

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY
BIENNIAL CONFERENCE**

Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

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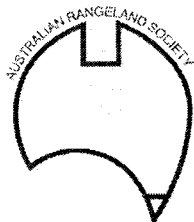
The reference for this article should be in this general form;
Author family name, initials (year). Title. *In*: Proceedings of the nth Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

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Anderson, L., van Klinken, R. D., and Shepherd, D. (2008). Aerially surveying Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.) in the Pilbara. *In*: 'A Climate of Change in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 15th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference'. (Ed. D. Orr) 4 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

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RANGEWAYS: COMMUNITY-BASED PLANNING FOR ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE LAND USE IN THE WESTERN AUSTRALIAN GOLDFIELDS.

Margaret Friedel¹, Don Burnside², Alec Holm³ & John Ive⁴

¹ CSIRO Centre for Arid Zone Research, PO Box 2111, Alice Springs NT 0871

² Dames & Moore – NRM, Level 3, Hyatt Centre, 20 Terrace Road, Perth WA 6004

³ Alexander Holm and Associates, 26 Edward St, Nedlands WA 6009; formerly Agriculture WA, South Perth WA 6151

⁴ CSIRO Wildlife & Ecology, GPO Box 284, Canberra ACT 2601

ABSTRACT

Since 1995, the Rangeways project has researched ways to identify and reconcile opportunities for different land uses while protecting biologically sensitive areas within the framework of community-based regional planning and Ecologically Sustainable Development policy. It has identified key issues and sectoral interests for the North East Goldfields of Western Australia, and subsequently captured the aspirations of each sector for land use, management and access. With the help of LUPIS land use planning software, sectors have negotiated their own land use plans and begun negotiating a combined plan. The Northern Goldfields Rangeways Strategy Group, representing all sectors, now has a collective vision and a business plan, based on mutually beneficial alliances with local organisations, which provide the foundation for their future.

INTRODUCTION

Rangeways evolved in response to calls for regionally-based land use planning for ecologically sustainable development in rangelands, as summarised in the National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management (ANZECC & ARMCANZ 1999) and in Morton and Price (1994). It commenced at a time when the state government was recognising policy and strategic deficiencies in rangelands, as a consequence of market failure to generate the desired adjustment. Initiatives established included a 'Whole of Government' statement on rangelands and a major program of industry development, structural adjustment and acquisition of lands for conservation in the Gascoyne-Murchison Region. At the same time, inconsistencies in government policy remain – as in the requirement for stocking of non-viable pastoral leases and in perceived impediments to alternate land uses on pastoral leasehold land.

Rangeways uses action research to engage community stakeholders in planning, and to develop tools and processes which will be widely applicable in the rangelands. It is based in the North East Goldfields region of Western Australia which covers an area of over 100,000 sq km between Kalgoorlie and Wiluna. This region offers an important example of changes occurring in the traditional pastoral use of rangelands. The value of the wool industry has been depressed for some time (Pastoral Wool Industry Task Force 1993) and increasingly pastoral properties are being purchased by mining companies and, to some extent, Aboriginal interests to achieve non-pastoral objectives. Current land uses include pastoralism, mining, tourism, conservation, Aboriginal cultural and subsistence activities, harvesting of wild animals and plant products, and small-area intensive industries such as horticulture. The balance amongst these is by no means fixed and other opportunities exist for new industries such as aquaculture, carbon sequestration and low intensity lifestyle activities like passive occupation and simply 'being there'.

OBJECTIVES

The challenge Rangeways set itself was to explore new approaches to land use planning by:

- Researching an evolving, dynamic, community led and owned planning process for managing change and conflict at regional and local scales – a *structured* approach
- Addressing land use planning comprehensively at a *regional* scale, rather than *use-by-use*
- Providing mechanisms for communities to cooperate in realising opportunities for complementary land uses and in resolving competing land uses in a just and equitable way
- Opening direct channels from the community to decision makers, politicians and policy planners and fostering better communication and coordination between all levels of government to ensure that agreed action is implemented
- Ensuring the integrated, best possible use of rangelands and protection and sympathetic management of landscapes which are valued for conservation at a regional scale.

ACHIEVING OBJECTIVES

Based on extensive interviews in the North East Goldfields as well as Perth, key issues and sectoral interests were identified for the region (Casella *et al.* 1996). Initially eight sectors were recognised but, as the project progressed, these redefined themselves into seven groups: Aboriginal, conservation and heritage, diversifiers, mining, pastoralism, prospecting, and tourism and recreation. These are flexible groupings which continue to change and grow, with individual members sometimes having interests in more than one sector.

Many more in-depth interviews (unpubl.) with members of the community, both local and general, contributed details of aspirations of each sector for land use, management and access. Identified ‘different thinkers’ across Australia were also invited to contribute their views, in recognition that stakeholders included people outside the region as well as local communities. The result of these activities was a comprehensive and ‘rich’ source of information to inform the planning process.

The more specific statements or ‘guidelines’ were coded into a form that could be introduced into LUPIS land use planning software (Cocks and Ive 1996; see also J. Ive (unpubl.) available from M. Friedel). At the same time, the ‘guidelines’ helped to define the underpinning data requirements, which included conservation attributes, potential for grazing, heritage sites, Aboriginal sites, rare flora and land tenure. A Geographic Information System was built from this information in order to generate a ‘map base’ and define planning units.

Community representatives developed categories of land use – ‘land use groupings’ – which delineated altogether eight primary activities eg grazing, intensive industries, conservation, and Aboriginal uses. They described what other uses could coexist with these primary uses if some conditions were met, and what uses were conflicting. Planning units in the map base were allocated to these groupings and their sub-activities, as directed by guideline preferences. Separate plans were developed initially by each of the sector groups, except the miners and prospectors. Each group refined their plan until they felt it reasonably represented their aspirations. Sector group representatives met together for the first time in October 1999, to review the first blending of all their plans and to begin the process of developing a shared vision for their region.

In combined meetings since that time, community members have determined their collective identity to be the Northern Goldfields Rangeways Strategy Group and their vision: ‘**To best use country for people and country**’. In the process of establishing the Strategy Group, members considered what model of group they required. Issues they considered were: potential affiliation with government or other institutions (eg. universities); nature of the Group’s authority; source of funding; level of agency support; types of activity sponsored; and nature of community representation on the Group. Examples of other major community-based groups with roles in natural resource management (NRM) were used

to determine an appropriate 'start-up' structure that would be refined through development of a business plan.

The Strategy Group has set important goals to generate the framework for their future:

- Establish a business plan (incorporating their vision and the actions below) and obtain funding
- Develop the capacity to advise on and assist sustainable use of rangelands through strategic partnerships
- Lobby for security and tenure reform, following detailed analysis of the current situation
- Establish credibility through projects, local alliances and NRM activities
- Become an inclusive, open, transparent, communicative group
- Continue to be a community-based representative group engaged in planning
- Continue to gain knowledge for making informed decisions, and be a community resource
- Establish agreed structures and processes
- Be recognised as the authoritative NRM body for the North East Goldfields region.

Development of a combined land use plan has been deferred while the framework for the Strategy Group is being established and will be revisited as part of the overall action plan. It was of critical importance to the evolution of the Group and is seen as a source of authority for group decisions. Ultimately, the most important outcome is not 'The Plan' but rather a process for generating an evolving, living plan, with the process serving as a potential model for other rangeland regions.

Rangeways research activities included a number of other strands which complemented and supported planning processes and development of community representation and action. These are not addressed in depth but are nonetheless important.

- **Policy development and implementation.** A Board of agency leaders was established to oversee the project and act as a conduit to political decision makers and agency staff. Recognising that some government policy and statutory mechanisms may impede desired changes, the project commissioned policy research, beginning with a detailed analysis of the adequacy of existing instruments. It also commissioned a report on the development of a Policy Advisory Group, comprised of people with good links into government at senior levels, to facilitate information exchange. Further initiatives will be developed through the Strategy Group's action plan.
- **Effective regional community representation.** From the outset project management was at pains to ensure that community involvement in the planning process was thorough, trustworthy, equitable amongst groupings and comprehensive. This required intensive one-on-one contact with many stakeholders. Particular difficulties were experienced in developing effective engagement with Aboriginal communities and mining interests. Aboriginal people felt unable to speak with one voice across the North East Goldfields and there are confounding issues associated with overlapping Native Title claims. Different Aboriginal groups were individually engaged and consulted, to build trust and ensure that all Aboriginal interests were able to have input into the process. As a consequence Aboriginal commitment to the process is now high, but will need continued support. On the other hand, mining interests initially saw little of benefit to them in the planning processes. Project management has had to work hard to demonstrate the value and need for land use to be inclusive and for it to be considered at a regional scale by the whole community.
- **Communication amongst stakeholders and decision makers.** Ensuring effective communication with participants, local communities and stakeholders outside the region was a challenge. Considerable 'off-line' data assemblage and processing were required and the community expressed frustration with a perceived lack of activity – there was a clear demand for more timely outputs. Steps to address this issue included: the development of a comprehensive marketing and communications strategy; regular issues of *Rangeflash*, a quality newsletter; distribution of a Resource Atlas on CD-ROM with a full spatial data set for the region; frequent

presentations to interest groups; and development of a web site www.rangeways.org.au. At the same time, misinformation about project objectives and processes, both within the region and within government at various times, has required some 'fire-fighting' to ensure that Rangeways is seen in its proper context as a research project with outputs that others may wish to advance. Part of the reason for these difficulties has been ineffective links to policy makers, an issue to be addressed by the Strategy Group.

- **Evaluation.** To track community engagement with the project and ensure that the issues being addressed are real, an independent longitudinal assessment of knowledge and attitudes was initiated in 1997. About a quarter of the people seen as Rangeways stakeholders have been interviewed twice, with a further interview scheduled for later in 2000. The results confirm that the issues of concern to the community are consistent through time and that there is acceptable support for the value of land use planning processes as a means of addressing these.
- **Critical appraisal of the Rangeways approach including strengths and weaknesses of community process.** Some of the strengths and weaknesses of the project have already been mentioned. The Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation (LWRRDC) is supporting two studies which will critically appraise this project and two others being presented at this Conference; the three projects focus on different aspects of rangeland land use planning and all are funded by LWRRDC. The first study is a review of regional resource planning projects by CapitalAg – Synapse, while the other, by Murdoch University's Institute for Sustainability and Technology Policy, is examining interdisciplinary approaches to natural resource management.

SUMMARY

This research has tackled a range of chronic rangeland issues through deliberate involvement of the community in planning processes. This approach recognises the continuing failure of the market to deal with these issues. In general, the community have welcomed the opportunity to participate in designing their own future, although expectations of likely outcomes vary markedly between interest groups. While we believe that the North East Goldfields community is better placed to address these issues as a consequence of this research, our experience tells us that these processes are still very vulnerable to internal and external pressures. Our commitment throughout has been to resolve land use problems through a structured approach to land use planning: to develop processes rather than 'A Plan'. It is clear that these processes require consistent and strong support from government to be viable for the long-term.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We gratefully acknowledge the funding support of LWRRDC, DTARD, Agriculture WA and CSIRO and we thank Dr Phil Price for his continuing interest and input. Many WA and federal agencies, as well as individuals, contributed data to the project, and colleagues assisted us in many ways. Without the North East Goldfields community, we would not have even started: we thank you all.

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