



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

Contested KAROO

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As I was reading this book, various keywords 'jumped out' from its 12 chapters. Using these keywords, I strung together a sentence which (for me) encapsulates the take-home message of the book: *The Karoo is a resource frontier entangled in jackal management and grapples with sacrifice zones, unjust sustainable development and dispensable indispensability.*

The Karoo is home to various in-demand resources – minerals, shale-gas deposits, renewable energy (wind and solar power), clear skies for astronomy purposes, fauna and flora and people. Unfortunately, its resource-abundant environments have contributed to the Karoo being a resource frontier – “a territory in which selected resources are up for grabs as new social forces move in to exploit them and in the process disrupt and displace prior arrangements” (Walker and Hoffman in chapter 12).

The manner in which prior arrangements such as the predator management by the Kareeberg famers are dismissed in appeasement of logistics related to the Square Kilometer Array (SKA) brought to mind the 'empty land theory': When external stakeholders, government, or the highest bidder, rush in to extract their desired resource, the Karoo is approached as a place void of people, culture, knowledge, and systems. Hence the book is appropriately titled “Contested Karoo”. The Karoo is riddled with various stakeholders who all want a piece of the pie – however bite sizes, appetites, and motives differ yet converge and



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contend in the Karoo, rendering it a site of struggle. No thanks to these contending interests, the Karoo has become a site of struggle entangled in jackal management (drawn from Terblanche's intriguing discussion of jackal management in chapter 7). The concept of jackal management is alluring as I perceive it to aptly describe the relationship between the various stakeholders in the Karoo. Given that external stakeholders have a long history of *extract and depart*, leaving behind a trail of destruction (as was the case with asbestos mining discussed by Marcatelli in chapter 3), and prioritising profit over communities' needs (as is the case with the energy-poor and electricity-strained communities in electricity-producing De Aar), low trust levels from Karoo communities is understandable. So, the jackals in the Karoo are not only wild animals – there are also jackals among external stakeholders, governments, and even within communities in the form of 'local elites'.

Caught between a rock and a hard place – between economic survival and protecting the environment – communities in the Karoo are forced to sacrifice either their livelihoods or the environment. Due to the extreme poverty levels in various Karoo communities, more often than not residents are forced to overlook harmful environmental practices and prioritise livelihoods. Ultimately, their communities end up being sacrifice zones – polluted and toxic spaces as a result of extractive industries that experienced temporary economic upliftment but now are neglected, impoverished, and disempowered (as explored by Xaba in chapter 11).

One of the major issues that the Karoo (and similar places) grapple with is unjust sustainable development. Sustainable development that only concerns economic and environmental concerns while disregarding broader societal concerns is unjust (as touched on by Manyani in chapter 6 and Malope in chapter 9). Such unjust sustainable developments ultimately result in impoverished and marginalised communities in the Karoo forming part of the 'indispensable dispensable' (Marcatelli in chapter 3) – they are indispensable as far as it concerns buy-in and approval of projects. They are definitely indispensable as a source of affordable, general labour but they are rendered dispensable and



discardable when more professional, specialised labour is required or when needed after projects are complete. Without the eradication of poverty and the enhancement of human capabilities being part of the goals of sustainable development of the communities (Malope, chapter 9), residents of those communities will continue being forced to sacrifice their environment just to put bread on the table (albeit temporarily).

While the book predominantly explores the contestations in the Karoo, some chapters give us snippets about the sense of community among people in the Karoo. In chapter 4, Walker and Vorster mention that one of the positive elements that residents of Sutherland appreciate about their town is the social cohesion. In chapter 5, Cupido, Ellis and Samuels mention the *krymekaar* [get together] meetings during which herders gather at a water point to share information about matters such as weather predictions and the presence of predators.

The book has a beautiful cover that shows the beauty of the Karoo landscape while simultaneously illustrating some of the topics the book focuses on. I appreciate that the book includes linguistic expressions from the Karoo and is not sanitised from the identity markers of the people whom the book focuses on. Another delightful element about this book is how easy it is to read, and it identifies and nudges researchers towards possible research avenues such as exploring the reasons behind the lack of full-time female herders in Namaqualand (as mentioned by Cupido, Ellis and Samuels in chapter 5). Chapter 2 by Hoffman and Petersen provides a useful overview of 'Karoo studies' which allows one to situate the book and facilitates the identification of underexplored aspects of the Karoo which require scholarly attention.

Although the book focuses on the Karoo, in this book the Karoo is a microcosm of South Africa. The issues that are laid bare are evident in other South African communities too. Every day, people have to make decisions between 'morality' and the survival and prosperity of themselves and their loved ones. Many South Africans (particularly those who are impoverished) are treated as politically indispensable but economically dispensable. Similar to the Karoo, South Africa is a contested space driven by misaligned priorities, distrust, unmet expectations and hidden agendas.