

A Unique Environmental Studies Program at the Little Desert Nature Lodge



Threat to Mallee Lands



Little Desert Nature Lodge

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Little Desert Nature Lodge Environmental Studies Program Threat to the Mallee lands of Australia.

While the protests have been long and noisy over the threat to our rainforests, so far little has been heard about the danger facing the vast and productive Mallee lands, a unique part of our heritage.

The Mallee faces a battle for survival as bitter as any in the world's endangered regions - indeed, scientists warn, parts of the Mallee are already living under a death sentence.

The Mallee is confronted by a battery of threats - the extinction of animals, birds and plants, soil degradation, the white poison of salt, the impact of mining and tourism, the introduction of the rabbit and of feral predators, invasions by weeds and pressure from agriculture and grazing.

A vast tract of scrubland extending from Western Australia across South Australia into northern Victoria and South-western N.S.W., the mallee encompasses almost a fifth of the land mass and comprises one of the main ecological systems that dominate the continent.

It is also, according to the leading scientists, Australia's most imperilled, region - and the one most effected by lack of public awareness.

The Mallee draws its name from the "mali", or water mallee tree, a tenacious eucalypt whose roots, chopped and drained into vessels, provided a bounty of portable water to the Aboriginal peoples who inhabited the semi-arid regions for thousands of years.

Today, the Mallee is not one but a multiplicity of interlinked environments, harbouring more than 700 distinct plant species, 400 kinds of birds and countless animals and insects, many still unknown and undescribed by science.

Two hundred years of European occupation have clear-felled three-quarters of the vast expanse of Australia's Mallee lands, to build one of the world's greatest, most productive dryland farming systems. Its contribution to the national wealth in wool and cereal grains is measured in billions of dollars each year, and most Mallee observers believe it will remain of vital importance to the economy and to living standards.

At the same time however, there is a pressing urgency to conserve the last remaining tracts of native Mallee bush.

At a recent conference of Mallee scientists held in Adelaide, the view was strongly supported that there should be a national ban of all further clearing of Mallee lands in Australia. (Clearing bans have already been implemented in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia).

But scrub clearing bans alone cannot save the Mallee. Only the appropriate type and degree of management by humans can do that - by scientists, farmers, National Parks officials, miners, tourism operators and visitors.

In a way, the Mallee is the critical test of the ability of Australia to sustain itself, to marry wise use of resources for food and wealth production with a desire to preserve our valuable native resources.

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A given area of the Mallee habitat can only support a given number of species. The more land that is cleared the less number of species are able to survive. Without realising it, we are sitting back watching extinctions happening in a lot of mallee areas.

The classic example of a threatened species is the Malleefowl. Once prolific, it is now believed to be down to as few as 750 pairs in N.S.W. (Numbers are also thought to be very low in Victoria in comparison to 20 years ago.).

The main cause of the extinction of many species of animals, birds, reptiles and insects, however, is by introduced predators - the fox, the cat, the wild dog and the rat are all destroyers of mallee fauna.

At the same time, plagues of rabbits and mice, huge herds of feral goats, along with normal grazing by domestic sheep and cattle devour and permanently alter the vegetation and the natural habitat.

Most ironical of all, that symbol of the Australian bush - the kangaroo - is now a plague in its own land, its numbers exploding because of the extra feed and water provided by farming.

The fundamental and most urgent of all the threats looming over the mallee heartlands is the peril of salinity.

Because mallee eucalypts are such efficient users of water, their removal has led to an enormous increase in rainfall soaking into the soils over vast areas. Mingling with underlying salt aquifers, the deadly saline groundwaters are now rising to engulf great tracts of low-lying land.

A massive effort needs to be put into planting species with high water consumption to lower the saline water tables.

The sandy scrublands of the mallee are unlikely to excite the public ardour or interest as did the Franklin or the Daintree Forest - but in their own way they are unique; in terms of the Australian environment, they are far more significant.

Three-quarters gone in little more than a century, its remnants still facing a diversity of threats, the mallee will become a fundamental test of the new greening that is sweeping Australia. It constitutes a critical challenge in the nation's attempts to marry conservation with the wise use of its resources.

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