

## **Australian Outback - Heart of a Continent**

Alun Hoggett

Desert Channels Group, 135 Falcon St, Longreach Qld 4730. E: [alun@dcq.org.au](mailto:alun@dcq.org.au), M: 0427 427969

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### **Abstract**

No documentary to date attempts to portray the diverse human and natural geography of the rangelands of Australia. At the end of 2013 Alun Hoggett, film maker with Desert Channels Group began research to develop a proposal for funding a documentary or series under the working title *Australian Outback: Heart of a Continent*. The intention of the documentary is to move Australians to engage in a deeper appreciation of the land that supports them, the people who manage and care for it, and the challenges they face. It is a story that will help dissolve many of the misconceptions that urban people have about the bush, and the people who make their living there. It aims to instil pride and understanding, not in some romantic notion of Outback, but in the whole of the living, changing, pulsing county at the heart of the Australian continent. The documentary will acknowledge the past, show the challenges of the present and reach into possible futures of this vast natural landscape. In the conference session Alun will show a 10 minute trailer to communicate the concept of the documentary. Following the trailer will be a facilitated discussion, and recording of themes and filmmaking approaches, drawing ideas from the conference attendees. This input from the conference will identify insights on the past, present and future management of the Rangelands, strengthening the foundation of research on which the documentary concept will be built.



Interviewing Des Nelson OAM near Alice Springs

### **Why tell the story of the Outback?**

I packed my motorbike in Canberra in 1996, and rode 2000 km in two days to Outback Queensland. As the odometer clocked over, towns seemed more laid back, self contained, and stretches of road grew longer in between. I rode through Ilfracombe, past historic farm machinery, closely parked, lining the road from one end of town to the other. For a person from the city, fatigued after two days on the bike, it was a surreal and comforting sight - a sign of care and connection to place and history.

Arriving in Longreach, the first person I talked to told me I could leave my gear unattended on my bike - a concept slow to compute, with my riding fatigue and ingrained wariness of theft from a life in the city.

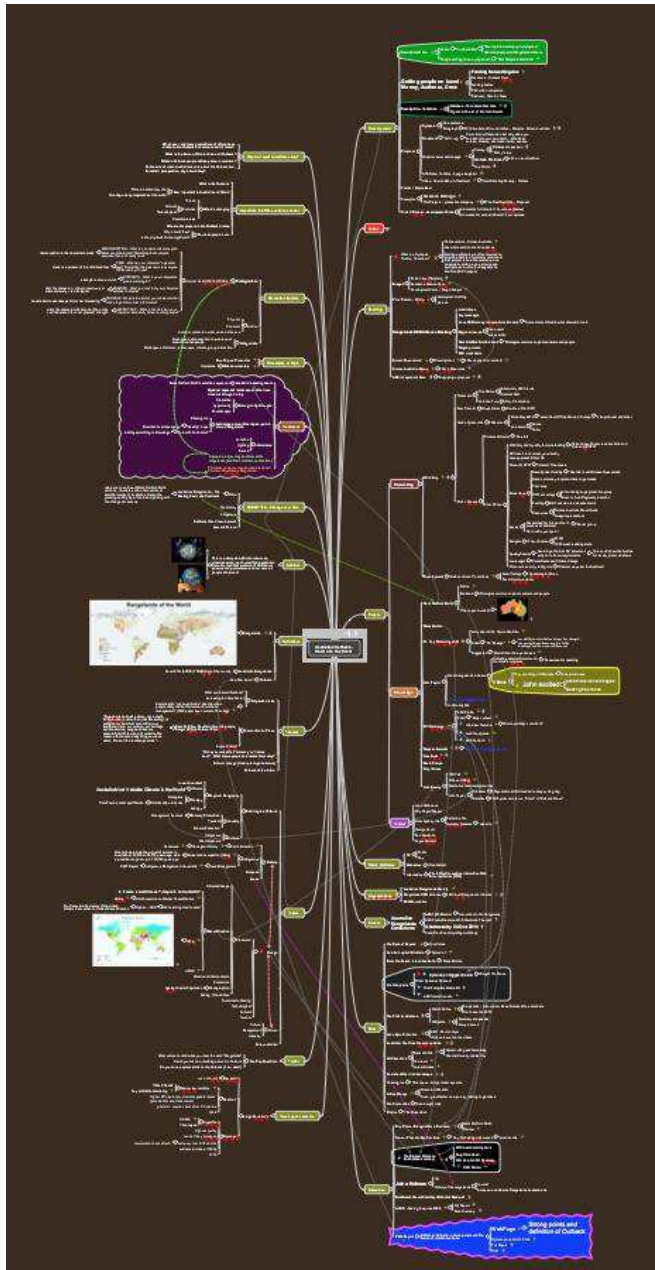
Eighteen years later I am still in Outback Queensland, along with so many other people who made similar shifts from the cities, held by a strong sense of community, shared connection and care for the vast and timeless landscape.

As an Outback based filmmaker, over the last 6 years, I have interviewed Aboriginal elders; People on stations and in towns; scientists, tourism operators and many others who call the Outback home. Each has a personal story of why the country and culture keep them here.

My aim is to make a documentary that rings true to the people of the Outback yet speaks to people in the cities so they better understand and care for the heart of our country.

### **Early research for a Rangelands documentary**

At the end of 2013 I began researching a documentary about the Rangelands to find out what had already been produced and look at documentary styles. I initially contacted leading pastoralists, Indigenous people, researchers, NRM organisations and filmmakers. All the people I called showed enthusiasm about the idea of a documentary on the Australian Rangelands, and they provided valuable information, suggesting themes and topics. After a month of research, the development went on hold in early 2014 because of work and other demands on my time.



Research mindmap - interconnection of ideas, images and resources

### City impressions of the Outback

Early in January 2015, I interviewed a dozen people on camera around the centre of Sydney, to get a feel for what urban people know about the Outback and what it means to them. I am keen to conduct more interviews when I get the opportunity as these provided wonderful insights and felt like the tentative beginnings of a conversation with our audience.



Words from a cross section of interviewees:

James - city based Archaeologist

*I know the generalisation about the outback. It has a connotation of something ancient, remote, separate from European Australian's perception of where they live.*

*I see it as an aboriginal landscape ... always a feeling of stepping into someone else's space.*

Michael - Cafe owner - Circular Quay

*From what I know about the Outback - from all our tourists - there's a big red rock in the middle of it and it's full of our Indigenous people...*

*To me when I think of Outback I think of Australians, Aborigines, beers and pubs and a laid back lifestyle, with a lot of flies and hats with corkscrews.*

Katherine - office worker

*A lot of our understanding of the Outback comes from TV show so... pretty limited...*

*I work in the city but the majority of my time would be more spent in the suburbs, which is to some degree very different from the central business district, but then again very different from rural communities and what it's like in the Outback.*

*As an Australian I understand it's a large part of our identity but my understanding of it is just what we get from TV shows.*

*Shows like Farmer Wants a Wife... I guess some of those farmers live hundreds of kilometres from the city... I assume things like buying groceries or going to the hospital would involve... just more effort than for people in the city. My primary concern would be that you're so far away from major hospitals... the risk of injury is a bit greater... If you've got some chronic disease it's all a bit... trickier.*

Chris - visiting Sydney from central Queensland

*Flies, dusty, desert, cowboy hats, long sleeved chequered shirts, more the dry climate, horses, cattle...*

*I do have some family that have run farms... my father's right into his cattle... he's bred a lot of cattle. At the moment I live in central Queensland... it's more beachy now.*

*I like the Outback. I think it's great to show the kids the Outback for the future - you don't want to destroy it.*

Becky - visitor from England

*The impression I have of it ... loads and loads of land, not much life, very dry...*

*I watched a film once called "Wolf Creek" which kind of put me off it. Because now I have this image of this man... he's still out there to this day - this murderer man. It wouldn't actually put me off going out there.*

Gumaroy Newman - Aboriginal performer filmed at Circular Quay

*I come from a Nation that they call Gumaroy...*

*To me the Outback is a frame of mind and a place in your heart and in your soul that's connecting to the greater mother earth...*

*...even still today you can walk away and leave your back door open... that's one of my favourite things...*

*Most international tourists... come down here...*

*We're expressing traditional culture in the contemporary form... so they get it*

*... Outback is where the knowledge comes from...*

*I go out there... Then I come back and share it with people.*

*I love it out there, absorbing the land, watching the animals, if it wasn't for the Outback and ... animals ... in the untainted environment we wouldn't have inspiration to do this dance to play that rhythm...*

*Just all these fellahs need to get out there and experience it, get their feet dirty in the black soil... cover them with the red soil of the red soil plains*

From the twelve interviews, all showed interest in the Outback - most felt it had some meaning to them and Australians in general; however the majority indicated a limited exposure to the Outback itself.

### **Why "Outback" and not "Rangelands"**

The initial documentary research focused on the Rangelands of Australia, but the street interviews conducted in Sydney suggest that the term "Rangelands" is not well understood by many of the urban audience. A film's title and subject need to catch its audience's attention.

In the PEW Charitable Trusts report - *A Modern Outback - nature, people and the future of remote Australia* (Woinarski *et al.* 2014) - the authors define the Outback area as differing mainly from the Rangelands in that they "...exclude the partially cleared and highly altered regions of much of western New South Wales and central Queensland..." If we use this definition, and focus the

documentary on the Outback, it will draw the public's attention to the Rangelands while using a term more familiar and evocative.

The term Rangelands will be important when the film touches on the physical geography and the global significance of the Outback.



Processing footage at end of day - Simpson Desert

### **Style and approach**

With a topic as broad as the Outback, there are endless ways to tell a story in documentary. Some factors affecting the final concept:

- type of story that the filmmaker has the passion to tell
- genre that appeals to audience, broadcaster and funders
- budget available
- availability and cost of talent (particularly with high profile personalities)

Below are a few concepts from my discussions with other filmmakers. They are ordered roughly by budget size.

### ***Local story as microcosm***

Film a story from a local town that explores some of the universalities and symptoms of bigger forces at work, for example how people relate to their town common.

### ***Short topic based stories for television***

Divide the themes and tackle them one at a time, perhaps for a program like ABC Landline

### ***Journey around the Outback - Local or non-celebrity talent***

The film follows a less well known person or people on a journey to explore chosen themes.

### ***Journey around the Outback - Well known talent***

Follow a journey around the Outback with a person or group of people that could include a contemporary comedian, a young Aboriginal person, a leading young grazier, an academic, a chef, a business leader.

### ***Web (interactive) documentary***

Good example of this is "The Block" <http://www.sbs.com.au/theblock>. Allows people to explore 3D maps, graphics, footage, soundscapes and text, according to their own interest.

### ***Blue chip geographic documentary***

Narrated story with high quality, footage, large-scale, high-budget production, usually focusing on the drama and majesty of the natural world. Most often keeping away from controversy or politics and instead focus on appealing subjects like migratory birds or whales.

### **Next steps...**

- Further research and networking expected prior to the ARS conference
- Facilitated conference sessions seeking input at conference, see below for themes and topics
- Post conference debrief and analysis of session data
- Seek funding and determine distribution medium

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### **Appendix: Input required - conference facilitated session**

- Why is it urgent to tell the Outback/Rangelands story?
- Is (or why is) the city-bush divide significant?
- What themes and topics from below are most important to explore?
- What themes will most impact or resonate with an urban audience?

### ***Themes***

Unique landscape and culture

City-bush divide

What are the ramifications?

Decline through neglect

Connecting urban people with the Outback

Connection to Place

Indigenous

Non-Indigenous

Newcomers (not brought up in the Outback)

Rural-urban drift

What draws people and makes them stay?

Cultural change

Outback of the future

## **Topics**

### Defining the Outback

#### Physical Geography

In world context

Climate

Most Variable in the World

Ecology

Bioregions

Relationships & Cycles

Flora/Fauna/Landscape/Climate

Geology

#### Industry

Primary Production

Tourism

Mineral Extraction

#### Culture

Indigenous

Non Indigenous

#### Infrastructure

### History

#### Earth formation

Geological History

#### Indigenous

Arrival and occupation

Land Management

#### European

### Change

#### Pressures

Climate Change

Desertification

Weeds and Feral animals

Economics

Demographics

Rural Urban drift

Ageing Grazier Population

Mining, Oil and Gas

#### Sustainable Grazing

#### Technological

#### Cultural

#### Tourism

### Future

#### Culture

#### Management

#### Industry