



Biodiversity in Southern Africa

Vol 1. Patterns at Local Scale Edited by N. Jürgens, D.H.

Haarmeyer, J. Luther-Mosebach, J. Dengler, M. Finckh & U. Schmiedel (2010)

Vol 2. Patterns and Processes at a Regional Scale

Edited by U. Schmiedel & N. Jürgens (2010);

Vol 3 +CD-ROM, Implications for Land Use and Management

Edited by M.T. Hoffman, U. Schmiedel & N. Jürgens (2010)

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There is no way that I can do justice to this set of volumes in the space available. It is easily the best value for money that the BES has given me! My sole complaint is the books weigh nearly 6 kg due to the very high quality of paper used, necessary for the comprehensive and excellent photographic material.

Volume 1 (801 pages) gives details of 45 transects, starting in northern Namibia and ending near Cape Town. Nearly all have details of topography, soil chemistry and profiles, climate, plant and animal species present. Desert crusts form a strong component in many of the dry areas and the

lichen flora is also comprehensively covered. Higher plants, vertebrates and invertebrates are fully described and well illustrated. However, the data for each transect are more than lists of species, as communities of plants of different life forms, plant-animal interactions and other ecological topics are covered. Each separate part has a note of the 'responsible authors' and the addresses of these are listed at the end of volume 3, so that anyone interested in a particular system can contact them directly.

Volume 2 (348 pages) draws out regional patterns. There are important sections on changes with time and the authors have been fortunate to obtain previously unpublished historical accounts. I learnt a lot from the history of human colonization of the area and how this affected land use and biodiversity. Some of the material is given in the form of case studies and I particularly enjoyed the one on snail shells as shelters for arthropods in the Sandveld. Human impacts are then considered and the final section is on experiments that can be conducted to check the veracity of suggestions made as to why changes have occurred.

Volume 3 (226 pages) considers the implications of data from the previous volumes for land use and management. Although the shortest, this is the most important volume since unless the incredible biodiversity of Southern Africa is not only understood, but also managed for the benefit of the people who live there, all the impressive scientific observations will be consigned to archives. Already a number of initiatives involving stakeholders have taken place. Topics such as restoring degraded land, optimal farm size, habitat fragmentation and the use of corridors are considered. To some extent this section is 'work in progress' and the authors are actively identifying problems and research needs.

This magnificent set of volumes is a joy to read, whether or not you have been fortunate enough to visit some of the areas concerned. It is a tribute to international collaboration on a large scale and should be on the bookshelf of everyone who is interested in biodiversity in its broadest sense, where communities of plants and animals exist in some of the harshest environments, which according to modelled predictions in the third volume, may well get worse.