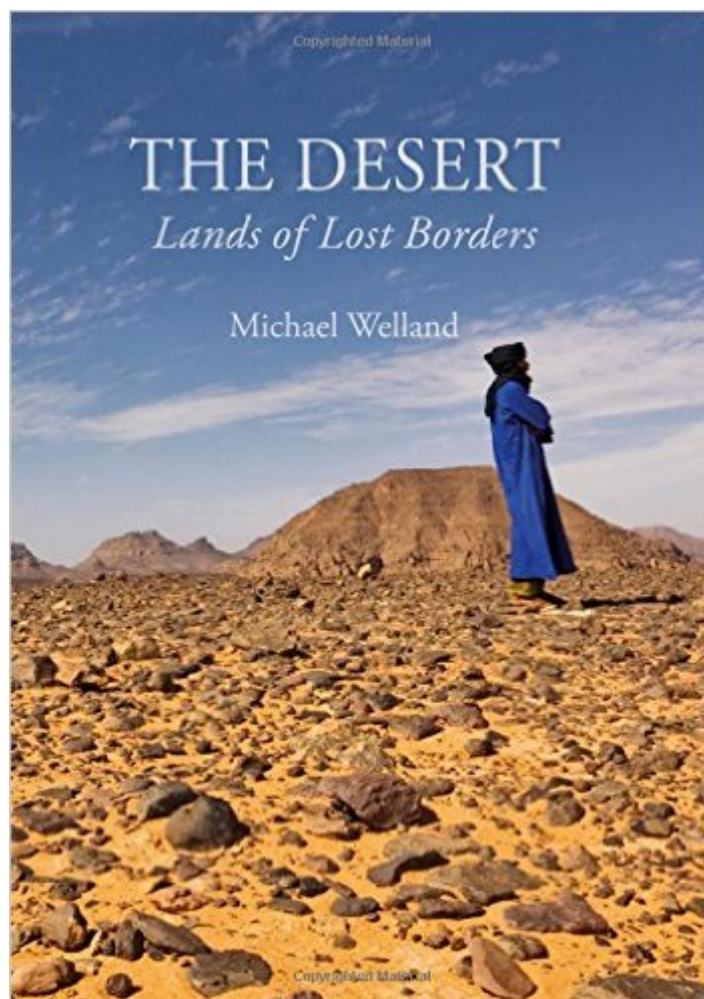


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# The Desert: Lands Of Lost Borders



## Synopsis

From endless sand dunes and prickly cacti to shimmering mirages and green oases, deserts evoke contradictory images in us. They are lands of desolation, but also of romance, of blistering Mojave heat and biting Gobi cold. Covering a quarter of the earth's land mass and providing a home to half a billion people, they are both a physical reality and landscapes of the mind. The idea of the desert has long captured Western imagination, put on display in films and literature, but these portrayals often fail to capture the true scope and diversity of the people living there. Bridging the scientific and cultural gaps between perception and reality, *The Desert* celebrates our fascination with these arid lands and their inhabitants, as well as their importance both throughout history and in the world today. Covering an immense geographical range, Michael Welland wanders from the Sahara to the Atacama, depicting the often bizarre adaptations of plants and animals to these hostile environments. He also looks at these seemingly infertile landscapes in the context of their place in history; as the birthplaces not only of critical evolutionary adaptations, civilizations, and social progress, but also of ideologies. Telling the stories of the diverse peoples who call the desert home, he describes how people have survived there, their contributions to agricultural development, and their emphasis on water and its scarcity. He also delves into the allure of deserts and how they have been used in literature and film and their influence on fashion, art, and architecture. As Welland reveals, deserts may be difficult to define, but they play an active role in the evolution of our global climate and society at large, and their future is of the utmost importance. Entertaining, informative, and surprising, *The Desert* is an intriguing new look at these seemingly harsh and inhospitable landscapes.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Having enjoyed Michael Welland's book, *Sand: The Never Ending Story*, I was excited to read his new book about deserts. Like his previous work, he entertains his readers with a philosophy that feeds into the theory of everything. He examines deserts as they are experienced by their dwellers and how they are perceived by outsiders. He informs his reader by presenting deserts as they are defined by language; experienced as an ever-changing geological phenomenon; placed in historical contexts; lived in as a cultural embodiment; embellished by artifacts and literature; and the creators of far reaching environmental factors. What I knew about deserts pales in comparison to what I've learned about them in this book. His wit and comfortable use of language makes this a fascinating and informative read.

This is an unusual book, mixing several sciences, literature, film, history, ecology and more. Welland has only written two books but his style is clear, graceful and informative. This is a book both about deserts and the relationship between people and deserts. There's a great deal of information. Much of it is science, but also history, a little physics and a substantial consideration of the arts. The book starts with what deserts are, what kinds there are and facts to reinforce the unusual environment such as the rainbow gecko licking its own eyeballs for water and a beetle with wings modified into water-repellent and water-attractive microsurfaces that allow it to collect water from fogs, both these in the Namibian desert. An interesting aspect is the phenomenon called desert varnish, a very slowly developing deposit on the surface of stones at the desert's surface. Its destruction can lead to erosion and sandstorms, as the wars in Iraq have (war vehicle tracks in the desert are the cause). It seems as if deserts are a major player in global carbon dioxide and nitrogen cycles. And dust from the Sahara is the origin of the soils in the Bahamas and the Florida Keys, and may be vital to the continued fertility of the rainforest. A couple of chapters concern insiders/ outsiders, in the sense of the complex and often sad history of native peoples and outsiders. He juxtaposes in highly informative ways the experiences of the Sahara's Tuareg, Australia's Aboriginal peoples and America's Indians. Perhaps the saddest experience has been that of the Aborigines and perhaps the most complex, that of the Tuareg. Describing all this is impossible in a short review, but Welland's discussion is exceedingly thought-provoking. He gets into ancient history of once important places such as Ur. Most of his discussion considers the Western USA, the Sahara and Australia, but there is some discussion of China and Chile. Some I

had not read of before; recent research has show the Garamantes (known to the Romans, inhabiting the desert to the south of Roman Africa) to have been much more "civilized" than once thought. Satellite imagery is providing interesting evidence. Chapter 5 is a wild mix of topics but generally considers the desert and religion, and philosophy. And also the desert and writers, books, film and painting. This is a very well done look at the desert as an idea in the arts and humanities. The last chapter looks at in some length the present and possible future of deserts, and concludes that things may not be as bad as once thought, that "desertification" is serious but not necessarily catastrophic. This includes the myriad international organizations interested in the matter, global climate change and more. This is to me the least interesting part of the book, although it may be the most important. It's plain that much policy is based on false assumptions, some of them essentially racist that the native peoples are killing their own resources (again, my descriptions here don't do much justice to a complex discussion). The very last portion is an amusing account of his deciding that since the book featured camels, he ought to experience riding one, and did so in Morocco. There's the usual collection of interesting trivia, stuff I like to find. Australia has marsupial moles that in effect have evolved to swim in sand, and throughout North Africa and Arabia, sand fish, odd lizards that have evolved the same. Overall, he's saying that the desert is not deserted. Deserts play a surprisingly important role in the global environment, and they have played an important role in human history (consider desert Arabia and Islam, for example). The insider/ outsider dynamics he discusses also includes animals, and the camels brought to the USA and Australia are fascinating.

One fifth of the world's population lives in arid lands that surround the deep deserts. These lands are the "lost borders" of Michael Welland's book THE DESERT, Lands of Lost Borders. Their importance lies in the significant role they have played, over time, in man's migrations and evolutionary adaptations. Welland's book is topical because, if and when climate change causes desertification, these borderlands will be the most affected. And if desertification turns out to be a non-issue? The borderlands, with their problems of poverty, population growth, and the strains of the modern world, will still strongly benefit from any remedial strategies. They are not lost yet, unless it's in the minds of people who, like ourselves, should be concerned. Edward Abbey says, "You cannot get the desert into a book" and Welland agrees with that sentiment, however you can't leave it out of books just because you can't do a perfect job. In this publication, Welland has made an excellent start at getting the desert into our minds, informing us of the present status of our knowledge, telling us where the problems lie, and laying the groundwork for future study and future action. This he does in a very informative yet entertaining way. From Tuaregs to Australian

Aboriginals, from Edward Abbey to Lawrence of Arabia, from plodding camels to hopping kangaroos, there's always something fundamental, unusual, or amusing on the agenda. Although the author concedes that what we don't know about the desert far exceeds what we do know, yet there is a lot to know, the main themes being water, weather, and change. When water is in short supply, as in the borderlands, even minimal climatic change will cause these barely-habitable zones to migrate, expand, or contract, thereby affecting a huge number of people who are already below the poverty level. But with the major effects of clouds and atmospheric dust not being well understood, modeling is not yet guaranteed to be useful. The bottom line on climate preservation/modification is that although it may be desirable, in the near term it's not easy nor quick, and it's not even certain to give the results you aimed for. The more cost-effective, faster, and certain program would be to direct our efforts toward the "political" factors: water use/conservation, sound natural resource development, and controlling population growth. That seems to be Welland's bottom line: if climate change comes--or even if not--let's do the things that are well within our grasp, the things that would ensure that these vital borderlands are not lost to future generations. I found the book a fine vehicle to understand a critical contemporary issue. With Welland's ability to explain complex issues in a "cut to the chase", enjoyable manner, it's a good read for any enquiring mind, whether that of the scientific generalist or of the general reader.

Written from the perspective of a modern day Renaissance scholar, Michael Welland takes the reader on an eloquent and fact-filled journey, in both time and place, to the arid regions of the world. Examining today's deserts, their origin, evolution and its inhabitants, both flora and fauna, the author illustrates a highly dynamic environment that has oft been neglected in the historical record. Man's impact on arid lands is discussed in judicious detail, contrasting nomadic and indigenous inhabitants with accounts of early explorers and western settlers. The plethora of illustrations, stunning photos along with detailed charts from various research organizations, provides the reader with a unique demonstration of the author's scientific background coupled with his deeply profound appreciation for the lands of lost borders.

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