

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.
Dr John Pickard
Graduate School of the Environment
Macquarie University
NSW 2109 Australia

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.

Photography

Reg Morrison's photographic work is described as "of international standing". This book will certainly enhance that standing. Approximately 270 photographs illustrate the 172 pages. (They are complemented by numerous diagrams and other illustrations.) There are superb photographs of both rarely seen and common animals, ranging from fairy-shrimps to ants and lizards, and from frogs to a kangaroo. The "arid zone flowers" are brilliant in detail and colour, and there are also some excellent illustrations of broader landscapes. The Lake Eyre salt-crystals are marvellous. However, the brolga and bustard are shadow-dark and cropped, the shield shrimp laying eggs is (I think) a bit of a mixed bag, and the photographs of Aboriginal artefacts are contrived and do not indicate the different uses of the tools. I also found that some pages were cluttered, partly as a result of cramming pictures and partly through extension of a photograph over two pages.

In addition there were several blemishes in other ways. For instance, the captions for excellent photographs on pp.52-53 do not always match the photos, and in my copy faulty reproduction had marred p.51 and p.54. I also question an occasional caption. For instance, I doubt that other than a limited number of Australians consider the red kangaroo "the last of the Megan-fauna" (p.137). In fact in South Africa, where animals larger than kangaroos abound, the Pretoria Zoo lists the red kangaroo under "Small Mammals". And although the Pink Cockatoo "favours the seeds of native pine and acacias", I suspect that most people in central Australia have seen them feeding on paddy-melons, and they certainly love desert poplar.

All-in-all, though, I believe that the photographs are of excellent quality. Anyone who does not get beyond a browse on them will undoubtedly have enjoyed the book, and learnt something of "the natural history of Australia's desert regions".

Writing style

Most scientific books are, I suspect, increasingly difficult for the interested general reader to comprehend. Penny van Oosterzee's great strength as a writer is to make the often incomprehensible and deadily dull academic writing comprehensible and interesting. "Longitudinal dunes streamed like hair" is a lovely image, and the "land of unpredictability" a perfect sub-title for an excellent brief summary. This easy flowing style of writing cannot entirely overcome the scientific complexities, yet perhaps it is neither possible nor desirable to do so. I believe that people would generally require matriculation-level reading skills to cope easily with the writing.

Content

The author's strengths are in geology, geography and plant-life, although a wide variety of animals are also considered in varying degrees of detail.

Her use of the Finke River as illustrative of the geology of Australia's arid lands is reminiscent of the Bicentennial history's time-slice approach to history. It is wonderfully successful in some ways, yet by having such a strongly developed focus it does not allow major developments elsewhere. Sections such as "Land of unpredictability", "Oasis locked in time", and "Islands of nutrition" provide excellent summaries of key aspects. "Termites", "Lizards" and "Frogs" are also well-summarized. However, "Ice-age man" and "Birds" get very short-shrift. Similarly there are good brief discussions of the Simpson and Tanami Deserts, and the Lake Eyre Basin, but apart from a brief summary of mulga there are only four other sentences dealing with the Great Sandy Desert. The Great Victoria Desert also receives very little coverage and, much as the "Coongie Lakes Region" is well-described, the Strzelecki Desert is otherwise ignored.

These strengths and weaknesses in content probably reflect the problems of adjusting to a publisher's demands. The same might be said of the bibliography, for it is quite clear that the author has read much more widely than is indicated.

Other comments

It is a pleasure to read a book that is remarkably free of spelling errors. I only noticed six, including interchanges of “stony” and “stone”, and “coolibah” and “coolabah”. In addition, the reference to a “River of fishes” on p.157 should be clearly linked to the box reference on p.168.

The author’s easy writing style has previously been commented upon. “In Australia the old rainforests were feeling the strain” is a perfect sentence (p.28). However, now-and-again there is a minor hiccup. Thus a reference on p.136 to the “breakaway country further north” is not geographically located until p.139. And carefully worded as part of the paragraph is on p.57, speculative reference to Aborigines trading palm-tree seeds is throwing a very long and unprovable loop.

As a final thought, reference to the 1894 Horn Scientific Expedition and the book’s title, “The centre”, suggest that central Australia was the author’s initial focus - and a very worthy focus. However, the sub-title, “The natural history of Australia’s desert regions”, suggests an expanded concept, possibly with the publishers having in mind a competitive up-dating of such as Michael Morcombe’s “Australia’s living deserts” (1980). If I am correct, I think it is this “slewing” of the author’s initial intention that has created what, for me, are the reservations despite my unreserved recommendation to purchase. The book is much better value than many other books of similar price. It should appeal to Australians and overseas visitors alike.

The book is available from various bookshops.

R.G. (Dick) Kimber, Alice Springs, N.T.