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## PLANNING ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE PASTORAL MANAGEMENT THROUGH THE GASCOYNE MURCHISON STRATEGY

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This ambitious project has a long-term objective of integrating commercial grazing objectives with management of landscapes for native plants and animals. It is based on the emerging realisation that over most areas and for most biodiversity, good habitat for stock is also good habitat for native plants and animals. A range of tools, including reservation, caters for particularly sensitive areas and organisms. However, the thrust of this process is to initiate dialogue between pastoralists and their landscapes towards ecologically sustainable pastoral management.

The process is based on an inverted form of the “expert questioning” technique. The landscape and range ecologists ask the real experts, the pastoralists, a series of questions regarding where their station lies in the regional context (e.g. drainage patterns). We then address a series of issues such as pastoral value, range condition, ungrazed areas, natural surface waters, unique or distinctive features (e.g. a landform or rare plant or animal), landscape junction areas (areas of extraordinary landscape richness), areas of aesthetic value and pests and weeds.

In response, the pastoralists (the whole family if they are interested) annotate a series of clear overlays on a station plan, showing infrastructure and land systems (country types). Gradually, it becomes clear that there is a congruence of themes over a relatively small area of the station in which to focus our attention.

We then address these core areas, looking for a win-win solution in which commercial grazing strategies are developed that we believe will be consistent with the other values that have been identified. The “lock it up” option is a last resort and is voluntary in this project: if the ecologists feel lock up is necessary we say so, look at exactly what is required with the pastoralists, what it would cost and inform a follow-up negotiating team.

The final stage of the process is to develop landscape monitoring systems to test whether our innovative grazing management strategies are achieving their commercial, ecological and pasture objectives. This process is also being developed with pastoralists and has the potential to revolutionise the way stations are monitored and inspected in future. In particular, we are developing with pastoralists their capacity to receive environmental certification.

It is early days yet, but as long as the process is deeply nested in the pastoral community and our innovative solutions stand up to scrutiny, we may just achieve that long-term objective.