
Although Charles Darwin, strangely, showed little personal fondness for the small southern continent, many later naturalists have grown to love the remarkable natural history and people of Australia. Such an enthusiast is Richard E. (Dick) MacMillen, whose career-long fascination with the land, animals, and culture of Australia resulted in a personal story and a perspective that he is now sharing in the form of a book, produced with the assistance of his wife Barbara. Richard MacMillen’s research and early scientific publications explored the energy and water relations of various mammals, birds, reptiles, and even semiterrestrial crabs in Australia’s arid zone. The limitations imposed by the scarcity and unpredictability of food and water resources in this vast environment represent an attractive research theme for an ecophysiologist such as Dick MacMillen. His book, based on several decades of travel and work in Australia, shows an appreciation for the land, its history, and its fate.

The spectacular news that Australian desert rodents derived from a Miocene lineage of the Muridae have evolved physiological and morphological adaptations like those of the denizens of other world deserts such as North America’s kangaroo rats (Dipodomys spp., Heteromyidae) was among the 1st of MacMillen’s down-under discoveries (MacMillen and Lee 1967). Publishing these 1st results was among the 1st of MacMillen’s down-under discoveries. The implications of humans, because of both their hunting and habitat modification, in the extinction of earlier megafauna. Next comes the incrimination of the European settlement of Australia in the displacement of aboriginal human populations and the destructive results of introducing grazing and the host of exotic mammals, both grazing and browsing herbivores and carnivorous predators (cats and foxes). The author portrays, in simple terms, the complex process of human influences that account for the extinction to date of nearly 10% of Australia’s native land mammals. Although such historic issues are of interest on all earth’s continents, we learn finally in MacMillen’s last chapter of how the special physical and biological character of Australia has influenced the unique contemporary culture of Australia’s arid regions. This is what brings together environment and people. This is what makes a good story. We can thank Dick and Barb MacMillen for telling this story in the form of a short natural history adventure book.

This book should be a pleasure for anyone who likes to engage in both the science and personal stories of scientists. The elements of fun, discovery, serendipity, and human experience in Dick MacMillen’s career enrich the reports on the creatures that inhabit Australia’s extreme and unpredictable deserts. For the reader, absorbing all of this is further enhanced by MacMillen’s appreciation for the land and people of Australia. Although the book is directly available in North America from the authors’ Web site (meanderingsinthebush.com) or Dog Ear Publications (dogearpublishing.net), it also can be obtained by readers in Australia and New Zealand as a 2nd edition put out by CSIRO Publishing. Proceeds from sale of the book will benefit Ph.D. students of animal