

Tree Clearing and Other Comments

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A ball put in the middle of a tree pulling chain when dozers were lower powered (Photo: C. Nason).

Introduction

The following are notes from an on-ground landholder who has owned and worked on a property in the Desert Uplands Bioregion in central western Queensland for 36 years. These are some comments after hearing the rangelands talks.

Our Experience with 'Tree Clearing'

1. Knocking down trees disturbs the soil and hence has a beneficial effect by releasing nitrogen, etc., from the soil, the same effect as digging up the soil before propagating plants in a garden in town.
2. This disturbance leads to much more grass and vegetation germination. Grass cover has a very beneficial effect on soil health and soil carbon and reduces soil erosion. Ground cover, in particular deep-rooted grasses and forbs, maximises soil carbon; tree cover does not.
3. Trees lying on the ground have a beneficial effect over time on the plants and soil. They provide protection for plants to grow up around them; they help to prevent soil loss/erosion from run-off after a heavy fall of rain; and they help to reduce topsoil loss by catching air-borne dust and falling leaves. Topsoil and leaves

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provide mulch around the fallen logs, which is beneficial to the growing of vegetation.

4. When trees are knocked down in the old growth forest country in the Desert Uplands Bioregion, the roots in the ground are still alive, as they are very deep. After the next decent fall of rain, every tree regrows. Some trees such as gidgee can be a lot slower to grow, while others such as ironbark take off very quickly.
5. During the long drought that we have been experiencing, we have noticed that in some of the old-growth forest country on our property, up to 70% of the trees have died – and even more in places. However, of the trees that we had previously pulled down, every single one has regrown and not one of these young, regrowing trees has died during this drought. Surely this has a very beneficial carbon-sequestering effect ...?
6. Unbiased research needs to be done over 15 years plus (in order to experience severe drought as well as a big wet) into carbon sequestration in pulled country and neighbouring old-growth forest country. Landholders could be paid to allow their regrowth trees to grow for 20 or more years, before being re-knocked down, in order to obtain maximum carbon benefits for the environment.

Environmental Protection/Improvement

One speaker mentioned that economics has the most significant impact on the environment in the rangelands. The Social Research Project in the Desert Uplands Bioregion, carried out by the Desert Uplands Committee and led by Gerry Roberts, found that younger landholders who had greater financial debt and young families to educate, etc., were more likely to be focused on the economics of their enterprise. It was the over-70s with much less debt (their families had grown up and were no longer dependent on them financially) who were interested in the environmental health of their properties and were taking the most action to improve it. Younger people were

definitely interested in environmental health; however, they were much less financially able to take on-ground action.

Hence, yes, the payment of landholders/enterprises to improve and care for the environmental/ecological aspect of their land should be a necessity. We are caring for the land for the benefit of all Australians of the present and into the future. Should not all Australians contribute towards the cost of doing this?

Such payment could be the equivalent of the agistment that would have been received on the numbers of livestock that have been reduced in order to have less impact on the vegetation. Or, in a farming situation, the payment could be the equivalent of the net profit that would have resulted from cropping that portion of land that has been set aside and no longer farmed.

The government and all Australians need to recognise the eco-services produced by landholders, especially as it is a cost to the landholder to run fewer livestock or farm less country. Landholders shouldn't have to bear the cost of the expectations of and benefits to the rest of Australia.

Healthy Food Production

Livestock that graze on the natural pastures of the rangelands, that free-range and often walk several kilometres a day, provide much healthier meat and milk than animals that are kept in yards for months in very close proximity to one another, unable to exercise, and fed a lot of non-natural food products. This healthy outcome should definitely be recognised, promoted and rewarded.

One of the questions asked of the speakers was why some landholders didn't notice the damage being done and do something about it.

Again, the Desert Uplands Social Research Project found that personality types play a very important part in how people operate their businesses and how they see their environment. One needs to appeal to different personality types in the way that they best understand and operate, in order to communicate with them more successfully.

As with all industries, with the carrying out of new ideas in the pastoral industry there are always the few who grab an idea first and experiment with it. The rest watch to see what the outcomes are. If the idea is successful, the majority will then gradually follow. There will always be a small number who refuse to change, unless there is a real and decent benefit, or legislation forces them to take action.

The majority of primary producers are not good at communication with government officials, public servants, university researchers, etc. They learn mostly through talking to their neighbours and other primary producers in a similar business. Again, through our Desert Uplands Social Research Project, we discovered that some landholders cannot read or write. This

does not mean that they are not successful in their business. They tend to be very successful as they have other advantages such as much greater observational powers.

Legislation, or forcing landholders to not use some of their country because of the presence of endangered species, etc., can often have a detrimental effect on the eco-outcomes. In order to obtain the best eco-outcome, the landholder should be rewarded for taking care of his/her property.

That way, instead of destroying or hiding their assets, as has happened in the past, people will come forward and acknowledge what they have. This will be of benefit to the whole country. Reward, not threats or punishment, has the best outcomes.

Author Profile

Margaret House has spent the last 36 years on a property in the Desert Uplands Bioregion outside Aramac. She and her family have always been interested in environmental issues and joined the Aramac Landcare group when it was first formed.

Out of the Landcare group they formed the Desert Uplands Build-Up and Development Committee in 1994–1995, as so many families in the ‘desert’ were struggling to survive. Most of the men, including Margaret’s husband, worked off-farm to keep their properties financially viable, while the women and children ran the properties during the week. Yet the people were tough, multi-skilled, and very resilient.

The Committee organised carbon workshops in the region in 1998 and followed that with carbon research into the region’s trees and soils. A Social Research Project was launched to understand people’s attitudes and actions towards their enterprises and their environment. Over time, it was noticed that the natural environment on the properties of those landowners who were struggling financially, or who went broke, ended up in a very poor state.

The Committee won a Landcare award for its Landscape Linkages Project, which paid landholders to improve on-ground/environmental outcomes; however, Margaret believes passionately that more research and extension of research outcomes are needed.



Desert fringe myrtle (*Calytrix microcarpa*) mostly occurs in the Desert Uplands Bioregion.
(Photo: Margaret House)