

BOOK REVIEW

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Mark Stafford-Smith and Julian Cribb. *Dry Times. Blueprint for a Red Land*

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Book details

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Review

It is a treat to read an ecologically based text which not only crystallises current understanding of an environment but also uses this knowledge to offer a way forward in the face of the increasing uncertainty posed by climate change. This book is about Australia's deserts and semi-arid regions, born of the first author's lifetime experience as a 'desert' researcher. Drylands constitute 41% of the earth's surface, and are set to expand with climate change, which renders the book highly relevant outside of Australia. Australian deserts offer a harsh and unpredictable environment for their plant, animal, and human inhabitants. Yet the authors present a strong case that the manner in which these inhabitants have coped with climatic uncertainty may offer compelling lessons for other regions that may become increasingly arid under the impact of climate change. These vast areas should not be ignored - in Australia they support only three percent of the nation's population but contribute seven percent of its domestic product.

The book comprises ten chapters which are logically sequenced, and individual chapters are well organized through the use of numbered sections. The first chapter sets the scene for the book's aim of exploring how to create sustainable livelihoods for people in deserts. It captured my imagination with the parallel drawn between the constraints on desert plants and animals, and those on humans. 'Life styles' of desert biota are adapted to meet the never-ending challenge of extreme temporal variability and unpredictability in a resource-deficient landscape with small, isolated pockets of rich resources. Human enterprise in this region confronts similar constraints, and accordingly successful business strategies resemble those of successful biota, and share similar weaknesses. The remaining chapters expand on the following facets of this theme. The authors posit that innovative responses of society to threats of climate change, such as desertification and water scarcity, can be found in past and present desert practices. Aboriginal practices may lead the way. Their knowledge-based culture has ensured survival in the unpredictable desert climate for millennia. Their lament of the erosion of this culture, and thereby loss of its knowledge base to a broader society, should have global resonance. An elegant socio-ecological hypothesis on desert drivers contends that an unpredictable climate and scarce resources

(low soil fertility) result in a sparse, mobile, and patchy human population. Social uncertainty is promoted by isolation from markets and lack of control over policy or labour. Accordingly, humans have to organise and manage their communities in a completely different manner from that to which urbanites are accustomed. For livestock ranching, graziers should develop into natural resource managers who strive to meet multiple objectives (control of alien and feral organisms, biodiversity conservation, fire management) and seek to derive multiple sources of income. A sufficient competitive edge to appropriate business strategies can be realised with the aid of modern technology, networking, and alliances rather than competition. Only a strong telecommunications backbone can cope with a sparse and mobile population over a large area. Australia needs these people in remote areas but how can they ensure a settlement is sustainable? Their treatment of the 'viability debate' of small remote areas was fresh; different communities need different proportions of natural, social, human, financial, or physical capital. Most settlements are small and are based on a single type of livelihood and therefore have distinctive needs for planning and management. Primary services of energy and water require on-site technologies that are small scale and low cost; health and education services need to be mobile rather than sedentary. The soul of the book emerges in the penultimate chapter, in which a call is made for greater devolution of political authority to regional and local levels. They highlight the varied failings of governance by urbanites with no direct experience of the challenges facing people living in remote areas, whose imposed solutions for small settlements invariably result in poor service delivery. Local communities should become closely involved in defining what services they require, what they can afford, and in developing creative ways to deliver those services. This is a universal issue deserving of close attention but one also fraught with abuse. This book emanates a positive outlook to the end - the final chapter distils a set of responses for ensuring sustainable human livelihoods in the desert.

I found no major fault with this volume. It was well conceived and well executed. This is not a technical book where one might choose to dip into a few pages. The authors have articulated an holistic viewpoint which deserves to be read from cover to cover. Quality of presentation and layout facilitate this. Text reads fluidly (the second author is an accomplished science communicator). Effective use of boxes and endnotes for background detail and citations ensures that the main themes are not unnecessarily interrupted. I recommend this book to anyone with a broad interest in arid and semi-arid environments - scientists, graduate students, policy- or decision-makers, managers, and the public. It lives up to its name of providing a blueprint for the management and development of the enchanting arid lands of Australia. Hopefully others will consider its lessons for their corner of the world.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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