

desert channels



desert channels

THE IMPULSE TO CONSERVE



Edited by
Libby Robin, Christopher R. Dickman and Mandy Martin



© Text: the authors 2010
Artwork: Mandy Martin 2010

All rights reserved. Except under the conditions described in the *Australian Copyright Act 1968* and subsequent amendments, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, duplicating or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner. Contact **CSIRO PUBLISHING** for all permission requests.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Desert channels : the impulse to conserve / edited by Libby Robin, Christopher R. Dickman and Mandy Martin.

9780643097490 (hbk.)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Desert Channels Queensland.

Conservation of natural resources – Queensland, Southwest.

Natural resources management areas – Queensland, Southwest.

Watershed management – Queensland, Southwest.

Robin, Libby, 1956–

Dickman, Chris R.

Martin, Mandy, 1952–

333.73

Published exclusively in Australia and New Zealand by

CSIRO PUBLISHING

150 Oxford Street (PO Box 1139)

Collingwood VIC 3066

Australia

Telephone: +61 3 9662 7666

Local call: 1300 788 000 (Australia only)

Fax: +61 3 9662 7555

Email: publishing.sales@csiro.au

Website: www.publish.csiro.au

Front cover Boat stranded on Cooper Creek floodplain, 2009. Photo: Tom Griffiths.

Back cover Artefact on claypan. Permission: Iningai people. Photo: Angus Emmott.

Endpaper map Desert Channel region. Courtesy of Desert Channels Queensland.

Inside back cover Richard Nelson and Steve Morton, zebra finches. Encounter radio program CD.

Image on CD Richard Nelson captures sounds of the land. Photo: Mandy Martin.

Set in xxxxxx

Edited by Adrienne de Kretser – Righting Writing

Cover and text design by James Kelly

Typeset by xxxxxx xxxxxxxxxx

Index by xxxxxxxxxx

Printed in XXXXXX by xxxxxxxxxx

CSIRO PUBLISHING publishes and distributes scientific, technical and health science books, magazines and journals from Australia to a worldwide audience and conducts these activities autonomously from the research activities of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO).

The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of, and should not be attributed to, the publisher or CSIRO.

Contents

Image credits 9

List of contributors 9

Desert channels: a continental perspective 32

Libby Robin and Mike Smith

Welcome to Iningai country 32

David Thompson

PART 1: PLACE

1 Arriving in the Desert Channels country 32

Chris Dickman

2 Alice Duncan-Kemp (Pinningarra) and the history of the frontier 32

Tom Griffiths

3 Connecting with our land 32

Karen Emmott

4 Pituri country 32

Mike Letnic and Luke Keogh

INTERLUDE I

Landscape studies 2007: environmental projects and the impulse to conserve 32

Mandy Martin

PART 2: LANDSCAPE

5 The story of our land revealed through plants 32

Glenda Wardle

6 Mystery and marvel: the invertebrate animal world 32

Steve Morton

7 Channel country rivers: the pulse of life 32

Julian Reid

8 Artesian springs 32

Rod Fensham

INTERLUDE II

Landscape studies 2008: aesthetic evaluation as an environmental tool 32

Mandy Martin

PART 3: BIODIVERSITY

9 Mammals and birds: life on the move 32

Chris Dickman and Max Tischler

10 Reptiles, amphibians and fish: going with the flow 32

Chris Dickman and Mike Letnic

11 Dragons, diprotodons, dinosaurs and dust:
150 million years of desert channels prehistory 32

Scott Hocknull and Alex Cook

12 Creating a herbarium for Cravens Peak 32

Max Bourke

INTERLUDE III

Landscape studies 2009: painting in place 32

Mandy Martin

PART 4: LIVELIHOOD

13 Conserving desert Australian livelihoods 32

Mark Stafford Smith

14 The forum is a campfire, the river is a story 32

Luke Keogh

15 Production lands, philanthropy and biodiversity 32

Guy Fitzhardinge

16 Conservation science: here and beyond 32

Libby Robin

INTERLUDE IV

Listening to the land: encounter documentary of zebra finches
at Oceans Bore (CD, at back of book) 32

Richard Nelson and Steve Morton

Further reading 9

Index 9



- ▮ Guy Fitzhardinge (left) and Richard Nelson, Cravens Peak Reserve, 2008. Photo: Angus Emmott.
- ▮ Libby Robin and Guy Fitzhardinge, S-Bend Mulligan River, Cravens Peak Reserve, 2009. Photo: Mandy Martin.
- ▮ Steve Morton, S-Bend Mulligan River, Cravens Peak Reserve, 2009. Photo: Tom Griffiths.
- ▮ Tom Griffiths, Ethabuka Spring, 2009. Photo: Libby Robin.

List of contributors



Faye Alexander is a ceramic artist and sculptor based in Alice Springs.



Max Bourke AM has worked in science, agriculture and the arts. He has had a life-long interest in conservation and is a board member of the Nature Conservancy (Aust.) and the Thomas Foundation.



Christine Campbell lives on Norwood Station at Blackall where she combines involvement in the family cattle- and goat-grazing business with a passion for the recording and preservation of Aboriginal and colonial heritage.



Simon Campbell is a grazier from Blackall, with a wide range of interests and experience in national agripolitical representation and agricultural research and development strategy and planning.



Alex G. Cook is a palaeontologist and geologist who is a senior curator at the Queensland Museum. His work has taken him all over the Great Artesian Basin.



Glenn R. Cooke is Research Curator, Queensland Heritage, in the Australian Art Department at the Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane. He has a particular interest in cross-cultural influences.



Stuart Cowell is Manager of Conservation Partnerships with Bush Heritage Australia. Inspired by many people involved in the Desert Channels and by the landscape itself, he has actively promoted collaborative approaches to landscape management for conservation outcomes.



Chris Dickman is Professor in Terrestrial Ecology at the University of Sydney and author (with artist Rosemary Woodford Ganf) of *A Fragile Balance: The Extraordinary Story of Australia's Marsupials* (2007). He has been researching the ecology of the Desert Channels region for 20 years.



Alice Duncan-Kemp was brought up on Mooraberrie station at the heart of the Desert Channels region in the early years of the 20th century. Her four major literary works on the region document traditional Aboriginal and pastoral understandings of country, and record natural history observations that remain valuable to conservation biology a century after they were written.



Hope Ebsworth is the Indigenous Cooper's Creek representative at Desert Channels Queensland. His country is around Durham Downs on the lower Cooper. He is the author of *Bury Me at Tartulla Hill* (2009).



David and Judy Elliott are founders of the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum and have co-ordinated dinosaur digs in the Winton district since 2002. Since 2006 they have hosted a dinosaur fossil conservation facility on their property. David and Judy publish an award-winning Australian natural history journal. In 2006 they were the Australian Geographic Society 'Conservationists of the Year'.



Anke Frank is a PhD student in the Desert Ecology Research Group at the University of Sydney, interested in the effects of grazing on natural systems.



Angus Emmott is a keen photographer, natural historian and grazier. His family has lived at Noonbah, a pastoral property near Longreach, for four generations. His latest book (with Steve Wilson) is *Snakes of Western Queensland: A Field Guide* (2009).



Tom Griffiths is a historian at the Centre for Environmental History, Australian National University. His books include *Slicing the Silence: Voyaging to Antarctica* (2007).



Karen Emmott lives at Noonbah, near Longreach. Her interests include creative writing, rural health issues and conservation, as well as the family cattle-grazing business.



Adele Haythornthwaite is an honorary researcher in the Institute of Wildlife Research at the University of Sydney. She has been part of the 'ratcatching' team for the past few years.



Rod Fensham researches the ecology and conservation of native vegetation, with a strong focus on the arid lands of Queensland.



Scott Hocknull is Curator, Palaeontology and Geology Geosciences, at the Queensland Museum. He is one of the state's greatest dinosaur enthusiasts and has co-authored several children's books on Australian dinosaurs. He is using palaeontological findings for research on climate change.



Guy Fitzhardinge is Deputy Chair of Desert Channels Queensland. He is a beef producer with a strong interest in conservation.



Luke Keogh is a historian working on the Queensland Historical Atlas. His PhD studies at the University of Queensland include a detailed study of the natural resource, pituri.



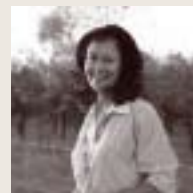
Leanne Kohler is Chief Executive Officer, Desert Channels Queensland, in Longreach.



Mandy Martin is an artist and Adjunct Professor at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University. She is co-author (with Jane Carruthers, Guy Fitzhardinge, Tom Griffiths and Peter Haynes) of *Inflows: The Channel Country* (2001).



Mike Letnic is an ecologist at the University of Western Sydney, and has been 'ratcatching' for more than a decade.



Jenny Milson is a pasture scientist based in western Queensland, where her family has lived and worked for four generations. She is the author of several books on plant identification and has a passion for working with land managers to achieve balance between productivity and environmental health.



Darrell Lewis is based at the Centre for Historical Research, National Museum of Australia. He is a historian whose research focuses on exploration and early settlement of the outback. His books include *A Wild History* (2010).



Bob Morrish trained as a research scientist in agriculture and now manages his own pastoral station in south-western Queensland. He was one of the active pastoralist-conservationists in the Currareeva Dispute.



George Main is an environmental historian and curator at the National Museum of Australia, Canberra, and author of *Heartland: The Regeneration of Rural Place* (2005).



Steve Morton is an ecologist who serves on the CSIRO Executive.



Nicola Markus is Chief Conservation Officer for Bush Heritage Australia and author of *On Our Watch: The Race to Save Australia's Environment* (2009). She previously worked as a senior manager for WWF Australia.



Richard Nelson is an anthropologist, writer and radio producer living in Sitka, Alaska, and periodically in Australia.



Tony Popic is a PhD student in the Desert Ecology Research Group, University of Sydney, researching the interactions between plants and animals.



Bruce Scott is Mayor of Barcoo Shire and Chair of the Remote Area Planning and Development Board, incorporating the Central Western Regional Organisation of Councils. His family has been involved in the pastoral industry around Windorah since the 19th century.



Jim Puckridge was a major arid-zone scientist who worked on the ecology of the Coongie Lakes region. He also wrote poetry.



Maureen Scott lives and works at Moothandella, a pastoral property near Windorah. She has a particular interest in conservation initiatives for the property.



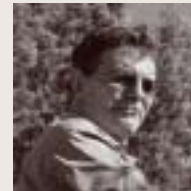
Julian Reid has been researching ecology in the Channel Country and adjacent deserts for more than two decades and is a PhD student at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University.



Jenny Silcock lives and works in western Queensland. Her recent research includes a major survey of natural waterbodies in the region.



Libby Robin is an environmental historian at the Australian National University and the National Museum of Australia. She is author of *How a Continent Created a Nation* (2007) and co-editor (with Rob Heinsohn and Leo Joseph) of *Boom and Bust: Bird Stories for a Dry Country* (2009).



Mike Smith, an archaeologist, is Senior Research Fellow at the National Museum of Australia and Adjunct Professor at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australian National University.

Mark Stafford Smith is Science Director for CSIRO's Climate Adaptation Flagship. He also has a smaller role leading the Science of Desert Living project with Desert Knowledge CRC.



Don Rowlands is a Wangkangurru elder who guided people through the Thutirla Pula story at the 'Traditional Owners' Forum in May 2009. Don has the added advantage of managing his traditional lands as a Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service ranger.



David Taylor is an independent director on the Macquarie Pastoral boards. He owns and operates a Cessna 210 and uses a Canon 40D camera.



David Thompson was born and raised in Barcaldine and is a proud custodian of Iningai traditional country. He has worked for Landcare and the Indigenous program for Desert Channels Queensland, and is currently an Indigenous Land Management Facilitator with the Australian government.



Max Tischler is a specialist bird researcher who is part of the Bush Heritage ecology team, based at the reserves of Cravens Peak and Ethabuka in the Simpson Desert.



Glenda Wardle is an ecologist based in the Institute of Wildlife Research at the University of Sydney. Her work on ecological and evolutionary processes combines experimental and field-based studies of native Australian plants in the Desert Channels region and elsewhere.



Alan Williams is undertaking a PhD in archaeology at the Fenner School of Environment and Society, Australia National University. He is a senior archaeologist at Archaeological and Heritage Management Solutions Pty Ltd.



Steve Wilson is Regional Co-ordinator at Desert Channels Queensland Regional Natural Resource Management Group. He is based in Longreach, western Queensland.

Image credits

We would like to thank all the photographers, artists and cartographers who provided the images that are fundamental to this work. Each is acknowledged with the individual images.

All Aboriginal images have been approved for publication with Aboriginal owners and with copyright owners, where applicable. We are grateful to the following owners (in alphabetical order) for permission to reproduce historical and contemporary material in the *Desert Channels* project and book: Jan Cruikshank (Watson family collection); Angus and Karen Emmott (Emmott family collection); Evelyn Hart (Reg Hart collection); Darrell Lewis (personal historical photographs collection); Jo Rodgers and the Pitta Pitta (Dajarra) families, David Thompson and the Iningai custodial families.

We would also like to thank the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland, the Queensland Museum, the Australian Age of Dinosaurs Museum, the Australian Stockmen's Hall of Fame at Longreach, Aussie Outback Publishing, Keeaira Press, *Toowoomba Chronicle*, Royal Historical Society of Queensland, Queensland Art Gallery and the National Library of Australia for images and for the help of their staff in preparing reproductions. Desert Channels Queensland, through the organisation of Steve Wilson, has also been a major source of images, including cartography and photographic material. Thanks to David Roshier for photographs of birds in regional floods over many years.

Other archival photography: Darrell Lewis and Luke Keogh.

Art photography

David Paterson for Mandy Martin paintings.

Mike Gillam for Faye Alexander sculptures.

Guy Fitzhardinge for Mandy Martin Mooraberrie sketches.



Prologue

LIBBY ROBIN AND MIKE SMITH

Desert Channels: A Continental Perspective

This is a book about the impulse to conserve. In a time of rapid global change, it considers what we want to conserve in our landscapes, our communities and our lives. The Desert Channels region is at the heart of this book, but we offer more than just a history and natural history of a large arid region in south-western Queensland. Conservation demands that we assess what we value about a place – its biodiversity, its human history, its resources, its community. Each of these defines the edges of the ‘place’ differently.

The Desert Channels are the north-eastern reaches of the great arid zone that extends over 70% of the Australian continent. In this context, the region is the part of the Australian arid zone where all desert rivers rise before draining away towards the great depression of Lake Eyre. From a continental perspective, the deserts of Australia are ecologically driven by fire in the west and water in the east. The braided channels of our region create that difference. In the western shield, there are no rivers or big flood-outs. Waterholes are patchy and more ephemeral than in the east, where irregular but large and dramatic floods make for richer ecological resources. Grasses, trees, animals and people of the desert all depend on floods in the east. Plants and animals are not conscious of political borders (except where they are fenced). And for tens of thousands of years before British settlement, the national boundaries within continental Australia were defined very differently by Aboriginal groups. Sometimes political boundaries can be cruelly inappropriate. When the Simpson Desert peoples came together to make a native title claim in the 1990s, many people met their relatives for the first time. The Aboriginal welfare systems of Queensland and the Northern Territory were so different that families had been separated for generations: they had lost touch with each other and with the country on either side of a border that had no meaning for their traditional culture.¹

Pastoralists also had a view beyond borders. European settlers such as Sidney Kidman did not immediately take up permanent settlement; rather, they treated this region as part of the Mitchell grasslands stock-droving trail from New

Business signs in Simpson Desert. Photo: Angus Emmott.

Isolated road warning, Diamantina Shire. Photo: Richard Nelson.

No through road warning, Diamantina Shire. Photo: Richard Nelson.

‘Hilton Hotel’, Middleton, Boulia to Winton Rd. Photo: Tom Griffiths.

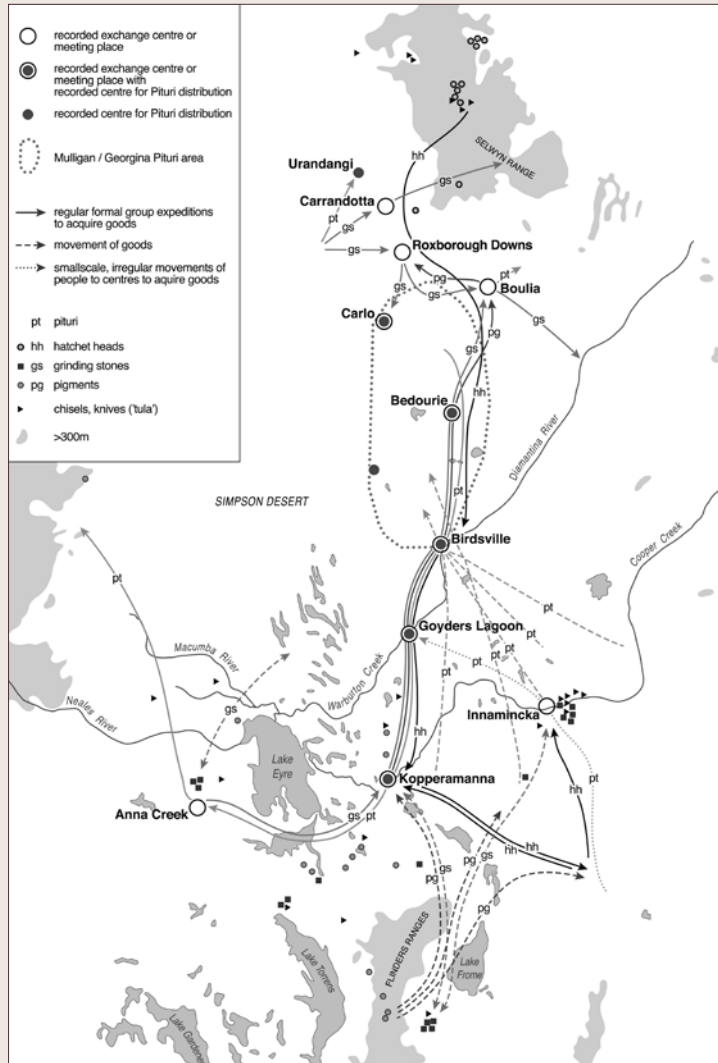
South Wales to the Kimberley. As the water ran out they moved the stock on, leaving the grasslands to recover behind them – water, not grass, was the limiting factor. Young Sidney Kidman and the Durack family, the ‘Kings of Grass Castles’, as Mary Durack famously called them, realised that the unpredictable climate of outback New South Wales could be complemented by pastures grown in the monsoonal north, a different climatic system entirely. They moved cattle northwards into the channel country, then into the Mitchell grass downs of the Northern Territory and beyond. Each time, the stock was moved on before the pasture ran out. The decision to move on and rest the country behind was a key to their success, but it only worked because of the continental scope of the operation.

Most of the Desert Channels region is in Queensland, so that state’s land tenure systems have shaped its land use patterns for the past century and a half. It is now mostly pastoral leasehold and freehold country. There has been little crown land historically reserved as nature reserves or national parks – this was country that could carry stock, and development in the late 19th and early 20th centuries favoured that use. In the era when European explorers and settlers arrived with their stock, there was little interest in the conservation of desert lands for other purposes. Even by the 1930s, when Queensland had developed an active interest in national parks and had one of the first and most active National Parks Associations in Australia, the focus was on forested temperate lands, especially those that were close to Brisbane and perceived as ‘threatened’. The early Queensland National Parks Association did not consider remote outback country as either threatened or in need of conservation.

Queensland is not alone in having its state headquarters in a major city on the seaboard. All the Australian colonies made their intercolonial and imperial connections by sea, and chose their centres in good harbours. In the 21st century, international connections are by air, but major airports are still all on the coast. The desert is, in a sense, the backyard of every mainland state.² Within the big state of Queensland, the Desert Channels region is very remote from its administrative centre: Brisbane is closer to Sydney than to Longreach, and closer to Melbourne than to Bedourie. Sometimes the long roads to Brisbane are physically cut by floods. The Desert Channels region, far from the state political headquarters, has learned to make decisions for itself.

Pause for a moment and ask: what makes the desert channels region distinctive? Clearly, it is not just the presence of river systems in the desert; ephemeral rivers occur in other parts of the arid zone. It cannot simply be the striking contrast of channels and floodplains juxtaposed with immense dune fields; this can be found in other areas. Nor is it high environmental variability – the ‘boom and bust’ character of the climate and the country – as this is shared with other Australian deserts. All these are important elements in the character of the region, but for its most distinctive elements we need to look elsewhere.

First, there is the immense scale of the river systems. The catchments of the Georgina, Diamantina, Thomson and Barcoo Rivers begin in northern Australia and extend for more than 1000 km into central and south-eastern Australia. They feed



Map: Clive Hillaker (after Isabel McBryde).

floodwaters from monsoonal Australia into Lake Eyre, in effect making this playa lake operate as a gigantic continental rain gauge. Second, the issue of flows is important. The dynamics of the slow movement of floodwater into the heart of the continent, through a variety of sumps and storages, adds another layer of environmental variability beyond that due to fluctuations in local rainfall. Last, these long channels give the country a distinctive grain – sometimes linear, sometimes reticulate – that is more developed than in other Australian deserts.

There is an old idea that the structure of a landscape affects not just the ecology of a region but also its historical geography. The French *Annaliste* historians called it *la long durée*, emphasising that long-term historical structures provided an element of continuity across the various histories of a region, contrasting with the ruptures, discontinuities and nervous ripples of more recent events. In the case of the desert channels region, these deeper structures are provided by the arid rivers that create a broad corridor along the eastern margin of the arid zone. They form a chain of ecological, cultural and historical connections across 10° of latitude, a vast swathe across the interior of the Australian landmass.

We can see this structure in the geography of Aboriginal trade and exchange systems in the Lake Eyre basin. The archaeologist John Mulvaney popularised the phrase ‘the chain of connection’ to describe the exchange of goods, ideas and ceremonies in Aboriginal Australia. He pointed out that the distances travelled by groups or individuals for these exchanges were greater in the Carpentaria-Lake Eyre region than in most other parts of the arid zone. At 400–480 km, these were some of the longest ‘chains of connection’ in arid Australia (and probably the world).³ Isabel McBryde developed this line of research. She showed that stone axes, red ochre, millstones and pituri were all moved in a broad corridor along the inland river systems, connecting the Mt Isa region in the north with the Flinders Ranges in the south.⁴ We know almost nothing about the antiquity and history of the exchange systems. Radiocarbon dating shows that the Innamincka grindstone quarries were operating by 1700 yrs BP (i.e. by about 250 AD, just as the Roman Empire was beginning to decline). But the Mt Isa axes and Pukardu red ochre have so far not been found in archaeological contexts where they can be dated.

McBryde developed a map of exchange networks in the Lake Eyre basin to show their considerable geographic extent.⁵ The inland river systems channelled trade and exchange into a corridor, creating a critical mass of intergroup exchange that is probably unique in the desert.

In this picture, one commodity – the psychoactive drug pituri – is the most enigmatic. It is archaeologically invisible and likely to remain so. Although the drug was widely distributed, we know little of its importance in the exchange systems. But pituri is lodged firmly in the European imagination. In many ways, the idea of pituri and its exchange throughout the desert channels region is a contemporary *leitmotiff* for the chain of connections the channels create in this striking desert landscape.

In a book about conservation there is a particular reason to think about the region's natural and cultural distinctiveness. There is also an imperative to think on a continental scale, as many of the people concerned about the conservation of this region come from beyond it. National and international organisations have recognised the unique importance of the Desert Channels region in the megadiverse continent of Australia. They have also recognised the crucial role for partnerships between the people on the ground, governments and private conservation organisations in achieving national and international conservation aspirations. This book documents a grand historical experiment that brings together landholders (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous), governments and philanthropic conservation on a scale unseen before in Australia. It is a crucial experiment that cannot afford to fail, as climate change and global expansion put unpredictable pressures on this region that drives so much of the ecological functioning of the Australian continent.

In the tradition of partnerships, the contributors in this book come from diverse backgrounds. Some of us have lived for many generations in the region and are making livelihoods alongside conservation goals. Some are specialist scientists whose personal experience of this country dates back decades. All of us share an impulse to conserve, and a commitment to maintaining things we value in a time of rapid change. What do we want to conserve? Everyone has a slightly different motivation and a different vision for conservation aspirations. We write, we offer artistic evaluations, historical, ecological and archaeological context and a concern about endangered species. Biodiversity conservation has been the major motivation for groups working on continental and global scales; the conservation of communities and their livelihoods is crucial for those living in the region. There are also concerns about cultural heritage, Aboriginal and settler places of importance, and the conservation of natural resources such as groundwater and pasture. Conserving a community is good for biodiversity, and respecting cultural heritage does not mean losing natural diversity. Working together across the visions for conservation is essential for all of them.

The contributors would like to thank all our institutional partners for making this book possible through financial and in-kind support. These include the Australian Research Council (DP0665034; DP0452475; DP0773754; DP0988535), the Australian National University, the University of Sydney (particularly the Institute for Sustainable Solutions Seeding grant L0433R5575), Desert Channels Queensland, the Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD), incorporating Central Western Regional Organisation of Councils, Bush Heritage Australia, Thring Pastoral Company and the National Museum of Australia.

Endnotes

- 1 Deborah Bird Rose, anthropologist in Simpson Desert native title claim, *pers. comm.* 2006.
- 2 Mark Stafford Smith (2008) Rangelands. In David Lindenmayer, Stephen Dovers, Molly Harriss Olson and Steve Morton (eds), *Ten Commitments: Reshaping the Lucky Country's Environment*. Melbourne: CSIRO Publishing.
- 3 D.J. Mulvaney (1976) The chain of connection: the material evidence. In N. Peterson (ed.), *Tribes and Boundaries in Australia*. Canberra: AIAS Humanities Press, pp. 72–94.
- 4 Isabel McBryde (1987) Goods from another country: exchange networks and the peoples of the Lake Eyre basin. In D.J. Mulvaney and J.P. White (eds), *Australians to 1788*. Sydney: Fairfax, Syme and Weldon, pp. 252–273.
- 5 McBryde (1987), map, p. 260.



Welcome to Iningai Country

The Iningai are a nation of family groups that have lived in central western Queensland for the past 60 000 years. We travelled and lived off the land using years of experience and observation to ensure Mother Earth always sustained and nourished us. Our land ranges from the beautiful desert uplands to the east, to the open Mitchell grass downs to the west.

Iningai country expands from between Lake Buchanan across the headwaters of the Vergemont Creek down to the Stonehenge jump-up country and across to where the Barcoo and Thomson rivers meet. Iningai country then follows the Barcoo River to its headwaters around Mt Enniskillen, then follows the Great Dividing Range back to Lake Buchanan.

Settler records identify many meetings with the Iningai people in the early days of white men's colonisation of this wonderful country. Some meetings between parties were extremely friendly and led to the forging of long family friendships extending across many generations. One settler moving to this area found lush grass as high as a horse. In his memoirs he mentioned the natives and how he took particular care to befriend them as he could see they had a vast knowledge of this rich landscape.

There are, however, just as many, if not more, facts and stories of conflict between the Iningai and the white pioneers. For many years in the mid 1800s this region was a lawless society and on many occasions Iningai people became victims of the lawlessness. Murder, rape, hatred and desperation were inflicted on both sides. Unfortunately the Iningai were at a disadvantage – they did not have the 'thundersticks' and horses that proved a great advantage in the conflict. The Iningai fought bravely, but were outnumbered and outgunned. After the conflict, the remaining Iningai were displaced from their traditional country and removed to missions, never to be heard from again – or so it was thought.

Today there are three custodian families of Iningai country, who proudly care for this country on behalf of the Iningai traditional owners. It is these custodian families who never let the memory of the Iningai be forgotten and who continually work to find descendants of this strong people to welcome them back to country. 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.

► Fish-net art.

▼ Hand stencil art.

▲ Stencil art.

▲ Stencil art with nests.

Permission: David Thompson and Iningai people.
Photos: Steve Wilson.

David A. Thompson

Iningai Custodian