

# Huon pine

*One of the oldest plants on Earth*



Parks and Wildlife Service Tasmania

DEPARTMENT of TOURISM, PARKS  
HERITAGE and the ARTS

## What is the Huon pine?

The Huon pine is a conifer and is endemic to Tasmania, meaning it grows naturally in Tasmania and nowhere else. Scientifically, the Huon pine is known as *Lagarostrobos franklinii* (formerly *Dacrydium franklinii*) and is the only member of the genus *Lagarostrobos*. Related species from the family Podocarpaceae, originating from the ancient supercontinent Gondwana are found in Chile, Malaysia and New Zealand.

## How long does it live?

The Huon pine is Australia's oldest living tree and is one of the oldest living organisms on earth. Individuals have been known to reach an age of 3,000 years. Fossil records from a tree found in a boggy area in the south west of Tasmania were dated at 3,462 years! (Carder A., 1995). Only the bristle-cone pine of North America exceeds it in age.

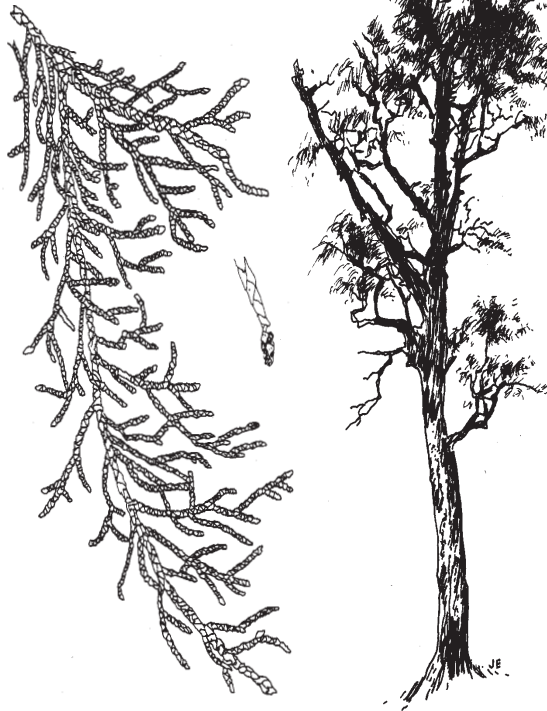
## The tree

The Huon pine grows at the incredibly slow rate of between 0.3 – 2 mm per year in diameter. Despite such slow growth the tree may attain heights of 40 m and commonly reaches 20 m to 25 m in height. The foliage of the Huon pine consists of tiny scales closely pressed to the stalk. The many little fingers of growth give the tree a distinct feathery appearance.

Huon pines produce pollen and seeds from small cones that are about 3 mm long. Male and female cones are produced on separate trees. A small number of trees produce both male and female cones, though this is quite rare.

Reproduction occurs in 'mast years'. Every 5 – 7 years a mass seeding occurs. Seeds are dispersed a short distance around the tree except where they land in water and are transported downstream. Huon pines also reproduce vegetatively. They do this by layering. Tree branches reaching the ground start to root and establish themselves as a new tree, which eventually breaks away from the parent. Branches breaking off trees can also take root.

In this way populations such as a forest stand at Mt Read, which have no female trees, continue to survive. It is believed that the Mt Read stand has been regenerating in the absence of female trees for more than 10,000 years, although no individual trees are more than 1,500 years old.



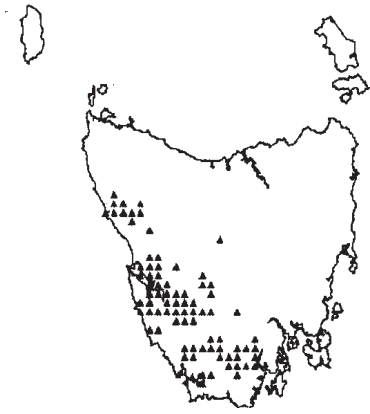
*Huon pine branch (left) and mature tree (right)*  
(Drawings courtesy Forestry Tasmania)

## Where does it grow?

Huon pines are found in the west and southwest of Tasmania. They grow among river-bank rainforest and also occur in a few subalpine lake shore forests. They are usually killed by fire and are drought sensitive, so are restricted to cool, wet places.

Huon pines are often associated with rainforest species such as myrtle (*Nothofagus cunninghamii*), leatherwood (*Eucryphia lucida*) and sassafras (*Atherosperma moschatum*).

Some of the most accessible sites to see Huon pines are: the Tahune Forest Reserve near Geeveston on the Picton River; the Arthur-Pieman River State Reserve near Corinna; the Teepookana Forest Reserve; the heritage landing on the Gordon River on the west coast; and near Newall Creek on the Mount Jukes Road south of Queenstown.



*The location of Huon pines in Tasmania*

## Our use of Huon pine

Huon pine has been prized as a timber since the early 1800s. In fact, one of the reasons for establishing a convict settlement at Sarah Island in Macquarie Harbour was to harvest Huon pine from the Gordon River. From 1822 until 1833 convict piners were forced to cut timber and bring log rafts from the lower reaches of the river to the settlement. There they were pit sawn into frames and planks to build ships for the Government. Pining continued as a commercial operation after the convict era. Felled trees continued to be floated down the river where they were picked up and taken to the mill at Strahan. Huon pine is one of the few native timbers that floats when green. From 1890 till the present day, the small port of Strahan, on Tasmania's west coast has been the main centre of pining. However, from 1850 until 1880, the Davey River settlement in the southwest, supplied the majority of the market.

The rich creamy yellow wood is soft, durable, smooth, oily and light weight. The wood is very easy to work with and takes a high polish. Huon pine is probably the most durable of Australian timbers, and logs which apparently have lain on the ground for several hundred years are still being harvested and milled. The durability of the wood is due to the presence of the essential oil, methyl eugenol, which gives Huon pine its unique odour. The oil also has preservative qualities and deters insect attack. It has been said 'the only thing slower than a Huon pine's growth is its decay!' As a consequence it is recognised as an excellent timber for building boats, furniture, and for joinery and turning.

Huon pine is still available as a sawlog for the production of crafts. Sources include areas flooded by Hydro Tasmania schemes and previously heavily cut-over areas, particularly the Teepookana State Forest near Strahan. The annual sawlog cut of 500 cubic metres per year from these sources is expected to last more than a century. Because it thrives in some of the roughest terrain, it has been more difficult to harvest than other Australian timbers. This has resulted in Huon pine traditionally being at least triple the price of common hardwoods, and, with its scarcity today, that has increased to a factor of six or seven.

## Looking after what is left

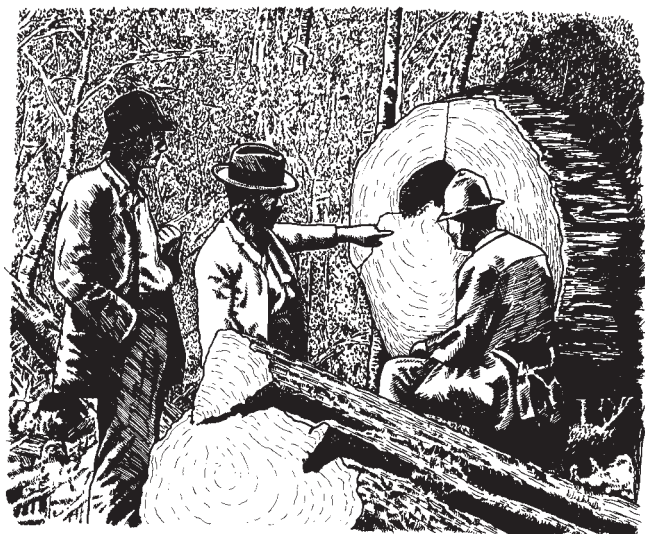
Estimates of the area of living Huon pine vary, but are in the order of 10,500 hectares. In addition there are about 800 hectares of standing, fire-killed pine. The current area of remaining pine is the remnant of a much wider original range that has been reduced by fire, inundation, logging and mining. Today most of the remaining stands are well protected within reserves, the majority within the World Heritage Area.

## Further information

Kerr G. and McDermott H. (1999) *The Huon Pine Story. A History of Harvest and Use of a Unique Timber*. Mainsail Books, Melbourne.

## Contact

Biodiversity Conservation Branch:DPIWE  
134 Macquarie Street, Hobart. 7000  
Phone: (03) 6233 6556  
Fax: (03) 6233 3477



*Piners inspect the sawn timber (Drawing courtesy Parks and Wildlife Service)*

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### FURTHER INFORMATION

Head Office: 134 Macquarie Street Hobart TAS 7000  
Phone: 1300 135 513

Internet: [www.parks.tas.gov.au](http://www.parks.tas.gov.au)  
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