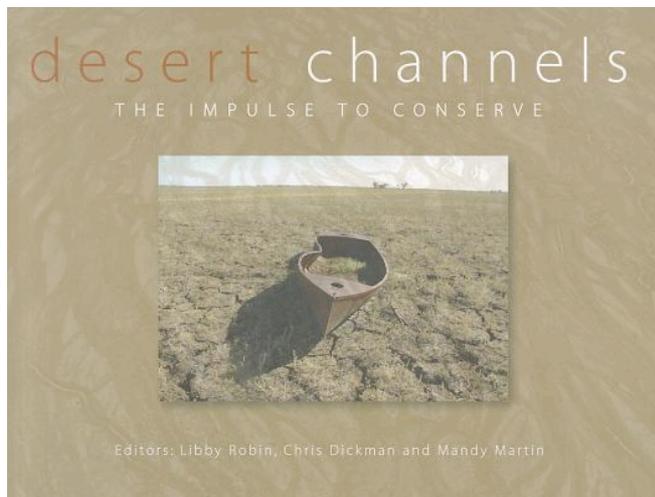


*Desert Channels: The impulse to conserve* edited by Libby Robin, Chris Dickman and Mandy Martin. Collingwood: CSIRO Publishing, 2010, pp. xxii + 330, AUD \$59.95 Hardback, ISBN: 9780643097490.



When I picked up this book, I was unsure of how to approach it. What is it? Is it a coffee-table book with lavish illustrations as the main feature, a view supported by the oblong design? Is it instead a series of memoirs of those who have lived and worked in South West Queensland, telling of their experiences of this remote part of Australia with its 14,500 people and 70,000 camels in a 500,000 km<sup>2</sup> hydrological basin draining, not to the sea, but inland? (This interpretation is reinforced by the list of 46 contributors.) Is it a polemic,

sweetened by anecdotes and illustrations, urging conservation of this unique landscape and culture? Or perhaps rather popular science and geography, with accessible accounts of the history of the landscape and the lives of its inhabitants, humans and other species? If it was trying to be all of these things, could its egalitarian eclecticism succeed in satisfying anyone?

My first skim-read was not encouraging – it is difficult to read, with the text block too wide for the type size, and with narrative chapters broken up by text boxes, not always by the author of the chapter or directly related to its theme. For someone used to reading a text from end to end, expecting the top of a page to follow from the bottom of the preceding one, the experience is, at first, disconcerting and annoying: it slows one down. On reflection, perhaps the forced disjunctions may be a useful design feature: if nothing else the interruptions emphasise the complex of viewpoints that need to be brought to bear to create an understanding of the Channel Country. Perhaps it's an age thing, with the designers presenting information in bite-sized chunks to suit the YouTube and Twitter generations? And it will probably work. Looking just at the images, both photographs and reproductions of art works made in response to the landscape, and reading the boxes will certainly give a feel for the characteristics of the region: its extreme variability from aridity to a vast shallow lake; its diverse and surprising fauna, now adapted to a boom and bust climate but which once comprised rich dinosaur populations; stories of its human inhabitants, both past and present; and of course its stark beauty.

But for an old-fashioned reader like me, the essays and the editors' top and tail provide the detail, and the interpretation, needed to understand the fascinating ecology of this landscape, so shaped by its inevitable floods and droughts, with many instances of complex features that differ from the standard accounts of physiological and behavioural adaptations to desert living. The Channel Country provides yet more examples of Australian research providing countervailing evidence to many biological generalisations. In this respect, describing puzzles that await answers is refreshing, as in popular science writing these are too often ignored and a false air of certainty provided. Another lesson from these accounts is the importance of a long view: a single research trip of a month or two will yield interesting data, but it will also mislead. While all biological communities are characterised by dynamism rather than stasis, the periodic, but irregular, inundations drive this biota in ways that theories based on studies of regions with regular seasonal changes in less extreme environments could not predict. But, as the CSIRO scientist Steve Morton points out on the enclosed CD of his

interview for Alaskan radio, from the point of view of members of species living here, most individuals will not experience a harsh life. They can complete their life cycles in a benign place, with abundant food and water. What interests us is the way that responses to the less benign periods enable the species to survive to burst into abundance when ‘good times’ return. For a biologist this raises interesting questions about the selection pressures that must be released in these good times, and the evolutionary drivers for the long-term survival of species in extremely variable environments.

In reading the engrossing biological essays on plants, invertebrates, mammals, birds, reptiles, amphibians and fish of this ‘desert’, it is easy to forget the human-focussed subtitle of the volume: ‘the impulse to conserve’. To this end, Mark Stafford Smith argues persuasively for the importance of local knowledge in interaction with detailed scientific analysis, for it is the residents, whether traditional owners or would-be pastoralists, who necessarily take the long view. This chapter is one of the best brief treatments I have seen of the role of Aboriginal knowledge in land management. Smith does not, as is so often the case, unquestioningly reify this knowledge as science, but does place experience, shared over historical time, as central to survival. For residents, this knowledge drives the imperative to conserve, for breaking the patterns of life will also make past experience less valuable as a guide for the future. In his analysis of the ‘desert syndrome’, an interacting set of drivers from inside and outside the region, he argues convincingly that desert livelihoods are always subject to the whims of distant economic forces and policy making, and that the future of the region depends on establishing the value of inland Australia in the national mind.

How well will this volume help influence the national mind? Or, in terms of my original doubt, will its heterogeneity satisfy any reader? The essays certainly have satisfied me: they are excellent examples of popularisation well-referenced to the literature and much enhanced by the illustrations, and as a set provide a nuanced view of the region. The format will probably attract many who would not pick up ‘popular science’, and even if the images and anecdotes don’t seduce them into reading any of the essays, they will get some background to political arguments around conservation.

If this title goes into a second edition, it should be enhanced by purpose-drawn maps: I could not find some key localities in the (small) maps that are included in the text. There are some inevitable infelicities and errors that have not been caught in the difficult task of editing a multi-authored volume – ferns do not have flowers – but there are few of these.

While I did not find it a physically comfortable book to read, it is one that I strongly recommend, both for its eclectic content, and also for its examples of excellent popularisation of science.

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