

Book Review

Nature Divided: Land Degradation in South Africa

Timm Hoffman and Ally Ashwell

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Global warming, be it blamed on man's unwise burning of fossil fuels or on natural increases of temperatures during the present interglacial (Holocene), is accompanied by loss of precious farming land due to aridification. Desertification is the topic of the day, and it is more than the buzz of this word which should worry us. Desertification is a synonym for degradation of land taking various faces and is becoming a major headache, difficult to deny and still more difficult to cure.

The frontispiece of the book by Timm Hoffman and Ally Ashwell entitled 'Nature Divided: Land Degradation in South Africa' almost says it all: the fence-line effect (so well known to veld managers) carries a symbolic message of important divisions (be it frontiers or demarcation lines) imposed on nature — and on our minds. It is the political, social and ecological background of the 'culture of divide' which forms the major backdrop of the main theme of this book — degradation of land in South Africa.

South Africa is a signatory of the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (1994) and as such is legally obliged to formulate and implement a National Action Programme to combat desertification. The Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, therefore, has contracted a technical report to tackle the Programme, which culminated in the publication of this book.

The book is structured in 13 Chapters spanning introductory chapters setting the scene (Chapters 1–3), those tackling issues of land degradation itself (Chapters 4–11), and those contemplating the way forward (Chapters 12–13).

It is a very concise and user-friendly text including many useful statistics on all kinds of issues related to land (and veld, soil, water) degradation. One profits from overviews of

definitions of various concepts of ecology, veld management and land degradation — all of these concepts are understood in so many different ways and carry different messages when articulated by laymen, ecologists and politicians! The facts summarised in this book are often eye opening, terrifying, and at least very educative. Did you, for instance, realise that more than 70% of Africa's food is grown by women? Or can you perhaps imagine the effects the HIV/AIDS pandemic may have (and would have) on land degradation or on agricultural production in South Africa as a whole? A terrifying thought, isn't it?

For those who were not very attentive at school or otherwise, and may have got a rather disturbed view of the history of their own country, this is a book to buy and read! Putting such an important issue such as land (veld) degradation into political and social context is its major virtue.

The 'Nature Divided' is a must for anybody interested in the past, present and future of our country. An interested layman, concerned farmer, caring (or less caring) politician, and academics alike can read it with ease. If you teach ecology at any level — this is an ultimate source of data and inspiration. You can learn still more if you go to <http://www.nbi.ac/landdeg> and consult the complete technical report this book is based upon.

By the way, about technical reports and their publication: not many research reports find their way into a book publication available to everybody. Such reports usually end up on dusty shelves joining the 'grey literature' stocks. This book is an example how to do it differently. The University of Cape Town, the National Botanical Institute and last, but not least, both Timm Hoffman and Ally Ashwell should be congratulated on this contribution. For R75 it is a bargain.

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