

Soil Seed Banks and Vegetation Dynamics in an *Acacia papyrocarpa* Open Woodland



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Cover images: *Acacia papyrocarpa* (LHS), *Brachyscome ciliaris* var. *ciliaris* and *Cephalopterum drummondii* (top RHS), *Maireana turbinata* (middle RHS) and *Rhodanthe floribunda* (bottom RHS).
Photos: E Steggle and L Pound.

CONTENTS

Declaration	i
Thesis Summary.....	ii
Acknowledgements	v
List of Figures.....	vi
List of Tables.....	x
Chapter 1 Introduction.....	1-11
1.1 Project Background	1-13
1.2 Thesis Outline and Research Aims.....	1-14
Chapter 2 Background to Key Research Themes.....	2-17
2.1 <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i> (Western Myall) Open Woodland	2-19
2.2 Soil Seed Banks	2-20
2.3 Biological Soil Crust and Seedling Emergence.....	2-23
2.4 Seed Dormancy Classification.....	2-24
2.5 Salinity and Water Stress.....	2-24
2.6 Restoration Ecology.....	2-26
Chapter 3 Study Site and Environmental Conditions	3-27
3.1 Introduction.....	3-29
3.2 Methods	3-39
3.3 Results	3-41
3.4 Discussion	3-46
Chapter 4 Spatial and Temporal Variation in the Soil Seed Bank of an <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i> Open Woodland.....	4-49
Abstract	4-51
4.1 Introduction.....	4-52
4.2 Methods	4-54
4.3 Results	4-57
4.4 Discussion	4-63
Chapter 5 Effects of the Biological Soil Crust on Seedling Emergence in an <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i> Open Woodland.....	5-69
Abstract	5-71
5.1 Introduction.....	5-72
5.2 Methods	5-74

5.3	Results.....	5-81
5.4	Discussion.....	5-90
Chapter 6 Applying Pulse Treatments to Promote Seed Germination in Three Species of <i>Enneapogon</i>		
	Abstract.....	6-95
6.1	Introduction	6-97
6.2	Methods.....	6-98
6.3	Results.....	6-99
6.4	Discussion.....	6-103
Chapter 7 Optimising Preparation and Application of Gibberellic Acid for Investigating Physiological Dormancy in Seeds		
	Abstract.....	7-111
7.1	Introduction	7-113
7.2	Methods.....	7-114
7.3	Results.....	7-115
7.4	Discussion.....	7-119
Chapter 8 Seed Germination of Six Arid Zone Plants under Salinity and Water Stress.....		
	Abstract.....	8-133
8.1	Introduction	8-135
8.2	Methods.....	8-136
8.3	Results.....	8-138
8.4	Discussion.....	8-141
Chapter 9 General Discussion and Recommendations for Further Research		
9.1	General Discussion.....	9-153
9.2	Implications for Restoration Ecology	9-155
9.3	Further Research.....	9-158
9.4	Conclusions	9-161
Appendix 1 Life Stage System for <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i>		
Appendix 2 Plant Species Recorded at the Study Site		
Appendix 3 Species Identified in the Biological Soil Crust in Areas Adjacent to the Study Site ..		
Appendix 4 A Comparison of Methods to Assess the Soil Seed Bank.....		
Appendix 5 Plant Species Recorded in the Soil Seed Bank Study		
Appendix 6 Soil Seed Bank Results: Indicator Species Analysis (Area)		
Appendix 7 Soil Seed Bank Results: Indicator Species Analysis (Time).....		
References		

Declaration

I, Emma Steggles, certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Thesis Summary

This PhD formed part of a research partnership between the University of Adelaide, Botanic Gardens of Adelaide and Iluka Resources Ltd. The project commenced in early 2008 and focused on improving our ecological understanding of *Acacia papyrocarpa* (Western Myall) open woodlands. The study site had no or little history of stock grazing and whilst there are similar studies in this type of ecosystem, they have all been conducted in areas subject to domestic stock grazing. Mining activities are increasing in arid parts of South Australia, and mid-way through the project a mineral sands mine commenced adjacent to the study site. Research outcomes were therefore also aimed at informing post-mine restoration efforts.

Three key research areas were studied:

1. Spatial and temporal patterns within the germinable soil seed bank;
2. Effects of the biological soil crust (BSC) on seedling emergence;
3. Seed germination of selected species under salinity and water stress conditions.

Soil seed banks are key components of arid ecosystems as they buffer plant populations against stochastic events such as prolonged droughts, and they play an important role in shaping the dynamics of a plant community. Annual plant species exist predominantly as stored seeds within the soil seed bank and are dependent on specific environmental cues to overcome dormancy and germinate. Relationships between seed dispersal, seed accumulation in the soil, microenvironment properties and seedling establishment are poorly understood, yet such information is needed to inform the management and restoration of arid ecosystems.

To investigate spatial and temporal patterns within the germinable soil seed bank, soil samples were collected seasonally from four different patch types over a two year period. Samples were collected beneath the canopies of *A. papyrocarpa* (Western Myall), *Atriplex vesicaria* ssp. *variabilis* (Bladder Salt Bush) and *Maireana sedifolia* (Pearl Blue Bush), as well as in open inter-shrub areas. Nomenclature is according to Jessop and Toelken (1986). As episodic rainfall and flooding can stimulate seedling emergence in a range of arid zone plants, the soil was treated experimentally with two watering regimes (moist and submerged) to study effects of water saturation on the composition of seedlings. To supplement the research, soil nutrient, soil moisture, soil temperature and in situ seedling emergence data were collected from each of the four patch types.

Research results show evidence of both spatial and temporal variation in the germinable soil seed bank. Soil samples beneath the canopies of *A. vesicaria* ssp. *variabilis* produced highest seedling numbers and diversity when compared with most other patch types, indicating potential differences in the way seeds accumulate spatially within the soil. Submerging soil samples did not affect seedling composition; however, the study only tested responses to the high end of the water availability spectrum. Total seedling numbers and taxa were

highest in summer and autumn collections, reflecting seasonal influences on seed accumulation as well as seed dormancy and germination cues. There was a strong indication that canopy presence may provide suitable conditions to enable seeds to overcome dormancy in seasons other than autumn, thus expanding opportunities for seedling emergence throughout the year.

Investigating the BSC and its influence on seedling emergence is important to understand ecosystem processes within *A. papyrocarpa* open woodlands. Crusts are important components of arid ecosystems in that they influence nutrient cycling, water infiltration, surface evaporation and moisture storage, as well as protect soils against erosion. As such, the BSC helps determine landscape structure and function. Very little is known about BSC effects on seedling emergence, particularly within relatively undisturbed *A. papyrocarpa* open woodlands. Such information is pertinent for managing and restoring ecosystems where the BSC has been removed or disturbed through activities such as mining.

A series of experiments were designed to study interactions between BSC and seedling emergence. Initially, quadrats were established in open inter-shrub areas at the study site, where soil crusts predominantly occur. Seedling emergence was compared between areas originally with or without crust as well as between crust/surfaces left intact or shallowly and lightly scratched to simulate disturbance. Seedling abundance, diversity and composition were recorded towards the end of winter (August) when seedling emergence commences and in late spring (November) after peak seedling emergence. This experiment was also replicated in a glasshouse using intact soil cores. Seeds of selected species were later inserted into fresh cores through pre-drilled side holes in order to study their species-specific response to the various surfaces.

Results from the quadrat experiment indicate that seedling emergence and species richness were higher in inter-shrub areas where BSC was absent. Disturbance did not affect seedling emergence in either surface type. Seed extraction and seed germination experiments were then used to determine whether the variability was due to differences in seed accumulation or whether the BSC actually inhibited seedling emergence through allelopathic effects (i.e. chemical leachates from organisms making up the crust). Results from these experiments showed that late successional stage BSC negatively influences seed accumulation and that leachate effects on seed germination are species specific and depend on the successional stage of the crust.

The final area of research was to investigate the germination response of a selection of arid plant species to salinity and water stress. Groundwater is highly saline and its use in mining operations results in the accumulation of saline waste materials beneath reconstructed soil profiles. There was concern that salts may rise through the soil profile by capillary action, potentially inhibiting seed germination, seedling establishment and the long-term survival of plants. In addition to the toxicity effects of salts such as sodium chloride (NaCl), salinity affects seed germination by reducing soil water potential. Species vary in their ability to

germinate under saline conditions and have critical water content requirements for seed germination.

This research investigated germination responses of six plant species that grow in *A. papyrocarpa* open woodland: *Enneapogon cylindricus* (Gramineae), *Eriochiton sclerolaenoides* (Chenopodiaceae), *Eucalyptus oleosa* ssp. *ampliata* (Myrtaceae), *Lepidium phlebopetalum* (Cruciferae), *Maireana trichoptera* (Chenopodiaceae) and *Rhodanthe floribunda* (Compositae). Species were selected to represent a range of plant families and life forms that were locally abundant at the study site.

Preliminary experiments were needed to ascertain methods for overcoming physiological dormancy and promoting seed germination. A series of pre-treatments were investigated, including different concentrations of gibberellic acid (GA₃) and potassium nitrate (KNO₃) as well as dry heat treatments. From these preliminary experiments, the six species listed above were identified as suitable for studying the effects of salinity and water stress. Different concentrations of sodium chloride (NaCl) and polyethylene glycol (PEG-8000) were then used to produce a range of water potentials to assess germination responses.

Results from this component of the research showed that species vary in their germination response to salinity and water stress, displaying high to medium levels of tolerance or extreme sensitivity. Depending on the species, seed germination was affected through high toxicity levels, low water potentials or a combination of these two factors. Salinity and water stress was found to affect the temperature range over which some species (*E. cylindricus*, *L. phlebopetalum* and *M. trichoptera*) were capable of germinating, and low water potentials caused delays in the seed germination of others (*E. sclerolaenoides* and *R. floribunda*). Two species (*E. sclerolaenoides* and *M. trichoptera*) showed evidence of the selective accumulation of ions.

Overall, this research provides important insight into a selection of key ecological processes in a remote and intact arid ecosystem. In particular, the results add to our understanding of ecological processes within *A. papyrocarpa* open woodland, highlighting the importance of trees and shrubs in patterning and conserving understorey plant diversity and demonstrating the role of BSCs in influencing patterns of seed accumulation and seedling emergence. The research was undertaken within the context of increasing human activities within Australian arid zones, in particular mining, which was reflected in the seed germination component of the project.

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List of Figures

Figure 2-1 Distribution of <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i> based on Australian herbaria collections. Sourced: 10 August 2011 from http://chah.gov.au/avh/	2-20
Figure 3-1 Mean monthly maximum and minimum temperatures and mean monthly rainfall recorded at Tarkoola weather station, 220 km east of the study site. Source: Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology (BOM 2012).	3-29
Figure 3-2 Location map showing Yellabinna Regional Reserve and the position of the study site. Adapted from a map supplied by Iluka Resources Ltd. (Data source: Geosciences Australia, DENR, PIRSA and Iluka).	3-30
Figure 3-3 Vegetation groups in and adjacent to the study site at Jacinth-Ambrosia mineral sand mine, Yellabinna Regional Reserve, South Australia. Source: Iluka Resources Ltd 2007.	3-33
Figure 3-4 Example of the typical life stage of <i>Acacia papyrocarpa</i> (a), <i>Atriplex vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> (b) and <i>Maireana sedifolia</i> (c) at the study site.	3-35
Figure 3-5 <i>Atriplex vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> shrub trapping litter and <i>Austrostipa nitida</i> seeds beneath its canopy (a) and five different species of seedlings beneath the canopy of a <i>M. sedifolia</i> shrub.	3-35
Figure 3-6 Annual daisies, <i>Cephalopterum drummondii</i> , carpeting open areas at the study site (a) and <i>Eucalyptus oleosa</i> ssp. <i>ampliata</i> (mallee) on sandy ridges (b).	3-35
Figure 3-7 Annual daisies: <i>Brachyscome ciliaris</i> var. <i>ciliaris</i> (a); <i>Cephalopterum drummondii</i> (b); and <i>Rhodanthe floribunda</i> (c). Photos: L Pound.	3-37
Figure 3-8 Seedling emergence: <i>Sida spodochroma</i> (a); <i>Zygophyllum</i> sp. (b) and <i>Maireana sedifolia</i> (c).	3-37
Figure 3-9 <i>Calandrinia eremaea</i> seeds (a), <i>Crassula colorata</i> var. <i>colorata</i> follicles (b) and seeds (c).	3-37
Figure 3-10 Extent of the biological soil crust (a), its absence beneath shrub canopies (b) and cracks in the crust and bare patches (c).	3-37
Figure 3-11 Soil nutrient analyses from four different patch types: <i>A. papyrocarpa</i> , <i>A. vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> , <i>M. sedifolia</i> and open inter-shrub areas.	3-41
Figure 3-12 A comparison of mean monthly volumetric soil water content and mean monthly soil temperature between four different patch types (<i>A. papyrocarpa</i> , <i>A. vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> , <i>M. sedifolia</i> and open inter-shrub areas) over 28 months.	3-42
Figure 3-13 Volumetric soil water content data showing heavy rainfall events during December 2008 between four different patch types (<i>A. papyrocarpa</i> , <i>A. vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> , <i>M. sedifolia</i> and open inter-shrub areas).	3-43
Figure 4-1 Riffle splitter for dividing soil samples into two even sub-samples (a); sub-samples in submerged treatment (b); and layout of seedling trays in the glasshouse (c).	4-56

Figure 4-2 Mean number of seedlings and taxa recorded per soil seed bank sample in moist and submerged treatments, from different patch types and different seasons.	4-57
Figure 4-3 Seedling numbers recorded from soil seed bank samples collected from four different patch types and eight different seasons. Different letters indicate significant differences between seedling numbers and statistics are compared between the four patch types. The data excludes <i>Crassula</i> spp. (refer to Figure 4-5).	4-58
Figure 4-4 Number of taxa recorded from soil seed bank samples collected from four different patch types and eight different seasons. Different letters indicate significant differences between number of taxa and statistics are compared between the four patch types. The data excludes <i>Crassula</i> spp. (refer to Figure 4-5).	4-59
Figure 4-5 Number of <i>Crassula</i> spp. seedlings recorded from soil seed bank samples collected from four different patch types and eight different seasons. Different letters indicate significant differences between seedling numbers and statistics are compared between the four patch types.	4-60
Figure 5-1. Light scratching of one half of each quadrat with nails < 5mm long (a) and placement of the cage to protect the quadrat (b).	5-76
Figure 5-2 Extracting soil cores. Petri dish lid protects the crust surface (a) and placing the base onto the soil core (b).	5-77
Figure 5-3 Inserting seeds into soil cores (a); scratching the surface (b); and the placement of replicates into the glasshouse (c).	5-79
Figure 5-4 Three different soil surfaces were used to study effects of BSC leachates on seed germination: type 1 early stage BSC (a), type 4 late stage BSC (b) and loose sand (c). ...	5-79
Figure 5-5 Mean number of seedlings per taxon across four different treatments (crust intact and disturbed and no crust intact and disturbed).....	5-82
Figure 5-6 Mean numbers of seedlings and taxa recorded in quadrats. Letters denote significant differences between treatments ($P < 0.05$), with seedlings and taxa compared separately.	5-83
Figure 5-7 Patterns of emergence and survival recorded from each surface type over nine months. .	5-83
Figure 5-8 Mean number of seedlings per taxon across four different treatments (crust intact and disturbed and no crust intact and disturbed).....	5-84
Figure 5-9 Mean number of seedlings and taxa recorded in soil cores. Letters denote significant differences between treatments ($P < 0.05$), with seedlings and taxa compared separately.	5-84
Figure 5-10 Seed extraction results showing different sized propagules accumulate differently between areas with crust and without crust. Asterisks indicate significant differences between treatments ($P < 0.05$).	5-85
Figure 5-11 Seedling emergence of five different plant species (<i>E. cylindricus</i> , <i>E. sclerolaenoides</i> , <i>L. phlebopetalum</i> , <i>M. trichoptera</i> and <i>R. floribunda</i>) inserted into soil cores with intact or	

disturbed Type 4 late stage BSC (crust) and loose sand (no crust). Letters denote significant differences between treatments ($P < 0.05$).....	5-87
Figure 5-12 Seed germination results of five plant species (<i>E. cylindricus</i> , <i>E. sclerolaenoides</i> , <i>L. phlebopetalum</i> , <i>M. trichoptera</i> and <i>R. floribunda</i>) after the application of crust leachates treatments. Letters denote significant differences between treatments ($P < 0.05$)	5-89
Figure 6-1 <i>Enneapogon avenaceus</i> germinants (a) and examples of germinants from each species. From left to right: <i>E. avenaceus</i> , <i>E. caerulescens</i> var. <i>caerulescens</i> and <i>E. cylindricus</i> . Bar = 10mm (b).....	6-103
Figure 6-2 <i>Enneapogon avenaceus</i> – germination results from pulse treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse treatments and three incubator conditions: spring/autumn, summer and winter. P value is significant when < 0.05	6-105
Figure 6-3 <i>Enneapogon caerulescens</i> var. <i>caerulescens</i> – germination results from pulse treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse treatments and three incubator conditions: spring/autumn, summer and winter. P value is significant when < 0.05	6-106
Figure 6-4 <i>Enneapogon cylindricus</i> – germination results from pulse treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse treatments and three incubator conditions: spring/autumn, summer and winter. P value is significant when < 0.05	6-107
Figure 7-1 <i>Atriplex vesicaria</i> ssp. <i>variabilis</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-120
Figure 7-2 <i>Austrostipa nitida</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-121
Figure 7-3 <i>Eriochiton sclerolaenoides</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-122
Figure 7-4 <i>Lepidium phlebopetalum</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-123
Figure 7-5 <i>Maireana erioclada</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-124
Figure 7-6 <i>Maireana radiata</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-125
Figure 7-7 <i>Maireana trichoptera</i> - germination results from GA_3 treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. P value is significant when < 0.05	7-126

- Figure 7-8 *Rhodanthe floribunda* - germination results from GA₃ treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. *P* value is significant when < 0.05..... 7-127
- Figure 7-9 *Stenopetalum lineare* - germination results from GA₃ treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. *P* value is significant when <0.05. 7-128
- Figure 7-10 *Zygophyllum aurantiacum ssp. aurantiacum* - germination results from GA₃ treatments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all pulse and chronic treatments, both pH adjusted and non-adjusted. *P* value is significant when < 0.05... 7-129
- Figure 8-1 *Enneapogon cylindricus* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared within the same time period across all NaCl and PEG treatments and two incubator conditions: constant 15°C and 30°C. *P* value is significant when < 0.05..... 8-143
- Figure 8-2 *Eriochiton sclerolaenoides* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared across all NaCl and PEG treatments and the two incubator conditions constant 15°C and 30°C within the same time period. *P* value is significant when < 0.05. 8-144
- Figure 8-3 *Eucalyptus oleosa ssp. ampliata* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared across all NaCl and PEG treatments and the two incubator conditions constant 15°C and 30°C within the same time period. *P* value is significant when < 0.05. 8-145
- Figure 8-4 *Lepidium phlebopetalum* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared across all NaCl and PEG treatments and the two incubator conditions constant 15°C and 30°C within the same time period. *P* value is significant when < 0.05. 8-146
- Figure 8-5 *Maireana trichoptera* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared across all NaCl and PEG treatments and the two incubator conditions constant 15°C and 30°C within the same time period. *P* value is significant when < 0.05. 8-147
- Figure 8-6 *Rhodanthe floribunda* – Germination results from water potential experiments. Statistics are compared across all NaCl and PEG treatments and the two incubator conditions constant 15°C and 30°C within the same time period. *P* value is significant when < 0.05. 8-148

List of Tables

Table 3-1 Braun-Blanquet Cover-Abundance Scale with midpoint of cover range.....	3-40
Table 3-2 Results from Indicator Species Analyses on seedling emergence data collected from four different patch types (<i>A. papyrocarpa</i> , <i>A. vesicaria</i> , <i>M. sedifolia</i> and open areas). Bold type indicates significant associations ($P < 0.01$).....	3-44
Table 3-3 Results from Indicator Species Analyses on seedling emergence data collected at different time periods (July 2009; Sept 2009; Nov 2009; Feb 2010). Bold type indicates significant associations ($P < 0.01$).	3-45
Table 4-1 Summary of significant results ($P < 0.01$) from Indicator Species Analyses, which show seedling taxa collected during different seasons and their associations with patch type. * P value is significant when < 0.01	4-61
Table 4-2 A summary of the seasonal distribution of seedling taxa in four different patch types. For each patch type and collection time, the total percentage is calculated from the total number of taxa recording peak seedling emergence. * P value is significant when < 0.01 .	4-62
Table 5-1 Species chosen for insertion into cores and germination experiments, with details of pulse treatments used to overcome physiological dormancy and maximise germination.	5-78
Table 5-2 Summary of the seven treatments used to investigate the effects of BSC leachates on seed germination.....	5-80
Table 6-1 Description of <i>Enneapogon</i> spp. seed collections including embryo type, viability of seed collections and seed measurements. Each <i>E. avenaceus</i> propagule consists of three different-sized seeds (small, medium and large) and measurements for these are recorded separately.....	6-101
Table 6-2 Summary of pulse treatments tested to overcome physiological dormancy in <i>Enneapogon avenaceus</i> , <i>E. caerulescens</i> var. <i>caerulescens</i> and <i>E. cylindricus</i> seeds.	6-102
Table 7-1 Description of the seed collections used to research methods for optimising the preparation and application of gibberellic acid to overcome physiological dormancy, including seed embryo descriptions and seed viability results.....	7-117
Table 7-2 A summary of pulse and chronic treatments used to research methods for optimising the preparation and application of gibberellic acid to overcome physiological dormancy in seeds.	7-118
Table 8-1 Description of six plant species included in salinity and water stress experiments, including collection viability results and seed embryo types.	8-139
Table 8-2 A summary of water potentials (MPa) and incubator conditions used to examine salinity and water stress on seed germination in six arid plant species.	8-140