Notes on a visit to Organ Pipes NP, March 2003

Table of contents

Notes on a visit to Organ Pipes NP, March 2003 1
Introduction 1
Background 1
Plants 1
Advice 1
Macedon Ranges 2

Introduction

I was active with FOOPs from 1972 to 1988 and amongst other things, spent a lot of time searching for seed sources, comparing collection sites to parts of the park and planning the use of the various species. I prepared the zoning maps and, in conjunction with ranger Jack Lyale and the other Friends, supervised planting operations. The first map had errors which were corrected with the help of experience.

Background

Since 1988, when I moved interstate, my visits to the park have been brief and infrequent. These notes resulted from a short visit in March '03. I had only time to visit the part of the park most frequented by visitors, so I did not see outer or newly aquired areas.
My first impression was that, taking into account two years of drought, the park looks pretty good. (Even parts of the Macedon Range were looking very stressed at the time). Until they were told otherwise, or read the interpretation signs, most visitors would not realize that this was a revegetation area.

Plants

I was particularly pleased with the spread of several saltbush species (*Rhagodia, Atriplex, Enchylaea, Einadea* etc). A few of these were present in small numbers in 1972, and others were added, but they are almost everywhere now.
It was not difficult to find weeds, like a head-high boxthorn a few metres from the main track, but remembering what it was like in 1972, we have come a long way. As always, it is easier to see weeds that remain, you don't see the ones that have been removed. One that is worth a mention is an introduced weed called *Galenia pubescens*, which is a common roadside weed and can be mistaken for a native saltbush. I saw a couple of healthy ones beside the track near the Rosette rock, and it has been growing in the carpark for at least ten years, perhaps mistaken for a native. It has small, pale frosty green leaves and small flowers which are pinkish when fresh. (But watch out for the native *Atriplex semibaccata*, which has orange-pink, diamond-shaped fruit).

Advice

A small criticism - I feel the friends are repeating a mistake we made in the '70s, by trying to grow "plains" herbaceous species on the scoria cone. The plains have heavy soil and poor drainage, waterlogged in winter,whereas the area near the visitor centre is about the best-drained part of the park. (On the other hand, the lignum in the carpark is doing amazingly well - the word "lignum" is usually accompanied by the word "swamp"!) Another thing I noticed was that the spring hinges on

the gates of the little walk near the visitors centre were too weak to properly close the gates - a very fat rabbit would have no trouble walking in!

Something which has caused some concern is the dying of many of the older wattles and the lack of replacement plants. First, I would like to make some general comments which apply to any natural area. Each ecosystem consists of hundreds, perhaps thousands of life forms, many unseen, each competing for a living and interacting in various ways. This is overlain by climatic cycles and the history of fire, flood etc, which result in an ebb and flow as each species is affected differently.

Macedon Ranges

From 1975, I also became very familiar with the Macedon Range and Wombat Forest, and some observations about these areas may be relevant. In 1982, trees and shrubs were dying on exposed areas of Mt Macedon with shallow soil. The same thing could be seen this year. After the 1983 fires, these areas became covered with almost impenetrable growth, which has now mostly gone. Change is normal.
In the Wombat forest, a rare bush pea (Pultenaea weindorferi) was hard to find before the fires, but afterwards there were dense stands within it's limited habitat. Kangaroos and wallabies, combined with short life and absence of fire, have now reduced it to a few twiggy specimens which may not last much longer. A fire of limited extent would produce more seedlings, but this would be a magnet to all the macropods, which would probably eat them before they could produce seed.

Returning to the wattles at the park, many are now 25 years old or more, and are at the end of their life. Wattles reproduce in two ways, by seed and by root suckers. Two which are particularly good at producing suckers are silver wattle and gold-dust wattle. Gold-dust wattle can be seen suckering strongly beside the main track, but these are severely nibbled back. Silver wattle tends to produce thickets beside the creek. Wattle seeds have a hard coating which can sustain viability for a very long time. Fire is the most common cause of seed coat damage, resulting in water penetration and germination. Mechanical abrasion, e.g. by ants etc, will also result in germination.
In my experience at the park, when there were brief periods of getting on top of the rabbits, seedlings of numerous species appeared, including wattles. These mostly did not survive, because the rabbits soon bounced back. On my visit, I found a number of wattle seedings amongst the protection of debris where old trees had collapsed. I also saw some fresh rabbit droppings and scratchings, although the numbers are probably low. Still, one rabbit can eat a large number of newly emerging seedlings.

Something which has mostly occurred since I left is the build-up of kangaroo and wallaby numbers. Whilst I see this as a plus for a National Park, it has it's down side, as these are now a major cause of seedling loss. Beside the main track, against the rock cutting, there is a short netting fence. Numerous seedlings, some now several years old, have been able to grow in this little niche where there is extra protection from both rabbits and macropods.
It is interesting that Isaac Batey, writing about the district as it was in the 1840's, said that kangaroos and wallabies had already gone, possibly in part due to liver fluke passed on by sheep, but guns and dogs would have soon driven them away.
We can speculate that the aborigines kept the numbers low and the open grasslands would have been more attractive to the kangaroos at least. I have not seen anything written which sheds light on this, or any speculation about the effect of browsing on the limits of tree and shrub growth in the region.

To summarise my thoughts on the wattles, there will be no substantial seedling regeneration whilst there are rabbits and macropods in the park, and whilst efforts to control the rabbits should continue, the kangaroos and wallabies are perhaps a problem we are stuck with. Short of a severe cull or some natural event to reduce their numbers, I feel that protected planting should be resumed, particularly in light of the importance of wattles to the sugar gliders.
Overall, my visit left me with a very positive feeling about the park. Keep up the good work!

Barry Kemp

Index

Atriplex semibaccata, 1
Galenia pubescens, 1
Isaac Batey, 2
Jack Lyale, 1
Macedon Range, 1, 2
Rhagodia, Atriplex, Enchylaea, Einadea, 1
Wattle, 2
Wombat Forest, 2