

Mia Audrey 0:09

Welcome to Earth Matters: environmental justice stories from so-called Australia and around the world, produced at the studios of 3CR on Wurundjeri Woiwurrung Country in Naarm, Melbourne, and broadcast across the continent via the Community Radio Network. I pay my respects to elders past and present of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung and of the many lands our content reaches. I recognize that sovereignty has never been ceded; this always was and always will be Wurundjeri Woiwurrung land. And I affirm that there can be no environmental justice without justice for First Nations peoples across the globe. I'm Mia Audrey.

Kat Herbert 0:54

This is a key moment to be brave and bold and committed to a positive vision for Australian landscapes.

Mia Audrey 1:13

What would you guess is the largest environmental threat to our iconic deserts? Feral animals? Contaminated or depleted water tables? Desertification? Cattle grazing? Actually, it's a grass. Since its introduction in the 1960s and 70s, and particularly in the last couple of decades, Buffel Grass has spread like wildfire through Central so-called Australia. It's wreaking havoc on fragile arid ecosystems and ranks higher than any other environmental threat in terms of its social and cultural impacts for Aboriginal people. How is one little grass doing so much damage? To find out, I spoke to Alex Vaughan and Kat Herbert from Alec the Arid Lands Environment Center in Mparntwe, Alice Springs. Here's Kat on what makes buffel grass the single greatest environmental threat to arid ecosystems, and what we need to do about it.

Mia Audrey 2:13

Kat, thank you so much for joining me from ALEC. Really appreciate you coming on the show. You're campaigning around buffel grass, which is considered the single greatest environmental threat to arid ecosystems. Tell us what makes it such a significant threat in your part of the world?

Kat Herbert 2:29

Buffel grass is nothing short of an environmental catastrophe. It smothers landscapes and poses an unprecedented fire risk. So those who haven't been lucky enough to be out here might not realize that the desert is absolutely teeming with life, beautiful wildflowers and little critters of all shapes and sizes and birds, and it's just full of life. But when we see Buffel grass take over, it becomes a desolate monoculture. All those beautiful flowers and daisies are gone, and even some of those big trees, like river red gums and desert oaks are also under threat. So Buffel grass poses a significant fire risk. It burns faster, hotter and more frequently. For example, there was a study done that showed that after a Buffel fire, 50% of river red gums were destroyed. These are trees that are hundreds of years old. They're wildlife sanctuaries, and they are adapted for fire, but these types of fires, they cannot withstand. And anyone who's been out here or even imagines it out here, might imagine these beautiful red rock gorges and desert landscapes, but that has become a tide of beige green as buffel grass has taken over all that color and beauty.

Speaker 1 4:14

Yeah, yep, I have been lucky enough to visit the area and yeah, it's impossible to ignore, especially when you've had someone like yourself, or friends that I've visited who've pointed it out, you really can't unsee it. And it is, it is a tide, and it's something that, by my understanding, has particularly intensified in the last couple of decades. Why is that and how much is understood about the extent of the problem?

Kat Herbert 4:39

So I think it behaves like a lot of invasive weeds. They do grow exponentially as this sort of seed bank grows. Other aspects are the seed can travel through rainfall, so after intense rainfall events, it will follow, follow the water and establish in new places. All plants are very adaptable, so will adapt to their environment and and take hold over time. One thing we have noticed with buffel grass is that it is growing in places that people didn't think it would be able to grow, for example, covering the red rock gorges. It was thought that the buffel grass wouldn't be that happy there. But now, as you mentioned, if you come out here, you'll see those gorges absolutely covered. And buffel grass has been planted and unmitigated for decades, since the 60s. In terms of the extent of the problem, we actually don't know. It hasn't been properly mapped, and there just hasn't been enough resourcing, research and leadership behind it to fully map the extent of a problem, which I think it's safe to assume, is actually far worse than most people would think.

Speaker 1 6:00

And what's really confronting here is that the places impacted by buffel invasion are so precious, and many of them are culturally significant places. Even the federal government recognizes the McDonnell ranges, for example, as one of 20 priority places nationally for threatened species conservation. Do you see the government acting in accordance with this recognition?

Kat Herbert 6:22

Well, firstly, I'd like to acknowledge that that is the only inland site that has received such recognition, and that's a testament to how beautiful, unique and precious this place is. It is a place of culturally significant sites. It is a niche for biodiversity and species like the MacDonnell Ranges cycad, which- it looks like it doesn't belong here. You're looking at the red rock gorges and the ghost gums, and then this prehistoric fern-like cycad sitting on the gorges, and it's this ancient species that has managed to survive in this niche for such a long time. So it's great to see the recognition of this very beautiful, unique place. But unfortunately, all throughout the West MacDonnell Ranges is absolutely covered in buffel grass. So we're stoked to see this acknowledgement. We're stoked to see some money behind it and some work being done on things like buffel. But when you see the scale of the problem, it's clear that it's going to require a lot of work, a lot of research, a lot of resources and long-term, landscape-wide strategic management to make sure we can truly protect these places. And it's worth noting that the MacDonnell Ranges cycad is fire-sensitive. So on these gorges where buffel is, it poses a fire risk to these very unique, rare species, right?

Speaker 1 8:14

So we could see irreversible damage and species loss.

Kat Herbert 8:17

Yeah, yeah.

Mia Audrey 8:18

So I guess this is where ALEC comes in, and the campaign around buffel invasion. I'm sure listeners are curious to hear a little about what your work involves, and a big part of that campaign is around classification. So in July last year, we did have the NT government finally declare buffel grass as a weed. Have you seen much change on the ground since that announcement?

Kat Herbert 8:44

Yeah, look, it's been, it's been an absolutely positive step forward. A big part of that has been the community campaigning and support to see action on this. So we've seen a bunch of money put behind it, and we've seen three full-time staff dedicated to buffer work, which is fantastic. It's been great to see stakeholders, people from, you know, all sides of the story and all sides of politics, and all the stakeholders come together to try and come up with a plan to manage this problem. And I think that's an absolutely great, great model, but it does involve committed, long-term strategic landscape-wide planning. Yeah, at the moment, the weed management plan is still being finalized for buffel grass, right? And one thing that the Arid Lands Environment Center is really keen to see in that plan is the banning of the sale of buffel grass seed, right?

Speaker 1 9:48

So even under, even under the weed declaration, that's still legal and allowed - to be selling and trading in buffel grass seed?

Kat Herbert 9:58

That's right.

Mia Audrey 9:59

So there's still a long way to go, it sounds like. I mean, that's what I'm hearing. I know that another thing that you're working on in the campaign is a wider classification on a national level of buffel grass as a weed. So a couple of years ago, you had 84 organizations sign an open letter asking that buffel be classified a Weed of National Significance. How has the open letter been received, and what would the particular benefits of the classification as a Weed of National Significance be?

Kat Herbert 10:28

So it's been really well received by the community. We're seeing a lot of community support for action on buffel and a lot wider understanding of buffel grass and the impacts of it. It was great to see such a wide range of organizations so enthusiastic to come and sign on to this open letter for action, which has been fantastic. We know there is a huge amount of public and community support for this.

Australians have a deep emotional connection to this place, and they really want to protect it, and I think that's reflected in this open letter and the growing momentum in this campaign. What the Weed of National Significance will do is, for starters, national recognition of the problem. So just identifying that this is a problem that needs action nationwide is incredibly significant. National coordination, a national, like, an appointed national coordinator and a national task force. It will importantly bring all the stakeholders to the, to the table so that they can come up with a practical way to move forward. It will turbo-charge research opportunities and developing best management practices and doing the mapping of actually understanding the extent of the problem. But something that's, that's important to add, this doesn't solve the whole problem. It's just the start. It's a step forward, but this is a key moment to be brave and bold and committed to a positive vision for Australian landscapes and a vision where they are flourishing and teaming with life and not giving up and making a commitment to turn it around and protect as much as we can, while we still can. So we know so many Australians also believe in this vision for flourishing landscapes, and that's why we're asking your listeners to sign our petition. You can hop onto our website and sign the petition that's calling for the declaration of a Weed of National Significance. Or, if your audience is really fired up, they can write a letter directly to the Minister for Agriculture, Julie Collins and ask her to support listing buffel grass as a weed of national significance.

Mia Audrey 13:04

Awesome Kat, thank you. I will have those links in the show notes when this show goes up online, so I'm sure listeners will jump straight on and show their support. Thank you for coming on the show and sharing your passion. Really appreciate it.

Kat Herbert 13:16

No worries. Thank you so much. It was nice to meet you.

Mia Audrey 13:20

Kat Herbert of the Arid Lands Environment Center, on the need for urgent action to protect arid ecosystems in Central so-called Australia and beyond. You're listening to Earth Matters, community radio's national environmental justice program. We're hearing about an environmental catastrophe unfolding in the central deserts and spreading to every mainland state: buffel grass invasion. Alex Vaughan is the policy advocacy coordinator at the Arid Lands Environment Center. He shared about the diversity of groups impacted by buffel and how they're coming together to slow its spread. Alex, thank you so much for joining me on Earth Matters

Alex Vaughan 14:04

Thank you so much for this wonderful opportunity.

Speaker 1 14:07

So buffel grass invasion, which we're talking about today, is this wide-reaching, intersectional disaster that impacts so many different communities. How have you gone about engaging the wider community in your campaign, and what kinds of things you hearing from them?

Alex Vaughan 14:21

I think for the Arid Lands Environment Center, which is the big community environment center in the central deserts and based in Mpartnwe (Alice Springs), for us, it's really about listening to the widespread concern around the risks, the impacts and the ways that it's affecting people's livelihoods; engagement with nature and the outdoors; cultural practices; as well as personal and public safety; in addition to, of course, the kind of existential impacts posed to environments and landscapes across, across this continent. I guess we've been hearing from a range of groups: concerned community members, traditional owners, custodians, as well as art centers and other organizations around how it's literally transforming complex, arid zone woodlands, spinifex grasslands and amazing river red gum systems into a monoculture, a beige monoculture, that is really changing the spirit and the heart of many areas, and that's affecting how we relate to place. So for us, it's really about listening to this concern, respecting that this is very disheartening, and these impacts have been building for very many decades, and then working with community members and other organizations and sectors to consider, what can we do about it?

Speaker 1 15:49

Yeah, yeah. I can hear there's so many different stakeholders in this. And in terms of land management, obviously, the first people to go to are the First Peoples. What has been your approach to working with elders and the wider community of First Nations custodians?

Alex Vaughan 16:04

Yeah. So ALEC is very grateful to be based here in in to Alice Springs on central Arrente country. Last year, we held a really beautiful celebration, but also awareness raising event called Name Arrwengkelthe, which was the Arrente word for 'grass sickness', about how to heal country in responding to buffel grass invasion, essentially. And that was working with Eastern Arrente traditional owner Veronica Dobson and her daughter Camille Dobson. And we also worked with Faron Peckham, who's a custodian here in Mparntwe, around designing this event, trying to be very community-oriented, very open, but also engaging. So we had, you know, bush foods and arts events. We had live music, we had a land management panel, we had lots of stalls, lots of food, roo tails were being cooked. And it was really thinking about, how does buffel grass impact this place, but also for ALEC in designing such event, for us to be working directly with custodians and co-designing: Who is this event for? How are we communicating what the impacts of buffel grass invasion are? And how do we recognize and respect the kind of in- the environmental injustice that is so present to do with buffel grass invasion: that too often it is Aboriginal ranger groups or community members that are the ones that are responding to and managing buffel grass impacts, but First Nations communities were not responsible for the spread of buffel grass across this continent. For very many decades, this, this struggle has been led by, by community members and custodians and First Nations communities that have really raised the alarm in terms of the impacts, and bush foods and bush medicines disappearing; Country being so overgrown that it becoming very difficult to hunt. Similarly the overgrown Country makes it more difficult to access Country and limits the amount of time people spend on Country. Country gets described as being sick, so it can become more difficult to share, share knowledge with the younger generations and improve that engagement, because the diversity, the color, the life is not as present in areas where there's so much buffel grass, and there's a number of First Nation statements that we center into- with the buffel grass work at all times. The umuwa Statement is an Indigenous ranger statement that was released a few years ago. There's a... there's a statement that comes out from around Uluru, Kata-Tjuta, Watarrka and the Petermann Ranges, the Anangu Statement. And I think we, yeah, just we respect and work with and center that this is a justice issue as well as an environmental, ecological health issue.

Mia Audrey 18:49

Well, I guess I'm curious as well about the flip side of what I'm hearing. In terms of who's managing the land and how they feel about buffel grass, you have farmers and pastoralists. What have you found when you've been speaking to farmers, how do you respond to what I assume is some resistance to the campaign to fight the invasion of buffel?

Alex Vaughan 19:07

Yeah. I guess it's important to emphasize, particularly in NT, where 50% of land is Aboriginal land, and then there's a further around 30% of land under native title. So there are, like significant areas of the Northern Territory where the land managers, the land owners, are Indigenous communities and traditional owners, and it is Indigenous ranger groups that do have the responsibility for management. In terms of pastoral response, there can be a diversity of views, but I would say the dominant response from the kind of peak bodies and the advocacy organizations, like the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association or Agforce in Queensland or the National Farmers Federation, is pushback about this. And I guess that's because buffel grass has predominantly been spread across this continent as a feed for pasture. It's drought tolerant, grazing tolerant, fire tolerant, which means that it's a super grass that doesn't die. But that's also kind of what is an environmental weed and has led to an unconditional catastrophe. And governments and pastoralists for decades spread it for their own needs and self interest, and a lot of this was kind of... Particularly in very arid and semi arid areas, for a long time, we had governments talking about these places as unproductive wastelands, deserts, the Outback, and, you know, pasture improvement across large parts of this continent in terms of bringing productivity and economic value, often meant sowing buffel grass. And for some in the pastoral communities, they're still holding on to this essential component and importance that buffel grass plays. So I think when we've engaged with pastoralists, you know, we have a very strong resolve that there's a deep wrong happening here. Keeping your head in the sand isn't... is no longer a path that we can take. It's a fact. It's, it's, it's recognized globally as being a high impact invasive grass.

Mia Audrey 21:15

Yeah, yeah. The global element of this, which you're touching on, is kind of news to me, and I imagine to some of the listeners as well, even the fact that this issue extends beyond the NT, because it has been ALEC primarily talking about this. But buffel grass is predicted to spread across up to 68% of this continent, and in terms of the global impact, you know, it was implicated in the devastating fires in Hawaii in August 2023. I'm wondering what you've seen that groups elsewhere are doing; have you

connected with groups across the continent, across the world, who are campaigning for proper management of buffel?

Alex Vaughan 21:48

Yeah, it's a really good question, and it makes this space so interesting, in terms of the local, regional, national and global ways in which we can, we can work. But in terms of the global picture, yeah, buffel grass is found across a number of southern states in the United States, and particularly the impacts are really bad in Arizona, so the planting and sale of seed is banned there. Like a decade ago, there was some kind of statement out of Arizona declaring a war on buffel. The kind of really big cactuses that you can see, they're really... they can't deal with any form of fire. So the introduction of a fire promoting species there is like a very quick potential landscape transformation. And there's a number of groups working in national parks. Their groups there seem to work a bit more in a landcare and community kind of advocacy capacity, rather than... I'm not sure if they have the same opportunities in terms of engagement with the State and national leaders to try and get more awareness here. The other addition, which you mentioned before, is that there is large infestations of buffel grass in Hawaii, and there were those fires in 2023 that you mentioned, where over 100 people unfortunately lost their lives, and buffel grass was one of a number of fire promoting species that fueled those really fast moving grass fires that had a really devastating impact. But buffel grass is also found in Mexico and different parts of Central and South America, and I guess it's just, it's a very common pasture species that has been spread and promoted across the world as seed is very cheap, and the species is incredibly resilient and hardy and deep-rooted. That means it's, it's, it's long lived, and it increases the viability of pasture in environments where otherwise it probably wouldn't be realistic. Also, buffel grass is, you know, native to parts of Africa like Kenya and Western Asia, and obviously, the relationship the communities and Indigenous people in those places would be very different to the effects that we see here, where buffel grass is able to take over and transform entire landscapes. There is growing recognition globally on the impacts of buffel grass as a very high impact species. But yeah, I think Australia is at the forefront globally of some of this work.

Mia Audrey 24:17

Yeah. I mean, the gravity of the problem is really striking to me. How do we get involved? I mean, on your website, you've given folks a lot of options: there's a petition, letter writing instructions, you can join working bees if you are in the area, donate funds for the campaign... Where do you recommend folks start if they're hearing what you're saying and feeling that call to action?

Alex Vaughan 24:38

Buffel grass has been nominated as a Weed of National Significance, and there is a particular opportunity over the next few months to draw more attention to this. So a decision will likely be made sometime in the first half of 2026 and ALEC and the Invasive Species Council are doing work to raise awareness of this struggle and what the opportunity is and why that's important. As mentioned earlier, buffel grass is found in every mainland state and the Northern Territory. So buffel grass is starting to enter the Victorian Mallee, so if you're based in Victoria, I'd really encourage people to write to their local MPs, the Department, the Agricultural Minister and Environment Minister and raise.. raise this concern. New South Wales, there's large swathes of buffel grass, kind of in the northwest of the state. In Western Australia, it's throughout a lot of kind of the Western desert, but it's also throughout the Pilbara, because buffel grass has been used on mine sites, historically as part of ecosystem restoration and rehabilitation.

Mia Audrey 25:39

Interesting intersection there, yeah.

Alex Vaughan 25:40

Yeah. Queensland is kind of, I'd say the stronghold nationally for grazing. There's, I guess, a strong foothold of buffel grass being viewed very favorably there. So I'd say, wherever you are, raise this as an issue with politicians, but also environment organizations; put this on their radar. And think about the arts and different creative forms to think about these kind of very difficult problems. We're always looking for new ways to share and think about struggles, and very cognizant that policy is often very dry and alienating for a lot of people, but we do have a very powerful story here, devastating story too obviously, but we need a diversity of ways of communicating and sharing about this problem.

Mia Audrey 26:31

Absolutely. Yeah. Thank you so much for the work that you're doing and the leadership you're showing from the dead center of the continent. It's really impressive and inspiring, and thanks for coming on the show.

Alex Vaughan 26:40

Thanks, Mia

Mia Audrey 26:42

Campaigner Alex Vaughan of the Arid Lands Environment Center, on how to pitch in to the battle with buffel grass. You've been listening to Earth Matters, community radio's national environmental justice program. I'm Mia Audrey. We've heard from Alex Vaughan and Kat Herbert of the Arid Lands Environment Center, on the scale of buffel grass invasion in the central deserts and beyond, and what needs to be done to mitigate its disastrous consequences. You'll find links to ALEC's website, including opportunities to take action, in this episode's show notes - via [3cr.org.au/earthmatters](https://3cr.org.au/earthmatters). Thanks for listening, that's all for now, but tune in next week for more environmental justice stories.

Mia Audrey 27:33

Earth Matters would like to thank the Community Broadcasting Foundation for their financial support and the Community Radio Network for getting the program out to you. Earth Matters is produced in the studios of 3CR, Naarm, Melbourne.

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