

## READING THE RANGELAND - A GUIDE TO THE ARID SHRUBLANDS OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Don Burnside, Alec Holm, Alan Payne and Georgina Wilson (1995) 140 pp.

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This book was produced with the support of a major grant from the National Landcare Program. It was money well spent for the product brings together the collective wisdom of pastoralists and of the indigenous people of the arid shrublands with the understandings and objective data of a generation of rangeland scientists in Western Australia. It is a book of which they all can be proud. One can only ask why more publications of this type are not available, written in these simple terms, for the non-professionals who still make the significant decisions on land use in the rangelands .

It is a book also meant for the perceptive traveller who cannot fail to gain from his reading an appreciation of the great dynamism residing in the apparently timeless landscapes of the region. It will be invaluable for the land manager for whom it is primarily directed. In writing it the authors have presented an account of our stewardship, over the past 140 years, of 850,000 square kilometres of pastoral land, more than 20 per cent of the pastoral land in Australia. Fifteen per cent, they say, is in poor range condition. They do not go on to say that this degradation is principally in the well-watered and fertile patches from which most of the diversity in the rangelands is derived, nor to speculate upon the effect which this depletion of resources has had upon the biological diversity of the vast region.

There is an admirable account of the soil and vegetation processes. It builds on the excellent generic papers on process for which Australian rangeland workers are so well regarded. The ill-effects of rangeland degradation on the efficient functioning of the system are pointed with colourful and well executed diagrams. The ecologically correct may object to the neo-Clementsian terms of decreaser, increaser and non-indicative plants which are used to classify the plants of the rangelands. The authors have, however, skilfully absorbed this classification into state and transition models which they use to describe the condition states in 12 types of arid shrub rangelands which are derived from an initial breakdown of mulga lands, saltbush and bluebush lands and sandplains.

In three chapters the condition states of each of the 12 rangelands are then described in qualitative and objective terms. There is a level of precision in these descriptions for they are a condensation of the data obtained from 25 years of range inventory surveys and from ecological studies carried out over a longer period. They are based on the durable and easily recognisable shrubby elements of the pastures of the Western Australian shrublands. Each of the levels is described in terms of the number of decreaser perennial species which should be in the vicinity and of the number of decreaser species which should be present in a centihec, a new term for a notional 100 square metres. For some types where more information is available they specify the number of all shrubs which should be present and the number of all shrubs per centihec.

Short, pithy keys to the management of each type, entitled good news signs and bad news signs, are highlighted in boxes. Finally, there is a photograph of typical sites in good, fair and poor condition, pictures which would surely alarm those not familiar with the Western Australian shrublands leading them to question how pastoralism manages to persist on its own, let alone with other concurrent values such as conservation. After a long association with this land I now wonder myself.

The authors consider that some of the changes which they have recorded are reversible and have suggested the means which pastoralists should adopt to effect the return. For others, notably the Nullarbor Plain where bluebush communities have been altered by rabbits and fire to herb and grass fields, they offer no solution. These communities have entered new cycles in which fire has a central role. Fire and bluebushes are incompatible. What will the perceptive tourist make of these changes, and of others seen with the greater insights which this book provides?

Not surprisingly, given their backgrounds, the authors do not discuss any of the competing uses for the rangelands, their guidelines being directed towards the use of the shrublands for pastoral purposes. Indeed, the chapter on how the land is managed ignores the claims of users others than miners and those who make some passive use of the land as tourists and holiday makers. The soon to be released National Rangeland Management Strategy may address the issue of competing demands for a share of these resources and it may even provide guidelines for the sustainable use of these difficult environments.

I hope that this book stimulates rangeland workers to produce companion volumes for the remaining rangeland areas in Australia. It is well worth the modest purchase price of \$30 including postage.

**David Wilcox AM**  
Cottesloe, Western Australia