David Pearson

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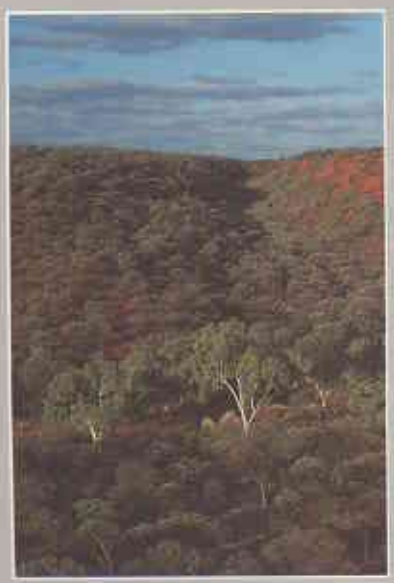
Research Scientist, David Pearson shares his observations on the remote Gibson Desert



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'I called this terrible region that lies between the Rawlinson Range and the next permanent water that may eventually be found to the west, Gibson's Desert, after this first white victim to its horror'. These were the bitter words of the explorer, Ernest Giles, on 6th May, 1874 after searching unsuccessfully for his lost companion. In a later expedition in 1876 Giles again had cause to curse this desert, declaring that *'...the region is so desolate that it is horrifying even to describe'*.

The Aborigines of the Gibson Desert overcame the problems of survival by maintaining both a flexible nomadic lifestyle and having an intimate knowledge of food and water resources. One Mantjiltjarra man recounting his travels prior to European contact, listed over 50 rockholes, soaks or claypans he had used. Most were temporary supplies, only lasting a few weeks after rain. The few 'permanent' water sources were vital refuges during droughts, and here family groups would come together, taking the opportunity to conduct ceremonial business. The close interaction of these nomads would eventually lead to tension as well as exhaustion of nearby food supplies. The family groups would fan out rapidly as soon as rain fell in the surrounding countryside.

These days most visitors traverse the Gibson Desert by the long and deeply corrugated Gunbarrel Highway, travelling from Carnegie in the west through Warburton to Ayers Rock. On the way they pass through the Gibson Desert Nature Reserve, which covers over 1.8 million hectares. It includes most of the landform and vegetation types typical of the Gibson Desert, particularly vast undulating lateritic plains clothed in spinifex and interspersed with thickets of mulga. In areas with deep sands, small spinifex covered dunes are frequent.

Extensive salt-lakes and small freshwater lakes add to the landscape diversity, while the subdued relief is broken by occasional breakaways and low rocky ranges. It is an area of subtle beauty. A climb to a high point provides a superb vista over the repeating pattern of delicately textured spinifex plains which contrast with the dull grey of mulga thickets. The over-riding impression is one of space, of room to move.

Desert bloodwoods in flower, a great attraction for several species of nomadic honeyeaters (opposite page, top).

Rolling sandstone hills in the eastern Gibson Desert Nature Reserve (opposite page, below left).

A ringtailed dragon stretches tall, perhaps for a view of the superb vista that surrounds it (opposite page, below centre).

Blossom of the desert bloodwood (opposite page, below right)

Old petroleum exploration gridlines access some parts of the reserve (above).

Thirsty coolabah trees in Lake Gruzka (below).

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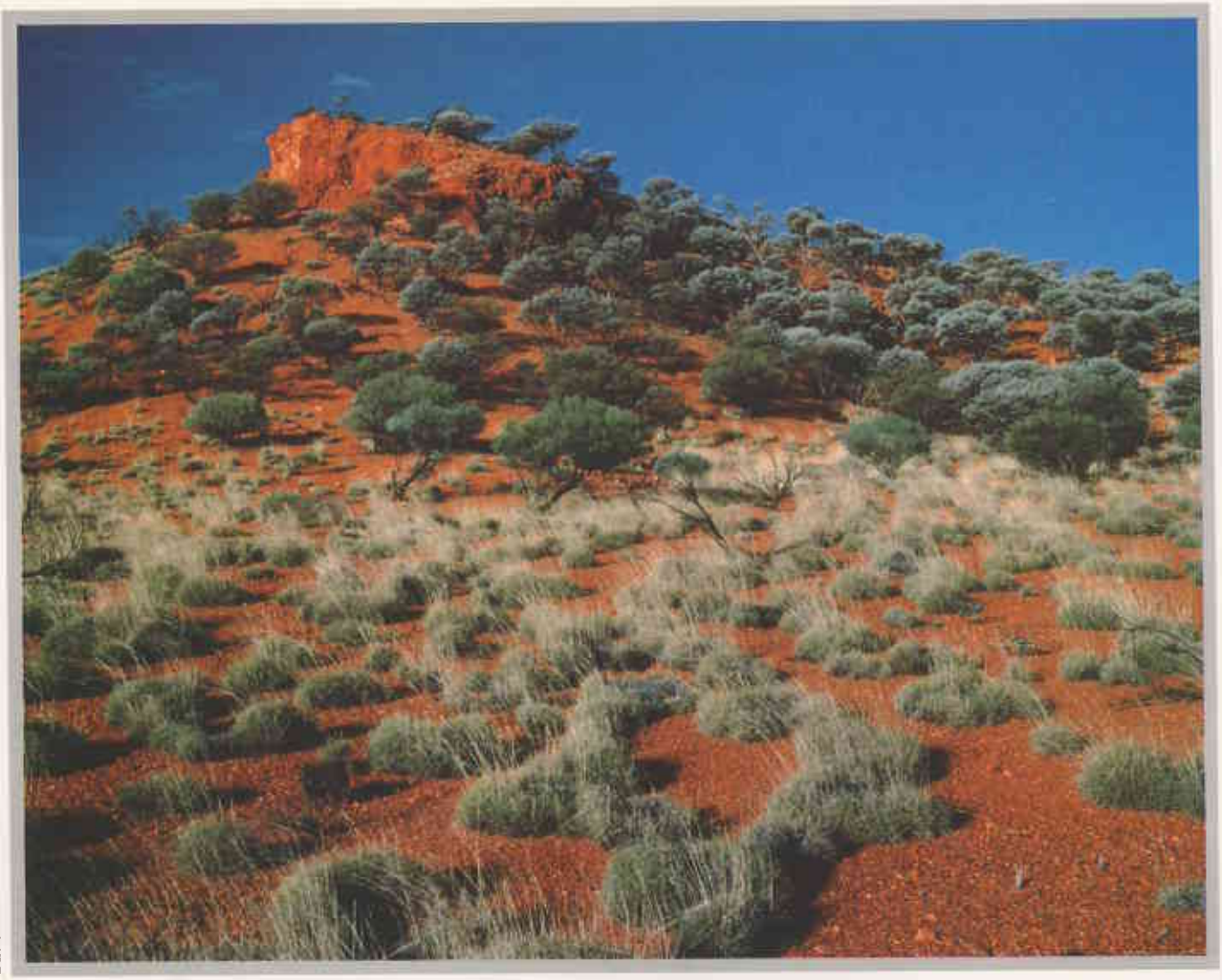

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Most travellers encounter little wildlife as they pass through the reserve, but those who are willing to stop and amble through the spinifex will be rewarded with sightings of numerous reptiles, especially colourful Military Dragons as they race between spinifex hummocks.

On a warm evening, a stroll with a torch may result in an encounter with one of the many translucent geckoes inhabiting the spinifex plains or a glimpse of a hopping mouse.

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The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve is a landscape of striking contrasts and startling colours:

Charles Kids, a prominent breakaway remnant covered in stunted mulga (above).

The twisting white-barked trunks of these coolabah trees are mirrored in the swampy mire of Lake Gruzka (left).

The management of a large nature reserve such as the Gibson Desert is a very real challenge. We still have much to learn about its flora and fauna. A substantial research programme has been established with the aim to provide better information for managers. Wider exploratory trips also help to build our knowledge. One such recently to the Alfred and Marie Ranges (named by Giles in honour of the Duke and Duchess of Edinburgh) searched for the rare Ramel's Gum and rock-wallaby populations, unfortunately without success.

Several mammal species have disappeared from the Gibson Desert in the last 50 years, possibly a consequence of changes in fire patterns and predation by foxes. Aerial burning techniques are being investigated to re-establish fire patterns suitable for these mammals, while it is hoped that fox control methodology developed in the south-west (see page 12) will help control them. The reintroduction of locally-extinct mammals may be possible in the next few years, making the Nature Reserve even more valuable for the protection of characteristic Gibson Desert flora and fauna.

LANDSCOPE

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EDITORIAL

It is difficult to remember a time when our daily news did not feature some environmental controversy. To people involved in environmental research and management, the popularity of 'the environment' is a mixed blessing.

Greater public consciousness of environmental issues has meant increased funding and, to some extent, greater prestige. But many scientists working on ecosystems are uncomfortable when their work is placed in the political spotlight.

The knowledge that a scientific observation that once would have been tucked away in a scientific journal to be read only by a few colleagues could become the centre-point of a political controversy is daunting.

Retaining objectivity in any research area is difficult. For those engaged in research on the natural environment it is even more difficult. Unlike the physical sciences in the natural sciences the truth is often camouflaged by interactions between factors which vary over time and space. When the results of this type of research are placed in the political arena, the mixture is often volatile and the truth a casualty.

To enable scientists to better seek the truth and communicate it, the scientific community has adopted what has been called "the scientific method". The scientific method is a code of conduct with rigid requirements. An offshoot of that code is a set of rules which scientists must follow, at least in reputable scientific journals, if they are to have their research published. Unfortunately, a byproduct of this is that scientific articles are not the easiest to read and are often plain boring.

Given that the environment has become a major political issue, it is important that those involved in the debate are fully informed. But scientists are faced with a dilemma. They need to popularise their work to reach a wider audience. On the other hand, they cannot afford to lose objectivity.

NATIVE CREATIONS

Nouvelle jardins, multiculturalism or laissez-faire; which garden fashion will you choose? Turn to ***page 22.***

WILD MARRON

Do our wild marron have a future or will local gourmets keep catching them to the point of extinction? Find out on ***page 4.***

KARRI MAGIC

What is really going on in the karri forest? On ***page 32*** *we take a look at the system of conservation reserves that have been established to preserve this awe-inspiring forest.*

STRANDED!

Relive the euphoria of the Augusta whale rescue on ***page 18.***

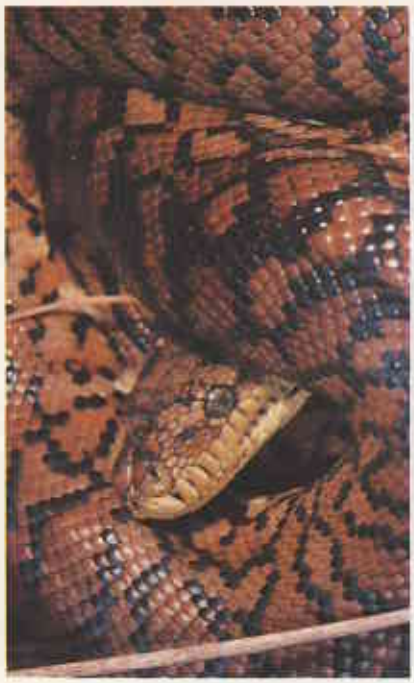
BACK TO BASICS

With today's massive land boom it's hard to imagine that the State once couldn't give land away fast enough. Now the government is buying back our valuable conservation areas. See ***page 43.***

DESERT GEM

The Gibson Desert Nature Reserve covers over 1.8 million hectares. It is a desolate but subtly beautiful landscape. Read about this unique area and the management problems it presents on ***page 48.***

SNAKES & ADDERS



Slim and active snakes have emerged hungry from their winter hibernation. But they're not all venomous. See ***page 51*** *for tips on living with snakes.*

AFTER THE FOX

Foxes pose a major threat to native mammals and other fauna. Can we outfox them? See ***page 12.***

A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

'Its pouch can hold more than its belly can', goes the popular rhyme. Find out more about this awkward but graceful bird on ***page 39.***

Cover Photograph

One of our natural wonders - the beaches of Hamelin Pool (Shark Bay) consist of billions of small shells.

Photo by Bill Bachman.

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