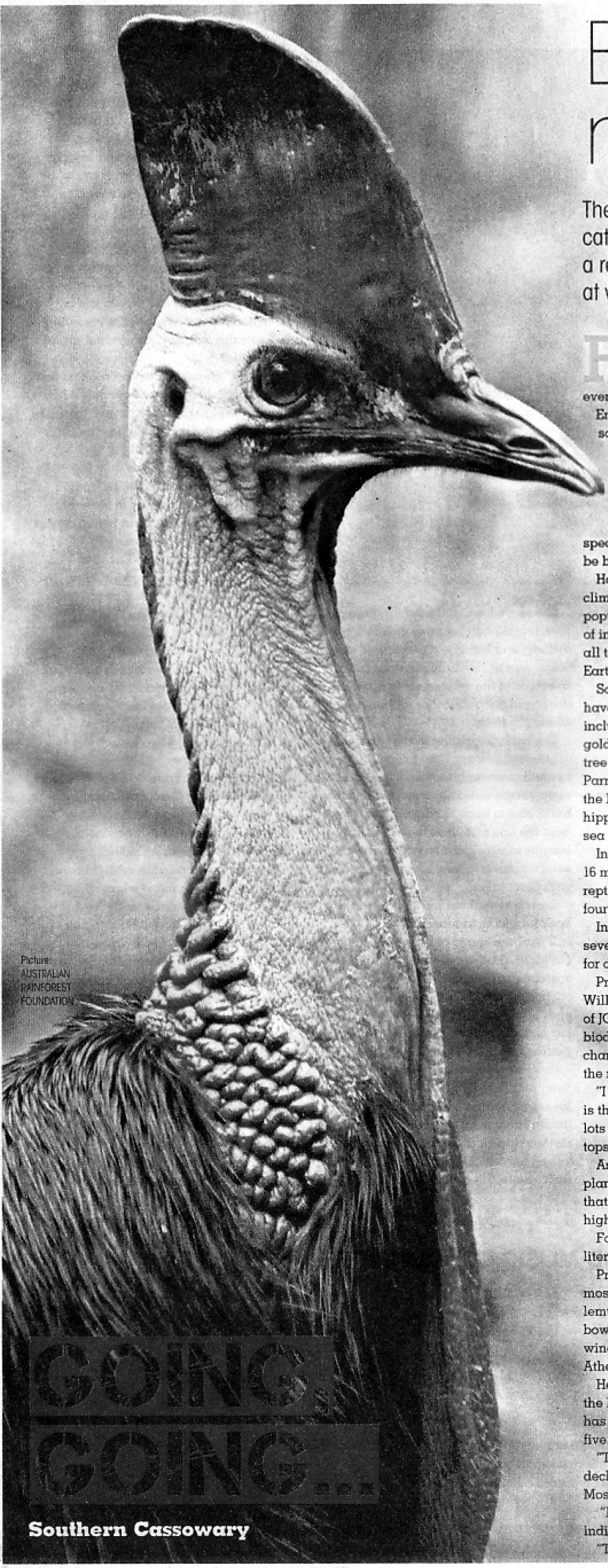

Picture: AUSTRALIAN RAINFOREST FOUNDATION

Southern Cassowary

Beastly tale of man's impact

The term "mass extinction" may seem like an overused catchphrase, but it rings heavily in the Far North, particularly in a region with two World Heritage areas. DENISE CARTER looks at what could soon be missing from our landscape

Researchers claim we are in the midst of one of the biggest mass extinctions the planet has ever known.

Endangered Species International says while the previous (five mass extinctions) have causes ranging from unknown to the rise of glaciers, large volcanoes, possible asteroids and comets and their resultant climate changes, today's species extinctions are almost entirely to be blamed on the influences of man.

Habitat destruction, human-induced climate change, over-harvesting, over-population, pollution, and the introduction of invasive species to native habitat all top the list for the woes of Planet Earth today.

Some 784 species of plants and animals have recently vanished worldwide, including the Hawai'i chaff flower, the golden coqui Puerto Rican tree frog, the Martinique Parrot, the Yuman box turtle, the Madagascan Pygmy hippo, and the Japanese sea lion.

In Queensland, 14 birds, 16 mammals, 15 frogs, eight reptiles, two butterflies and four fish are endangered.

In the Far North, there are several species hanging on for dear life.

Professor Stephen Williams, who is the director of JCU's centre for tropical biodiversity and climate change, points out those on our hit list in the region.

"I think from our work what's most clear is that the creatures to be hit hardest are lots of different animals that live near the tops of mountains," Prof Williams says.

As climate change heats up parts of the planet, including the Far North, creatures that live on mountains will have to climb higher to reach their normal habitat.

For those already living on the top, they literally will have nowhere to go.

Prof Williams says the creatures most in danger in the region are the lemuroid wing-tailed possum, the golden bowerbird, the tooth-billed bowerbird, the wing-tailed possum, tiger quolls, and the Atherton scott-wing.

He says the one in the most danger is the lemuroid wing-tailed possum which has been disappearing rapidly in the past five years.

"The lemuroid wing-tailed possum has declined a lot in the mountains behind Mossman," Prof Williams says.

"For several years, not a single individual was seen.

"The Wet Tropics Management Authority has got together with us and we are monitoring them for the next six months. In places where up to 10 per hour were seen, in five years we still haven't seen any."

Jacinta Allen from the Rainforest Foundation says the species in the most danger in the region is the southern cassowary.

"There are less than 1500," Ms Allen says. "Their land has decreased, therefore, the birds won't multiply and breed, because of the encroachment of human habitat."

The loss of the southern cassowary will be a loss indeed, especially considering the 150 rainforest plants that rely on them to disperse their seeds.

"So we will lose many species of tree as well," Ms Allen says.

Last weekend, another adult cassowary was killed by traffic at the South Mission Beach turnoff leaving two of his chicks to fight for survival by themselves.

> Cassowaries use 100 per cent of their habitat, so if you get rid of 10 per cent of their habitat, you kill 10 per cent of their population

"Each year this adult cassowary has lost chicks to car strikes at the same location and there have been many reports of near misses," founding member of Community for Coastal and Cassowary Conservation (C4) Liz Gallie says.

"He died quite quickly – the chicks were in the bush screaming."

The future of the two chicks is now in doubt. Although they are near to the age of independence, they will be confined to the same habitat and likely meet the same fate.

"Cassowaries use 100 per cent of their habitat, so if you get rid of 10 per cent of their habitat, you kill 10 per cent of their population," Liz says. "Of the young birds, very few reach adulthood because of traffic and too many dogs."

The cassowary road death toll is four adults in seven months and 60 over the past 15 years.

Ms Gallie questioned why the speed limit through the Mission Beach area could not simply be lowered to reduce the number of hits.

"This is an iconic endangered species we are talking about," she says.

"If the cassowary is allowed to be lost at Mission Beach, then the cassowary coast region would not only lose its icon but a major part of its tourism economy and appeal."

Far north frogs on the list of fading wildlife are the endangered Kuranda tree frog, the armoured mistfrog, the Australian lace-lid, the sharp-snouted day frog and the waterfall frog.