

Book review

The Australian soil classification—an interactive key. By D. W. Jacquier, N. J. McKenzie, K. L. Brown, R. F. Isbell, and T. A. Paine. CSIRO Publishing. A\$59.95. Interactive CDROM.

Now, as my former lecturers at University will gladly tell you, I am no pedologist but I foolishly volunteered to review this “book”, which is actually a CD, some time ago and have only just got around to having a play with it. I guess I said I would because in the late 1980s I had the opportunity to be seconded to the then Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Dairy Branch, and came across some very interesting soils there. An Interactive Key then would have been extremely useful to help me identify the strange and wondrous soils I came across. Always supposing, of course, that I could have used a personal computer or laptop then!

The disc comes in an attractive A5 sized cardboard and plastic disc holder with some colourful profile photos of poor, old, and tired Aussie soils. There is a comprehensive User Guide in a pocket inside the front cover and brief but adequate instructions on how to load and run the programs on the disc. I did it, so anyone can!

The package comes with a step-by-step tutorial to show you how to allocate soils to classes. I’m a male, however, and dispensed with the need to read or follow the instructions and just blazed away guessing at stuff, making mistakes but generally pretty quickly picked up how to use this key.

The Guide tells you that if you don’t know much about the soil you are dealing with then go to Best Order when you are choosing the character values for your soil profile. This Best Order feature was already there when I opened up the program.

I chose to try and find out the taxa of a particular soil that occurs in north-west Tasmania, which I was calling an “acid swamp podzol”, and which is similar to the some of the sandy podzols in coastal

Northland. I was driving mostly on memory (I had no quantitative data) but by following the sequence of characters and answering the questions about whether the character was present or absent or other information about the horizons, drainage, colour, chemistry etc. (much of which was accompanied by helpful photos or text) I managed to eliminate 11 843 taxa (out of 11 848) by selecting 24 of the best order characters in about 10 minutes. I probably put a lot of incorrect information in, but the profile photos (all very high quality) helped keep me on the straight and narrow.

I ended up with five taxa left—podosol; aquic podosol; humic, aquic podosol; peaty, humic, aquic podosol and melacic, humic, aquic podosol—whatever all that means! There is an information button which you then hit and which allows you to select each of these taxa, and by toggling an “eye” icon, a photo of a representative profile is shown on screen. Really great—I narrowed my profile down to an aquic podosol. Any Aussie pedologist who might read this can write to me with my marks out of 10!

I found this an easy and impressive tool to use and further features include extensive notes of soil characters, many of which are illustrated, a glossary, and extensive references.

I would recommend this Key to any pedologically inclined person, or indeed anyone interested in Australian soils, as an easy to use, comprehensive key to our western cousins’ soils. The Key is available from CSIRO Publishing at a cost of A\$59.95...or you could borrow my copy!

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