

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY
BIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

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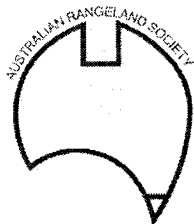
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The Australian Rangeland Society

FOCUS ON THE FUTURE - THE HEAT IS ON

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This conference is taking place at a very significant time for the use and management of Australia's rangelands. The discussions in which we are about to engage, coming shortly after the release of the draft National Strategy for Rangeland Management, represent the first national gathering of stakeholders able to propose with credibility scenarios for the future use of rangelands which will effectively represent action plans dealing with the essential elements of this milestone document. No doubt, as technicians or landholders, we are all keen to be updated on the scientific and practical advances in rangeland science which will be presented as part of this conference. This is, after all, one of its fundamental functions. But the organisers have also provided us with an opportunity to make a substantial contribution to the public debate on the future of our rangelands. This is a logical progression from the Society's last conference in Katherine, which I believe marked the emergence of this biennial gathering as a significant national forum for such discussion. So we are, for the next few days, focussing very much on the future - and the heat is on *us* to develop scenarios for our rangelands 15 years hence which will materially influence the future course of events.

Why should we do so? I want to suggest that fundamentally our task here is to find ways of harmonising the disparate values held by those groups in the Australian community which today regard themselves as stakeholders in the rangelands. Thirty years ago, this diversity of values was barely noticeable. Pastoralism was accepted by the community at large as the predominant and appropriate use of these lands and the values of pastoralism were compatible with those of the 'outside' community. Since the 1960s, however, this situation has altered dramatically. The rise of the environmental movement, the advent of Aboriginal land rights, the growth of the mining and tourist industries, and increasing urbanisation are but some of the trends resulting in the establishment of a variety of interest groups whose values are different from those of pastoralism and not always compatible with it. A survey conducted by the Society in 1995 found that 59 per cent of Australians considered that conservation of plants and animals was a major contribution which rangelands make to Australian life while only 46 per cent thought that production from grazing animals was an important contribution (Australian Rangeland Society 1995). This trend was repeated in all States, and for both urban and rural populations. Accompanying these changing values has been the development of an increasingly complex web of State and federal legislation intended to provide for the corresponding diversity of community aspirations. The result is that rangeland use and management are today subject to competing claims, often based more on values than facts, and decision making processes vastly more complex than those required under the various acts which have traditionally regulated the pastoral industry - the heat is on in this sense too!

Since these conflicts involve values, they can only be resolved, and disparate positions harmonised, by negotiation in good faith of mutually comprehensible and acceptable objectives which satisfy at least the basic 'needs' of various interest groups, if not their 'wants'. If our discussions at this conference can contribute significantly to this process, then in 15 years time our current dilemmas may be seen simply as a transition from one stable state to another in which divergent values, if not shared are at least accommodated, and social cohesion is again maximised.

Can we imagine what this future might look like? I have no wish to pre-empt the outcome of our discussions but it is worthwhile to revisit the findings of the only other major forum in recent years to have considered the issue - the 1993 national workshop on research and development for sustainable use and management of Australia's rangelands (Morton and Price 1994). At the risk of oversimplifying,

participants in that workshop considered that requirements for sustainable rangeland use within 10 years included:

- A legislative framework which provided for appropriate security of tenure, multiple land uses, and an incentive-based approach to regulation.
- Participatory regional land use planning addressing social, cultural, economic and environmental objectives.
- Unimpeded opportunities for structural adjustment within the pastoral industry.
- Diversification of income sources for landholders, including utilisation of native species and off-property income.
- Pastoral management which achieves both economic and off-reserve conservation objectives through control of total grazing pressure and tactical responses to seasonal variation.
- Broad-scale monitoring capable of defining trends with sufficient precision to satisfy public policy requirements.
- Nature conservation secured through the implementation of a comprehensive and soundly based biodiversity strategy.
- Rationalised use of artesian water resources.
- Mining considered within the overall context of rangeland policy.
- A tourism industry supported by adequately funded research and development in sustainable management of land and biota.

These requirements reflect many of the new values which I have already mentioned while clearly foreshadowing a continuation of pastoralism over much of the rangelands. At the broadest level, however, they also reflect a need to get the relationship right between the rangelands and the rest of society. Our discussions at this conference should clearly address this issue for it will be a determining factor in shaping the future of these lands and their people. I would suggest that in 15 years time the technology for sustainable rangeland management will largely be in place. That technology will include, for example, the capacity to define management objectives for particular landscapes and the strategies necessary to achieve them, together with the software packages and on-line data access which will assist managers with the tactical decisions required to reconcile environmental and economic objectives. But the extent to which that technology is translated into sustainable rangelands will depend on the presence of a population able to utilise it. That, in turn, will depend in no small measure on how Australian society handles issues such as access to health, education and community services for rangeland residents, recognition of the public good component of sustainable land use, and development of a fiscal environment compatible with the endemic level of seasonal risk. It will also, of course, depend on the value we place on the maintenance of our cultural heritage, both Aboriginal and European.

For the pastoral industry more specifically, the requirements identified by the 1993 workshop imply some substantial adjustments, recognising that changes in technology and consumer preferences, obligations imposed by international agreements and the globalisation of the economy all mean that crises can no longer simply be attributed to unfortunate coincidences of drought and low commodity prices. The industry will need to change how it does business in more fundamental ways. These may include, for example:

- A greater emphasis on sheep meat production in the southern rangelands, with altered flock structures and a production system that more closely integrates the pastoral and agricultural regions.
- Promotion of a 'clean, green' image for rangeland products, with a corresponding revolution in the way in which the industry conducts its public relations. This will need to recognise that images of drought and desolation may do more to provoke criticism than to engender sympathy, and that broad-scale monitoring of rangeland resources, while often viewed as a threat, offers the industry a chance to demonstrate its environmental credentials.
- Recognition that sedentary pastoralism is not always compatible with the ecology of inland Australia, particularly for those semi-arid ecosystems maintained by fire, and that a capacity for temporary

- destocking may need to be incorporated in the industry structure and land administration system.
- Acceptance that some land may need to be retired from grazing, or left undeveloped, in the interests of biodiversity.
 - Recognition that in the global economy the family business will become more difficult to sustain without economies of scale and closer integration into the off-farm sector.

The requirement for diversification is already seeing landholders developing a range of new industries, or income sources, and this trend can be expected to continue. Although commercialisation of kangaroos has not yet proceeded to any significant degree outside the damage mitigation function, at least one pilot project is already in place, involving graziers in a cooperative operation. In the longer term, such developments seem to offer exciting prospects not only for income diversification but also for participative approaches to wildlife management. Small scale horticultural industries may also offer opportunities for some pastoralists. Australia, for example, currently has some of the best varietal material of jojoba available in the world, ideally suited to our semi-arid rangelands, and prospects for long-term development of a viable industry seem encouraging. For the tourist industry, already a major economic force in the rangelands, the sheer space of the outback must surely become an increasingly marketable commodity in a crowded world.

Obviously rangeland communities will continue to be influenced by a variety of factors operating at national and international levels which we are unable to address. But it is feasible for us at this conference to make a meaningful contribution to the development of a framework for the sustainable habitation of our rangelands, and to the underlying task of getting the relationship right between the rangelands, their people and the rest of society. If we can do so we may find that we have helped create a future in which the heat on all concerned is noticeably less than at present.

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