Bush lives – bush futures: the economic future of Australia’s remote rural heritage

Two centuries of European settlement has dramatically and fundamentally altered the cultural landscape of Australia. Colonists drawn from all parts of the world considered it terra nullius – an empty land of limitless opportunity, unaware of the delicate ecological relationship which had been forged by its Aboriginal owners.

Land management practices of 60,000 years were largely swept aside by the incoming tide of European settlement, as homesteads and roads, fences and townships imposed a new conceptual pattern over the finely-wrought checks and balances that had for so long sustained the land and its peoples.

...an unknown continent

As settlement pushed westward, native vegetation was cleared for grazing and ploughing, the water tables rose, lifting salt from the geological seabed. The earth became increasingly saline as ancient topsoils were washed or blown away.

Introduced livestock, particularly sheep, as well as feral European animals – rabbits, pigs, carp and goats – proliferated in the favourable climate and almost overwhelmed a unique native flora and fauna of subtle, harmonious diversity.

...an unrecognised cultural landscape

Wildfire and Aboriginal firestick farming ceased to maintain the grassy rangelands by suppressing the growth of shrubs, and overgrazing by introduced livestock removed native grasses. As a result, native woody weeds established their dominance, growing into dense thickets and out-competing native grasses.

Kangaroo populations expanded beyond their native range as dingo numbers were reduced and water availability improved, increasing the total grazing pressure on native pastures.

...an unfamiliar climate

Australia’s climate cycle was disturbingly unfamiliar and unreliable from the perspective of European settlers. Seasons and rainfall seemed erratically distributed: an unpredictable succession of ‘droughts and flooding rains’, which we now recognise as the El Niño – Southern Oscillation climate phenomenon.

The settlers did not know that Australia is the world’s driest vegetated continent, a fragile land of which 75 per cent is arid regimes (40 per cent desert), with high evaporation rates; nor did they know that only 6 per cent of its soils are arable. As settlers cleared the land, salt rose and poisoned the soils.

Settlers met firm resistance from the Aboriginal peoples protecting their land. Despite massacres, poisoning, and the inexorable spread of foreign diseases.
exacting a heavy toll on the Aboriginal peoples, their demands for their lands were never silenced.¹

Timber, particularly the abundant native cypress, was a characteristic building material for the early permanent buildings of the western Division of New South Wales, often in drop-log construction. Grass, bark and shingle roofs were soon replaced when corrugated iron became readily available in the 1860s.

With sawdust insulation, corrugated iron was quickly adopted for use for walls and verandahs, skillions and outbuildings; its lightness, portability and durability ensured its widespread use in towns and countryside alike.

After 1861 the government began to break up the huge pastoral holdings occupied by squatters.² To enable smaller scale farmers to 'select' land, the government introduced leasehold regulations to encourage 'closer settlement' – subdivisions based on a theoretical stock-carrying capacity sufficient to support a family.

In the early 1870s, wool prices reached their highest-ever levels (relative to costs). Stocking rates were maximised: by 1881 there were 8 million sheep in western New South Wales, nearly doubling in a decade to 15 million.

From the mid-1860s, cheap wire fencing, together with improved boring and pumping technology to build tanks and wells, enabled pastoralists to maintain stock away from the rivers. Properties in the north-west began to tap the underground water supply of the Great Artesian Basin, constructing hundreds of open bore drains and stock watering points by the 1890s.

The determination of appropriate livestock carrying capacities and management regimes proved extremely difficult. Government policies established economic incentives for farmers and pastoralists to pursue development at the expense of the environment. These included taxation incentives for land clearing and subdivision for closer settlement schemes in areas, which we now know, could not sustain intensive development.

Mineral strikes also created new settlements. Temporary towns based on easily won minerals flourished at the turn of the century. Buildings and people came and went, cottages and huts of tin and timber were erected, then moved on, leaving a legacy of mining equipment, shafts and ruins.

When wool prices fell in Europe in the late 1870s, the surging Australian economy of the 1880s quickly spiraled downward into the 1890s Depression, worsened by a disastrous 8-year drought from 1895–1903. Rabbit plagues and overstocking led to severe erosion problems throughout the western division.

These years culminated in the ruin of many a small, heavily indebted Western
selector, as banks foreclosed and runs were abandoned. It was to be 50 years before Australia’s flocks were rebuilt to pre-drought levels. The legacy of environmental degradation caused by 1890s overstocking and unmanaged feral pests remains today.

The 1901 Western Lands Act established a policy of retaining land in the most fragile areas – the Western Division – as Crown land, regulating its use and management through lease conditions and regular inspection. Major withdrawals of land for closer settlement occurred again in the 1930s and after World War II – boom years for wool.

Post World War II the agricultural sector was globally optimistic – the Green Revolution of technology, improved machinery, selective plant and animal breeding, and fertilisers and pesticides promised an endless expansion of food production for the growing world population.

Australian farmers invested in rapid land clearance for broad-acre cropping, much of it based on high levels of fertiliser use or on irrigation from inland rivers with unknown long-term capacities. Land management practices that in the temperate well-watered lands of the Northern Hemisphere may well have succeeded, eventually proved disastrous in arid Australia.

During the 1980s, globalisation of commodity production, coupled with the national removal of tariff and subsidy protection from some rural industries, marked the beginning of a decade of radical rural adjustment in Australia. For almost two centuries the nation had ‘ridden on the sheep’s back’, wool among its most significant export commodities, until the collapse of Soviet markets – followed by recession affecting the markets of Western Europe and Japan and currency problems in China – suddenly halved Australian wool prices in 1990.

As wool prices fell to their lowest recorded value in 1991, the national reserve price scheme for wool failed spectacularly, leaving an enormous wool stockpile and with it a long-term debt for wool producers.

Wheat prices also dropped throughout the early 1990s, during the subsidy war between Europe and the USA. Then drought hit the eastern states.

In 1987, global recession rocked the financial sector and compounding interest bills crippled smaller farmers, as they had a century earlier.

The rural economy narrows: the 1990s

For those who left the land, jobs in the rural sector were fast disappearing. As the rural population of Australia reduced, government and private-sector cutbacks resulted in the loss of 30,000 jobs in New South Wales regional areas between 1986-96, eliminating about a billion dollars in salaries, thereby reducing local demand for services.
These withdrawals have significant multiplier effects in a small rural town, weakening the social structure of the community. By 1995, only 27 per cent of the state's population lived outside the three major metropolitan areas, representing 35 per cent of the state's workforce, but with 43 per cent of them registered as unemployed.

Government and corporate policies reacted to rising rural out-migration and the growth of E-commerce in the mid-nineties by withdrawing more services: bank branches, agricultural equipment outlets and government offices closed in many smaller towns. The withdrawal of the social capital of their employees, many of whom might have been the supporters of sporting and social organisations as well as heritage/conservation initiatives, further weakened community infrastructure.

Political change

The recognition of Native Title rights has also added uncertainty of tenure to some pastoral and mining leaseholders on Crown Land. Confusion and misinformation abound.

Ultra-conservative political forces emerged from these sudden economic changes and increasing social uncertainties, with some elements of rural frustration voicing a racial agenda that profoundly shocked the existing two-party system nationwide. Independent political candidates emerged, seeking to seize the balance of power and the ability to influence government decisions.

Generational change

Over 90 per cent of Australian farms are still family concerns, sometimes handed down through three or four generations. As each generation inherits, the property is often divided among the children, continually reducing the viability of the farm. Today, most farmers see their property as their superannuation funds, and encourage their children to train for careers off the property, or diversify their properties.

In much of the arid Western Division, however, there is little opportunity for diversification of production. Many Western Division properties are now uneconomically small and distances are too great to allow owners to generate off-farm income. Recognising this dilemma, in 1997 the commonwealth and state governments jointly launched the WEST 2000 Strategy to act as a financial catalyst to support Western Division communities dealing with these challenges and to foster innovation. Local Rural Counseling Services were established to support farmers with free, confidential and independent financial advice, to clarify their options and future plans. Economic restructuring has been essential.
Global warming

Even the climate seemed to be changing in the nineties. Australia's long-term climatic research is now revealing that severe drought affects some part of Australia every 18 years— but not regularly or predictably: sometimes in a 4-year cycle, other parts in a 38-year cycle.

Climate variability affects us all, but its consequences are manifold for agricultural activity.

The El Niño phenomenon and the Southern Oscillation Index (SOI) amplify the variability of Australia's climate. Research suggests that as well as these natural variations of climate there is increasing evidence that human activities are contributing to climate change. Global warming, which increases with the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere (for example, through burning fossil fuels and land clearance) also warms the ocean, increasing the frequency of El Niño events.

Today, the El Niño effect and the SOI is a daily feature of many television news reports. Gone are the copperplate Station Rainfall Books: electronic communication and information resources now available to farmers have transformed agricultural decision-making. Crop variety choices can be made on the basis of long-term global commodity projections, and then pre-sold.

Environmental degradation

Through the 1980s, environmental, geological and paleontological research findings emerged in Australia that caused serious concern among agricultural scientists, environmentalists and water managers. Eric Rolls and Mary White led the way, with 1990s popular publications such as Dr Tim Flannery's *The Future Eaters* giving historical, anthropological and geological context to the evolving picture of Australia's environmental and human drama in the bush.

At the end of the 20th century, predictions of the damage wrought by salination following two centuries of wholesale land clearance began to make national headlines; governments are now introducing controversial controls on land clearance and a water cap on extraction from rivers and underground sources.

In such an era of change, it has been felt that government response has generally been too little, too late. Bush communities, however, have had to react more quickly to survive, taking long-term action as stewards for future generations.

Landcare movement

The community-based Australian Landcare movement, established in 1989, is a driving force in repairing environmental damage and promoting the adoption of sustainable natural resource management practices on a regional or catchment-wide basis. It seeks to raise community awareness through education programs...
and skills development, especially projects involving young people. Forty-three per cent of New South Wales’ farmers participate in Landcare, and taxation concessions now provide some additional incentives for farmers to make conservation related expenditures: for example, saltbush regeneration.

**Ecotourism**

A potential lifeline for the future conservation of redundant rural buildings of heritage value is often seen in tourism: the shearsers’ quarters converted to farm-stay accommodation being an example. Occasionally woolsheds are conserved and interpreted as historic sites by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, but since the 1960s the rate of abandonment of rural heritage buildings far outstrips such solutions.

Demolition by neglect or through scavenging of materials will be the fate of most of Australia’s pastoral heritage buildings and infrastructure. Alternative uses will not be found easily for isolated complexes now redundant.

**Heritage care?**

Although the pastoral industry is still the dominant land user in Australia, there is no comprehensive inventory of the buildings, technology, infrastructure and places which it has created over two centuries of European occupation. Much of it is already redundant, yet regarded as commonplace and therefore threatened. Neither is there a comprehensive record or understanding of significant places relating to the more than 60,000 years of Aboriginal occupation.

The conservation of Australia’s rural heritage buildings and places for future generations, therefore, depends on us heightening an appreciation of their value. It also depends on the sympathy of the individual landowner and the landowner’s ability to sustainably manage the land and to use and maintain, or conserve the building or place.

Finding alternative uses for purpose-built structures such as woolsheds and meathouses is not as straightforward as conserving a homestead in which a family might continue to live. Perhaps it is time for a nationwide ‘Heritagecare’ movement to begin – the cultural environment equivalent of Landcare – to share these responsibilities and actively support the maintenance and conservation of our built environment. Just as the Australian Landcare movement promotes and conserves our natural heritage, a Heritagecare movement could operate in tandem with existing heritage legislative mechanisms.

**Innovation and inspiration are needed**

New voices from the bush began to emerge in the 1990s: voices of individuals – not the civil servants or producer lobby groups, but those of the farmers
sitting on local catchment boards watching their rivers die; the voices of rural counselors helping families leaving the land to adjust to uncertain urban futures after generations of commitment to the land. These are voices which need to be heard by city cousin and parliamentarian alike, through initiatives such as the Bush Lives: Bush Futures (BL:BF) project.14

Initially a touring exhibition of commissioned photographs, videos and catalogue text, BL:BF was mounted by the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, to bring public attention and focus to these issues through its web site and schools education program. Supported by a series of community forums, the exhibition is now touring regional New South Wales for three years.

**Ways forward**

The families featured in BL:BF are innovative landholders, who have had to think laterally to explore new ways of economic survival. They have found new land-use practices and developed new businesses, which in turn underpin the conservation of Australia’s pastoral heritage places and buildings by increasing their long-term economic and environmental sustainability.

BL:BF celebrates the remarkable stories of eight pastoral properties and eight tenacious families and communities, united in that they live in western New South Wales (five in the Western Division) and through the fact that they each face significant environmental problems or difficulties of economic scale. Each property is unique in the approach which its owners and managers have chosen to take toward rehabilitating their land, as well as conserving Aboriginal places and important heritage buildings. The project, outlined below, celebrates the initiative of eight innovative landowners, who have laterally explored new ways of economic survival. The process has involved finding new land-use practices, evolving native title agreements, and developing new businesses, all of which increase the sustainability of their properties and advance the reconciliation processes.

**Going organic**

As the wool industry began to fail in the early 1990s, many smaller landholders began the difficult search for new market niches, alternative products or processes into which to diversify. Industrial hemp, olives and emu production were each investigated by the Amos family, owners of ‘Tantaranna’, near Moree (established 1902, 1142 hectares), before they decided to move into less expensive (and initially lower yielding) organic farming. They maintain their sheep as crop ‘wee’ers’, and found unanticipated health benefits as chemical usage on their property ceased. Their economic sustainability enables the maintenance of the turn of the century homestead and mid-nineteenth century shearmers’ quarters and woolshed.

**Becoming holistic carp crusaders**

Other landholders have turned problems into opportunities. At Oxley Station
(established 1850, 10,500 hectares), the McFarland family has tackled the plague of European carp, which has devastated inland rivers since the 1970s. By using an innovative electro-fishing stunning system (which does not adversely affect native fish), the carp can be efficiently and selectively caught and processed into valuable commodities, including the garden fertiliser ‘Charlie Carp’ now marketed nationally. Using holistic management techniques and saltbush regeneration, the McFarlands are rehabilitating damaged land at Oxley Station, demonstrating their methods to tourists and school parties who stay in the 1860s red-gum homestead complex.

Turning sheep into goats

At Kaleno, Cobar (established 1881, 32,000 hectares) the MacDonald family is dealing with the population explosion of feral goats by farming them instead of shooting them out (several million are estimated to live in arid Australia). This has required active involvement in pressuring for the development of processing and marketing of Australian goat meat (Australia is now the world’s largest exporter of goat meat, developing markets worth almost $25 million in the Middle East, Asia and Africa), and finding new uses for Kaleno’s wool infrastructure. The shearsers’ quarters are now providing cash flow, as ornithologists and photographic tourists enjoy Kaleno’s solitude and its 1880s timber drop-log homesteads, carefully maintained by the MacDonalds.

Fighting woody weeds

At Ellerslie, Emngonia (established 1900, 32,000 hectares), Nancy Robinson’s amateur entomological observations led to the identification of a native scale-insect that destroys woody weeds. With the loss of Aboriginal firestick farming practices since European settlement, native woody weeds now infest 70 per cent of western New South Wales, shading-out native pasture and hindering stock management, and thus economic returns. Working with the Cuttagoa Landcare group and in a bid to halt the spread of woody weeds, the Robinson family have initiated some of the long-term scientific research that is needed to test the biological control efficacy of breeding and distributing these tiny insects. The scientific jury is still ‘out’ on testing Nancy’s theories, but researchers and tourists alike visit to stay at the shearsers’ quarters, and learn more about the Cuttagoa environment.

The corporate farm: wool, water and weatherfax

After 130 years in the ownership of the Peters family, the famous Tubbo Station (established 1830s, 23,000 hectares) passed into corporate ownership in 1985, diversifying from labour-intensive wool operations to capital-intensive water management.

The declining health of the state’s rivers and increasing dryland salinity has led to the recognition of water as an essential and expensive agricultural
commodity. Many corporate properties such as Tubbo have been comprehensively reassessing the environmental capacity of the land. The aim is to identify conservation works and potential for diversifying into new crops and irrigation opportunities where appropriate, always watching salination levels carefully. The company has maintained the gracious 1908 homestead and its mature gardens, as well as the famous 101-stand woolshed, a landmark on the Sturt Highway.

**Sharing Aboriginal places**

After thousands of years as an Aboriginal camp, the discovery of gold in 1871 caused a temporary town to flourish at Mt Drysdale in the 1880s. At its peak, the town housed 10,000 gold seekers, with all the associated town and public services. As the mines petered-out the inhabitants of Mt Drysdale moved elsewhere, leaving a legacy of mining equipment and shafts: a ghostly impression on the landscape today.

The Mitchell family live in the former Tank Caretaker’s cottage at Mt Drysdale and open the property (now 2000 hectares) to tourists. They have actively sought recognition and encouraged the traditional use of the Aboriginal relics and places of Mt Drysdale that are significant to the Ngemba people, for whom it is an important site in the creation pathway of Biaime. The Mitchells remain concerned about the likelihood of re-mining and exploration work damaging the significance of these places.

**The Salt of the Earth**

Established in the 1840s, Moorna, near Wentworth, has run huge flocks – up to 250,000 at shearing time – but is now reduced in size to 27,000 hectares. Moorna has moved from wool to organic cropping, with massive desalination problems (its groundwater is twice as salty as the sea) and reclamation work yet to be resolved.

Moorna’s extreme salinity may be due to the construction of the massive water storage facility at adjacent Lake Victoria. It is likely that the water-storage pressure displaces salty groundwater into the land and river, adding to the already significant problem of salt mobilisation caused by clearing and irrigation upstream in the Murray-Darling Basin. Much research remains to be done to establish the exact cause, but the effects are plain to see.

The Walsh family have redirected Moorna’s management, and are working through salination reduction options to develop sustainable practices for Moorna’s stock management, at the same time maintaining the 1911 bungalow homestead and outbuildings.
A unique bi-cultural community

On the banks of the Culgoa River, the 1890s Weilmoringle homestead and nearby 1970s Muruwarri community of Wyaliha, based on the original pastoral camp, represent an unusual bi-cultural community. It was initially run as a cattle property from 1857, switching to sheep as the government reduced the property size to allow closer settlement. By the 1970s, at less than 15,000 hectares in size, Weilmoringle had become too small to be viable.

The Gill family set about reconsolidating the property to an economic size, while simultaneously excising the Wyaliha area for dedication to the Aboriginal Lands Trust, thereby facilitating its independent status as the Wyaliha Aboriginal Corporation. The Corporation has since built twenty houses, a medical centre and meeting rooms, developed the school and connected sewerage, electricity and water to the village.

The remarkable BL:BF families, traditional owners and local communities have found that the land itself is now dictating critical changes to previous management practices to ensure its continued economic and social viability and to conserve its life-sustaining soil and water resources. Political and social changes are also in train, a major issue being the outcome of Native Title claims currently pending after recent High Court of Australia decisions on the co-existence of Native Title with pastoral and mining leases.

However, for most of Australia’s pastoral heritage, the future is likely to be abandonment.

Abandonment: for the good of the land

Australia is now rapidly abandoning long term pastoral activity in places where the wool industry is no longer viable and where degradation, ongoing stocking or land clearing may lead to permanent environmental damage. Reduction of building and infrastructure use leads to less maintenance, and redundancy encourages scavenging of materials. And re-use depends upon an economically viable proposition. Remoteness adds to these difficulties.

As a small contribution to the rural heritage debate, I am developing a new project for the Historic Houses Trust of NSW, tentatively called ‘Abandoned for the Good of the Land’, which will look at recording the stories and decisions to abandon pastoral land-use for environmental management objectives. This will include removing places from economic production, or perhaps transferring activity into a less-damaging form of management. The exhibition will recognise that some loss is inevitable and highlight an acceptable end to an era of environmental mismanagement and the beginning of a more sustainable future. Like BL:BF, this project would have the property owners and managers tell their own stories through video, to speak for themselves, to act as catalysts to improve dialogue with city-based decision-makers.
An Australian heritage places record

Pastoral heritage places of significance to European and Aboriginal communities should be identified, recorded and new management and maintenance regimes developed for them, supported by economic incentives. This will require a major social and economic commitment from the Australian community as a whole, for this is a national need.

I believe that an Australian equivalent of the American Historic Buildings Record is essential to document our pastoral heritage as much of it passes into ruin: abandoned for the good of the land, as environmental management takes precedence, as native title rights are granted, or as economic rationalisation takes effect in the wake of massive environmental, social and political change.

A small working group with representatives of the NSW State Library, the NSW Heritage Office and the University of Sydney has been convened by the Historic Houses Trust to examine the feasibility of such a project and seek external funding.

Conclusions

It is commonplace to conclude that the successful conservation of most of our rural heritage will rely on ensuring its continued economic viability - if something can be used, it is worth looking after, but for much of Australia’s rural heritage, its ‘use-by’ date may well have passed.

New economic strategies are being forged to support the conservation of Australia’s rural heritage, but one strategy may well be abandonment: abandonment of places for the greater environmental and economic good, but only after these places have been recorded for posterity.

We know we are losing important places of our recent pastoral history. Unless we make the effort, and make it now, we will have no record of just what we are losing. It will readily return to the earth.

endnotes

2 The Crown Lands Alienation and Occupation Acts, 1861, often referred to as the Robertson Land Acts.
5 For example, tractors ordered through the www. and delivered to the farm gate cost several thousands of dollars less than the same purchase at the local town franchise.
12 Landcare was an initiative of the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Farmers Federation. The Natural Heritage Trust is a major contributor to Landcare work.
13 Extensive heritage legislation exists at federal and most state/territory and local levels, but with variable will to administer its full capacities.