

A narrative to support the future of the Australian Outback

B. J. Traill^{A,C} and Mark Stafford-Smith^B

^APew Charitable Trusts, GPO Box 1544, Brisbane, QLD 4001, Australia.

^BCSIRO Land and Water, Canberra, ACT 2600, Australia.

^CCorresponding author. Email: wilderness@hotmail.net.au

Abstract. Stories matter: as powerful frames for policy and public understanding, but the current narratives about Outback Australia are both confused and often negative. We illustrate this power of stories, including how deliberate framing and story-telling to create a better narrative on some rangeland issues has had positive policy outcomes. Moving to a more intuitive name is one key issue – we suggest that talking of the ‘Modern Outback’ is a powerful change in this regard. We then draw on discussions to provide a set of guiding principles for how to frame writings about the Outback, and give an example of their use.

Additional keywords: drylands, guidance, mental models, modern dreaming, rangelands.

Received 18 May 2020, accepted 18 August 2020, published online 25 September 2020

What are the narratives?

‘Nations tells themselves stories. They are not fully true, they are often bitterly contested and they change over time. But they are powerful: they underlie the necessary fiction that is ‘us’.’ Fintan O’Toole, Irish writer and commentator.

Stories matter, especially big stories. Narratives bring meaning and coherence to people, communities, regions and whole nations. It is often misunderstood, perhaps especially by those of us trained in science, that these narratives are not just stories to amuse or for idle speculation. It is often difficult to precisely specify or to absolutely quantify the impacts of the over-arching narratives of place and people, but they are fundamental in framing what is possible for the whole or part of a society, what a government may do for good or ill, what is permissible or not socially, and where and how scarce resources of land, water or money may be allocated (Maclean 2009). This really matters, as even implicit narratives are reinforced through society in many ways. For example, Shanahan (2016) analysed how journalists self-edit their stories to suit their editors’ different narratives of rangelands in each of Kenya, India and China. Other, potentially more positive or empowering stories are rarely told and the dominant narrative is further entrenched.

There have been several narratives – some old, some modern – that have been important in the Outback (e.g. see Maclean 2009). In the 1960s the great Australian anthropologist, Bill Stanner, identified the ‘Great Australian Silence’ – the general avoidance of discussing Indigenous issues in mainstream Australian history and current affairs. The powerful narrative that Indigenous history and culture was irrelevant to Australian life was maintained within families, whole towns, and by the bulk of the Australian community at large as well as

by governments in Australia (Stanner 1969) until progressively changing in more recent decades. This narrative was hugely consequential in suppressing legal and economic rights for Indigenous people for more than a century (Hollinsworth 2006).

This contrasts with a related more modern narrative: the rise in understanding of ancient and modern Indigenous land management. ‘Country Needs People’ is a story that has been consciously built over the last decade (e.g. Altman 2007; Pascoe 2014; Steffensen 2020; Country Needs People 2020). The narrative is that traditional Indigenous ecological and cultural knowledge is of enormous value in managing modern Australian landscapes. This description, new to most Australians, has created a space where there is deepening public and bipartisan political support for Indigenous land and sea management. This support has already delivered more than \$1.7 billion of government funding for Indigenous rangers and Indigenous Protected Areas, providing now 3000 full and part-time jobs for Indigenous people, most of them in Outback communities. This level of support would not have happened without conscious public presentation of this new narrative.

Two Outback institutions – the Schools of the Air, and the Royal Flying Doctor Service – illustrate other long-standing, positive public narratives which helps their ongoing political support and funding. They are both familiar institutions that are also broadly known outside the Outback. Schools of the Air were established in the 1950s by the education departments of all Outback states. Originally set up using two-way radios, they have transitioned to web-based communications. Their iconic status has assisted with their continuity. In a recent example, the Western Australian Education Minister attempted to de-fund the state’s Schools of the Air in 2018. The government reversed their decision with an ‘astonishing backflip’, following a strong public

backlash, which came from the Outback and also from people in the state capital, Perth (WA Today 2018). The Minister admitted that she had under-estimated the public support for the institution. The Royal Flying Doctor Service is a non-profit organisation which provides emergency and primary health care services for those living in areas of Australia who cannot access a hospital or general practice due to distance. It similarly has an exceptional and iconic organisational narrative that supports its work, including fundraising and policy development (RFDS 2020).

So what is the narrative for remote Australia – the ‘Rangelands’, the ‘Outback’ as a whole? Does it have a narrative of what it is and how it works that is held by the majority of Australians? There are no detailed social assessments, but from observations over the last two decades, and some specific qualitative polling done by Pew Charitable Trusts, we perceive that there is not a settled, broader and general narrative. Rather there is a disparate mixture of often contradictory views that can be usefully separated into three distinct strands. In part it is seen as the Australian heartland, viewed with a positive, nostalgic mythology of a vast red landscape, harsh but beautiful, with intact nature and abundant wildlife, inhabited by resilient Outback people, cattlemen and traditional Aboriginal people, who are close to the land. This co-exists with an alternative, deficit view of the Outback as a wasteland, a waterless desert, of little productivity, a place of poverty and dysfunctional communities which is largely irrelevant to modern Australia, its only value being the metal ore shipped from its mines. The third narrative strand, if it can be called that, is one of obliviousness – simply an absence of knowledge and focus by urban or recently immigrated Australians, having no direct or indirect contact with the Australian rangelands to create relevance in their lives.

Each narrative strand has truths within it: nature and culture *is* still abundant in the Outback; there *are* high levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, for both Indigenous and some non-Indigenous communities; and the functioning of remote Australia *is not* obviously relevant to the daily lives of most urban Australians. However, these strands are also contradictory, and do not provide a singular settled narrative of what modern remote Australia is. They do not provide a coherent and understandable story about what happens there that helps frame what could and should happen there.

Rangelands scientists and practitioners, such as members of the Australian Rangelands Society and others working on issues in remote Australia, have long sought to highlight the environmental, social, cultural and hence economic opportunities of the region. These efforts have helped understand the overall social, environmental and economic status of these lands and how communities and landscapes work (e.g. Ash and Stafford Smith 2003; Foran 2007; Foran *et al.* 2019). In part they have sought to explain how some of the deficit views on rangelands are really just a matter of functioning differently, not better or worse. In the same way, the failings of policy devised in populated areas reflect a problem of implementation, not the underlying system (Stafford Smith and Cribb 2009). Knowledge and policy delivery based on social and scientific research, the dissemination of on-ground learning and utilising Indigenous knowledge has improved the lives of Outback residents through increased economic outputs from the region, and also improved environmental resilience. Examples of such policies and knowledge include the longer term

funding referred to above for Indigenous land management, new techniques for noxious weeds (e.g. DCQ 2020), the introduction of *Bos indicus* cattle, the new option of carbon farming (Cockfield *et al.* 2019) and better knowledge and support of ecologically sensitive burning regimes (Steffensen 2020).

However, this important collection of detailed knowledge and assessments does not in itself make a story that is coherent and powerful to most Australians, especially to political and policy decision makers. To maintain and improve Outback landscapes and communities, a new positive narrative is required, one that seeks to position the Outback as a key piece of modern Australia – a vital part of Australia’s natural and cultural heritage, but also of deep importance to Australia economically and socially. Such a new story needs to build a narrative that melds the unparalleled living legacy of Indigenous Australians, with the on-ground realities of remote contemporary Australia to create what might be termed a modern, future-looking Dreaming for the Outback. At the Australian Rangelands Society conference in September 2019, a world café session engaged with numerous attendees on this topic, and the following commentary draws upon that discussion.

What’s in a name

The first key issue is what to call the landscapes we are talking about. Names are fundamental to engage people, especially where they know a landscape poorly. So far in this paper we have consciously used multiple names to describe the area – ‘remote Australia’, the ‘Australian rangelands’, and the ‘Outback’. For any public communication, especially with decision makers, we suggest that ‘Outback’ is the best descriptor of the regions outside the more settled and freehold lands of Australia – in fact Woinarski *et al.* (2014) refer to the ‘Modern Outback’. By contrast, ‘Remote Australia’ is not a name, but simply a negative relationship to somewhere else. ‘Rangelands’ originally described extensive areas of native vegetation used for grazing, but now tends to be used as well for surrounding lands that have not been cleared or deforested; but this is not applied consistently in Australia, nor widely understood. ‘Outback’ is broadly known, even outside Australia, and the term resonates in positive ways with Australians, even if they are sometimes ignorant about the details of what lies there.

A narrative for a Modern Outback

Foran *et al.* (2019) provide a sharp overview of possibilities and directions for Outback Australia. Other papers in this special edition also spell out specific positive pathways for the future of the Outback. However, good policy proposals for the Outback always have to face its underlying ‘democracy deficit’ – around 80% of Australia’s land area with less than 2% of its voters according to the latest authority (Foran *et al.* 2019). For fundamental democratic reasons, public decision makers will tend to focus on where most people live. If we are to succeed in overcoming this deficit, we need a coherent, well-articulated and consistently marketed narrative (Stafford Smith 2016): one that is true, but not entangled in detail, and delivered in ways that speak to modern, mainstream Australians in urban centres. This can be done, as shown successfully with Indigenous land management over the last decade, and by the School of the Air and by

Table 1. Summary guidance for improving the public and policy narrative about the Outback

Source: synthesised by the authors from discussions in a world café session at the Australian Rangelands Society Conference, Canberra, September 2019.

Key point	Comments
The name	Use the name that works for the general public: 'Outback' and 'Modern Outback'. Avoid terms such as rangelands, remote Australia, desert, arid Australia except for technical uses
The Outback is special	Provide a positive framing, while acknowledging continuing challenges. Start and finish stories with the strengths and marvels of the Outback – rare natural place on a crowded planet; ancient geological landscape; oldest continuing human cultures; big skies, stars and mulga fires; place to breathe and find your soul; its economic values.
Living in the Outback	Emphasise the similarities of Outback lifestyles of various outback inhabitants – pastoralists, Indigenous people, miners, conservationists (compared with urban dwellers) – more than their differences, and how these inhabitants are working together.
The Outback needs active management	Country needs people managing the land – Indigenous rangers, pastoralists, conservationists. Show examples of how science, traditional knowledge and modern local knowledge can come together for good outcomes – a 'Modern Outback Dreaming'.
Economic and cultural wealth	The Outback provides cultural and economic wealth to Australia. It is in Australia's national interest to champion and sustain the Outback.
The Outback is different	The Modern Outback functions differently to dominant urban and rural Australia. Policy needs to be developed especially for it. Distant centres of power and populations can create dysfunction and problems through poor understanding of Outback conditions.

the Royal Flying Doctor Service over many years as discussed above. It is also attempted by many other sectors of society – as shown by examples as disparate as campaigns to legalise gay marriage and to keep burning 'clean coal'. If those of us collectively interested in the Outback cannot tell a simple, positive narrative, we will continue to grasp for attention on the edge of mainstream focus, policy and resources.

We synthesised the discussion at the world café to a small set of guiding principles (Table 1) that should be considered in any writing related to the Outback by readers of this journal. We draw on this and the work of the Outback Alliance (e.g. Outback Alliance 2018) to propose the following as an example, but urge all readers to apply the guidance to their own contexts:

The Modern Outback is an extraordinary place. It generates much of Australia's wealth, while also being one of the few great natural places remaining on the globe. It is vast, covering four-fifths of the Australian continent, but less than two percent of Australians live there. This landscape is fundamentally different from our cities and regional towns where the vast majority of Australians live; but it is no less essential for Australia's economic development and global reputation.

The Modern Outback continues to underpin the nation's material economy, and its bushlands and rivers remain widely intact. But there are challenges, in part because government, corporate headquarters and even city-based well-wishers live so far away. Some communities remain blighted by poverty and poor essential services. Some native wildlife and plants continue to decline, threatened by invasive feral species and uncontrolled wildfires. Livelihoods can be undermined by unwitting distant policy decisions.

Nature still dominates in the Modern Outback, the boom and bust cycles of rain still drive the country. Its residents are resilient and work cooperatively to live in testing conditions. Indigenous cultures remain strong, and at the heart of the Outback are the history, stories, skills, knowledge and work of Aboriginal people. Together, these experiences provide lessons and identity for our nation.

A thriving Modern Outback is good for us all. Caring for this extraordinary landscape and supporting the people who want to live there will maintain its physical, cultural and economic wealth for all Australians.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Acknowledgements

We particularly thank the many contributors to the world café discussions at the Australian Rangelands Society 2019 Conference, and additional comments provided by Paul Webb, Brad Witt and Katrina Sinclair, as well as two helpful reviewers. We'd also like to thank the uncountable researchers, Traditional Owners, land managers and other residents and lovers of the Outback who have helped refine and distil this bigger picture view for us over many years. This Special Issue was funded by the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR).

References

- Altman, J. C. (2007). Alleviating poverty in remote Indigenous Australia: the role of the hybrid economy. *Development Bulletin (Canberra)* **72**, 9.
- Ash, A., and Stafford Smith, M. (2003). Pastoralism in tropical rangelands: seizing the opportunity to change. *The Rangeland Journal* **25**, 113–127. doi:10.1071/RJ03010
- Cockfield, G., Shrestha, U., and Waters, C. (2019). Evaluating the potential financial contributions of carbon farming to grazing enterprises in Western NSW. *The Rangeland Journal* **41**, 211–223. doi:10.1071/RJ18032
- Country Needs People (2020). Country Needs People website. Available at: <https://www.countryneedspeople.org.au/> (accessed 5 August 2020).
- DCQ (2020). 'Desert Channels Queensland 2020.' (Desert Channels Queensland: Longreach, Qld, Australia.) Available at: <https://dcq.org.au/premier-weed-control/> (accessed 5 August 2020).
- Foran, B. D. (2007). Sifting the future from the past: a personal assessment of trends impacting the Australian rangelands. *The Rangeland Journal* **29**, 3–11. doi:10.1071/RJ07019
- Foran, B., Stafford Smith, M., Burnside, D., Andrew, M., Blesing, D., Forrest, K., and Taylor, J. (2019). Australian rangeland futures: time now for systemic responses to interconnected challenges. *The Rangeland Journal* **41**, 271–292. doi:10.1071/RJ18105
- Hollinsworth, D. (2006). 'Race and Racism in Australia.' 3rd edn. (Cengage: South Melbourne, Vic., Australia.)

- Maclean, K. (2009). Re-conceptualising desert landscapes: unpacking historical narratives and contemporary realities for sustainable livelihood development in central Australia. *GeoJournal* **74**, 451. doi:10.1007/s10708-008-9234-9
- Outback Alliance (2018). 'Joining the Dots: Policy Pathways Fit for the Outback.' (Outback Alliance: Alice Springs, NT, Australia.) Available at: <https://outbackalliance.org.au/2018/11/25/joining-the-dots-policy-pathways-fit-for-the-outback/> (accessed 5 August 2020)
- Pascoe, B. (2014). 'Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?' (Magabala Books: Broome, WA, Australia.)
- RFDS (2020). Royal Flying Doctor Service. Available at: <https://www.flyingdoctor.org.au/> (accessed 5 August 2020).
- Shanahan, M. (2016). Media Perceptions and Portrayals of Pastoralists in Kenya, India and China (Chapter 15). In: 'The End of Desertification? Disputing Environmental Change in the Drylands'. (Eds R. H. J. Behnke and M. Mortimore.) pp. 407–426. (Springer Earth System Sciences: Berlin, Germany.)
- Stafford Smith, M. (2016). Desertification: Reflections on the Mirage. In 'The End of Desertification? Disputing Environmental Change in the Drylands'. (Eds R. H. J. Behnke and M. Mortimore.) pp. 539–560. (Springer Earth System Sciences: Berlin, Germany.)
- Stafford Smith, M., and Cribb, J. (2009). 'Dry Times: A Blueprint for a Red Land.' (CSIRO Publishing: Melbourne, Vic., Australia.)
- Stanner, W. E. H. (1969). 'Reconciliation and 'The Great Australian Silence' (The Boyer Lectures 1968 – After the Dreaming).' (Australian Broadcasting Commission: Sydney, NSW, Australia.)
- Steffensen, V. (2020). 'Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia.' (Hardie Grant Books: Melbourne, Vic., Australia.)
- WA Today (2018). WA School of the Air to Remain Open as WA Government Backflips. Available at: <https://www.watoday.com.au/national/western-australia/wa-school-of-the-air-to-remain-open-as-wa-government-backflips-20180111-h0gtag.html> (accessed 29 July 2020).
- Woinarski, J., Traill, B., and Booth, C. (2014). 'The Modern Outback: Nature, People, and the Future of Remote Australia.' (The Pew Charitable Trusts: Australia.) Available at: <https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/assets/2014/10/themodernoutbackforweb.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2020)