

BOOK REVIEWS

The Simpson Desert - Natural History and Human Endeavour

By Mark Shephard

Publisher: The Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch) Inc. and Giles Publications, Adelaide.

Price: \$44.95.

Mark Shephard's 'The Simpson Desert' is a very well-produced book. It is excellent in design and overall presentation. The print is a good readable size and the photographs, both those of historical nature and the recent coloured ones, are very well chosen. The South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia is to be commended, along with the author, for the fine quality of the publication.

The sub-title of the work is 'Natural History and Human Endeavour'. Does the book fulfil this promise? Certainly, for most readers, it probably does. In Chapter 1, 'The Living Desert', the land systems, geology, flora and fauna are well-described and illustrated. It is a pleasure to read of personal enthusiasm for, and observations of, birds when the author also uses the information to briefly discuss diversity, seasonal fluctuations, and other aspects. As might be expected, he similarly discusses mammals, referring to both the surviving species and the tragedy of rapid extinctions for others. Reptiles and insects are also briefly, but well, surveyed.

At times, primarily in the introductory 'personal perspective', the author tends to 'purple prose', but this is a minor quibble. Otherwise he has a clear and readable writing style which is to be commended.

I now turn to an examination of the remaining four chapters.

'Aboriginal Occupation' falters a little in that no Aborigines appear to have been interviewed; T.G.H. Strehlow is not mentioned; insufficient study has been made of M. Smith's archaeological research (although one paper is referred to); and Kimber's papers on Aboriginal water-bags and resource management were not considered. Numerous other references exist. However, to his great credit the author draws upon the most impressive published records of all, those made by the remarkable linguist Dr. Luise Hercus and her key informant, the late Mick McLean Irinjili. Pages 58-67 are essential reading for anyone at all interested in the Aborigines of the Simpson Desert. It is reasonable to point out, however, that although the Wangkangurra culture 'vanished forever' (p.67), the fringes of the Desert traditionally used by Aranda and associated people still have modified living cultures, and considerable traditional knowledge remains.

'European Exploration' is excellently discussed. The years 1844-1939, those spanned by Sturt's expedition through to Madigan's, cover the entire period of desert exploration. It is also nice to see the rarely published Colson photographs, taken during his quite remarkable crossing in 1936. One could quibble that John Ross's and Frank Scarr's expeditions of the 1870s should have been mentioned, but all-in-all it is a very well considered overview.

I confess to having found it surprising, given that 'Human Endeavour' is a key component, that pastoralism, prospecting, mineral surveys, formal survey work in the 1960s, scientific research by such as CSIRO, and occasional other interests, have not been considered to any great extent, if at all. Several are, to be fair, alluded to in the various chapters but pastoralism, although confined to the peripheries of the Desert, is almost certainly deserving of a chapter in itself.

In contrast to the above 'sins of omission', 'The Recreation Boom' is well-researched. Many travellers have not, of course, felt the need to publish their accounts, but of those who have a very good selection has been considered. Furthermore, the ill-prepared and foolhardy have also been mentioned, and their deaths provide a timely warning that the Simpson is truly an Australian Desert.

'Conservation and a Look to the Future' is the fifth and final chapter. The inertia of the Northern Territory Government is contrasted with the endeavours of South Australia and Queensland in creation of a National Park. However, the total review is positive and well argued and, as with all chapters, excellent illustrations are used throughout.

Finally, although the appendices are very useful, the Bibliography is limited, and a search through the 'References' is required to locate all sources.

In summary, Mark Shephard's 'The Simpson Desert' despite some limitations, is undoubtedly well-conceived, well-researched, competently written, excellently illustrated, and well-produced. It is excellent value and an essential purchase for people with any interest at all in the 'Natural History and Human Endeavour' of the Simpson or, indeed, more generally of inland Australia.

R.G. Kimber
Alice Springs, N.T.

Pest animals in Australia

By George Wilson, Nick Dexter, Peter O'Brien and Mary Bomford

Publisher: Bureau of Rural Resources and Kangaroo Press

Price: \$16.95

This glossy 64 page book is sub-titled 'A Survey of Introduced Wild Mammals' and that is basically what it is. It provides a medium for a series of distribution maps of pest animals across Australia. The species covered range from major pests where control activities are warranted such as pigs, donkeys, horses, rabbits and goats to minor or widespread species (camels, deer, rats, mice) where control is not an important issue.

Both the forward and the text acknowledge the 'limitations in accuracy, precision and currency' and this is undoubtedly the major weakness of the book. Given this, it must be questioned why the data has been presented in a relatively expensive coffee-table format as it is unlikely to have general community appeal.

Each of the 20 species is described under headings of history, distribution, diet, behaviour, breeding, impact, control and value as a resource. The description is necessarily brief but is sufficiently well referenced for interested readers to obtain more detail.

The exception is the distribution and habitat which is based on information provided by the various State and Territory agencies responsible for pest animal management. Their different approaches to management and the subjective differences in assessment of densities result in some cross-border anomalies in the maps.

Since responsibility for policy and control will remain with individual States/Territories the differences in assessment and the publication of these maps will not have any effect on actual control. Nevertheless, the presentation of an Australia wide picture of these various pest animals seems, somehow, to be a necessary and worthwhile contribution.

A. W. Hogstrom
South Perth, W.A.