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CHANGE IN AUSTRALIA'S RANGELANDS: IS THERE NEED FOR A NATIONAL APPROACH?

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ABSTRACT

During the 1990s the Commonwealth worked cooperatively with State and Territory governments, traditional owners, industry, the farming community and conservation groups towards a national rangeland strategy. This provided the framework for the Australian Collaborative Rangelands Information System (ACRIS). The ACRIS report, *Rangelands 2008 – Taking the Pulse*, provides the necessary information for addressing biophysical and socio-economic science and information gaps, and gives renewed impetus to revisit rangelands issues and management practices, as specified in the 1999 *National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management*.

INTRODUCTION

Implicit in much of the ACRIS 2008 report is the need for policy and policy coherence, across all levels of Australian government and administration, to accommodate accelerating change and increasing diversity in rangelands economic and social activity. The report provides a sound scientific and technical basis upon which to inform current decisions and to open up a broader discussion about future approaches and policy issues for the sustainable management of Australia's rangelands.

The obvious next question is, does Australia, in view of the evidence presented by the ACRIS, need a national rangelands policy framework? We can start to answer the question by broadly presenting the context in which a policy discussion could be contemplated by the national government. This is based on brief analysis of key players, review of the history of Commonwealth involvement in rangelands policy, evidence presented by the 2008 ACRIS report and some final thoughts on whether the current mix of policies affecting the rangelands can meet future policy challenges.

THE NEED FOR EVIDENCE TO INFORM COMPLEX POLICY DISCUSSIONS

A recent article in "The Australian Journal of Public Administration" suggested that systematic research, or evidence, is now integral in policy development, program evaluation and program improvement in public management and administration. The Australian Government and Public Service has not been immune from this ground swell of interest in evidence-based policy, which is based very clearly on delivering efficiency and effectiveness in public policy and answering key questions such as 'what works'?, and what the result is when policies and programs change (Head, 2008).

Providing the evidence for policy change, continuation, or indeed new policy can be, with sustainable management of natural resources, about as difficult as it gets. Ecosystems do not speak our language but they do leave subtle hints of stress and degradation for those with the skills, capacity and willingness to pick them up. But, at the very least, most of us recognize that all aspects of our society and economy, to differing degrees, depend on maintenance of a healthy environment and wise and sustainable use of our natural resources. Public perception, usually shaped by powerful lobby groups and influential media comment, can frequently take over at this point, pushing public policy towards decisions, which, with the benefit of hindsight, might have been better with the support of science-based information and data systems.

That policymakers have not used science to its full potential in the past is not too surprising. After all, our focus, as a nation, on environment and natural resources management issues is little more than a generation old. There is not a large historical body of biophysical and socio-economic data to draw upon in decision-making, and often the conclusions from scientific data are conflicting, or at least, ambiguous. However, governments are still accused of being re-active and piecemeal in using the

good science we have. Such accusations make a good case for investing more strategically in our scientific resources and consolidating scientific information into systems and databases that can be made readily available to everyone.

It is not hyperbole to suggest that the Australian Collaborative Rangelands Information System has been a pacesetter in delivering accessible data-based, scientifically validated information about Australia's rangelands to a public audience. From a policy perspective the 2008 ACRIS report has been just as valuable in highlighting what we don't know about changes in the rangelands as it has been in confirming long-held assumptions. For example, *Rangelands 2008 – Taking the Pulse* demonstrates we have the capacity to identify management-induced changes in landscape function and critical stock forage through the filter of seasonal condition. This provides a powerful tool for policy and program managers to more precisely target their interventions. Conversely, lack of comprehensive data constrains our ability to specify trends in biodiversity at the landscape scale or in landholder adoption of sustainable management practices. This inevitably means that our responses to these issues are guided mainly by supposition and opinion. But, while high-quality scientific information such as that provided by ACRIS can inform policy, it does not *predetermine* policy.

Science, politics, policy and practice

Science gives policymakers the empirical analysis and evidence to support their work but policy decisions also come from politics, debate and contestable analyses, which often overlay and partly conceal empirical evidence. At the end point of a policy dialogue, policymakers are bound to make a judgement drawn from the interplay between a diverse array of contestable evidence, including that based on solid science. It is probably true that good science, in today's world of greater efficiency in government, gives policymakers a head start, but it is rarely enough to enable them to create sound policy on that basis alone.

Those with a deep and well articulated political knowledge and those knowledgeable about matters of practical implementation are equal contestants in this competition. As Head (2008) suggests, the former group is skilful in initiating or adjusting strategies and tactics, putting together agendas, prioritising, persuading and advocating. They can build coalitions of support and negotiate trade-offs and compromises. They know how to use the media and can harness a selection of supportive 'facts' to support an argument, approach or campaign. The latter group draw strength from their years of practical professional wisdom. They might not be as well-connected as other groups in the race for policy favours and their skills and experiences can sometimes be undervalued. They can be sceptical of best practice guidelines and bureaucratic rules and protocols handed down from on high, but policymakers know their judgements and final decisions will have little impact without the input and cooperation of this group. Communicating comprehensible and accessible science to these sectors might be frustrating to most scientists involved in natural resource management but it is of critical importance to the sustainable future of Australia's natural resources. That the ACRIS has been able to do this for an area of no less than eighty one percent of the Australian landmass is, indeed, extraordinary.

WHAT HAPPENS NOW? OPENING A NATIONAL DISCUSSION ON POLICY ISSUES

For national policymakers currently working in the area, the 2008 ACRIS report could enable a rangelands policy discussion to start on an equal footing with political or managerial imperatives, because it has the capacity to satisfy the public's thirst for knowledge and improve community capacity for evidence-based debate about nationally significant environmental and sustainable use issues.

Of course, we first need to ask why or whether we need to have this discussion at all. Policy discussions presuppose existence of a problem, that there is something wrong with the way Australia is managing rangelands natural resources or that there has been policy failure.

It is useful at this point to reflect on a body of work that was carried out in the 1990s. During this decade the Commonwealth worked cooperatively with State and Territory governments, traditional

owners, industry, the farming community and conservation groups towards a national rangeland strategy - presumably because policymakers at the time sensed, or had hard evidence about decline in the quality of rangeland ecosystems. The 1994 "Rangelands Issues Paper" stated that almost "...all the industries and communities based on the rangelands are heavily reliant on available natural resources for survival and prosperity, which raises the issue of whether rangelands are being managed in an ecologically sustainable way".

The result of this decade-long discussion was production, in 1999, of the "*National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management*". In its executive summary it was rather less equivocal about the condition of the rangelands, stating simply that past "...management practices have led to significant areas of the rangelands being degraded calling into question their long-term sustainability under current uses". It went on to say that the *National Principles and Guidelines* would "...establish a framework of those with interest in the rangelands to develop strategies and actions to manage change and ensure a viable legacy for future generations". And indeed, over the succeeding years, the *National Principles and Guidelines* provided a framework for reporting and understanding change leading to improved management outcomes, which became the ACRIS, and identified the need for regional planning in managing rangeland's natural resources. But there were clear gaps in knowledge; the paucity of solid scientific evidence to support changes to management practices advocated at the time was sometimes cited as a major limitation of the *National Principles and Guidelines*.

Following on from the *National Principles and Guidelines*, the National Land and Water Resources Audit produced *Rangelands – Tracking Changes* (NLWRA, 2001), which defined the elements of a comprehensive monitoring and reporting program as well as defining the scope and structural arrangements for the ACRIS. The ACRIS gained momentum through initially testing its capacity to report change for five focus questions across five pilot regions (see <http://www.environment.gov.au/land/management/rangelands/acris/index.html>).

Now, in 2008, the ACRIS report takes us further down the pathway for addressing science and information gaps and provides renewed impetus to revisit rangelands issues and management practices articulated in the *National Principles and Guidelines*. Uniquely, the ACRIS provides information on *change*, as opposed to *state* in rangeland natural resource condition at a scale that is useful to those needing to develop a response to current and emerging issues. These users include national, state and territory and local governments, regional NRM organisations, and local community groups. While the ACRIS is not yet able to serve every user group, its report is a very significant step towards providing information required to support government legislative and policy initiatives in the rangelands. For the first time, those concerned with rangeland policy can move on from vague generalisations about sustainability to evidence-based policy founded on technically sophisticated assessment methods, bioregion by bioregion.

MANAGING CHANGE: IS THERE A NEED FOR A NATIONAL RANGELANDS POLICY FRAMEWORK?

Change is the consistent theme running through the 2008 ACRIS report and there is little doubt that the pace of this change has gradually accelerated since the 1990s when the condition of the rangelands first emerged on national policy agendas. Changes highlighted in the report include grazing and/or agricultural intensification in some bioregions, declines in rangeland biodiversity and changes in land tenure arrangements.

The rangelands are a major contributor to the Australian economy and economic activity is conducted in an environment where rainfall variability is a major driver of change in the natural condition of the land. In different regions and at different times, other natural and human pressures act to drive change – inappropriate fire regimes, the spread of weeds, unsustainable grazing pressure sometimes exacerbated by unmanaged populations of kangaroos and feral herbivores, and water extraction and diversions. Despite these pressures, much of the rangelands, with their characteristically infertile soils, still contain relatively intact ecosystems worthy of conservation. Add to this mix significant

recent evolution in indigenous policy and major (often taxpayer assisted) land acquisitions by environmental NGOs, philanthropic organisations and indigenous communities, primarily for biodiversity conservation, and the time seems apposite to commence a discussion.

It would seem natural and logical that the scope of any ensuing policy discussion would include (but not be necessarily bound by) sustainability and 'best practice' issues related to pastoralism and agriculture, indigenous interests and aspirations, governance and institutional arrangements, water, outback tourism, biodiversity conservation, and major emerging national policy issues with implications for the rangelands, such as water resource use and global warming. It is in the course of any such conversation, now with the luxury of hard evidence to support it, that policy successes and failures are revealed.

Against this background, and looking further ahead, a national rangelands policy could potentially provide a flexible, cooperative and adaptable high level intergovernmental framework to deliver real and cost-effective gains in rangelands productivity, sustainability and conservation. Would a discrete rangelands policy deliver more or better outcomes for the rangelands than the current national policy mix? It is possible (but by no means certain at this early stage) that the type of flexible framework suggested above could be an important key to opening the way for better integration of existing policies into rangeland specific settings. For example, such a policy could use the ACRIS interpretation of trends in landscape function and stock forage, relative to regional seasonal quality, as the trigger for access to existing national policy on incentives for environmental protection and biodiversity conservation. It could also be argued that the kind of inter-jurisdictional cooperation and collaboration exemplified by the ACRIS could be translated into the policy field and that, with an overarching policy framework, the rangelands would not be neglected as major national policy issues, particularly climate change and water, begin to gather momentum over the next few years.

CONCLUSION

Evidence-based policy is a reality of modern government and administration. Science and hard scientific evidence and information, by itself, is not sufficient to win a policy debate, which will usually be highly contested between the scientists and those adept in the art of politics and practice on the ground. However, good biophysical and socio-economic science and information can give the policymaker a significant start in preparing the groundwork for policy discussion. The ACRIS is one such body of information and it breaks new ground in our understanding of the eighty one percent of Australia classified as rangeland. It provides the impetus to revisit many of the assumptions policymakers have previously held about the rangelands, to reveal and assess previous policy successes and failures and to open up a discussion on rangeland policy issues. In time, continued provision of information by the ACRIS can support a flexible, cooperative national policy framework to guide, cohere and better integrate existing national and sub-national policies into rangelands settings.

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