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CENTRE LAND WATCH - MONITORING BY PASTORALISTS FOR PASTORALISTS

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ABSTRACT

Centre Land Watch (CLW) is a pastoralist-driven monitoring project based in Central Australia. The industry employs a project officer to provide quality extension support so that pastoralists can get the most out of their monitoring. The project aims to take the fear out of monitoring by introducing "first timers" to the concept in a non-threatening way. Pastoralists who are already experienced at monitoring work with the project officer to hone their skills and add more rigour to their system. Time is taken to determine what skills individual pastoralists are seeking and what they want to get out of their monitoring activities. Centre Land Watch is different to most schemes because it customises the monitoring activity to suit the interests and confidence of individual pastoralists.

INTRODUCTION

The majority of pastoralists in the Alice Springs district are members of an independent landcare group called the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA). Through CLMA, the industry employs project staff to raise funds and manage landcare projects on 30 million hectares of pastoral land.

At various times, tourists, regulators and environmental groups have accused the industry of degrading the country. This criticism has tended to coincide with extended droughts. When this situation arose in the mid to late 1990's, the industry realised it lacked the hard evidence to show that pastoralists were managing the country appropriately. In 1998, members of CLMA got together to develop a monitoring system that could be used by pastoralists. It was decided that pastoralists would make use of existing photopoint sites on their leases (see Walsh *et al.* 2002 this volume) and that they would collect written information in addition to photographs. A simple and relevant site sheet was designed by the pastoralists and the scheme became known as Centre Land Watch.

CLMA members recognised that Centre Land Watch would only be adopted for the long term if pastoralists had access to technical assistance and support. CLMA successfully applied to the Natural Heritage Trust to employ a project officer to provide these things.

WHAT IS CENTRE LAND WATCH?

A major aim of Centre Land Watch is to integrate the various monitoring systems that have been deployed on stations over the years. There have been four main point-monitoring systems installed on pastoral leases in the Alice Springs district. Only one of these is currently in use (the Pastoral Land Board Tier 1 system). Most pastoralists are confused about the different systems on their leases and many do not know where all their sites are. The Centre Land Watch project officer collates all known monitoring information for each lease and explains it to the pastoralist.

Some stations have a large number of existing photo-monitoring sites (>50). The Centre Land Watch project officer assists the pastoralist to rationalise their monitoring system to ensure that it is manageable. This is achieved by determining what the pastoralist wishes to monitor and selecting the best sites to achieve these aims. If existing sites are unsuitable for the intended purpose, new locations are selected and sites are installed. Pastoralists are also encouraged to dig out old photos of their stations for inclusion in their monitoring program. There is quite a bit of variability in what pastoralists want to monitor. Forage availability, animal impact, seasonal variability, tree and shrub encroachment, vegetation recovery after fire and success of erosion control works are just some examples to date. As a result, the Centre Land Watch recording sheet is customised to suit the monitoring aims of each pastoral family.

The Centre Land Watch project aims to encourage all members of the family to participate, including the children. The project officer accompanies the participants around the sites and assists with photography and data collection. Technical assistance is provided with plant identification, cover estimation, map interpretation, GPS operation and the identification of soil erosion. The participants are encouraged to identify changes occurring on the site over time and to record these on the Centre Land Watch sheet. This field extension provides an excellent opportunity for two-way communication. Pastoralists are encouraged to share their opinions and beliefs about the country, plants and cattle with the project officer and other members of the family. Care is taken to ensure that these conversations remain "on-station".

Prior to leaving the station, the project officer confirms what further resources or assistance the pastoralist desires. Customised photographic herbaria and "cheat notes" for recognising different species are developed with pastoralists who want this resource. Labeled photographs are returned to the station, along with updated station maps and customised Centre Land Watch record sheets. There is no restriction to the number of visits that a station can request. The project officer will make as many visits as required to ensure that pastoralists are confident with their monitoring. Subsequent visits are often used to highlight links between monitoring and other business activities (such as infrastructure planning, rainfall collection, stock recording etc). A series of visits allows slow and steady progress and avoids "information overload".

SUMMARY

The Centre Land Watch project is designed to assist pastoralists to overcome the problems that have previously "held them back" from undertaking monitoring.

Centre Land Watch works because:

- It offers a quality "one-on-one" extension service.
- It is voluntary.
- It is flexible.
- It is quick, uncomplicated and avoids technical jargon.
- It is relevant because pastoralists design it to suit their own interests and needs.
- It can be modified as confidence grows.
- The project officer is employed by the industry.
- There are no "regulatory overtones".
- It is NOT "one size fits all".