Foreword

This book draws together practical experience regarding fences and their ecological effects from around the world.

Fences are such a familiar part of life on our crowded planet that we easily forget that they are socially and evolutionarily a recent phenomenon. The "enclosure" movement in Britain, just a few one hundred years ago, was part of the huge social transformation that led to the industrial era, with all its benefits and problems. Before that, land was mostly held communally, and grazing animals moved freely. The trend to private ownership of land and the associated containment of the animals it supported came later to the colonies. The invention of barbed wire is one of the technologies that underpinned the conquest of the American prairies, the Australian outback and the South African veld.

Changes of that magnitude, both socially and ecologically, have consequences – some beneficial, others less so. Fences are designed to be barriers to animal movement. As such, they reduce the functional scale of an important element of grazing ecosystems. Seasonal migrations become impossible, gene-flow is restricted and dispersal is constrained. Sometimes it is possible to artificially substitute these processes or compensate for their absence. In other cases, there is a realisation that managing at larger scales is both easier and less expensive, and fences have come down.

Within the African continent, South Africa represents one pole of an ongoing debate about how and when wildlife movement should be constrained. East Africa represents the other pole. In South Africa, wildlife and other land uses are strictly spatially separated by fences. The fencing technology to do so has evolved greatly from the four-strand barbed wire of our cattle-ranching forebears. The cable fence for containing elephants, the high multistrand smooth-wire fence for antelopes and the electric fence for carnivores are examples. In East Africa, the preference has always been for an intermingling of wildlife with cattle ranching and crop agriculture. The benefit is protected areas without hard boundaries. A negative consequence is human–wildlife conflict. The two poles are less sharply defined than they once were – the benefits of fewer, more strategic fences and more selectively porous

boundaries are better understood in South Africa, and a rapidly filling landscape is forcing East Africa into a stricter separation of incompatible land uses.

Our relationship with fences therefore contains some paradoxes. We recognise the wry wisdom in the saying "Good fences make good neighbours". At the same time, we have to agree with Robert Frost: "Something there is that doesn't love a wall".

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