



Where will we be in 20 years?

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Abstract

While we are local to our neighbours, very central to major cities, we are very remote from the politicians and decision makers, always a challenge to have our perspective heard, I reckon in 20 years that will change.

The year is 2045. This paper explores the author's insights looking forward into the future, revealing both key aspirations for Australia's rangeland communities and potential roadblocks. For pastoral Australia to thrive in the future, management based on landscape needs will be the norm. There will be greater populace and regional economic developments in our rangeland communities. The term remote will become a thing of the past, and national affections for the rangelands will be regarded highly by all stakeholders. Failure to reach these goals will be to the detriment of the rangelands and its people.

Introduction

We live in Far Western NSW, between Wentworth and Broken Hill, on the Anabranh River. With the combination of river floodplains and undulating sandy rises, there is naturally a lot of diversity in our landscape on our 31, 000 ha property that we manage. Diverse landscapes can be found across the rangelands of NSW, and indeed across all of Australia. The way we manage our landscapes is underpinned by our awareness of ecological health and biodiversity. Something as targeted as managing for increased ground cover or adjusting stock numbers according to seasonal conditions can go a long way for sustainable management of the land (Soils For Life 2024). Importantly, diverse landscapes should be respected and appreciated, as diversity is strength and ensures resilience, of which is so important in our variable climate.

The following paper is based on the author's own opinion of 2045, as seen from the perspective of an Australian pastoralist. Current realities are firstly addressed, followed by what '20 years from now' might look like with aspirational change.

Current Situation

Although Australia's rangeland area is vast, the proportion of Australia's population residing in the rangelands is low, around 2% (Nielsen et al. 2020). This provides a huge challenge for the rangelands, with limited capacity to care for our rangelands and support and endorse healthy rangelands. Looking 20 years into the future, one can't help but consider the changes needed to secure a prosperous future for Australia's rangelands communities.

Some see the opportunities of renewable energy as providing a secure future of rangeland populations, unfortunately we haven't learnt how to value the land when building energy infrastructure. Others see the best option for the future as being large areas turned into National Parks, this decision comes with its own problems of shifting increased costs onto existing land owners, biosecurity, pest plants and animals as well as increasing fire risk, potentially risking biodiversity.

There is very little knowledge about rangelands and their management in the state and federal Government offices and too often decisions are either not made or blanket decisions are made across large areas, suited to some, not others. There is no question that certainly some decisions around National Parks, appear to be more about buying urban vote, than landscape health. No question that for most voters they genuinely want to make good decisions for the future of our wonderful environment, not many really know what that is and are open to options presented by politicians via media, "game changers". Without the support of those living and working in the Rangelands, these decisions only succeed in increasing the divide between urban and rural areas.

State boundaries can cause divisions in communities, with different legislation around livestock (e.g. SA doesn't allow goat enterprises on pastoral leases), stocking rates (some states cap stocking rates), clearing (how regrowth is defined) and services (electricity and roads). While state Govts enjoy the income in the form of royalties, leases and taxes, that return is very quickly gobbled up by large capital cities that are very demanding.

Enterprise diversity is really important in an arid/variable environment, the current depressed state of the wool industry will impact regions ability to maintain economic viability if it continues, reducing diversity. With the costs increasing much faster than the price received for products, this encourages increasing scale, reducing the number of people and thus reducing the amount of care that the land receives, that is the cycle we are in.

Technology for the rangelands brings great opportunity, while also trepidation. With some looking for the "silver bullet", the tool that will make managing the land and livestock simple, can be mostly done from home via a screen. While quality land managers are slowly adopting tools that help them improve their connection with the land and livestock and/or improve communication amongst the management team.

Some parts of the Rangelands have been seen as "carbon mines", areas that have been targeted for carbon projects to offset emissions from remote places (urban areas). While this has seen a large influx of capital into those regions, a gold rush, there will be a significant hangover, a legacy of fixed land management that will continue for generations. Land management in these areas needs to change as new information becomes available, they need to be the best managed patches of land in those regions.

20 years from now

Looking forward into 2045, I am optimistic for a new status quo, as describe by the following. The year 2045 will be a turning point for pastoral Australia, as it will be the start of management based on landscape needs, and while land tenure is still held by the state, management based on outcomes will override archaic legislation.

Many other aspects of life in the rangelands are coordinated by regional systems, rather than state based, such as health, education, housing and infrastructure. This has seen a real change in the population spread, where moving to the rangelands is quite common now.

With the acknowledgement and respect of the many ecosystem services that land managers can provide in the Rangelands, this has bought many more people to call the rangelands home and show their love of the land.

Although technological advancements still occur, it is not technology that has taken over the management of the environment. Humans still have a key role to play, such as managing livestock and use of fire. Being able to become involved in rangeland management is now a sought-after role.

There is much more balance to the discussion about carbon emissions, than there was 20 years ago. Take Rangeland livestock for example, where methane emissions are easily offset by biodiversity credits, improved water infiltration and the “platinum badge” for healthy eating.

While for many the renewable energy boom in the 20’s and 30’s was a great income support, now with the understanding of there being no such thing as “low value land”, renewable energy projects and transmission lines are planned with that in mind. This has seen a large reduction in transmission lines and renewable energy sites are rarely visible in the landscape, such is the sensitivity of the new planning guidelines.

Conclusion

For Australia to secure a prosperous future for its rangelands, it will be important that changes are made in line with fostering thriving communities of diverse landscapes. It is hoped that this paper ignites a fire inside you and challenges you to examine the future. Some questions to ponder: “What value do we place on our unique and wild Outback and those that choose to live there?”; “Is our society so busy *putting out fires* in urban areas to even think about those that live in remote Australia?”; and “Do we accept *Geographical Narcissism* as discrimination, while having zero tolerance for racism, sexism?”.

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