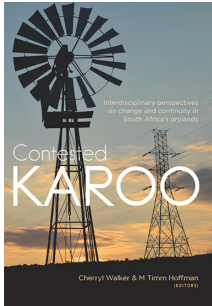


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Contested Karoo: Interdisciplinary perspectives on change and continuity in South Africa's drylands

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The country ahead of us, the country behind: A review of 'Contested Karoo'

Contested Karoo arrives as a valuable and timely contribution to the field of work focusing on the Karoo – a field that has tended to be dominated by studies of the physical environment. The book constitutes a collaboration between scientists working more on the physical environmental side and social scientists, providing critical perspectives both on the Karoo past and also, importantly, on the different plausible futures facing the Karoo, given ongoing social and environmental challenges. The book effectively provides a type of 'road ahead, road behind' perspective on a rapidly evolving landscape – biologically and socio-economically.

The Karoo has often tended to be viewed from the outside as empty – a repository for a range of projects, programmes and imaginaries. Yet, of course, people have lived there for thousands of years – and the tendency to consider the Karoo as a type of empty stage for favourite narratives (for example, around what constitutes 'good' rural development), has had significant consequences. As a result, while a rich and rewarding volume, the book does not provide comfortable bedtime reading. It is clear, across the range of sites and examples considered in the book, that most land uses have overpromised and underdelivered to local communities.

The book argues convincingly that the Karoo should be regarded as a type of "reconfigured resource frontier" (Chapter 12) – where powerful vested interests effectively focus on extraction of value (for example, minerals, and renewable and non-renewable energy). As a result, the notion of comfortable narratives imposed by external view is key – for example, in the case of renewable energy, several chapters emphasise the extent to which renewable energy has been seen in the Karoo (and, of course, elsewhere) as a kind of 'silver bullet' strategic investment – one that can ensure energy security and the transition to low carbon energy generation, but one that can also provide a measure of socio-economic benefit. A number of authors unpack this notion – including, for example, the chapter on renewable energy investments outside De Aar, where the contrast between the renewable energy infrastructure and the significant energy poverty amongst the local communities is both striking and timely, given the prominence of discussions in South Africa around the 'just transition' at present.

The book also considers the past and future of farming in the Karoo, noting that livestock farming is likely to continue to constitute a key part of plausible land use futures for the area – but that it is already changing, and will continue to adapt in response to environmental and socio-economic change. For example, it is clear that the trend of declining commercial stock and the rise of different forms of game farming is a continuing one¹ – but this is another example of the extent to which the book unpacks what might be comfortable narratives around Karoo land use. Frequently, externally imposed storylines regarding the changing nature of Karoo farming are very uncritical and optimistic about the environmental and socio-economic (including labour) benefits of the rise of different typologies of game farming. We know, of course, that game farming activities come in a variety of forms, and the critical debate throughout a range of chapters, around not just the current and possible benefits of game farming but also types of eco-tourism activities, provides real practical considerations in terms of how such activities might be planned, implemented and viewed.

What really resonates throughout the book as we consider emerging uncritical storylines is the notion of power. When we unpack, for example, how renewable energy or tourism in the Karoo have tended to be presented somewhat optimistically and uncritically, one of the key approaches taken by a range of chapters is effectively unpacking these by asking 'who has the power'? Power here can include both who has the power to define what success might look like, but also who may define who benefits, and how. If there is one single more important practical message that one can take away from the book, it reminds us that we can never be overconfident and uncritical in considering plans and programmes in fragile landscapes – that we have to ask the difficult and uncomfortable questions.

Effectively, the book constitutes a key contribution beyond the Karoo itself, to understanding of resilient drylands, with clear implications at both national and global levels. A primary example here would be the aforementioned concerns regarding priority investments in marginal environments (e.g. mining, renewable energy and the SKA), and their ability to provide equitable benefits to all, including so-called 'surplus' communities, while ensuring environmental sustainability. This cluster of chapters alone has significant implications more widely – far beyond the academic community, and, in fact, far beyond the Karoo.

The visual material in the book provides a rich complement to discussions in text – my one comment was that I would very much have liked higher-resolution maps to consider, but this was likely a feature of the electronic review copy. The photographs are beautiful, and emphasise the powerful love and commitment of many of the authors both to the landscape, and to those living within it.

In terms of audience, the book is certainly targeted for specialists and peers, with robust and useful material around specialist areas. But I think the use of the book goes beyond domain specialists – which is important. I think (and hope) that it will also be of significant interest to the civil society organisations active in this area, including those concerned with social and environmental justice. There are also useful notes regarding changing paradigms in conservation and agriculture – these go beyond interest only to environmental and conservation scientists, and are likely to be of clear interest to farmers, civil society and conservation practitioners. I would argue that this is a highly desirable outcome.



Acknowledgement

Sincere thanks are due to David Guterson for his permission to make use of the title of his 1989 book of short stories in the title of this review.

Reference

1. Hoffman MT, Skowno A, Bell W, Mashele S. Long-term changes in land use, land cover and vegetation in the Karoo drylands of South Africa: Implications for degradation monitoring. *Afr J Range Forage Sci.* 2018;35(3/4):209–221. <https://doi.org/10.2989/10220119.2018.1516237>
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