

INTRODUCTION

His Excellency, Lieutenant General John Sanderson AC, Governor of Western Australia

Adapted from the Opening Address by His Excellency at the Biennial Conference of the Society in Kalgoorlie in September 2002

While it is really unofficial, having a year dedicated to the Outback is timely and important. It provides an opportunity to reflect on how much we owe to those resilient Australians who have ventured into the interior of this continent to generate the wealth and the folklore of our nation. It is also a chance to join city to country in recognition of the importance of the regional communities to the future of the coastal urban centres. Among other things, it allows our vast and beautiful heritage to be celebrated while committing the community to restoring it to sustainable use for future generations.

The Australian Rangeland Society fosters the art and science of using the rangelands of Australia commensurate with their ability to sustain this use. Sustainability is the great catch cry of the age. What it really means is something that needs now to be sorted out by dialogue. There is no other way, and that dialogue is going on throughout this nation and the world.

The dialogue in large part is about building up trust among us. There is now substantial evidence that many of our young people do not trust the older generations, and certainly not the form of leadership that has been offered in the past. This is probably because many things have been done to cause enduring damage to our global environment even though it was known that harm was being done. It is not possible to claim that earlier generations were ignorant of their impact on the environment.

The conference theme *Shifting Camp* was chosen to highlight the need to examine the case for a shift to a new paradigm governing rangeland use in Australia. It was chosen as a way of acknowledging that the people of Australia's rangelands are in an extraordinary state of transition. There are questions about whether we should be shifting from the old paradigm in which the principal use is believed to be the current default use, pastoralism, to a new paradigm or understanding of the use for the rangelands. Should we move to a new paradigm that takes into account other uses, and the claims of others that they should have use of the land either in partnership with the current users or even have sole rights to the land?

Like everything else about this rapidly changing and complex world, the great issues concerning the use of the rangelands will no doubt take this conference on a roller coaster ride of globalisation and market forces, environmental degradation and genetics. In the discussions there will, of course, for some be more immediate concerns such as how to survive and meet the needs of your families.

The dual dynamics of globalisation and environmental degradation drive us all towards an urgent need to reach a consensus across the boundaries of all stakeholders and interest groups as to what these terms really mean for the future use of our rangelands.

As a consequence of my personal observations in various parts of the World, but particularly here in WA since back in my home state as Governor, I am tempted by my instincts to use such terms as vital and critical instead of urgent. I have resisted this in the knowledge that I am not an expert in the associated fields, and that there will be some debate here and in other places by

those who have expertise as to the criticality of reaching agreement on sustainability models that work. There has already been some work done on addressing the requirement to forge alliances that are powerful enough to overcome short-term needs and expediency in the interests of a more enduring and greater good. Attendance at this conference recognises the importance of this alliance building.

It has been rather easy in our country to be lulled into a false sense of security about these things. We have been a most fortunate people for the last century, with enormous space, abundant raw materials, a system of law making and justice that is self-correcting and is flexible enough for rapid response in the face of emergency, and a history that is unencumbered by civil strife of any magnitude.

There is a good understanding of, and general respect for, administrative law. We have that unique thing in human history, a united continent. Unlike most peoples, so far we have not had to fight amongst ourselves for these things.

We have initiated and managed a multicultural experiment that has been watched with great interest by the rest of the world and for which we are now starting to reap the rewards. There are big advantages in a diverse community, in that we are better able to reach out and communicate with and understand the world about us as it changes. We should be very confident about this. By any measure, our problems would be seen to be relatively small by comparison to those of peoples in the more crowded parts of the Earth. Our opportunity to manage our future ought to be the envy of much of the rest of humanity.

But behind that rather smug sounding assessment lie many problems that demand our deliberate and detailed concern. There is abundant evidence to suggest that we have not been very sensitive to the different rhythms of this country and have taken a harvest from it at a rate that has not been sustainable. We have alienated vast areas for agriculture and have imperiled habitats for our unique treasure of flora and fauna. Past use of our rangelands for pastoralism has been far from benign. Most of us would agree that land use strategies need to change if the biological diversity of this land is to be preserved. Fortunately, many of the pre-European ecological processes and much its diversity are reasonably intact, providing us with this opportunity.

Many current leaseholders are very much more attuned to the needs of their environment than their forebears. They are on the whole better educated, more confident in their management practices and aware of the need to manage sustainably. They are embracing alternative products, developing new skills in marketing and identifying those attributes of the rangelands that give their product an edge in the marketplace. There are among leaseholders some who also value the quality and the independence that their way of life gives them more than income. Some wool producers would have to be in this category given the lamentably low prices of the past 10 years – despite the very recent spike in prices providing some relief. On the other hand and in contrast to the wool producers, those cattle producers selling live cattle for export have seen good prices over the past two years.

This raises the issue that as in many other areas of traditional agriculture, some rangeland leases are far too small to yield sufficient income to provide for stock improvement, infrastructure maintenance, for retirement and for education. Lessees on small leases sometimes therefore have to maintain flock and herd numbers at a level often incompatible with the demands of ecological sustainability. This seems to me to be a very tough issue that will have to be addressed.

Other stakeholders, or Drivers, are well represented at this conference, including the conservationists, the miners and indigenous people. They are also being driven themselves by economic and social forces as well as by global forces that in time will probably compel the development of the new paradigm in which sustainability will be so important.

The general community at large is often represented as a stakeholder, a convenient term for an amorphous mass, each part of which has its own objectives. In reality, the Drivers are all part of that community and, within it, each must negotiate an outcome where the use of land does not impair its capacity to support any other form of use in the future. All the Drivers need to recognise each other as potential allies in the campaign to arrive at a new paradigm for land use.

Conservationists have always valued highly the largely unknown source of genetic material and intact ecological processes of the rangelands. They are concerned about intergenerational equity between this and future generations. As it has been shown in some instances that conservation of biological resources can be revenue generating while being compatible with pastoralism, the universality of this approach to land use seems to be a dialogue of great importance for that future.

Compared with pastoral activities miners have only little environmental impact on the rangelands. Their impact is almost insignificant, but miners do have an increasing role to play in regional conservation, land rehabilitation and other community initiatives so they may be more clearly identified by the other Drivers in the rangelands as contributors to the area from which they derive their income.

Finally, the needs of the original occupiers of this land are of vital importance. It is only recently that we have begun to appreciate the nurturing significance of the songline and the importance to the spiritual and social health of indigenous people of their connection to the land. It may be of equal importance to the spiritual and moral health of all of us. We need to discuss the long-term value of recovering as much of this as possible.

It has to be acknowledged that economic and social drivers and global forces, that are quite outside our control, have a very great influence on the use of rangelands. The former have had and continue to have a continuing impact upon the level of use that the land has to sustain. Global forces, including the demand for sustainable eco-tourism pushed by increasing urbanisation and disaffection with close community living, will also influence the way in which the rangelands are used. This alone, let alone the insistence upon clean and green products by those nations to whom we export, will ensure that globalisation places demands on the future management of our interior.

The long-term impact of the emptying out of the rangelands as people find it more and more difficult to make a comparable and dignified living, and to offer their families a fair share of the Australian dream is a matter of grave concern. We are increasingly dependent on resource extraction on a vaster scale to maintain our lifestyle in urban concentrations growing at a much faster rate than our rural population. ‘What is wrong with that?’ it might be asked. Nothing, is the answer, provided the proceeds are used to give us an educated workforce and the creative opportunities for an enduring future for our young people. And, at the end of the day, it is important that the rest of the world regards us as a fit custodian of our very large part of the Earth’s surface.

Two of our fastest growing exports are firstly education, which is good, and secondly the brainpower of our most talented youth, which is good if they come back, and very bad if they do not. We have to make sure that we create an environment at home that fosters both the retention and the return of our most creative people. They are those who are going to provide the answers to our future needs for viability and sustainability.

Mass and the size of the home market have always been an Australian problem in the larger scheme of things. We clearly need a larger population than we have now, and this applies particularly to Western Australia. We have always shared doubts about our ability to have a significant population while maintaining the quality of our environment and our lifestyle. This question of population now has greater immediacy as we face up to the issue of our relevance in an increasingly globalised world.

Globalisation and the growth of multinational conglomerates through amalgamation and takeover provide the potential for much greater concern. We are confronted with the possibility of more of the answers to the questions that affect our future being resolved elsewhere, with decreasing consideration of the needs of local populations. This is not just about Sydney and Melbourne making decisions about the rangelands; for, increasingly, they are also branch offices in the world economic game.

A strong and educated population that has a stake in the countryside and forces its relevance on the decision-makers is a key ingredient in this. Building and sustaining such a population is probably anathema to those who think that we have already overloaded our fragile land, but I suggest that the idea of increasing our population and repairing the damage we have done are not mutually exclusive objectives. The potential for a new set of dynamics that could emerge from such an approach is at least worth exploring. It may be forced upon us anyway.

Perhaps of greater concern, more than anything else, in all of these issues is the linear way in which we are now addressing the future. Our rangelands are complex adaptive systems in which we are adaptive agents – not external controllers. Our rangelands are facing a future in which powerful climatic and economic drivers are likely to disturb them with unforeseen consequences for sustainability, yet in which top-down directives are ineffective. The influence must come from the users and their allies, the Drivers at this conference. We influence the behaviour and evolutionary path of this system, but long-term attempts to control rangelands through hierarchical command-and-control will fail because such a complex adaptive system is not amenable to centralised control.

Changes in the decision-making environment of resource users are means of achieving a sustainable evolutionary path. They point towards the need to increase our capacity to learn, to gain feedback from past disturbances in order to adapt to future change.

Put simply, we have to use the environment to build a future for our children, and we have to care for it in ways we have neglected to do in the past. To do that we need to know more about that environment. I am by nature an optimist, and take great heart from the fact that there is a growing awareness of these issues among the general population, and an emerging generation that is more deeply concerned with the ideas of sustainability. They need leadership, however, and such leadership must come from people like yourselves, who have the expert knowledge in these fields and who are prepared to generate a dialogue that in turn sustains action. *Shifting Camp*, your conference, is an important contribution to the development of that dialogue.