

International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists

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Samburu pastoralists, Kenya (International Livestock Research Institute).

A dedicated International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) would open up opportunities to highlight the complexities and values of rangelands 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, e.g. 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 rangeland 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 marginalised people, both politically and economically. Approximately half of the world's livestock is managed by pastoralists, upon which their livelihoods and food security depend. In the face of increasing land use pressures, climate change, and 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. 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.

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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 countries and organisations around the world. A decision will be made by the United Nations in 2020, 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 (UNEA 2 and UNEA 4) led to an agreed resolution 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 about 80% of the continental landmass and gives Australians a 'national sense of place'. Six World Heritage sites provide tourism opportunities, and mining is a major industry. Our rangelands produce agricultural exports of approximately \$90 billion annually to the national economy, by supporting various industries including 11.8 million cattle (43% of the national herd) and 7.1 million sheep (10% of the national flock).

An IYRP has many benefits for Australia, including the opportunity to showcase and market:

- clean, 'green' products of meat and wool produced by the 6,000 pastoral businesses, including the world's largest area of certified organic rangeland production (about 10 million hectares);
- rural business skills, as Australian rural people are the most productive and entrepreneurial in Australia (a typical rural resident contributes \$80,000 in goods and services annually, with one innovative business to every 14 people, compared to the national average of one in 32 people);
- agricultural business management and modelling tools, such as the 'digital homestead' and precision pastoral's eTrend® technology which combines remotely recorded cattle liveweights and pasture information – tools that are now being exported around the world;
- tourism opportunities in the Australian Outback with its iconic Australian animals, conservation areas and cultural heritage, e.g. Indigenous culture and the wide-open spaces of the Australian rangelands;
- Australian expertise in developing alternative rangeland industries, valued at ~\$200 million annually from such enterprises as harvesting bush/native foods, cut flowers and feral animal harvesting;
- Australian agricultural training and university programs in rangeland science and large-scale grazing management, including providing tertiary qualifications for international students;
- world-leading carbon management programs, including the use of Indigenous knowledge of fire management to mitigate carbon emissions from tropical grasslands, and Emissions Reduction Fund projects aimed at sequestering carbon by revegetating rangelands; and
- Australia as the power plant of the future,

with opportunities to export solar power and provide a major carbon store; with high sunlight intensities, e.g. through Clean Energy Innovation Fund co-investment.

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 [meaning 'Third World' or developing countries (Dados & Connell, 2012)], with the lack of rights 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 recognised 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.

For further information about the proposed international year, click on this link: <https://globalrangelands.org/international-year-rangelands-and-pastoralists-initiative>

Organisations are encouraged to express their support by writing to the Government of Mongolia:

*Mr ULAAN CH., Minister for Food, Agriculture and Light Industry of Mongolia
Government of Mongolia, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia*

Literature Cited

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Author Profile

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