

## 'The threatening desert. Controlling desertification'

Author: A. Grainger 1990

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369 pp

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"Desertification is the degradation of lands in dry areas." "Desertification is not the desert expansion of popular imagination. Instead it is essentially a subtle, dispersed and continuous process which occurs far away from the desert fringes..." With these sentences Grainger opens his book, and I immediately revised my ideas on the subject. I was guilty of the popular imagination. However, his bold assertion that "The direct cause of desertification is poor land use" (p. 2) did not surprise me in the least.

The book is updated and expanded from an earlier 'Desertification' (Earthscan 1983). I have not seen this book recently so I will not compare the two, rather I will concentrate on the merits of the present volume. The book is well-structured with a logical sequence of chapters each leading in to the following chapter. Within each chapter, sections continue the logical subdivision. In a subject so full of complex interactions, Grainger avoids the minimalist trap by integrating across all of the dimensions. Desertification is a complex web of environmental, social, political, technological, and economic factors. Any attempt to 'solve' it by concentrating on just one, or even two, factors is doomed to failure. Grainger's treatment and exposition of these interactions is the real strength of his book.

I found reading large slabs of the book quite depressing. Some chapters seem to be endless litanies of destruction of the environments, and death of vast numbers of people. The saddest aspect is the pitiful inefficiency of most foreign aid programs, and the inability of the helpers to get it right. The most common and endlessly repeated (and arrogant) mistake is to ignore local social mores as if they simply do not exist or matter! For example, the persistent misunderstanding of group (family/village/tribe) and individual rights on community grazing lands. In this light, some of Grainger's comments are interesting. For example, "Some of the critics of social forestry expect more altruistic behaviour from people in developing countries than is evident in their own." (p. 229).

Grainger's treatment of environmental factors is straightforward and adds little that is new. Like so many others, he tells us that fine soil material is deposited in/on villages, rivers, lakes, irrigation channels and the oceans by wind. In contrast, he tacitly assumes that fluvially transported material is merely eroded and he completely neglects where all this material goes until many pages later. There is considerable discussion of drought: meteorological, agricultural and hydrological (p. 40), but none on what could (will?) be called "political" drought. How long will it be before nations controlling trans-national rivers impose political droughts on their downstream neighbours? Rapacious overuse of the Colorado River by the US has already ended any flow into Mexico. With friends like this, who needs enemies?

As the book covers a global problem then readers will find faults with the coverage/detail/facts of their particular region. I have listed some below. However, the value of this book lies in its overview of an issue that affects us all.

Grainger's method of citing authors irritated me immensely: "Ellen van der Laan of the Centre for African Studies in Leiden, Holland, has identified five main reasons..." (p. 186); "According to James Risser of Stanford University....(Risser 1985)." This is an affectation that wastes words as Grainger implies that he is on first name terms with various (reputable) sources. Further, these "most-favoured authors" are individually listed in the Index, complete with first name. Those who do not make it to the first name list in the text are not listed in the Index, merely in the Bibliography! Obviously there are authorities, and then there are authorities! This approach reaches its nadir on p. 28 with "As one UN expert has said....(Anon. 1977)." How does Grainger know that this unidentified person is an expert? Related to this are personal

communications from large bureaucracies: "World Bank, personal communication" (p. 197). I have always found banks extremely impersonal, perhaps Grainger has been more fortunate!

On a more local note, a map of world vegetation (Figure 15) shows most of semi-arid Australia as "Tropical savanna/woodland". When will non-Australians get it right? Gross errors like this make we wonder about the veracity and accuracy of other sections of the book that are not so easy to check.

More serious is Grainger's view of what should be considered a baseline against which degradation is assessed. He clearly believes this to be the long-discredited climatic climax. By definition, *Homo sapiens* of whatever race or standard of technological development is unnatural (p. 28)! This leads to absurdities later in the book where Grainger discusses fuelwood (p. 100). "In normal situations such [fuelwood] gathering is not very intensive and would not present much of a problem, but rising population and diminishing forest resources make the impact of gathering more significant...". This is a very peculiar statement given the present (and past several decades of) uncontrolled population growth in these same countries. The environment includes *Homo sapiens*, any other view is patently incorrect.

Discussion at the end of Chapter 1 shows that the ideological position of commentators is critical to understanding their views and assessment of desertification. This is something that we have been familiar with in Australia for years: the different views of graziers, scientists and land administrators on the condition of the same parcel of land.

The main lesson for Australians and Australia is that it is happening to us now. It is not just a problem in Africa. The cause may be slightly different, but there are remarkable similarities across continents and markedly different societies. What can we learn from this book that we can apply in Australia? Surprisingly little except for the critical importance of social factors, which even we ignore. As the book is about Africa in general and the Sahel in particular, it is not directly applicable to our livestock management systems.

As I said above, ideology and hidden agendas play important roles in understanding desertification. I am not too sure of Grainger's stance, but I recommend his book as a good introduction to the subject. The problems that I have listed are relatively minor compared with the global coverage. Read the book and you will understand why we will probably never control desertification. A grim but realistic prognosis.

The book is available from various book stores.  
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### **The Centre. The natural history of Australia's desert regions.**

Penny van Oosterzee  
Publisher: Reed Books, Sydney  
Recommended retail price of \$39.95.

Penny van Oosterzee's book "The Centre" deservedly won the inaugural Eureka Science Book Prize. I would not be at all surprised if it were also to win a prize for its striking cover design.

As an opening comment, I strongly recommend the book to people with an interest in natural history, yet I do have reservations about the book. To explain this contradiction, I have divided my review into several sections. Although the concept of the book is the author's, I turn first to the photography, as I believe that this is what will initially catch any prospective purchaser's eye.