

## Deserts

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1. Australian society recognises the primacy of Indigenous interests.
2. Create new means of regional governance to replace the present fragmented and spasmodic policies and programs.
3. Further develop Indigenous programs to achieve natural resource benefits and integration with Aboriginal cultural life.
4. Further engage resource companies in achieving sustainability.
5. Develop reliable, meaningful and cheap measures of biodiversity and ecosystem health for a vast landscape.
6. Find new approaches to the challenges posed by feral animals.
7. Find new approaches to the challenges posed by weeds.
8. Choose natural assets to be targeted for fire management.
9. Explore opportunities in carbon farming.
10. Choose water assets to be targeted for management.

### Introduction

The Australian deserts lie beyond the fences. They are the lands that proved too tough for European settlement, too poor to support the cattle and sheep that elsewhere have transformed our perception of the country from desert into rangeland. If the rangelands are the outback (Chapter 2), the deserts are the far outback.

Some of this terrain possesses names familiar to many Australians, such as the Simpson Desert. Other areas may not be so widely known – the Gibson, Great Victoria, Great Sandy, Little Sandy and Tanami Deserts. The deserts comprise 2 million km<sup>2</sup> of sand. Sometimes the sand is swept into ridges, whereas elsewhere there is flat sandplain. Occasional rocky outcrops sometimes shed enough water after rain to create small creeks, and a few rivers penetrate from outside, but they all peter out. Three ecological features stand out: there is very little surface water; the leached sands are among the least fertile soils of our continent; and yet the country is covered with a wealth of plant life. The harsh physical background leads to a tiny human population. Of the 350 000 residents of inland Australia, only ~40 000 live in the deserts. The few non-Indigenous people fly in and out of mining camps. Most residents are Aboriginal people who live on their traditional lands on scattered settlements, often far out into the country. The land is not ‘empty’: it is Aboriginal land.