

FROM forest floor

An acclaimed Central Victorian photographer shows there truly is magic in mushrooms

Words: Sarah Harris - Photographer: Alison Pouliot



It might be said Alison Pouliot is a woman on a mission to put the fun into fungi.

Turning her lens on the mysterious underworld of Central Victorian forests, the internationally-renowned environmental photographer seeks to illuminate a forgotten kingdom.

Her delicate compositions of perfect parasols, plump puffballs and lacy corals are a symphony of the soil – all captured in that brief eight to 10-week window when what lies beneath surfaces in fruit bodies.

The fungi kingdom with its enormous variety of yeasts, rusts, smuts, mushrooms, moulds, mildews and toadstools includes some of the most ecologically and economically valuable organisms on earth.

People have been unwittingly relying on fungi since the very first loaf of leavened bread was baked and the first tub of grapes fermented into wine.

Fungi puts the pop into champagne, is the source of a raft of life-saving drugs including most famously the antibiotic penicillin, as

well as providing a nutritious food source.

Yet, for all fungus provides it is woefully neglected, particularly here in Australia, as Alison, who divides her time following the autumn between Central Victoria and Europe, explains.

“It’s an altogether separate kingdom to animals and plants. It’s often called the forgotten kingdom because we only ever talk about flora and fauna.

“They are also known as the ‘orphans of Rio’ because incredibly when the Convention on Biological Diversity was adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 they were left off.”

Alison, a trained ecologist who specialised in waterway biodiversity and worked with the likes of the North Central Catchment Authority, moved into photography as a means to capture visually what was happening in the waterways.

“Basically, I got sick of counting fish – measuring the world and documenting it in a quantitative way,” she explains.

While most of her income is still derived from selling images of water, her fascination with fungus is gradually overtaking and is the focus of her current PhD research.

“I have looked at all the Australian legislation – as dry and dreary as it is – around biodiversity and none of it mentions fungi,” she laments.

“They are really sort of out of consciousness here, and I think that could be because we don’t have the same sort of cultural connections they have in Europe.

“Because they have been a subsistence food in Europe and there is all this incredibly rich mythology around them there is an awareness and fungi have been included much more in conservation efforts.

“The irony is we actually have way more fungi in Australia than there are in Europe.”

Close to 15,000 species of fungi have been described in Australia, but it is thought this is less than 20 per cent of the picture.

Part of Alison’s campaign to raise awareness has been a program of fungi and



photography workshops. Slowly but surely people are coming to understand the need to better understand the fungal partnerships connecting animals, trees and landscapes.

"In Australia fungi are generally spoken about as being pathogenic or disease causing.

"Most of the money goes into looking at rusts and smuts and moulds. It goes into looking at problem fungi that cause massive damage to agricultural crops, so most farmers think of them as being just the bad guys.

"But they also benefit crops, benefit remnant vegetations, make a healthier more resilient landscape, put structure back into soil and increase water retention."

The tree we see in the backyard, she says, is really just the tip of the story.

"If you imagine putting a stocking on a stick, the mycelium – the underground vegetative part of the fungus – coats the roots and can actually extend the root system of the tree by up to 1000 times.

"It solubilises (makes soluble) things like nitrates and phosphates so the tree can absorb them, and in return the tree gives the fungus a feed of sugars, because the fungus can't photosynthesise.

"When we look at, say, a eucalypt, we think 'oh, it's a tree', but it's not, it's a relationship.

"With truffles it is actually a three-way relationship because you have their connection to the eucalypt, but they can't disperse their spores unless a wallaby, bettong or some other mammal comes and digs it up, so you have this connection between three kingdoms.

"You have the eucalypt that needs the fungus to be able to absorb nutrients, you have the fungus that needs the bettong.

"It is this beautiful relationship."

Fungi are, indeed, our friends. ■