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## SHIFTING MANAGEMENT'S PERCEPTIONS OF BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION THROUGH A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS IN THE SOUTHERN RANGELANDS OF WA

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Off-reserve conservation in the southern rangelands of Western Australia (WA) is gaining momentum at the enterprise level through the participatory Ecosystem Management Understanding (EMU) process. The project evolved from the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy (GMS) during 2000 and four years later, three additional staff joined the initial team totalling six full time equivalent members with the potential for growth in the future. Its framework has been used to develop management capacity from the Carnarvon Basin north of Carnarvon extending through to the Nullabor Plain in WA. Its approach engages managers of land (Murchison Land Conservation District Committee and the Ecosystem Management Unit 2002) and is a vehicle for regional progress (Pringle *et al.* 2003). Pastoralists are the main participants however work is also being undertaken with indigenous communities, mining companies and the Department of Conservation and Land Management. This diverse involvement may potentially lead to improved catchment management.

Principally, the EMU process builds local capacity. Its construction is a gradual process from a two-day baseline mapping exercise to capture land managers knowledge and introduce or reacquaint them with principles of landscape ecology and sustainable pastoralism. Given time (three to four months) this fundamental understanding of landscape patterns and processes germinates and managers begin to see their land systems from a perspective other than stock management, mostly for the first time. At this stage the EMU team spends an intensive two to three day reconnaissance with land managers who are open to adopting either new management decisions or altering existing ones. This moves managers towards practices developed from an ecological perspective. Developing land managers' capacity to "play" with their management techniques and observe how these fit within the landscape either maintains or alters their management accordingly. Hence, it is a management cycle of continual performance rolling towards the ultimate goal of sustainable pastoralism based on sound ecological principles.

From this process and with ongoing collaboration with the EMU Team, a significant number of land managers have committed to, or are engaged in, active on-ground preservation and restoration activities. This includes, but is not limited to, land managers that have:

- Internationally certified environmental management systems in place.
- Developed specific management activities for conservation of biodiversity (and protection of rare flora) as well as publishing their perspectives on biodiversity in relation to responsible management.
- Significantly changed their grazing management practices including de-stocking, re-location of waters and fencing programs to protect fragile areas, particularly floodplains and; protected areas of aboriginal and cultural significance.

Land managers wearing their new ecological glasses feed back into the EMU process in a number of important and significant ways. Once land managers are formally engaged, their experience is passed on to industry, initiating interest from land managers who have yet to take on an ecological management perspective. It produces a flow-on effect like the way ripples radiate when a pebble has been dropped into a pond. Additionally, as ripples spread their diameter increases, as does the scale at which the EMU process can be applied. Larger scale, incorporated projects have evolved from the capacity built at the enterprise level. This has led to the development of catchment-scale restoration projects involving officers from different government departments, mostly from district departments. These industry-led, catchment scale, multi-disciplinary and multi-departmental projects potentially

open doors, as it has for numerous land managers, for cohesion between institutions, enabling community-driven ecological sustainability in WA's rangelands.

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