
The 2010 edited collection, Desert Channels: the impulse to conserve, is a stunning example of the opportunities that environmental history offers for interdisciplinary collaboration and understanding the significance of a place. Over forty contributors from diverse fields share their insights into, and passions for, the arid Desert Channels region of south-western Queensland. This landscape is ‘shaped by the arid rivers that … form a chain of ecological, cultural and historical connections across 10° of latitude’ (p.xv), connections that include stories of climatic variability, animal migratory patterns, Aboriginal trade and exchange systems, European exploration and pastoralism, and scientific inquiry. The contributors range from local Aboriginal people and pastoralists to palaeontologists and conservationists, and their stories have been woven together by the exhaustive efforts of editors Libby Robin (historian), Chris Dickman (ecologist) and Mandy Martin (artist). What could have been a chaotic miscellany is instead a colourful and meaningful tribute to a place for which the contributors feel and share the ‘impulse to conserve’.

As a desert landscape that is seemingly remote and sparsely inhabited, we might wonder what threatens the Desert Channels region. The photographs of the collection seem to suggest that the landscape is thriving. But contributors draw attention to dangers of excessive pumping from waterholes, destruction of habitat, degradation from pastoral land use, introduced species to ecological integrity, climate change, among others. Although these problems are not unique to the Channel Country, the contributors believe the historical and ongoing importance of the region warrants its conservation. In his fascinating account of writer Alice Duncan-Kemp, who documented her life in the Channel Country in the mid-twentieth century, Tom Griffiths warns his reader that ‘there is an insidious forgetting going on’ (p.40). This is a timely reminder not only about attending to the material or environmental problems of the region, but also to remember and acknowledge the past. As Iningai Custodian David A. Thompson writes, ‘There are many stories to be told – good and bad, embarrassing and inspiring – no matter what, they are stories that must be told. They are part of Australia’s history – our history’ (p.xix).

With so many contributors, the book defies categorisation: it is both travelogue and soundtrack, photograph album and field notebook, atlas and story book – certainly a departure from many other monographs in CSIRO Publishing’s catalogue. Like a musical composition, Desert Channels is structured in four parts, interspersed with artistic ‘interludes’. These interludes present Mandy Martin’s landscape studies of the region, ‘aesthetic evidence’ that is ‘part of a well-rounded environmental appreciation’ (p.163). The first section, ‘Place’, traces the human presence in the Desert Channels, for it is people that give rocks, trees and dirt the meanings that create a landscape. The reader is guided through the landscape by ecologists, historians, and creative writers. Their stories reveal how Aboriginal people, pastoralists, and scientists have experienced, understood and engaged with the land, water, flora and fauna of the region, and how these interactions have changed over time. They enliven the desert, revealing its vitality, its thriving ecosystem of interaction between ‘nature’ and humanity.
In the second and third sections, ‘Landscape’ and ‘Biodiversity’, ecologists reveal the numerous plants, animals, reptiles, amphibians, fish and insects that have inhabited, and continue to inhabit, the Desert Channels. Their existence is inextricably tied to the ‘boom and bust’ cycles of the region, the ecological pulses that awaken and silence the country. As Glenda Wardle explains, ‘Here, landscape changes on unfamiliar timescales. We see not seasons but irregular bursts of productivity interrupting long periods of dormancy’ (p.99).

The ecologists also navigate the hydrological features of the region that have inscribed the ‘channels’ on its surface, and uncover the ancient animals that remain ever-present in the landscape. Although the region may seem remote, it is not isolated from the rest of the continent or from the consequences of white settlement. Rather, the Channel Country gives birth to the notorious bushfly and locust plagues that invade southern areas, offers refuge for migratory birds, provides water to the Olympic Dam mine near Roxby Downs, and presents instructive case studies of ecological resilience.

The final section, ‘Livelihood’, returns to stories about the human presence in the region, focussing on the development of scientific interest and concerns for conservation, land rights and community, especially since the 1980s and 1990s. The diverse contributions to this section reveal the complexities of protecting human landscapes and the importance of local knowledge to understanding the desert ecology of this remote region. The scientist, the farmer, and the historians who composed this section highlight David Lowenthal’s observation that, ‘All environmental concern, if not anthropocentric, is humanly generated, voiced, and valued. Ecology’s mission is restoring not just ecosystems, but the human communities that sustain and are sustained by them’ (p.i).

As these sections attest, Desert Channels is an amazing collaborative effort, which not only bridges the disciplinary cultures of the academy but also the binaries of past and present cultures and landscapes. It is valuable because it provides a medium for the expression of those voices that are often marginalised in ‘official’ histories and reports, whether they are human or ‘natural’. After all, communication is the key to understanding the region’s past, present and future, and ‘Telling and listening are part of conservation practice’ (p.268). This superb presentation invites itself to be read at leisure, mined in depth, or simply perused for the scenery. Combined with a collection of engaging stories, its design qualities will certainly ignite the reader’s impulse to conserve not only the Channel Country but also other regions that exist on the fringes of the Australian geographical imagination.

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