

DEATH IN PARADISE

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Tears stream down my dusty face and I'm engulfed with despair as I write of the grim events that have unfolded before me and force myself to look at the images I've captured of scenes that I hope never to see again.

Australia has come under fire from a barrage of destruction at the hands of Mother Nature and, having come face to face with the corpses of the victims of the drought that she's inflicted on the land, I write the words that must be heard, especially by those who have no concept of the reality of the situation or who erroneously believe that the latest drought has run its course. Like a war correspondent I attempt to describe hell on earth, to present a balanced, unbiased and unemotional view of what lies before me, yet as I look at the images of death in a corner of the outback that once seemed to be paradise my work is hindered by another deluge of tears.

I've seen the effects of drought on many occasions. I've travelled through arid landscapes that were once fertile agricultural fields, and I've seen the barren and dusty outback strewn with the dead and decaying corpses of wildlife. I thought my soul had become impenetrably hardened to the sight of birds of prey feasting on the rotting carcasses of the victims of drought, but on my most recent foray into the outback every grim scene from the past paled into insignificance. Past droughts were merely a slap on the wrist by Mother Nature, but this most savage of droughts is something entirely different.



Above: A victim of the drought

It can be argued that droughts are simply part of a cyclical weather pattern, or that they're a result of global climate change that's been aided by the activities of the human species that has spread across the planet in plague proportions, but whatever the reason for the drought might be, the consequences remain the same. And it's not a pretty picture in the Australian outback.

It was impossible, on my recent journey, to ignore the fact that the land was under attack from what might ultimately be recorded as the worst drought in the nation's history, but as I travelled through northern South Australia I ignored the clouds of dust that accompanied every subtle breeze, the barren plains that were devoid of all but the most tenacious of vegetation, and the unusual lack of wildlife. And as I approached Mount Chambers gorge, a place of stark beauty that was to be my campsite for a few days, memories of past visits came flooding back. I remembered its rugged rocky landscape, the trickling stream that muttered across tumbled stones, the air filled with perfume from the golden blooms of wattles, and the swathes of gaudy Sturt Desert Peas and cassias that had been on my doorstep like my own glorious garden, but all I found on this occasion was a scene reminiscent of a bloody massacre.



Above: Mount Chambers Gorge during the drought

Countless kangaroos, perhaps close to death from starvation, had come here in the hope of being revived by the life-giving water, but with every pool having evaporated the gorge became their final destination, and the bones of these once beautiful creatures littered the landscape. More than 48 carcasses lay within a 100 metre stretch of the gorge, but I had no inclination to count the many others, families and mates perhaps, that lay in skeletal heaps or had been mummified by the drying winds and the relentlessly arid environment.

I screamed at Mother Nature, at any god who might be listening, demanding to know how any supreme and merciful deity could be so savage, so brutal, so unforgiving, but there was no reply other than the angry growl of the wind that brought red dust swirling through the gorge.

On my previous visit I'd camped beside a stream that trickled slowly, melodically over weather-worn boulders. I'd marvelled at the resilience of gigantic gum trees with their gnarled roots, like arthritic hands, holding them tenaciously onto the rocky cliffs where their minute seeds had sprouted decades, maybe even centuries ago, and in their welcoming shade red kangaroos had grazed on verdant vegetation while others sipped silently at the clear cool water. I'd clambered to the lofty peak of a hill and gazed at the stunning view as the rocky gorge was illuminated with the golden hint of sunset, and I had been reluctant to leave, but this time I couldn't wait to get away, to flee from the ugliness that nature had imposed on what had been a corner of paradise, and to escape from the stench of death, for the gorge had become nature's graveyard.



Above: A victim of the drought.

I'm passionate about Australia's unique wildlife, and especially about kangaroos of every species, and here, where so many had died, I wept uncontrollably at the thought of their suffering and I wept for pleasant memories that had been obliterated.

I cursed Mother Nature, cursed our human society that almost certainly bears some responsibility for climate change and perhaps also for the increasingly frequent and increasingly severe droughts that have ravaged the landscape and decimated some populations of wildlife. I vowed that I'd never return to the outback until the drought had retreated, but when morning came, as I prepared to leave the gorge, my sadness and my tears were for more than the wild creatures of the bush.

The human population of the outback is suffering too. Many graziers have been forced to sell off their livestock and, with little or no income, have abandoned their homes and the land they love. Some have been persuaded to accept charity - government welfare payments or assistance from a variety of organisations that are doing their best to alleviate human suffering but can do nothing to end the drought. Others have seen suicide as the only option, and I weep for them and their families too.

Business owners in the outback's towns have fallen on hard times too, with some forced to close their doors, but while the scenery is certainly not looking its best, this isn't the time for tourists to abandon the outback too, for to do so would be merely another step towards oblivion for the smallest of settlements that are struggling for survival.



Above: Mount Chambers Gorge in better times.

The outback is rarely a lush and verdant environment, but even during this most horrendous of droughts its vast landscapes are stunning and I'll continue to visit Australia's inland regions and patronise the businesses in every small town through which I pass. It's the least I can do to help my fellow Australians. I'll have a meal or a cup of coffee and a snack in dusty cafes, buy fresh meat from local butchers, crusty bread from the bakery, and groceries from the general store, and I'll top up with fuel knowing that every cent I spend is assisting the people of the bush and helping to keep their small towns alive.

Mother Nature will inevitably bring an end to the drought and the scars she's drawn on the landscape and on the human population that has been so severely affected by this catastrophic weather event will eventually fade, but until that day arrives, each of us must do whatever we can to assist our fellow Australians and to let them know that we care about their suffering during what is undeniably the toughest of times.