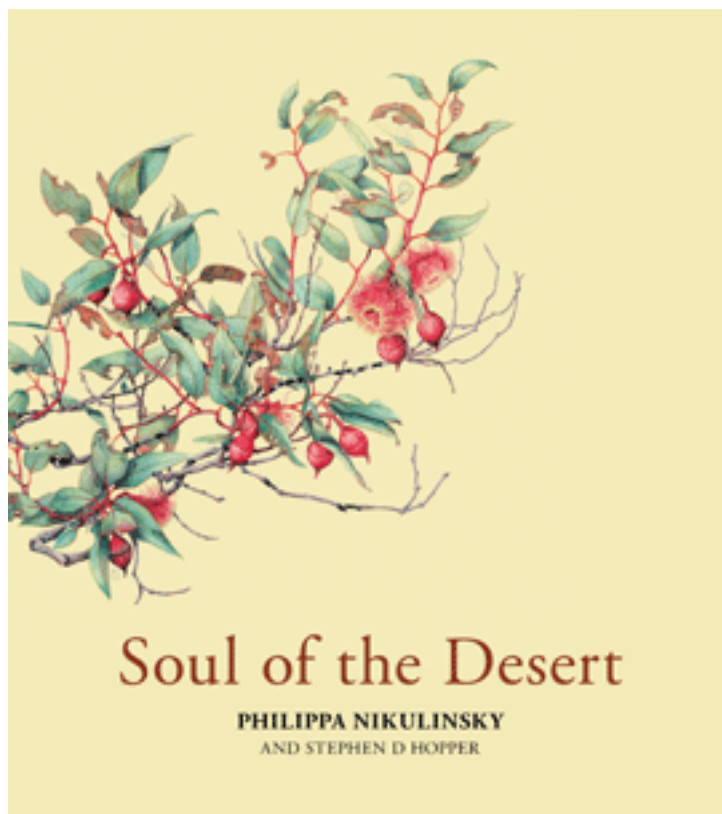


The Soul of the Desert.

Philippa Nikulinsky and Stephen D. Hopper. Fremantle, WA: Fremantle Press, 2011. Paper. 184pp. AUD\$45 NZD\$56.61. ISBN139781921888649. (First hardback edition, 2005.)



The Soul of the Desert was first published in a hardback edition in 2005. Following a 2007 reprinting, Fremantle Press produced this paperback edition in 2011. This is the second collaborative project of Philippa Nikulinsky and Stephen D. Hopper, whose *Life on the Rocks: the Art of Survival* was first published by Fremantle in 1999 and re-issued in 2008. Nikulinsky is a Western Australian artist, celebrated for her paintings and drawings of WA plants, animals and birds. Reflected in her art is her commitment to local knowledge and a deep love of country in all that that entails. Hopper, an eminent plant conservation biologist, was at the time of the current publication Director of

the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. He stepped down in 2012 to return to Western Australia to take up a new Chair in Biodiversity at UWA. He had previously (2004-06) held that University's first Chair of Conservation Biology.

The word 'soul' in the title of Nikulinsky's and Hopper's beautiful book of pictures of and words about Australian arid areas, focusing on the deserts of Western Australia, is a kind of gauntlet thrown down to the economic imperative. This is a book that informs, persuades and enchants and its tone is unashamedly one of reverence. It is neither the usual picture book nor the usual scientific study, but an unusual and innovative collaborative work that crosses generic and historical boundaries. With its roots in the age-old tradition of the meeting of art and science in natural history it draws on two complementary ways of seeing the world. Besides their deep knowledge of their subject, Hopper and Nikulinsky bring to their task, also, a sense of personal commitment to the values that motivate the championing of conservation. The first section offers a succinct account of the history of current arid areas in relation to the history of the formation of the Australian landmass and to the history of its human occupation. Hopper pinpoints key topics and issues that may be followed up by an interested reader via an extensive bibliography. The book is then divided into sections according to terrain: 'Ranges and Outcrops', 'Plains', 'Dunes', 'Wetlands' and sections on wide-ranging plants and animals and on diversity.

As Nikulinsky and Hopper point out, Australia's 'deserts' are not, mostly, the conventional 'endless drifts of sand and rock', but 'vast arid lands [that] have a richness and diversity that enthrall and captivate' (8). Nikulinsky's exquisite drawings in watercolour that form the bulk of the book give a sense of the bounty of life in these regions. They are predominantly of plants, but also of birds, insects, and some animals. The paper is pale cream; the plant paintings, in the tradition of specimen paintings, appear against the plain page, in the manner of pressed plants but with a strong sense of life in them as they reach out towards the edges of the page, and from the use of colour, one of the book's distinctive features. Nikulinsky explains that she makes 'detailed colour notes while everything is fresh' and records them in a colour diary (24). Some of the pictures with animals have background sketched in, but the overall effect is of a kind of mystery within or behind the meticulous detail. Each picture is accompanied by the common and botanical names (all of which are to be found in an excellent index) and a short account of particularities – about its habit or habitat, or its traditional use as food or medicine, or its name. In another layer of complication and richness, the artist draws attention to the art, with occasional unpainted elements and by including an initial section devoted to 'Development of a Painting', where she explains, with illustration, her processes.

Both the natural history artist and the natural historian belong to a tradition that crosses boundaries. The artist must also be a natural historian and to communicate his or her work, the scientist depends on the artist. This aside, there is also a great tradition of writing about science and Hopper is clearly a scientist who loves words and is an enthusiastic communicator. But this is an innovative book within this tradition in the intimacy of its tone, infused as it is with a sense of personal voice and personal commitment. In the final chapter of the first section, Hopper addresses the idea in the title. The desert's soul is its force of life. It is 'in the dust, the red rocks and blue sky, the wind and rain, in the dunes and salt-lakes, in the people, and in the plant and animal life, waiting to be experienced, revealed, revered, by those who would look' (23). The book itself is a kind of worshipful gesture towards this desert soul: 'Hopefully, recent events have not dimmed 40,000 years of human wisdom accumulated through desert life, and the future holds some promise for these quintessentially Australian landscapes' (23). I am not surprised that this book has been reissued. It fills a need for information and inspiration on the part of those who are concerned about the future of Australian landforms and the diversity of life that they support. We need songs, as it were, with which to go to the barricades; we need more books like *The Soul of the Desert*. And let's not forget the publishers here, Fremantle Press, who perform a great service in keeping works like this alive.

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