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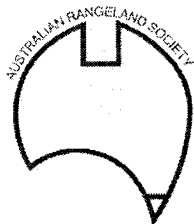
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*The Australian Rangeland Society*

## SHIFTING CAMP -- BORROLOOLA OR THE BUSH

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In the early part of last century there was a saying among bushmen, "I'm going to Borroloola". This indicated that they were going to their final camp before they died. It's not that Borroloola was such a bad place, it's just that, up on the Gulf, it was out of the way.

In 2001 the executive of the Australian Rangeland Society considered the propositions of either winding up the society or continuing on with it. They chose to continue. But where to?

### WHY SHIFT CAMP?

There are a number of reasons why we shift camp.

- This camp is bare and eaten out. The disciplines on which we relied can't help us any more or certainly not to the extent we require.
- We think there is a better camp somewhere else. There are people leaving this camp and we are either hopeful or anticipating something better.
- We are not wanted here any more. We can't get certain sectors to join with us. We can't stimulate national interest or priority nor can we create supporting institutions.
- Moving is too much effort and we are in effect going to Borroloola.

Before we decide on where we might move to, we should get an idea of where we are and what we are looking for. Fortunately for the rangelands, the National Land and Water Resources Audit has conducted a comprehensive review of resources and their condition. It has documented and analysed the principal biophysical, social, economic and institutional factors related to the rangelands.

In summary, it has concluded the following.

- The rangelands are defined by being natural systems.
- In general the rangelands are in reasonable condition with some areas of concern (e.g. the arid areas and Murray Darling Basin), some significant losses (e.g. small mammals in the arid areas) with significant land systems not well represented within conservation reserves.
- There are threats to the health of the rangelands, particularly in areas of fragile soil and vegetation and those subject to episodic natural catastrophes (drought, flood).
- In many cases the ecosystem functions are not well understood.
- Feral animals are a major concern because of the impact they have on natural vegetation and systems and total grazing pressure.
- It is difficult for pastoralists and graziers to be profitable because there are real limits to how much they can intensify and counteract the variations in season, price and the continuing decline in terms of trade.
- For most areas of the rangelands population is declining but in contrast aboriginal population is increasing.
- There are important issues in relation to young people in the rangelands in terms of career and professional opportunity, changes in culture, diversity of social interests and issues of despair.
- The rangelands suffer from institutional neglect from government and private jurisdictions. Structural adjustment is not dealt with proactively.
- The rangelands is the 'back paddock' of all jurisdictions except the Northern Territory.

- Most of the land is still government owned as leasehold, Crown land or reserves. Aboriginal interests own about 20 percent.
- The skills base and human resource capacity is strongly influenced by government and government services. However this influence and investment by State and Territory governments is declining with an increase in community-based services and support.

## THE BASIS OF THE CAMP - KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS

As well as the physical nature of the camp, it is the knowledge and knowledge systems which make the camp and the people in it interesting.

One form of knowledge is that which is people-centred. It is derived from people being embedded in the landscape. In the rangelands these are predominantly aboriginal people and pastoralists.

They live in the landscape, are dependent on it, observe it closely, respond to it and commune closely with it. This leads to a particular type of learning based on experience and guided by those who have already acquired experiential knowledge. This knowledge defines an individual's status, more than their age or their social titles. They and their knowledge are defined by the landscapes; place, space and time.

This knowledge defines the approach people take in their relationship to the rangelands. They respond and adapt to their environment using rules of thumb and lore. These approaches are valued because they help avoid failure and catastrophe. Failure can mean irreversible change and damage. So the preferred forms of management are those that are productive within the capabilities of the environment and which reduce the risk of failure. The knowledge develops by slowly and incrementally modifying the rules and lore.

This knowledge is captured in language and in stories, social and cultural patterns of behaviour and the feelings people have. It is predominantly oral and thoughtful. It is not shared easily and generally only with those assessed to be able to understand this knowledge. It is maintained by use, otherwise it is lost. It is taught and passed on by practice in a guided way and is quite specific to location and application. Attempts to document this on paper are rarely successful.

In both aboriginal and pastoral societies, passing this knowledge on to young people is proving difficult. The young are influenced by wider and newer cultures and more formal forms of knowledge and learning.

Social contrasts and clashes also put stresses on this form of knowledge and its continuation. Contrasting cultures and commercial demands, differences between visitors and residents and the impact of wider environmental issues and societal concerns make it difficult for this knowledge to persist and grow.

Both pastoralists and aboriginal people feel a strong sense of belonging to their rangelands environments and localities. Their knowledge has many similarities in development and context. Their disagreements are not about the importance or nature of their knowledge in relation to the rangelands. It is more to do with whether two peoples who belong to and feel so strongly about the country, can share it.

This people-centred knowledge is the most extensive and widely based source of understanding and knowledge within the rangelands.

A second form of knowledge is that which is based on science and is derived using the scientific method. This science centred knowledge seeks to determine cause and effect within defined levels of probability. The purpose of this approach is to understand components of the rangeland and be predictive about the outcomes of interactions and processes within the natural systems. Because of the nature of the method it is difficult to learn about complex systems and their interactions. It is often presumed to define facts. The

interpretations and analysis, while rigorously derived and based, are influenced by human qualities and values.

The difficulty for the application of science knowledge in the rangelands is that rangelands natural systems are dominated by the impact of extreme events. This includes germination flushes, droughts, rapid losses of soil and nutrients, floods, destructive fires and damaging grazing activities. The scientific approach prefers to smooth these things and look at extreme events as part of the continuum rather than as defining activities.

The scientific approach is fuelled by innovation and change and the exploring of new opportunities. It is used to understand problems and to estimate the outcome of new approaches and changes. It is a most helpful approach in understanding new events and situations outside the range of experiential knowledge.

There is no implication that one form of knowledge; people-centred or scientific, is superior. Each has its place and its value.

We need also to consider a third form of knowledge. This is possessed by interested bystanders and visitors. They can be curious or concerned and often have strong feelings about the rangelands. Mostly their knowledge is based on partial information and is generally accepted at face value. They assimilate this information within a wider perspective of their own world, which may be coastal environments, the city, other countries or temperate areas of the world.

They have a right to use the rangelands and a knowledge basis helps improve their rangeland experience. Additionally they can have a powerful influence on the future use of the rangelands and the direction of policies which impact on it. Generally their concern is about not losing the rangelands or its defining characteristics and their major focus is on aesthetic values.

So we have a range of people with concern and motivation to have the rangelands in good health. Sometimes they agree and sometimes they disagree on what this is and how it should be achieved. They have a range of levels of knowledge particularly in relation to the cause of certain impacts and effects and on the interactions of components of the landscape at different spatial and temporal scales.

This has led to a number of proposals and responses for rangeland management. These include adoption of the precautionary principle, removal of people, return to traditional aboriginal management, conduct more research, impose legislation and regulation and exploit resources currently 'going to waste'. For those living in the landscape it often leads to a reaction of 'leave us alone'.

## **WHICH CAMP?**

How can we possibly cater for all these knowledges, values, opinions and proposals in the one camp? Is it conceivable that we can all live together peacefully?

It seems there are two possible options.

1. We can have a camp that only caters for one or two of these groups provided they are not too conflicting or contrasting.
2. The camp is a place where all the groups can meet for occasional and important gatherings.

The social structure in the rangelands in the past has tended toward the latter. In aboriginal society, tribal and family groups had their own areas where they lived. But there were areas, such as the Bunyan Mountains in Queensland, which did not belong to a particular tribe but which were used as places of ceremony and meeting on occasions of particular food availability and cultural significance. Similar

places existed across the rangelands. Similarly in the early settler period, people were quite isolated on stations or droving. But country race meetings and rodeos were an opportunity for gathering, sharing of views, enjoyment and celebration and still are.

### **WHICH TYPE OF CAMP SUITS OUR NEEDS?**

Our camp needs to focus on supporting communication, discussion, debate, learning and reducing isolation. All of these are issues of interest and concern to people living and working in the rangelands. The camp needs to be relevant to the acquisition of knowledge, debate about minor and major issues and be multicultural with no dominating philosophy.

The camp has to be relevant to the range of different outlying camps, each of which is independent in many aspects of its life and operations. It must not be threatening to any particular participant or visitor. It welcomes and values those who want to be a part of the rangelands. It has a focus on overcoming isolation and separation. But above all else it must foster the diversity of values and knowledge which make up peoples' understanding of, interaction with and reaction to the rangelands and its environment.

If we relate this concept of a suitable camp for the rangelands to the Australian Rangelands Society, there are a number of implications.

- We accept that there is no single discipline, paradigm or philosophy for understanding the rangelands and how it and its people work. There is no single rangelands science.
- There is a focus on the rangelands landscape and its identity. It is an including approach. The emphasis is on identifying with and understanding the scope of the rangelands.
- The operational approach is concerned with how to be inclusive and non-judgmental of other's views. This will require a rangelands or resource management approach based on knowledge and not on use or users and their separate approaches. It understands core values such as variability, extremes, niches of ecology and use, uniqueness of the systems and processes, fragility and the inability to easily intervene to fix things.
- Management requires compatibility with and responding to the environment. Diversity is essential to effective functioning and survival. Adaptation and adaptive management approaches are the foundation of effective involvement and intervention. Knowing the limits and thresholds is important. Being comfortable with needing to be patient and responsive in utilising opportunities as they arise is critical. Knowing that climate is more influential than anything man can do is a prerequisite.

It's a difficult and complex environment. But fortunately it is diverse and that is the basis of survival.

### **THE NATURE OF THE CAMP**

The Australian Rangelands Society needs to mirror the nature of this rangelands environment, its people and their knowledge. It should not strive to be just another scientific society.

If we choose a camp which has wide relevance to people in the rangelands and caters for diversity, there are significant implications for the way we operate. What should the structure of the governing or organising council be? What sort of communications should we engage in? Do we need a special purpose Journal, which consumes two-thirds of the budget and meets the need of only some in the camp? What sort of events should the camp put on?

So which way leads to Borroloola and which way to the bush?

I believe we need to shift camp. If we stay where we are we will bleed to death and might as well go to Borroloola. It is time for leaders to act and for us to decide. We have an enormously stimulating and exciting opportunity to capture the diversity of the country and its people, their ideas and values. We have a unique confluence of knowledge systems to foster, nurture and explore. I know what I prefer. I'm going bush.