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PROFILING OUTBACK LIVELIHOODS: A 'PROOF OF CONCEPT' STUDY

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INTRODUCTION

The Desert Knowledge and Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centres (CRCs) jointly initiated a project provisionally entitled the 'Outback Atlas' project. The Outback Atlas concept had its roots in Tropical Savannas CRC research on ecosystem health (Whitehead *et al.* 2000) and a regional dynamics scoping study conducted by Stafford Smith *et al.* (2003). By definition the Outback Atlas project covered desert and savanna regions. It acknowledged that outback problems were qualitatively different from those identified in densely populated coastal areas. The Atlas was to be dynamic, mapping multiple views, drivers, issues and social-ecological indicators of viability for outback regions. The first of two stages of this project is covered by this poster and is concerned with the 'Proof of Concept' for the Outback Atlas project.

THE PROOF OF CONCEPT STUDY

For the Proof of Concept (PoC) stage of the project, a case study approach was employed to a) articulate the intent, methodology and potential products of the project, b) refine the meaning of the concept of a 'dynamic Outback Atlas' and c) based on a & b, develop a proposal for a full-scale Outback Atlas project. The case studies were Ti Tree (Anmatjere) in the Northern Territory and Greenvale in Queensland.

The case studies involved semi-structured interviews and meetings with community leaders, peak body representatives and general residents who were prepared to take part in the research process. In the Anmatjere case study, participants were from indigenous communities, government service providers, table-grape producers and pastoralists. The Greenvale case study participants were traditional owners, town residents and graziers.

Interviews and workshops with CRC staff and external stakeholders were used to refine the dynamic Outback Atlas concept and to further the development of a full Outback Atlas proposal. The research approach also involved a review of literature.

OUTCOMES

Several of the classic issues affecting outback regions of Australia were demonstrated through the pilot case studies, such as remoteness, high unemployment and limited and unreliable access to basic infrastructure. However, several further issues specific to the regions were also raised. These included seasonal importation of labour by local industries even though there was a high level of unemployment of local people in the Anmatjere region; and access to water supplies for traditional owners in the Greenvale region.

A key area of similarity in both regions was the degree of preparedness of the main community groups to work together to gain mutual benefit. In the Anmatjere region, indigenous people and table-grape producers were working together to improve Aboriginal participation in the industry, and to speed up resolution of native title issues and land release for table-grape production. In Greenvale, town residents were partnering with traditional owners to keep the town 'alive'. However, in Greenvale town residents expressed concern over a lack of collaboration between townspeople and graziers.

There was also weak interaction between indigenous communities and pastoralists in the Anmatjere region.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FULL PROJECT

The core issues of both pilot study regions are mainly in the social, economic and cultural domain. Study participants noted the stronger biophysical focus of several research efforts such as the Tropical Savannas CRC ecosystem health monitoring program (Whitehead *et al.* 2000). It is proposed that the full project employs a series of workshops to develop understanding of the unique issues and drivers of dynamics in the outback regions, specifically including socio-economic and cultural issues. The methodology for the full project will combine wide coverage of outback regions with intensive case studies.

Several other recommendations flow from the PoC stage. Participants noted that views, issues and drivers of viability of the outback regions are not static, which was a connotation of the term 'Atlas'. Consequently, the Outback Atlas has been renamed 'Profiling Outback Livelihoods' to indicate that the project will be dynamic, going beyond a list of issues and a spatial snapshot of the state of resources and services. A mechanism for presenting critical social-ecological changes over time and an exploration of systemic linkages between issues in the socio-economic, cultural and biophysical dimensions were also needed. Where relevant, the project should attempt to assemble information in real-time through negotiated access to websites which update data continuously.

The PoC study articulated four key outputs for the full scale project with a main focus on delivering on the first two:

1. A descriptive conceptual model of stakeholder perspectives, issues and indicators of regional viability and social desirability.
2. Systems representation of the critical features (key issues, drivers and associations) of regional state and dynamics.
3. Integrated sets of existing biophysical, economic and social data at a regional scale, and
4. A synthesis of the three above products into a dynamic 'Outback Atlas'.

The project is expected to facilitate context relevant policy formulation, investment decisions and public discourse on development of the outback regions.

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