When Gordon Brent Ingram went out to Niger to photograph the Tuareg, he was armed with nothing save his camera and a burgeoning conscience. And one can’t help feeling that he might have aided his cause with a little less self-effacement and a little more of the Sherman gall. Ingram’s exhibition at the RIBA, entitled “Gardens of Despair: Tuareg responses to desertification”, is a demonstration of the ethical hang-ups to which academics are prone when working in other cultures.

The Tuareg are facing a crisis their...
The Tuareg are facing a crisis: their traditional way of life as pastoral nomads has gradually been wiped out as the southwards spread of the Sahara has subsumed their grazing grounds. Their response has been to settle around whatever water they can find, and dabble in agriculture. "The gardens have become refuges," says Ingram, "and desperate experiments for survival."

In this well-produced series of photographs Ingram shows us the dramatic encroachment of the desert; he shows us their wells, and their gardens, ecologically precarious rows of maize. In fact, he shows us a great deal of the Tuareg environment in a range of shots, supplemented by (very necessary) explanatory text. What is omitted is the Tuareg themselves. Of the 35 prints (both cibachromes and black and white), only three or four have people in them. And in all but one of them, the people are lost somewhere in the middle distance.

This is not because the Tuareg must
This is not because the Tuareg were camera-shy. Rather it was a question of Ingram trying not to be invasive, not to show his subjects in the “wrong” light, either as noble savages or starving Africans: “I had problems deciding whether to include this in the show,” he says of a particularly inoffensive group of women sitting around making baskets.

The result is that the accompanying text overruns the pictures; the more we hear about the Tuaregs’ attempts to determine their predicament, the more we want to see some indication of their emotional response to the environmental catastrophe.

On the existing evidence Ingram, an art school graduate before turning academic, certainly has the photographic expertise required to take on such an enterprise (the one shot in which he does home in on his subjects is a tantalising taster). But, Ingram insists, the three years he spent with the Taureg was not long enough. Fifteen years, he says, would just about do it.