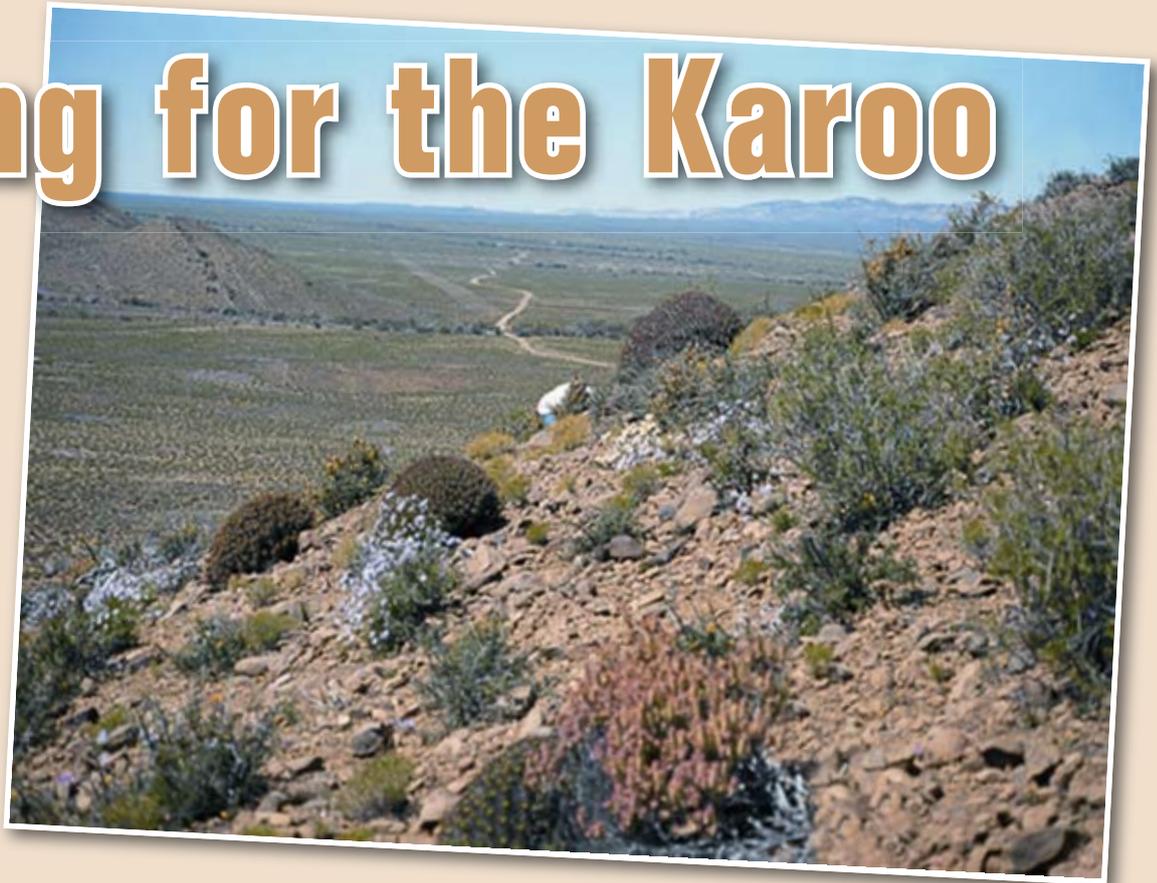


Caring for the Karoo

Karoo Veld: Ecology and Management.

Edited by Karen J. Esler, Sue J. Milton, and W. Richard J. Dean (Pretoria: Briza Publications, 2006). ISBN 1 875093 52 4



Main photograph: Warm north slope of a koppie with many noors plants.

Top: Leopard tortoise.

Above: Palatable bossies and opslag flowering abundantly in a road verge.

The harsh, unpredictable, wild, open Karoo landscape of rugged mountains, stony plains, salt pans, and sand dunes is the subject of this beautifully presented book.

The area spreads over some two-thirds of South Africa, and its ecosystem is composed of land users and their livestock as well as wild mammals, birds, invertebrates, plants, and soil. All these affect and interact with one another – and are subject to the great fluctuations of rainfall and temperature, from year to year and decade to decade.

This volume covers the five different types of Karoo veld ecology and is a practical, affordable guide to ways in which the region's natural resources can be understood and managed, so that it can sustain not only commercial enterprises (such as wool and mohair production, mutton, game, and tourism) but also the life of the veld itself.

Part 1 introduces the Karoo's plants, animals, soils, and water resources; the influences of climate, soil, and management on veld composition; and the functioning and long-term value of the land. In Milton's words, it shows how "natural Karoo ecosystems work, including the way plants grow and flower after rain then lie dormant, the importance of insects for pollination, the role of animals in making micro-sites for seed germination. Most important, it describes the limits imposed on land production, and hence on

animal numbers, by the low and variable rainfall."

"The second section deals with practical management issues, including grazing systems, water point arrangement, and veld and wetland rehabilitation", she continues. It is based on the philosophy that land users should leave the land in as good or in a better state than they found it. Part 3 shows readers how to keep records, assess, and monitor the condition of the veld so that the quality of the land keeps improving – together with the efficiency (and the profits) of those who work it. Says Milton, "it requires the manager to examine carefully the composition of vegetation cover, the condition of individual plants, the establishment of various kinds of seedlings, and the animal activity on the soil surface."

The appendices in Part 4 are invaluable for those living in and visiting the Karoo who wish to learn, know, and appreciate its richness, diversity, and way of life: there are animal unit conversions, palatability and grazing indices for assessing the productivity of the flora, a splendidly illustrated guide for identifying different types of common Karoo plants, and an extensive reference list for further reading.

An earlier, shorter publication – written by Sue Milton and Richard Dean in just a few months and published by the Agricultural Research Council (ARC) – appeared in 1996, "to put the understanding of Karoo veld ecology and management, which we had gained from research and interactions

New books

Gough Island: A Natural History.

By Christine Hänel, Steven Chown, and Kevin Gaston. (SUN Press, 2005). ISBN 1 920109 03 X

Superbly illustrated, this book is about the animals and plants of Gough Island and gives a history of the territory's discovery and exploration. It's a must for island and seabird enthusiasts as well as for anyone concerned with biodiversity and its conservation in remote locations.

Amazing Numbers in Biology.

By Rainer Flindt (Springer, 2006). ISBN 3 540301 46 1

Did you know that the eyeball of a giant squid is nearly half a metre in diameter or that midges beat their wings more than 1 000 times a second? You'll find wonderful statistics on every page of this splendid book.

Stapeliads of Southern Africa and Madagascar. Vol. I and II. By Peter V. Bruyns.

(Umdaus Press, 2005). ISBN 1 919766 37 5 and 1 916766 38 3

Lavishly illustrated with maps, line drawings, and photographs, these volumes deal with the 182 species of stapeliads found in southern Africa, all but a handful of which are endemic to the region. They will delight and inform botanists, specialist hobbyists, and everyone interested in these succulents.

Grass Aloes in the South African Veld.

By Charles Craib. (Umdaus Press, 2006). ISBN 1 919766 41 3

Grass aloes are mostly miniatures. They're deciduous, found mainly in grasslands, and their growing pattern is aligned to the winter fire cycles of the veld. Their attractive flowers make them desirable, if difficult, to cultivate, but this book with its illustrations gives all the information that one might want about them.

A Patented World? Privatization of Life and Knowledge. By Ana Agostina and Glenn Ashton (English edition). (Fanele, 2006).

ISBN 1 77009 229 3

This collection of essays analyses the ownership of many of the world's ideas and products. Amongst other things, it examines the patenting and use for private profit of genetically engineered crops, patented computer programmes, human cells, and biodiversity, molecules, and atoms. It's controversial, but it deals with material that cannot be ignored.

Molecular Gastronomy: Exploring the Science of Flavour. By Hervé This. (Columbia University Press, 2006). ISBN 0 231 13312 X

If you take science, cooking, and good food seriously, this book is for you. Drawing on research in the chemistry, physics, and biology of food, it reexamines and debunks time-honoured dictums about cooking, discusses such matters as the physiology of flavour and how chewing affects food, and is full of practical tips about delectable cuisine.



Above: Opslag, grasses, and kapokbos seedlings.

Right: Tank waterpoint with a stone ramp and emergent plants.

Below: Tree in standing water near Beaufort West.



with farmers, into a form accessible and useful to them", explains Milton. "Roger Ellis [ARC Range and Forage Institute] had identified user-friendly, non-prescriptive information on Karoo rangelands and their management as a need in the agricultural community." That concept and content gave the two authors the confidence to produce a fuller picture. Dean calls it "a 'self-reinforcing' project – the more we gathered together for the book, the more confident we felt about publishing it." Then Karen Esler came on board; she involved additional specialists, raised the necessary funds, and, with great efficiency and energy, coordinated the revision and expansion of the original work.

To raise awareness of the Karoo among a far wider readership, she says, "we wanted a book with practical and accessible visual as well as verbal messages". She sums up the hopes that drove this initiative: "The vast landscapes and uniquely southern African biodiversity of the region are entrenched in the hearts and heritage of so many of us, but we need to ensure sustainability into the future. The Karoo has its share of threats (overgrazing, invasive alien plants, climate change). My hope is that every farmer in the Karoo and every visitor will have access to this book and will buy into its principles, because hope lies in knowledge."

A great coup, she adds, was finding Piet Vorster and his wife Elsa, who "did a spectacular job translating the book into Afrikaans". The response to the publication has already exceeded all expectations.

Financed by the Critical Ecosystem Partnership Fund, the project took about two years from start to finish, but it's a culmination of far more time and effort than that. As Milton describes it, "the collections of photographs by a range of people represent many hundreds of thousands of kilometres of travelling in the Karoo over two decades. The information and pictures reflect 19 years (each) of research and life in the Karoo for Richard, Karen, and me. With other experienced researchers and consultants, I should think that there is at least a century of observation in the book."

This volume will enrich the library and the understanding of everyone who ever has anything to do with the Karoo, whether as a resident or as a visitor. □