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Nudging the narrative: Heading in the 'right direction'

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Nudging the narrative: Heading in the 'right direction'

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Summary text for the Table of Contents online

Lack of engagement with rangelands by politicians and the general public has led to policy failure and unsustainable practice. We argue that thinking in terms of cultural reciprocity with land will lead to greater sustainability of rangeland uses. Many grass-roots initiatives are already showing the way by working at the boundary of science, society and decision makers, involving everyone with a stake in the outcome and developing genuine collaboration and acceptance of diverse value systems.

Abstract

Lack of engagement with rangelands by politicians and the general public has led to policy failure and unsustainable practice. We argue that thinking in terms of cultural reciprocity with land will lead to greater sustainability of rangeland uses. Many grass-roots initiatives are already showing the way by working at the boundary of science, society and decision makers, involving everyone with a stake in the outcome and developing genuine collaboration and acceptance of diverse value systems.

Additional Keywords: Cultural reciprocity, sustainability, transdisciplinarity, collective resolution

Commentary

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There are few certainties on the journey towards environmental, economic, social and cultural sustainability in rangeland use. Change will occur through some combination of chance, intent, and timing. Given this inherent complexity, what can rangelands practitioners do to nudge the system in the right direction?

First, the question of a right direction. This is a matter of judgement, open to contest, and subject to continuous revision. Our consensus at any given time comprises the cultural narrative. Laws, policy, and the power of the economy are potent drivers of the current narrative, but do we share a sense of where we wish to go? Perhaps because there are several dominant interests in the rangelands, not necessarily compatible with one another, and relatively few voters, there has been little political imperative to resolve a more functional and integrative national position on the rangelands. What would it take to shift the rangeland narrative in Australia, setting us more surely on a path towards abundance and resilience?

We suggest that this new narrative begin with 'custodial reciprocity with the land', reflecting an indigenous sense of cultural connection and obligation. In a sense, this is a very old narrative, but one that has been ignored by many in the haste to develop industries based on rangeland resources. Margaret Kemarre Turner OAM, a senior Arrernte woman strong on language and culture said "We are part of the Land. The Land *is* us, and we are the Land. That's how we hold our Land." (Turner 2010). The kinship system relates to the Land by skin name, and "tells us…who we are and where we're from", in the sense of "where you really originated". "You were created out of your ancestral country to be who you are." "The only way that we can translate into English how we see our relationship with the Land is with the words 'hold', and 'connect'. The roots of the country and its people are twined together." MK Turner (2010) wrote a whole book about what it means to be an Aboriginal person, of which the foregoing is a very inadequate representation, but she gives us a strong clue as to what this means for us when she says: "And always, you treat the Land good, the Land treats you the same."

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In March 1845 explorer Charles Sturt was north of Depot Grey (NSW) when he rode over “flooded lands of somewhat sandy soil, covered with a different grass, of which large heaps that had been thrashed out by the natives were piled up like hay cocks” (Sturt 1849/1969, p. 294). Historian Bruce Pascoe (2014) described several occasions when Sturt encountered extensive seed harvesting by Aboriginal people in what seemed to Sturt be very inhospitable country. Pascoe (2014) subsequently remarked on the “industry and ingenuity applied to food production over millennia” by Aboriginal people, demonstrated by reports of early explorers and settlers of water harvesting, hoeing and fire, and he attributed the sustainability of this use to intimate knowledge of land, embedded in culture. The point is that long-term environmentally, culturally and economically sustainable use of rangelands is possible, even if the type of use is now different, given a deep understanding of how the country works and a commitment to care for it.

Pastoralist Bob Purvis (1986) said “After 25 years on the job, I have applied and refined a series of management principles and techniques which guide my property management.” These begin with: “Nurture your land and it will repay you. Abuse your land and it will break you sooner or later. Manage your land first - the stock will respond.” He went on to detail how this can be done in practice and, 33 years later, he and his family still run an environmentally and financially sustainable enterprise.

A change in narrative to ‘custodial reciprocity with the land’ creates obvious tensions, especially when economic growth has priority. At the national scale sectoral interests can promote expansion of an industry, at times with little real sense of obligation to incorporate explicit targets for resource management, community care, or social license. And at a personal level, we acknowledge the sacrifice needed in order to become one with country, to treat country well. What does that sacrifice mean with respect to the individual land manager's relationship with the dominant culture and all its normative inertia? In 1986, Bob Purvis described himself as “The outsider” and went on to say: “For

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many years I have found myself quite at odds with my pastoralist colleagues and many government bureaucrats who are charged with overseeing land management" (Purvis 1986).

At about the same time that Bob Purvis published his paper (1986), a number of farmers in Victoria initiated a volunteer group, 'Landcare', to repair the natural environment. The Landcare movement attracted some high-profile support, a groundswell of public interest and the eventual commitment of substantial federal government funding (Landcare 2020). The principle of land stewardship is now widely understood and there seems little doubt that the concept of 'custodial reciprocity with the land' is closer to acceptance than it was 35 years ago. However, we are not there yet.

With some idea of a shared vision for the rangelands, we turn now to consider the 'nudge'. Who is to do the nudging and how? It can be dispiriting to survey the past failure of both politicians and the general public to engage with rangelands. Where policies have been devised, they have focussed on regulation, information transfer and market mechanisms "all of which show sparse evidence of effectiveness" (Brennan 2019). Fred Chaney (2015) remarked "As yet no political party has embraced the need for serious changes in the way government itself operates in remote Australia". He notes: "Policy for remote Australia needs to be … 'custom-built' to meet its specific circumstances and needs".

Given decades of absentee leadership from above, we propose Leith *et al.*'s (2017) approach for shaping and accelerating grass roots leadership, based on genuine collaboration and acceptance of diverse value systems. Here, we quote extensively from Leith *et al.*'s (2017) book 'Enhancing Science Impact'. They examined climate change as an example of a complex problem, and we believe the same analysis is appropriate to the rangelands. This complexity is seen as "a constellation of diverse issues, which concern different people in various ways and for differing reason… When people argue about climate change, they are often talking about completely different issues, concerns, values and beliefs – all at the same time". As Brennan (2019) noted, such multiple perspectives can all represent valid responses to different needs, different experiences and different knowledge systems.

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Because there can be winners and losers such matters are political: resolution depends on who has the power to make decisions. In addition, the lenses through which climate change is examined are selected by people in terms of preferences and values – they are deeply social. Sometimes, problems may appear to be about technical questions when they are really about values and goals. We suggest that sustainability problems in the rangelands will often occupy the top right panel of Figure 1 (Leith *et al.*'s (2017) Figure 1.3).

[Insert Figure 1]

If we are to make progress toward sustainability in the rangelands, all the potential stakeholders need to have some ownership of both the problems and the solutions. Too often a problem can be defined by a key stakeholder and only then will other players be invited to help.

In ideal circumstances win–win answers to these problems can emerge, but they are more often typified by trade-offs. Decisions lead to a redistribution of benefits, costs and risks across communities, between human and natural systems, and between the present and future. For all parties to support such trade-offs, there needs to be work at the boundary of science, society and decision makers, and inclusion of everyone with a stake in the outcome. This means involvement of broader publics who have a stake in and knowledge of pertinent issues, as well as government, industries and scientists. In deeply contested matters, it is essential that a high level of authenticity and shared meaning is available to dissolve the customary bounds of technical and social specialisation. This is a 'transdisciplinary' exercise. Referencing Pregernig (2006), Leith *et al.* (2017) explained that 'transdisciplinarity' comprises four elements: (1) interdisciplinarity, (2) participation of non-expert stakeholders, (3) problem orientation (i.e. the focus is on real-world problems rather than basic science) and (4) solution orientation (i.e. the main focus is to provide practical solutions).

So, there is a role for diverse stakeholders in attempting to deal with complex problems in the rangelands. The initiative need not rest with governments and in fact, as we have argued,

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governments may not be interested in or willing to engage with rangeland issues. There are numerous examples of sustainability problem-solving in the rangelands, which have grown from grass roots activities to engage with a full suite of stakeholders including governments. Some of their key characteristics are a considerable investment of time and reflexivity, that is, reflection on the inherent values that each party inevitably brings to the table, and commitment to relationship building.

Through mechanisms such as the regional NRM arrangements (NRM 2020), the Outback Alliance (Traill 2019; Outback Alliance 2020) and the Rangelands NRM Alliance (2020), we can see that there is real progress being made in the boundary work that meshes networks, agendas, and resources toward shared goals. A key challenge is accepting the need to prioritise and fund this boundary work in recognition of the essential role it plays in relationship development and maintenance. In this sense, one of the big stumbling blocks has been the lack of an agreed set of metrics that can be used to verify value for money. Assessing the efficacy of NRM boundary work is the goal of 'Seven Signs of Planning' as proposed in a re-envisioning of NRM Regional Plans and planning processes for Northern Australia (Brisbin 2018).

There is potential for projects that help crystallise public consensus around values. The Beef Sustainability Framework (BSF 2020) provides a connection between the grazing industry and sustainability metrics agreed through international convention. In pursuit of this goal Meat & Livestock Australia is making use of the recent development of the Australian Open DataCube (2020) to establish the link between a verifiable history of management with an observed history of vegetation changes.

Farmers for Climate Action (FCA 2019) shows that there is a robust movement, especially amongst young primary producers, for a new narrative about agriculture and its place in a rapidly changing environment.

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In further examples of the collective resolution of sustainability issues, not driven by government policy initiatives, the *Ten Deserts Project* is building capacity of Indigenous groups to look after country for a range of economic, social, cultural and environmental outcomes. It is led by Desert Support Services, an Indigenous body, enabled by $21 M provided by the BHP Billiton Foundation, and supported by diverse Indigenous and environmental organisations (Catt 2019; Richards 2019; IDA 2020). Furthermore, Aboriginal ranger programs started small, funded by Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) from 2003. They are now a major employer on-country: northern savannas supported at least 650 Indigenous FTEs through Commonwealth Working on Country and Indigenous Protected Areas programs in 2018 (Russell-Smith and Sangha 2018).

In the conservation arena, Bush Heritage Australia and Australian Wildlife Conservancy have purchased pastoral properties of conservation value with extensive funding provided by the general public, without recourse to government funding. Pew Charitable Trusts has supported multiple projects, including the *Ten Deserts Project*, through its *Outback to Oceans* initiative (PEW 2020). As Clarke (2019) pointed out, “civil society has an important role to play in promoting public policy and funding commitments to support conservation action by landholders in the Outback.”

We are seeing the public mind shift towards new narratives that emphasise environmental and cultural priorities in the development of economic activities. With enough determination, inclusion and insight, we suggest that increasing public demand for greater sustainability of land use and ‘custodial reciprocity with the land’ is possible and is happening. The ‘nudge’ to the new rangeland narrative can come from anyone. What is required is an unwavering commitment to build relationships and work towards genuine consensus.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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212 **Caption for Figure 1.**

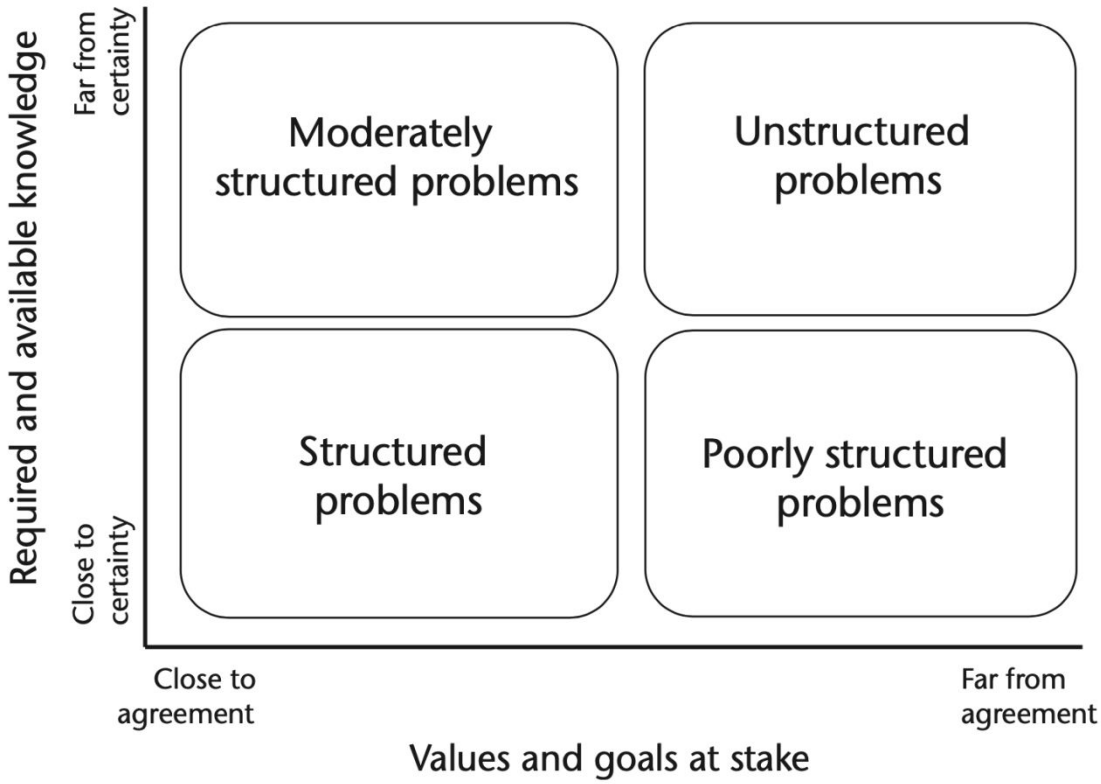
213 Problem structures. Reproduced from Leith *et al.* (2017) with permission from CSIRO Publishing.

214 Adapted from Hoppe (2011); Turnhout et al. (2008).

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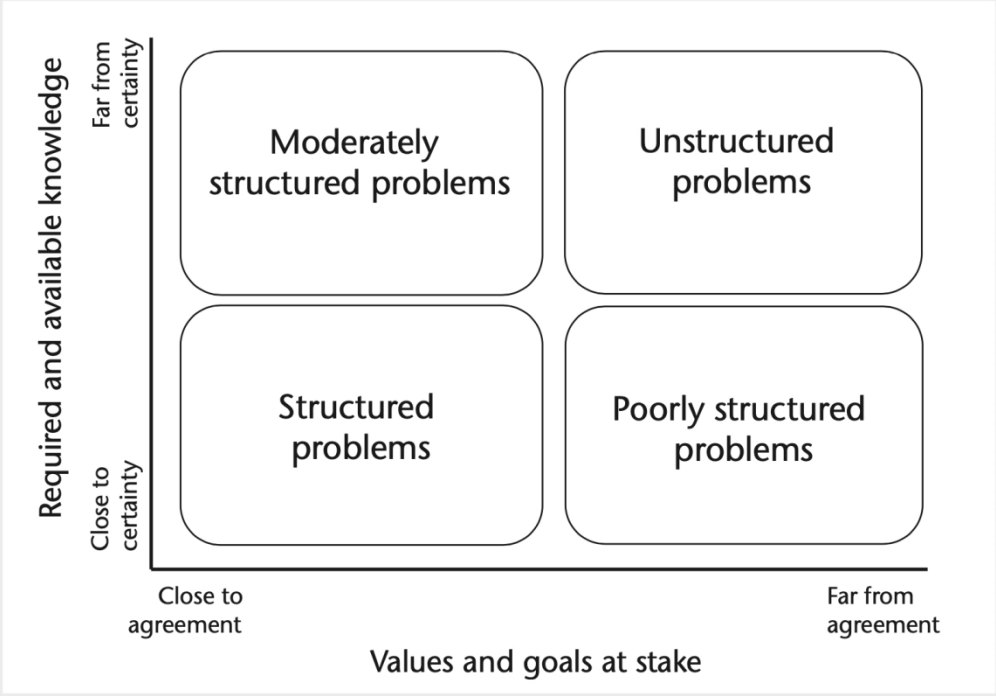


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217 **Figure 1:** Problem structures. Reproduced from Leith *et al.* (2017) with permission from CSIRO

218 Publishing. Adapted from Hoppe (2011); Turnhout et al. (2008).

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