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The Australian Rangeland Society

AN ABORIGINAL ALTERNATIVE
THE MANAGEMENT SERVICES UNIT

R. Edwards

Western Australia Department of Agriculture, Derby

INTRODUCTION

The Fitzroy Valley is located in the Kimberley region of north west Australia. The main form of agriculture is the extensive grazing of cattle on vast pastoral leases known as stations. There are eighteen recognized Aboriginal pastoral enterprises including both pastoral leases and reserve lands.

Aboriginal ownership of pastoral leases in the Kimberley began in the early 1970s. At this time many Aboriginal people were forced to leave stations because the cost of labour was too high.

The people moved to camps and reserves about the main Kimberley towns and became welfare dependant and victims of the many social problems associated with poverty, unemployment and dispossession.

Through Federal Government funding, pastoral leases have been purchased and communities have moved back on to their homelands. The aims and aspirations of each community vary but ownership of a cattle station is seen as security for their homeland, as an economic base for the community, as a place of employment and training, and often as a refuge from the social problems of the towns.

A lot of criticism has been directed at the management of the Aboriginal pastoral leases from within the pastoral industry. Concern has been expressed over their "economic viability", their ability to provide a sustained contribution to the Kimberley cattle industry, the maintenance of infrastructure, the accountability of the funding the risk of jeopardizing disease, vermin and noxious weed eradication programs, and that they will always require government funding.

In 1988, when a group of three pastoral leases in the Fitzroy Valley were purchased by Aboriginal interests a condition of the lease transfer was that an acceptable management system be put in place.

THE MANAGEMENT SERVICES UNIT

The Aboriginal Development Commission detailed a management strategy that would incorporate the three leases of Bohemia Downs, Louisa Downs and Mt. Pierre with the two previously purchased leases of Noonkanbah and Millijiddee. The umbrella management group referred to as the Management Services Unit, or MSU, came into being in early 1989.

The MSU provides a structure through which decisions and advice can flow in a manner that overcomes cultural barriers such as the division of labour and commercial barriers such as planning skills.

The MSU is headed by a board of directors which receives support from the MSU manager, two work supervisors, the five station management committees and the station managers.

MSU Board of Directors

The Board is made up of two members from each station. The Board makes decisions regarding the MSU and not station matters. Issues of policy, funding, employment, training, and budgeting are discussed and acted on.

MSU Manager

The MSU manager is responsible to the Board of Directors. He prepares the budgets and funding submissions for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Commission. He provides support to the Board on fiscal matters, policy, legislation and training.

The MSU manager also attends the station management committee meetings.

Work Supervisor

There are two non-Aboriginal supervisors: one for Noonkanbah and Millijiddee and one for Mt. Pierre, Louisa Downs and Bohemia Downs. The work supervisor acts as an adviser to the station management committees. He assists in setting, supervising and monitoring work programs. He maintains station records. He assists the station management committee and the MSU Board with development plans and budgets. He liaises with outside agencies and identifies training requirements.

Station Manager

The station manager is a member of the community and works along side the Work Supervisor.

Station Management Committee

The station management committees hold meetings at least every six weeks. The committee is made up of members of the work crew and the managers. They are supported in their decisions by the Work Supervisor and the MSU Manager. Decisions are made concerning individual station training needs, budgets, policy and development.

Work Crew

The station employ full time award wage labour from the community. Temporary or seasonal employees are funded by the Community Development and Employment Program. The crews perform general station duties under direction from the manager and work supervisor.

Support Services

These include the book keepers, the mechanic, and full-time Training Officer.

FUTURE OF THE MSU

Major cultural barriers block the entry of Aboriginal people into the world of business and enterprise. Through the use of outside advisers and support staff, and where the decision making process is being left up to the community people, gradual changes are taking place.

The MSU Board of Directors now conduct their meetings themselves, whereas before it was chaired from outside.

A station management committee recently sacked a member of the work crew; this is a very serious decision with possible social and cultural implications within the community. The committee has developed the confidence to take decisions and act on them.

MSU members are now taking a much higher community profile. The station managers regularly attend Land Conservation District meetings.

With the development of confidence and managerial experience much of the criticism directed at the stations will be answered.