

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The thinking in this book arises from nearly three decades of life and experiences in desert Australia, and a side interest (that has now become central) in climate change. Many years of working with the international body of scientists who study the global climate has convinced me that we face a future of rapid change. This change is almost certainly going to come upon us faster than the carefully couched public estimates, creating huge uncertainties about what the future will bring for our children and our children's children.

Deserts are all about dealing with uncertainties. They hold vital lessons of immediate relevance to a world beset by climatic, economic and resource variability – a world where the stable certainties on which our civilisation was built seem increasingly fragile.

In my time in the desert, I have valued countless generous exchanges with many desert dwellers, from pastoralists back of Bourke to traditional elders among remote desert sands, with research colleagues in dry river beds and public servants in tall city towers. These encounters have often been challenging, but invariably welcoming, and it is to all these people who care about the desert that this book is dedicated.

Reflecting on these interactions, it has often struck me that desert dwellers – myself included – are endlessly bemused by the slings and arrows that the 'world out there' seems to throw at them. Discussions start with tirades about the unfairness of drought, continue with amazement at how people in distant capitals such as Canberra have no idea what life is like in the bush, and round off with disgust that the national news only ever mentions the outback when something disastrous (outback murders) or humorously quirky (antics around the first traffic lights in Alice Springs) rears its head. 'Why can't they take us seriously?', comes the cry.

Well, I have come to see that, like drought, most of these frustrations are a more or less

inevitable outcome of how the whole place works, not some evil conspiracy. Understanding this is the first step to correcting the situation as far as possible, or living with it more happily in so far as it is not. Hopefully, desert readers will emerge from the end of this book with greater equanimity and resolve than when they started. And non-desert readers will have a better appreciation of how one of our nation's principal wealth-generating regions really works.

At the same time as I was experiencing these desert encounters, I met a set of people outside the desert who are grappling with climate changes and how to adapt to live with them. Here I found another group that is bewildered by what the apparently uncontrollable forces of nature are imposing on them. 'How can we make decisions in the face of such uncertainty?', they ask, desperate for more certainty. Unfortunately, science is telling us that certainty is often not possible. Of course, desert dwellers have lived with uncertainty for eons, and so their tale is especially important.

Desert differences challenge our comfortable preconceptions, and push the limits of our assumptions. Because of this, the understanding of why the desert operates in special ways to cope with uncertainty and resource limitations is a key to our understanding of the nature of Australia as a whole, and indeed of the planet, as we engage with the dry tsunami of climate change.

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