

Policy Follows Population: Alternative Development for the Rangelands

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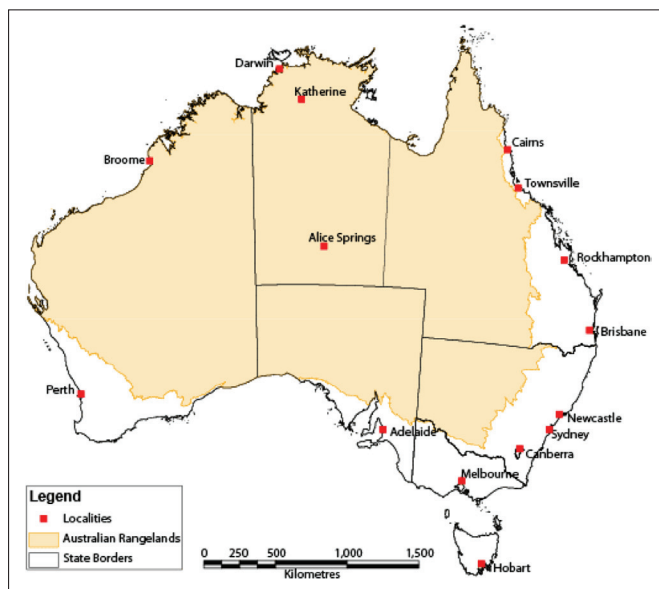
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Australian Rangelands

Rangelands cover about 80% of Australia. This vast and remote heartland is commonly called the Outback (Figure 1). It has diverse climates (monsoon, arid and semi-arid) and ecosystems (savanna, woodlands, shrublands and grasslands). The most productive of Australian agricultural land is a small crescent along the south-east and south-west coastlines. With poor soils and unreliable rainfall, the rangelands are mainly used for grazing (Grundy et al., 2016).

Figure 1. Australian rangelands.



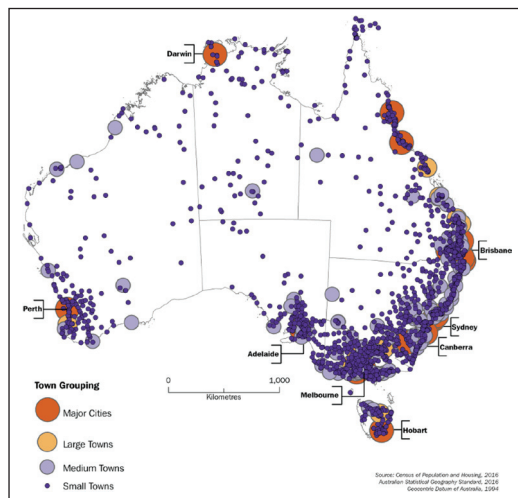
Source: CCIA (2019). <https://www.environment.gov.au/land/rangelands>

The average population density in Australia is 3.1 people per km², but the population is not evenly distributed (ABS, 2016a). Most people live in the productive zone: 71% of Australians live in large, mainly coastal cities, but only 10% of the population live in towns with fewer

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than 10,000 residents (Figure 2). The remaining population is sparsely distributed across the vast, remote rangelands. Indigenous people comprise 3.3% of the population and have a similar distribution pattern, with only 7% living in remote locations (ABS, 2016b).

Figure 2. Population distribution: major cities, large, medium and small towns.



Source: ABS (2016a). <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/2071.0~2016~Main%20Features~Small%20Towns~113>

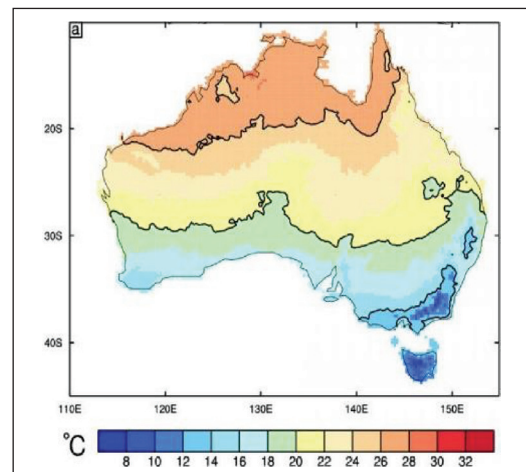
Changing Social, Physical and Economic Landscape

Between 2006 and 2016, the Australian population grew by four million, but the population of rural areas declined, and the agricultural workforce shrank more than 5% (Jackson et al., 2018; ABS, 2016c). Most rural residents are older couples with no children (47% rural, cf. 38% all Australia). Remoteness limits access to employment opportunities and quality incomes. The rural workforce is older (median 49 years, cf. 40). Unemployment is much higher, in part due to a less skilled agricultural workforce (55% have no post-school qualification, cf. 33% all Australia). Most agricultural workers are low-paid labourers, and rural incomes are 60% lower than all Australia. Rural Australians have poorer health than other Australians, in part due to

reduced access to services (AIHW, 2019). This shrinking, ageing, less skilled, less healthy and poorer population is significant when considering the future of the rangelands.

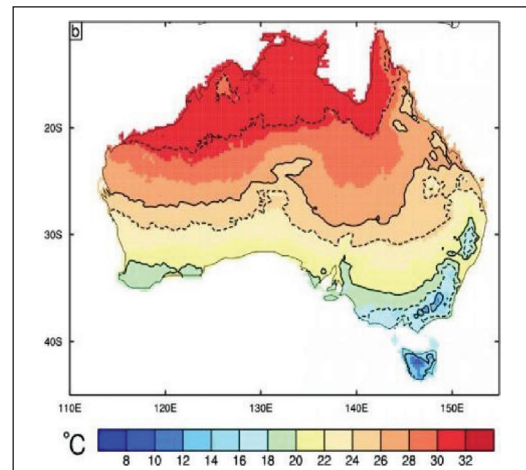
CSIRO maps demonstrate how the physical landscape is changing to a rapidly warming climate (Figures 3 and 4). The change from current to projected mean temperatures means existing agricultural practices are unlikely to be sustainable. This changing climate has serious consequences for the pastoral future in the rangelands.

Figure 3. Annual current mean temperature.



Source: CSIRO (2015).

Figure 4. Projected mean temperatures, late 21st century.



Source: CSIRO (2015).

The rangelands' contribution to the Australian economy is diminishing. Grazing on natural vegetation is the most common land use (44.9%), but the export value of all rural products has declined significantly over time (Table 1; DFAT, 2014). This reduction in the relative value of agriculture suggests that diversification would improve the economic sustainability of the rangelands.

Table 1. Australian export value by sector (%).

	Rural	Mining/fuels	Manufacturing	Other goods	Services
1969–1970	42.4	16.9	19.6	51.0	16.0
1991–1992	21.1	25.9	21.4	10.3	21.2
2013–2014	12.0	50.1	12.7	7.9	17.4

Source: DFAT (2014).

Wellbeing in Rural Australia

Rural people embrace an independent lifestyle: they are resilient, have a strong sense of place, and they volunteer more often than urban populations (Cheers, 2018). Yet the overall wellbeing of rural people is less than urban populations (AIHW, 2019). Rural Australians have limited access to professional expertise and skilled services of all kinds, including police, dentists, lawyers, counselling, health specialists and most trades. There are few support services for children, the aged, people with disability or for mental health. Skilled people are also less available in remote rangelands. As a consequence, people living in remote areas have higher mortality and morbidity rates, higher levels of accidents, suicide, depression and domestic violence. Beyond health, personal security and social care, remoteness reduces access to education and the creative arts. The constrained access to the Internet, mobile phones and services of all kinds in remote areas reduces access to information, emerging concepts and new ideas (Green, 2015). Access to ICT, education and the arts improves human capital, increases wellbeing in regional and remote areas, and offers a foundation to underpin successful innovation and development (Gibson et al., 2010).

Changing Policy Landscape

At the same time as life in the rangelands has become more difficult, there has been a persistent decline in public focus, and commitment

to provide support for remote areas of Australia has waned (Collits, 2001). For decades, Australian governments have embraced neo-liberalism, with 'small' government, self-help and self-management becoming a panacea for rural decline. Issues previously understood to be government responsibilities are now regarded as the responsibility of individuals, self-governing producers or community groups (Cheshire, 2006). Concurrently, rapid urbanisation has refocused policy towards providing urban infrastructure rather than supporting remote areas.

The rangelands are no longer embedded in the hearts and minds of the nation (Walker, 2015). In the era of globalisation and the new neo-liberal environment, remoteness has resulted in reduced political visibility and influence. Jacoby & Schneider (2001) demonstrate the influence of organised interest and lobby groups on public policy priorities. The National Party strongly influenced Australian government policy for many years, but its influence, along with other Australian rural business lobby groups, has weakened. As rural populations and the contribution of agriculture to export income declined, the National Party moved its focus to support economic growth through mining. Associated with this political change has been the decline in traditional news media and the rise of social media. The effects have been especially prevalent in remote areas of Australia, where remoteness and digital disadvantage contribute to social exclusion (Park, 2017).

Approaches to Regional Development

Taken together, these significant changes in the Australian social, political, economic and environmental landscapes suggest a need to rethink the future of the rangelands. What could be a realistic, socially and ecologically sustainable future? And what principles could guide a redevelopment process?

Traditional development approaches adopt a deficit model. Embracing the normative Chicago School economic stance, the central components are capitalism, competition and industrial growth. This version of development involves “self-help guided by a raft of community and business leaders focusing on creating innovative, creative, scientifically literate, highly networked, investment ready and risk accepting cultures [and it] requires an effective flow of venture capital and mutual support systems” (Sorensen, 2015, p. 41). These local requirements are not likely to occur in the Australian rangelands, and the level of policy commitment assumed to be necessary cannot be expected in the current Australian political environment focused on low taxes and small government.

Gray (2007) suggests a new form of regionalism. Emphasising a combination of participation and informed global engagement, he proposes an “eco-utopian” approach combining ecological modernisation with bioregional principles. Political decision making in new regionalism is democratic, participatory and collaborative. Communities are organised primarily around naturally defined regions. New regionalism is outward looking and globally engaged, with an ethos embedded in the notion of a global civil society to provide a vision and desirable level of accountability. In this utopian visualisation, production and consumption is local and cooperative, and natural resources are used efficiently. While this is a noble vision, it fails to consider how civic actions could connect effectively in the remoteness of the Australian rangelands landscape.

Others propose an entrepreneurial approach to transform localities, involving leadership and

knowledge-based cultural economies (Petrov & Cavin, 2013). This approach might suit urban environments where connections among participants can be made readily. However, it would need significant investment in human and social capital, as well as regional governance processes, to engender viable, long term improvement in wellbeing in remote Australia. Whether Australian governments would invest to embed effective changes is a decision that would need to occur at the ballot box.

Gibson-Graham (in Pike et al., 2011) notes that contemporary regional development has focused on rational economics, while cultures, networks and diverse practices have been devalued or ignored. In contrast, post-development theory does not assume a singular pathway towards improved wellbeing. Instead, it seeks to build a cooperative and empowering culture as a solidarity economy. By valuing diversity and rethinking the importance of social connections in an economy, “it becomes possible to imagine many different development pathways that build on local assets, experience and expectations” (p. 228). This holistic ‘bottom up’ regional development approach, incorporating community entrepreneurship, has been effective in Scotland, Quebec and Spain (Smith, 2012).

Indigenous development approaches are also highly relevant to the future of remote Australia (Lee & Eversole, 2019). Indigenous involvement enables access to important traditional cultural knowledge to design sustainable ecosystem management practices. Sharing knowledge and embracing Indigenous perspectives of relationships could generate cross-cultural innovation. Lee & Eversole argue this approach improves governance arrangements and service relevance, and advances wellbeing.

Incremental or Transformative Change Processes?

Accepting that the serious issues in rangelands need to be addressed, there is a question whether incremental or disruptive change processes should

be adopted. Governments frequently prefer an incremental change approach that considers cost benefits, evaluative frameworks and so on. Incremental change also allows projects to be timed for best effect at the ballot box. While noting that mining has produced the most significant changes in Australian rangeland landscapes, the Productivity Commission promotes a cautious approach:

Before investing in new infrastructure, governments should carefully consider alternatives to improve the use of existing infrastructure, particularly where incremental improvements or technology enables lowercost solutions, such as global positioning systems to manage demand and better utilise existing capacity (Productivity Commission, 2017, p. 74).

Rather than restraint, Walker (2015) advocates disruptive activism to capture policy interest. As an insider based in central Australia, Walker's advice is firmly fixed on the politics of remote regions. Even though the rangeland population is larger than the ACT, it is dispersed over 80% of the continent. This physical remoteness reduces public attention and political influence, especially in the current political environment. Walker argues that innovative radicalisation would progressively reignite the national interest required to achieve national investment. This viewpoint has some merit, even though it might appear to challenge the traditional conservatism of rural Australia. It will be essential to capture political attention to gain traction for the extent of change required to create a sustainable environment. Walker proposes that visionary policy initiatives would not only benefit the rangelands, but also the nation. His advice to be courageous and innovate beyond existing arrangements is commendable.

Alternative Future for the Rangelands

To survive as a viable region, two primary goals should guide rangelands development decisions: repopulation strategies and improving wellbeing. Expanding the population will

improve the visibility of rural and remote issues in the political landscape and gain commitment to the region. Creating long term, well-renumerated jobs will provide income for individuals and essential revenue for regional governance processes. Access to quality ICT and education services is vital to produce good jobs. Access to basics such as fresh food, along with support services for families, is essential to sustain the wellbeing of remote Australian populations.

Successful regional development strategies rely on a rigorous process to plan and coordinate the implementation process. Creating and maintaining an effective governance system will be vital if this vast region is to move beyond ameliorating regional adversity and achieve successful transformative change. Designing and implementing an effective governance system for the vast, remote rangelands region would be a complex task. Others have considered this issue (Foran et al., 2019), but fully discussing the governance process is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, some underpinning principles that would inform decision making are proposed below. The most important principles are that decisions should be strategic, increase the population, create value, and improve human wellbeing by identifying:

- projects, events or activities that have the potential to increase physical, economic, social, cultural and information infrastructure;
- existing resources, e.g. space, sun, expert knowledge;
- regional strengths, e.g. resilience, commitment, creativity;
- opportunities that would contribute to long term income-producing capacity;
- opportunities with the potential to attract investors, including governments;
- opportunities that have the potential to create quality, long term jobs; and
- projects that are relevant to the region and that will generate benefits for Australia.

Four industries appear to have the potential to provide significant benefits for the rangelands beyond the existing grazing industry. The first two development options listed below could be achieved with internal rangelands governance. The other two options would require significant government involvement, but could generate enormous benefit to the rangelands if established.

1. *Alternative energy* is an obvious industry to extend benefits across the rangelands, since Australia has a huge coastline and the highest average solar radiation per square metre of any continent. Domestic uptake of solar energy has grown rapidly since 2010, especially among middle class households. Developing alternative energy projects and linking these to the south-eastern energy distribution grid would produce quality jobs and generate income in the rangelands.
2. *Strategic tourism development* to attract particular market segments. These will require systematic planning and coordination across the region to facilitate tourist movement between events in nearby locations. Traditionally, the Australian tourism industry has operated reasonably successfully as local small enterprises, but there has been little success in organising significant coordination to drive and sustain tourism destinations with major international appeal. Strategic developments of major new facilities would attract local and international markets, for example an Indigenous Cultural Museum.

Alternatively, strategic tourism could be designed around large, sequential *participatory* events occurring throughout the cooler months in remote areas. Investing in strategic regional planning and tourism coordination would improve the capacity to attract large crowds for annual events. For example, music events, racing and ballooning have been successful in remote

areas, and they are especially valuable for places with low populations. These kinds of activities could be extended to other events and activities, such as outdoor dining promoted as the 'largest table' in Outback Australia. A major Indigenous cultural centre would be a very significant attraction for international tourists, provided quality accommodation and travel services were available. Likewise, dinosaur tourism is a growing market. Investment in strategically expanding facilities aligned with major events might encourage longer stays and increase the spend of the large Grey Nomad tourism market. These kinds of activities would provide substantial income and seasonal employment for inland regions.

3. *An inland space centre* offers numerous benefits for the rangelands. In 1997, the Australian Government announced that a Space Agency would be created, predicting it could create thousands of jobs. Now established, it has a very modest staff in Adelaide. If located in the rangelands however, a space centre could bring international recognition for the region, generate inward investment, foster international collaborations and provide local income. Importantly, a space centre would build regional capacity by bringing human capital and quality jobs into the region. While there are few rigorous studies analysing the benefits of a space centre, it would appear to be highly likely to aid sustainable economic development and improve wellbeing in a way that would be culturally suitable for the rangelands.
4. *An Outback University* would bring students to the rangelands – an important consideration since some of these qualified students would stay in the region after experiencing rural life. Education already provides significant export income, but most Australian universities are located

along the Australian coastline. The Outback University could be established with multiple campuses, probably in Longreach, Alice Springs and Broome, possibly as additional campus sites of Charles Darwin University. The Outback University would provide an opportunity to co-locate facilities such as a hospital, school, TAFE training centre, library, sports training facility and specialist services. Co-located facilities bring benefits to isolated locations by enabling interactions between the academic staff and regional population (Charles, 2016). Providing different levels and kinds of education on the same campus would overcome the types of issues associated with the closure of the Central Queensland Training Colleges at Longreach and Emerald (Coaldrake, 2018). Provided the education facility offers a range of suitable

programs and operates effectively, studying at an Outback University has the potential to be highly popular with international students. These students would generate valuable export income and add to population diversity in the rangelands. Universities in similar remote locations, such as the University of the Arctic in Canada, provide valuable, quality jobs, and offer sites for regionally relevant research. Existing remote multiple-campus universities have been very successful. For example, the University of Alaska Fairbanks offers degrees to nearly 10,000 students, and it makes a significant contribution to the Alaskan economy. Likewise, the University of Tromsø (Norway) has 16,000 students and 3441 staff, including 1700 academics. Both of these universities conduct highly regarded and locally relevant research.

Conclusion

Opportunities for a prosperous future in the rangelands are constrained by changing social, economic and political landscapes. These issues, when combined with limited access to quality ICT, health, education and support services, have resulted in depopulation across the region. As the Australian urban population has proportionally increased, public commitment to assist remote Australia has declined. Public policy has followed the people, and Australian governments no longer feel committed to sustaining remote areas. It is vital therefore, to develop strategies to bring back people to the rangelands.

To achieve this goal of improved human wellbeing in the rangelands, it is essential to abandon an incremental change process, and diversify the economy beyond traditional grazing. The foremost principles guiding the selection of new industries should be to repopulate the region and improve human wellbeing. Four industries appear to have the potential to achieve these goals. Developing major strategic tourism facilities and events, along with an alternative energy industry, could be achieved with internal rangeland governance. Two larger projects could offer significant benefits for the rangelands: an inland space centre and an Outback University. These two major projects would require significant government commitment, but they have the potential to generate enormous benefit to the rangelands.

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An Indigenous Cultural Centre would be a strategic tourism attraction (Photo: Margaret House [Aboriginal Initiation Site in the Desert Uplands]).

Author Profile

Dr Douglas is an accomplished social researcher, business academic and development specialist, and has extensive experience as a health and community support professional. Her research is focused on change processes, social innovation and small, hybrid organisations. She has worked in the ACT and eastern Australia mainland states, and at the World Health Organisation in Geneva.