

Conclusion

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Extensive tracts of the rangelands of Queensland and Australia are in crisis. Whether it is revealed by indicators of biophysical condition and trend, or measures of socio-economic strain, these lands and their communities are in widespread decline. This trend raises serious questions in terms of long-term sustainability and food security. Unfortunately, no overall metric is available to quantify the extent of this decline across the whole state, but the collective view of the contributors to this Dialogue and these *Proceedings* is that it is widespread and serious. Some parts of the rangelands such as the Channel Country are in relatively good condition. Parts of this region and elsewhere are managed by large companies with multiple properties across regions. This means they can conduct a form of pastoral nomadism at a large agribusiness scale to better manage pasture resources.

These rangelands are unique and in their symbolism may be likened to other great natural assets of Australia such as the Great Barrier Reef. Sustainable management of these lands, occupying about 80% of Australia's landmass, is an imperative, given their pastoral productivity, their biodiversity and their iconic cultural heritage that plays no small part in defining Australia's identity.

Whilst many of the dry lands around the world are also seriously degraded and their communities impoverished, Australia has the economic and knowledge capacity to reverse this trend on our continent. The degradation trend has been brought to scholarly and public

attention many times before, e.g. at The Royal Society of Queensland's special conferences on the Brigalow Belt of Australia (1984) and the Mulga Lands (1986). Further, a comprehensive review by the Australian Government and all rangeland State and Territory governments led to the development of the *National Principles and Guidelines for Rangeland Management* in 1999, following 30 public workshops across Australia. This cooperative, multi-government forum attempted to develop a new vision for the rangelands but failed to gain traction. Previous calls by experienced Arid Land Administrators and many drought and economic forums have all expressed a common concern about the use and management of the rangelands.

The Rangelands Dialogue heard that the current economic settings cannot lead to ecological sustainability of the rangelands and, especially, cannot remedy the legacy of degradation over more than a century. Drought policies and assistance packages generally focus on immediate relief, whereas long-term adjustment measures are required.

The impoverishment of land and people is now accentuated by rapidly materialising changes in climate. A general warming with increased variability is now beyond rational doubt; and in most places across Queensland's rangelands, the climate is drier and hotter.

No longer is a model of *business as usual* deemed appropriate or responsible.

External funding for carbon sequestration creates a key opportunity to drive significant

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change in land management, and much stronger price signals are not unrealistic given the extent of measures that will be required to meet the threat imposed by climate change. This response could be further enhanced with financial institutions requiring regenerative agriculture as insurance against bad returns from unsustainable use and management.

Policy change might involve change in land use, in tenure, in the economic framework that currently does not reward supply of ecosystem services or restoration of natural capital, and in apportioning responsibility for observing duty of care between public and private agents.

To illustrate the breadth of measures that might be required to achieve ecological sustainability, rangelands could be classified into a number of categories each requiring a specific set of measures, for example:

- Submarginal lands deemed uneconomic for continuous pastoral use and beyond the capacity of private ownership to address land restoration.
- Marginal lands where rural reconstruction, incentives for managing ecosystem services and building resilience are still realistic.
- Better-watered localities where ecologically sustainable management should be incentivised.

Significant policy initiative is required. The organisers of the Rangelands Policy Dialogue are optimistic that this civil society-led initiative might be what is required to kick-start policy change.

It has been advocated in papers in this collection that there is a need for the formation of a new public authority. This could take the form of a Rangelands Authority or similar statutory entity at a national or state level. Such an authority could promote policy review at multiple scales, foster broad community support for the rangelands, secure long-term funding for research and extension, possibly manage the rehabilitation of degraded areas that are unviable for pastoral production but may have multiple values, and incentivise the production of ecosystem services.

Subsequent to this Rangelands Dialogue, a Rangelands Declaration was endorsed in August 2019 by the three co-sponsors: the state's senior scientific institution, The Royal Society of Queensland; the peak body for the regional catchment bodies, Natural Resource Management Regions Queensland; and the pastoral industry's peak body, AgForce. The Rangelands Declaration, appended below, provides a platform for cooperative development of a new vision for Queensland's rangelands and new institutional arrangements to implement the vision.

Declaration for the future of our Rangelands

Brisbane Dialogue, 2019: a conversation on Queensland's rural future and implications across the Australian outback.

In the face of...

- A deep and enduring attachment to Queensland's outback country, its rural communities, and the iconic ecosystems on which they depend;
- Ongoing decline in these communities due to unrelenting economic pressures, a legacy of unfortunate planning and legislation, and the lack of bold, forward-looking policy choices;
- The compounding effects of a highly variable climate that is expected to become hotter and increasingly variable, with more severe episodes of flood and drought, and persistent ecosystem stress; and
- The resulting vulnerability of production systems to frequent disruption, a widespread decline in land condition, and the tragic loss of biodiversity throughout the ecosystems that sustain us; then

We, as Queenslanders, need to...

- Accept there are pressing issues in our Rangelands and an urgency to bring urban and rural communities into serious and constructive conversation;
- Celebrate our common agreement on the biological, cultural, and economic necessity of a flourishing, populous, and life-affirming outback, while minimising attachment to outdated ideologies that only serve to separate people from one another;
- Affirm that landscape management properly rests in the hands of people acting with modern knowledge and Indigenous wisdom, and that they are the trusted custodians of sustainable utilisation, conservation, and regeneration;
- Recognise that more investment is required to build the ecological health of our country, including arrangements that deliver stewardship and natural capital payments; therefore,

We, the undersigned, commit to...

- Cultivating an enduring and respectful rapport between land managers and the public, enabling fulfilment of mutual rights and obligations;
- Supporting a Rangelands reform agenda that includes:
 - ◆ Reviewing and revitalising institutional arrangements to deliver strengthened regional participation in land use planning, regulation, and conflict resolution;
 - ◆ Programs to enable the informed and ethical use of data to ensure all people can participate in shaping the Rangelands future in a constructive manner, particularly in the area of natural capital accounting;
 - ◆ Cooperative ownership of a biennial State of the Rangelands Report presenting social, biophysical, cultural, and economic indicators of condition and trend;
- Establishing a Rangelands Consultative Council, independent of government, but inclusive of it, to improve our institutional capacity for developing and delivering improved governance arrangements and practical management solutions across the Rangelands, for the benefit of the country, its rural communities, and for Australia's current and future generations.

20 August, 2019