to have highly variable climates, specifically in regards to rainfall, with some areas such as the east coast of Australia known to experience multi-decadal periods of drought as well as floods of extreme magnitude (Warner, 1997; Erskine and Warner, 1998; Rustomji et al., 2009). Proxy records that extend back over several hundred years are needed in such regions to understand these decadal climate patterns. Dendroclimatology has been suggested as a possible proxy technique for reconstructing long-term climate records in these environments (Baker et al., 2008; Boysen

et al., 2014; Haines et al., 2016). However, to date few tree-ring based studies have been carried out on Australia's east coast (Heinrich et al., 2008, 2009). The main deterrent to such studies is the long-held belief, originating with work undertaken by Ogden (1978), that issues with ring anomalies in Australian tropical tree species make them unsuitable for dendroclimatological investigation. More recent studies have begun to investigate the climate response of some Australian tropical tree species (Baker et al., 2008; Heinrich et al., 2008; Drew et al., 2011) but compared to temperate regions very little work has been undertaken in the tropics and subtropics. Recent reviews on the progress of Australian dendrochronological studies have suggested that multi-technique approaches should allow for both the development of ring-chronologies

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: h.haines@griffith.edu.au (H.A. Haines), psp@ansto.gov.au (P.S. Gadd), j.palmer@unsw.edu.au (J. Palmer), j.olley@griffith.edu.au (J.M. Olley), qh@ansto.gov.au (Q. Hua), h.h@ansto.gov.au (H. Heijnis).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.palaeo.2018.02.025>

Received 27 June 2017; Received in revised form 19 February 2018; Accepted 25 February 2018

Available online 27 February 2018

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and climate reconstructions (Heinrich and Allen, 2013; Haines et al., 2016).

One subtropical Australian environment that is lacking in both historical and long-term instrumental climate data is Southeast Queensland (SEQ). This region, and more specifically Brisbane which is the major urban centre of SEQ, would benefit from a long-term, tree-ring rainfall reconstruction to understand its highly variable climate. SEQ and Brisbane are characterized by a history of high magnitude, destructive floods and decade long drought events related to inter-annual rainfall variability specific to Australia's east coast (Kiem et al., 2003; Rustomji et al., 2009; van den Honert and McAneney, 2011; Haines and Olley, 2017). Such extreme events are known to have major environmental and economic costs, with the recent Millennium Drought (1996–2010) causing billions of dollars in loss across the country and heavily affecting Queensland's agricultural sector, which is one of the main economies in SEQ (Bond et al., 2008; ABS, 2011; van den Honert and McAneney, 2011; Heberger, 2012; BoM, 2015a). Understanding the frequency and long-term pattern of such events is a priority for climate scientists in SEQ. Recent rainfall analysis by Haines and Olley (2017) has indicated that while rainfall across the whole of SEQ is spatially variable there are regions that demonstrate strongly correlated rainfall patterns. This analysis indicated that to develop a precipitation reconstruction for Brisbane tree-ring sites in close proximity to the city should be selected. Urban settlement, land clearing, and logging have made such sites difficult to locate (Kemp et al., 2015) but D'Aguilar National Park located directly to the north of the city does fall within Brisbane's rainfall zone as identify in Haines and Olley (2017). More importantly this park is known to contain species such as those in the *Callitris* and *Araucariaceae* families which grow in response to climate, and can therefore be used for climate reconstructions (Ash, 1983a, 1983b; Baker et al., 2008). One of these species is *Araucaria cunninghamii* (Mudie) which was shown by Ash (1983a) to produce annual growth rings which are limited by precipitation. As such these trees can be used to reconstruct long-term past rainfall records. Unfortunately, coring of *A. cunninghamii* trees within D'Aguilar National Park demonstrated that the cores from these trees produced rings which are too faint to be identified visually. Previous studies in tropical environments elsewhere in the world have however used density patterns in wood to indicate ring boundaries and develop annual growth patterns (Worbes et al., 1995; Tomazello et al., 2000).

Wood density variation was first used as a dating method for tree-ring analysis by Polge (1970) and is based upon the magnitude of change in density between latewood and earlywood as seen through X-ray densitometric scanning (as detailed in Polge, 1966). Many improvements have been made since this early work on the X-ray scanning techniques but the principles in density analysis have remained the same. After X-ray scanning, we noted that the *A. cunninghamii* samples taken from D'Aguilar National Park demonstrate typical densitometric patterns where the change in density between the end of one ring's latewood and the beginning of the next ring's earlywood indicate the potential location of ring boundaries. Here we first date the core samples taken from *A. cunninghamii* trees in D'Aguilar National Park using X-radiographs and wood density patterns. From this, we develop a precipitation reconstruction for Brisbane, Australia and report on the usefulness of this method for wider paleoclimatic study in instances where the physical features of tree cores/slabs do not allow for easy visual ring identification.

2. Regional setting

Southeast Queensland, Australia is located along the Queensland–New South Wales state border and extends from the coast on the east, to the Great Dividing Range to the west, and north to the Sunshine Coast region (Fig. 1). Brisbane is located midway up the east coast of Australia and is the most populous urban area in subtropical Australia (ABS, 2016). Annual precipitation is around 1020 mm with the majority

falling between November to March. Average minimum and maximum temperatures range from 10 °C to 21 °C and 22 °C to 30 °C respectively (BoM, 2017). Directly to the northwest of the city is the South D'Aguilar section of D'Aguilar National Park which contains large regions of subtropical rainforest (QDNPSR, 2015a). Based on work by Haines and Olley (2017) that demonstrates spatially homogeneous regions of rainfall are located across SEQ, it was determined that the rainfall variability seen in Brisbane will be closely correlated to the rainfall variability observed within this park.

Brisbane and the regional areas surrounding the urban centre have been heavily modified since European settlement began in the 1820s. These changes include widespread logging activities and land clearing (Horne and Hickey, 2001; Kemp et al., 2015). In subtropical Queensland most of the rainforest has been removed with the majority of remnant rainforest vegetation stands found in State Forest and National Parks (Horne and Hickey, 2001). This makes the D'Aguilar National Park a key location to help understand long-term rainfall conditions in Brisbane as there are few other locations within SEQ that a tree-ring based rainfall reconstruction can be created for the city.

D'Aguilar National Park was developed as a series of small national parks that were joined together under one title in 2009 (QDNPSR, 2015b). The subtropical rainforest in the Maiala section was the first region preserved in 1930. This region had been previously logged and replanted with *Araucaria cunninghamii* trees prior to including it in the National Park (QDNPSR, 2015b). Discussion with D'Aguilar park rangers and staff suggested that the replanting of this area had occurred during the mid to late 1800s. This location is similar to the few other remnant Australian subtropical rainforest settings in SEQ as the Maiala *A. cunninghamii* site (referred to herein as DMA) sits on a hillslope where a thin layer of soil covers a volcanic bedrock material. The vegetation in all of the SEQ *Araucariaceae* rainforest remnants is similar in composition but the understorey, composed of vines and smaller plant species, is less dense at Maiala than rainforest stands which have never been logged such as the World Heritage Protected rainforest in Lamington National Park. *A. cunninghamii* is the dominant species in the Maiala rainforest with few trees of other species reaching canopy height at this location (Fig. 2). It is unclear if the dominance of *A. cunninghamii* at this site and/or the light understorey cover is due to previous logging activity or if this is the natural vegetation condition found at this location.

The Maiala section was further developed for visitor use in the early 2000s when a parking area to access trails, a picnic shelter with barbecue facilities, and a toilet block were added. These facilities are found a few hundred meters away from the replanted *A. cunninghamii* trees. The researchers were not aware at the start of this study that the septic system for the toilet block involves a discharge of filtered groundwater which flows underground and is released within the forest at a location directly uphill from the *A. cunninghamii* DMA site. Park rangers undertaking works on the site confirmed evidence presented in aerial photographs that indicated the septic system was buried at this location in 2002.

3. Materials and methods

3.1. Tree-ring chronology development

Trees selected for this study ($n = 27$) needed to meet the following criteria: to have reached canopy height, represent a dominant or sub-dominant tree in the stand, not appear to be competing for resources with another dominant/subdominant tree, and appear on visual inspection to not be affected by localized factors such as insect infestation or heavy strangler vine coverage. Two 12 mm diameter cores were taken from each tree in the study ($n = 54$) at a minimum of 90° apart. Each sample was labelled and placed in vented plumbers piping for transport back to the lab.

Samples were air dried for 3–5 days in the lab before being placed in a drying oven at 40 °C for 4–6 h to remove any remaining moisture.

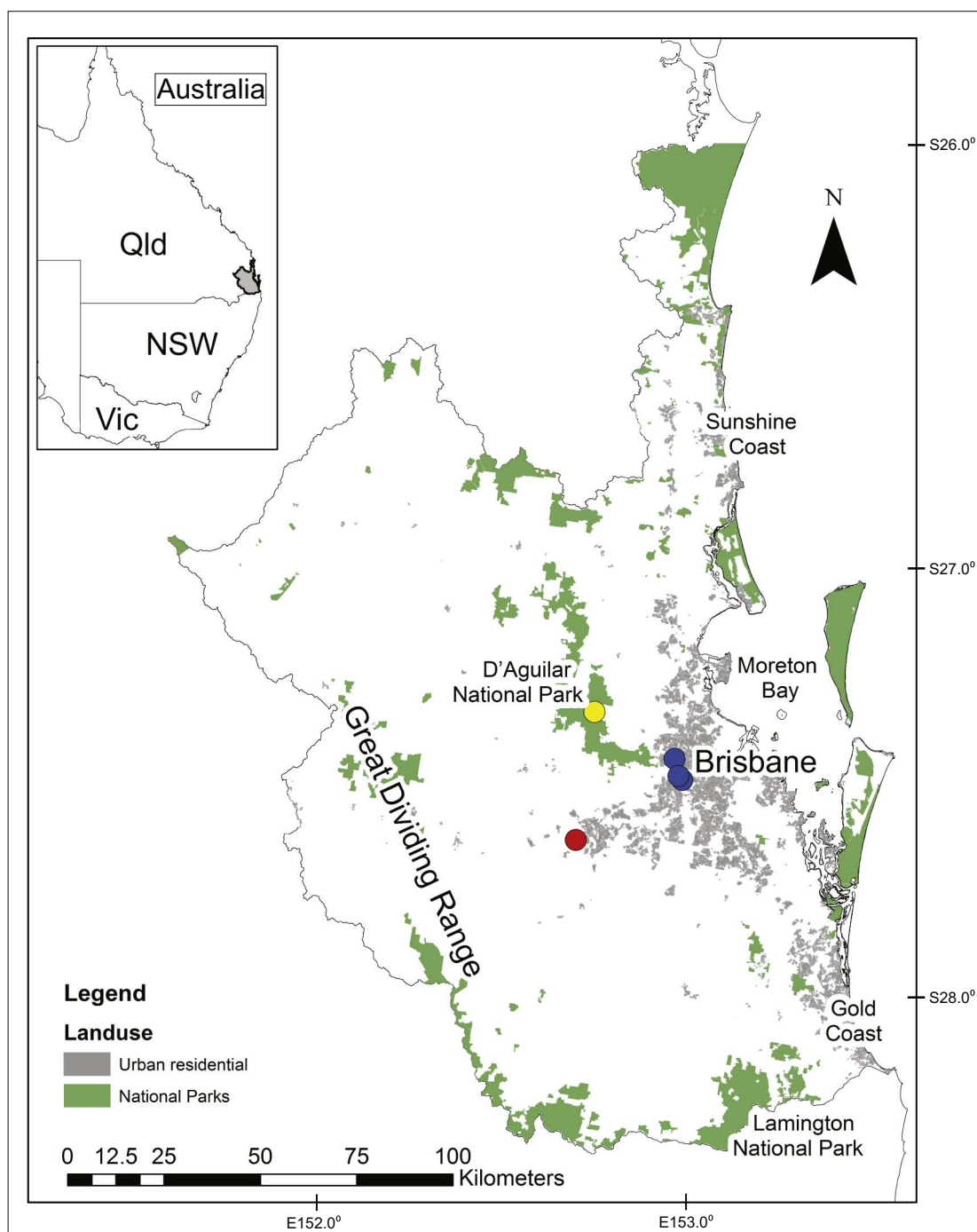


Fig. 1. Map out Southeast Queensland with urban areas including Brisbane marked in grey and National Parks in green. The location of the DMA site at Maiala is indicated in yellow, the three rainfall stations used in this analysis in blue, and the temperature station in red. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

Each sample was mounted using non-toxic acid-free glue and cut using a twin-bladed saw (Dendrocot 2003, Walesch Electronics). This cutting procedure provided three sections for each sample: the bottom section of the core remained glued into the mount, the middle section is a lath that is a consistent 2 mm depth, and the top section of remaining sample can potentially be used for any destructive analysis (Fig. 3). The mounted portions of all samples were progressively sanded with 400, 800, and 1200 grit sandpaper to attempt to bring out any visual ring boundaries or markings in the wood. Some features were identifiable but little variation could be observed relating to ring boundaries making traditional visual ring counting impossible. The 2 mm lath from each core was run through an Itrax core scanner (Cox Analytical

Systems) located at the Australian Nuclear Science and Technology Organisation (ANSTO) in Sydney, NSW, Australia. The scanned data provided an X-radiograph developed at a 20 μm scale and a density pattern analysed perpendicular to the tree-rings. This scanning method is non-destructive allowing for further testing to be conducted on the lath once scanning is complete.

3.1.1. Use of the Itrax X-radiograph and density pattern for dating *A. cunninghamii* samples

The Itrax Core scanner produced radiographic images of the *A. cunninghamii* trees that allowed for ring boundaries not seen by the naked eye to be identified (Fig. 4). The black and white radiographic



Fig. 2. The DMA site: Subtropical rainforest with minimal understory vegetation.



Fig. 3. Sample DMA026E after being cut with a twin-bladed saw. Each core is comprised of A) the bottom section of the core which is glued into the base, B) a lath of 2 mm depth for scanning on the Itrax core scanner, and C) the remaining portion of the core which can be used for destructive analysis such as radiocarbon dating. While some evidence of ring boundaries are present in the DMA samples there are large parts of the cores where such boundaries cannot be identified as evidenced by the central portion of DMA026E.

images show numerous features in the wood, not just the latewood/earlywood boundaries that represent rings. Previous work by Ogden (1978) and Ash (1983a) indicated that false rings are prevalent in samples from *Araucariaceae* species and these appear as potential rings in the radiographic images as they do in *A. cunninghamii* trees where the ring boundaries are visually identifiable. Therefore, we also used the density pattern produced by the Itrax scan to help identify where ring boundaries are located in the tree cores (see Fig. 4). The density pattern was overlaid on the X-radiograph using the program RediCore (Cox Analytical Systems) and the image was transferred into Adobe Illustrator where ring boundaries were visually identified and marked on the image. The ring widths were then measured in micrometers and ring width series created for each core using the program TELLERVO (Brewer et al., 2010). It should be noted that any program where the image can be analysed and the ring boundaries measured could be used for this analysis; Adobe Illustrator was selected in this instance due to its availability to the authors. Dating of this Southern Hemisphere tree-

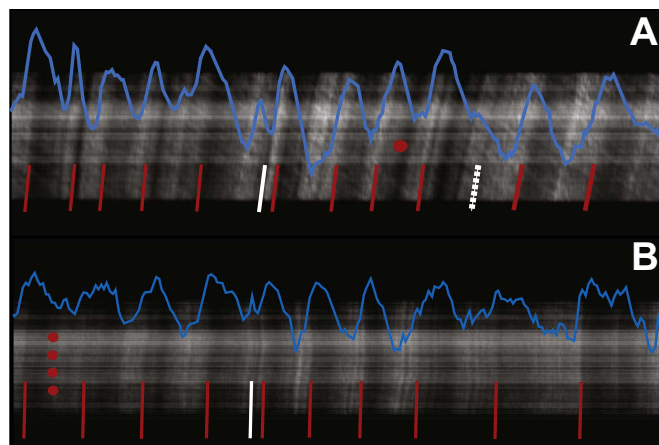


Fig. 4. A) Sample DMA026E for the period 1986–1998 and B) Sample DMA012F showing their Itrax Radiograph image overlaid with density pattern (blue line), actual ring boundaries (red line), fake ring boundaries observed in the radiograph and density pattern (white solid line), and a fake ring boundary observed only in the radiograph (white dotted line). The oldest rings are found to the right of the image with the youngest on the left. In A) ring 1990 is indicated with one red dot and in B) ring 2000 is indicated with four red dots. (For interpretation of the references to color in this figure legend, the reader is referred to the web version of this article.)

ring series was undertaken using the Schulman (1956) convention with the year assigned to the ring being the one in which growth began.

As with visual dating of this species it can, in some instances, be difficult using Itrax data to determine the difference between true and false ring boundaries. This is because false rings also show a change in density but the magnitude of change is generally lower than a true ring boundary. To accurately work out the ring dates, five trees from the DMA chronology had their ring ages dated through bomb-pulse radiocarbon analysis on two single rings from one core of each tree (Biondi et al., 2007; Pearson et al., 2011). This analysis is based on the atmospheric ^{14}C bomb curve for Southern Hemisphere mid-latitudes resulting from aboveground nuclear testing mostly in the 1950s and 1960s (see Hua and Barbetti, 2004). The Southern Hemisphere calibration curve peaks in 1965 so a single bomb radiocarbon date delivers two possible calendar ages for each specimen ^{14}C value, one being on the rise and the other one on the fall of the bomb curve (Hua and Barbetti, 2004). For this reason two single rings from each core were collected for radiocarbon measurement as the relative age of the two rings is known which can correctly place the dates on the curve. These specimens were wide rings formed in years close to the 1963–1967 bomb peak period to allow for the best possible calendar age resolution (Hua and Barbetti, 2004; Hua, 2009). All ten specimens were pre-treated to alpha-cellulose (Hua et al., 2004) and then combusted and converted to graphite (Hua et al., 2001) for accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) ^{14}C analysis using the STAR Facility at ANSTO (Fink et al., 2004).

Once the ^{14}C results were available to help determine the difference between true and false rings the dating of the DMA chronology was revised to remove ring anomalies. With the aid of the ^{14}C results we could determine the magnitude of density change between rings that was representative of a true ring boundary. This could then be extrapolated to the trees that did not undergo ^{14}C dating. Some trees were removed from the DMA master chronology due to localized influences effecting individual trees. In total 20 trees from this site were used in the DMA master chronology; for these trees quality control was conducted using COFECHA to ensure crossdating and measurement accuracy which confirmed the correct identification of false rings (Holmes, 1983; Grissino-Mayer, 2001). Mean sensitivity and mean series inter-correlation (see Table 2) were evaluated to determine the common signal within the chronology indicating if the chronology could be used to represent climate. Next, the series was power transformed and

detrended in ARSTAN (Cook and Holmes, 1985) using a Friedman super smoother set at a high sensitivity (level 3 within the ARSTAN program). This form of detrending was selected as the region is known to present climate conditions that alternate between extreme wet and dry conditions and this form of smoother allows for these extreme shifts to be incorporated without biasing the overall dataset. It should be noted that we evaluated other ARSTAN detrending options and found little variation in the results from the different index series. The standard output chronology was selected for use in this study as analysis in ARSTAN indicated autocorrelation was not significantly present in the DMA tree-ring data, removing the need for autoregressive modelling. The EPS (expressed population signal) value was used to determine the acceptable level of commonality within the data series indicating a reliable chronology. While a standard value of EPS = 0.85 is considered a reasonable limit (Wigley et al., 1984) tropical and subtropical species can be difficult to crossdate and several papers have used an EPS value of 0.80 when working with these species (Fowler et al., 2004; Baker et al., 2008; Chen et al., 2015). As such we selected an EPS = 0.80 level as the higher 0.85 was not sustained through the entire time period of this analysis. Correlation statistics were developed for the DMA chronology using the *dplR* package (Bunn et al., 2014).

3.2. Climate response

The DMA chronology was compared to monthly precipitation, minimum temperature, and maximum temperature variables to determine climate response at this site. The climate data was sourced from the Bureau of Meteorology historical climate database (BoM, 2015b) which provides quality controlled data series. For Brisbane rainfall the 1940–2015 period from the Toowong Bowls Club (station 40245) was used as it is one of the longest and most complete records for Brisbane city. To fill in missing data, rainfall values were used from Ashgrove Bowls Club and Brisbane Botanic Gardens Mt. Coot-tha (stations 40326 and 40976 respectively); least squares analysis demonstrated these three rainfall station datasets were not statistically different from each other. The SEQ temperature network is sparse compared to the rainfall data. However, temperature conditions are much more uniform across the region (BoM, 2015b) indicating that temperature data from location further from the tree-ring site would still be representative of the DMA temperature conditions. As such, the Amberley AMO (Station 40004) minimum and maximum temperature data, which has no missing values for the period of 1940–2015, was used in this study. Rainfall data were also evaluated seasonally and annually by summing the monthly variables together. Seasons are delineated as follows: winter = June, July, August; spring = September, October, November; summer = December, January, February; and autumn = March, April, May. Annual rainfall represents winter through autumn precipitation and is allocated to the year where the annual period commenced.

DendroClim2002 (Biondi and Waikul, 2004) was used to evaluate correlation and response coefficients between the climate and growth variables. The annual DMA site index was compared to monthly, seasonal, and annual precipitation as well as monthly minimum and maximum temperatures. Temporal response was tested with forward evolutionary modelling using a 24 year moving window. Pearson correlation analysis was undertaken to analyse for statistical significance at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$) for all static and temporal correlation and response variables.

Based on the results of the climate response analysis it was determined that a rainfall reconstruction of Brisbane precipitation could be developed using the DMA chronology. The program PCReg (<http://www.ideo.columbia.edu/tree-ring-laboratory/resources/software>) was used to develop a point to point linear regression model of annual rainfall. Calibration and verification analysis was undertaken using linear regression with a split period method for the part of the record prior to site disturbance which occurred in 2002 (Fritts, 1976). Early calibration was run from 1946 to 1971 and late calibration from 1972

to 2001. Verification statistics from PCReg were utilized to test the reconstructed output for robustness. The reconstruction presented is based upon the full 1946–2001 calibration period.

4. Results

4.1. DMA chronology development

Ring boundary identification was completed by analysing both the radiographic images and the density pattern produced by the Itrax core scanner. Features that appeared in the radiograph to be ring boundaries were then compared to the density pattern changes between latewood and earlywood. Boundaries were determined to be true only if the visual feature on the radiograph correlated with a significant change in the overlaid density plot. In some instances, as demonstrated in Fig. 4 what would appear to be a ring boundary on the radiograph did not correspond to a change in density indicating this was not a true ring. Once the boundaries were identified each of the cores were dated and comparisons made between the two cores from each tree to compensate for any locally absent rings which are known to be common in these species (Ash, 1983a). To account for false ring boundaries that may be observed in both the radiograph and density plot, dating verification was undertaken using bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating.

In order to develop the master chronology five trees were dated using bomb-pulse radiocarbon and the results are presented in Table 1. In all but one of the ten rings dated the original age given to the ring was incorrect. This was expected for trees of the *Araucariaceae* species as they are known to have many issues with ring anomalies (Ogden, 1981; Ash, 1983a). Dating was off by 0–6 years and in most cases false rings were the prominent ring anomaly although missing rings were seen in sample DMA014. Through the use of bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating where the results could be compared to the Itrax data false ring identification became clearer by looking at the magnitude of change in density between earlywood and latewood. The missing rings in tree DMA014 occurred at the outer most portion of the core where the image was unclear due to some damage to the wood lath that made ring boundary identification problematic. This issue arose in two other trees in the series and was easily corrected due to the knowledge gained from bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating tree DMA014. All series were redated after the ^{14}C dating was analysed to reflect the improved awareness of what constituted an annual ring using the radiograph and density dating method.

Quality control was undertaken on all tree cores and samples that were overly influenced by localized factors were removed (e.g. Heavy vine coverage; proximity to other dominant trees). Crossdated tree-ring measurements developed from twenty trees extended from 1941 to 2014, however the DMA chronology was truncated at 1945 based on an EPS values of 0.80 and a low sample size (below 5 prior to 1945; Table 2). The common signal strength weakens prior to this point and becomes more representative of variability within individual trees and therefore does not provide a robust representation of environmental variables. Maximum and minimum tree series length was found to be 74 and 32 years respectively and a mean series length of 56 years. While the oldest tree in the series dated to 1941, the youngest started growing in 1968; all trees in the series were living when they were cored in 2014. This dataset is representative of a single age cohort of tree growth which was to be expected as the site was planted after being completely cleared by logging and was not of sufficient age for a second younger cohort to have developed.

The DMA chronology has a mean ring width of 0.4186 mm, a median ring width of 0.3571 mm, and a skew of 1.200 (Table 2). These indicate similarity between the cores in the DMA dataset. Several correlation statistics were also calculated to determine the environmental sensitivity of the chronology (Table 2; see Biondi and Qeadan, 2008). While there is almost always a contribution from conditions observed in previous years to a trees growth, the Gini value of 0.292 indicates that

Table 1

The assumed & actual dates of 10 radiocarbon samples obtained from 5 DMA trees.

Tree	Sample code	Assumed year of growth	^{14}C content $\pm 1\sigma$ (pMC)	Calibrated ^{14}C age (95% confidence) ^a	Actual year of growth ^b
DMA006	OZU612	1962	159.57 \pm 0.38	1964.50–1965.24 1966.42–1968.33	1966
	OZU622	1970	139.41 \pm 0.36	1963.51–1963.93 1973.90–1976.20	1975
DMA010	OZU614	1964	150.29 \pm 0.43	1964.01–1964.39 1969.88–1972.23	1970
	OZU615	1967	142.68 \pm 0.38	1963.69–1964.06 1973.31–1974.83	1973
DMA012	OZU616	1964	152.46 \pm 0.36	1963.94–1964.82 1968.62–1971.41	1964
	OZU617	1968	149.72 \pm 0.41	1963.98–1964.37 1969.90–1972.25	1970
DMA014	OZU618	1964	120.42 \pm 0.31	1960.07–1963.22 1984.69–1988.12	1961
	OZU619	1967	160.82 \pm 0.39	1964.64–1965.65 1966.35–1968.30	1964
DMA025	OZU620	1963	162.27 \pm 0.41	1964.66–1967.73	1964
	OZU621	1967	151.77 \pm 0.37	1963.94–1964.82 1969.42–1971.84	1969

^a Age calibration was performed using SH1–2 data set (Hua et al., 2013) extended back in time using SHCal13 (Hogg et al., 2013), and CALIBomb program (Reimer and Reimer, 2004).^b Actual ages given are those determined through redating the tree cores after radiocarbon analysis.**Table 2**

Summary statistics for the DMA master series.

Chronology length	1945–2014
No. of trees	20
No. of cores	39
Mean ring width (mm)	0.419
Standard deviation (mm)	0.232
Median ring width (mm)	0.357
Skew	1.20
1st year EPS > 0.80 and sample size > 5	1945
<i>Correlation statistics</i>	
Mean sensitivity	0.384
Mean series intercorrelation	0.650
Gini	0.292
AR1	0.460
Rho	0.477

year to year variability in this series is moderate and therefore the chronology is more sensitive to environmental conditions. Narrow rings indicating heavy drought conditions (such as in 1990, 1968, 1960–61) are found to be consistent between most tree series in the chronology (Fig. 5A) with the Millennium drought from 1996 to 2010 suggested to be effecting the region. Wide rings appear to be in agreement across some series in the chronology (Fig. 5A) but evidence of heavy rainfall associated with known floods in the Brisbane region, such as the major floods of 2011 and 1974 (see BoM, 2016), do not appear to be captured here.

4.2. Correlations with climate

Analysis of the DMA chronology climate response to Brisbane rainfall and regional temperature variables demonstrate that precipitation is more closely connected to ring growth than temperature (Fig. 6). Seasonal and annual precipitation conditions are more strongly correlated to growth than individual monthly variables (Fig. 6A). The significant relationships between rainfall and growth are positive indicating that in years with little rainfall tree-ring width will be reduced. No significant relationships were found between tree growth and maximum temperatures (data not shown) and only November minimum temperature conditions were seen to be significant (Fig. 6B). This correlation is negative and indicates that lower minimum temperatures during the start of the growth season could affect tree growth. This matches with observations of climate-growth relationships made

using dendrometers in other areas of SEQ on *Araucariaceae* species that demonstrated minimum temperatures influence the commencement and conclusion of the growth season (Haines et al., in press). Our observations match those found by Ash (1983a) indicating that precipitation was the climate variable most strongly connected to *A. cunninghamii* growth but that temperature variables also had an observable effect. However, in line with Ash's (1983a) conclusions, it is annual Brisbane precipitation that the DMA chronology can be used to reconstruct.

4.3. Rainfall reconstruction

To develop the reconstruction Brisbane rainfall and the DMA tree-ring chronology were calibrated over three time periods: early (1946–1971) and late (1972–2001) periods were used to validate the statistics via a split period method and the full period (1946–2001) is used for the rainfall reconstruction (Fig. 7). Calibration and verification statistics for all three periods are presented in Table 3; these were all determined to be statistically significant. There is little variation between the statistics for the two split calibration/verification periods indicating that the relationship observed between the chronology and rainfall remains steady over time. Reduction of error (RE) and coefficient of efficiency (CE) values were all positive (Table 3) indicating that the developed model is a robust (albeit modest) representation of annual rainfall. However, the correlation value is low which suggests that while rainfall has an influence on the growth of the DMA *A. cunninghamii* trees there are other localized influence(s) also affecting these trees. Nevertheless, the developed reconstruction can still be considered sound due to the statistical validity of the analysis.

5. Discussion

Both the DMA chronology and the climate reconstruction presented here are the first developed using an Australian *Araucariaceae* species. This chronology is robust and well replicated as the thirty-nine cores used show coherent ring width patterns through the entire record (Fig. 5, Table 2). Narrow rings representing low rainfall conditions, such as 1952, 1968, and 1990, appear in most cores across the entire series (Fig. 5). This consistency suggests that the ring width measurements developed using the Itrax radiograph and density data to identify ring boundaries is of similar quality to traditional dating methods used elsewhere. The period of the Millennium Drought (1996–2010)

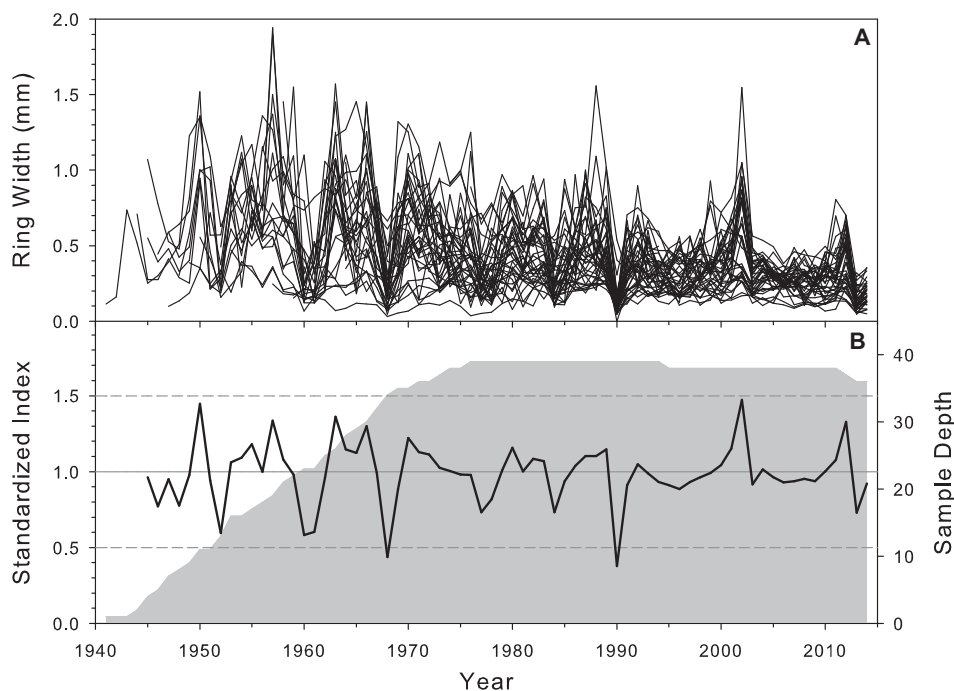


Fig. 5. The raw ring width series (A) and STD chronology from ARSTAN overlaid on sample depth (B) for the DMA data.

demonstrates uniform ring widths that are narrower than average for most cores during this period (Fig. 5) with the exception of 2002 (discussed below). While ring width studies are good at representing low rainfall conditions they do struggle to properly characterize heavy rainfall conditions in regions like SEQ where large amounts of a year's rain may fall within short periods. Trees are limited in how much material they can build up within a short period of time as growth is an effect of conditions averaged through time (e.g. a growth season) rather than based on individual events (Fritts, 1976). In the DMA chronology some wide tree-ring widths do appear to match well with years where rainfall was found to be above the mean, such as 1966, 1970, and 1989 (Fig. 7). In other instances, such as 1973 and 1995, the heavy rainfall which occurred is not captured in the tree-ring record (Fig. 7). However, this can be explained by the way rainfall occurs during these years. If a large amount of rain falls over a short period only so much water and nutrients can be taken up by a tree and the rest is lost to groundwater and surface flow. If the remainder of the year does not have a lot of rainfall then the ring that is formed on the tree will not be very wide as it only had one key rainfall opportunity for improved growth. Yet if several moderate to large rainfall events occur over the course of a year then a tree can take advantage of numerous opportunities to intake water and nutrients, therefore increasing their growth potential allowing for a wider ring to form. Looking at the rainfall data for Brisbane it is clear how these two situations have both occurred during the study period. In 1973 and 1995 the majority of rainfall occurred during a few short events. For example in 1973 over a third of the growth season rainfall occurred during one event and 50% of the year's rainfall occurred over only six days, which represented 1973's three largest precipitation events (lasting one, three, and two days respectively). The rainfall during years where wider rings occur was spread more evenly throughout the growth season. For comparison, in 1966 the three largest rainfall events occurred over a total of nine days (each lasting three, one, and five days respectively) and represented less than a third of the rainfall that fell during the growth season.

Another issue that needs to be considered when looking at this rainfall reconstruction is alternative, specifically localized, influences on tree growth. Discussion with National Park staff prior to the commencement of this project suggested that the trees at this site had been

replanted in the mid to late 1800s. However, the chronology suggests that the trees were in fact planted in the 1930s or 1940s around the time that the Maiala region became part of the National Park. Therefore, the trees at this site are all from one individual cohort which is less than 100 years old and limits the variability of responses to environmental conditions.

Due to the young age of the trees the DMA chronology was not as lengthy as originally intended which did not allow for a long-term rainfall reconstruction to be developed. Nevertheless, the chronology presented a significant overlap with reliable Brisbane precipitation data and provided an opportunity to apply and test the Itrax ring boundary identification technique. Annual rainfall was found to account for nearly 15% of growth variability in this series (Table 3) which is low even for other Australasian tropical/subtropical reconstructions (see Shah et al., 2007; Heinrich et al., 2008, 2009). Yet the documentation of significant relationships between tree growth and climate (Fig. 6) as well as the development of a statistically valid rainfall reconstruction (Fig. 7), even one with low variability, suggest that this technique can be applied to tree-ring samples with non-visual rings that are intended for use in dendroclimatology. Climate response analysis demonstrated that even though this is a short tree-ring record there is a significant observable influence of annual rainfall on tree growth. However, we do acknowledge that this 69-year reconstruction developed from one cohort of trees is of insufficient length and lacks variety in response to growth variables to account for all trends related to localized issues such as resource competition. Standardization has greatly reduced some of the growth trends associated with a single age cohort (Fritts, 1976), but cannot provide the same range of environmental interpretations that occur within a long-term chronology developed from multiple cohorts. This is a bias caused by the selection of this site which occurred due to misinformation provided prior to the start of the study. Such bias in site selection is commonly unavoidable in SEQ as there are few locations that remain in unmodified, natural condition that also contain tree species useful for climate studies.

Other localized effects may also be contributing to the low percentage of reconstruction variance explained by the rainfall data. Disturbance such as the major work conducted at the Maiala site where the septic system was buried to complete the building of the amenity

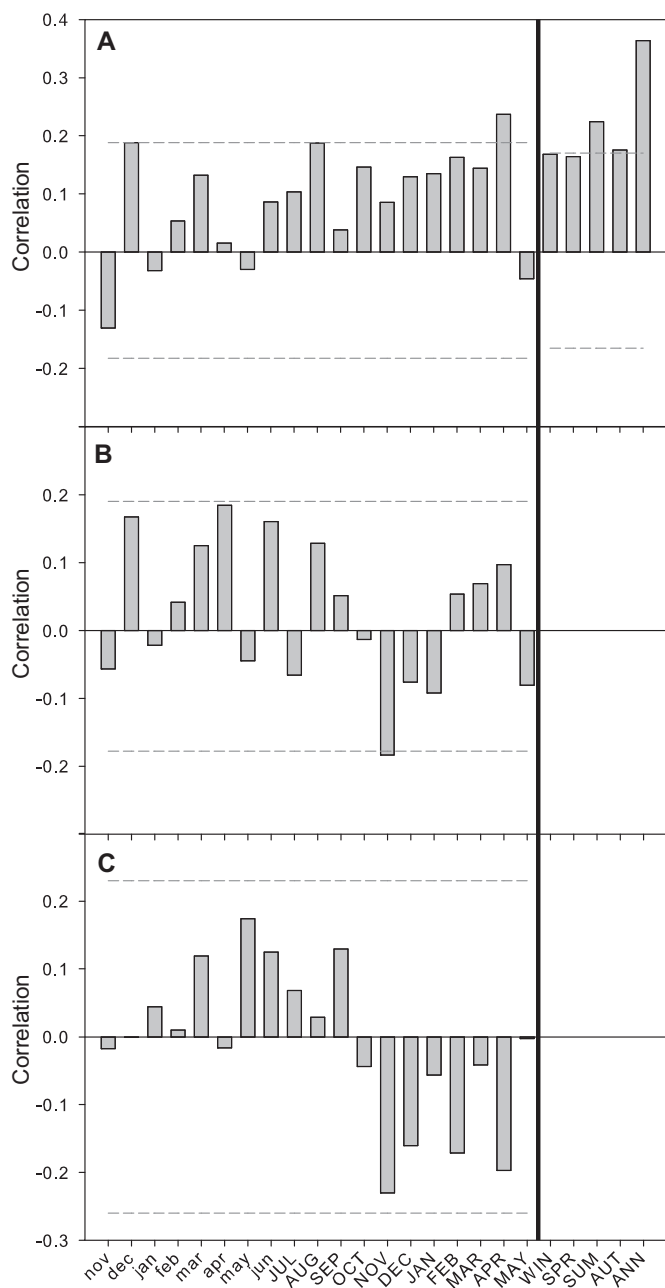


Fig. 6. Climate response values for the DMA chronology series and both the Brisbane rainfall and SEQ temperature data. Correlation coefficients are given for monthly, seasonal, and annual precipitation (A), average monthly minimum temperature (B) and average monthly maximum temperature (C) for the year prior to growth (lowercase), the year of growth (uppercase). Correlations are significant when they surpass the dashed lines. Note: significance levels are dependent on the climate variable being calculated.

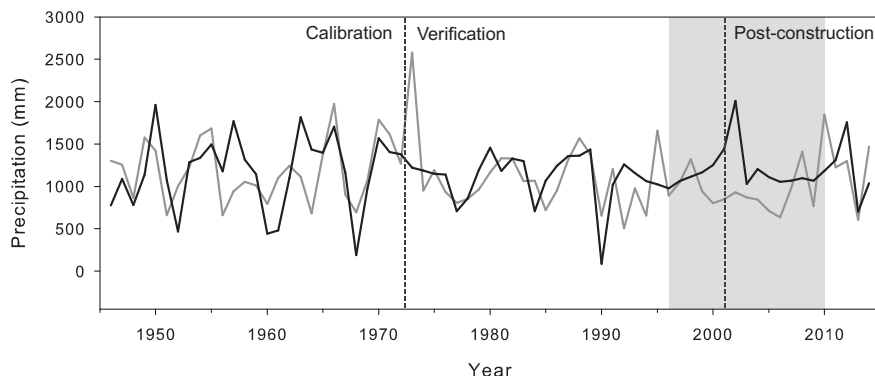


Fig. 7. Reconstructed (black line) and instrumental (grey line) annual precipitation for Brisbane over the period 1946–2014. The calibration period (1946–1972) and verification period (1973–2001) are indicated. The precipitation records are extended through the Maiala post-construction period for reference. The Millennium Drought occurrence in eastern Australia is indicated by the light grey background.

block appears to have affected the tree ring record. This could account for the wide 2002 ring observed in the DMA trees during a year with little rainfall as conditions at the site would have been heavily influenced by the ongoing construction and the discharge of nutrient-rich water from the septic tanks. Beyond 2002 there is a period of eight years with little variability in ring width which occurs during the Millennium Drought where narrow ring widths would be expected. This could be a lasting effect of the amenity block construction as the septic system is likely to be providing nutrients uphill of the DMA site that are cancelling out the environmental growth requirements of the trees. However, this period of muted variability in the record seems to begin prior to 2002. As such, this may be an artefact of the Millennium Drought itself. While most of SEQ was suffering from low moisture conditions the high elevation DMA site located within a small catchment may have had more moisture available than on the agricultural valley plains. In order to further investigate this change, a 26-year moving window analysis of the correlation values between the chronology and the instrumental rainfall was undertaken for the entire 1946–2015 period (Fig. 8). A drastic decrease in the correlation between variables is evident in the early 2000s, in line with the disturbance at the Maiala site. This would suggest that it is the localized influence of the work occurring at the site that is influencing the low variability in ring-widths and that any analysis of rainfall based on the DMA reconstruction should be truncated in 2001. However, both Figs. 7 and 8 appear to show that in the last few years of the record the tree-ring pattern is again matching well with rainfall and that the correlation between the variables is increasing. This may suggest that the trees at the DMA site are equalizing to the conditions at the site and that environmental conditions may again be driving tree growth.

Other long-term rainfall studies that have been undertaken in southeastern Australia have investigated the low-frequency variability related to phenomena such as the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO) and the Interdecadal Pacific Oscillation (IPO) (Chiew et al., 1998; Verdon et al., 2004; Heinrich et al., 2009; Gergis et al., 2012). Such an undertaking would provide a better understanding of how climatic conditions are influencing the tree-ring data at the DMA research site. However, the short duration record produced here precluded such analysis from being performed. Preliminary spectral wavelet analysis demonstrated no significant relationships as would be expected on a 69-year record. For such a low-frequency analysis to be performed a longer chronology from the SEQ region, such as the one developed by Heinrich et al. (2009) would be required. As the majority of the *Araucariaceae* trees within D'Aguilar National Park were logged and those in existence now represent a replanting program after National Park status was granted, it is unlikely that an extension to the current DMA chronology is possible. While there are a few sites of unlogged remnant *Araucariaceae* forest located within SEQ none of these are in close proximity to Brisbane.

Regardless of length, the creation of this ring width chronology, from a site with non-visual ring boundaries, is a very important development for tropical dendrochronology. Faint ring boundaries are

Table 3
Calibration and verification statistics for the Brisbane annual rainfall reconstruction.

Time span	Calibration				Verification			
	First	Last	r	C-RE	First	Last	V-RE	V-CE
Full	1946	2001	0.377	0.111				
Early	1946	1971	0.413	0.170	1972	2001	0.118	0.107
Late	1972	2001	0.345	0.119	1946	1971	0.155	0.111

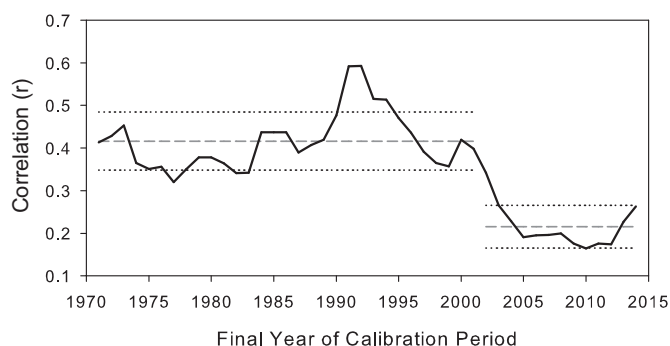


Fig. 8. Moving window of correlation values for 26-year calibration periods (black line) over the entire 1946–2014 reconstruction. The mean values (grey dashed line) and ± 1 standard deviation (dotted lines) are given for the period up to 2001 and from 2002 onwards.

very common in tropical species (Biondi and Fessenden, 1999). Here we have demonstrated that tree-ring boundaries can be identified using the radiographic images and the density pattern generated by the Itrax core scanner. This technique is non-destructive and while used here on a tropical/subtropical species it can be applied to any environment or species as long as the researcher has access to an Itrax core scanner, or equivalent technology, to produce both radiographs and density patterns for comparative analysis.

6. Conclusions

Long-term understanding of climate variations along the tropical/subtropical east coast of Australia cannot be developed from the short historical and instrumental records available. Consequently proxy climate records need to be developed. Within Southeast Queensland there are tree species such as *A. cunninghamii* that show potential for use in developing rainfall reconstructions but ring anomalies, including faint, indeterminate ring boundaries, make analysis problematic. This issue can be overcome in some instances by the method presented here where true ring boundaries are identified, dated, and widths measured through the use of radiographic images and density plots developed using the Itrax core scanner. In order to be confident in the dating a multi-technique approach involving bomb-pulse radiocarbon dating should be undertaken. Our results from applying this method to trees at the DMA site in D'Aguilar National Park demonstrated i) that a chronology can be created, ii) that tree growth is responding to climate at this location, and iii) that a statistically valid rainfall reconstruction can be developed using this method. While the reconstruction indicates that at the DMA site tree growth is certainly affected by localized influences the analysis does show that annual rainfall is the driving environmental factor for tree growth at this location. By selecting a tree-ring site where a longer, multi-cohort record can be developed there is a high probability that a long-term record of SEQ precipitation can be reconstructed. The results clearly show that the Itrax dating method can prove useful for undertaking tropical dendrochronological and climatological studies.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Jack Coates-Marnane, Tanya Ellison, and Dr. Craig Woodward for assistance in the field and both the Queensland Government Parks and Wildlife Service and the Queensland Department of Environment and Heritage Protection for allowing permitted access to the field site. Thanks also to ANSTO for H.A. Haines' access to the radiocarbon lab and assistance in preparing and analysing samples for radiocarbon dating. We acknowledge the financial support from the Australian Government for the Centre for Accelerator Science at ANSTO through the National Collaborative Research Infrastructure Strategy (NCRIS). The authors appreciate comments from Dr. Craig Woodward, Dr. James Speer, and two anonymous reviewers on early drafts of this manuscript.

Funding source

This work was supported by an Australian Research Council Linkage Grant (LP120200093) and an Australian Institute of Nuclear Science and Engineering Postgraduate Research Award (ALNSTU11387). Heather A. Haines received PhD scholarships from Griffith University, the Australian Research Council, and the Australian Institute of Nuclear Science and Engineering.

Declaration of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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