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## GRAZIERS, POST-GRADUATE STUDENTS AND LAND MANAGEMENT IN SEMI-ARID NSW: THE EXPERIENCE OF A DECADE OF INTERACTIVE TEACHING FIELD TRIPS

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Understanding the challenges facing land managers in the rangelands of New South Wales is the primary objective of 'Semi-arid Land Management', a unit of study we run in the postgraduate Environmental Management coursework program at Macquarie University. Teaching about land management in remote, regional and rural Australia to urban dwelling students is unrealistic without talking to the land managers themselves. So we take the students out of their comfort zone and put them literally face-to-face with the land and its people, allowing them to re-examine their preconceptions with the help of those who live and work there. At the same time the graziers are confronted with the views of those who judge them and the landscape, carrying with them romantic notions of the Outback mixed up with book-learnt knowledge of a century of land degradation.



Grazier Mark Etheridge talking with students about the Total Grazing Pressure enclosure erected on his property *Kalyanka*, near Wilcannia, NSW.

The core of the unit is a six day field trip to the White Cliffs – Wilcannia area of western NSW. Each day, we travel with the landholders, see something of the landscape and the property management, and talk with them about what they do and why. Student assessment is via an oral presentation out in the paddock in front of the landholder, an integrative report on land management, and an essay in which the students discuss how their perceptions of semi-arid NSW have changed as a result of the field trip. Here, we present excerpts from these essays and graziers' views of their interactions with the students which demonstrate the success of this interactive model of teaching and learning in broadening knowledge and dispelling misconceptions. At the end of the trip students, the likely agency policy-makers of tomorrow, have a deeper understanding of those challenges, and the graziers have had their voices heard. We believe the end result is a more sustainable future for both the land and its people.

### ON DROUGHT:

*... [lack of] soil moisture for pasture, rather than water to drink, was really brought home by the number of dead animals at water points. Now I understand what is meant by 'pasture drought' ... Animals don't die of thirst – they starve to death ... (Gabrielle van Willigen, 2003)*

*...some government policies such as Exceptional Circumstances do not reward or assist those farmers that manage properties effectively...environmentally sustainable management practices are not promoted ... (Rachel Crewe, 2003)*

### ON THE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF RANGELANDS GRAZING:

*[Given] considerable capital expenditure, low land values, and persistent negative returns from sheep grazing, the economic merit of grazing is questionable ... (Kim Whillock, 2003, accountant and daughter of a grazier!).*

## ON THE MANY AND VARIED ROLES OF WOMEN IN THE RANGELANDS:



Annette Turner from *Polpah*, near White Cliffs, NSW, explaining the challenges of raising three children whilst running a grazing property

*... wife, mother, teacher, emergency nurse, stock hand, accountant, small business manager, family counsellor, industry spokesperson, community leader, pig shooter, sheep butcher, horticulturalist, social secretary ... (Deb Young, 2003)*

*Aside from [their role in] the family unit, ... women like Annette Turner are the backbone of community welfare ... she inspired all the students with her involvement in employment schemes for local residents of White Cliffs ... (Rachel, Crewe, 2003)*

### **SO, WHY DO THEY (THE GRAZIERS) DO IT (THE GRAZING)??**

*... it's part of my culture ... (Barry Turner, Polpah)*

*... beautiful country, nice people, being ultimately responsible for how the land is managed ... (Mark Etheridge, Kalyanka)*

### **AND WHAT DO THE GRAZIERS GET OUT OF THIS TIME SPENT WITH ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT STUDENTS?**

*"I ... have an obligation to help people understand this country and how it is being managed. By discussing our approaches, hopefully we open the way to more appropriate management ... (Mark Etheridge, Kalyanka)*

*Our three children ... need[ed] to have a balanced view [of environmental issues]. They needed to rub shoulders with people who had ... a passion as far as environmental issues go ... [and] it has opened the door to a network of professionals always ready to answer questions, offer advice, and support us in our efforts ... (Annette Turner, Polpah)*

*We actually look forward to sharing our knowledge with the students. In return we have become very much more aware of our surrounding landscape and, where possible, have made changes to protect it. Through this connection we have become even more convinced that by giving and taking on both sides, productive grazing and environmental conservation can co-exist ... (Virginia Angell, Mt Jack)*

### **IS THIS A SUCCESSFUL MODEL FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING ABOUT THE RANGELANDS?**

If the responses of both the students and the graziers are any indication, then the answer is a resounding 'Yes!' Our current students consistently give the unit and its teaching very high ratings, and tell us (and other students) how much they enjoyed the unit and how much they learnt. Our graduates report that they are applying in the workplace what they learnt about the intricate social, political, economic and historical linkages of NRM in the rangelands. Although it can be inconvenient to them, the graziers keep inviting us back. They encourage us and our colleagues to do research on their properties, and through them, other graziers have asked us to visit their properties. And they have agreed to us talking about them at this conference of the Australian Rangelands Society: no better endorsement than that!