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Source: Wildlife Biology, 10(1) : 73-74

Published By: Nordic Board for Wildlife Research

URL: <https://doi.org/10.2981/wlb.2004.001>

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The Kruger Experience, Ecology and Management of Savanna Heterogeneity

Edited by: Johan T. du Toit, Kevin H. Rogers & Harry C. Biggs.
Publisher: Island Press, Washington, USA, 2003, 519 pp.

Established in 1926, Kruger is one of the oldest national parks in the world. The huge 22,000 km² protected area in northeastern South Africa can draw on a century of experience in management and research (the Sabie Game Reserve was established 1898). Thus, for most people interested in ecological research and management, Kruger is well known. Although numerous publications have been produced from Kruger, no single volume has previously been published synthesising the ecological and management experiences gained in this protected area. This book, which contains half a thousand pages, is an impressive attempt to rectify this.

The simplest way to produce this book would have been to give individual authors the opportunity to write a chapter about their particular research programme or management responsibility. Instead, the editors have chosen to focus on savanna heterogeneity as a common denominator. The heterogeneity approach must have been highly challenging for the editors, as well as for the different authors, recognising the fact that most of the research done in Kruger has been unidisciplinary and generally involving single species. Nevertheless, the authors have to a large extent kept to the general theme of savanna heterogeneity, although the focus and integration have been achieved better in some chapters than in others. All in all, the central theme of savanna heterogeneity has lifted the book from a simple compilation of chapters to a more coherent volume.

Although the emphasis on interactions between different biotic components and their abiotic templates strengthens the book in many ways, it is also evident that much relevant information on these topics is missing. For example, termites, dung beetles and wood-boring beetles are recognised as having profound impacts on the Kruger savanna. Some of these relationships are dealt with excellently in the book. However, despite the importance of these insect groups, the space they are given is relatively modest. From the book, we learn that no studies have focused on insects as drivers of savanna heterogeneity in Kruger. By pinpointing crucial, missing information about the contribution of invertebrates to savanna heterogeneity, the book sets a fruitful scene for future research in Kruger.

Although the invertebrate research in Kruger has been relatively modest, particularly larger mammals have been studied extensively. Previous work in the equally famous Serengeti has been dominated by grazing ecology, but Kruger is more famous for its work on browsers. Browsing ecology is thus well covered in the book. Not only do we find a synthesis of previously pub-

lished results, but the book also contains some novel results on large herbivores, as well as some interesting hypotheses for further testing.

It is indeed impressive to read about the more than 300 ongoing research projects and the extensive management operations in Kruger. As a medium-income country, South Africa has made a tremendous contribution to savanna ecology and management for many years. A comparison with research and management of national parks in my own country, which is one of the richest in the world, is almost embarrassing. The book illustrates well the huge management tasks of Kruger, involving challenging issues like culling, fire management, water provision and the relationships with neighbouring communities. In many areas of management, it is evident that Kruger has gone further than most other African national parks, but unlike many other protected areas in Africa, Kruger still has no community-based natural resource programmes in place.

The book is a sad reminder that African ecology is still a topic dominated by Americans, Europeans and white Africans. Whereas the book's central theme is savanna heterogeneity, ethnic heterogeneity is poorly reflected in the list of contributors. Unfortunately, this is not only a South African phenomenon, a decade beyond the abolishment of apartheid. In order to sustain the fragile support for conservation areas across the African continent, it is of paramount importance that all of those who work within university systems build enthusiasm, competence and confidence among upcoming black African ecologists.

Island Press deserves credit for publishing this important book. The printing and layout is generally good, although some figures are not well printed in my copy and some few tables are a bit messy to read. There are few pictures, but they serve as excellent illustrations to the text.

The target audience for the book should be scientists and managers of protected areas. As such, the extensive volume should definitely be of great interest far beyond tropical Africa. Although this book is not written as a textbook, sections are well suited for postgraduate courses in savanna ecology.

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