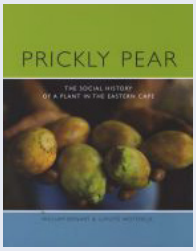
# The phenomenal, pliable, palatable prickly pear!

**Book Title:**
Prickly pear: The social history of a plant in the Eastern Cape

**Book Cover:**

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**ISBN:**
9781868145300

**Publisher:**
Wits University Press, 2011,
R250.00*
*Book price at time of review.

**Review Title:**
The phenomenal, pliable, palatable prickly pear!

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**How to cite this book review:**
Nattrass N. The phenomenal, pliable, palatable prickly pear! S Afr J Sci. 2012;108(9/10), Art. #1432, 1 page. http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/sajs.v108i9/10.1432



Anyone who has harvested prickly pears will not forget the formidable spines studding the broad succulent cladodes (leaves) or the tiny, needle-like glochids protecting the sweet yellowish fruit. Known as *turksvy* to the Afrikaners (who made jam, syrup and *witblits* spirit from it) and *itolofiya* to the Xhosa (who brew beer from it) – the prickly pear is an iconic symbol of the Eastern Cape. Yet, as William Beinart and Luvuyo Wotshela point out in their comprehensive and engaging new book, the prickly pear (*Opuntia ficus-indica*) originated in Mexico. It was transported to the rest of the world by sailors who ate the cladodes as a vegetable to protect against scurvy, and by settlers to be planted as a thorny barrier and a drought-resistant food for people and other animals.

Prickly pears grow easily from a single cladode placed on the ground and were well established on the Mediterranean coast by the mid-1500s. Beinart and Wotshela argue that the prickly pear was probably introduced in South Africa sometime in the 18th century as a castaway from a boat and then helped along the way into the interior by humans (for example, a farmer is known to have brought two cladodes from the Western Cape to his farm in the Eastern Cape in 1750).

Both Black and White pastoralists planted prickly pears, but the plant soon started spreading on its own with the assistance of crows and baboons. By the 1850s, the prickly pear had become highly invasive, covering riverbeds and whole valleys to the exclusion of other plants. At its height in the 1930s, Beinart and Wotshela describe how it formed impenetrable jungles up to 25 foot high on an estimated two million acres, mostly in the Eastern Cape but stretching also into KwaZulu-Natal and Mpumulanga. Farmers who were most negatively affected – crop farmers shut out of rich riverine lands and livestock farmers whose ostriches, sheep and goats experienced high rates of injury to their eyes, mouths and throats from consuming glochids – pressured the state to take action. The government initially focused on distributing poison but eventually resorted to biological controls. Biological control was resisted both by Black and White farmers in less affected areas but to no avail (the discussion of the politics of prickly pear eradication policy is fascinating). Despite concerns about ecological impact, cactoblastis moths and cochineal bugs were bred and released in designated zones. By the 1950s, numbers of prickly pear were reduced by 80% – even in places the biological control programme had not explicitly targeted.

Although still declared a weed, the prickly pear is no longer deemed invasive, and continues to be harvested by Xhosa women for sale as fruit or to be brewed into beer. Beinart and Wotshela provide an appreciative portrait of the role of prickly pear in African life, pointing out how rural 'betterment' programmes separated people from the prickly pear fences they had planted and harvested – and how contemporary concerns about stock theft and security are further constricting their access to wild prickly pear on commercial farms. They also tell the stories of White farmers, notably Charles Rubidge and his son Sidney, both of whom planted prickly pear and experimented with growing spineless varieties. Sidney invested significant resources in prickly pear, opposed the biological control programme and then watched helplessly as the family plantation of spineless prickly pear was devastated by cochineal insects.

The book is interesting not only for its historical breadth, interdisciplinary reach and social insights, but also for its contemporary relevance. It raises questions like: what is an invasive plant? Or a weed? Does its Mexican origin mean it is not South African even though it is deeply embedded in African and Afrikaner culture and has become part of the local environment? And, given its useful properties as a drought-resistant plant and as a source of protein, sugar and moisture for humans and livestock, should we not be rehabilitating it once more, especially given the challenge of global warming? These questions are not only posed explicitly in the book, but also through the global discussion, over the past 100 years, on the pros and cons of the prickly pear.

The book is both fascinating and entertaining. It provides a fresh and informative lens on South African scientific, social, agricultural and ecological history. The past is juxtaposed against contemporary events (such as the prickly pear festival) and the book is amply illustrated with wonderful old photographs in which the prickly pear serves as a persistent backdrop for everyday life. The book inspires a new appreciation of the prickly pear and an intense desire to make the recipes it contains: prickly-pear cake (made from the fruit) and napalitos salad (from the cladodes). It is a book for all tastes. Enjoy.