COPING WITH CHANGE IN AUSTRALIAN RANGELANDS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Choosing an appropriate theme poses major questions for conference organisers- what are the critical issues of the day, do they lend themselves to a coherent format, are major issues currently being addressed by people with useful contributions to offer, will the theme attract the necessary delegates? After considerable deliberation, the Organising Committee for the Australian Rangeland Society's Seventh Biennial Conference held at Cobar from 5-8 October, 1992, chose "Australian rangelands in a changing environment".

This theme reflected the dynamic, often turbulent, times confronting the graziers, scientists, bankers, farmers, conservationists and extension workers concerned with rangeland management. It highlighted the need for management to change effectively and rapidly when required, for "sustainable rangeland management" to become more than a hackneyed phrase.

Invited speakers covered both 'biological' and 'socio-economic' environments in seven discrete topics. The paper by Walker and Steffen deals with change on a global scale, discussing likely impacts of climatic change on rangeland use and productivity. Archer discusses ecological change at a landscape scale given these climatic constraints. French's paper highlights the importance of climate to arable farming at the pastoral/cropping interface. The extensive marginal cropping lands have hitherto been largely ignored by rangeland scientists but we require skills to manage lands on the fluctuating margin and to restore them to productive pastures when necessary.

Restoration depends upon grazing management that is more sophisticated than that of the past. Danckwerts discusses changing attitudes to grazing management, providing an international perspective. In Australia, this change has involved a growing acceptance of the need to manage total grazing pressure if rangeland productivity is to be restored and maintained.

Three papers cover topics relating to the socio-economic environment. Morton traces changes in community perceptions of current rangeland management and the increasing public awareness of major conservation issues. Economic constraints underlie most rangeland activities and Chudleigh presents a sobering review of how the current economic problems of the western world impinge on Australia's economy, and rangelands in particular. The final paper by Ison underscores an increasing acknowledgement, certainly within scientific ranks, of the need for greater emphasis on community input into programs designed to develop appropriate rangeland practices.

In the past, there has been no systematic presentation of conference papers to a wider audience. Following peer review, the seven keynote papers from the Cobar conference are presented in this issue of The Rangeland Journal. Hopefully they are precursors of similar anthologies emanating from future national rangeland conferences.