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The Australian Rangeland Society

ABORIGINAL PEOPLE AND THEIR LANDS IN RANGELANDS ENVIRONMENTS

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This presentation will discuss the relation between Aboriginal people and their country in Rangelands environments by comparing societies in north western New South Wales with those of the Western Desert in the north of South Australia. The considerable diversity of environments which can be called 'rangelands' have always contributed to the diversity of the relations between land and the societies who lived on them. This diversity has been complicated further by the conditions under which rangelands Australia has been colonised by Europeans and others over the last 170 odd years. Geographic and environmental variation have led to different timing and intensity of colonisation and therefore to different impacts on indigenous societies. As well, however, there are now often simplistic assumptions made that 'remote' Aboriginal societies in arid conditions are more 'traditional' and therefore more committed to traditional environmental management practices than Aboriginal societies in more heavily and longer settled 'rural' areas.

This paper will argue that in the present as well as in the past, both environmental and political/cultural conditions have shaped Aboriginal goals concerning land relations and management. There are as many parallels as differences to be seen in the remote and rural Aboriginal responses to colonialism, in attempts to modify traditional practice to meet new conditions and to sustain the central principles of traditional relations to land. Such efforts are, however, often harder for outsiders to recognize in rural areas than they are in more remote areas. There are also parallels for each group of communities, whether remote or rural, in the escalating pressures which can obstruct such community land practices and goals.