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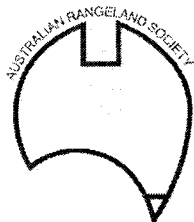
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NATURE CONSERVATION EXTENSION IN THE SOUTH WEST QUEENSLAND RANGELANDS

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INTRODUCTION

Nature conservation across south west Queensland has been an issue that has traditionally generated fear in landholders. On-going vegetation clearing debates, land acquisition programs by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, water reforms and general statements by 'green' groups all strike at the heart of landholders. Not only do these debates affect their livelihoods but also their pride in managing their own land. Recognising these fears, the community based South West Natural Resource Management (SWNRM) group developed and implemented a new approach to extension of nature conservation in their region. A grant program, funded through the Natural Heritage Trust (NHT), aims to overcome this reluctance toward nature conservation by increasing knowledge and awareness of the issues. This process has proven to be an effective extension method where past methods have had limited success. Landholders have a great opportunity to lead the way in demonstrating the integration of conservation and production through this grant process.

BACKGROUND

The SWNRM group area extends over the Mulga Lands bioregion of south west Queensland. Grazing is the main land use, traditionally being a wool growing area, with a current transition to cattle by many landholders. Although modified by pastoral activities, the bioregion is fortunate in maintaining representatives of the original diversity of species. Only six 'Of Concern' and two 'Endangered' regional ecosystems are listed for the Mulga Lands under the Queensland Vegetation Management Act 1999. The Queensland Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation Act 1994 lists 28 species of fauna (1 Extinct, 3 Endangered, 9 Vulnerable and 15 Rare) and 19 species of flora (7 Vulnerable and 19 Rare), with only 12% of the regions cleared of woody vegetation. However, there is currently only 2.4% conserved in reserves such as National Parks with private landholders having the responsibility for the management of approximately 90% of the region. There exists a high potential for major planning across the Mulga Lands for on-property conservation alongside production systems.

While Landholders recognise the need for a sustainable management, resources, particularly financial, often limit their capacity to implement these practices. Long-term planning is difficult, as short-term production demands placed on landholders by the current marketplace limits their ability to address long-term concerns. This grant program aims to increase the awareness of landholders through providing incentives (in the form of a 50% subsidy for on-ground works) to integrate areas with nature conservation value into their production systems, with a focus on long-term sustainability. Voluntary conservation agreements are negotiated with the landholders, providing an opportunity for education and ensuring management considerations for both the production and natural values. Ownership of the project is always emphasised as remaining with the landholder. Over 45,000 hectares of important habitat are now being conservatively managed under these agreements within the SWNRM area.

DISCUSSION

Landholders are the principal manager and stakeholder of the ecosystems of the region, combined with their apprehension of nature conservation issues, the role of extension is as difficult as it is important. Existing networks between project officers and landholders were utilised to promote the grants initially, with one-on-one extension proving effective in promoting nature conservation leading to the first round of applicants for the grant. Specific grant workshops and general extension activities at local field days and events such as shows, are used to promote nature conservation and the grants, although the major extension activity, comes from landholders that have received the grants. Each grant recipient agrees to formally promote their project with activities such as field days and written articles in local media, but the informal discussion about their project with fellow landholders has

proven to be a big step in overcoming the fears of 'nature conservation'. Over the three years that the grants have been offered, the number of applications has continued to increase, doubling after only the first year.

Extension officers from Queensland Parks and Wildlife Service (QPWS) and the Department of Natural Resources and Mines (NR&M) provide information and technical support through all stages of the project. Project officers establish monitoring sites with the landholder, using GRASScheck (Grazier Rangeland Assessment for Self Sustainability) and photo sites as the main tools. These user-friendly monitoring methods become the landholder's responsibility and extension officers provide continuing advice and assistance.

Projects have mostly focused on the control of grazing pressure within areas of high habitat value, through the use of strategic fencing and the control of water points. Projects range in their values, although all form valuable corridors and refuges across the landscape. Current projects under management agreements include managing regional ecosystems listed as 'Endangered' and 'Of Concern'; Lake Dartmouth, a nationally important ephemeral wetland listed under the Directory of Important Wetlands (QLD168); communities of 'Endangered' and 'Vulnerable' species; Brigalow/Belah/Coolibah Gilgai swamps, Open mitchell grass plains and riparian vegetation communities across many south west river and creek systems. Management for these areas have been established using 280 km fencing, 60km piping and relocating 47 water points.

The grant process has not been without a few drawbacks. One of the main challenges has been with funding through NHT having a limited time in which projects are to be implemented on-ground. Unpredictable conditions under which landholders work, affect their ability to be able to complete on-ground works to a schedule. A simple case of machinery breakdown or the more difficult situation of drought can place landholders with the best intentions outside their original timeline. In these situations limited extensions have been granted and project officers have been able to provide alternative arrangements such as funding Conservation Volunteers Australia. A group of volunteers help complete fencing where difficulties have prevented the landholder from doing so, allowing the focus to remain on achieving on-ground works. There are also the added benefits achieved by the volunteers experiencing the real 'outback', whilst the project gains an extra promotion activity with the volunteers' involvement in the project.

In 2002, the SWNRM group extended the successful grants scheme to include Landcare projects in the current round of funding. These Landcare grants are also proving to be a successful method of extending land sustainability issues to landholders alongside nature conservation. Given the potential for these grants and their positive outcomes, the group is in the process of including the grants as part of their investment plan for future funding under the new Natural Heritage Trust arrangements.

CONCLUSION

The grant process has allowed incentives to incorporate conservation values on-property overcoming the financial difficulties that limit landholder participation. More importantly the grants provide methods for extension through landholders spreading the message to their peers in a non-threatening way thus by-passing the fear factor associated with 'nature conservation'. The continuation of incentives provided through the grant process will ensure the incorporation of nature conservation into everyday land management practices across the rangelands of south west Queensland.