

DESERT UPLANDS COMMITTEE AND REGION

LEADING ENTERPRISES, COMMUNITY AND ECOLOGICAL SUSTAINABILITY

The Desert Uplands Committee is a proactive regional strategy group conceived and driven by its grazing community to effect sustainable practices.

The Desert Uplands Committee is actually the Desert Uplands Build Up and Development Committee, established 15 years ago to steward the Desert Uplands Bioregion (DU), in north-eastern Australia. About the size of Tasmania, it's 75,000 square kilometres or 8 million hectares and nationally recognised as a Biodiversity Hotspot.

It's termed desert for its low fertility soils of ancient weathered red sands; and its low and highly variable rainfall. It's not rolling red sand dunes, rather open woodland over native grasses, mostly spinifex. It remains over 70% uncleared.

It's an elevated red sandstone plateau where the Great Dividing Range splits as it heads north through the centre of Queensland. The uplandscape has rocky sandstone and basalt outcrops and escarpments falling gently into creeks and lakes, including 25 significant wetlands and lakes of Galilee and Buchanan, internally draining, naturally saline. The Uplands forms the upper catchments of both Lake Eyre through the Cooper Creek system and the Great Barrier Reef Lagoon via the Burdekin River. The Great Artesian Basin Recharge zone also underlies the region.

The rich biodiversity consists of over 50 rare and threatened plant and animal species with great wildflowers after rain. Much aboriginal and early European heritage remains intact. Introduced weeds and pests at times menace these critical upper catchments.

The 300 plus landholders are predominantly beef grazing, mostly breeder operations. The principal income is from selling steers, their weight at turnoff ranging from weaners to bullocks being dependant on pasture and markets. Cull females are the secondary income as most operators run a self replacing female program. Hence, good management of the livestock and the pastures are critical to the both the business and the landscape, the latter's mineral deficiencies overcome by feeding out supplements, the most important being phosphorous.

Balancing productivity and conservation on such fragility is a delicate balance. Late last century a group of visionary and committed graziers met this challenge by forming the Desert Uplands Committee (DUC). Some fellow graziers were struggling with getting the balance right, with both the condition of their cattle and country deteriorating, often 'pushed' by low cattle prices and high debt levels. There was limited knowledge and understanding of these particular desert

ecologies and their functioning, many in industry and government disregarding the region.

Further the Desert Uplands region has fractured governance being the back end of 7 shires, post amalgamation now 5. There is little to poor infrastructure with no sealed internal roads, with 2 highways that transverse the top and bottom of the region. In 2002 the region was then split down the middle with the introduction of regional bodies, the west being Desert Channels Queensland and the east to what is now known as North Queensland Dry Tropics.

Back in 1995, with the group formed, the committee members garnered interest and in-kind and financial support from politicians, local, state and federal, government agencies and key organisations. Scientists were engaged to increase the knowledge base of the ecologies and its functioning by research, field work and region wide site visits to working properties and engaging with these graziers. In 1998, the region was declared a national Biodiversity Hotspot. By the turn of the century, both landholders and the wider engaged community were better informed of the ecological assets and processes unique to the region. With this knowledge and information came respect and support, both internally and externally, for the region, and the enterprises and community it supports.

So how does the DUC meet the challenges of its mission, to drive economic, environmental and social sustainability? For it has done so, devolving \$12 million in targeted effective programs, elevating grazing practices and outcomes, to become one of the longest running regional strategy groups in the nation.

Ultimately it comes back to being community conceived and driven.

- Passion and love of the country, the cattle and the community
- Issues can be identified quickly and honestly, true causes pinpointed
- Responses and solutions are designed that are appropriate and that work
- Programs are implemented on ground with minimal resources
- Knowledge and information is brokered in a true two way process for both of - listening, learning and doing

The DUC is a true grass roots organisation with true engagement, an actual 'from the ground up' model that is working.

The committee consists of 16 members, with an executive of three. The dozen landholders are complimented by 2 local aboriginal custodians and 2 key regional stakeholders. The nonvoting advisory panel of 4 (Climate Risk, NRM, Livestock & Pests, Agribusiness) will soon be complimented by formalising past members, staff and associates into an active DUC Alumni, providing timely and critical input.

A preference for choosing locals when recruiting staff means that the important cultural aspects are not needed to be taught. Rather time is allowed for project specific skills be acquired, supported by the committee, resulting in exceptional extension.

An open office and open meeting policy enable a broad sweep of views and ideas to be disseminated, often allowing lateral solutions to emerge. The committee meets across the region 6 times per year, with the half day seated procedural part followed by a topical presentation or field visit. Regular newsletters, active website, electronic coms plus the good old phone, fax and property visits keep all informed and engaged. Further also, field days give practical hands-on demonstration in comfortable setting; and information days are often quickly organised in response to critical issues such as the recent Galilee coal mining and exploration.

The committee instituted a monitoring and evaluation process early, for both the region and the committee. This appraisal process has provided critical feedback highlighting issues within the community, and ensuring the organisation, its projects and their deliverance are in a continual improving evolution. A recent report by this consultancy has shown there to be a 1.6 multiplier effect on devolved funds, and a 2.6 eventual multiplier over the last decade when all values are included.

The past 15 years of effectiveness by the DUC means the region has one of the most engaged groups of rangeland graziers in the nation. Many have active property plans and property management plans, the key to achieving sustainable grazing practices, and they being the key to economical, environmental and social sustainability

From the suite of many projects, these three projects illustrate mechanisms and process that have been successfully used.

- **Enterprise Reconstruction Scheme**
- **DUSLRA**
- **Landscape Linkages**

The **Enterprise Reconstruction Scheme** was an early program which addressed those critical production/conservation challenges and debt issues. \$4 million was spent across 55 enterprises which built up property infrastructure, facilitated capital restructuring and property adjustments and illustrated how strategic investment could elevate and catalyse capacities.

The Desert Uplands Strategic Land Resource Assessment or **DUSLRA**, is a comprehensive database of geology, soil and vegetation types to a scale of 1:100,000. Developed in partnership with EPA, this unique and highly detailed information, available from distributed CD's and the web, provides landholders with property scale mapping of land types, critical for implementing sustainable

practices. DUSLRA has been instrumental in improving adaptive behaviour, especially with change of property ownership. Its greatest potential though may be as a dataset to collate with climate prediction models, rainfall patterns, grass cover records and satellite imagery, to more accurately forecast weather and its vegetative effect, as is currently being investigated.

Landscape Linkages, recently completed and highly awarded, enabled landholders to deliver ecosystem services in the southern Desert Uplands. Using the market based instrument of an auction system and accessing bids volunteered with a sophisticated metric, 85,000 hectares of privately held land increased its ground cover by 40% increase, as a mere \$2.30 per ha pa. This project developed, piloted and implemented by the Desert Uplands Committee is illustrative and exemplary of the how a community driven organisation can be innovative, effective and instrumental in finding solutions to sustainability in rangeland Australia. In this case, Landscape Linkages delivered conservation services at a fraction of the cost of national reserves, without compromising food production or enterprise viability.

As a community group, its biggest strength is its biggest weakness.

Currently, the Desert Uplands Committee has been de-funded as governments, federal and state, focus on national priorities and centralised governance. The voluntary committee will guard the collective knowledge within the organisation. It will work with those who choose to support stewardship of the Desert Uplands rich biodiversity, unique landscapes, grazing enterprises and agrarian community. Sustainability of the region was and is the challenge. This community model is exceptional in and exemplary of the effectiveness of meeting this challenge in its proud fifteen year history.