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*The Australian Rangeland Society*

## Keynote paper

### Radicalising the rangelands: disruptive change or progressive policy?

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#### Introduction

In 'The Bush' Don Watson captures the nub of the rangelands dilemma. "Only about 15% of Australians now live outside the cities and the essentially suburban coastal corridor...Those coastal suburbs are home not to the descendants of drovers and Anzacs, but ambitious migrants from Asia and the Middle east, with no taste for rural life, and no appetite for sagas of male bonding in shearing sheds and creek beds under Banjo Patterson's everlasting stars." (Watson 2014)

He goes on to say, "The bush is a social construct as well as an ecological one: as much as the things that grow and live there, we define it by the people who inhabit it." (op cit p66)

I came to the outback from the city more than 40 years ago. In that time I have observed significant changes to the towns and people of the outback. These observations of the dynamics of the social, cultural and economic mix of the outback form the basis of my own reflection.

As a social construct the bush, in my particular reflection, is variously referred to as remote Australia, the Outback, the Australian Rangelands and everything that sits outside the experience or ambit of the majority of the population who live in cities and cling to the coastal fringe.

This reality is however not new for members of the Rangelands Society. The personal reflections of people who have been engaged with the rangelands for a similar time reveal consistent signs of irreversible change.

#### Rangelands futures

The ninth biennial conference of the Australian Rangeland Society in Port Augusta in 1996, conducted a foresight study developing future scenarios for the Australian rangelands out to the year 2010. (Blesing *et al.* 1996)

One scenario, Looking Out, was driven by economic returns and individual interests. Under this scenario, good financial returns from industries in the rangelands would enable appropriate investment in human, cultural and ecological resources considered to be under threat in 1996.

A second scenario, Looking In, was driven by communities and shared values. Under this scenario, empowerment of local communities and reconciliation between Aboriginal and European peoples would provide a platform from which a range of new land uses, products and enterprises could evolve.

Ten years later Foran (2007) looked for trends impacting on the rangelands by examining how 'Looking Out' and 'Looking In' had fared in the preceding decade. Australia had experienced unprecedented economic prosperity and engaged fully in the process of globalisation. In 2007, the rangelands were where the mines and some interesting tourism destinations were located. Issues such as national security, terrorism, oil depletion, global climate change and the consumer society

have seduced most urban Australians to focus mostly on their own personal situations. National and state policies were now dominated by these strong global drivers. (Foran 2007, p9)

Foran's dominant reflection on the limitations of the earlier fore-sighting exercise was that events outside the rangelands, many of them global and somewhat random, take policy focus away from well designed and defensible future policy options (Foran 2007, p7).

The key question according to Foran was how to restructure the advocacy position of rangelands so that they collectively are not perceived as forever mendicant and having to rely on support from the populated periphery of the nation.

The traditional narrative underpinning rangelands advocacy was cast around mining, pastoralism and tourism and the contest for land and resources between these sectors and Aboriginal interests. In line with the evolution of 'The Bush' chronicled exquisitely in Don Watson's book (Watson 2014), new players, new practices and new pests have changed that narrative and the associated advocacy forever. Today we do not have recognition of outback champions like Kidman or Flynn or Perkins. These early champions were revered and attracted support for their contribution to the outback.

In 1912 Rev John Flynn's vision resulted in the establishment of the Australian Inland Mission (AIM) and the "mantle of safety" which contributed so much to the opening up of the inland. Flynn in his day held public meetings where he used his photographs and his gift of storytelling to bring the bush to the people of the cities. He also had a personal relationship with the Prime Minister of the day. Today, it is harder to tell that story and it is often only told around singular crises.

In 2015 rangeland interests are driven largely by self interest and international investors more so than national interest. The rangelands are no longer in the hearts and minds of the nation.

As Fitzhardinge (2012) noted the future of the rangelands lies not in the hands of those who live in the rangelands, but in the hands of the wider population who represent the greater political, social and economic power.

Fitzhardinge (2012, p39) concludes that the focus on production and productivity alone, without due regard to the changing context in which agriculture exists (especially in the rangelands) will simply be a race to the bottom.

Community attitudes have changed. The contribution that agriculture makes to the domestic economy is not what it once was. The economic importance of agriculture to the nation is now small. Gone are the days when the nation rode on the sheep's back. The real value in farm products is increasingly being added post farm gate – where the goods produced on farms have value added to them by people and industries a long way from the bush and hence it is currently beyond the ability of the producer to capture it (Fitzhardinge 2012, p42).

Fitzhardinge picks up Foran's key question noting "It is essential for the rangelands to speak as a single united voice – a voice that promotes the values of all Australians and the values of rangeland landscapes to all – not just the people who live there. Currently no unified organisation represents what is in fact the bulk of the Australian landmass," (Fitzhardinge 2012, p42) and the rangelands are too easily dismissed as unimportant.

In these circumstances Watson offers some comfort. "The bush never stops adapting, both as an environment and as a mental construct. It is impervious to its own destruction." (Watson 2014, p91)

In the most recent contribution to the conceptualisation of the outback The Pew Charitable Trusts publication on 'The Modern Outback' (Traill and Woinarski 2014) brings together in a very beautiful and graphic way the dimensions of the new modern outback. It emphasises the integrated nature of the outback and develops a compelling case for maintaining the conservation values inherent in the

outback. The Outback is at a crossroads economically and environmentally. Social and economic development is highly dependent on maintaining the natural health of the Outback. The condition of many landscapes and wildlife species in the Outback is dependent on active human management. One of the great threats to its nature is now not too many people but not enough people – people living in and on the country and actively managing it. National policies and economies during the past 150 years have led to altered patterns of people on the land (Traill 2014). Technology now exists for people to fly in and fly out of the outback or the ability to work it remotely. Much of the outback now has fewer people inhabiting and actively managing the millions of square kilometres of country.

Under pressure of globalisation and market economics the narrative of the rangelands has changed and continues to change and with that the national interest in the rangelands has declined.

The Desert Knowledge Movement, the formation of the Desert Knowledge Statutory Authority (DKA) and the funding of the Desert Knowledge CRC were grass roots community attempts to stimulate new foci on intellectual development in the rangelands (Foran 2007, p6). The Desert Knowledge Movement responded to an analysis that suggested a service/knowledge economy was needed to underpin the rise and fall of the producers commodity led economy that largely drove the rangelands. The social driver for the change to the economic base however was the startling demographic projection that pointed to a 34% increase in working age Aboriginal men by 2016 – equating to some 10,000 jobs across the desert. Where were these jobs to come from?

### **Policy failure or governance dysfunction?**

DKA's remoteFOCUS (Walker et al. 2012) project identified a series of common issues present across remote Australia whether we were talking with people in the pastoral, Aboriginal, tourist or resource sectors. The project identified a deep sense of disconnect and discontent throughout extensive consultations across remote Australia.

People say they don't get a say in the decisions that affect them and they do not see equitable and sustainable financial flows and better services tailored to their needs. Importantly they feel excluded from the greater Australian narrative and ignored by a distant public service.

1. The remoteFOCUS Report demonstrated that governance arrangements are a threshold cause of policy failure across remote Australia. Effective governance is needed to deal with the impact of rapid economic and social change in regions. Effective governance can ultimately only be achieved with the active involvement of the affected citizens. But this essential mobilisation is negated by the present governance framework and cannot be remedied within it.
2. Policy for remote Australia needs to be separately conceived and framed. In essence, the circumstances and challenges of remote Australia are wholly different from those that confront citizens in metropolitan areas. The prosperous mining precincts, the homeland settlements and communal economies and the great pastoral estates all implicate government in a primary economic role quite unlike that elsewhere in Australia. Government is the market.
3. The challenge in designing new policies for remote Australia is a strategic one. Australia's policy system which has few, if any, platforms which can host exchanges on complex systemic reform. An appropriate discussion of possible new policy frameworks—one that is sufficiently open to new evidence and new concepts, that is serial and sufficiently protracted, and that is not immediately politicised in partisan debates—is very difficult in the present Australian policy system.

### **Is there a rangelands narrative?**

If this analysis and Watson's statement are accurate, a response to our current condition is beyond ready influence by public policy alone. What remains in the national interest? Will the conservation

value of the outback win through given the fierce predominance of the market led production on the rangelands.

Rangelands impinge to a degree on national security through the buffer of confidence their vast expanse provides to coastal communities. Rangelands also figure in the national conscience through the complexity of issues around 'the problem' of Aboriginal lifestyles as perceived by coastal communities. Yet beyond national security and Aboriginal disadvantage few topics spark national interest in rangelands unless they relate to an individual's shareholder dividends.

In the absence of a narrative that positions the outback in the national interest, will the rangelands benefit from grand national projects or from increasingly focused progressive policy?

Outside of the Northern Development Agenda and the recent Pilbara Cities and Royalties for Regions program in WA, there is no strategy, no considered development framework to guide innovation and inspire development of Aboriginal futures and how these could interact with the rest of the community, the nation and the global economy. What we do have are ongoing reactive and costly interventions to address crises, and a need for special measures to address long-term neglect.

The recently released White Paper 'Pivot North' (Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia 2014, 2014) goes some way to providing an overarching vision for Northern Australia's Development. It reflects a strong focus on production values and economic land use and links to the great Asian markets. It is interesting that many of the impediments to development identified in the report align with those identified in 1860 after the Northern expeditions (Cross 2011).

Visions for the north of Australia are not new and have time and again proven intractable.

Invariably they are framed around opportunities for trade with the great Asian market. The Northern Territory Plan 1863 failed; Scullin wound up the North Australian Commission in 1931 because it did nothing but 'inquire, report and recommend'. Progress by the 1947 Northern Australia Development Committee was hindered by isolation, the tropical environment and a lack of continuity of development policies and finance for infrastructure. Over the ensuing years a number of taskforces and Offices of Northern Development have been established to provide advice on sustainable economic development issues and to broker solutions to improve coordination between governments, businesses and communities.

Following a steady stream of other reports (Joint Select Committee on Northern Australia 2014, p24) the coalition's 2030 Vision for developing Northern Australia seeks to align the north with the two great regions of global economic and population growth - the Asian region and the tropical region - capitalising on Northern Australia's strengths and unlocking major economic value for the benefit of all Australians. In some respects 'Pivot North' brings us full circle on the colonising approach of the original South Australians.

Again major decisions affecting remote Australia are being framed in capital and regional centres on the coast or in Canberra, with little understanding of the key drivers and unique settings that the rangelands specialists have been articulating for the past 35 years. The narrative remains largely economic and does not convincingly embrace the other unique and valuable elements of the rangelands and their communities and their governance.

Learning from mistakes is innovation. Innovation that needs leadership. It appears there is a lot of scope for innovation in current direction setting.

### **Innovation and indifference**

As I reflect on the evolution of ideas and innovations over the past 35 years in the rangelands I am doubtful that we have the influence and voice to impact on new policy and to achieve the potential that exists in the rangelands.

Reliance on policy alone has failed the rangelands. Policy follows vision and is inspired by vision.

What becomes clear from revisiting the visions of the past and the current condition of the outback is that most Australians are now indifferent to what happens in the outback. It is evident that no amount of progressive policy will cut through and neither is a singular focus on economic productivity likely to provide a significant enough vision to drive development.

I am inclined to believe that without the public champions, without voice, without strong market pull, we need a more disruptive and innovative radicalisation of the rangelands narrative to overcome indifference and re-ignite national interest and national investment.

The remoteFOCUS report argues that there is a critical need for an on-going institution that has the mandate and authority to focus on remote Australia, change the dynamic of under-development that afflicts the region, and sustains a momentum for change and regional coordination that is specific to remote Australia.

The market will not define the national interest in remote Australia and its peoples. Only disruptive radical innovation will cut through indifference to drive the necessary reforms.

### **Radicalising the rangelands – disruptive innovation and a settlement strategy for remote Australia**

It seems inconceivable that the nation would empty out the outback or turn its back on those who reside in the outback. It seems inconceivable that the outback without significant government intervention will generate anything like the number of jobs required to attract aboriginal people into full economic participation.

The desired improvement in social cohesion, reduced income differentials, and increased choice and opportunity for individuals living in the rangelands requires an overarching shared sense of vision and purpose. It is difficult to see a way of moving from welfare to a 'normalised' model without this.

Three connected innovations would disrupt the current pattern and offer incentive for investment. (see Walker et al 2008)

1. The establishment of an **Australian Outback Commission** would create a multi-jurisdictional framework to set in place a process to achieve a vision that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people would acknowledge as providing a strong sense of purpose in the national interest. In effect it provides a framework or platform for common accountability and provides a working strategy for the investments in people and place over the next 50 years.
2. The establishment of an **Australian Outback Trust Fund** could provide the capital investment to permit a new future to be truly realised. This would be established through collaborative state, territory and federal legislation, modeled on the Alaska Permanent Fund (Barnes 2006), with the power to levy rents on all uses of natural resources in the outback zone. The trustees would be constrained by a charter to invest the financial capital from those levies to the best effect in environmental, social, human and physical infrastructure of the outback. The trust beneficiaries would be defined as all inhabitants of the outback.
3. The preparation of a **National Outback Development Plan** that provides the vision for a strategic network of settlements, population and governance across the breadth of Australia's outback that taken together provide safety, security and services to all Australians in the national interest. The plan should be accompanied by a fifty-year investment strategy.

A response of this magnitude by the national, state and territory governments would provide a mechanism for unifying interest of Indigenous and non Indigenous peoples of the outback and a rationale for investments in infrastructure, health and education and governance over Australia's vast outback. A firm commitment will also encourage the development of policy settings and livelihood opportunities across the outback that respond to the nations safety, security and service requirements.

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