

## The dinner party

It is very vulgar to talk about one's business. Only people like stockbrokers do that, and then merely at dinner parties.

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of being Earnest*, 1895

My experiences in explaining our planned use of RHD in Australia to veterinarians and other disease control experts in Europe convinced me that their views about pest control were very different from those of many of my Australian colleagues. This led me to thinking about the reasons why many Australians had developed such a divergent view. After all, Australian culture is still heavily influenced by European perspectives. My guess is that this changed view is strongly influenced by the scale of the landscape of Australia's outback, the lack of other distractions associated with urban life, and the fact that there are few people. This provides both the flexibility and the need for innovative action in solving problems yet, once decisions have been taken, those solutions need to be applied consistently and in a highly practical way.

To illustrate what I mean about landscape scale and the lack of social distractions, I will start with the feelings I have each time I visit Oraparinna National Park in the Flinders Ranges in semi-arid northern South Australia. Oraparinna is one of those wonderful places where the bones of the earth are laid bare and you can almost feel the forces that shaped our world. Each glimpse of a sharply twisted seam of rock and each slab of ripple-marked sandstone from the bed of an unremembered sea says something about the process.

One mainly dry creek bed runs westwards, right through the main range. Water has cut deep through ancient sedimentary rock strata to form Brachina Gorge. There, fossils going back to the earliest forms of life are revealed. Circular cross-sections of stromatolites, the remains of early bacterial colonies that grew in shallow seas, are to be found in the 630-million-year-old limestone of the Trezona formation, while rocks from 550 million years ago show the imprints of broken sea-pens and the attachment discs of related animals alongside segmented worms and primitive creatures with jointed legs. These fossils from the Ediacran assemblage represent some of the world's earliest known animals.

The stream bed of nearby Wilpena Creek drains eastwards towards a complex of vast dry salt lakes on the eastern side of the ranges. Only exceptional rains, perhaps two or three times a century, see water in these channels reaching that final destination. In this arid landscape it is not hard to read the evidence of times long past. In one of the dry lakes, Lake Callabonna, complete skeletons of the giant, wombat-like diprotodon can be found. The final footprints of these marsupials, made just before they became mired in treacherous ooze 30 000 years ago, can sometimes be picked out in the low light of early morning as slightly raised, pizza-plate sized ovals on the salt crust. The dry wind erodes these compacted ovals a little more slowly than the rest of the salty mud.