International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists

Keywords: Rangelands, Pastoralists, United Nations, Declaration

A dedicated International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) would open up opportunities to highlight the complexities and values of rangeland around the world, as well as here in Australia. Even though rangelands cover over half the earth’s land surface, rangeland issues are a low priority for governments. Some policies contribute to land degradation, for example, the forced settlement of mobile pastoralists such as transhumant herders in Africa and China. Decisions are often based on a lack of understanding of these often dry and remote environments, and this ‘benign neglect’ was highlighted at a recent United Nations meeting (Johnsen et al. 2019). The knowledge and culture of rangelands communities are also poorly understood.

Rangelands around the world support an estimated 500 million to 1.5 billion pastoralists, and they are among the world’s most marginalized people, both politically and economically. Approximately half of the world’s livestock are managed by pastoralists which support the livelihoods and food security. In the face of increasing land pressures, climate change, growing economic and population burdens, pastoralists and their habitat are under duress.

The Government of Mongolia is calling for an IYRP to increase global recognition of the importance of both the rangelands and the pastoralists who use them. In Mongolia, approximately 80% of the landmass is rangelands and pastoralism is a primary way of life, so its government well understands the value of rangelands and the need for appropriate management, including the benefits of pastoralists’ moving livestock as the different seasons and years require.

Widespread support

Now that the Government of Mongolia has made a proposal for an IYRP to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), it is calling for support from organisations around the world. A decision will be made by the United Nations in 2020, but the process of review is starting in July 2019, so time is critical.

Momentum has been building at various events internationally as a result of ongoing efforts by the IYRP Support Group and partners, including FAO, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), the International Centre for Agricultural Research in the Dry Areas (ICARDA), the Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP), the International Rangeland Congress (IRC) and the International Grassland Congress (IGC).

Side events at the United Nations Environment Assembly (both UNEA 2 and 4) led to an agreed resolutions calling for increased global efforts to conserve and sustainably manage rangelands. In 2019, the ongoing effort for a UN designated IYRP was acknowledged. The United Nations recently designated 2021–2030 as the Decade of Ecosystem Restoration – a global call to action to reverse the degradation of up to 350 million hectares of deforested and degraded land, including rangelands, in an effort to combat climate change and preserve biodiversity.

Benefits for Australia from an IYRP

Australia’s participation in an IYRP will further enhance our already high reputation in pastoralism and agriculture. The Australian rangelands or ‘outback’ covers 75% of the continental landmass and gives Australians a ‘national sense of place’. Six World Heritage sites provide tourism opportunities, and mining is
Rangelands are the focus of much research which aims to increase agricultural productivity, address economic and environmental issues, and develop sustainable livelihoods for rural and regional communities.

In addition, the IYRP will contribute internationally to the achievement of the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals, in particular:

- **Rights of pastoralists (SDG 1, 2, 5):** the lack of land rights is a huge challenge for pastoralists in countries of the Global South, posing big threats to pastoral sustainability and viability.
- **Importance of people (SDG 15):** in helping to “… combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, halt biodiversity loss”, and the need for multilateral environmental agencies to cooperate
- **Ensuring availability and management of water, and sanitation for all (SDG 6):** Australian water expertise is well recognized, and could assist in helping to achieve equitable access to safe and affordable water (SDG 6.1); increase water-use efficiency in all sectors (Goal 6.4); protect and restore international cooperation and capacity building to support developing countries in water harvesting; recycling and many other activities (SDG 6.6).

Rangelands are important globally, as remote drylands provide valuable grazing lands for livestock and native wildlife. As well as extensive animal industries, these areas support major mining industries, contain some of the world’s largest rivers and sustain pastoralists with diverse cultures, such as Australian graziers and pastoralists, Mongolian herders, African nomadic peoples and Scandinavia’s Sami reindeer herders.

**Conclusion**

In Australia, an enhanced profile for rangelands, their industries and communities would contribute to a growing national awareness of their significance, an increase in investment to support their sustainable use, and an international awareness of the contributions that the Australian experience can make to the management of a major biome globally.

This briefing note calls on organisations with an interest in rangelands to please write to the Government of Mongolia to express your support, with copies to be sent to FAO. Addresses are:

- **PLEASE EMAIL & POST ALL LETTERS TO:** [dana@danamkelly.com](mailto:dana@danamkelly.com) and [f.flintan@cgiar.org](mailto:f.flintan@cgiar.org)
  **Dr Dana Kelly, PO Box 4868, Toowoomba EAST, Toowoomba, QLD 4350**
- **PLEASE ADDRESS:** Secretariat of the Committee on Agriculture (COAG) of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00153 Rome, ITALY

I acknowledge colleagues in the IYRP Support Group and Australian Rangelands Society for much of this material.