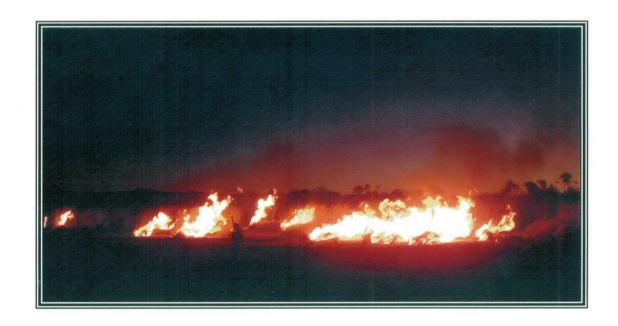
Fire ecology of the spinifex hummock grasslands of central Australia

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of the University of New England

January 2007

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisors Dr. Peter Clarke and Mr. Grant Allan for their guidance and support throughout my candidature, and for their invaluable suggestions during the writing up of this thesis.

I am grateful to Scott and Kathy McConnell, who introduced me to Haasts Bluff, and who provided me with enormous support, encouragement and hospitality during my three years at Haasts Bluff community. I would also like to extend my gratitude toward my young Luritja friends, Herbert Multa, David Corby, Derek Dixon and Jacob Hayes, all of whom taught me much about the desert and about the ways of Aboriginal culture. Thanks also to Douglas Multa, the Jugadai family and other traditional owners in the Haasts Bluff region, for giving me relatively free access to their lands while I carried out my fieldwork. Brian Connelly and the Central Lands Council have also been most helpful in facilitating the acquisition of permits during this project.

I am sincerely grateful to Peter Latz, John Wrench and Dr Rod Rogers, for inspiring me to study fire and plants during the early years of my university education. Thanks also to Dave Albrecht, Hillary Coulson (both NT Herbarium), Angus Duguid (NTPWS) and Tim Collins (Alice Springs Desert Park) for their assistance during fieldwork components of this thesis. Shane Forester, John Sergeant, Kasia Gabrise and all the ex-Greencorps and CVA team members were all a great help and made my work out bush an enjoyable task. Special thanks to Majella Bowden and Fran Sharp, whose assistance and friendship during these years has been invaluable. Thanks also to Fran's parents, Ian and Louis, for putting me up in Alice Springs, and to Ian especially, for the many interesting conversations concerning the history of Australia's arid lands.

During my time in Armidale, Richard Willis, Doug Clark, Wal Whalley, Ian Telford, Dorothy Bell, Tim Curran, Kerri Clarke, Lachlan Copeland, and many other students and academic staff in the Botany department at UNE have provided much help. On a personal note, I am thankful to my friends Phi Nga, Mr Kinley, Chundi Dorji, Sangay Dorji, Stephen Knoerls, Gary Melville, Navjot Bhuller, Monica Campbell, Shanti Virgona, Kathy Nano and many other students at Wright Village. Finally, I am grateful for the support I received from my mum and dad, and for the encouragement I received from my aunty and uncle, Val and John Coyle.

Abstract

Australia's spinifex hummock grasslands are arid ecosystems that experience intermittent but widespread fires. These fires occur in response to above-average rains, which cause biomass levels to increase and allow fuel contiguity to occur. Previously, there was very little scientific understanding of the ecological effects of these wildfires on spinifex grasslands, although anecdotal evidence suggested that a recent fire 'event' (2000-02) had been catastrophic to both plant and animal populations. This thesis was concerned firstly with quantifying the contemporary fire regime of the spinifex grasslands of the Haasts Bluff Aboriginal Reserve, west of Alice Springs, and secondly, with improving our understanding of how fire regimes affect vegetation dynamics within these grasslands.

Examination of Landsat MSS satellite imagery dating from 1979 to 2003 found that contemporary fire patterns in the reserve were characterised by large-scale fires during 1982-85 and 2000-02 but with virtually no fires in other years. The mean size and total area burned by these fires was greatest during summer months, and this was believed to have been the result of higher air temperatures, lower humidity levels and higher lightning incidences during these months. Fire interval distributions during the study period were bimodal, with modes at 2-3 years occurring when multiple fires took place during fire-event periods ('82-85, '00-02), and 15-17 years occurring during the inter fire-event period ('85-99). Floristic and seed bank surveys in areas burned by these fires revealed that time-since-fire had an overriding influence on the dynamics of ephemeral grasses and herbs, with greatly increased occurrence of both vegetation and seed of these species in recently burned areas. Other functional types, such as clonal herbs and resprouting woody species were unaffected by time-since-fire. Fire season had little effect on most functional groups, although a strong effect on recruitment of woody species was observed, with increased seedling numbers following summer compared to winter fires. Fire interval had transitory effects on ephemeral plants, clonal plants and on seedlings of Triodia species. Surprisingly, no interval effects were observed on resprouting or obligate seeding woody vegetation.

The results of the field surveys were explored more fully in field experiments in which four species of *Acacia* were burned under differing fire intervals, seasons and 'severities'. These experiments demonstrated that the selected *Acacia* species could resprout repeatedly after short fire intervals, though high levels of mortality were observed for certain species under high severity and/or summer burns. Additionally, most woody species failed to be detected in the seed bank. This result was largely explained by seed removal and decay experiments, which revealed that seeds of these species would be removed by seed predators almost immediately after seed fall.

Overall, populations of most life history groups in the spinifex grasslands appear to be resilient to fire, with all groups possessing adaptations or life history characteristics that ensure persistence following pyric disturbance. Despite these findings, demographics of several plant groups were clearly affected under certain circumstances and it is suggested that fire, in concert with pre- and post-fire rainfall, can act as a driving force in regulating plant community dynamics in spinifex grasslands.

Certification

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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