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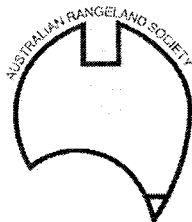
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The Australian Rangeland Society

COMMUNITY CONCERNS - THE VISION LEADING TO THE NATIONAL RANGELAND MANAGEMENT STRATEGY

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BACKGROUND

Australia is in the process of developing a strategy for the management of its rangelands. When the task formally began in December 1993, some nine months after the Federal Government's commitment to the process, few would have believed that the draft would still be under public consideration in September 1996.

The process has been comprehensive, involving issues papers, public submissions, workshops, extensive consultation across main users of the rangelands, and finally, extensive drafting and approval of the draft by the key stakeholder groups and the two Ministerial councils, Agriculture and Natural Resource Management Council of Australia and New Zealand and Australia and New Zealand Environment and Conservation Councils.

THE VISION

The rangeland strategy development process clearly indicated that there was not a shared vision for the rangelands of Australia; indeed the view and understanding of the community as to the current use and condition was at best patchy.

The process itself has significantly improved the understanding of key stakeholders; in particular it has certainly improved their awareness of the views of other users and interest groups. However, the process has not yet, in my view, managed to get any clear commitment or directions for the rangelands from the broader community, that is, the electorate in general.

In response to this the working group has proposed a vision that incorporates an ongoing need for the community to learn more about the rangelands.

VISION: That all Australians will recognise the value and significance of the rangelands for the diverse economic, cultural and social values which they contain, and will be committed to the ecologically sustainable management of the rangelands through implementation of this strategy.

Notwithstanding the current lack of a shared vision, there was a common list of issues of concern amongst those who had some knowledge of the rangelands. Major issues of concern were:

- the economic viability of pastoralism;
- the sustainability of the resource;
- Aboriginal heritage;
- social development;
- alternative land uses;
- land tenure/land administration.

While the issues were shared, the perspective and desired outcomes or directions to follow varied significantly.

WHO IS INTERESTED IN THE RANGELANDS?

The reality is that few people, other than those directly involved in the rangelands, are interested in them, at least, interested enough to either comment on the issues being addressed by the strategy, or to attend a workshop. Overwhelmingly, the pastoral industry was the group most interested in the strategy process, followed closely by environmental groups (Table 1). If consultants, academics, scientists and bureaucrats are added in, there were not too many other groups or individuals interested enough to be involved in the process, at least not to date.

Table 1. Submission to the Working Group by area of interest.

	No.	%
Pastoral Industry	48	35
Mining Industry	3	2
Environment and Conservation	34	24
Landcare Groups	11	8
Other	43	31
Total	139	100

About 1.6% of Australia's population live in the rangelands, which comprise about 70% of Australia. Most of the 300,000 inhabitants in fact live in a few large population centres and appear to have little involvement with the rangelands, at least not an adequate involvement to be overly concerned about future management.

WHAT ARE THE RANGELANDS?

The 70% of Australia classified as rangelands for the purposes of the strategy development comprises the arid and semi-arid areas of the continent, with some high rainfall areas of above the Tropic of Capricorn included. The term 'rangelands' itself was not well accepted in some quarters, but during the process appears to have become better accepted.

Table 2 indicates the dominant use of the rangelands by area. The main use in terms of economic return and employment is the mining industry, with over 40% of Australia's total value of production of minerals coming from rangeland areas.

There are currently 4700 pastoral properties in Australia, employing around 7000 people. Both the number of businesses and the number of people employed in them are declining rapidly.

Table 2. The dominant uses of Australia's rangelands by area (in millions of hectares).

Rangeland use	m ha
Conservation reserves	22
Pastoral	339
Aboriginal lands	22
Unoccupied	107
Total	550

THE VIEWS OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

While the mining industry has many of its operational centres in the rangelands and generates much of its income from within them, it has not shown much interest in the rangelands generally, except in the issue of access.

The four groups in Australia showing a strong interest in the rangelands, that is pastoralists, Aboriginal peoples, conservation groups and rangeland 'professionals', agree on a number of issues relating to current and future management of the rangelands, but also disagree on many.

Throughout the process the conservation movement, represented by the Arid Lands Coalition, maintained the position that the current allocation of land in the rangelands to grazing of sheep and cattle is not ecologically sustainable. On the other hand, the National Farmers Federation, representing the pastoral industry, while accepting that sustainability had not been achieved, believes strongly that cattle and sheep grazing can be sustainable.

The focus of interest of Aboriginal groups is on access, ownership and cultural issues, and to a lesser extent biodiversity and economic opportunity. Sustainable land use, while implicit in the vision of Aboriginal groups, is not defined or articulated in a similar context as with either the conservation or producer groups. Indeed, the Working Group became aware of significant conflict of views between Aboriginal groups and others relating to feral animal management.

Rangeland professionals were in general agreement with the view that current use is not sustainable, with both lack of economic viability and a declining resource base being issues of concern. However, there was not a consistent view as to the extent that beef and sheep grazing can achieve sustainable use. Indeed, it may be that full sustainability, encompassing environmental, economic and social sustainability is not comprehensively achievable on any one parcel of land, and that a hierarchy of objectives and compromises will be needed on a region by region or area by area basis.

TOWARDS THE VISION

The vision proposed by the Working Group is in summary:

- better knowledge
- sustainable management.

While most stakeholders would accept this readily, there is still, in my view, quite contrary views of what this vision actually means. While there are nine areas where there is strong agreement that action is required, there is a range of views on both the direction and extent of action. These nine areas and some examples of views are:

Policy, legislation and administration

While there are shared views on the need for consistent policy and better administrative arrangements, there is ongoing disagreement over appropriate regimes for access and tenure.

Commercial use

There is general agreement on the economic difficulties in much of the pastoral industry, but lack of agreement on the potential to improve the situation. The current situation is recognised as not sustainable and there is strong support to develop multiple use opportunities and to diversify.

Management

The view that some management practices are not sustainable was shared, with agreement that improvement is essential. However, there are widely different views on what actually will be sustainable.

Conservation of the natural environment

There is support for the need to improve management of natural environment, but widely differing interpretations on what this actually means and on the appropriate balance between resource use and conservation.

Recognition of knowledge, rights and interests of indigenous people

There was general support for the need to recognise these rights, but widely different interpretations on what these rights are.

Conservation of cultural and social heritage

There is strong support for the concept in abstract, but as with the indigenous people issue, there are widely diverging views on what heritage issues should be included in any conservation plan.

Research and monitoring

It is broadly accepted that the knowledge base for future management of the rangelands is inadequate, but differing views were held on what is feasible and practical in terms of research. The need for more comprehensive monitoring is well accepted.

Coordinated planning

There is strong support for coordinated planning on a regional basis, but again quite contradictory views as to how comprehensive it should be and who should be responsible.

Programs and services

There was a strong view that rangeland occupants are disadvantaged in terms of access to programs and services. The need to improve delivery was tempered by an acknowledgement that the cost of delivery of services in remote locations is very high.

RELATED ACTIVITIES

At the same time as the National Rangeland Strategy process has been progressing, arguably at a political level, there has been a lot of related endeavour in the rangelands. This has included regional planning exercises in south-east Queensland, western New South Wales and the Gascoyne-Murchison area in Western Australia, research planning exercises by the North Australian Beef Research Council, the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation and the Meat Research Corporation, and a position statement by the Environmental Protection Authority in Western Australia.

All these exercises have highlighted issues relating to sustainability and acknowledged the complex interaction between resource condition, profitability and the legislative framework, including tenure. To some extent these activities represent the community moving towards the vision of the Working Group.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT

The draft strategy is now available for consideration, and the public's interaction with it will be an important part in the process. The goals and strategies need refining and prioritising and, of considerable importance, an action plan must be developed and agreed. As such, a plan will involve expenditure and commitment from all stakeholders. It will need to be practical and feasible within the resources of all stakeholders.

Previously I suggested that if the strategy is successful it should at least be a support to managers, scientists and the community as to which way we should proceed. Perhaps an equally important outcome is that the strategy process is giving the community a chance to decide which way that signpost will point.

At the end of this process, we may have indeed made progress.

WHAT WAS SAID

There is a policy vacuum - we do not have a clear idea of what the Australian community wants from the rangelands, or who has responsibility for decisions. (Workshop report LWRRDC 1993.)

At last we ordinary people are asked to put our thinking to a better way of using an arid landscape. (Submission to the Working Group 1994.)

How can economic pressure on producers from disproportionate cost increases (cost price squeeze) be minimised. (North Australian Beef Research Council 1994.)

A socially and economically viable community involved in a diverse range of industries based on the use of the rangelands in an environmentally sustainable way. (Gascoyne Murchison Rangeland Steering Group 1996.)

In Aboriginal terms the rangeland areas of Australia belong to Aboriginal people who can trace their ownership back to a time beyond calculation. (Submission to Working Group on behalf of Aboriginal people 1994.)

Long term planning and monitoring horizons lead to reliable understanding of the conditions under which sustainability exists. Since the 1930s, the trend is consistently towards improved range condition across most of Australia. (NFF Submission to Working Group 1994.)

Unfortunately, to date the majority of human activities around the globe continue to be ecologically unsustainable. (Arid Land Coalition's Submission to Working Group 1994.)

Australia's rangelands can be used if they are managed wisely. The challenge is to make that use sustainable and to ensure that future uses are not precluded. (The Future of Australia's Rangelands, CSIRO 1989.)

If we don't develop as a Nation a view of how we will manage the rangelands in the future we are likely to mismanage them. (Robertson 1994.)

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