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David Freudenberger

CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology, Canberra

THE WORLD'S SAVANNAS

Edited by M.D. Young and O.T. Solbrig

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'The World's Savannas' is a most impressive book. It is not another textbook about ecosystem function, or a discussion about plant and animal ecology, or a treatise on land management. Rather, its aim - as indicated by the book's subtitle, 'Economic driving forces, ecological constraints and policy options for sustainable land use' - is to provide recommendations for use and management of savannas that take into equal account ecology, economics and social factors. The book focuses on the interface between the natural and social sciences in an attempt to distil the best approaches for human use of savanna environments. The result, for this reader, is a fascinating compilation of ideas.

First, though, what is meant by a "savanna"? The term designates a tropical grassland with scattered trees, and is applied to large areas of Africa, South America, southern Asia and northern Australia. Because savannas are characterised by oscillating and variable rainfall, and by low soil nutrients, agricultural developments frequently experience difficulty and pastoral activities predominate. Australian rangeland managers and scientists would recognise the tropical section of the rangelands as savannas.

The book begins with a set of introductory chapters providing an overview of the economic, ecological and social conditions pertaining to use of savannas around the world. There is considerable emphasis here on the systems of land tenure that have developed in different continents to allow humans to utilise the savannas. Subsequently, nine case studies of different savanna regions are presented, almost all of which are co-authored by an ecologist and a social scientist. Finally, the editors provide a summary designed to draw out the policy insights of their contributors.

Only one chapter, by John Holmes and John Mott, is concerned solely with Australia, and so the unwise Australian reader might be tempted to conclude that there is little of relevance in the book. Such a conclusion would be badly flawed, however. The Australian chapter happens to be placed last in the series of case studies, and as I scanned through the preceding studies of southern Africa, of India, and of South America, I was constantly surprised by sparks of recognition during descriptions of problems and suggested solutions. It's almost as if the book builds towards the contribution by Holmes and Mott. Their chapter - "Towards the diversified use of Australia's savannas" - should be required reading for all those concerned with land use policy in northern Australia and, indeed, in the Australian rangelands as a whole.

Holmes and Mott briefly review the history of European occupation of the Australian savannas, note the mostly unsuccessful governmental attempts to stimulate development, describe quickly the degradation and pasture instability arising from unwise grazing practice, point out the increasing value of tourism and therefore of conservation, and highlight the significance of a rapidly growing and new

form of land tenure in Aboriginal communal ownership. They proceed from this point to a consideration of policy issues that will need to be taken into account in achieving national goals of economic efficiency, ecological integrity and social equity. They conclude that in the northern savannas we can expect to see in future:

- i) localised rather than widespread nodes of development;
- ii) Aboriginal homelands;
- iii) manageable but low-yielding pastoral lands; and
- iv) extensive tracts of undeveloped and economically submarginal lands that will pose ongoing challenges in land tenure and management.

Holmes and Mott stress that delineation of manageable pastoral lands and the development of policies for management of Aboriginal land are critical priorities.

So far, I have not mentioned several key issues for Australian savannas noted by Holmes and Mott, but which appear common to many of the world's savannas and which are summarised by the editors in their concluding chapter. They may be summarised as follows:

- i) land use policy must begin with a careful assessment of ecological capacity - to ignore this leads to land degradation;
- ii) subsidies for production must be avoided - to do otherwise leads to social inequity and land degradation;
- iii) responsibility for management should be devolved to local communities, within guidelines consistent with national goals; and
- iv) local communities should be provided with appropriate resource rights and social equity.

The book demonstrates to me that, although Australian policy and land management have some distance yet to travel before sustainable use is guaranteed, our democratic and egalitarian philosophy places us in a much stronger position than most other savanna countries. Can we achieve this goal, both in our tropical and arid rangelands? It would help us do so if we could convince our policy-makers to look carefully at this book - but, in the interim, read it yourself.

S.R. Morton
CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology, Canberra