

The Bush

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5 facts about contemporary land use in Australia

- Saltbush, much derided, is now planted by graziers as fodder: it increases the carrying capacity of marginal country by up to a factor of ten, and makes for tastier and leaner meat with higher levels of vitamin E. It controls wind and soil erosion, and can be used to revegetate waterlogged and salinity-despoiled land. It reduces weeds, encourages useful insect life, and is a first-rate firebreak.
- An inch of soil can blow away in an afternoon, and it can take anything from fifty to 10 000 years to reconstitute it. No-till farming reduces erosion by 80 per cent.
- Where once the movement of water across the land was slowed by chains of ponds and swampy meadows, now it flows unchecked, with dire consequences for soil nutrient levels, productivity, biodiversity and water quality. The draining of land, deforestation, grazing, agriculture, dieback, erosion, the concussion of hard hooves, even the loss of burrowing mammals such as bandicoots and bettongs, everything since the arrival of Europeans has accelerated the movement of water.
- Jersey cows are no longer common on Australian farms, but it takes 19 per cent less Jersey milk, compared to Friesians, to produce cheddar cheese, and the Jerseys' carbon footprint is 20 per cent smaller.
- In Victoria, by the end of the nineteenth century firestick farming had become as much a habit of graziers as it had been of Aborigines, and for some of the same reasons: to keep the woodland open for sheep and cattle, to encourage grasses and edible plants to grow. The graziers did two things differently: often they burned intense rather than cool fires, and they burned forests that the Aborigines did not. In doing this they radically altered the environment and increased the risk and frequency of wildfire.

