

The Desert Uplands – Bioregional Deliverance

In the centre of Queensland, southwest of Townsville is the Desert Uplands Bioregion of 75,000 square kilometres, some eight million hectares, about the size of Tasmania. An interrange plateau of the Great Dividing Range that splits as it heads north; of weathered sandstone creating low fertility red and yellow sandy soils interspersed with escarpment country.

Its elevation means low yet highly variable rain events, and has formed internally draining lakes, primarily Galilee and Buchanan. It is a nationally declared Biodiversity Hotspot with 70% remaining uncleared open forest country underlaid with mainly spinifex grasses.

It supports 350 grazing enterprises, mostly beef producers, and a population of over 6,000. The fast developing Galilee Coal Basin is in the south.

The Desert Uplands Committee (DUC) was formed fifteen years ago by progressive landholders keen to ensure ecological and enterprise integrity through challenging seasons, and to understand, promote and expose their unique bioregion. It is currently an active voluntary group of seventeen committed to the mission of addressing the environmental, economic and social issues unique to the Desert Uplands Bioregion.

Managing natural resources at a bioregional level and through an organisation governed by a committee of mainly land managers has clear advantages. Well informed regional decision making are the key to good policies, processes and practices that underpin and drive the committee's good works.

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

A constant challenge for the region and committee is the bioregion's governance is so fractured, on many levels. It is divided into five regional shire councils, only one with its offices within the region. The Desert Uplands is within 3 RDA (Regional Development Australia) regions; and in four state electorates and three federal electorates.

Historically, this fractured governance was one of the drivers for forming the committee, to achieve some unity for these desert landholders, especially important in the managing weeds and pests across catchments and the Great Dividing Range.

Then in 2001, the regional body process split the region laterally with the eastern half becoming what is now known as the North Queensland Dry Tropics and the western half Desert Channels Queensland. With most NRM (Natural Resource Management) funding now coming through these regional bodies, the Desert Uplands have been clearly disadvantaged, with neither body having any real comprehension of the importance, significance or issues of this elevated desert. Also, it adds the inefficiencies of devolving funds and reporting through layers of bureaucracy.

Further, there is the present federal Caring for our Country program. Currently, it is politically stalled with the notification of the Open Grants way behind its May deadline. From 2009's \$53 million worth of these grants, there is clearly a preference for funding coastal, urban, peri-urban and farming related works, with very few dollars beyond the camelicide agenda going to Australia's rangelands although it's 70% of Australia's land mass. For the Desert Uplands Committee, this has meant a complete defunding of the organisation.

As one of the longest running regional strategy groups in the nation, the Desert Uplands Committee is community conceived and driven. This means:

- There is 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 organisation has successfully conceived, designed and implemented various innovative programs that specifically addressed key regional issues. In excess of \$12 million were devolved with over 70% getting on-ground, with co-spending by landholders multiplying this by 2.62.

These statistics come from evaluation reports done by Williams and Partners (Chartered Accountants Brisbane) who were engaged in 1998 to constantly monitor the organisation effectiveness. This independent and ongoing feedback has ensured the organisation's activities are attuned to and deal with what is happening 'out there'; and that communications across the bioregion address and identify emerging issues expediently.

It is an ongoing disappointment that the centralised decision making of the Caring for our Country program shows no respect, appreciation or understanding of this deep regional knowledge, skills or capacity. For the Desert Uplands Committee in particular, its exemplary track record and proven status is seemingly disregarded in Canberra.

The predominantly landholder committee, its extensive network and past good works have ensured strong on-going on-ground connectivity, enabling thorough processes to identify key regional issues and for innovative solutions to emerge. An honest, open and fair appreciation of the ecological/enterprise dynamic has enabled a broad collaborative effort with many scientists, universities and a wide range of government personnel.

Together many progressive projects have evolved and been implemented underpinned by a holistic vision to be efficient and effective, aiming for sustainability and an improving trend. With the committee's voluntary capacity and advocacy, and guided by a continually updated strategic plan, the organisation has been able to adapt to funding options and opportunities. Through partnerships and co-operative endeavour with an array of industry sectors, social and community initiatives have been part of the delivery mix.

Hence, over the fifteen years, the Desert Uplands Committee has increased its rangeland grazing productivity; identified and worked to secure its biodiversity assets; and enhanced its community, enterprise and ecological resilience to climatic extremes, commodity price fluctuations and demographic changes.

And through a long dry spell that has well and truly recently been washed away with a remarkable, strong enduring series of rain events.

The Committee delivers an extensive and varied suite of services to landholders and the Uplands community, including workshops, training, plans, mapping and resource sharing.

Now I will give you some examples of Desert Uplands Committee programs and projects.

DUSLARA

Desert Uplands Strategic Land Resource Assessment is a comprehensive database and mapping of 85,327 square kilometres of the region initiated by the committee and produced with EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) in 2005. Significant research, field work and interpretive effort of satellite imagery underpin 1:100,000 scale land system categorisation and mapping, and has been most useful in illustrating, detailing and dealing with many of the land use issues within the bioregion.

The tool available on line and through distributed CD's is especially relevant when properties are bought and sold (all 525 properties have individual maps); and given the bioregion some of the recognition and scientific investigation worthy of such a biodiversity rich area.

STRATEGIC WEED CONTROL

Working with the then seven councils of the bioregion and their RLO's (Rural Lands Officers), this Blueprint for the Bush Project was very successful at targeting and treating key localised infestations, many along or close to rivers, creeks and waterholes. Thousands of acres of privately and publically held land were professionally treated, with the all important monitoring, recording and reporting setting new benchmarks through intensive on-ground works coupled with current technologies of digital photography, satellite mapping and GPS's.

ADVANCING ON GROUND NATURAL CONSERVATION

A targeted program that identified biodiversity assets on grazing lands, and through improved farm management practices and specific infrastructure, protects key riverine and refugia habitats across many properties. So successful, QANTAS and Landcare have now twice partnered with the committee to extend this program, with another section of the Alice River being fenced as we speak.

LANDSCAPE LINKAGES

The Landscape Linkages Project 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, at 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 bioregional organisation can be innovative, effective and instrumental in finding solutions to natural resource management and 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.

Clearly, there would be great benefit through furthering this project linking into the Great Eastern Ranges Initiative now being developed, and adapting it for key biodiversity assets and thresholds around and within coal exploration and mining tenements.

EMPOWERING WOMEN FORUM

This year through a DAFF (Department of Agriculture, Farming and Fisheries) program, the committee was able to deliver triumphant forums to women of the Uplands. Through key speakers and presentations, and finessed format, the attendees were inspired to further their commitments, careers and input into industry and community. These days demonstrated the wide scope and diversity of projects and subsequent affect that such a connected and strong bioregional organisation such as the Desert Uplands Committee can deliver.

The Galilee Basin coal exploration and impending mining activities will challenge the Committee's regional leadership role and mission, as it forges new alliances and seeks inventive ways to protect the Desert Uplands' food productivity, rich biodiversity, agrarian community and cultural identity. The fractured governance as explained earlier also makes co-operative and collaborative effort very complex through those multiple layers.

The current water, carbon and methane debates with the low level of key data from Australian rangeland areas such as the Desert Uplands continue to obfuscate the rigorous discussion that needs to be had between remote and urban Australians. Politically, this has seen natural resource management and the policies that sit behind it become disenfranchising to many landholders and beef producers of the rangelands, and particularly those in the Desert Uplands with their near-intact landscapes, nuanced ecologies and passion for their stock, enterprises, community and culture.

To progress the debate, Grass Fed Beef Days were held across the region earlier this year seeking to elucidate and elevate the production of grass fed and finished beef, with speakers from MLA (Meat and Livestock Australia) and Teys Abattoir.

Subsequent to that, this BOVINISTA costume was designed and made. It is to be worn publicly to remind all that rangeland cattle basically simply convert dry low value grass on non-arable lands to high quality protein for a protein poor world.

THE DESERT UPLANDS BUILD-UP AND DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY COMMITTEE

VISION *That the people of the Desert Uplands will, through sustainable economic and environmental development, progressively increase their standard of living and quality of life.*

MISSION: *Delivering Community Solutions for Regional Issues*

ROLE: *To address economic, environmental and social issues, borne out of the characteristics unique to the Desert Uplands Bioregion*

Biography

Robyn ADAMS, a fourth generation grazier, runs a cattle breeder operation with her husband Terry BRENNAN on wooded spinifex pastures in the southern Desert Uplands. Committed to a holistic approach to country, cattle and community, Robyn has a wide range of interests, skills and past experience including twenty years working in the costume and fashion industries interstate and overseas.

Robyn joined the Desert Uplands Committee in 2002. Elected chair in October 2007, she has continued to meet the challenges of policy and funding changes, whilst being a passionate advocate for the extensive rangeland beef industry within the anthropogenic climate change debate and an increasingly discerning urban consumer.

Also involved with growing the arts at a provincial level, Robyn is further capacitating the region with an integrated approach to community and culture.