



Northern Australian Indigenous producer group progress, learnings and contributions

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Abstract

This paper tells a story of engagement, respect, learning and hope. Indigenous involvement with the northern cattle industry has been a foundation element since the industry began to operate on indigenous land, over 150 years ago. That involvement has seen many changes and this project represents a change towards improved indigenous engagement with research and extension, with industry movement towards sustainability and with a two-way approach to developing ways to live in this landscape while meeting environmental, social, cultural and financial aspirations. Engagement with elders, time on country, time for yarning combined with a joint exploration of the collection, analysis and use of data, along with listening to experience both in livestock and land management and care have combined to present pathways and tracks to follow.

Indigenous businesses in this context are largely community owned and operate on community held land. Aspirations for the businesses and for the land differ from the conventional Australian cattle enterprise either family run or large corporate agribusinesses. Employment, caring for country, social and cultural access are important drivers for indigenous land owners and business operators. Profit, efficiency, and asset accumulation are some of the major drivers for non-indigenous cattle enterprise operators. All operators however, have in common the requirement and the desire to care for the natural resource, the livestock and the people and to be productive and profitable. The potential has always existed to work together to create and develop appropriate land management and care approaches.

This project is taking important steps towards integrating indigenous and non-indigenous aspirations and providing learnings for the Australian cattle industry as a whole.

Introduction

Indigenous communities and corporations throughout northern Australia own over 5 million hectares, run over 300,000 head of cattle and employ more than 200 people in the cattle industry. The total footprint of the Indigenous Agricultural sector is estimated at 8.1 million hectares and includes land in every state and the Northern Territory (Barnett 2022). The northern indigenous cattle holdings are on par with the large Agribusiness corporations which have been involved in the Australian cattle industry for over 100 years. Indigenous people have been involved in the Northern Pastoral Industry from its beginning in the mid nineteenth century (Duncan-Kemp 1934). This involvement, from the start has engaged men and women and each are recognised as superb stock handlers and managers. (Simone 2016). However, for much of the last 100 years indigenous pastoral workers and businesses have not been engaged with industry research and extension in any meaningful way, nor have indigenous cattle and land owners and managers been involved in

development of industry level strategy, policy or direction (Barnett 2022). Research and extension services, originally provided by state governments, now largely provided by industry bodies, universities and private consultants have been readily available and accessible to non-indigenous producers and have shaped many changes throughout the industry. The lack of engagement of indigenous producers and industry participants is apparent at any cattleman's meeting or workshop throughout northern Australia and at any interaction between industry and government. The level of indigenous employment has significantly declined over the past 50 years (Josif 2009). This results in a two-way loss. Indigenous pastoral workers and managers miss opportunities for employment and to engage with developments in research, technology and management and the industry does not have the opportunity to benefit from indigenous knowledge and experience in land management. Indigenous knowledge has a crucial role to play as the industry develops appropriate responses to the challenges it is facing. Engagement with research and extension and with the broader industry by indigenous cattlemen and women, communities and corporations will be crucial for the industry and for indigenous participants.

The Australian cattle industry faces a period of significant change as resource degradation becomes apparent, the impacts of climate change begin to have an effect and the wider world places more responsibility on land managers to ensure practices are sustainable and now, regenerative. The northern beef industry also faces considerable issues of low productivity and low profitability (McCosker 2010, McGowan 2017). Industry research in 2020 concluded that "poor adoption of production technologies or practice change on farm has been a long standing industry issue" (Fitzpatrick 2020 p. 6.). The Northern Beef Breeding Project was initiated with the aim of addressing the issues of productivity and practice change. The project aims to use peer to peer learning techniques to "engage northern beef producers in the use of objective data to inform business decisions and provide a direct conduit for research and development outcomes to changes in business practice" (Fitzpatrick 2020 p. 3.). This project has taken important steps to encourage, enable and facilitate indigenous participation and two-way learning.

The indigenous component of the Northern Beef Breeding Business project is a joint venture initiative with support from Meat and Livestock Australia (MLA), Indigenous Land and Sea Corporation (ILSC) and Animal Health Australia (AHA) under the Northern Breeding Business (NB2) project framework.

Methods

The project is currently working with twelve indigenous businesses. These businesses manage over 4 million hectares, run around 150,000 head and employ 70 indigenous people.

The project was initiated through personal contact and on property visits with indigenous communities and corporations managing land and operating cattle enterprises. Engagement with elders has been an important aspect of the project from the beginning and has been crucial to ongoing engagement. Most of the indigenous enterprises involved in the project are managed by community owned indigenous corporations. These corporations each have a board of community members which is responsible for strategic decision making. Group membership is diverse and includes board members, station managers, station staff and agricultural advisors.

The NB2 project places emphasis on facilitator training and on building trust within each group. All project facilitators have access to a mentor and the other project facilitators to discuss group progress, to learn from each other and to exchange ideas and experience. The indigenous component of the project utilises facilitation, communication and training processes tailored to suit indigenous property managers, communities and pastoral workers. The process is based around "on country" residential style workshops, peer to peer learning and exchange, specialist input, individual property work and ongoing mentoring. There is a strong focus on member participation, ownership and engagement. The focus is set by group members and the process follows directions established through participatory group input. Four to five workshops are conducted each year. These workshops are based on land operated by group members and involve land and livestock-based activities

as well as meeting room sessions. Participants are accommodated together and share meals and informal time, so there is time for stories and yarning, getting to know each other and exchanging ideas and knowledge.

The broader project aims of engaging beef producers with objective data and using this to change business practice are met through engagement with specialist input and communicated through shared group experience. Meetings allow for one on one information exchange as well as group interaction. Group members are at varying levels of management intensification and are engaged with different aspects of land management. There are opportunities for all group members to learn from and benefit through contact with all other group members.

Indigenous group activities are integrated with the broader NB2 project which exposes participants to other aspects of the cattle industry and people from a range of backgrounds. These contacts enable the building of a range of networks across the spectrum of the cattle industry and facilitate a two-way cross fertilisation of ideas, experience and knowledge across groups and across the industry.

Results

Engagement with the process, with other group members and with industry personnel is a highlight of the group activities. Indigenous pastoral workers, land owners and managers have demonstrated a hunger for information and for engagement with the wider cattle industry. Group members have been operating businesses for some time and have been aware of other indigenous cattle enterprises but often have not made contact or worked together and have largely not engaged with the broader industry. These meetings and workshops have provided welcome opportunities for people separated by large distances to meet, yarn and share experiences, knowledge and information.

The project has been operating for four years and members have attended at least four meetings/workshops each year. Awareness of the importance of data, of collecting good data, collating and analysing the data and using the results for development of strategic management interventions has grown. Members are now ready to use data management templates developed by the project throughout their businesses. Opportunities to learn about research and technological developments have been embraced by group members as has the opportunity to meet with and discuss common issues with non-indigenous industry members.

Group meetings and workshops are designed to encourage a cross flow of information, experience and knowledge and this is leading to practice change. A number of strategic and operational management interventions have been implemented by group members. These include improving reproductive efficiency, changing turnoff strategies, infrastructure improvements and an increased focus on supplementation.

An important aspect of the project is the use of mentoring both formal and informal. Group membership is highly diverse in terms of expertise, experience, knowledge and aspirations. The businesses range from large scale beef breeding enterprises to smaller beef businesses, enterprises with a focus on managing for environmental outcomes such as carbon sequestration and savannah burning, cultural tourism and indigenous ranger programmes. The open, participatory nature of meetings means that all members are able to contribute to discussions and there is always something to learn.

Elder members of the group have gravitated towards mentoring roles and this is actively facilitated. In addition to the group workshops and meetings group members conduct property visits, knowledge exchange and management support covering a variety of topics. The group has a natural focus on bringing all members along and the structure of the project enables this.

The broader NB2 project has developed a number of tools to enable and facilitate data collection, analysis and management. Specialists are invited to group meetings and regularly conduct training sessions focussed on data management, reproductive efficiency, pasture and grazing management and business management. The degree of literacy on these topics has improved markedly through the life of the project.

As the project progresses group members aim to broaden the focus to incorporate broader aspects of land management and include multi-functional approaches such as land management for environmental, cultural and social outcomes. This will open opportunities for two-way information flow and co-design and will provide opportunities for employment, training and income diversification.

Discussion

The project has built significant social capital within the group and with industry members engaged with the group. A combination of time spent on country, formal and informal time spent together and a generosity of spirit on behalf of land owners and custodians has enabled the development of group cohesion and trust. To provide an example of co-design, the principles of operation of this group, a group of indigenous cattlemen and women, have been developed by the group. This, in turn, has facilitated an open approach to the application of knowledge, research results and advice and is enabling practice change. The building of trust and group cohesion has been a crucial first step and this takes time, yarnning, shared meals, sharing and respect.

Indigenous pastoral workers, land owners and managers have much in common with their non-indigenous counterparts but also have significant differences. Indigenous landowners and business operators have different aims and aspirations to non-indigenous landowners and business operators and operate under a different land tenure/land ownership framework (Barnett 2022).

The beef cattle industry in Australia, like many primary industries is continually facing pressure on costs and the industry, particularly the non-indigenous sector is focussed on using technology to reduce labour and resource use costs. Two of the most important aims of indigenous communities engaged with the cattle industry are employment and training. Improved engagement of indigenous pastoral workers, land owners and managers with the broader industry and participation in industry events and activities may deliver positive outcomes in terms of stable employment and staffing levels and opportunities for indigenous and non-indigenous industry participants. For this to become reality indigenous and non-indigenous industry members must continue to engage in dialogue and create frameworks for meaningful discussion.

Group members are also considering other, innovative aspects of land management which may provide opportunities for employment, training, income diversification and engagement with non-indigenous land managers. These include landscape management for environmental outcomes such as carbon sequestration, biodiversity conservation and regeneration and will come into focus as the group continues to grow. In many cases these enterprises and activities will be more important than the operation of a cattle enterprise on the land. These aspects of land management and enterprise operation will also benefit from two-way discussion, listening and learning and may involve increased engagement with the emerging environmental management sector and potentially provide direction for the broader cattle and land management industries.

Many people involved in land management in Australia, indigenous and non-indigenous have seen a future where indigenous and non-indigenous, scientific and experiential, community driven and corporate ways of managing land are combined to create land management approaches that are multi-functional and appropriate for this landscape and will care for the country and the people into the long term (Massey 2017). There are those also, who say that this possibility provides real cause for optimism for the future of the planet (Tacey 1995). "If we are to make changes of this kind, we need to talk with the whole country about it" (Gammage 2021 p. 183.).

For these dreams to become reality there is a requirement for dialogue, for sharing, listening and the creation of opportunities to move forward together.

This project with the support of MLA, ILSC and AHA has taken steps towards developing a framework for working together for the long-term benefit of indigenous cattlemen and communities and for the broader Australian cattle industry.

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