

Politics Within and Without — The Origins and Development of a Rangelands Landcare Group

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Abstract

The 1990s saw a resurgence of interest in land-use reform in the arid and semi-arid rangelands of Australia. Scientists and conservationists called for a reassessment of land use in areas now used for extensive grazing of cattle and sheep. Landcare groups formed by pastoralists were criticised for deflecting resources away from questions of land-use reform. While Landcare groups in agricultural regions of Australia have been subject to considerable assessment, analysis of rangelands Landcare has tended to revolve around questions of land use to the neglect of analysis of the operation of the groups themselves. Based on a case study of a pastoral Landcare group in the rangelands, the research reported in this paper found that pastoral Landcare in the rangelands has comparable outcomes to Landcare elsewhere in terms of the creation of opportunities for improved communication and learning among landholders. In addition, this group has developed from an emphasis on single-issue projects towards multi-faceted projects focussed on social as well as ecological sustainability. The analysis also found that political considerations were significant in the formation of the group and remained important for some pastoralists at the time of fieldwork. Finally, rangelands Landcare in this case study has provided a vehicle for reformist pastoralists and their associates to work actively towards influencing their peers to acknowledge land management problems and to reflect on their management practices.

KEY WORDS *rangelands; Landcare; pastoralism; ranching; sustainability; land-use reform*

ACRONYMS

ALC	Arid Lands Coalition
ASPD	Alice Springs Pastoral District
CLMA	Centralian Land Management Association
EMS	Environmental Management Systems
NT	Northern Territory
NTCA	Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association
RCD	Rabbit Calicivirus Disease

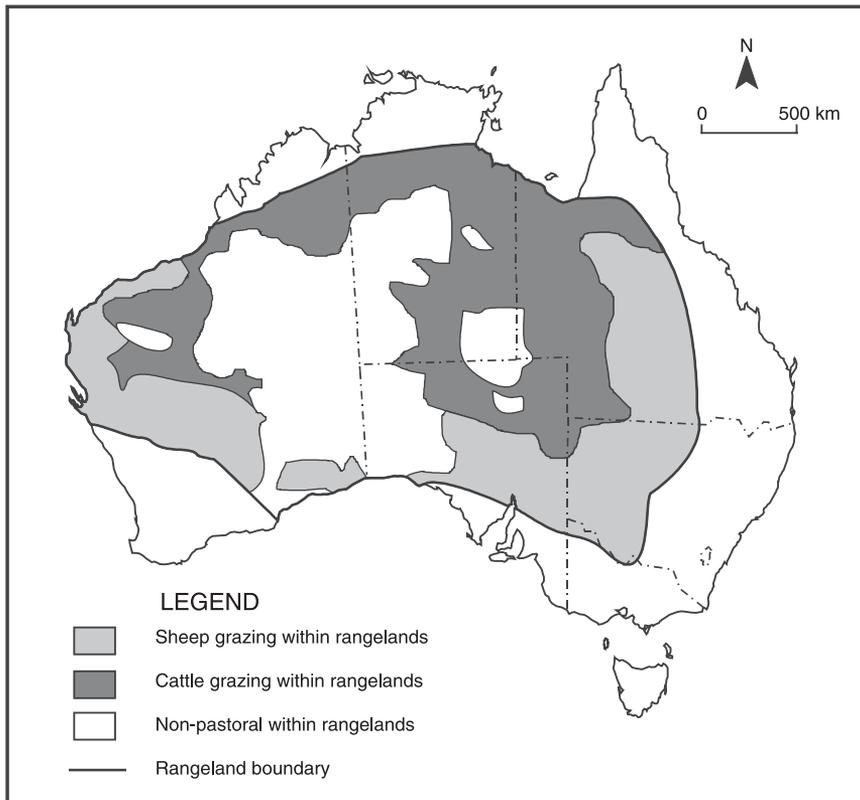


Figure 1 Australian Rangelands (Source: Stafford-Smith and Morton, 1990).

Introduction

The last two decades of the twentieth century saw the latest in periodic upswings in ecological and conservationist interest in the arid and semi-arid rangelands (Figure 1) in the inland and north of Australia (Heathcote, 1987; 1994). This included calls from conservationists and ecologists for reform of pastoral land use and management in the rangelands (for example Morton *et al.*, 1995; Ledger and Stafford-Smith, 1996). These groups suggested that not only was there a need for significant change in pastoral management practices but that the viability of pastoralism should be assessed region by region. Furthermore, they canvassed the possibility that

pastoralism be phased out in areas where it was not economically viable and where alternative activities or tenures — such as tourism, Aboriginal land ownership or nature conservation — were more appropriate on economic, social or ecological grounds. These goals remain on the agenda of the Australian conservation movement (for example Australian Conservation Foundation, 1991; 2003).

The late 20th century saw the development of the Landcare movement and the creation of Landcare groups across agricultural and pastoral areas of Australia (Campbell, 1995; Ewing, 1999). These voluntary groups have worked to address land degradation problems on agricultural

and pastoral land across Australia since the 1980s but particularly since the early 1990s. Due to its success in mobilising landholders to take action on resource management problems on rural land, Landcare is one of Australia's environmental and rural success stories of the last ten years. It has, however, not been above criticism on a variety of grounds (Baker, 1997; Cary and Webb, 2001). One recurring criticism is that Landcare has been 'overly preoccupied' with productivity issues to the detriment of environmental issues such as biodiversity conservation (Curtis, 1997, p. 144). Landcare is seen as tinkering with, if not strengthening, existing land-use practices rather than facilitating more searching discussions about current and future rural land use in Australia. As noted earlier, conservationists and others have called for the economic, social and ecological viability of pastoralism to be assessed on a regional basis with a view to removing pastoralism from those areas where it is shown to be non-viable (for a discussion of these issues see Holmes, 1994; 1996; 2002). Conservation groups such as the Arid Lands Coalition (ALC), an alliance of organisations such as State conservation councils and the environment centres in Alice Springs and Darwin, have interpreted pastoral Landcare as an inappropriate use of public funds in the context of broader questions about future rangelands tenure and use regimes (ALC, 1996). This focus on the suitability of the Landcare model in the rangelands has tended to obscure consideration of the dynamics and operation of pastoral Landcare groups as producer-based participatory environmental management groups (ALC, 1996; Pastoralists and Graziers Association of Western Australia, 1999; Centre for International Economics, 2000). To better understand the impacts of Landcare in the rangelands this paper assesses social aspects of the operation of a pastoral Landcare group in an arid area. The focus is on the evolution of the group and the extent to which its operations have provided a basis for social change that can lead to improved pastoral land management. As also noted by Davies (1999), however, pastoral Landcare in the

rangelands remains under-researched and there is little detailed evidence by which to generally judge its influence and impact.

In the late 1980s, the foundations of a pastoral Landcare group, the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), were developed in the Alice Springs Pastoral District (ASPD; Figure 2) in the southern Northern Territory (NT). I use the term 'pastoral Landcare' to refer to Landcare as it relates to pastoralism and the CLMA, not to other forms of Landcare in the ASPD such as programs run by Aboriginal organisations. The CLMA remains the only pastoral Landcare group in the region and covers the approximately 70 pastoral stations in the ASPD as well as several stations in other districts that look to Alice Springs as their regional centre. By the early 1990s, this Landcare group was formally constituted as the CLMA. The political climate of the time was an important determinant in the group's formation and, arguably, the group continues to play a key role in protecting pastoralism from reforms such as those proposed by the ALC. Rather than examining this proposition, the aim of this paper is to analyse the dynamics of a pastoral Landcare group in the rangelands. In particular, this paper focusses on changes in the orientation of the group and the extent to which it has been able to generate social and cultural resources with which to further its land-management aims. These objectives are met by tracing the enactment of the group's objectives from its establishment, through changes in the nature of its projects and the operation of more informal processes of influence associated with the group.

I suggest that despite overt political origins, the functioning of this Landcare group, particularly up to the late 1990s, illustrates at least two processes. The first of these is the potential for the evolution of pastoral Landcare from relatively narrow concerns to encompass broader questions of land management and sustainability. The second is the process by which pastoral Landcare in the rangelands can provide a credible vehicle for 'reformers' amongst pastoralists to work towards influencing their peers. By

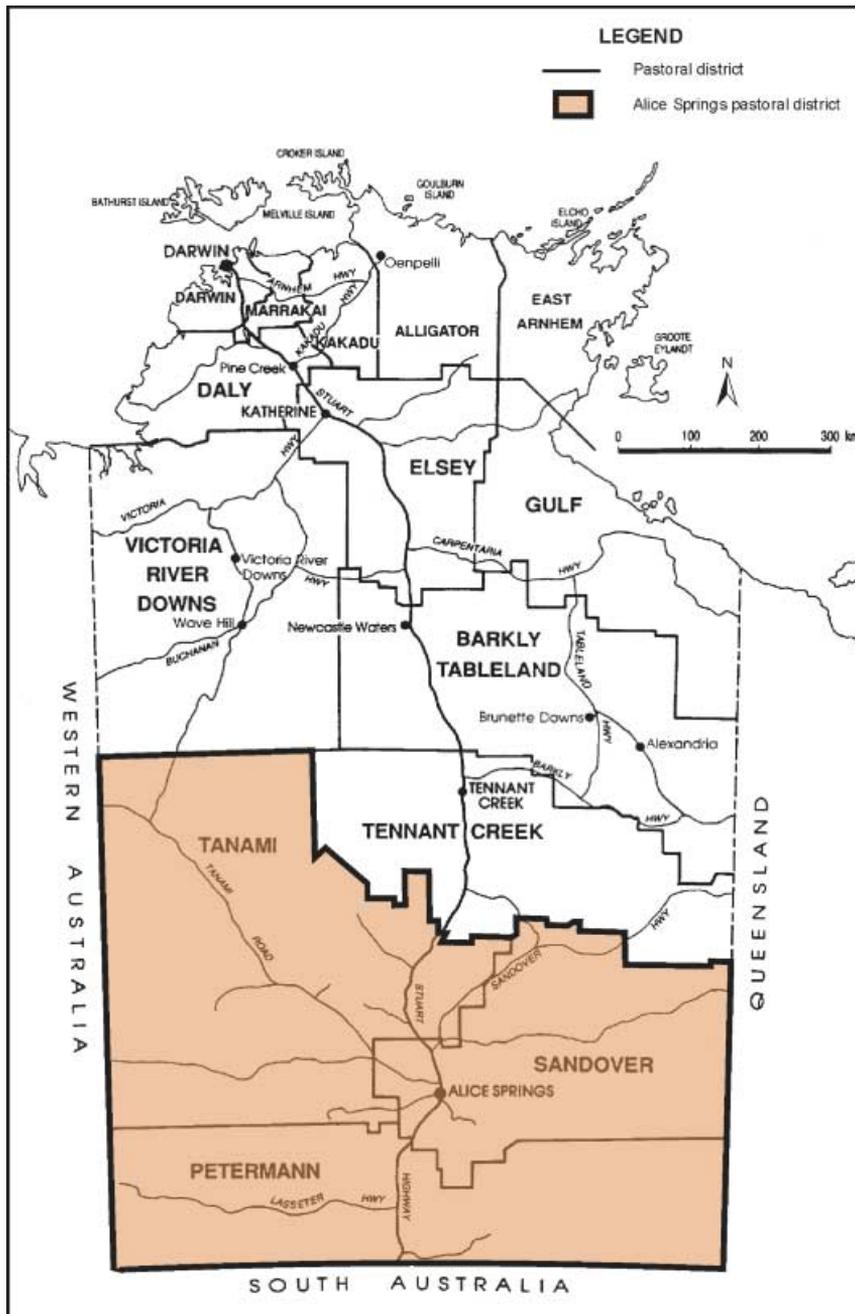


Figure 2 Northern Territory Pastoral Districts (Source: Riddett, 1991).

'reformers' I refer to pastoralists and their associates such as CLMA staff who perceive a need for changes in pastoral land management practices, who are interested in trialling and promoting new approaches and techniques, and who are prepared to work towards these ends through the Landcare group. Within the Landcare framework, such pastoralists have been able to act on the group's objectives without significantly compromising pastoral norms concerning station management and discussion of pastoral land management issues. In these respects, the CLMA is comparable to Landcare groups elsewhere (Cary and Webb, 2000), although, as will be discussed, the nature of pastoral culture makes their achievements noteworthy. Compared with other jurisdictions where formal evaluation has been more extensive and has identified links between producers' level of Landcare involvement and their adoption of 'best practice' techniques (for example see Curtis and De Lacy, 1996; Curtis *et al.*, 2000), the extent to which CLMA operations have materially influenced individual pastoral management practices in the ASPD remains unclear. Nonetheless this paper suggests that independent of conflicts over land use, pastoral Landcare in the rangelands has merits similar to those of Landcare groups elsewhere.

What is Landcare?

The question of defining Landcare is important in examining the development of the CLMA. What is the purpose of the CLMA? Is its role primarily to improve pastoral land management, or is it a highly successful exercise in marketing pastoralism as 'green'; an attempt to depoliticise land use in the rangelands? Such issues have been among those at the heart of evaluating Landcare.

Definitions of Landcare range from those emphasising community groups working towards sustainable land management (Baker, 1997), to those in which Landcare is little more than a signifier for existing government rural extension programs (Lockie, 1997a). Relatively early in its development Campbell (1995) was able to identify twelve interpretations of Landcare. These included:

1. a group extension program;
2. an awareness-raising organisation;
3. a forum for local people to discuss, learn about and act upon issues of common concern;
4. an outlet for land users keen to improve land management;
5. a social focus for sharing the stresses of rural decline, and
6. a way of changing (sub)cultural norms.

Alternatively, Landcare has been framed as a symbolic tool that has legitimised existing agricultural practices and marginalised alternative viewpoints and groups:

The understanding that Landcare is based on new levels of cooperation and participation — that 'Landcare is for everybody' — obscures the manner in which particular interests are pursued through Landcare. (Lockie, 1997a, 39)

In his analysis Lockie (1997a) refers specifically to the practices of agribusiness. Conflicts over land use in the rangelands, however, and the continued dominance of pastoralism in the face of alternative economic and social perspectives on rangelands, suggest that this analysis may also have application to the operations of the CLMA.

At the level of Landcare group operation, evaluation of Landcare has taken a variety of pathways. These have included investigations of the impact of Landcare on landholder knowledge and adoption of 'best bet' practices (for example see Curtis and De Lacy, 1996) and the relationship of Landcare to gender relations in rural areas and agriculture (Beilin, 1997; Lockie, 1997b). A further approach to assessing Landcare is to examine the role of Landcare groups or networks in creating social environments in which landholders' capacity for improving land management practices can be enhanced. In this approach Landcare has been assessed as contributing to the creation or mobilisation of social capital and as creating opportunities for adult learning for cultural change (Crombie, 1995; Cary and Webb, 2000; Sobels *et al.*, 2001; Carr, 2002). In particular, Landcare has played an important role in nurturing new networks, new

opportunities for interaction and group learning, and new relationships directed at improving rural land management practices. Landcare has become a central part of contemporary rural development in Australia, assisting landholders in dealing with environmental, social and economic stress.

Methods

This research is based upon a case study of one Landcare group. While evaluation of Landcare has tended to emphasise regional and national studies, case studies have also been used to complement this approach (Ewing, 1997; 2000; Carr, 2002). Case study research is characterised along the following lines:

An in-depth, multifaceted investigation, [often] using qualitative research methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources. (Orum *et al.*, 1991, 2)

Further to this, there is a number of specific reasons for adopting a case study approach:

1. it permits the grounding of observations and concepts about social action and social structures in natural settings studied at close hand;
2. it provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus making a more holistic study of complex social networks and of complexes of social action and social meanings, and
3. it can furnish the dimensions of time and history to the study of social life, thereby enabling the investigator to examine continuity and change in lifeworld patterns (Orum *et al.*, 1991, 7–6).

As Ewing (1997) has argued, these attributes of case study research make it an appropriate means by which to examine the operation of Landcare at the local level. The local dimension is a key rhetorical and operational component of Landcare and a case study approach is ideal for examining how Landcare is taken up locally and how it relates to local structures, practices and processes.

This research relies largely upon a range of interview and ethnographic material collected in

1996 and 1997 in the ASPD. The CLMA case study was part of a broader study (Gill, 2000) of pastoralists' responses to the changing perceptions of rangelands outlined earlier. The ASPD was appropriate for a study of such responses as conservation values and Aboriginal land rights have significantly challenged pastoralism in the area. The CLMA is a key part of these changes and its development, evolution and success from the very early days of national Landcare (and earlier) make it a useful case study for evaluating rangelands Landcare. Fieldwork included semi-structured interviews with 34 pastoralists on 16 stations. This is approximately 22% percent of the stations in the ASPD. I also interviewed five retired pastoralists and three staff members of the CLMA and Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA). The research incorporated a range of other more informal discussions and observations, which included travelling around stations with pastoralists in the course of their work, working on stations for up to several days, and attending Landcare meetings. Almost all interviews were recorded by note taking. Most pastoralists, except for some retired individuals, did not wish to be recorded. A range of documentary sources were also drawn upon. These included newspaper articles, reports, transcripts of hearings, speeches, and documents relating to Landcare projects from government and the CLMA.

In order to make sense of this disparate information coding was used to break the information down. This essentially involved an iterative process of classifying the information according to categories derived both from the research aims and from the information itself (Patton, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994). This non-linear process of analysis and data gathering (Minichiello *et al.*, 1990) facilitates combining

issues of meaning and symbolic expression with an analysis of the political and economic contexts within which such expressions are manifested [and] to furnish contemporary expressions of meaning with historical lineage, to look back and contextualise the ideas

and views of the present in terms of the past. (Jacobs, 1999, 23)

Such an approach allows the development and work of the CLMA to be viewed in historical perspective and within the broader context of pastoral society in the CLMA.

The CLMA: its profile and role in pastoral land management

The CLMA is an independent, pastoralist-run organisation. Unlike many Landcare groups it employs a full-time coordinator and other staff in its own right rather than relying on government agencies. Like many other Landcare groups the CLMA has struggled with government agencies over funding priorities. Nevertheless, between 1989/90 and 2002/03 the CLMA attracted grants totalling approximately A\$3.2 million from Landcare-related sources (Gardiner and Associates, 1997; Environment Australia, 1999; 2000; 2001; Environment Australia and Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry Australia, 2002). This money was variously used to fund expenditure such as equipment purchases, demonstration works, and CLMA staff salaries.

The CLMA is an integral part of land management institutions in the ASPD. Along with the pastoralists' political organisation, the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA), the CLMA has become one of the 'voices' of pastoralists and is a visible ambassador for pastoral stewardship in the ASPD. It has won State/Territory and national Landcare awards for its work and in 1995/6 it boasted a membership rate of 51% of ASPD pastoralists, which is high by national standards (Baker, 1997; Cary and Webb, 2000).

The origins of pastoral Landcare in the ASPD

Political pressures

To a significant extent the initial role of the CLMA fulfilled Lockie's political characterisation of Landcare (Lockie, 1997a). By the late 1980s, ASPD pastoralists were becoming con-

cerned about the increasing interest of conservationists in rangelands and pastoralism. In 1988, following a field day sponsored by the NTCA, ASPD pastoralists met in Alice Springs and formed the group that became the CLMA.

Pastoralists had already been concerned about conservation organisations' growing interest in rangelands management. In 1987, the NTCA president — an ASPD pastoralist — expressed this concern, calling for a 'small working group to be set up immediately to recommend action that needs to be taken 'to deflect conservationist criticism of the industry and undertake compilation of 'industry supportive data' (Heaslip, 1987, 15–16). It seems that environmental concerns *per se* were not the sole motivation for the initial moves towards forming a pastoral group to deal with land management issues.

The NTCA director urged ASPD pastoralists strategically to express support for documents such as the National Conservation Strategy (NTCA file 366-B). Interviews conducted in 1996 and 1997 with pastoralists, some of whom had been involved in these early meetings, further confirmed that political motivations were a key reason behind the formation of the CLMA. For example, a pastoralist formerly active in Landcare said:

Well, he [the NTCA director] knew the pressures were going to come from the — I was going to say radical group, but its probably the wrong word — but Greening Australia at that time, and the Conservation Foundation were becoming very outspoken and anti-pastoralism of any description, especially in this semi-arid country. That was his reasons. He said: 'Now, get yourself organised, because you're going to have to stand up to these people and provide some answers'. He sort of, well, more-or-less got that movement started. (Interview 11/10/96)

Pastoralists felt they had to demonstrate that not only were they addressing problems inherited from the past but that they were good land managers, and thus could be trusted to manage their land without unwanted criticism and reform.

The fledgling pastoral Landcare group soon became associated with defending pastoralists from allegations of over-grazing. In 1989, one of the founders of the CLMA was reported as saying that there is no land degradation in the ASPD, that he had seen 'heavily stocked country come back better than ever', and that what was required was simply 'spelling' of country to encourage regrowth of perennial grasses, attention to weeds, and remediation of erosion caused by roads ('"Landcarers" say its OK', *Centralian Advocate*, 3/5/89, 2).

Reforming land management: debate and constraints

While political considerations still constituted an important reason for pastoralist membership of the CLMA in 1996 and 1997, there were other reasons. These included opportunities to learn new management techniques, a desire to see reform in the industry, and provision by the CLMA of a forum in which pastoralists could talk comfortably about land management problems.

In support of these views regarding a land management role is evidence that the CLMA operates in a manner consistent with Campbell's (1995) interpretations of Landcare. Referring to the formation of the CLMA, a past president said that there was significant support among pastoralists for improved land management and for a group that could facilitate this. Moreover, the director of the NTCA appears to have anticipated the rise of Landcare in Australia, and saw it as an opportunity to address land management problems in The ASPD. In a 1988 letter to a founder of the CLMA, the director suggests the group direct its energy to:

sound rangeland management practices designed to ensure the future sustainable use of the rangeland which includes measures to reclaim part of the rangeland previously degraded by 'whatever' means. (NTCA file 366-B)

His reference to degradation caused by 'whatever means' is significant for it refers to an apparent reluctance among pastoralists to

admit to the existence of land degradation. In a 1989 letter to another co-founder of the CLMA and other pastoralists, the director argued that they needed to admit that degradation had occurred:

it *has*, either naturally or by man's action to *one degree or another*, so lets get on with: i) identifying its forms, ii) quantifying its extent, and iii) implementing corrective action. (NTCA file 366-B)

In the correspondence the director listed changes in pasture composition, increases in woody weeds and soil loss through overgrazing as forms of land degradation they needed to address.

There are a number of key points to draw from the above material. First, the origins of the CLMA were both politically motivated *and* motivated by a desire to improve pastoral land management. This twin purpose is highlighted in the initial proposed aims of the CLMA which were to create:

1. a self-help organisation to help manage the land better, and
2. an unbiased documented history of ASPD pastoral properties (Minutes, CLMA meeting 22/7/88).

The latter aim refers to the political intent behind the formation of the group. ASPD pastoralists believe that much of the criticism of the environmental impact of their industry is unjustified. Like primary producers elsewhere, it is commonly felt among pastoralists that this criticism has its roots in an urban or white-collar bias against agriculture and grazing, and a lack of knowledge of the history of the landscape and the pastoral industry.

Second, by the late 1980s, the topic of land degradation and the issue of how pastoralists should handle it in a political and public sense was a point of discussion, and possibly contention, among pastoralists and their associates. Third, there is evidence that the CLMA had at its inception an agenda of promoting changes in pastoral land management. As discussed below,

the CLMA has necessarily adopted a strategic approach to achieve this from within pastoralist ranks, without alienating those pastoralists the CLMA leadership hoped to influence.

Furthermore, this and other evidence suggest that, although pastoral society is characterised by considerable social cohesion (Dominy, 1993; 1997; Holmes and Day, 1995), pastoralists are not necessarily united on issues such as land degradation and Landcare. For example, divergent views regarding stocking rates illustrate differences amongst pastoralists. Consistent with criticisms of pastoral practices, a number of pastoralists indicated in interviews that they thought some of their peers were carrying too many stock, some to the point of ongoing reckless indifference to the environmental impact. Most of the pastoralists who expressed this view also said they would like to see the government take action against these individuals. The pastoralists also indicated that they would like to see pastoralists themselves take action, but saw this as near impossible for fear of ostracism as much as for lack of any practical avenue for action. Some interviewees also feared retribution. Some of those named as being 'heavy on the land' were perceived as politically influential. The solidarity presented by pastoralists to the outside world can obscure internal divisions, and pastoralists seeking to effect change have to work within the confines of pastoral norms.

This fear of ostracism bespeaks an important characteristic of pastoral culture that limits what is possible to do and say in public. A strong code of public solidarity influences pastoralists and they are also constrained by a convention that censures public comment. Pastoralists' sense of origins and the nature of personal and family relationships to land inspire a strong sense of insiders and outsiders (for example, Dominy, 1997; 2001; Gill, 1997). This division can come to apply to pastoralists themselves and pastoralists run the risk of being ostracised by others, and becoming outsiders themselves. Pastoralists within the CLMA who wish to bring about change are therefore limited by a culture of solidarity and exclusion.

Reform from within

By 1997 the CLMA committee had undergone significant generational change. Those involved in CLMA's creation were no longer actively involved and/or had largely retired. The committee was made up predominantly of younger pastoralists from the next generation of managers. The CLMA objective was now to 'foster management practices' that will achieve 'regional social, ecologic [*sic*] and economic security for today's and future generations' through 'sustainable productivity' ('CLMA and the Future', pamphlet, October 1997; CLMA, 1997, 1). Although it clearly retains a productivity focus, this is a far broader vision than simply improving land management practices, as originally proposed. According to leaders and key pastoralist members of the CLMA, achieving this objective requires reforming the way pastoralists manage their properties, their interaction with each other, and the issues that form the focus of their interaction. This means creating social networks orientated towards land management rather than those associated with the traditional industry and production issues pursued by the NTCA.

To a significant extent modifying the stock management practices, particularly stock numbers, of pastoralists is a key plank in the strategy of the reformers. Stock numbers are, however, a sensitive issue in the ASPD and elsewhere. A tension between official preferences for relatively lighter stocking regimes and pastoralists' financially advantageous preference for heavier stocking and 'opportune use' of flushes of vegetation growth, has long been a feature of rangelands administration (Heathcote, 1964; Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 1997). Pastoralists are also sensitive as to the commercial nature of their stocking practices. Moreover, stocking practices reveal much about the nature of the pastoralists and their attitudes and beliefs. In order to modify stocking practices, reforming pastoralists must change the 'dominant farming subculture' (Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995) of ASPD pastoralists. Such subcultures are constituted in part by the attitudes and beliefs members are 'supposed' to subscribe to, and the practices that

they are 'supposed' to follow. Stocking practices and stock management are central to pastoralism. Promotion of lower stock numbers and more intensive or careful management of stock and pastures represent substantially different ways of not only managing, but of actually 'doing' pastoralism. The promotion of alternative practices also carries the risk of being taken as implying that one's peers are managing poorly, and of crossing boundaries of land and knowledge.

For these reasons, CLMA leaders must work carefully within the boundaries set by pastoral culture to foster changes in land management. The issue of stocking rates must be tackled carefully. Although they perceive that some members of an 'old guard' were gradually becoming more open to the CLMA's work, CLMA leaders perceive that there is an influential 'old guard' among pastoralists who retain sufficient power amongst pastoralists to frustrate CLMA activities and plans. To enable CLMA to achieve its goals and to redefine what constitutes 'good' pastoralism, CLMA leaders must acquire the credibility or 'cultural capital' required to install their vision of pastoral management as the dominant model in the ASPD (Phillips and Gray, 1995; see also Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995). This struggle is not necessarily with individuals. The deeper problem faced by CLMA reformers is that they are engaging with practices and beliefs deeply embedded in pastoral history and identity. From this perspective CLMA reformers are not simply trying to change what pastoralists do and think but the very values, ideas, tools and memories with which they think and act (Gill, 2003; see also Ison and Russell, 2000).

Conservationist criticism that there is not enough evidence for 'on-the-ground' results from rangelands Landcare (Arid Lands Environment Centre internal notes and ALC, 1996) does not sufficiently acknowledge the cultural complexity of pastoral and rural society, and the struggles that occur amongst pastoralists. In part the CLMA's proud and assertive emphasis that it is about 'action' and practical on-the-ground work (Millington, 1992) has perhaps worked

against it in this regard. Not only does the CLMA thereby discount what actually may be among the achievements discussed in this paper — building social and cultural foundations for longer-term changes in pastoral attitudes, beliefs and management practices — but they invite scrutiny into their projects and into the extent to which pastoral practices have changed as a result of Landcare. As evaluators of Landcare have found, attempting to evaluate what is essentially a modestly-funded and relatively youthful volunteer program that seeks to change well-established approaches to land use and management by such material outcomes is problematic (Cary and Webb, 2000). However, for the CLMA boldly to proclaim that they seek to alter pastoral attitudes and encourage pastoralists to significantly change their management practices would be untenable. It seems likely, as for Landcare elsewhere, that systemic change to rangelands land management due to Landcare is likely to be slow, particularly in the absence of efforts to assist pastoralists to deal with structural constraints (Curtis and De Lacy, 1996; Cary and Webb, 2000).

Evolution of the CLMA

Whether the CLMA is likely to continue to play an implicit or explicit political role, there is a genuine reform agenda amongst its leaders and active members. While there is an absence of detailed information regarding the influence of CLMA activities on pastoralists there is evidence that as an organisation the CLMA has been able to realise elements of the reform agenda outlined above. First, CLMA projects have evolved beyond their early focus on weeds, erosion and feral animals; second, more informally the CLMA is associated with networks among pastoralists through which management changes are promoted.

The projects

Consistent with Davies' (1999, 64) observation that pastoral Landcare is 'constrained by the conservatism of tradition', the CLMA has focussed on projects that are likely to be non-

threatening to pastoralists. These projects are consistent with CLMA organisers' views of cattle and land, and do not destabilise their own position, and they are also likely to appeal to other pastoralists' land management priorities. CLMA priorities are generally held amongst pastoralists. This was not, however, universal. Rabbits, for example, are not a problem on all stations. At least one pastoral family was not a member at the time of fieldwork as they did not agree with CLMA priorities and what they perceived as an emphasis on rabbits. CLMA has also participated in other smaller projects, perhaps most notably in conjunction with other organisations such as the Threatened Species Network concerning threatened species conservation on pastoral land (CLMA, 1997). For example, CLMA is part of a Recovery Team working on the conservation of shrub species in the region (Duguid, 1999). However, it is clear that projects related to rabbit control, weed control and soil erosion (largely in relation to works such as track placement) have dominated CLMA projects. Up to 1996/97, rabbit control projects accounted for about 43% of CLMA grants (Gardiner and Associates, 1997) and they remained a key activity to 2001/02. In this period the CLMA received A\$468 000 for 'Post RCD [Rabbit Calicivirus Disease] rabbit control to benefit threatened species in the Finke bioregion' (Environment Australia, 2001; Environment Australia and Agriculture Fisheries and Forestry Australia, 2002). This is in part due to a still strong desire among pastoralists for such projects (personal communication CLMA, 6/5/03) and in part due to wider scientific interest in the ecological consequences of CLMA rabbit control work. The rabbit control projects at various sites — involving warren ripping, monitoring of the effect of the fatal rabbit calicivirus, and follow-up monitoring of rabbit numbers and the ecological impact of rabbit reduction — are CLMA's best-known projects.

Nonetheless, the evolution of CLMA projects supports the reformers' contention that they wish to move the CLMA beyond weeds and feral animals. An early, if isolated example

of this was a land-use planning workshop run by the CLMA in 1992. This workshop promoted the concept of property management planning as a means of improving business and land management. According to CLMA leaders, CLMA's support of property management planning facilitated 'safe' discussion of stocking levels and they said they hope to be able to address stocking issues more substantively in the future.

By 1995/96 and 1996/97 two small projects were instituted that illustrate a broadening of the CLMA agenda beyond rabbits, weeds and rehabilitation to include improvement of station management as a whole. These are the 'sustainable resource management' projects on two relatively productive land systems that have been subject to high grazing pressure. The aim of these projects was to establish the best management strategies to regain and maintain the productivity of such land systems, and for on-going pastoral management to be based on 'sustainable land-use principles' (CLMA, 1997). While these projects remained small and relatively low profile, they represented a new dimension to the CLMA's work to that point.

While rabbit projects have remained a large element of the CLMA's work, more recently the association has initiated some projects that aim to improve pastoral land and business management through processes of learning and review. While the 1998–2002 'Integrated Pastoral Resource Management' was largely an extension of weed, rabbit and erosion control projects, it also worked towards 'an industry approach to conservation' and the CLMA's 'Environmental Management Systems' (EMS) project (Personal Communication, CLMA, 6/5/2003). This project has been funded under the Commonwealth Government's 'EMS National Pilot Program' and aims to:

develop and implement EMS on 15 cattle properties and assess the system's value in terms of improved business and environmental outcomes. The pilot will also identify EMS tools and approaches that are suited to pastoral enterprises in arid environments. (Kemp and Troeth, 2003)

While Geno (1999) has identified a range of potential problems with the use of EMS in agriculture, particularly outside a corporate setting, CLMA's move to this arena may be seen as an attempt to marry economics and environment matters in pastoral management. Potentially it will enable pastoralists to gauge the environmental and economic outcomes of their management actions more accurately, and to relate the two. Whether it becomes a genuine process of learning and change rather than, as Geno (1999, 581) fears, 'an ideal way to assert that everything is being done to preserve and protect the environment while leaving the actual level of environmental performance open to interpretation', remains to be seen.

Finally, CLMA's recent 'Centre Land Watch' project further illustrates the evolution of the CLMA away from its earlier focus and towards projects that explicitly emphasise building pastoralists' management capacity, and developing systems for monitoring the outcomes of management actions. The Centre Land Watch project aims to support pastoralists in monitoring the condition of the soil and vegetation on their properties, and to further develop their knowledge and understanding of the interactions among soils, plants and cattle (Walsh, 2002).

Informal networks and setting examples

Another way in which CLMA leaders have sought to influence their peers is through existing social networks among pastoralist neighbours and friends, in such a way that pastoral families have become active CLMA members. For example, through such influence one family that had expressed antipathy towards the CLMA in an initial interview was hosting CLMA field days within a year. In this case a leader of the CLMA was able to work through social networks, particularly among women, that existed between neighbouring stations in one part of the ASPD. Through family networks, stations in other parts of the ASPD subsequently also became involved in the CLMA. Such networks were also used to lend equipment to other pastoralists so that they could trial techniques

promoted by the CLMA. In one case earthmoving equipment was offered to a family perceived by their peers as being 'heavy on the land' due to high stock numbers. This earthmoving equipment was then used to build ponding banks on a degraded area. The CLMA leaders were under no illusions that building ponding banks to rehabilitate degraded land necessarily represented a significant shift in attitude on the part of this pastoral family. Nevertheless, they saw this exercise as an opportunity to encourage this family to begin considering CLMA ideas and their own approach to management. After an enthusiastic tour of the ponding banks by the borrower of the equipment, the pastoralist who had lent it said to me 'I think we've had a win there'. Strategies such as these aim to facilitate involvement and change through indirect means that encourage pastoralists to become involved or to change their practices by their own choice.

Reforming pastoralists have also sought to facilitate change by acting as examples of alternative management regimes. Many pastoralists prominent in the CLMA are running relatively low stock numbers, certainly lower than those run by their parents or by previous owners of their stations. Many pastoralists I interviewed indicated that they had reduced stock numbers by up to 50% of numbers previously carried on their stations. I cannot attribute this directly to the influence of the CLMA, and the period of fieldwork was also a time of relatively low rainfall. However, these changes in stocking regimes do seem to be part of a shift in ASPD pastoralism, and reflect a strong interest expressed by many pastoralists to move to lower stocking strategies for economic and environmental reasons.

Some pastoralists expressed interest in such a change but required some examples as to how it might be done and were critical of the CLMA for not focussing enough on stock management. For example, one pastoralist in his twenties was interested in stock strategies for drought management and thought that CLMA work should focus more on stocking issues. This comment was particularly revealing as one pastoralist in the region has been practising extremely low

stocking regimes for many years, yet pastoralists generally have not seen him as an example to follow. This individual has not only practised an approach to station management that is highly divergent from and challenging to the practices of others, but he has also at times been outspoken in his criticism of other pastoralists' management practices. Other pastoralists have not only ostracised him to an extent, but also view his lifestyle as impoverished due to low income. In interviews, however, two young pastoralists indicated that he had influenced their thinking on land management and stocking regimes. In addition, there are now other stations running relatively low numbers but whose owners in comparison to this individual live more conventional lifestyles. At least three of these are associated with the CLMA. In general, such changes appear to be creating room for greater acceptance of conservative stocking strategies to be demonstrated and at least considered by other pastoralists. The more recent CLMA projects such as Centre Land Watch and the EMS scheme contain the potential for furthering pastoralists' developing interest in alternative approaches to managing their cattle and their land.

There was some evidence from interviews with pastoralists that CLMA activities were having some of the effects desired by CLMA leaders. Pastoralists indicated that the CLMA provided a forum in which ideas could be exchanged among pastoralists, potentially sensitive issues such as land degradation could be discussed, and the practices of others could be seen and described by the pastoralists involved. Pastoralists whom I interviewed valued the fact that events such as field days were organised by pastoralists, rather than outside 'experts'. The president of the NTCA indicated that the CLMA, particularly through its field days, was a forum for discussing difficult land management issues to an extent not previously possible. As one pastoralist leader of CLMA said in relation to the role of CLMA field days, 'bush people have a lot of pride, you can't bruise it'. At CLMA field days pastoralists see or discuss firsthand new techniques and approaches to

station management. They can be active or passive participants. They do not run the risk of appearing as an ignorant or poor manager. They are able to return their own properties, evaluate what their peers are doing, and follow up or apply it as they see fit, again without risk of their pride being 'bruised'.

The CLMA: more than land management

After fifteen years of successful operation it could be argued that the NTCA and ASPD pastoralists have been successful in their original political strategy to protect their industry from criticism and reform. As a producer group, however, the CLMA has made contributions towards improving pastoral land management in the long term. If pastoralism is to remain in the ASPD and maintain or increase productivity, at the very least the CLMA is an active and positive force for facilitating this in a manner that goes further towards meeting environmental goals than past pastoral practices. The CLMA fulfils a number of the roles for Landcare identified by Campbell (1995). These include a community-based vehicle to address land degradation and a forum for discussion among landholders. Most importantly, while it may be premature based on the evidence presented here to argue that the CLMA is a vehicle for changing (sub)cultural norms among pastoralists, there is evidence that CLMA leaders are pursuing this as a goal of the organisation. In these regards the CLMA is comparable to Landcare groups elsewhere (Cary and Webb, 2000).

There is, however, more to the CLMA than a focus on land management alone. Pastoralists who have adopted more conservative stocking practices indicated that they had done so largely for economic reasons rather than environmental reasons *per se*. With strong competition in the beef industry (Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics, 1999), marketing a distinctive and high-quality product is increasingly important. Moreover, rangelands pastoralism faces significant structural, economic and environmental constraints to viability and sustainability (Stafford-Smith *et al.*, 1997). For example,

researchers from the North Australian Research Unit in Darwin found that northern cattle producers would have to lift productivity by 20% to remain financially viable (ABC Radio, NT Country Hour, 23 July 1999). Pastoralists see lower stock numbers as one strategy for generating higher or at least more stable returns through *consistently* being able to turn off high-quality stock and meet buyer expectations. The potential increases in productivity through lower stock numbers and adoption of CLMA-promoted activities are seen as offering increased chances of financial survival and profitability through improved land condition and resilience. Environmental management is becoming a key component of economic performance. A more productive and resilient natural resource base will enable production of high-quality stock, and the EMS project appears to arise from this relationship between environmental and economic performance. To see the CLMA as purely an 'environmental' or 'land management' organisation is simplistic. The Gardiner report into the CLMA quotes a pastoralist on its cover page:

The CLMA is the only way that we can ensure that this country is here for our children. (Gardiner and Associates, 1997).

This sentiment parallels the views of many pastoralists in interviews, and illustrates how the CLMA is a vehicle for pursuing the survival of pastoralism, the stability of pastoral families and their ongoing ability to remain on the land.

In this context the CLMA must be seen as one of a range of strategies taken by pastoralists to ensure their financial survival. These strategies include or have included managing stores to service local Aboriginal populations, dealing in Aboriginal art, operating roadhouses, trialling fruit production on stations, being involved in the tourism industry, adopting cattle and beef quality assurance schemes, attempting to market beef directly overseas, and promoting the region's beef as 'clean and green'. In relation to so-called 'blackfella stores' it was said to me by pastoralists that some stations were valued as

much for their stores as for their potential cattle production.

Conclusion

The role of Landcare in the rangelands has been the subject of significant policy debate amid broader and long-standing questions of land use in the rangelands. Pastoral Landcare in the ASPD developed in this context and initially had strong, explicit associations with defensiveness felt by pastoralists, and was itself a vehicle for articulating traditional pastoral views regarding pastoral practices. Given the shift to regional and catchment-based approaches in the implementation and funding of programs such as Landcare (Ewing *et al.*, 2000), and the diversity of interests in land in the ASPD and the rangelands as a whole, the avowed role of the CLMA in protecting pastoral interests may yet become more problematic. Nonetheless the pastoral Landcare group has evolved from its direct associations with the NTCA to create new networks and institutions among pastoralists specifically directed towards environmental and land management issues. Moreover, while maintaining a significant focus on pastoralists' priorities of weeds and feral animals, the group has gradually re-directed its efforts towards projects which aim to improve pastoralists' management capacity and which provide opportunities to learn systematically and cooperatively from the outcomes of their management decisions. Through its projects, field days and meetings, the CLMA has helped to create a learning community of pastoralists orientated towards a process of moving to sustainable pastoral land management. The Landcare program has enabled pastoralists to attract the resources required to bring this about.

However, while this paper argues that the CLMA has created social space and opportunities for interaction on land management issues, there remains a lack of information on the extent to which CLMA operations have influenced management practices on individual stations, or the precise nature of the networks created through CLMA's work. Despite the significant amount

of funding to the CLMA, to date there has been no independent assessment of such issues in the ASPD as a whole. The only review of the CLMA (Gardiner and Associates, 1997) was not independent and did little more than describe projects and enumerate membership and attendance at CLMA activities. As discussed earlier, Landcare evaluation needs to encompass more than such relatively shallow description. With their more holistic aims, and in concert with other case studies of contemporary rangelands Landcare, the implementation of the EMS and Centre Land Watch projects provide opportunities to assess critically the evolution of rangelands Landcare and its impact on pastoralists and land management practices.

The evolution of the CLMA is to a significant extent due to the role of the group as a vehicle through which 'reformist' pastoralists are able to act. While it is easy to see the CLMA as synonymous with 'ASPD pastoralists' as a whole, this is not necessarily the case. Similarly, a distinction should be made between the political role of the CLMA and the views and activities of reformer pastoralists who see the CLMA as an opportunity and vehicle to advance land management reforms. The CLMA is not only a means by which rangelands politics are acted on, it is also a means through which differences within pastoral society are played out and acted on as reformers use the CLMA to extend their influence and networks. The pastoral Landcare group provides a credible base for reformers to influence their peers both within and beyond the formal group and its activities. To existing concepts of Landcare we can add the idea of Landcare as an intentional process of differentiation, influence, negotiation and reform by which reformist landholders can act on their peers. The political space of Landcare is not confined to that ground between Landcare and its critics, it also exists among landholders.

Finally, the evolution of the group in the direction of projects which search for ways to survive economically, socially and ecologically, shows that today this group should not be cast simply as a land management organisation. It is

a vehicle for communal survival strategies and is one of a number of such strategies in the region. In Campbell's (1995) terms, it is a way of sharing the stresses of rural life. The CLMA, however, is not only an outlet for this apparent need but it is also a means by which ASPD pastoralists are obtaining resources from elsewhere to pursue industry and community development and survival. In this case, a Landcare group is moving towards playing a self-help development role across both economic and environmental arenas. Whether such a role will be able to draw on the social gains of the last fourteen years to overcome the structural constraints facing rangelands pastoralists in particular will be a significant test for rangelands pastoralism and Landcare.

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