

PROCEEDINGS OF THE AUSTRALIAN RANGELAND SOCIETY

19th BIENNIAL CONFERENCE

Official publication of The Australian Rangeland Society

Copyright and Photocopying

© The Australian Rangeland Society 2017. All rights reserved.

For non-personal use, no part of this item may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without prior permission of the Australian Rangeland Society and of the author (or the organisation they work or have worked for). Permission of the Australian Rangeland Society for photocopying of articles for non-personal use may be obtained from the Secretary who can be contacted at the email address, secretary@austrangesoc.com.au

For personal use, temporary copies necessary to browse this site on screen may be made and a single copy of an article may be downloaded or printed for research or personal use, but no changes are to be made to any of the material. This copyright notice is not to be removed from the front of the article.

All efforts have been made by the Australian Rangeland Society to contact the authors. If you believe your copyright has been breached please notify us immediately and we will remove the offending material from our website.

Form of Reference

The reference for this article should be in this general form:

Author family name, initials (year). Title. In: Proceedings of the 19th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference. Pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Australia).

For example:

Bastin, G., Sparrow, A., Scarth, P., Gill, T., Barnetson, J. and Staben, G. (2015). Are we there yet? Tracking state and change in Australia's rangelands. In: 'Innovation in the Rangelands. Proceedings of the 18th Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conference, Alice Springs'. (Ed. M.H. Friedel) 5 pages. (Australian Rangeland Society: Parkside, SA).

Disclaimer

The Australian Rangeland Society and Editors cannot be held responsible for errors or any consequences arising from the use of information obtained in this article or in the Proceedings of the Australian Rangeland Society Biennial Conferences. The views and opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Australian Rangeland Society and Editors, neither does the publication of advertisements constitute any endorsement by the Australian Rangeland Society and Editors of the products.



The Australian Rangeland Society

From the ground-up: Fostering local ownership and building capacity of the southern rangelands of WA

Kieran Massie

Rangelands NRM, Suite 1 125 Melville Parade, COMO WA 6152 . E: kieranm@rangelandswa.com.au

Keywords: community, collaboration, rangelands, natural resource management, southern rangelands, Western Australia

Abstract

In the southern rangelands of Western Australia there are real opportunities to drive sustainable pastoral production and adoption of improved land management practices.

By adopting a systems-based approach driven by the pastoral industry with aligned support from government agencies, financial institutions and NGOs, Rangelands NRM is supporting targeted landscape interventions to increase confidence in the regenerative capacity of the landscape.

No single land management practice stands by itself. Practices like understanding carrying capacity, placement of watering points and management of total grazing pressure are all interlinked across the complex and diverse rangelands system. Sustainable grazing management within a changing landscape requires judgement about how to fit practices together in the specific circumstances of properties, land systems and regions.

We believe a region's greatest asset is its people. By recognising and promoting the local knowledge of land managers and complementing this knowledge with technical expertise and support at appropriate junctures, barriers to the development of sustainable pastoral production can be identified for further enquiry through shared learnings.

This process of enquiry informs the development of on-ground 'trials' and the introduction of alternative approaches to pastoral land management. Once established, a continuous improvement approach is adopted where land managers share learnings and adapt their management strategies where appropriate. Ultimately, the approach bolsters the confidence of pastoralists in applying, adapting and improving current best practices, and in evolving new practices leading to locally-owned and tailored landscape interventions.

Rangelands NRM is a not-for-profit, non-political and neutral organisation working towards better WA rangelands. We connect people and projects so that real solutions can develop. We coordinate effort and resources so that the maximum results are achieved on the ground. We work with organisations to deliver on ground results. We believe if we work together, we can achieve better results.

Introduction

Across the southern rangelands of Western Australia, community-led initiatives are driving adoption of improved land management practices and building the evidence base for the regenerative capacity of the landscape. Rangelands NRM is connecting and coordinating effort and resources in support of these initiatives. We recognise and promote the local knowledge of land managers and complement this knowledge with aligned technical expertise, to drive landscape-scale change and enable rangelands communities to look after their own patch.

Current trends in the southern rangelands

The southern rangelands region of Western Australia encompasses an area of over one and a half million square kilometres that includes the Gascoyne, Murchison and Goldfields-Nullarbor sub-regions. Both the southern rangelands and the communities that exist within them constitute an important part of the social and economic fabric of Western Australia. As in other parts of regional

Australia, the southern rangelands is currently experiencing significant social, economic and environmental upheaval. These upheavals are a result of land use competition, and changing environmental conditions including climatic variability, loss of landscape function, ground cover, and increasing pest populations.

Land uses such as mining, tourism and the reservation of land for conservation are now challenging the traditional dominance of pastoralism throughout the region. In turn, this is challenging the viability of many communities, which are still heavily reliant on pastoralism for an economic livelihood.

Restructuring and rationalisation within state government agencies has seen a reduction in agricultural extension and development support officers. This situation has put pressure on producer groups across the region, who have previously led natural resource management (NRM) initiatives. The majority of these groups are run on a voluntary basis. Coupled with a changing funding environment in which everyone is expected to deliver more with less, this pressure has significantly undermined the capacity and confidence of many groups across the region to engage in NRM initiatives.

In response, Rangelands NRM has put a substantial amount of work into improving our understanding of the systemic pressures (beyond the ecological) facing both producer groups and individual pastoralists. This will allow us to better target the support we can offer to people on the ground, and facilitate greater community ownership of NRM efforts.

Some lessons we have learned

There is a general consensus amongst many of the producer groups and individual pastoralists that the historic practice of continuous grazing (where stocking rates are not changed in response to climatic or rangeland conditions) is no longer viable in the southern rangelands. Nevertheless, this approach to grazing management is held in place by forces that will only change with targeted and coordinated action by those with a stake in the industry. That requires co-design of pathways towards more flexible and more sustainable grazing and land management practices.

No single land management practice stands by itself. No singular solution will fix things. Rather, a sustainable system requires thoughtful action and collaboration to understand and shift the root causes of tired and ineffectual practices. This systems approach must also consider a range of internal and external influences including:

- pastoral traditions and identity wedded to continuous grazing;
- disincentives to destock that make it difficult to reduce grazing when conditions demand it;
- a complex landscape system with highly variable rainfall, where a mismatch of grazing pressure and feed can be disastrous for incomes and the environment;
- a lag between new practices and new knowledge and their widespread adoption in the industry;
- a financial system that favours the short-term and makes it difficult to finance long-term regeneration; and
- a cycle of mistrust where government attempts to impose directions are met with resistance by the industry, and retreat from dialogue by all parties.

There is already a solid foundation of emerging practice to be drawn from:

- better knowledge of rangelands ecologies;
- innovative technologies to assist grazing management (which are becoming increasingly cost-effective over time);
- leadership capacity within the pastoral industry; and
- partnerships with indigenous and mining interests, bringing additional knowledge and resources.

However, these efforts need connection and coordination in order to deliver the landscape-scale improvements in rangeland conditions and community resilience. Fundamental shifts in mindsets

are required, and the rangelands needs an institutional framework that supports producer-led innovation in a safe-to-fail environment.

Arguably, government's role is no longer to direct. The pastoral industry, rangelands communities and government agencies must work together to diagnose what keeps old practices in place. In turn, this collaborative effort should co-design action to shift practices and mindsets and nurture innovation.

At Rangelands NRM, we see our role as facilitating that co-design. We can connect people as they work out where things are stuck and what will get them moving. Through our network of relationships across the rangelands and government, we are well-placed to coordinate action across interests, and to draw out learning as ideas are implemented. Where appropriate, we can use our partnerships at the local level to deliver on-ground outcomes.

Some first steps we have taken

We recognise that a region's greatest asset is its people. We recognise and promote the local knowledge of land managers. However, we also seek to complement this knowledge with technical expertise and support at appropriate junctures. Barriers to the development of sustainable pastoral production can be identified through our shared learnings.

Throughout our journey, one of our biggest drivers has been promoting and building upon the huge amount of knowledge and expertise that is out there and sharing it as widely as we can.

A very simple initiative that we ran last year, took the form of a road trip from Yakabindie Station in the Goldfields to Boolardy Station in the Murchison. The initiative provided interested pastoralists, government officers, researchers and other land managers with an insight into the huge amount of regenerative effort that has been led by people across the region. This initiative also sought to encourage reflection on what drives the success and failure of landscape interventions, beyond the on-ground works themselves.

The trip incorporated visits to pastoral stations, Indigenous Protected Areas and conservation reserves across the region. Participants discussed the historic legacy of rangeland management decisions and the lessons to be taken to inform future action.

The real value of the initiative wasn't so much in the inspection of on-ground works and their subsequent success or failure, as much as it was about the secondary effects of information sharing. These include sharing some of the lessons people had learned over the years. It was a rare opportunity for reflection on NRM initiatives that wasn't tied to any reporting framework or program evaluation process. Throughout the trip, those participating would share insights from their own experiences. In the process of doing so, the participants identified areas or alternative approaches for further enquiry. This created the foundations for co-design of pathways to more flexible and more sustainable grazing and land management practices.

Taking our own lessons from this valuable experience, we realised that sustainable and productive land management needs to harness the knowledge and experience being utilised in communities.

2017/2018 is the final year of the current National Landcare Program (NLP). In recognition of this, we held a sustainable grazing workshop in December 2016. Representatives from the three southern rangelands Recognised Biosecurity Groups (as broadly representative and democratic bodies), state government agencies, financial institutions and rangelands researchers attended. Attendees co-designed an approach to a program of work upon which we could build the foundations for the post-NLP funding environment. The aim was to identify projects that would increase the confidence of pastoralists in applying, adapting and improving current best practices, and in evolving new practices.

Arising from this workshop has been a coordinated program of NRM initiatives, led by producer groups and delivered over the next twelve months. To ensure the sustainability of the initiatives beyond the twelve-month window, each initiative is linked to broader industry-led initiatives underway across each sub-region, comprising:

- Gascoyne
 - Bullseye Project: Central and Southern Rangelands cattle predictably hitting supply-chain specifications.
- Murchison
 - Investigation into irrigated agriculture in the Southern Rangelands
- Goldfields-Nullarbor
 - Generating consistent sheep and goat supply from the Southern rangelands

Conclusion

There are real opportunities to drive sustainable pastoral production and adoption of improved land management practices across the southern rangelands. The passion and enthusiasm of many of our partners in the pastoral industry is a constant source of inspiration. They are consistently willing to share ideas for new and innovative NRM approaches, grounded in real and practical knowledge of the land. It is this willingness and insight which allows Rangelands NRM to foster links between people and organisations, and help support strong land management throughout the southern rangelands.