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The Australian Rangeland Society

TOWARDS A COMMUNICATIONS LED RURAL RENAISSANCE

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ABSTRACT

Things are crook in the bush! The weather fluctuates, but indexed commodity prices and social stability continue to decline. I want to suggest a way by which we could take greater control of our destiny; to harness the winds of change and use their energy to redefine our social, political and economic platforms. I personally believe that the latest National Rangeland Management Strategy should be released as a discussion paper, with a clear commitment from all governments involved that a genuine and comprehensive consultative process will be undertaken; a process that would encourage community generated visions to be developed and integrated into regional strategies and ultimately a composite Rangeland Strategy. The implementation of an information technology based Rangeland Network would assist natural resource managers, administrators and scientists to model the ecological, commercial and administrative systems from their respective locations. Once united, the rangeland communities would be able to ensure that an equitable and sustainable share of wealth generated in the Outback remained there. If some of the money could be spent developing state of the art telecommunications infrastructure it would help to entice service industries out of the cities, as it has in Sweden.

RANGELANDS IN TRANSFORMATION

When asked to give this paper I initially focused on developments in communications technology such as the InterNet, and how rangeland residents could access and take advantage of these new media. I will still address these topics, but to give our circumstance greater context I will focus first on the transformation taking place in the rangelands. The benefits and constraints of developing regional rangeland strategies will then be discussed. Finally we will explore how information technology could help us to integrate regional strategies into a composite Rangeland Strategy.

Things are crook in the bush! The weather fluctuates, but indexed commodity prices and social stability continue to decline. Our Governments encourage more consultation and self-determination, yet we now spend far too much time heading off inappropriate draft legislation. The chronic infrastructure shortages we have endured seem set to continue as new industries are being encouraged to fly in and out; in the process exporting rangeland wealth and political influence to coastal cities. Meanwhile, the impasse between native and pastoral title remains in the courts, consuming the patience of governments, Aborigines, pastoralists, miners and taxpayers alike. The most frightening thing of all is not knowing when this period of transformation will end or where it could leave us and the rangelands.

I want to suggest a way by which we could take greater control of our destiny; to harness the winds of change and use their energy to redefine our social, political and economic platforms. What I am going to suggest may offend some and engender the suspicion of others. It may not be the only solution to our woes, but it provides direction and hope and encourages others to propose better alternatives.

The rangelands are resource rich with numerous mineral deposits and a diversity of landscapes, flora, fauna and cultures. They are one of the last hospitable wildernesses on Earth and their intrinsic value is incalculable given that humanity is doubling its number every thirty-six odd years. As world population expands, the rangelands are coming under greater interest and scrutiny. We are being watched by people viewing television documentaries; by tourists from car and bus windows; by agricultural, mining and tourism developers; by scientists, conservationists, writers and poets. The

outside world is watching the rangelands with wonder, amazement, jealousy, greed, pity, concern and confusion. Their opinions of the rangelands vary greatly. Some share the romantic sentiments of poets such as Banjo Patterson and Dorothea Mackellar, who saw the Australian bush as an Arcadian paradise. Others relate better to Henry Lawson's description of it as an 'Outback Hell'. Love it or hate it, few outsiders have much understanding of the rangelands and yet their opinions are influencing the political and economic decisions being made about us. By contrast, the opinions of Rangelanders are seldom heard outside the rangelands. It is therefore in our best interest to develop a representative Rangeland Strategy, so that we, the inhabitants of the rangelands, are represented in the debates shaping our future.

DEVELOPING A RANGELAND STRATEGY

The National Rangeland Management Strategy (NRMS) could become part of the Rangeland Strategy. At present it is not broadly representative of the rangelands, but of the bureaucratic, industry and conservation lobbies that were on its working party. There are only about 300,000 people that inhabit the arid and semi-arid regions of Australia; yet the rangelands cross too many bio-climatic, social and political regions for a single strategy to be practically developed or applied. I personally believe that the latest NRMS should be released as a discussion paper, with a clear commitment from all governments involved that a genuine and comprehensive consultative process will be undertaken; a process that would encourage community generated visions to be developed and integrated into regional strategies and ultimately a composite Rangeland Strategy. These strategies need to be expanded beyond the NRMS's primary focus on pastoralism so that they represents all Rangelanders. Multiple landuse may be the only sustainable means we have of satisfying all stakeholders' expectations. Time and effort need to be taken to encourage as many stakeholders as possible to debate and shape these strategies.

There are many rangeland regions where this process has begun; in Queensland we have the South-West Queensland Strategy, the Regional Initiative (North-West Queensland) and the Cape York Heads of Agreement. Through these processes the unique characteristics and requirements of the regions are being articulated. These and other regional strategies could be offered as models to regions where strategies have not yet been initiated.

The Cape York Heads of Agreement may not have been ratified as yet, but it clearly demonstrates that the key stakeholders are capable of sorting out their differences without resorting to the courts. Experience has shown me that if there is enough tolerance and mutual respect the welfare of the local community and its environment is an ideal place to begin building community cohesion. The diversity of views will turn into an asset, as it provides a broader perspective from which to develop strategies and tackle problems. The benefits of more inclusive regional strategies and a more inclusive Rangeland Strategy are numerous. They would:

- encourage Australian governments to collaborate more effectively on rangeland issues;
- define appropriate and non-appropriate land utilisation by region or land systems;
- explore opportunities for multiple landuse;
- help develop and share methods to prevent, and rehabilitate existing, land degradation;
- further the reconciliation process;
- help establish and foster interstate networks and alliances.

RECONCILIATION

Reconciliation requires maturity and trust. Maturity to admit mistakes, and trust to be open to the consequences of admission and the lessons that must be learnt. Reconciliation needs to occur between not only indigenous and non-indigenous people, but all elements of Australian society. We have lost faith in each other, and until we begin rebuilding this confidence we will remain divided.

Traditional Aboriginal land management practices have much to offer contemporary Australian society in our quest for a more sustainable and environmentally friendly existence. Aboriginal spirituality and

reverence for the land should serve as an important reminder that every civilisation history has recorded waned and/or collapsed with the decline of their agricultural systems. The reconciliation process must not only acknowledge and rectify, where possible, the atrocities and dispossession Aborigines suffered, but also repair the serious damage we have done to our country.

Rangeland managers know that poor land management decisions have degraded the environment. The introduction of animal and plant pests is an obvious example. This example also highlights that the most serious mistakes are not made just by land users but by our society as a whole. We have to move beyond allocating the blame and accept that we all have a moral responsibility to correct the situation as quickly as possible.

People everywhere are volunteering their time and resources to conservation-minded groups. The dialogue and networks being generated are helping to break down traditional barriers and attitudes - attitudes that were built out of the need to be self-sufficient and independent. Collaboration is crucial if we are to successfully address the numerous challenges we face. We need to demonstrate that we are capable of working together or else governments and courts will have little choice but to intervene.

We cannot change the past so let us focus on shaping our future.

INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

Developments in information technology have major implications for people who are geographically isolated. In practical terms, many services that were previously only available in cities can now be accessed on the InterNet, through a computer linked to the phone line by a modem. The World Wide Web (Web) provides a multi-media platform on the InterNet that enables images and sounds to also be accessed on-line. This greatly improves the InterNet's ease of use and is encouraging more people on-line. Unfortunately not all rangeland residents can take advantage of the Web, because the Digital Radio Concentrator Systems that connect remote subscribers to the telecommunication network are too slow to adequately support the Web's graphical requirements. We will continue to fall behind the rest of Australia in the provision of telecommunications services until we start to use these technologies, demonstrating to government and telecommunications providers that we are genuine users of these services.

In north-west Queensland I am currently working to help establish a Community Information Network (CIN) which is sponsored by the Australia Council for the Arts, the Queensland State Library and the regional local councils. The CIN uses Lotus Notes to provide networked access through libraries and the Cloncurry Telecentre to community directories and a calendar of events. The next CIN objective will be to encourage more of the community to contribute to this fledgling local information economy. There is a great deal of information in most rangeland communities that is not easily accessible at present and will be lost if we fail to formally record it; information including written and oral history, land tenure, maps, cultural events and sporting results. We plan to use this platform to record and publicise our regional resource management strategy. This same platform could be used to coordinate the integration of regional strategies with the latest NRMS to produce the Rangeland Strategy.

The implementation of an information technology based Rangeland Network would assist natural resource managers, administrators and scientists to model the ecological, commercial and administrative systems from their respective locations. It would enable stakeholders to discuss all the factors involved in sustaining the rangelands. With the continuing down-sizing of government there needs to be such a system put in place so that rangeland communities can easily contribute to and be aware of the political and administrative decisions that affect them. The cost of establishing a Rangeland Network could be offset by royalties from its application elsewhere, particularly in other arid and semi-arid regions of the world.

THE RURAL RENAISSANCE

Commodity prices are not depressed because there is a shortage of consumers. They are depressed because world markets are largely controlled by global commodity traders who reduce prices to their lowest common denominator irrespective of environmental or social circumstances. This might be free trade at its best, but it is becoming increasingly self-defeating as land degradation increases largely because rural communities are so economically depressed. If people aspire to a healthy environment and sustainable land use they must be prepared to pay commodity prices that enable primary producers to protect and nurture the environment and their work force.

We cannot expect the commodity traders to reverse the commodity price squeeze, so we will have to develop alternative commodity marketing channels to those that are being centrally controlled. The InterNet provides an ideal conduit that would enable us to market more than just price. The Web's capacity to handle multimedia means that we could show images of our products and where they come from and explain the social and environmental benefits of purchasing our produce. Any move to increase food prices will prompt lots of ethical debate about how the poor would be able to afford food; but surely that is a more manageable dilemma than how we can sustain food production.

The establishment of a Rangeland Network and a Rangeland Strategy are likely to initiate a rural renaissance. Once united, the rangeland communities would be able to ensure that an equitable and sustainable share of wealth generated in the Outback remained there. If some of the money could be spent developing state of the art telecommunications infrastructure it would help to entice service industries out of the cities, as it has in Sweden. The migration back to the bush will no doubt gain momentum once former city dwellers begin to appreciate all the economic and environmental benefits of rural life.

CONCLUSIONS

We live in one of the last great habitable wildernesses on Earth. As the custodians of the Outback we have a great responsibility to protect and nurture it for future generations. This requires us to reconcile our past mistakes by developing shared regional visions for the future. These visions need to be articulated into regional strategies and then integrated into a composite Rangeland Strategy so that we can convince the rest of Australia that it is not only worthy of support but emulation. Reconciliation would help us to build greater social cohesion, achieve sustainable land management, develop new information industries and gain much greater credibility throughout the world.

The choice is clear. We can either continue to deny that we have serious problems, or begin to reconcile past mistakes by collaboratively developing a Rangeland Strategy using a Rangeland Network.

The choice remains ours, for the time being at least.