

Some Hints on the

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Care & Management

Of Our

West Australian

Bush and Forest



By
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CARE AND MANAGEMENT of W.A. BUSHLAND.

If asked to give my reasons for writing some hints on the care and management of our West Australian bush and forest I would say, without hesitation, the present shocking condition of our remaining uncleared areas. A second good reason is because most of the damage has been done during my life time and I know just what has caused a big percentage of it. The cause of our present unsatisfactory set up cannot be attributed to any one aspect of over all conservation—so, we ask ourselves, where have we gone wrong? Are we doing something we shouldn't? or is there something we are omitting to do?

I hope to be able to supply some of the answers. Someone once said history is the same thing happening over and over again only to different people. Anyway, let us look at a bit of past history.

There had been little damage to our bush and forest or general environment till the start of this century. By 1920 trouble was on the way mainly due to the introduction of the fox and rabbit. With vast acreages of bushland little damage was noticeable to the casual observer till about the 1940's. During the period between 1920 and 1940 the rabbit and fox reached plague proportions in many districts. About this time red tape and bulldozers put in an appearance. The red tape was mainly in connection with fire control. It was thought by many people—including some connected with National Parks and Forestry that fire should be kept out of our bush and forest. This view was shared by many farmers and graziers. Fear of fire resulted in many regulations and restrictions in connection with the lighting of fires. The result was insufficient burning at the right time of the year in our bush country. The disastrous Dwellingup fire which virtually destroyed the town was the result of poor management of the bush in that area, probably mainly brought about by the war which meant a shortage of man power.

About the mid forties the bulldozers came into their own as a means of clearing vast areas in a short space of time. These large areas were pastured and subsequently stocked at a heavier rate than hitherto thought possible. The twenty year period between nineteen forty five and nineteen sixty five will, in my opinion, go down in history as the period when the greatest amount of devastation occurred in the shortest time in our bush and forest. Probably more than for the previous hundred years or so. Much more damage was done than most folk today realize. There is still big trouble ahead as it will be another fifty years before we feel the full impact of our folly during the twenty year period I have just mentioned.

By the end of this century our creeks, rivers and other waterways will be well and truly brackish and salty and our limited areas of bushland will have diminished even further. By this time even the most complacent person will have realized all is not well—but too late.

In these modern days people are reluctant to use old-fashioned ideas, and prefer to use present day technique, which they consider superior. There is, however, one aspect of our environment that still requires old-fashioned treatment—I refer to the care of our bush and forest country. It took thousands of years to bring our vast areas of bushland to the condition it was in when the white man arrived. We would be well advised to get back to using the same treatment—where possible—as nature used for thousands of years, particularly in regard to burning bush and forest. A few years ago I wrote and published at my own expense (\$500.00) a booklet titled "The Kiss of Life". In this booklet I advocated Autumn burning and the fencing of bush away from domestic stock, along with several other suggestions. In my opinion these points are essential for the well-being of our bush and forest. There is, of course, damage to our wild life and environment from many causes. Domestic cats gone bush, foxes and rabbits, just to mention a few, and in our efforts to eradicate some of these pests we destroy the habitat of much of our wild life. 1080 rabbit poison and many of our present day insecticides used in the fields are responsible for damage to our insect, bird and animal life, just how much damage is very hard for the average person to ascertain.

I, personally, do not specialize in any one aspect of conservation. I feel this is where we have fallen down in the past with our piecemeal approach to the problem. If I lean toward one particular aspect of conservation it would be keeping the bushland or habitat healthy. It's useless to be able to identify and name animals, birds or plant life if you are going to neglect to maintain bush country in a healthy state. I am quite convinced that healthy bush and forest with adequate fresh water available at strategic points, will be teeming with wild life. Some species may even have to be thinned out to help nature keep a good balance. Twenty five or thirty years ago our weekly country paper "The Western Mail" ran a mutual help column, ideas and hints were contributed by readers, usually with plenty of practical experience. The man who ran the section used the pen name 'Martingale'. In passing I would mention that much useful information was gained, especially by farmers and primary producers, from this column. The point I wish to make is this—Martingale once wrote an article on the eradication of rabbits and used an expression that I still remember, "Aim at the rabbit and you miss him—Aim at his cover and you hit him". I think this is the crux of our conservation problems—its the cover or habitat—or lack of it, where we continue to fall down.

Firstly I will touch on National Parks, reserves and bush land under the control of government departments and shire councils. There is in my opinion no happy medium regarding controlled burning. Many of our parks and reserves are only burned by accident, or, in the case of reserves, by fire brigades to eliminate a fire hazard. Forestry departments do a terrific job from a point of view of eliminating fire hazards but to my mind they miss out on the most vital point—the time of the year. Nature would have done her burning—or 90% of it—between the end of November and the end of April, whereas forestry do most of their controlled burning during spring which is against all laws of nature and could be one of the reasons why "die back" in our jarrah forest is spreading at a rather alarming rate.

Another aspect of conservation that is in a shocking condition, and one overlooked by most conservationists and the public in general, is privately owned bush. Thousands of acres of this bush on grazing and farm lands is slowly deteriorating and on the way out. Even if immediate action were taken little improvement would be seen for fifteen to twenty years. Without this bush I have just mentioned national parks and reserves cannot play their full part in overall conservation. In my humble opinion this privately owned bush is going to be our downfall. The majority of folk think that these hundreds of areas one sees from our country highways and roads are healthy bush. This is not so—50% is already ruined and the remainder deteriorates more each year due to damage by domestic stock. In most instances the carpet of small and medium sized scrub and vegetation has disappeared. This lower vegetation is vitally necessary for much of our smaller animal and bird life to survive—also to help against water and wind erosion and the pollution of creeks, water courses, rivers etc. The disappearance of this lower vegetation is the first sign of mismanagement. As time progresses the trees are ringbarked and killed by domestic stock, which also destroy seedling as they germinate, by either eating them, or trampling them underfoot.

When pasture adjacent to bush is heavily stocked a thousand years of nature's work can be ruined in from three to five years. In most cases the destruction is slow and few people realize that it is happening. Conservationists all over Australia would do well to press for cheap fencing material to be made available, if farmers and graziers would co-operate and fence some of these areas. In a nutshell conservationists are jumping around and are very upset by pollution from mining and heavy industry but have failed to see a much greater disaster happening right under their noses.

Many of our reserves and national parks need water points, such as dams, to compensate for those water holes now outside the perimeter of parks or others that have turned salty. The fact that our

wild life has to move across cleared territory to procure water leaves them wide open to destruction, they become an easy target for predators, motor vehicles, shooters, etc. Reserves and parks need to be self supporting. The usual excuse is lack of funds. The longer many of these much-needed necessities such as water, fencing and controlled burning are left unattended to, the greater our conservation problems become.

The main reason why we need to be more cautious in the future than in the past is because we have done enough damage in the last thirty years to last for several hundred years. Much of our larger plant life takes a hundred years or more to reach maturity, which means it takes a long time to catch up lost leeway. If combustion engines, or waste from a factory, or some insecticide is causing pollution and the need be urgent, pollution could be stopped almost immediately. Not so pollution caused by lack of vegetation. Where too much clearing has been done it could easily be fifty to one hundred years after corrective treatment before much improvement was noticeable. So far I have touched fairly briefly on many aspects of conservation. I will endeavour to elaborate a little more on the major points. Snap judgements can be very misleading when dealing with nature and the bush, people must realize that there are cycles from less than one year to at least one hundred years. A certain area of bush country might look to have changed entirely after a run of abnormally dry or wet years, or as a result of fire, yet it probably was at the same stage perhaps ten, fifteen or twenty years earlier, and will keep on changing as time goes on and may not look the same again for twenty or thirty years. This is why it is very necessary to live by, or at least keep returning to, an area for forty or fifty years to be able to get much idea of what is really happening.

I read in my newspaper and heard on T.V. about the devastation at Bluff Knoll in the Stirling Ranges, after a few hundred acres had been accidentally burned. From my long association with the bush I would say the area referred to would have looked the same, or worse, at least on forty occasions during the last thousand years. How do I know this? mainly keeping my eyes and ears open over the last fifty five years, and from information passed on to me by my father, grandfather and great grandfather, along with quite a bit gained from my association with old bushmen.

A few hundred years ago if an area of bush or forest was burned there were no conservationists rushing around passing judgement on something they knew very little about. Folk haven't much imagination when they consider that wattle, hakea, or some other similar plant is going to choke out everything else. The same thing has happened down the ages for umpteen years. I doubt if the seed of these plants has been waiting since the days of the ark, ready to spring into life when an area is burned. Most areas that present day

folk consider ruined by fire are already on the way out due to animal manures, superphosphates and domestic grasses. Once grasses get onto road verges and small reserves regular burning merely hastens their destruction, this applies mainly to the smaller vegetation. Finally even the trees and medium vegetation will disappear completely unless replanted by man.

This is where man is so destructive, most of his activities associated with stock and grazing result in no seedlings being able to survive. I personally consider this our major downfall. If insufficient young are being produced to replace those lost by natural causes then the management of the area is at fault. Conservation today has reached a stage where we can't maintain the existing animal and plant life, let alone produce more. If you burnt an area of virgin bush as often as you could for fifty years it would still recover and suffer no permanent damage. If you grazed domestic stock on bush that was never burnt for twenty or thirty years, this area would suffer little damage—but use fire and domestic stock together and the damage is greater. Use fire and domestic stock in conjunction with improved pasture and bush and it's dynamite. The carrying capacity of the pasture enables vast numbers of stock to be grazed on small areas with disastrous results. I have seen healthy bush ruined in three to five years when left in the same paddock as improved pastures.

One must realize that nature is often cruel, fire and predators of various kinds kill trees, animals, birds and insects. If every tree or plant that germinated lived, and every bird and insect that was born survived, one would scarcely be able to move. I have seen a pair of duck with twenty young ones—also fifty seedlings pop up where one tree had fallen—with nature it is the survival of the fittest. One should never shed tears for what is lost, it is what we have left that really matters. Lightning is, and has been for thousands of years, nature's way of lighting fires in our bush and forest. When man extinguishes these fires and fails to re-light at a less dangerous time, or burns bush at a time when nature intended that no burning should be done, then we have trouble. Down the years I have made a careful study of lightning strikes, and from my observations nature would have done 95% of her burning between the beginning of December and the end of April, in the lower portion of this state (W.A.). With our present day island type parks and reserves we leave ourselves wide open to a complete burn out unless we control burn. In the interests of safety and conservation this burning should be done mainly in the autumn. If a park or reserve is all burned at the one time cover and food for animals and birds etc. is reduced so much that much of the wild life is lost. I have known people to burn bush in winter time so as not to hurt it. Actually more damage is done in winter than a much hotter fire would have done several months earlier. It is also possible to burn insufficient acreage. Small patches of burnt country can be eaten

bare by the wild life moving in in great numbers from the unburnt areas. This is why an experienced person should be in charge of bush country. Experience has taught bushmen to know when and how, and what is probably more important,—why. In days gone by if a million acres of bush was burnt at the one time some wild life managed to escape and they moved back when the burned area had greened up. Also when a fire burns unchecked for weeks that portion that burns during the nights and cooler period has patches left unburnt, or barely touched. To put it briefly, in the early days there were always some safety zones—many of what used to be safety zones are now on adjacent farming property and have long since been cleared and ruined by domestic stock. A thousand years ago the bush managed itself—today we have much less acreage and it requires much more skilful management. Take for instance our Stirling National Park some 280,000 acres. Three years ago this park could have been completely burned out in two days, with possible loss of life, had a fire started during the hot summer months. I maintain that if an area of bush in excess of five hundred acres can be completely burnt out by one fire there is something radically wrong with the management. To a person with little or no experience with fire all sorts of what appear to be obstacles loom large and cloud the real issue. Folk afraid of fire, see every fire as a dangerous one and become so cautious that they often live with virtually a powder keg at their back door. There are dozens of these people living on the land, and some in various jobs associated with national parks and bush fire control. When a person with no practical experience of fire is in charge of large areas of bush or forest this lack of experience can be a major stumbling block to conservation. The modern trend to use and depend on ploughed and graded fire breaks is ridiculous. The bush doesn't have to be burnt in natty little squares or to any particular pattern. One selects the most suitable time of the year which is usually when the pasture in the paddocks won't burn, preferably after the opening rain, or when adjacent paddocks have been well eaten out you then select a suitable day, one with the wind about to move around to the south (in most cases) with showers developing. The main point is to only burn when surrounding farmland is quite safe, this could vary by three months in extreme cases. Another good idea is to do more burning when the conditions are suitable, rather than set a rigid yearly programme. For instance a year with plenty of thunderstorm activity, particularly if odd fires have been started by lightning, everything else being equal, that is the year to burn. If you haven't any safety zones in the area to be burnt, the sooner you get some the better. Rest assured the longer one puts off burning the greater the risk one runs of complete annihilation. One good man should be able to control an area the size of the Stirling Ranges without fire breaks or fire fighting equipment, just using existing roads. The more fire breaks that are

ploughed or graded the sooner the bush will be ruined. Its not fire that runs bush—it is man.

My remarks regarding burning will be brushed aside by many as over simplifying a gigantic problem. There is no problem except red tape. The imaginary problems and obstacles appear to be there because the folk who see them don't know any better. Take farming and primary production today—lousy with farm advisers and experts and in the worst position it has ever been in. The same applies to flora and fauna conservation. Plenty of theory and talk but insufficient practical experience used.

The great need today is to get folk with years of practical experience into positions where they can implement ideas that are known to be sound. We must be very careful when employing overseas experts to manage our National Parks and bush country that we don't lose twenty five to fifty vital years while they experiment and find out what is already known by many Australian bushmen. The tendency today is to think that people who have lived a lifetime in the Australian bush know little or nothing—while the expert from overseas is a full bottle.

Many of Australia's present day problems have been brought about by blindly following some overseas country. With Australian conservation this won't work. The vastness of our country with its wide variation of vegetation and climatic conditions make it impossible to lay down any set rule regarding management of bush and forest. An expert in any field should be a jump ahead of trouble and only practical experience tells one in what form and which direction that trouble may come from.

We have many folk who can identify plant, animal and insect species and people who can grow and breed these plants and animals in captivity. They do much to help educate the general public regarding many aspects of conservation but achieve little without the know how of bush or habitat management. I firmly believe healthy bush and forest is the first essential—most other aspects take care of themselves. Older folk who have moved through our bush country for thirty to sixty years and can remember what Australian bush should look like are the ones to take heed of.

It's useless for people to form conservation pressure groups unless they are quite sure of the end result of what they are advocating. The person with the experience knows from the word go just what result to expect from some particular aspect of management that he is about to implement. If he is a true conservationist his judgement will not be swayed by politics or the mighty dollar—or even some short term personal gain.

It is not sufficient to slow down or stop the conservation rot that has set in. We must aim to vastly improve our present unsatisfactory set up. To do this, farming, mining and tourism—along with many

other activities detrimental to healthy bush and forest must be moved down the priority ladder to make room for conservation at the top. Conservation isn't a dirty word. It has been contaminated by many of man's activities and the sooner every man, woman and child in Australia realizes this the better—because Australia cannot survive for any length of time if we continue to destroy our environment at the present rapid rate. In closing the author wishes to draw attention to the fact that one third (fourteen hundred acres) of the family farming property at Cranbrook has been left uncleared for shelter and conservation and there is over eight miles of fencing doing nothing else but protecting bush country from domestic stock. These areas are not considered waste but are part and parcel of sound farm management.

The main reason why we must tread warily in the future with our remaining areas of bush and forest is because we have done so much damage during the twenty year period between 1945-1965. We will not feel the full impact of this damage for fifty to one hundred years.

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