

Putting Things Right in the Rangelands

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The Outback takes in the red centre and the great pastoral regions of the inland. The most vulnerable parts of this vast area are the 'rangelands', the great pastoral regions of the inland. What little rain they get is patchy and irregular. That is what makes their management so challenging at the best of times.

Right now the rangelands are really stressed. People are stressed, communities are hollowing out, native mammals are more threatened than ever, and graziers are carrying way too much debt. And now climate change is going to make droughts longer, hotter and even more erratic.

Old Remedies for Familiar Sores

The striking aspect in all of this is how we continue to rely on partial remedies to 'put things right'. However, we as a community are good at practical responses to pressing problems. There are good stories out there. Individuals and groups are busy with all manner of support activities. Fodder rolls are arriving from better-off districts; banks are showing a little compassion; relief payments are more accessible. Agencies are getting better with mental health services; others are looking further ahead. Some are demonstrating regenerative farming practices; some are promoting a more holistic relationship with country. Carbon farming initiatives are under way.

Obvious solutions can have perverse outcomes. Cutting down trees can improve short-term profitability but at the expense of land

condition and biodiversity for future generations. Converting pastoral properties to tree farms can also boost income, but locked gates hollow out communities and undermine pest control programs.

But the killer point is that, when taken together, our many remedies are simply not enough. Poverty, suicides and other stress indicators remain stuck on 'code red' for rural Queensland. Clearly, busying ourselves with old remedies for familiar sores won't do.

Doing Rangelands Policy

Where we struggle is in the business of acting collectively on the big issues. We get busy with remedies before checking to see if the diagnosis is right. The world-weary remind us that these things run in cycles. The wary warn that patterns are changing. We should learn from Indigenous people about 'living on country'. Scholars want to build the knowledge base. Market ideologues want more competition. Community groups want better services.

We are good at brainstorming the causes and effects of distress in the rangelands. The archives record our many endeavours at unpacking 'the crisis in the bush'. Everyone knows what the real problems are, and everyone wants to know why we don't get on with it.

But we don't have much of an appetite for drilling down to expose the underlying pressures which are driving that distress or to canvass

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novel approaches for dealing with transformative change. The real challenge now is to develop overall strategies for managing the rangelands for good environmental, social, economic and governance outcomes as we move forward into a very challenging future.

Admittedly, policy analysis at this level is contested and challenging, as witness our national response to climate change or our record here in Queensland on vegetation management, still festering after 20 years of disagreement.

There are factors which make policy paralysis on rangeland matters particularly problematic. First, the political agenda is dominated by metropolitan affairs and institutional capacity in the bush has been degraded. So there is a chronic governance deficit. Rangelands policy is characterised by short bursts of federal intervention with long periods of state neglect.

New governments in Canberra roll out programs for the latest rural crisis. But these cashed-up, centrally driven initiatives can struggle to deliver what they promise, as witness the current mess in the Murray-Darling Basin. State governments are the official custodians of country, but they take their rangeland responsibilities lightly. For the past 20 years and more, George Street has been running down its capacity for strategic research and land management in the rangelands. Pastoral and agricultural colleges at Longreach and Charleville are mothballed, and some national parks are managed by absentee rangers.

Second, sectoral bias can distort the analysis of rangeland issues where problems are defined in terms of the environmental, the social or the economic backgrounds from which experts operate. This is understandable. But it is unhelpful.

The sectors cross over. For example, it is evident by now that many family grazing enterprises can't absorb the costs of managing through long periods of drought. Enterprises which are distressed financially can't maintain land condition and biodiversity, so distressed pastoral elders are leaving the industry and taking their hard-won

knowledge with them. That loss diminishes our capacity to manage future disruptive change.

Looking Ahead

We know that managing the rangelands is going to get a lot trickier. Economic growth is ramping up world demand for food while good land is being diverted to other uses. Our rangelands are a resource for closing the forthcoming food gap. Foreign institutions are already banking broad-acres as a hedge against food insecurity.

Climate change is making weather patterns more erratic with longer droughts and hotter days. For example, under one scenario Longreach will, within a decade or so, experience 42 *more* days a year with temperatures above 35°C. Productivity falls off at high temperatures, so we can expect a lot of 'down time' on productive activity in the future.

A Strategy for Managing Disruptive Change in the Rangelands

Leaving communities to go it alone against drought is past its use-by date as a strategy for managing the rangelands. It is failing long-suffering communities now, and it is not fit for the purpose of managing the transformative changes which are now unfolding. We need a better strategy for managing the rangelands, and we need a better process for doing rangelands policy. Here are some observations which may assist.

Understandings which should inform this project include:

- Remote communities have demonstrated great resilience in responding to the troubles in the bush, but they do not have the resources to cope with the transformative changes that are now unfolding. The wider political community must join with them in devising and implementing a new deal for the rangelands.
- The issues are complex and interrelated, so we should not be looking for a master plan or a blueprint. We should develop

the capacity to formulate and implement policy appropriate to the circumstances of particular regions in a period of transformative change.

The rationale for embarking on this project is that remote communities are now in distress and external factors are set to increase stress levels. The lessons learned in better managing the pastoral regions of Queensland will benefit land managers across the Outback and in countries dealing with desertification and related issues.

The principal questions the project should address can be stated in sectoral terms as:

- How can rangelands environments be managed for biodiversity protection and sustainable environmental function?
- What alternative enterprise structures can be devised to allow the conventional family pastoral enterprise to transition to benefit from the lower-risk profiles enjoyed by larger corporates and foreign investors?
- What are the roles and responsibilities of remote communities and the wider political

community in formulating and implementing policy on rangeland matters?

With these observations in mind, the purpose of the project is to devise a system of governance fit for achieving better economic, social and environmental outcomes in the rangelands in these times of transformative change.

The process for pursuing that objective must necessarily be innovative and exploratory. The design and delivery of deliberative forums is a way of seeking innovative new approaches. It must establish legitimacy in remote communities and in the wider political community. Partisan dogmas and doctrines, e.g. on the virtues of the family farm or the free market, should be discouraged.

If the strategy is to be successfully implemented, it must be adequately resourced, including the resourcing of institutional arrangements that seek to improve on those adopted in the past. The strategy must be enabled to generate the inter-agency and inter-governmental coordination necessary and to establish the monitoring, reporting, compliance and review measures to judge its effectiveness and continuing relevance.

Author Profile

Des Hoban is qualified in economics and regional planning and has a doctorate in government. He started out as a Patrol Officer in PNG. These days he convenes a bush care group in Brisbane. In between times, he worked on regional planning projects in Australia and development assistance programs in neighbouring countries.



Summer storms can bring local relief for some (Photo: D. Hoban).