

**CHAPTER 31****Critical Thinking Activity**  
**Australia and New Zealand****Australia: Restoring the Land**

*Australia has always seemed familiar due to its history as a British colony, but nothing could be farther from the truth. Read the excerpt and then answer the questions that follow.*

Australia has a veneer of familiarity on its edges—cities, forests, rivers, and beaches—but at heart it is bizarre. That strangeness has led its recent settlers into a rocky relationship with its land. . . . A number of environmentalists both inside and outside the country think the continent has been damaged by farmers, loggers, miners, and others over the past two centuries.

If my father had know what would happen, said [one] farmer, “he never would have cleared that paddock. Underfoot, salt crunched. “My father cleared a paddock, got one crop of wheat off it, and the next year it all went to salt.” Behind us a forest of dead eucalyptus trees stood in a salty swamp, a graveyard of skeletons with gray arms raised in goodbye. This place is a called a salt scald. There are shallow layers of salt in the ground there, and shallow aquifers just below them. When farmers cleared millions of acres of land and the trees no longer protected the aquifers, the water table rose to the surface, bringing salt up with it.

Efforts are being made to lower the water table by planting trees, including the oil mallee, a tree closely related to the ones people originally worked so hard to cut down. A prominent scientist in Western Australia says that only replanting most of the cleared land is likely to improve things significantly.

A part of the originality of Australia has been lost to human error. Australia has one of the most biologically diverse landscapes in the world, but that wealth has been eroded. Australia is the world champion home for marsupials, like kangaroos and wombats; there were at least 144 species here 200 years ago. Today 10 of those are extinct and another 19 are endangered. Fifteen percent of the country’s rodent species have also become extinct in the past two centuries. This record of extinction was described by Australia’s own State of the Environment Advisory Council as “the worst for any country.”

Much of this loss happened because species introduced intentionally or by accident overwhelmed the natives. The country’s rabbit infestation is legendary, but among the other animals that have made huge impacts are water buffalo, donkeys, goats, horses, cats, dogs, foxes, and camels. In addition, more than 40 percent of the country’s forests have been cleared for farms or by logging, including about 75 percent of the rain forests and 90 percent of mallee and temperate woodlands.

One of the more devastating introduced disasters is the cane toad, a dumpy little hopper from Hawaii intentionally brought to the northeast coast region in 1935 to eat cane beetles. (It didn’t.) The toad is moving swiftly across the country. It looks innocuous, but has a deadly poison in its

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skin. Some native predators, thinking the toad is a new kind of slowmoving treat, chomp it and die.

In the clamor of conflict over the land of Australia, are there some voices of hope? Yes. Western Australia's Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) developed a program called Project Eden, which is designed to clear the peninsula of feral animals and restore native species. Project Eden has been going on for six years. It started with an electric fence across the isthmus connecting the 405-square-mile Peron Peninsula to the mainland. After the fence was built, CALM started trapping and killing goats, foxes, and cats. Today cat numbers are reduced, goats are fewer, and the foxes are nearly gone. Woylies, the first native species released there, seem to be surviving.

In the western part of the state of Victoria, Landcare has been so successful that it's spawning international copies. It focuses on the planting of trees, the fencing off of rivers from livestock, the controlling of soil salinity, the saving of bits of bush. Everywhere in Australia someone is practicing Landcare. It's just a gradual process. Not spectacular, but it's fun, and it seems to be working. It reaches further all the time, by quantum leaps and quantum creeps. The Landcare program is quietly working its way into the Australian culture.

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**1.** What caused the salt to form in the cleared fields?

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**2.** Why have many native species of animals in Australia been placed on the brink of extinction? What possessed people in the 1800s to do this? Using classroom resources, find one example of this and describe the specific effects it had on that particular native species.

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**3.** What does this article lead you to believe about the value of individual effort/participation in regards to the health and future of the environment?

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