

WESTERN CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

An alliance of conservation groups focusing on western NSW

BRIEFING 3: HISTORY OF THE PILLIGA

Detailed descriptions of the pre-European vegetation of the Brigalow Belt South bioregion and other parts of western NSW, based on interpretation of historical records, are provided by Benson & Redpath (1997), Denny (1994), Mitchell (1991) and Norris *et al.* (1991).

These studies support the view that the region historically contained a variety of grassy and heathy woodlands, riparian areas, and heaths. In areas that have not been cleared, these vegetation types are still present today.

However, a selective reading of the early observations of some explorers has led some authors, most notably Rolls (1981), to suggest that the Pilliga Scrub was originally cover by open grassland or grassy open savannah. As a result, a popular myth has arisen that the Pilliga Scrub is a 'man-made', recently grown forest, and that this forest has saved our extant wildlife. These claims have been strongly disputed in the scientific literature.

A man-made forest?

Rolls' claims have been analysed and compared in detail by Mitchell (1991), Norris *et al.* (1991), Denny (1994) and Benson & Redpath (1997), and all four analyses dispute his claims.

In their analysis of Oxley's observations in the region, Benson & Redpath (1997) point out that the forest was so dense in some areas that they '*could hardly turn their horses*' and complained about the lack of grasses to feed their horses.

Many written historical records support the conclusions reached by Benson & Redpath (1997) and others that the Pilliga has always been a heavily timbered area. For example, in an address given in Coonabarabran in 1913 about how best to settle the Pilliga, a Mr Cameron (1914) writes that:

"In most of this country the timber is very thick and dense, and the settler will have to do a good deal of hard work before he is able to put much of his land under cultivation".

Carnahan (1976) described the character of the vegetation prior to modification by Europeans in some detail, suggesting that in woodland and forest areas there was an upper stratum of eucalypts, 10-30 m in height and with a crown density of 10-30% cover above an understorey of low trees. From Dubbo to Baradine, the overstorey structure in many areas is thought to have been more dense, with a cover of 30-70% with *Callitris* (cypress) the dominant species. Stump counts in Pilliga West have shown that it carried a density of mature trees of about 30 to the hectare (Paull 2001).

There is very strong evidence to prove that there was always an area of ironbark forest in the western part of the Pilliga, including photographs from the early 1900s. It was west Pilliga that was the backbone of sleeper industry in the first half of the 20th century. The first Forest Assessor, Mr Wilfred de Beuzeville described the western Pilliga in 1916 as follows: "...*there exists in the Western Pilliga an ideal forest area, practically in its virgin state, which is a very valuable asset to the Department controlling it. We have (1) excellent forest of C. glauca [White Cypress] occupying about one third of the area. (2) Similar forest of E. crebra [Narrow-leaved Ironbark] of about the same extent. (3) an excellent area for grazing and edible shrub land of perhaps the same area, and (4) an enormous forest of immature C. glauca, occupying about three-fourths of the total area of the combined types.*" (van Kempen, 1997)

Any cursory evaluation of the logging history of the Pilliga shows that an open savannah simply could not have supported the amount of timber extraction that has occurred, with 800 000 tonnes of sleepers and 2 million tonnes of cypress pine logs recorded as being removed since 1916.

Which saved the wildlife?

All the early explorers in the Pilliga area mention the presence of possums. Some records describe them in their 'millions'. These are presumably the Common Brushtail Possums which are now close to extinction in the region. Recent surveys over several years throughout the BBS have recorded Brushtail and Ringtail possums on only a couple of occasions. Recent scientific work by Date *et al.* (2003) and Paull and Kerle (in press) confirms the on-going severe decline of large numbers of birds and possums of the Pilliga region. There is no doubt that any objective reading of the historical and scientific evidence confirms that human practices have led to the decline of wildlife in the Pilliga region, rather than the reverse as claimed by Rolls (1981).

Table 1 Decline of vertebrates in the Pilliga

Extinct birds	Declining birds	Extinct mammals	Declining mammals
Malleefowl	Australasian Bittern	Western Quoll	Tiger Quoll
Australian Brush-turkey	Square-tailed Kite	Brush-tailed Phascogale	Black-striped Wallaby
Australian Bustard	Black-breasted Buzzard	Red-tailed Phascogale	Rufous Bettong
Flock Bronzewing	Black Falcon	Stripe-faced Dunnart	Brush-tailed Possum
Squatter Pigeon	Grey Falcon	Fat-tailed Dunnart	Ring-tailed Possum
Blue-winged Parrot	Peregrine Falcon	Planigale spp.	Squirrel Glider
Shy Heathwren	Bush Stone-curlew	Western Barred Bandicoot	Eastern Pygmy-possum
Black-throated Finch	Mulga Parrot	Bilby	Feathertail Glider
	Swift Parrot	Brush-tailed Bettong	Water Rat
	Budgerigar	Eastern Hare-wallaby	Dingo
	Yellow-tailed Black-cockatoo	Bridled Nailtail Wallaby	Grey-headed Flying Fox
	Rainbow Lorikeet	Brush-tailed Rock Wallaby	Fox
	Crimson Rosella	Hopping Mouse (?)	Little Red Flying Fox
	Blue Bonnet	Plains Mouse	
	Masked Owl	Gould's Mouse	
	Red-backed Kingfisher	Eastern Chestnut Mouse	
	Azure Kingfisher	Stick-nest Rat (?)	
	White-browed Scrub-wren		
	Chestnut-rumped Heathwren		
	Little Button-quail		
	Southern Whiteface		
	Yellow-throated Miner		
	Regent Honeyeater		
	White-naped Honeyeater		
	White-throated Honeyeater		
	Black-chinned Honeyeater		
	Pied Honeyeater		
	Painted Honeyeater		
	Yellow-plumed Honeyeater		
	Hooded Robin		
	Flame Robin		
	Spotted Quailthrush		
	Gilbert's Whistler		
	Leaden Flycatcher		
	Satin Flycatcher		
	Ground Cuckoo-shrike		
	Plum-headed Finch		
	Diamond Firetail		
	Zebra Finch		
	White-backed Swallow		

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