

CONSERVATION AND WILDLIFE IN THE AUSTRALIAN ARID RANGELANDS: AN INTRODUCTION

S.R. Morton

Division of Wildlife and Ecology, CSIRO, P.O. Box 2111, Alice Springs, N.T. 0871

The rangelands constitute the vast Australian outback, a land of harsh extremes and great beauty, of considerable economic value through the pastoral, mining and tourism industries, of significance to many Australians both black and white as the heart of their country - and of extraordinary importance to plant and animal life. As awareness grows in the wider Australian community of the richness of biological diversity contained in the rangelands, it is likely that the topic of management for conservation will also increase in public profile and importance. In recognition of such public interest, this Special Issue of the Rangeland Journal contains papers concerned with the subject of conservation and wildlife.

It is regrettable that, from the point of view of native plants and animals, European settlement has not always brought benefits. Many native mammals of arid Australia have, for example, suffered severely in the past 200 years, and several are extinct. Other groups of organisms have fared much better, fortunately, but the history of the mammals teaches us that we cannot take the long-term persistence of our biological diversity for granted. Land managers and scientists will need to work together to learn more about the functioning of the rangelands, and to devise strategies for ensuring that productive use of the country can proceed without undue effect on conservation values. All of the contributors to this Special Issue are aiming at that goal in their individual ways.

The Issue begins with three papers which describe some of the problems that wildlife species have experienced since the arrival of Europeans. The tone of these papers is sometimes negative, but it is necessary for us to face the fact that our management has sometimes been faulty in the past if we are to find ways of correcting those problems. Thus, the remaining seven papers look forwards. Maher and Braithwaite point the way ahead for conservation of an unusually mobile component of the fauna, Read writes of the type of monitoring activity which will be essential to conservation management, and Harris outlines the activities needed for care of the desert mound springs. But not all conservation issues concern wildlife. Humans are an integral part of the rangelands, and so the following two papers introduce the heritage of Aboriginal people and of pastoralists into the picture. In my view, it follows logically that the final two papers consider nature conservation in the context of the whole landscape.

This collection of papers cannot pretend to be a complete overview of conservation issues in the rangelands: it is only a sampler. Its intent is to stimulate more activity in the great task of learning how to look after our country, so that it will continue to support not only our activities but also all those other organisms which share Australia with us.