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Paul McDonald

[Paul.mcdonald@sqlandscapes.org.au](mailto:Paul.mcdonald@sqlandscapes.org.au)

## **We need to start with where people are at, not where we want them to be**

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For around 30 years, different governments, industry groups and academic entities have worked to extend their knowledge and practice to landholders across the Rangelands with the view that this will result in their improvement in condition, trend and extent. These efforts have employed often ingenious approaches built on great logic and the understanding that preaching and teaching and showing sustainable practice and approaches will ultimately result in improved landscape outcomes. The evidence shows this approach has not worked well given the limited monitoring and evaluation of the condition and trend of our natural assets demonstrates a continuing and in places, accelerated decline across most landscapes.

Conventional wisdom says we should try harder, make more rules and policy, and be more creative and develop more targeted, better prioritised programs and approaches with better and more comprehensive modelling and monitoring so we can garner more money from governments to do better and better. My experience teaches me that this approach has and will continue to fail us and for one very basic reason – we do not understand the people we are wanting to influence well enough.

Little research exists to help us understand who manages our landscapes; instead, the majority of assumptions lie around needed to deliver more workshops, more education, more data and more science to help these people do better. The limited research done in the early 2000s by the University of Queensland around Central Queensland indicates up to 80% of our land managers have a personality and learning profile which means the majority of our attempts at extension do not reach them or their learning networks. Trying harder to do these approaches better means nothing to these people.

As a result, I think we need to form a way forward on:

1. Learning more about the people who look after our rangeland landscapes
2. Discovering ways to help their learning and practice improvement on the terms which make sense in their day to day lives (likely to be around business risk and working trials)
3. Finding ways to help them measure their improvement in ways that make sense to them with the result that natural capital is improved at their pace.

This approach puts the people who impact rangeland landscapes at the centre of their own learning and improvement. While academia and practitioners can put labels on the resulting initiatives and discuss ecosystems services and other components to better landscape outcomes, the language and practice of improvement needs to focus back on what makes meaning and sense to the person/entity actually causing the impacts. The 20% that do learn through extension approaches already know whatever is being offered. Some have told me that they have learned nothing from us (the NRM groups) over the past 10 years.

Any policy or dialogue we have on our rangelands is unlikely to result in any real change on the ground unless we change first.

**Status:** A hastily written opinion based on too many years in NRM.

**Bio:** Paul McDonald is the Chief Executive of Southern Queensland Landscapes, Australia's newest NRM group looking after the Queensland Murray Darling and Paroo catchments.

**Reference:** <https://www.miragenews.com/what-are-the-four-personality-types-of-australian-farmers/>