

Most people can readily identify a forest, or a grassland or a wetland – these are the simple labels we give different plant communities. The aim of this book is to move beyond such simple descriptions to investigate the 'hidden' structure of vegetation, asking questions such as how do species in a community persist over time? What prevents the strongest species from taking over? And, are there rules that confer stability and produce repeatable patterns? Answers to these questions are fundamental to community ecology and to the successful management of the world's varied ecosystems, many of which are currently under threat. In addition to reviewing and synthesising our current knowledge of species' interactions and community assembly, this book also seeks to offer a different viewpoint – to challenge the reader, and to stimulate ecologists to think differently about plant communities and the processes that shape them.

J. Bastow Wilson was a professor of botany at the University of Otago, New Zealand. He taught ecology from 1971 until his retirement in 2013, when he was awarded the title of Emeritus Professor. He was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand in 1997, in recognition of his prominence and global leadership in plant ecology and vegetation science. In 1999 he joined the board of chief editors of the *Journal of Vegetation Science* (including its sister-journal, *Applied Vegetation Science*), and in 2000 he became the chair of the chief editors until his retirement. In honour of his services to plant ecology, Wilson was made an honorary life member of the International Association for Vegetation Science in 2013. Over the course of his career Wilson made sustained, insightful and significant contributions to our understanding of how plant communities function, with his research published in over 230 scientific papers. He passed away in April 2015 after a short illness.

Andrew D. Q. Agnew, now retired, taught students plant ecology and taxonomy in Dundee, Baghdad, Nairobi and Aberystwyth. He has a deep interest in the flora of Kenya, and has published widely on the flora and vegetation of that country. Agnew was a long-term colleague of Wilson, and together they published many scientific papers on vegetation dynamics and plant community ecology.

Stephen H. Roxburgh is an ecologist with the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation in Canberra, Australia. He has published more than 100 scientific papers and reports on a range of ecological topics including plant community structure and the maintenance of biological diversity, vegetation patterns and dynamics, and greenhouse gas and carbon accounting. He was a former PhD student of Wilson and worked closely with him over the last weeks of his life to help bring to completion *The Nature of Plant Communities*.

Cover image: Regenerating Mountain Ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*) forest in Victoria, Australia, following a stand-replacing wildfire in 1939.

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