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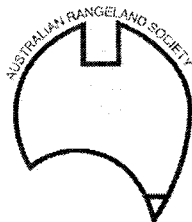
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# **BUSHCARE IN THE RANGELANDS: BEYOND RAISING AWARENESS AND EDUCATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Sustainable use of native vegetation has become a central issue in the management of rangeland ecosystems. Bushcare, a major native vegetation management initiative under the Commonwealth's Natural Heritage Trust, is investing in a suite of projects across the rangelands that attempt to integrate biodiversity conservation with sustainable production. Five case studies are presented that illustrate the need for a multi-stakeholder cooperative approach in addressing complex environmental issues. A mix of on-ground activities and institutional mechanisms are used to improve upon resource knowledge, planning and bringing about long-term protection and sustainable management of native vegetation. These exemplify a move toward an evolving paradigm that seeks sustainability as its primary focus in rangeland management.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Sound native vegetation management has long been recognised as a major consideration in the sustainable use of rangeland ecosystems. Extension programs aimed at encouraging the sustainable management of natural resources in Australia's rangelands have been only partially successful due to sparse population, remoteness, inadequate regional infrastructure, difficulties in facilitating social learning and scale of environmental problems, both temporal and spatial (CIE 1999). Bushcare, the largest program of the Natural Heritage Trust, has undertaken a targeted and strategic approach to native vegetation management (Hill 1999). This paper outlines a number of projects across different jurisdictions that aim to integrate biodiversity conservation with sustainable production in the rangelands.

## **WESTERN AUSTRALIA: IDENTIFICATION AND PROTECTION OF NATURE CONSERVATION VALUES IN THE GASCOYNE-MURCHISON REGION**

The Gascoyne-Murchison region occupies approximately 34 million ha or 25% of Western Australia and is recognised as an important area for pastoralism, mining, tourism, as well as having unique biophysical and cultural values. Currently, this area is the focus of a major new regional initiative between the WA and Commonwealth governments, landholders, industry and the Aboriginal community. Under the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy (GMS), environmental protection and sustainable vegetation management is a primary goal.

With the assistance of Bushcare funding, officers from the WA Department of Conservation and Land Management in consultation with landholders are involved in identification and protection of areas with high nature conservation value in the Gascoyne-Murchison region. This project includes the collation of existing data and information to determine both areas suitable for protection under voluntary management agreements and for reservation under the national reserve system. While currently in the initial stages of implementation, the project aims to develop management plans in consultation with landholders that will reflect best practice native vegetation management. The

project will also establish benchmark monitoring sites across the region to ensure that conservation objectives are being achieved.

### **NORTHERN TERRITORY: INTEGRATED RANGELAND MANAGEMENT IN THE VICTORIA RIVER DISTRICT**

The Victoria River District contains a diverse array of landscapes, landowners and landuses and is the Territory's second most important cattle production region. A legacy of this region's long pastoral history is a range of land management issues such as fire, weeds, feral animals and grazing management which impact on the sustainability of enterprises and the natural values of the region.

In response to concerns raised by landholders and industry groups regarding feral animal numbers, the Northern Territory Government has declared the region a 'Pest Control Area', requiring all landholders to reduce feral animal numbers. A consequence of this action was the development, by the Victoria River District Conservation Association (VRDCA), of a NHT devolved grants application to address other land management issues and thereby complement the environmental benefits accruing from the reduction in feral animals. The group proposed a scheme which would allow landholders within the region to allocate funding to actions according to local priorities. To date, the group has completed the first round of funding allocations which will affect in excess of 160,000 hectares. Most land will be under voluntary management agreements between the group and landholders, with some areas potentially included in long term agreements with the Northern Territory Parks and Wildlife Commission.

### **QUEENSLAND: CONSERVATION OF SPRINGS IN THE DESERT UPLANDS BIOREGION**

Natural springs, in the Great Artesian Basin and other aquifers that occur throughout the rangelands of Queensland, are significant for their cultural, social, economic and environmental values. Many of these springs are under threat from aquifer drawdown, pollution and loss of native vegetation through uncontrolled domestic and feral animal use.

Landholders in the Desert Uplands are working in partnership with the Desert Uplands Build-up and Development Strategy Committee and the Environmental Protection Agency to manage springs and other significant ecosystems in off-reserve areas. Under a Bushcare funded project, landholders are offered advice and a range of incentives to manage these areas in a sustainable manner. Voluntary management agreements and the declaration of nature refuges, under the *Nature Conservation Act*, are encouraged to assist with long-term protection. Agreements are developed in consultation with the relevant landholders and outline the management practices required for the conservation of springs. This project attempts to balance two management objectives: management for sustainable production and management for the conservation of these unique ecosystems found in the rangelands.

### **NEW SOUTH WALES: RANGELAND MANAGEMENT ACTION PLAN – A LONG-TERM VISION**

The community in the south of the Western Division (Lower Murray Darling catchment) has developed a Rangeland Management Action Plan, part funded by Bushcare and other programs of the Natural Heritage Trust, which provides the basis for long-term sustainability of the rangelands. Priority issues identified under the Plan include enterprise viability, landholder participation in extension programs and institutional arrangements. Vegetation management features strongly in the principle considerations for on-ground sustainable management. These include:

- management of total grazing pressure of native, domestic and feral animals;
- domestic livestock management;
- weed control; and
- native vegetation protection.

Enterprise viability, and the resulting need for structural adjustment, is the highest priority issue in the region. Economic viability strongly influences the adoption of best management practices. The Plan proposes a range of actions, broadly grouped under improving rangeland condition and preserving aboriginal cultural heritage. While some actions require major changes to current management practices and institutional arrangements, government agencies and the community support the plan. This represents a genuine move towards long-term sustainability in the Western Division of NSW.

## **SOUTH AUSTRALIA: ANANGU PITJANTJATJARA TRADITIONAL FIRE MANAGEMENT**

In recent years, the Anangu Pitjantjatjara (AP) Land Management Program has been supplemented by Natural Heritage Trust funding from the Bushcare and National Landcare Programs. Funding has been used to assist in the employment of local community rangers. The community rangers plan, organize and implement effect various traditional and contemporary land management works in consultation with traditional owners. Examples include rockhole cleaning and assistance with the fire management program.

To enhance traditional fire management techniques across the AP lands a series of regional workshops were held, bringing together traditional land managers and contemporary land managers to facilitate the transfer and application of traditional skills and knowledge of fire management. Traditional fire management, known as patch burning, consists of controlled burning of areas on a regular basis and assists in maintaining biodiversity and reduces the risk of wildfire. The workshops have resulted in an increase in patch burning activities through:

- wider and deeper community understanding of traditional fire management;
- greater confidence in the application of patch burning techniques by current land managers;
- reinforcement of land management knowledge held by elders; and
- increased application of traditional fire management practices, and thus a healthier environment and a reduced risk to the region's biodiversity.

The most recent focus of the program is fire management to enhance the protection of the region's mallefowl population.

## **CONCLUSION**

Through strategic investment in the rangelands, the Bushcare program is encouraging the active participation of key stakeholders in promoting cross-boundary stewardship. This aims to encourage the integration of biodiversity conservation and sustainable production outcomes, which is seen as integral to the survival of viable land uses, particularly pastoralism. On-ground native vegetation management is complemented by investment into social capital and institutional mechanisms that will lead to improvements to planning and knowledge, and better long-term management.

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