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# THE CHANGING FACE OF PASTORALISM IN THE PILBARA

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## INTRODUCTION

The Pilbara region of Western Australia covers 510 000 square kilometres and extends approximately 400 km eastwards from the coast to the desert. The Pilbara is an area where 'the heat is on'. Pastoralism has always been, and still is, the most extensive land use in the Pilbara, however it now generates only 0.4% of the region's wealth. Of the 65 pastoral leases only 35 are being run by 'traditional' pastoralists, the remaining leases having been taken up by mining companies, Aboriginal groups and for conservation. This poster highlights the change in ownership of pastoral leases in the Pilbara.

## PASTORALISM

Pastoral leases cover about half of the Pilbara; the area to the east of the pastoral land is desert. Pastoral development began in the Pilbara in the 1860s with extensive sheep grazing on native shrublands and grasslands. Sheep numbers peaked at 1.8 million in 1934. Poor wool production, poor reproductive rates, low wool prices and the increase in dingo numbers caused the collapse of the sheep industry in the inland Pilbara during the 1960s. Sheep are now restricted to the coastal areas and the better inland soil types. The emphasis of the pastoral industry turned to cattle. Some of the smaller inland sheep stations were amalgamated to create the large (~200 000 ha) cattle stations of today. Currently there are around 170 000 cattle and 200 000 sheep in the region, generating over \$25 million per year. Prospects for the cattle industry are good. Pastoralists are switching from the traditional British breeds to Brahman bloodlines, allowing increased productivity and greater profitability through the development of live export to Asian markets.

## MINING

With the establishment of iron ore operations in 1966 and production of oil and gas since the 1980s, the mining industry dominates the Pilbara economy. It provides a great amount of wealth and controls most of the towns and major infrastructure. Mining activity has led to a ten-fold increase in the population of the region since 1960. Mining companies have increasingly purchased pastoral leases affected by their operations to avoid land use conflict.

## ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Aboriginal people have had a long association with the Pilbara. The region is recognised as having the largest range of Aboriginal artefacts in the State. Aborigines have been able to re-acquire pastoral stations, particularly in the 1970s, and today about 20% of pastoral leases in the Pilbara are controlled or owned by Aboriginal groups. This may increase following the new native title legislation.

## CONSERVATION

Conservation is an important land use in the Pilbara, which has three major national parks that represent over half of Western Australia's national park estate. Two of these were converted from pastoral leases in 1946 and 1975. The third, Rudall River National Park, lies to the east of the pastoral area, within the Great Sandy Desert. Tourism makes a significant contribution to the Pilbara economy; the development of Karijini National Park is considered to be the catalyst for significant tourism development in the region.