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Article *in* Ecological Management & Restoration · January 2013

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doi: 10.1111/emr.12042

The Victorian Bush: its 'Original and Natural' Condition

Ron Hateley, Polybractea Press, Melbourne, 2010. xi + 209 pp. ISBN 9780977524075. Price AUD$45.00 (paperback). http://www.victorianbush.com.au/

The whole country was open woodland,.....there are more trees now than at the time of European settlement..... These are the assertions of those claiming that Australia was a preprepared sparsely treed grassy paddock, patiently awaiting the arrival of northern hemisphere herbivores and grain crops. It is a convenient belief for those wanting to clear native vegetation, particularly regrowth vegetation, but is the belief justified? Who counted the trees? Is there any real evidence that Aboriginal land management kept wild nature in check and that we have subsequently let nature expand rampantly and uncontrollably in the past few centuries, or could it be that ecosystems were utilised within bounds mainly set by geology, topography, soils, climate and disturbance regimes long before any human presence on the continent?

The view of rampant vegetation expansion after the release of Aboriginal burning practices has been promulgated for some years by an eclectic mix of people including Eric Rolls (a farmer) and Tim Flannery (a zoologist) and more recently Bill Gammage (a social historian – see reviews of Leavesley, 2012 and Sinclair, 2012). While motivations are variable among its proponents, the 'expansionist' viewpoint is put forward in land management debates and has been used for example to oppose vegetation clearing laws in NSW (*tree density is unnaturally high*; *regrowth is not 'natural'*) and to suggest that increased burning and grazing will somehow solve all of our ecological 'problems' and bring things back to 'how they should be'. Clearly, these assertions and the assumptions underlying them need to be tested, but here is the rub: attempts to describe Australian ecosystems 'as they were' at the time of European exploration and colonisation rely on qualitative sources such as historical records and the observations, opinions, paintings and drawings of European explorers, settlers and scientists.

What has been lacking from the public discussion is someone to assess these qualitative sources from an ecological rather than from a rural or social perspective. Ecologists have tended to shy away from the debate and deemed the area to be highly political, which it is, and too subjective for an adequate ecological response.

This situation is one of the prime motivations for the late Ron Hateley to write *The Victorian Bush: Its 'Original and Natural' Condition*. Although similar critiques have been undertaken previously for New South Wales (Benson and Redpath 1997) and for Queensland (Fensham, 1997), Hateley's book fills a gap in relation to Victorian vegetation communities in particular but at the same time, is written for a wider audience beyond the scientific community. Because of the subjective and incomplete nature of the evidence, Hateley deliberately puts quotation marks around 'Original and Natural', suggesting any interpretation will only ever be an approximation of reality and acknowledging that, yes, humans have indeed been in Australia for some time.

Hateley's book has dual aims: (i) to document and analyse the earliest European observations across the major vegetation types of Victoria, to assess the validity of past and current assertions that current vegetation patterns and composition are entirely artefacts of changes to Aboriginal fire regimes wrought since European colonisation; and (ii) to gather and interpret descriptive information relating to vegetation distribution, composition and structure that could be used to assist in developing benchmarks for vegetation restoration and rehabilitation in Victoria.

The book is divided into 13 chapters. An introductory chapter is followed by a sequence of six chapters based on early descriptions by explorers and squatters of specific regions of Victoria: '*First Glimpses and Tuckey's Surprise*' (Port Phillip and Coastal Victoria); *'Inland'* (Albury to Geelong); *'Bearbass then, Melbourne Now'* (Melbourne); *'A Tour Through Southwest Victoria in 1839'* (Geelong to the SA border); '*The Forests of Gippsland'* (Melbourne to Omeo and Orbost); and *'The Diggings'* (Victorian Goldfields). A variety of journal entries are quoted covering a range of vegetation and terrain – Hovell's description of the scrub on Mt. Disappointment in December 1824 (p. 23) is both enlightening and amusing and I will leave you to read why (*'....had there been any doubt of his Manhood before, these doubts were now removed.'*). While showing that extensive areas of open woodlands and grasslands did indeed exist in many areas, Hateley also shows unequivocally that there were also tall wet forests, shrubby dry forests, heaths, swamps, scrubs and areas that early explorers wished that they had never entered into because of the density of the vegetation. The Gippsland chapter is a particularly interesting read in this regard. Could it be that these vegetation types are not artefacts of settlement but intrinsic expressions of the Australian environment, having evolved over millions of years and used to greater or lesser degrees by the Aboriginal inhabitants with varying degrees of impact?

Chapter 8 assesses 'fire-stick farming' in more detail and discusses historical accounts of the variety of Aboriginal uses of fire in Victorian communities. Part of the confusion in the literature is the attribution of fire and smoke to various causes at various times, some human, some lightning initiated, but many descriptions of 'smoke' are simply referring to campfires, although hunting and signal fires are also in evidence. From a landscape fire management

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perspective, although used widely and extensively in woodlands and grasslands and to some degree dry forests, there is essentially no extant historical evidence of the use of fire in moist or wet forest ecosystems. Archaeological and ethnographic work in Australia and the USA support this argument, showing intensive occupation of coasts, swampy areas, river valleys and flatter, fertile terrain by Aboriginal inhabitants but only limited and often seasonal use of steeper forested areas (Feary 1988, Vale 2002).

In Chapter 9, the impact of settlement of fauna in Victoria is discussed using historical accounts and details the effect of habitat change, hunting and feral mammals on native fauna, notwithstanding any supposed changes in fire regimes. The next four chapters then discuss the role of disturbance in Victorian plant communities and canvass the effects of drought, parasitic plants and storms among other disturbance agents, with some interesting speculation by Hateley on the potential role of localised storms and hurricanes on plant community dynamics and the formation of patches. Essentially, these chapters are attempting to reflect the fact that plant communities are dynamic and not static, so that a range of variation in their extent and condition over time and space is to be expected, with or without fire.

It is in the last chapter (Chapter 13. *'Synthesis'*) that Hateley sums up his interpretation of the historical literature as it pertains to Victorian plant communities and states (p. 185): *'However, what do 'original' and 'natural' really mean? Some forests and woodlands in Victoria were in a state of flux well before European settlement. They were not necessarily idyllic and pristine and in some sort of static balance. In some areas, they were dead and biodiversity depended on that'.*

I think the book convincingly shows that vegetation complexity was readily in evidence at the time of colonisation and that the Victorian vegetation did not consist solely of open woodland nor was fire the only disturbance agent. Vegetation composition, structure and density was variable yet strongly influenced by major environmental factors such as climate, slope, geology and aspect, and fire in whatever form was and is but one disturbance agent among many which include grazing, drought, flood and storms. It is interesting that for all of the talk of changes to vegetation since European settlement from the 'expansionist' viewpoint, fire is the constant focus, yet the effects of grazing, logging, clearing and feral animals on vegetation structure seem to be ignored. From an ecological point of view, the fact that Hateley introduces the notion of a variety of disturbance agents affecting vegetation dynamics in time and space is useful for readers unfamiliar with disturbance regimes. This may assist readers to come to the profound realisation that fire per se is not a magic wand nor is it the sole agent of disturbance in Australia, or elsewhere.

If the proposition that the whole of south eastern Australia was an open parkland is taken as a hypothesis, then Hateley has satisfactorily falsified such a hypothesis for Victorian plant communities, using many and varied examples across the state. This should come as no surprise to ecologists, yet it needs to be out there for the public to digest in the face of politically motivated claims to the contrary.

The book could have done with a tighter edit and the language in the book can be a bit awkward at times, for example, '*This statement is not just grandiose, but quite preposterous*.' (p. 97). There are also a number of assertive phrases used in the text such as '*This must have been*….' The assessment of historical sources seems to bring this writing style out in authors, and in this sense, Hateley unfortunately mirrors the assertive phraseology found in the writings of Rolls, Flannery and Gammage. Still, it is a book that needed to be written and may have benefited from a future edit and revision, but unfortunately Ron Hateley died in 2011, too early to gauge the impact his book might have on public debate about forest and woodland conservation and management. Although currently out of print, it deserves to be widely read by students and the general public for an alternative interpretation of historical sources and the exposition of hitherto ignored sources, but will also prove useful to ecologists wanting a broader insight into early European observations in a variety of Victorian vegetation types.

So, next time, someone prefaces a discussion on land management with the words: '*The whole country was…..'*, you should politely interject and say '*…..no it wasn't*'.

Review by Michael D. Doherty, CSIRO Ecosystem Sciences, Canberra, ACT 2601, Australia. Email: michael.doherty@csiro.au

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