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The Australian Rangeland Society

THE DESERT UPLANDS COMMITTEE

R. Adams and M. House

Desert Uplands Committee, PO Box 310, Barcaldine, QLD, 4725

Email: stratford01@bigpond.com

INTRODUCTION

In the past fifteen years, the Desert Uplands Committee, as a strong, progressive grass roots group, has initiated and implemented innovative on-ground projects, region-specific research and many, large scale, well targeted programs that have substantially addressed the many economic, environmental and social issues that were constraining the region and its landholders. This paper briefly outlines its history and progress, as an illustrative example of what a collective committed group can achieve.

CONCEPTION

Two decades ago, the Desert Uplands was a 'forgotten region', the back end of seven shires in central Queensland, regarded as inferior and fairly worthless by many. On the mostly cattle grazing properties, lots of the men worked off-farm to support their families and were away for sometimes weeks on end while the wife, and often fairly young children, kept the properties going. Young children were driving vehicles including trucks around the properties, and doing the work of adults. The population was generally younger than average. Many lived in poverty yet, as is often born of tough circumstances, they were very hardworking, multi-skilled, possessed initiative and creativity.

Two locals, Lesley Marshall and Margaret House recognized how unique their region and properties were, and wanted to work together with the community to gain recognition for the Desert Uplands Bioregion, to introduce research into the area so as to improve landholders' decisions and management, and thereby increase the viability and sustainability of these enterprises, and the region.

The formation of the Desert Uplands Committee began in 1994 when the Aramac LandCare group applied to extend a scheme initiated by the South West Strategy, the Mulga Land Degradation Voluntary Property Build-up Scheme, to the Desert Uplands region. So, in 1995, the Desert Uplands Build-up and Development Committee was established. Its role was and is to address economic, environmental and social issues, borne out of characteristics unique to the Desert Uplands Bioregion.

Back in the early nineties, Margaret House remembers when a neighbour was going off shearing or mustering all week, then coming home on weekends and going out roo shooting all night. He often had the kids on the back of the vehicle all night, curled up with the roo carcasses to keep warm, as it was the only time they would get to spend time with him. Margaret remembers a DPI economist in Longreach at the time, saying that he would love to put some of the Desert people on good Downs blocks to see what they would achieve, because they could do with \$2 what it took a much better off Downs owner \$100 to do. Yet, when we asked for more research dollars to be spent in the Desert back in the early 1990's, we were told it not possible because \$100 spent on the Mitchell Grass Downs gave \$120 in improved economic performance, while it might only give \$20 in improved performance in the Desert country. Such was the thinking of the day.

The Desert Uplands Committee is now one of the longest running regional strategy groups in Queensland, consulting extensively with the wider rangeland community and public authorities. Its well developed strategies have improved the viability of enterprises and hence communities, and the sustainability of land use within the Desert Uplands region. The Committee consists of active local landholders and key empathetic community and agency members. It initiates and coordinates region-specific research projects,

prepares submissions for funding which are then devolved on-ground through targeted projects, and provides information to assist landholders in their property management.

THE REGION

The Desert Uplands region covers some 75,000 square kilometers of outback Queensland. The region extends to the north of the Flinders Highway near Torrens Creek whilst the southern boundary is approximately 50 km North West of Tambo. The area is bounded by a line from Blackall to Hughenden through Barcaldine in the west and the Belyando River in the east. Towns within the Desert Uplands are Barcaldine, Jericho, Alpha, Hughenden, Prairie, Torrens Creek, Pentland, Aramac, and Muttaborra, all on the edge of the region. Internally, there are no towns, or bitumen sealed highways, to date.

The term 'desert' is used to describe the bioregion because of the abundance of spinifex, a hardy, spiny-leaved tussock forming grass common to the drier inland areas of Australia and the predominant red colored soils, along with the semi-arid climate. Although the soils are sandy, the area is well covered with native trees, shrubs and grasses, unlike the traditional view of a desert comprising loose, slow moving sand dunes. Seventy percent of the region is remnant vegetation. The red earths of the Desert Uplands are morphologically and chemically similar to the soils of the well known mulga lands. Straddling the Great Dividing Range, this elevated landscape has created unique internally draining lakes and is the headwaters of two major catchments, the Burdekin and Lake Eyre Basins that almost split the region in half, north-south. Sandstone ranges and sand and clay plains dominate, with Mitchell grasslands in the west and narrow patches of Brigalow in the east. To the north the region abuts granite ranges and basalt tablelands. To the south the sandstone continues into the Carnarvon Ranges.

The Desert Uplands region is home to a number of rare and threatened fauna and flora species as identified after *the Nature Conservation (Wildlife) Regulation 1994*, such as the Edgbaston Goby (*Chlamydogobius squamigenus*). This species of fish is found only in the Desert Uplands, approximately 30km north-east of Aramac in the Edgbaston Springs.

Approximately 6 000 people reside within the Desert Uplands, living and working on pastoral properties and towns within the region. The predominant primary industry is cattle grazing, with smaller areas of mining, and conservation. Since 2000 the estimated value of agricultural land in the Desert Uplands region has increased by approximately three times whilst liabilities have increased by approximately 2.3 times. Close to 1 200 individual land parcels have been identified in the Desert Uplands region. These are amalgamated into about approximately 320 properties, with an average size of between 20,000 and 25,000 ha. The median property size is 13,300 to 18,900 ha.

GREAT PROJECTS

In 1998 the Desert Uplands Committee introduced the Enterprise Reconstruction Program which aimed to increase the viability of those pastoral enterprises that had the capacity for long-term economic and sustainable resource use. This was achieved by providing financial assistance for property build-up, on-property development, capital restructuring, partnership arrangements and enterprise succession (to a total of \$30,000 per year over a maximum of 3 years per enterprise).

In 1999 the Desert Uplands Committee identified the need for detailed land resource information at a scale that relates to individual properties (i.e. 1:100000) as there was very little mapping and soils information, such that is necessary for planning and implementing management practices required for sustainable land uses. Hence the DUSLRA (Desert Uplands Strategic Land Assessment) Project which collated the data of previous surveys and together with remote sensing techniques and air-photo interpretation identified and mapped individual soil-vegetation associations. Extensive field work over three years provided the data on soils and vegetation to assess the limitations, capabilities, biodiversity and condition of each land type. This data has been entered onto a database to allow summaries of all of the different land types to be

linked to GIS maps. The DUSLRA project was completed and launched in November 2003, and updated in 2005. This information has proven to be an invaluable management tool for land managers and is available on CD from the Desert Uplands office.

Developed in 1999 by the Desert Uplands Committee to raise the biodiversity values of the area is the 'Advancing On-Ground Nature Conservation' Project. This project provides catalytic funds to landholders for on-ground works that will actively protect, restore or assist with better land management of native vegetation and waterways, and enhance available habitats. On-ground projects include the treatment of weed infestations, fencing of natural springs and riparian areas, fencing of different soils types to allow improved stock management and additional watering points to spread grazing pressure throughout paddocks. From 1999 to 2007, 110 projects have been funded which equates to approximately \$1.2 million being spent on ground with the region. Landholders contribute at least 50 % of the project costs with the average being around 60%. In monetary values this equates to over \$3 million being spent on conservation related projects in the Desert Uplands within the last eight years.

The Desert Uplands has also been very successful in running on-ground works through the National LandCare Program (NLP) and Envirofund. A total of 37 projects have been successfully funded, with \$765,000 being devolved to landholders.

All this equates to over 35% of landholders in the Desert Uplands bioregion having applied to participate in conservation projects with the Desert Uplands since 1999. During this time the Desert Uplands has managed a total of 147 on-ground projects and devolved nearly \$2 million. Including landholder contributions, there has been \$4.2 million spent in conservation work throughout the region.

ACHIEVEMENTS

More recently, in the southern Desert Uplands, the Landscape Linkages Project has used a tender based approach to reward land managers by paying them to maintain or improve country on their properties, to keep it in good condition, providing benefits to both land managers and the natural environment. Also known as MBI –market based incentive, this is the first trial of an environmental stewardship program in central western Queensland. It has proven to be very palatable to landholders as they determine what areas they offer and what they get paid to provide these environmental services to the greater public.

Landscape Linkages builds on a pilot project conducted in 2004-2005 funded by National Action Plan for Salinity and Water (NAPSWQ) to develop a conceptual design for a MBI bidding process to deliver landscape connection of good quality biodiversity habitat across the southern Desert Uplands. Landscape Linkages aims to protect remnant vegetation and areas of biodiversity significance, with tendered areas being managed to maintain specified levels of condition, contribute towards biodiversity attributes and improved land condition.

After three bidding rounds the DUC was able to fund fifteen two year management agreements to maintain or improve land conditions over 85,207 ha of land, just over half of the total offered. A high diversity of country was offered from open woodlands to range country, with a variety of Endangered, Of Concern and Not of Concern vegetation types. Visits to the successful properties were undertaken at end of dry October 2007 and will be again at end of dry October 2008 where photos and grass weights are taken as part of the Landscape Linkages agreement. These grass samples are then dried and weighed with the results being collated and compared with previous years to establish if the vegetation coverage has either been maintained or improved. So far, over all of the fifteen properties involved, the grass weights have improved by 66%.

The Committee has also conducted a Social Research project (SEO3) and two Monitoring and Evaluation surveys which were completed by land managers in the region. The SEO3 set out to find what factors

influence the land management decision making of land holders in the Desert Uplands. While to outsiders some decisions seem simple this is usually not the case and the complexity of decision making can be attributed to a number of factors including time, labour, finance, experience, local knowledge and the uncertainty of 'what if' scenarios. It was found that landholders are familiar with recognised 'best' natural resource management. However, this stated knowledge can be over-ridden when making decisions about natural resources, such as in times of severe drought, and in some cases these decisions have resulted in detrimental effects to natural resources, and this was acknowledged by graziers. They also acknowledge the role of field days as useful events for increasing awareness of natural resource issues, information exchange amongst peers and practical demonstrations that have in a number of cases been identified as the trigger for action to change.

Other projects that have been delivered include Property Management Planning, Strategic Weed Control funded by Blue Print for the Bush, and Long Term Carrying Capacity Projects. Throughout the year, the Desert Uplands Committee actively builds the capacity of landholders by organizing workshops and field days, often using properties as demonstrative sites and facilitating networking and mentoring opportunities vital to such a dispersed population.

GRASS ROOT STRENGTH FOR TODAY AND TOMORROW

The Desert Uplands Committee is a strongly focused organization which has successfully and continuously engaged with the broader rangeland community. It has evolved during since its birth in 1995 achieving its initial principle aims of recognition and respect for the unique bioregion and its enterprises, and getting critical research happening that was region specific. The DUC will continue to build the sustainability of its land, landholders and the community through strategic and targeted programs. Often innovative, always progressive, sometimes in the face of adversity & controversy, but always producing results and working for the region with its active grassroots members, that is the Desert Uplands Build Up and Development Committee.