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*The Australian Rangeland Society*

# 'WOODY WEEDS', PEOPLE AND GUNDERBOOKA: A LOCAL STUDY

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## ABSTRACT

Since the mid-nineteenth century—and especially from the 1950s—'woody weeds' have spread across the red soil country around Gunderbooka Range. I explore human consequences of this strident environmental response, and consider the varied explanations of graziers, scientists and others for the dramatic changes. I suggest that the Gunderbooka environment—a forceful agent—banished pastoralism. Alternative land uses emerged.

## INTRODUCTION

Gunderbooka Range lies between Bourke and Cobar, fifty kilometres east of Louth.<sup>1</sup> The boulder-strewn Range is a long, crescent-shaped sandstone outcrop looming above a wide plain of mulga (*Acacia aneura*) and box-tree (*Eucalyptus* spp.) scrub. Ngiyampaa and Paakantji people hold traditional connections to the area. From the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s Gunderbooka Range lay across the junction of three large pastoral stations: Yanda, Gundabooka and Curraweena. Intensification of closer settlement followed World War I.

### **From meadows to jungle: before and after pastoralism**

As Charles Sturt approached Gunderbooka Range in 1828 he passed through thick vegetation, 'but on clearing it ... The hill which we had occasionally seen, broke full upon us, at a distance of about two miles and a half, the intervening space being a continued meadow ... while the grass was up to the horses middles' (Sturt 1983, p. 55).

In the late 1850s Captain Randell steamed his riverboat through the Gunderbooka area and described country for which 'sheep-carrying qualities can scarcely be overrated, the grass for miles and miles together in many of the bends being so thick and long that it can only be walked through with difficulty, and is as thick and close in the bottom as the meadows of England' (Randell 1986, p. 147).

When cattle (*Bos taurus*) and sheep (*Ovis* spp.) flooded the district an extraordinary transformation began. Early pastoralists noted the advance of indigenous shrubs spurned by domestic stock: hopbushes (*Dodonaea* spp.), turpentine (*Eremophila sturtii*), budda (*E. mitchellii*), emubush (*E. longifolia*) and many others.

At first 'woody weeds' spread slowly. In 1935 visiting popular writer Frank Clune could relax on Mulgowan's verandah and gaze 'across the plain of the sinking moon' (Clune 1952, p. 110). At Wee Toura in the 1940s there were so few trees in the horse paddock that the Thompson family gave each a name. As a barrier to wind Mrs Thompson planted tough, fast-growing oleander bushes (*Nerium oleander*) around the homestead that stood exposed in an open paddock.

In the 1950s the pace of scrub encroachment quickened. On Toolooly in 1960 a pastoral inspector encountered a 'dense jungle'. By 1969, reported a government committee, most of Belah was lost to scrub, while 'woody weeds' covered almost half of Burrawa and Curraweena (Inter-departmental Committee 1969). From a distance, Gunderbooka Range seems to float on a grey-green, leafy sea.

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<sup>1</sup> Generally accepted spellings are 'Gunderbooka Range', 'Mount Gunderbooka' (the highest point on the Range), and 'Gundabooka' for the pastoral leasehold and the National Park.

## WHAT CAUSED THE SCRUB 'INVASION'?

The factors responsible for the dramatic postwar change in vegetation communities are numerous, interactive and at times contested.

Fire once kept country open. In the late nineteenth century Grenville Teulon recorded that Bourke Aborigines used the word 'pullara' to denote both 'open country' and 'flame' (Curr 1886, p. 211). In 1997 Paakantji elder Bill Ellwood told anthropologist Jo Erskine that his ancestors had camped beside Gunderbooka Range, 'in winter time out of the wind ... just before the summer started they would burn it all off' (Erskine 1998, p. 25).

In the 1890s Gundabooka's manager wrote that 'owing to the absence of fires' the station's grassy flats were 'becoming rapidly covered with box seedlings, which will soon form a dense scrub' (Langlands 1896). Until World War II vast bushfires sometimes swept the district. Stan O'Mally, son of a closer settler, said he thought the introduction of mechanised fire control units in the 1950s reduced the frequency and intensity of scrub-killing fires.

The loss of medium sized mammals appears another cause. Jim Noble linked the disappearance of herbivorous burrowing bettongs (*Bettongia lesueur*) to the late nineteenth century spread of scrub across the western plains. (Noble 1997, p. 68). In the early 1950s—when myxomatosis arrived—pastoralists watched the shrubs spread.

Pastoralism itself fostered scrub. Artificial watering points sustained intense grazing from cattle, sheep, feral animals, and kangaroos. These herbivores grazed away grasses and edible shrubs. Drought-breaking rains favoured the germination of inedible plants once wind and water erosion had depleted the red earth's diverse seed store (Noble 1997, p. 47).

Pastoralism's impact intensified with closer settlement. Water held in new tanks gouged from the plain usually lasted longer than edible herbage. Sheep eliminated perennial vegetation that would normally have survived droughts and limited wind and water erosion. In the 1950s and early 1960s—in response to high wool prices and good seasons—graziers introduced more watering points, subdivided their leaseholds into smaller paddocks, and raised stocking rates. The scrub spread.

### Seeing scrub differently

The 'invading' indigenous shrubs are 'weeds' to pastoralists. Scrub not only limits economic viability, it destroys an environment known since birth: an open, manageable landscape. From a horse, motorbike, or homestead verandah pastoralists could no longer observe and control their land. In thick scrub pigs (*Sus scrofa*) ate lambs snatched from unwary ewes, and goats (*Capra hircus*) wore paths to the base of Gunderbooka Range.

Local historian Bill Cameron observed a refusal in Bourke's pastoral industry to accept that grazing by domestic stock caused environmental damage and contributed to the spread of 'woody weeds'. Rangelands ecologists try not to speak of 'degradation' during meetings with Western Division leaseholders. A Western Lands Commission inspector noted in 1990 that recent 'serious land degradation' on Burrawa had been 'caused by ... invasion of woody weeds' (McLeod 1990). The shrubs, according to the *Land*, 'invade' red soil country, 'leaving the land unproductive and exposed'. In the late 1970s Bourke grazier Nancy Robinson began investigating biological control options for 'woody weeds' (*Land*, 19 February 1998, p. 29). McLeod, Robinson and others seem not to consider scrub encroachment a consequence of pastoralism's ecological alterations, but a management problem externally imposed.

Others see scrub encroachment as a response from the local environment to pastoralism. Gundabooka National Park ranger Tim Lanyon suggested that the shrubs act as 'scar tissue', whereby the landscape uses vegetation to bind its wounds. Remembering the fierce dust storms of the 1930s and 1940s,

grazier Stan O'Mally thought scrub now lessened wind velocity and prevented the pick up of soil. Rangelands ecologist Jim Noble explained that beneath many large shrubs are 'hummocks' of accumulated topsoil and organic matter that are higher in nutrients and moisture than adjacent, exposed soils (Jim Noble, pers. comm.).

## **DISRUPTING HUMAN LIVES**

How did the local environment's pronounced responses to pastoralism shape human lives? For Aboriginal people pastoralism limited the availability of bush foods. Murawari descendant Jimmie Barker told how environmental change forced people onto reserves such as Brewarrina: 'After the massacres, the Aborigines disappeared into the bush ... It was not until some years later that they dared to return ... They felt that there would be some sort of a sanctuary for them, and the issue of food was an attraction. The advent of cattle and sheep had disturbed the bush's natural balance and existence had become more difficult' (Barker 1980, p. 126).

In 1887 Yanda's owner thought his property 'on the whole deteriorating in value'. He attributed the station's condition 'to an over-estimate of grazing capacity, its deterioration under stocking, much of it being covered now with scrubs of a bad description, where once it was open' (Hatten 1887).

'Woody weeds' restricts pastoral viability in several ways. Pasture won't grow on eroded soils beneath thick scrub. The vegetation limits visibility across paddocks and complicates movement through country. Mustering takes longer. Stock die when pastoralists can't quickly muster sheep for treatment during blowfly waves. Sheep left behind during mustering re-infest flocks treated for lice.

In the late 1960s, Belah leaseholder Jim Higgins wrote to the Pastures Protection Board: 'My property has ... operated at a loss for years. I have injured myself through overwork involved in an endeavour to break even. All efforts to sell have met with no success whatever ... The only suggestion I have ... is that the authorities take over the leasehold area ... leaving me my small freehold block, with my house and garden. I feel that I can obtain enough work among the people on the better country to enable me to live' (Higgins 1967).

'Woody weeds' had engulfed Belah, and—with a shrunken income—Higgins had fallen behind on his rate payments. A few years later a Western Lands Commission inspector reported that Higgins had 'thrown in the towel'. Belah's paddocks were empty, and Higgins took odd jobs from neighbours. The inspector also noted that Higgins had received treatment for mental illness, and that he 'is still not a well man' (Knight 1973). Did mounting management constraints associated with the spread of scrub contribute to, or cause, his psychological distress? Higgins sold Belah the following year.

As farm incomes fell in the 1960s the habit of Gunderbooka graziers volunteering their labour to neighbours in need of help fell away. Pastoralists sought off-farm jobs that paid.

### **Building a national park**

In 1969 a government report suggested that lessees of holdings thick with 'woody weeds' might sell their leaseholds to the National Parks and Wildlife Service (Inter-departmental Committee 1969, p. 71). In the early 1970s the Service did consider buying Belah, but couldn't get government support (McMichael 1972). The property was too isolated, and it lacked massive trees or rolling surf—politically desirable features for ministers in search of new national parks.

In the late 1980s National Parks developed procedures to reserve lands that sampled the breadth of the Western Division's natural systems (Lunney et al. 1994, p. 32). Very little of the Cobar Pediplain was reserved for conservation. With Aboriginal staff members, and a history of interaction with local Aboriginal communities, the Service knew of Gunderbooka's cultural significance.

In the early 1990s western pastoralists holding leaseholds dominated by woody weeds faced average debt levels of almost half a million dollars (Lunney et al. 1994, p. 12). With little prospect of making a profitable sale elsewhere, several Gunderbooka leaseholders took advantage of interest shown by the Service. Swift sales followed brief negotiations. The New South Wales Parliament gazetted adjoining leaseholds Belah and Ben Lomond as Gundabooka National Park in 1996. Two years later the Government added Mulgowan to the Park.

The creation of Gundabooka National Park has enabled some local Aboriginal people to intensify their engagement with this landscape. Park staff consults the Gunda-Ah-Myro Aboriginal Corporation—which comprises people with ancestral connections to Gunderbooka Range—on all management decisions.

## CONCLUSION

In 1835, on country that became part of Gundabooka station, Thomas Mitchell rode down the fertile bed of a dry creek—‘this richest of clover fields’—to reach the Darling River ‘at a point occupied by a numerous tribe of blacks ... Their roads appeared in all directions ... In short, the buzz of population gave to the banks, at this place, the cheerful character of a village in a populous country’ (Mitchell 1848, p. 255).

One weekend in February 1998 I stayed alone in Belah’s shearers’ quarters. Park staff and their families were away. No one lived on Pattison, a property alongside Belah that extends to the Darling River. From the steep, dark banks of the Darling to the silent gorges of Gunderbooka Range not one other person drew breath that night.

Pastoralism brought people to the region, for a time. Now the many-roomed nineteenth century homesteads are empty, decaying. On Gundabooka station lessee Tony Falkenhagen can’t find a way to contain the scrub. Present land-use systems support declining populations. If Cobar’s mines closed, that buoyant town would shrink smaller than Louth, locals agree.

At Gunderbooka pastoral activity induced a strident environmental response. ‘Woody weeds’ helped to squeeze out pastoralism—the very activity that had fostered their growth. This environmental transformation aided another historical reversal: the return to Aboriginal people of a role in the management of this ancient, now damaged, cultural landscape.

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