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Open access ‘Contested Karoo’ book seeks to better understand the arid zone that covers almost a third of the country



The editors, discussant, and some of the authors at the book launch. Left to right: Hana Petersen Boitumelo Malope, Timm Hoffman (editor), Cheryl Walker (editor), Igshaan Samuels, Renelle Terblanche, Emma Archer, Stephanie Borchardt, Clement Cupido.

Photo UCT Press.

The University of Cape Town (UCT) Press recently launched an open access book titled "Contested Karoo: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Change and Continuity in South Africa's Drylands". The volume was edited by UCT's Professor Timm Hoffman and Stellenbosch University's Professor Cheryl Walker.

The Karoo is popularly imagined as a desert, vast and empty, scarcely peopled. However, the reality is much more complex and challenging. An unusual collaboration between sociologists, botanists, anthropologists, ecologists, and agricultural researchers, among others, the book seeks to better understand the arid zone that covers almost a third of the country.

Even a deceptively simple question like "Where is the Karoo?" comes under the spotlight, depending on whether one is asking as a botanist interested in biomes and transition zones, a historian interested in changing land uses and their effects on human populations, a geologist interested in the distribution of a particular rock formation or a state official concerned about cohesion in governance and development planning. Understanding this complexity is what makes *Contested Karoo's* interdisciplinary approach so critically important.

Critical insights

Historically, the region has been politically and socially marginalised, subjected to histories of extractivism, dispossession and alienation. Increasingly, it is being seen as a 'resource frontier'. Blue skies and shale geology open questions about energy possibilities and their costs for a nation beset by energy deficits. Some think that fracking will create revenue streams that will alleviate poverty, both locally and nationally, even as environmentalists raise alarm about the hidden costs of our petroleum reliance. Dark night skies make the Karoo globally important for astronomy, but scientific wonder about the universe means that people living near the Square Kilometer Array (SKA) telescopes can't use cellular technologies that would interfere with data gathering.

The Karoo's paleontological record offers critical insights into our distant past, raising questions about what histories mean to us and what is destroyed when land use patterns change. Farming layers over prior displacements of herders and others, and now abuts conservation, with contesting ideas about how to manage land, animals and people. Sheep farmers worry about jackals, even as ecologists point to the ways that fencing has curtailed the range and freedom of wild creatures. The Karoo's unique botany and the dangers of climate change draw the eye of botanists, while an illicit trade in succulents threatens a delicate ecology and its biodiversity.

The fact that the Karoo spans four provinces with different population densities and needs means that different ideas about land management and development must be factored into governance. In other words, as the Karoo is increasingly constituted in terms of its resources and how to govern them, different imaginaries come to the fore and shape ideas about what it is and what can be done with it.

Decision-making

Contested Karoo takes this seriously. Decision-making is only as good as the data that informs it, and where there are many fantasies of and interests at stake in the Karoo, it is vital that the evidence base on which decisions are made is strong. Yet understanding the Karoo across disciplines and scales has been no simple task, not least, as Professors Hoffman and Walker note, because of "underlying assumptions about the nature of 'truth' that tend to place natural and social scientists in separate research silos". They added, "Negotiating these differences requires mutual respect and openness to other perspectives.

We have experienced this engagement as intellectually very enriching and productive of new insights and further research questions.”

The University of Pretoria’s Professor Emma Archer, who helped launch the book, described it as “The most robust interdisciplinary approach to research I’ve ever seen”, adding that “This is important because the most critical challenges we face fall squarely across disciplines.”

By bringing social, environmental, historical and political-economic approaches into a single frame, the book enables a more careful understanding of who has stakes in the Karoo and its future, how those stakes are imagined and what their consequences may be for different sectors.

“[Contested Karoo](#)” is available on the UCT Press website.

ENDS

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