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The Australian Rangeland Society

LAND USES ON ABORIGINAL LANDS IN SOUTHERN NORTHERN TERRITORY.

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ABSTRACT

Since the introduction of the Land Rights Act (N.T.) 1976 the debate over land use has been very emotive. Historically, Europeans have been quite single minded in their pursuit of natural resources and slow in their efforts to accommodate the social and economic needs of Aboriginal people who are directly affected. This paper shows that there need not be conflicts over Aboriginal land if there is an exhibition of common courtesy and a respect for Aboriginal culture.

The challenge presented in this paper is for Australian land users (and funding agencies to Aboriginal organisations) to develop an understanding of Aboriginal culture and priorities with regard to land use. The challenge is also to understand the benefits of Aboriginal land to both Aboriginal and non Aboriginal Australians. There is a need to develop social cost benefit techniques that take into account and accurately quantify these non monetary benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Prior to the European invasion of central Australia the semi-nomadic Aboriginal people actively managed the land, basing their practices on thousands of years of accumulated knowledge. Traditional land use revolved around the society's hunting and gathering activities, and was founded on a strong spiritual base. To a large degree the "traditional" Australian landscape is an Aboriginal artifact, maintained in its "pristine" form by conscious Aboriginal management(1).

The European occupation of the land, accompanied by the forced removal of Aboriginal people to settlements, has resulted in a radical change in land use. Present land uses are a result of conflict over the control of resources and the relationship between the inhabitants' present needs and their responsibility for future generations.

The introduction of the Land Rights Act in 1977 hallowed the official adoption of the policy of self-determination. This gave Aboriginal people a degree of control of their own lives and of what happens to a proportion of their tribal lands. Suddenly land that non Aboriginal Australians didn't want became potentially land that they couldn't have, a degree of control was vested in the previously powerless, and the Land Rights paranoia began.

WHAT IS ABORIGINAL LAND?

In Central Australia traditional systems of tenure exist even where more recent non Aboriginal systems of tenure have "come in on top". However traditional tenure has only been legally recognised since the Aboriginal Land Rights (N.T.) Act came into effect in 1977.

This Act has enabled groups of Aboriginal people of the Northern Territory to claim portions of their traditional lands, provided that the land affected is owned by Aboriginal people or is still unalienated and is owned by the Crown. Since all productive land had already been occupied by the European settlers almost all Aboriginal land is, by western standards, useless. However this does not imply that land that is now Aboriginal owned has not been affected by European encroachment. The environment has been adversely modified by mining, introduced animal species including rabbits, cattle, horses, donkeys, foxes and cats and by noxious plant species.

Aboriginal people are therefore now faced with land management issues which have developed as a result of non-traditional land use. They are faced with the deterioration of the condition and the sustainability of the physical environment, which in turn leads to deterioration of Aboriginal peoples' individual life style and the health of the community.

In many cases Aboriginal communities link this deterioration of lifestyle directly to the loss of a traditional values. People do not necessarily want to return to a subsistence style existence, but they have experienced the breakdown of their society following exposure to western values. Aboriginal Land gives Aboriginal people a cultural breathing space to reassess the breakneck speed at which their environment has changed over the last 100 years and gives them a greater ability to choose the direction of their future.

WHAT IS LAND USE?

Putting the politics of power aside, the crux of this debate is the different attitudes of the Aboriginal and non Aboriginal societies to "land use". Non Aboriginal Australia generally judges land to be under proper "use" if it is producing commodities of quantifiable value; agricultural products, minerals, wood or tourist dollars. Non-use, in the sense of non-production of a commodity is not seen as an acceptable land use. However, the entire traditional Australian Aboriginal approach to land management is to maintain the status quo. Spiritually Aboriginal people do not differentiate between the land, the associated traditional management activities, the flora and fauna and themselves. Thus merely living on the land can be for them an all encompassing land use.

This is not to say that Aboriginal people of central Australia do not wish to obtain economic independence, something that they, particularly when living in remote locations, have very few means of acquiring. They remain the poorest sections of the Australian community. However, it is patently obvious to all who can see that economic development in Australia over the last 200 years has not been sustainable in any sense of the word. Aboriginal people who have had no control over events in the past should not be expected to hurtle down the same blind alley now that they have an opportunity to select the pace of change.

LAND USE AND CONFLICT

The implication that Aboriginal Land is a form of land use, and a form of land use that may conflict with other land uses implies an enormous misunderstanding of both Aboriginal people and their land use practices. Land use patterns on Aboriginal land are at least as wide as on non Aboriginal land and support a considerably larger population than on non Aboriginal land of a similar quality.

Consideration of all other types of land use is based on the spiritual relationship that Aboriginal people have with the land, colloquially known as "looking after the country". This relationship is strictly defined along hereditary lines and is very specific. In some cases the responsibility that people feel that they have to the land, will totally preclude any other form of land use.

Conflict over the use of Aboriginal Land principally occurs between the Aboriginal land owners, and sections of the non Aboriginal population who feel that they should have an input into the way that Aboriginal land is used and managed. Perhaps they forget to look over their shoulders and see what has happened to the land that they have been managing for the last 100 years.

Not surprisingly the priorities of the Aboriginal land owners, and those who feel that they know better, differ. Aboriginal groups are still fighting for the most basic of human rights that are taken for granted by the non Aboriginal population. Consultation with most rural Aboriginal communities indicates that peoples' primary concerns still relate to cultural breakdown and to basic service provision, and while those needs remain unsatisfied other issues will remain a low priority. Difficulties are accentuated by cultural differences in the perception of method of satisfaction of those needs, for example housing needs for Aboriginal communities differ radically from those in non Aboriginal communities.

A primary factor in non Aboriginal land use is specialisation, which automatically leads to competition between the conflicting interest groups; land can be used for conservation or pastoralism or housing. However, Aboriginal land is often used at a low intensity for all these purposes, and Aboriginal people do not perceive them as conflicting.

When McLaren Creek pastoral lease was purchased destocked in 1985 the Traditional Owners saw the station principally as a chance to move back to their land and maintain their cultural integrity. The station supports about 150 residents in five separate locations.

The management of the pastoral resource has changed quite considerably since the transfer of ownership. They have developed the station at their own pace and now run a small herd that pays its operating costs. The low stocking rates have allowed the regeneration of native plant species and have arrested the soil degradation. The reduction of grazing pressure, combined with a traditional fire regime, has led to a reduction in the woody weed problem. The Traditional Owners also harvest the feral horses on the property for the export market and own a small gold mine and two mineral claims.

Community members supply the local tourist trade with quality artifacts and also harvest native plant seed for commercial use. The Traditional Owners for the area are also custodians for the Devils Marbles, a local tourist attraction.

While the ownership of the station has not allowed the community to become totally economically independent (many cattle stations have difficulty in supporting one family) both the social and economic benefits are potentially quantifiable.

Although this example of low level utilisation of a number of resources in tandem may not provide a pattern of land use that is compatible with non Aboriginal interests, there is no evidence to suggest that Aboriginal

custodians have had an unreasonable approach to development proposals on Aboriginal land(2).

Work done by Cousins and Nieuwenhuysen(5) on the mining industry found "that Aboriginal communities in their study do not generally seem opposed to mining or economic development in itself. They want instead development which respects their cultural traditions, in accordance with their perceived needs, and in which they can share the benefits."

So far this year the Central Land Council (CLC) has entered in to four exploration agreements covering over ten thousand square kilometres of Aboriginal land, and many more are under negotiation. When the Tanami Joint Venture representative, Patrick Hardford said: "The agreements represent a sound commercial position for both the land owners and Tanami Joint Venture, with the rights of both parties adequately protected"; he demonstrated that there is no need for conflict over land use, only negotiation.

The hand over and lease back of Uluru National Park from the Commonwealth to the Aboriginal Traditional Owners has been well publicised and documented and is presently operating under an agreement which is beneficial to all parties concerned. At Watarrka (Kings Canyon) National Park a controversial agreement (in terms of national park management) was reached between the Northern Territory Government and the Traditional Owners to establish Aboriginal living areas in the national park. However, this agreement seriously compromised the Traditional Owners who saw a national park established on their land, receiving only small living areas in return. Thus it should be considered that it was not a matter of "allowing" Aboriginal people to live in a national park but of imposing a national park on Aboriginal land (3).

It is difficult to argue that cultural conservation is a less worthy aim than nature conservation. Cultural conservation, where the traditional culture has strong land ethic, may in fact enhance the chance of nature conservation (3).

Some Aboriginal groups are now considering tourism as a possible economic venture. Small family groups are establishing "tours" to explain Aboriginal culture, bush foods and their country. However, tourism does have environmental problems. One such problem particularly associated with Aboriginal lands is the pressure placed on mulga (*Acacia aneura*). Mulga is an economically important wood. The increased demand for artifacts, along with rabbits and a changed fire regime, is placing this species under pressure. Other species used for artifacts include the river gum *E. calimaldulensis*, *E. terminalis* and *E. microtheca* (4), however these are possibly under less pressure at present.

Land Rights and mining and other developments can be and are compatible providing there is compliance with the Aboriginal Land Rights Act, that fair agreements are negotiated and there is a respect for Aboriginal culture. Similar methodologies can be used to implement successful land management strategies on Aboriginal land.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Aboriginal people must be consulted to determine their perceptions of land management and aspirations for land use at a local and regional level.

2. Aboriginal perceptions of land use are as valid as those formulated by non Aboriginal land management groups and should be recognised as such and be given equal status.
3. Research is needed to identify environmental problems and issues threatening Aboriginal land.
4. Data from the above mentioned research should be used in consultation with Aboriginal groups, and in conjunction with basic geographical, social and environmental data to develop long term land use strategies.
5. Support and funding for community projects should have continuity. (Economic development potential should not be the only criteria for attracting advisory and financial support.)
6. Community and economic development programmes must be designed to continue to operate in the absence of the donor agency. A failed programme more usually reflects the inadequacy and inappropriateness of the design and implementation of the programme, although the Aboriginal community that is powerless to respond more often shoulders the blame.
7. The Land Councils have a statutory responsibility for land management on Aboriginal land. In recognition of this both non Governmental and Governmental bodies should use the broad based representation that the Land Councils have to consult on various land management issues. In addition Land Council technical staff, in consultation with Traditional Owners, should continue to collate basic data and to work on the development of general land management strategies for Aboriginal Land.

CONCLUSION

The continuing conflict over Aboriginal land rights has demonstrated that Aboriginals and other Australians think about these matters in radically different ways, in concepts which at times seems incommunicable to one another. Aboriginal Land is not a conflicting land use and in fact incorporates a multiplicity of land uses, including mining, tourism and cultural and community development. This must be recognised as a reality and this conference should recognise and recommend the need for a management strategy that deals with this in a climate of cultural tolerance.

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