



Reconciling interests in the rangeland

The pastoral industry in Australia's rangelands is in deep trouble. Hit by falling prices for cattle, sheep and wool, many people say it is in terminal decline.

As if the cruel effects of commodity price plunges weren't enough, there are other problems. Environmentalists, for example, point to diminishing biodiversity and increasing land degradation and say land management practices must change.

According to Nick Abel, a scientist with CSIRO Wildlife and Ecology based in Canberra, people outside the pastoral industry – including Aboriginal people, conservationists and the mining and tourism industries – are keenly interested in what is happening in the rangelands. They see it as a time of opportunity.

'There is great potential for satisfying the aims of these groups and benefiting pastoralists at the same time – with better laws and policies,' he says. 'For example, pastoralists could be paid more per hectare to manage part of their land for nature conservation than they now earn from wool. That is cheaper than setting up public reserves, so society and pastoralists both benefit.'

Pastoralists are used to hard times; they're not about to roll over like a flock

of drought-stricken sheep. According to Leon Zanker, who runs a property about 300 km north of Wilcannia in the Western Division of New South Wales, a new breed is being forged in the face of economic extinction.

'Everybody's still talking about pastoralism in that turn-of-the-century form: running sheep and cattle,' he says. 'We're saying hang on, forget this, we're new-age pastoralists. We now want to take on board other forms of earning an income off this country in a sustainable and well-managed way.' He talks of flexible grazing systems that might include goats, kangaroos, emus and pigs, as well as 'non-pastoral' activities such as farm-stay tourism.

To help manage this process of change, three years ago Abel and Bill Tatnell of the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation established a project dubbed '21C' (Sustainable use of rangelands in the 21st century). With funding from the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation, it aims to promote the establishment of policies and institutions needed to support sustainable land-use in the rangelands of western NSW.

The approach was simple in concept and complex in practice. In a series of workshops, five stakeholder groups –

pastoralists/innovators, Aboriginal groups, the conservation lobby, tourism operators and miners – worked separately to develop a list of potential land-uses for the Western Division.

The project team classified the Western Division into land types; the stakeholders then wrote guidelines for allocating each of their proposed land-uses to these land types. For example: 'allocate land adjacent to permanent water to tourism' or 'allocate land within 10 km of a tar road to camping'. A land-use can have as many guidelines as stakeholders think are needed to get it allocated to suitable land.

A CSIRO software package called LUPIS, designed by John Ive and others, was used to generate land-use maps. The next step in the process – now under way – is negotiation, in which stakeholder groups come together to compare maps. Are they irreconcilable, or can compromises be found that might enable the values of different stakeholders to be accommodated?

So far, this question is unresolved; the project is at a critical stage and the players are cautious. Zanker, for example, is unconvinced that all stakeholders have the same degree of legitimacy.



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Working towards sustainable land-use in the rangelands of western NSW.

Far left: Views from the ranges north of Broken Hill. Pastoralists are considering new ways of making an income from this country.

Left: Policy-maker Robert Keed displays a model of Western Division policy.

Above left: Nick Abel and Bill Tatnell discuss the 21C project.

Above: Pastoralist Leon Zanker (left) discusses land-use maps generated by LUPIS with representatives from CSIRO and the NSW Department of Land and Water Conservation.

'We're the ones that have paid for the leases we operate, we're the ones that pay the rates and taxes every year, we're the ones on the ground making day-to-day decisions,' he says. 'It can be hard for us to accept that we should all of a sudden just open the floodgates and say "rightho, what do you fellas want? We'll give it to you.'"

Judy Boyden is a member of the conservation stakeholder group. She is supportive but similarly sceptical.

'I think the process is really good, because we're starting to talk, to involve other groups,' she says. 'And I think unless we can work something out together as stakeholders then we're really not going to get anywhere.'

But she is concerned that all the good intentions will be wasted if the outcomes of the process don't have an impact on policy-makers. Abel agrees: it was for this reason that he and his colleagues built another element into Project C21 aimed at influencing policy-maker perceptions. To do so, he drew upon psychological theory.

'People don't accept many things by being told, they mostly learn through experience,' he says. 'So we have to

provide that experience: in the case of the policy-makers, we held workshops in which they analysed policies and laws themselves, and could see what needed to be changed. This is much more likely to be effective than if we wrote a report and dumped it on the desks of policy-makers. We're saying look at it, draw your own conclusions.'

A similar process is under way among stakeholders:

'We provide the experience through which the stakeholders can reassess their own values,' he says. 'We don't lecture them; they will reach their own conclusions.'

Abel says that the negotiated outcome of the stakeholder process will be fed into the policy-maker process, which will then produce an implementation strategy that will include incentives, laws and regulations. What happens then?

'The idea is that we've got this critical mass of policy-makers on board to maintain the momentum, to make sure it doesn't drop out again,' he says. 'We believe changes are about to happen in New South Wales legislation, and if we can influence those for the better we will be delighted.'

The project is generating other benefits. Abel reckons that the process itself shows considerable potential as a model for resolving other land-use conflicts.

'Linking the biophysical and the ecological with the social, economic and political is a good way to do business,' he says. 'I'm counting on agencies picking it up and running with it, doing it elsewhere.'

But this might all be jumping too far ahead, because the negotiations between stakeholders in the Western Division are yet to be played out and cannot be taken for granted. But the signs seem positive.

'I'm a bit unsure and in some ways a bit intrigued to see just how it will all come together,' says Zanker. 'We're a pretty pigheaded bunch I suppose but at the end of the day we've also got to realise we've got to have a certain amount of give. But so do other stakeholders.'

Boyden contends that the inclusive nature of the process is almost bound to lead to better outcomes.

'It's a whole lot better than having stuff imposed on us from above,' she says. 'I think it's got some hope.'

Alastair Sarre