

“The Cutting Edge” – People, Place and Possibilities

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Renmark, South Australia is not, on first blush, an obvious choice for a venue to hold an Australian Rangeland Conference. Attendees at the Conference will have noticed the green, manicured parks, gardens and ovals of towns in the region and the almost endless rows of grape vines and fruit trees that surround them. Renmark is in many ways an archetypal River Murray town and, to the casual observer, Australia's rangelands must seem a million miles away. Yet South Australia's rangelands start just north of Renmark, separated from the town only by the Murray River, which cuts knife-like between the intensive land uses and closely settled areas to the south and the arid and isolated “outback” to the north.

In choosing Renmark as the venue for the Australian Rangeland Society's 14th Biennial Conference, the organising committee wished in part to use the town as a metaphor for the Conference theme, “The Cutting Edge” – People, Place and Possibilities. Like the River Murray itself, they were looking for a conference that allowed participants to travel along the “cutting edge” for a few days; able to still engage with the current and familiar topics and issues (i.e. the green, settled side of the river) but also able to travel across to the far side; to look at the new, the controversial and future possibilities. As has been the case with Australian Rangeland Society conferences for over the last decade, the organising committee also wanted participants to be exposed to the whole spectrum of work happening in Australia's rangelands; not just the traditional range sciences. The sub-theme of “People, Place and Possibilities” recognised that the land and biodiversity are still important but that people and their communities and economic activity and industries are integral to any honest discourse about the current status of and future prospects for Australia's rangelands. Thus, key note speakers, presented papers and posters for the conference were invited with the theme and sub-theme in mind; they had to challenge us wherever possible and help us see our rangelands in an integrated way.

The papers presented in this Special Edition are therefore a cross section of the spoken papers and poster presentations that were made at the Conference. All open our eyes to the possibilities, both in the here and now and in the future. All cover at least one aspect of the triple bottom line; the social, environmental and economic factors which are of as much importance in Australia's rangelands as anywhere else.

Foran's keynote contribution is a sometimes encouraging, sometimes disturbing yet always challenging account of how the scenarios envisaged for Australia's rangelands at the Society's Port Augusta conference ten years ago have unfolded. Some developments were seen with remarkable clarity but it is also

clear that the importance of contemporary global drivers such as the embrace of economic and trade globalisation, biosecurity and climate change were not fully appreciated. Given the likelihood of a far more chaotic future, perhaps the primary aim should be to manage Australia's rangelands for resilience.

The combined drivers of trade and community expectations have led to the development of Environmental Management Systems (EMS) for many sectors of agriculture. Lester Pahl and others report on a survey on the uptake of EMS by pastoralists in western Queensland. They conclude that the poor uptake and implementation of EMS is a result of uncertain rewards not as yet outweighing some very clear costs, at a time when many pastoral businesses are under extreme duress. While it would appear that people's hearts are ready, the vital connection between the environment and economics has not as yet been made and thus their heads are not ready to follow.

The measurement of change has always been an important theme for range science in Australia and this conference gave participants plenty of opportunity to develop their thinking and contribute to debate in this area. A landmark paper by Watson *et al.* reports on a region wide assessment of change in rangeland shrub and tree species, based on 12 years of data from the Western Australian Rangeland Monitoring System (WARMS). The significance of this paper is that it is the first time that results from such a large scale, long term rangeland monitoring program in Australia have been properly analysed and reported. While there was some debate at the Conference as to whether monitoring systems such as these are able to detect changes in broader landscape processes, it is clear that the trends for many important rangelands plant species in the area of study are positive. A paper by Jafari *et al.* continues the development of our knowledge on the use of remotely sensed information to measure change across a number of vegetation indices, commonly used as measures of range condition.

A special session during the Conference looked at the issue of pastoral intensification in northern Australia. It was clear from the presentations made that, while there are great possibilities for increasing animal production from these landscapes while maintaining their integrity, it will require far more intensive management, supported by new technologies. Coates and Dixon present their work on one such evolving technology; the use of Faecal Near Infrared Reflectance Spectroscopy (F. NIRS) to predict the proportion of grass and non-grass plants selected by grazing cattle. This and other technologies will be vital in helping managers more precisely monitor and manage the “what, where and when” of livestock grazing and nutrition.

It is hoped that, through these papers, readers will get a sense of the range of topics covered at the Society's 14th Biennial Conference. More importantly, it is hoped that they will motivate

all with an interest in Australia's rangelands to help the Society to continually push the debate on science, people and economics in our rangelands out to "The Cutting Edge".