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The Australian Rangeland Society

GRAZING MANAGEMENT IN CENTRAL AUSTRALIA

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The sustainability of an area depends entirely on how we manage the precipitation, the time of year it falls and the quantity of rain. If you ask a cattleman 'What makes a good manager?', the answer you will most probably receive will be 'Five inches of rain at the right time of the year'.

Each land manager has many different grass communities unique to his particular area. These communities respond to grazing stock in a variety of ways. The discerning pastoralist will keep a wary eye on the lighter carrying areas - ensuring a responsible attitude to the land and its idiosyncrasies.

The increased availability of 'top feed' recently has increased the variety of sustenance for stock. This is possibly due to a combination of wet years in the early 1970s and a lack of fire as a management tool.

Each soil type and grass species requires a different length of time to rejuvenate. This must be considered and taken into account when resting a particular area.

Wind and water are the most dominant forces changing our landscape, and they are natural. If people are to work the land for the production of food, clothing, housing and transportation, all of which come from the soil, we must find a balance between erosion, transportation and deposition of soil.

By creating a better environment for native grass species, one almost eliminates the need to send stock away on agistment in a dry time. One cannot achieve total grazing management in central Australia. The climate and pastures do not lend themselves to a rigid strategy.

Assessing and knowing the herbage mass level permits the producer to accurately recognise the usefulness of the pasture and how much it can produce. This skill can pay dividends, as the quality and quantity of animal product derived from pasture-fed livestock is directly related to the quality and quantity of the pastures they graze.

Monitoring sites were started in the Northern Territory in 1976 by the Department of Primary Production as a means of identifying the changes occurring within our landscape. There are now over 800 sites in central Australia. As weather dominates the overall situation, more so than human intervention, fluctuations from year to year have made it difficult to find a consistent trend.

The fact that primary food producers have been pushed further and further out into the more marginal country, as the cities expand over the best soil, has become a cause for concern to conservationists, bankers and pastoralists alike.

The dollar cost to improve the health of the land, and ultimately boost production, is extremely high. First, we must get rid of the rabbits. It costs, but this cancels out in the long run. The education of all Australians and tourists to the consequences of spreading noxious weeds must be promoted as well.

While graziers are improving the land on which they run their stock, they are also upgrading their herds. Pastoralists are looking for superior quality stock with better feed conversion rates and temperament. This quality beast requires less grass to convert to a more tender and tastier meat product. The animal's temperament is probably one of the most important traits if it is to put on weight. The quieter the animal, the more contented they are to feed along.

Life on the land is a gamble every day. Land managers cannot say at the beginning of any season that they will take the stock out of a paddock on a particular date. There are a couple of reasons for this need of flexibility:

1. The feed may not have grown sufficiently due to reduced rainfall; or
2. Above average rainfall may have given another couple of months forage.

There has been talk over the last few years for the implementation of a Property Management Plan. Almost every person who has connections with a pastoral industry has a plan, but cannot be rigid with it. Granted, one must have a basic plan for the future, but nature and market trends have a habit of throwing even the best laid plans out the window overnight.

Landcare has proved to be a resounding success for Australia. Its major achievement has been the awareness of the Australian population of the fragility and ability of our land.

Sometimes it seems that some pastoralists manage their rain quota better than others. There are so many variables to sustainability - each one different, due entirely to a particular situation that may or may not repeat itself in the future. One can have the land totally rehabilitated and still have to sell more stock than the average turn-off or agist them if the rain does not fall as expected.

To SUSTAIN means:

- to keep up an existence;
- to supply with necessities or nourishment, provide for;
- to support the spirits, vitality or resolution of, encourage;
- to endure or withstand, bear up under, *sustain hardships*.

So, next time you hear the word 'sustainability', try to remember the amount of blood, sweat and tears that have gone into the building of our primary industry in the past and will go into its maintenance in the future.