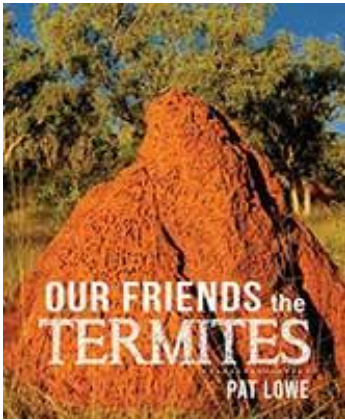


# Kimberley Society

## Book Review



*Our Friends the Termites* by Pat Lowe. [Backroom Press](#), Broome, 2015, 143 pages, ISBN 9780977561575, illustrated. RRP \$26.95.

That termites are the friends of humans is at the heart of this delightful book. Broome-based author, environmentalist, and Co-Founder of Environs Kimberley, Pat Lowe, takes readers on an engaging journey across times, places, disciplines and cultures (especially Australia's north) to explore not only the history and value of termites to humanity and all living things, but also why termites suffer such 'bad press'.

With evocative chapter headings like 'The good that termites do', 'Termites and People', 'How Termites talk to each other', and 'How Termites think', it is clear from the outset that content will focus on the intrinsic relationship between humans and nature with, in this case, nature's qualities being seen through termites. Via a distinctively creative and detailed writing style, Lowe regularly takes readers on the termite trajectory with her; she and nature are always in the same space. Writing, for example that 'I was once probing a likely-looking burrow with my hunting stick, hoping to find an echidna ...' (p.126), Lowe encourages readers to imagine being there with her, whether or not the landscape in which she probes is known or familiar. Such a style conjures up the best of what might be called Friendly Science, as a complementary contrast to the more formal Citizen Science.

What some might consider remarkable is that termites form such terrific subject matter. Reflecting on the findings of earlier researchers, including a 1948 work titled 'Our Enemy the Termite' (p.9), Lowe draws on her own experience and more recent research to expand and deepen the narrative. Reviewing works as wide-ranging as Biology, Ecology, Literature, History, and Zoology, alongside stories told to her, and relevant printed and media accounts, Lowe's book nicely shifts the 'bad news' claim of termites from 'Enemy' to 'Friend' full-circle, possibly reflecting the ingenuity and travails of the species about which she writes.

Readers come to care for the daily chores termites undertake, where they live and why, family life, the types of materials they like to eat (or not), and how they are adapting to cultural and environmental change. Readers learn, for instance, that 'modern termites have shifted from using traditional materials for various purposes to using plastics. They do not eat the plastic, but break it into tiny pieces, carry it away and use it instead of soil or sand particles to build their covered ways' (p.87).

Lowe learnt much about the working life, thought patterns and behaviours of termites and their uses in the Kimberley from Walmajarri loved ones, such as the late Jimmy Pike, Ngarta Bent and Jukuna Mona Chuguna. She cites, for instance, the use of wet ant-bed material which could be used by 'Aboriginal women [to] ... patch up holes or cracks in their coolamons', and that 'Jimmy [Pike] sometimes used it as a colouring and sealing agent for his art' (p.75). Notwithstanding the rich material relating to Australia, Lowe also draws on literature and ideas from European, African and Asian settings. A wonderful example of this breadth is the illustration of a termite mound's insulation capabilities to cook food: 'In their post-modern cookery book entitled *The African Kitchen*, Stow and Baldwin describe how to turn a vacant termite mound into an oven, and how to cook pizza inside it' (pp.79-80). Noting that termite mounds have been used for cooking in the Kimberley, she comments, too, that in Laos 'termite mounds are sometimes used for kilns for the production of charcoal' (p.80).

The text is punctuated by a series of black and white photographs and sketches. It does not have an index, but ends with a Glossary, Bibliography and Acknowledgements. Its strength is the subject matter and Lowe's curiosity and enduring ability to gather information about, and to tell, a

good story. Her careful and creative writing ensures that *Our Friends the Termites* cogently overturns hitherto misguided claims that termites are 'the Enemy' in a way that will not only add to knowledge and understanding about termites, but also to the wonder and importance of human/nature interactions.

*Our Friends the Termites* is the latest book from Backroom Press, the small but vibrant publishing house in Broome.

*Sandy Toussaint*