

the **basin**

# **BULLET**

the voice of desert channels queensland

next  
page

exit

December 2007

- is our Island too small?
- spoilbank: a testimonial
- DCQ new blood

seasons  
greetings

# As I See It...



Kevin07, Kevin07, Kevin07!

This is no longer simply a slick electioneering slogan that Australians are sick of hearing, it is the new catchcry of climate change activists around the world. And it's not our Kevin – although the thinking world is grateful for the United States' new-found isolation in this matter – it is Kevin Conrad, the delegate for our closest neighbour, Papua New Guinea, at the recent Bali conference on climate change.

Harvard educated Conrad, amid the growing frustration of delegates with the intransigence of the US delegation, leaned quietly to the microphone and said in measured tones: "We have a saying: if you are not prepared to lead, get out of the way. We seek your leadership but if, for some reason, you are not willing to lead, leave it to the rest of us. Please get out of the way." He sat back amid wild applause and ... the Americans succumbed, and agreed to compromise on the Bali roadmap on climate change.

If the words and courage of a minnow on the world stage can sway a super-power, why can't the words and examples of individuals at a local level sway the wider community, local government, and State and Federal politicians?

Even tsunamis begin with a single tremor.

**The Editor**

<b>Island Too Small?:</b> soiling our own nest?	<b>3</b>
<b>Reap and Sow:</b> you only get what you give	<b>4</b>
<b>Greenies, Brownie; Cockies, Townies:</b> opportunity for accolades	<b>4</b>
<b>Hot Date:</b> everyone needs one	<b>5</b>
<b>DCQ news:</b> still whipping up a storm	<b>5</b>
<b>Fields of Knowledge:</b> better than dreams	<b>6</b>
<b>Spoilbank:</b> a testimonial	<b>7</b>
<b>Infusion:</b> getting new blood	<b>8</b>
<b>Catchment Committees &amp; Desert Uplands Roundup:</b> exactly that	<b>9</b>
<b>Rendevous:</b> Fiction by Mark Kleinschmidt	<b>10</b>

# an island too small?

Around 800 AD, a group of weary Polynesian seafarers dragged their sturdy ocean canoes onto a welcome beach on the planet's most isolated piece of land. Either by accident or design, they had landed on Easter Island, a remote outpost of tropical forest and birds ... birds everywhere, at least 6 species of land birds and 37 species of breeding sea-birds. Studies of surviving pollen grains show that the island's forest was home to the world's largest palms and dandelions as big as trees.

They had found a land of plenty! With abundant birds and fruit to eat; trees to cut for fuel; trees to cut to clear land for gardens; trees to cut for canoes for catching porpoises and tuna, and trees to cut for the transport of huge statues. Things were pretty good.

As the population grew to its peak of around 10,000, more trees were cut, and by 1600 all the trees were gone and with them the land birds, all but one of the seabirds, the canoes with the attendant porpoise and tuna meat, the rollers for transporting statues, the fuel, the fruit bearers, and the soil stabilisers ... all gone!

The remaining accessible animal to the islanders was homo sapien. When Europeans arrived in 1722 the population had crashed to about 2,000, the barren grassland was littered with the spear-points of the islanders' last great hunt, the survivors picking their teeth with the bones of their fellows.

The Norse, when they arrived in Iceland around 850 AD, likewise found a bounteous, wooded island not dissimilar to parts of Norway and Britain; within a few centuries the trees were all gone, cut for fuel and construction. The grazing practices imported with their livestock were eventually recognised as unsuitable and were adapted to sustainable models that are still used today. The Icelandic Norse saw what was happening and made a clear choice, as a society, to change the way they did things so their descendants had a future.

Rwanda, pre-1994: rising population – similar density to Holland – supported by primitive agriculture; abrupt drop in food production due to drought and massive deforestation; rapidly rising violence and theft committed

by increasing numbers of young men without land, without food, without hope ... without a future.

Almost a million people were butchered in Rwanda, but it is more than just a story about evil perpetrators and innocent victims: it is a salutary lesson on how environmental factors can mix with the social and political soup to produce a poisonous brew. It may also have alerted us to enough of the contributing factors for the lessons to be used as an early-warning of potential future disasters.

It appears that 18th-century philosopher, Thomas Malthus was right when he wrote: 'population and environmental problems created by non-sustainable resource use will ultimately get solved . . . if not by pleasant means . . . then by unpleasant' ones not of our own choosing.

Those of us who enjoy an affluent, rapacious, western lifestyle are currently consuming resources at a rate that far outstrips the earth's

capacity to sustain it. To add to our existing gluttony, there are additional billions in the world aspiring to, and actively trying to attain, the same level of affluence and profligacy. Modern transport and trade has connected us as surely as if all the earth's lands were pushed together into the one mass. We are mining the wealth of every part of the earth's surface ... and her depths. Can we survive on our tiny planet? Will the brave new technological age pull us back from the brink? We communicate, travel and trade like there was no tomorrow ... and there may not be unless we act, and act now.

Our world has been corporatised, advertised, synthesised, globalised and traumatised.

Where will we go when then the natural systems of the earth, the very systems that support life, spiral out of control and begin to shut down?

Will there be enough resilience left in the tired planet to support the remnants that survive famine, disease, social chaos and mutual destruction, or will we, like the Easter Islanders, simply eat each other to the edge of oblivion?

Exacerbating these effects is climate change. Whether it's human-induced or merely exacerbated by our activities and unsustainable resource use, climate change will clearly cause things to go wrong. The real danger is that, in most instances, it won't be sudden, but gradual. In that case, things will, unfortunately, remain comfortingly deniable until it's way too late.

We, as a world society, must act and we must act now. After all, we are but an island in the vast ocean of the cosmos: we have no canoe ... no bearing to set ... no fair wind to blow ... no one but each other ... no island but this.



# As Ye Sow, So Shall Ye Reap

At a recent biodiversity workshop in Tambo, participants were told by workshop facilitator, David Akers of the Environmental Protection Agency that if you look after your land, then your land will look after you.

"Graziers have often commented that it is rewarding to find that the practices associated with maintaining a productive grazing business are also critically important to maintaining ecological processes," David Akers says. "For example, controlling weeds and feral animals, maintaining ground cover and managing grazing pressure along drainage lines all contribute to sustainable grazing and a healthy ecology."

These biodiversity workshops, developed by David Akers, complement the broader Grazing Land Management project. Grazing Land Management is a cross-regional project covering Queensland's rangelands, is funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust, and managed by Desert Channels Queensland.

Both the biodiversity and the GLM workshops have been tailored to specific bioregions (Mulga Lands, Mitchell Grass Downs, Channel Country, Desert Uplands, etc.), and are aimed at giving land managers the edge when it comes to managing their land and business enterprise as a single, productive unit.

"We've always been aware," says Matt Bauer of Greendale, Tambo, "but it is great to hear it again. Dave did a great job of telling us about maintaining the balance on our properties. His workshop was well presented, practical and very straight forward."

Matt, who heard about the workshop when applying for project funding from DCQ, had joined a number of other landholders and shire council officers at Stirling Downs, Tambo, for the biodiversity workshop.

"Everything we heard at the workshop is very useful and made us think more about the way we do things. It helped us see the bigger picture," he explains.

The workshop increased participants' knowledge of biodiversity on their properties, and how to manage for better production and ecological outcomes. They also looked at the geology, vegetation and fauna of the area and how this fits in with routine property management practices. Other areas covered included environmental planning, how to manage landscape health, where to get technical advice, and how to prepare an application for grant funding.

Soil health, assessing the ecological and productive condition of landscapes, migratory bird patterns and managing wetland areas are topics that will be covered during a proposed series of workshops in the Tambo and Charleville areas. If you would like to know more, please contact the project officer, David Akers at Longreach EPA on 4652 7301 or email [david.akers@epa.qld.gov.au](mailto:david.akers@epa.qld.gov.au)

## Greenies, brownies; cockies, townies!

No matter where you live in the Central West of Queensland, if you have a philosophy of resource prudence, environmental leadership or innovation, why not nominate for the Desert Channels Queensland Environmental Awards.

These awards have five categories:

Recycling and Waste Management

Water Saving

Education and Training

Innovative Environmental Management

Environmental Support – Green Theme

The Desert Channels Queensland Environmental Awards are part of the Remote Area Planning and Development Board's inaugural Central West Industry Excellence Awards which will culminate in a Gala Evening on 8th March 2008 at the Longreach Civic and Cultural Centre.

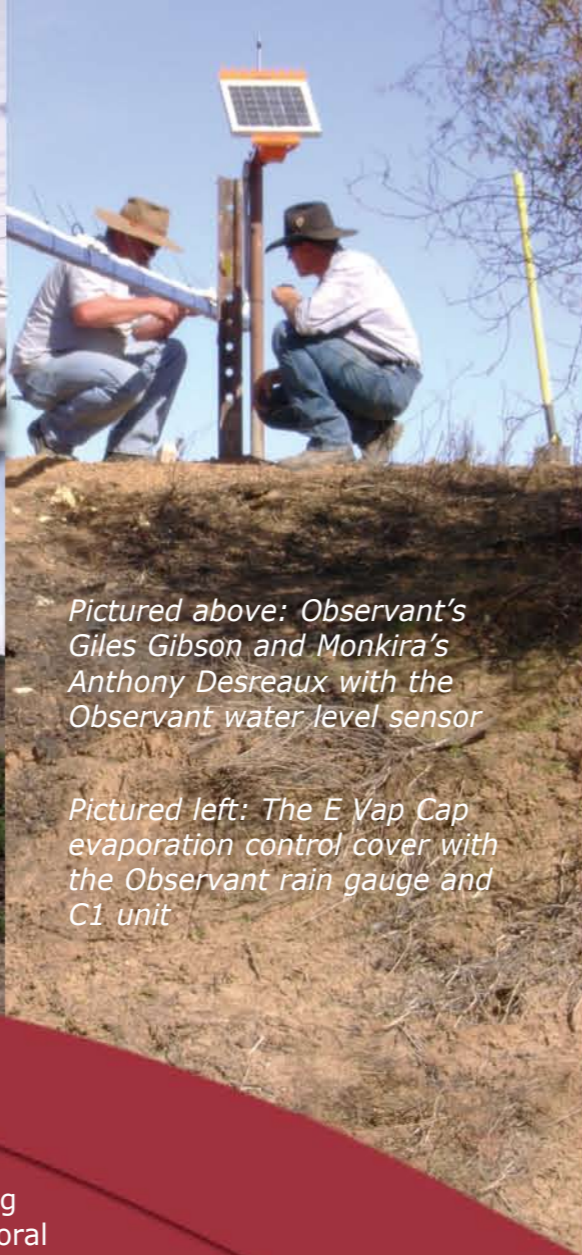
The MC for the evening is actor, Penny Cook, well-known for her roles on popular television programs, E-Street, GP, The Flying Doctors and A Country Practice. Supporting her will be Guest Speaker, Peter Davidson. Peter was a paramedic on the first rescue helicopter to reach survivors of the 1998 Sydney to Hobart Yacht Race.

Winners of the five Environmental Awards categories will receive a unique Richard Moffat sculpture valued at \$1,000, promotion throughout the year as leaders in environmental activities, extensive media exposure, a framed certificate and a DCQ partnership sign.

These awards are open to individuals or groups who have shown excellence in environmental activities in the region. For a nomination pack, or for more information, contact Roelie Hartwig on 4652 7825, but hurry, nominations close on 30th January, 2008.



### HOT date



*Pictured above: Observant's Giles Gibson and Monkira's Anthony Desreux with the Observant water level sensor*

*Pictured left: The E Vap Cap evaporation control cover with the Observant rain gauge and C1 unit*



Mark **Friday 4th April 2008** in your diary: that's when NAPCO's Monkira Station is hosting the Desert Knowledge CRC's WaterSmart Pastoral Production™ Project's Field Day.

Over the past year, Monkira has been field-testing and monitoring the reliability and cost effectiveness of a large remote-monitoring system, solar pumps, evaporation and seepage control devices.

Monkira has seen significant time and dollar savings since implementing these new technologies and manager, Anthony Desreux, will be opening Monkira to other graziers, suppliers and manufacturers to let them view and discuss the technologies in use.

Come and hear about the considerable benefits, talk to the people who use the technologies every day, and see the infrastructure in use on Monkira Station.

Also on the day:

Field tours of technologies in use on Monkira

Exhibits of appropriate types of equipment and designs that would commonly be needed to deliver water costs effectively around a property

Comprehensive remote monitoring telemetry system incorporating water levels, flow rates, rain gauge, camera and motor controllers

Conserving water through seepage and evaporation control devices

Regional Projects and funding opportunities for your property

Live entertainment and bar

Free camping and meals included

More information go to: [www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/watersmart](http://www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au/watersmart)

Whew, what a year! We farewelled some old faces from both Board and staff, and welcomed new (see Infusion article); continued to roll-out project funding; ran arid gardening and funding application workshops, field days and training days; conducted a garden makeover; made promotional DVDs, a documentary and TV ads on pest awareness; were a finalist in the State Landcare Awards; and celebrated 5 years of work with the community.

Board members farewelled during 2007 were: Bill Bode (Great Artesian Basin Advisory Council); Leslie Marshall (Desert Uplands Committee); Angus Emmott (Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee); and Rhondda Alexander (Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee) - from our staff we lost Rod Ferdinands our Monitoring and Reporting Officer back to Victoria. (pictured below from left to right)

On the plus side we have continued to fuel our growth and success with new staff members James Newman (Project Officer, Traditional Knowledge Recording Project), Ron Beezley (NRM Facilitator), Brittany Wakefield (Administration Office), Mike Chuk (Planner), Roelie Hartwig (Public Relations Officer) and Jade Fraser (Information Systems Officer). (Pictured bottom row front left to right (Roelie Hartwig absent) This completes a well-rounded team with enhanced capacity to deliver projects and information to all parts of the community across a third of Queensland.

We recently held a very successful National Landcare Program field day at Sesbania near Corfield where more than thirty people attended to hear how Errol and Carleen Enriken run their enterprise and control weeds. Guest speaker, Peter Whip provided a lot of information on property planning and development planning, and DCQ Landcare Facilitator, Cameron O'Neil demystified funding applications and the funding process.

Equally as successful was the Spoilbank field day where John and Judy Sedgewick shared their experiences on running a DCQ devolved grant project to fence off rugged jump-up country to conserve habitat.

Two more of our recent National Landcare Program field days were washed out by the scattered storm activity across much of the region. Some places have had good rain (not before time) while others have had very little, and many, none at all. Hopefully, the gaps in the rainfall mosaic will fill quickly.

Ever proud of our region and keen to showcase it, DCQ submitted a bid for the 2009 State Landcare Conference. Word has just come through that we were successful, so stay tuned for the details of what we're sure will be a great promotion of the land managers of the Queensland section of the Lake Eyre Basin.

Also a great promotion opportunity to be involved in is the Excellence in Industry Awards of which DCQ is sponsoring the environmental section. If you think your enterprise, project or household operations are worthy examples of environmental leadership, why not nominate (see separate article).

Finally for 2007, from all the DCQ team, have a wet Christmas and a fulfilling New Year.



More than 50 interested locals gathered at two recent property field days to share information, see how others were doing things and learn new skills. The two field days were hosted by landholders who have projects with DCQ and were funded through the National Landcare Program.

The first, held at Errol and Carleen Entriaken's Corfield property, Sesbania, focussed on the control of prickly acacia, training and information sharing.

The eradication of prickly acacia is a thorny issue for many property owners, but the Entriakens, with assistance from Desert Channels Queensland, are running a successful eradication project.

"The eradication of weeds is a time consuming and expensive exercise," says Errol Entriaken. "But with funding through organisations such as Desert Channels Queensland, methods of eradication have become more readily available and affordable."

"At Sesbania, we implement every method of eradication of weeds and prickly acacia, including machinery and low residual chemicals, with follow-up work being really important."

The second field day was at John and Judy Sedgwick's Longreach district property, Spoilbank. According to Judy Sedgwick, seeing project work funded on a neighbouring property by Desert Channels Queensland was what got them started.

"We first became aware of Desert Channels Queensland's project funding when we were at Springplains when Steve Wilson, DCQ's Regional Coordinator was there to inspect a project that DCQ had provided funding for," Judy explains.

"After speaking to Steve about the possibility of receiving funding to fence out our hills, we decided to go ahead and apply in the next round of funding. Our project was to completely fence off an area around the hills so we could exclude all stock from the area permanently and leave it as a reserve."

As part of the field day activities, DCQ conducted a short training course in photo-monitoring and the use of a GPS unit. Both skills can be used by landowners to record before, during and after project activities to show what changes their work is causing.

Guest speaker for the days, Peter Whip of PRW AgriBusiness, presented information on property and development planning. Peter focussed on the link between property planning

and the economics of the property business, emphasising the importance of improving infrastructure and changing the business to subsequently better manage the pastures.

"There is lots of good training available for graziers, but unfortunately implementation of new ideas is not happening," says Peter Whip. "Many graziers are not being mentored; there is no one to help guide graziers who decide to change their thinking."

The Sesbania field day allowed the Entriakens to share their methods and implementations first hand and to explain the successful partnership with DCQ. "Because time is crucial, combining your field days with other activities, such as training, and therefore covering more ground in one day is of great benefit," Errol Entriaken says.

"This also encourages people from other organisations to attend. People can get new ideas, share information, find out about such things as new chemicals and have an opportunity to network."

Desert Channels Queensland's Landcare Facilitator, Cameron O'Neil, says it is encouraging to see property owners sharing their experiences and successes in such a positive and professional manner.

"This is what Landcare is all about," he says. "It's all about community, and these types of days really bring people together and provide a fantastic opportunity for land managers to discuss agriculture and its future."

"Our field days are open to all interested people, and I strongly encourage those who want to get a first-hand look at what industry leaders are doing and how Desert Channels Queensland can assist them, to come along."



# spoilbank field day



*Pictured :John and  
Judy Sedgewick*

*Spoilbank field day address by Judy Sedgewick on behalf of her and her husband, John, 28th November 2007.*

"We first became aware of Desert Channels Queensland's project funding when we were at Springplains and Steve Wilson was there to inspect a project for which they had received funding. Denise and Steve Hawe had fenced out the range of hills on *Springplains* that also continues and finishes in *Avondale* (Ed. part of *Spoilbank*).

"After speaking to Steve Wilson about the possibility of receiving funding to fence out our hills, we decided to go ahead and apply in the next round of funding. Our project was to completely fence off an area around the hills so that we would be able to exclude all stock from the area permanently and leave it as a reserve. Our stock had used the hills for a camp, so by their removal it was going to allow the regeneration of edible plants in the fenced area as well as being a benefit to us in helping to make the management of our stock in this area easier.

"We were successful in receiving funding for the project which allowed us to employ a fencing contractor and purchase the fencing materials. We did however go over budget with the materials as when we cleared the fence line we found there were more gullies than expected. We also had to deviate around a small hill that we hadn't been able to see because of the thick gidgee.

The total area that is now permanently destocked is 71 ha. We hope to see the regeneration of native plants and an increase in bird life after our big wet season in the New Year. Part of our contract with DCQ is to continue our baiting of this area and keep a photographic record.

"To receive funding from Desert Channels Queensland you need to be prepared to contribute above 50% of the project costs. This can be financial or in-kind.

"Our biggest cost was clearing the fence line. It was too much for our little D4 but we were fortunate enough to be able to call on the Upshot dozer known as 'Alice'. The other costs for us included stick-racking, pegging and grading the line, rails, ends and wooden posts and, of course, time.

"After being granted the DCQ funding and fencing off the hills, we decided we could split the Mountain Paddock in two by continuing the eastern boundary fence of DCQ onto the

Avondale bore. We now have an area of the country in which it was impossible to get a clean muster that is now manageable, as well as allowing us to control the stocking of this country better than previously. We can thank Desert Channels Queensland for giving us the start.

"To us, Desert Channels Queensland is delivering Landcare across areas of Western Queensland in many different ways. DCQ is a community-based regional management body run by very dedicated and helpful people.

"For those who will apply to DCQ for project funding in future rounds we wish you every success.

"John and I thank you for attending the field day here today, and DCQ for providing the BBQ and refreshments. We wish you all a Happy Christmas and a wet year ahead. Thank you all."



# INFUSION!

With the recent election of members to the respective catchment executives, there comes an infusion of new blood to the DCQ Board.

Newly elected Chair of the Cooper's Creek Catchment Executive, Leonie Nunn of the Stonehenge district property, Sunnyside, replaces long-term Board member and neighbour, Angus Emmott of Noonbah.

Angus said he was honoured to have been on the DCQ Board since its formation. "It's been a great journey. DCQ has grown into a very successful group, and I'm very proud to have been part of it," he said.

"It's always good for an organisation to get new members with fresh ideas and enthusiasm: it keeps it invigorated and growing."

Nick Walker of Rio, Longreach, also newly elected to the Cooper's Creek Catchment Executive, has been appointed as a roving proxy to cover for both Leonie Nunn and the other Cooper's Creek representative, Maree Morton of Innamincka Station, Innamincka. The Indigenous representative for the Cooper is Hope Ebsworth of the Wangkumarra people of the lower Cooper.

Representatives on the DCQ Board from the Georgina Diamantina Catchment Executive are Errol Entriaken of Sesbania, Corfield, (replacing Bob Young of Winton who was a founding member of both the DCQ Board and the Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee), and Kelsey Neilson of Two Rivers, Boulia. Bob will remain involved in his new capacity as their roving proxy. A replacement is yet to be nominated for the catchment executive's outgoing Indigenous representative, Marlene Speechley of the Waluwarra people. Other losses to the Board from this catchment committee are: founding member of both the Board and the Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee, Rhondda Alexander of Currimundi (formerly of Marion Downs, Boulia); and her long-time proxy, Jan McIntyre.

Other representatives to the DCQ Board come from the Desert Uplands Committee (Robyn Adams of Stratford, Blackall and Margaret House of Fortuna, Aramac), local government (Dougal Davidson of Tambo, and David Arnold of Remote Area Planning and Development Board), the Great Artesian Basin Advisory Council (John Mayne of Tarabah, Tambo), and conservation interests (Guy Fitzhardinge and Doug Humann, both of the Australian Bush Heritage Fund, share this position).



Board Members pictured right:

(from left to right) Bruce Scott (local government proxy), Maree Morton (Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee), David Arnold (local government), Leonie Nunn (Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee), Peter Douglas (Chair), Hope Ebsworth (Cooper's Creek Catchment Committee), Guy Fitzhardinge (Conservation Interests), John Mayne (Great Artesian Basin), Robyn Adams (Desert Uplands Committee) and Errol Entriaken (Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee). Absent: Dougal Davidson (local government), Kelsey Neilson and Marlene Speechley (Georgina Diamantina Catchment Committee), Margaret House (Desert Uplands Committee).



# catchment roundup

## Catchment Committees

Both the Cooper's Creek and Georgina Diamantina catchment committees have recently restructured to include a catchment executive that provides representation to the Desert Channels Queensland Board. While anyone is welcome to attend committee meetings, the executive for each committee was elected via a catchment-wide vote.

The elected executive for the Cooper's Creek Catchment Executive is: Leonie Nunn, Sunnyside, Stonehenge (Chair); Mike Price, Marengo, Aramac; Nicholas Walker Rio, Longreach; Hugh MacKay, Hotspur, Jericho; Jim Marwell, Isisford; Matthew Barrett, South Galway, Windorah; and Maree Morton of Innamincka Station, Innamincka. The Indigenous representative for the Cooper, appointed by the region's Aboriginal Advisory Panel, is Hope (pronounced Hopey) Ebsworth of the Wangkumarra people of the lower Cooper.

The Georgina Diamantina Catchment Executive members are: Errol Entriiken, Sesbania, Corfield (Chair); George Scott, Nash Station, Mt Isa; Kelsey Neilson, Two Rivers, Boulia; Robert Jansen, Marion Downs, Boulia; Cheyne Williams, Davenport Downs, Winton; Bob Young, Winton; and Toni Wilmott, Winton. Marlene Speechley of the Waluwarra people is the Indigenous representative.

Both the Cooper's Creek and Georgina Diamantina catchment executives provide three representatives (1 Indigenous and 2 other) to the DCQ Board. The representatives from the Cooper are Hope Ebsworth, Leonie Nunn and Maree Morton, while from the Georgina Diamantina they are Marlene Speechley, Errol Entriiken and Kelsey Neilson.



## Desert Uplands

Co-founder and stalwart of the Desert Uplands Committee, Lesley Marshall, has hung up her spurs and is now ready to enjoy her retirement and travel throughout Australia with her husband Bob.

After thirteen years of inspirational leadership, energy and commitment, Lesley has worked tirelessly to nurture, guide, grow and elevate this unique organisation for the benefit of the region, its people and their lands.

Lesley has worked tirelessly representing the Desert Uplands region, sourcing funding, being a member of the Desert Channels Queensland Board, the Burdekin Dry Tropics NRM Board, and the Community Advisory Committee for the Lake Eyre Basin Ministerial Council.

In 1996 Lesley won the ABC Rural Women's Award for Western Queensland and came second in the state competition. She received the Churchill Fellowship in 1998 which allowed her to travel to Canada and study the Prairie Lands Rehabilitation Programme.

When she and Margaret House founded the Desert Uplands Build Up and Development Strategy Committee in 1993, their aim was to gain recognition for the Desert Uplands Bioregion, and to encourage research into the area to improve the information that was available for the people who lived in the Desert Uplands. Lesley says that her greatest achievement in working with the Desert Uplands Committee is that this aim has now been achieved.



# rendezvous

I hate the waiting, the stomach-churning fear, the nervous anticipation, the dry mouth and sweaty palms. It's always the same before the wheels start to roll ... too much time to think: going over the possibilities, the 'what ifs'.

But today is not going to be a 'normal day at the office' for this soldier, today is perhaps my toughest assignment to date ... I'm meeting Alexis!

'Settle down, Jimmy,' I tell myself with a deep breath, 'everything will be fine. You know the attraction's mutual, just go with the flow, have fun, and see where it leads ... life's too short.'

I run shaking fingers through my hair for the hundredth time, smooth the front of my shirt, grab my drink, and take a long, calming swallow. It's not that I drink a lot, but I like the reassuring feel of the bottle in my hands and, with the sort of life I lead, I figure I deserve a small psychological crutch.

And Ted agrees ... he's my partner. We've been through a lot, Ted and me: a lot of scrapes, close shaves, mainly high-speed stuff and undercover work. One gives you the adrenalin, the other just wears you down so you look forward to these periods of release, where you get to go out in the real world and have a bit of fun.

Ted reckons, 'go for it'. He says Alexis is a great girl and, if I wasn't in the way, he'd have a shot at her himself ... I'd have to watch my back. No ... I'm being paranoid. Ted would never do that, he's my mate; we've been through so much. I've known him since ... well, forever: he's part of the family.

My mother hugs him too hard and too long and calls him 'Teddy', but he doesn't seem to mind. He accepts it as his due ... and smiles ...

I glance across the small room we share and catch his bright eye, maybe it is a little beady, shifty even ... what is he thinking? I throw him a silent salute and take another long soothing draught. He smiles back in his quiet, enigmatic way. Do I really know him? Is he the staunch friend and partner I think? Haven't we stood shoulder to shoulder through it all, always there for each other: dependable and true?

Or does all that count for nothing when it comes to a girl? All's fair ...? I think I see him shoot me a wink as I turn at the sound of my wheels arriving.

I'd ordered a limo and my driver is the usual, tall, motherly woman who likes to fuss over me. I find it flattering ... and comforting in a way. I settle back and think of Alexis.

The city-scape slides smoothly passed: haphazard stacks of toy-room blocks teetering upwards, out of sight; late morning shoppers scurrying to another bargain; elegant women, their staccato stilettos drumming out a rhythm of mystery and promise.

The sonorous hum of the wheels and the rocking of the suspension usually lull me, but I can't enjoy this ride. There's too much turmoil gnawing at the ragged edges of my mind ... perhaps it's the drink. I'll give it up ... one day.

What if she doesn't feel the same way I do? What if I've misinterpreted the signals? This is worse than going into action: the butterflies, the clamminess, the quickening breath, the racing heart ... all over a girl! But what a girl!

'Jimmy,' I think, 'get a grip. You know she likes you ... doesn't she? Stay cool, how can she not like your rugged good looks, razor wit, and mysterious life? I go to take another draw on my drink and some slops on the front of my shirt.

Damn!

I yell at the driver, 'Did you get your license from the bottom of the Weetbix packet?' Not really, I'm too polite. I don't say anything; I know it's not the road.

The world flickers past, unaware of the momentous happenings in its midst. So much the better; if it all goes wrong, no one will know: I've got my reputation to maintain.

We approach the rendezvous and I see Alexis's limo, it's larger than mine ... but then, she is from the high end of town. I see her raven hair and the contrasting creamy skin; the long, curved lashes framing dark pools of desire; full, moist lips provocatively moueing in my direction.

My stomach back-flips; my mouth's full of sawdust. I reach for the bottle ... it's empty, but I suck on it anyway, just for that ghost of a taste, reassuring, settling ... unlike the scent of Alexis that now fills my nostrils.

I'm nearly mad with excitement. Play it cool ... what would Ted think?

We pull in beside her and I stretch out a hand ... our fingers touch ... electricity ... she smiles ... my tension morphs into exhilaration ... all's well.

Our drivers slouch around, obviously enjoying the open air, but always attentive, looking back to see if we need anything. 'Would you like another drink, Sir? ... some more to eat, Miss?' Well, that's what they're here for.

I want to climb in with Alexis but the damn seatbelt won't budge. Alexis laughs at my predicament and offers me some nibbles and a drink. I accept graciously, they smell and taste like Alexis. Oh, heaven! I fumble with the belt catch: my dexterous fingers have deserted me. I try harder ... it's locked solid ... seized. I sense conspiracy and swivel to my driver. She smiles, non-conspiratorially. I exhale slowly: no danger there. She's seen my plight and is on the way. So is Alexis's. Between them they'll get this high-security crap off me.

Alexis hands me another nibble as I wait. Our fingers linger, her skin hot on mine.

Suddenly, we're jerked apart ... my driver's gone mad. Alexis's chubby face rapidly recedes, and I'm left crying at the soggy piece of Cruskit in my hand as my mother pushes my stroller towards home and the consoling embrace of the teddy with the enigmatic smile.

*Desert Channels Queensland is funded by the Australian Government's Natural Heritage Trust*