

A large, mature Platycerium plant is shown growing on the trunk of a tree in a lush, green forest. The plant's long, dark green, lanceolate leaves radiate from a central point, creating a fan-like appearance. The background is filled with dense foliage and sunlight filtering through the trees.

PLATYCERIUM OBSERVATIONS IN CARNARVON GORGE, QUEENSLAND

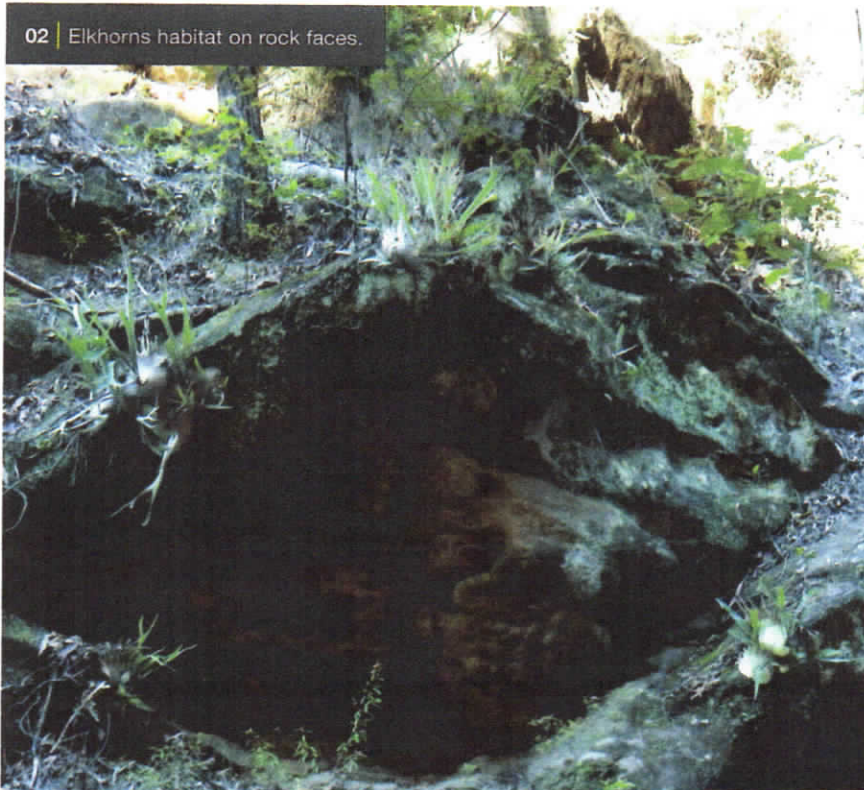
Seeing staghorns and elkhorns in home and botanic gardens is a joy most gardeners have experienced. To see them in their natural habitat growing where and how you do not expect them is a whole new different thing. Horticulturist *Mike Kvauka* reveals what he saw there.

Main | Elkhorns growing on boulders at Carnarvon Gorge.

01 | Nursery of baby elk horns on native cycads.



02 | Elkhorns habitat on rock faces.



Earlier this year I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to explore Carnarvon Gorge, Central Queensland. It was a dream come true – all the plants I had seen on television I was finally going to see in the flesh. Being a plant nutter, I could not wait!

I noticed whilst walking through the Gorge that all the Elkhorns (*Platycerium* spp.) were growing on rock faces and boulders or on the trunks of the native cycad (*Macrozamia moorei*) – not trees!

All my life prior to this I had only ever seen elkhorns growing on trees in the wild. Here, the only elkhorn specimens on trees appeared to be plants that had broken off from a larger cluster higher in the landscape and fallen onto the ground. By chance, they had fallen against the base of trees which stopped them from rolling further down the bank of the Gorge. These ferns were slowly trying to grow upwards.

Other observations were that the shield fronds were a lighter colour and the tops were more pointed. The fertile antler fronds were finer and more erect. Clearly the harsher environmental conditions necessitated that the plants make a few adaptations.

Examining various boulders and rock faces I never saw any baby specimens or a 'nursery' for the elkhorns. However to my astonishment, the *Macrozamia moorei* appeared to be the primary nursery host for the elkhorn spores and baby specimens.

Looking back at pictures I had taken my theory is that most of the canopy trees appeared to be *Eucalyptus* species. Most seemed to shed their bark leaving a fine smooth trunk – ideally suited to the native sugar gliders.

I believe consequently that these trees would neither offer a suitable environment or lodging site for fern spores to establish.

It was an amazing adventure to visit Carnarvon Gorge and a great horticultural experience to see elkhorns adapting to their unique conditions in the middle of Central Queensland. **STG**