*Proc. Eleventh Ann. Conf. Grassland Soc. NSW, 1996, pp. 24-27*

## NATIVE AND NATURALISED GRASSLANDS:

# The Pooginook story - A fundamental change in decision making

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*Summary:* Pooginook and Wonga combined is about 17,000 ha in prime Riverina grazing country. The land is well timbered with boree, box gums and cypress pine as well as natural open perennial grasslands. Over the last decade we have seen wool both rise and fall as well as observing the always unpredictable weather patterns. During the last few years Pooginook has had to focus on the day to day management of the property in order to achieve the maximum efficiency from the land. Having realised that the conventional methods being used were not working and at the same time having a detrimental effect on the livestock, soils and landscape we began looking for other solutions. The logic behind holistic resource management, to us, appeared to provide us with a solution to our problem. Deciding to run with HRM has meant many changes around the property. Not only the initial physical changes but the psychological changes and education of those who live and work at Pooginook. Under the guidance of experts in their fields we believe that the changes made to management styles and physically to the landscape has been a successful. With the application of the logical thinking and testing against guidelines we believe that we will be able to make other larger changes that will prove to be equally successful.

My background and education were traditional. My baggage came in the form of station managers, station cook, gardener, groom, jackaroos and overseers. I was managing people who made sure other people were working, and made everyone feel good in good times. The sheep were selling and showing exceptionally well. The native pastures grew, or so it seemed when it rained, and wool was supreme. From most peoples perspective "we were going along" very nicely. Why change?

Then difficult times came. The end of the 1980's. You all know the rest. Our business was out of balance. The lead in my saddle bags starting to show. We realised there had to be a better way to managing this brittle environment and our poorer soils for a sustainable future. European husbandry habits were not working. Many practices have pushed the land against the flow of nature. We had to stop the erosion of our soils, the continual grazing of our paddocks and provide planned rest periods. We had to encourage native perennial grasses and get bio-diversity to work for us. For profit and lifestyle.

## Self evaluation

Our "set and forget" or conventional set grazing mentality of stocking was playing a slow strangling effect on our pastures and stocking rate. Low successional grasses and woody weeds were spreading. Bare areas between grasses exposing bare ground were slowly increasing. We had always been conservative stockers when compared with the district. Despite this our bio-diversity was not looking good.

Decisions had to be made to change our conservative established business practices. This involved a long and hard look at every aspect of our business. But how could we get every decision to move us towards our business and families goal. The worst decisions are the short term "Survival Decisions" based on 'gut feeling'. There had to be a better way of looking at our land, it's management and the long term function of our family and society.

## Some of our grasslands problems

We had low successional plants such as caltrope, Patterson's curse and Bathurst burr becoming more prevalent. The caltrope (bindy eyes) are a major problem on our sandhills and are even showing adaptability to our heavier country. They play havoc in the lambs feet and with summer rains giving it rigorous growth causing photosensitisation in our stock.

Barley grass, Paterson's curse and stinking lovegrass thrive on the lighter soils. The set stocking was not helping control these weeds. They were get-

ting less competition from the perennials that were continually being nibbled at and not able to thrive and set seed.

Native Australian perennials have been degraded by the "set" stocking management. At Pooginook even with our conservative stocking rates, set grazing of the sweeter palatable species was reducing nutritional value of our pasture. Over resting and over grazing was occurring in most paddocks.

With all the investment sheep and cattle producers put into genetics, few farmers from the dry-land areas discuss or know much about natures perennials. At shows and hogget competitions pasture management is never mentioned or questioned.

## Finding solutions

We were part answering our own questions quite by mistake. At Pooginook, a paddock - about 80 ha is half way between the shearing sheds. Big mobs were moved on their way to shearing and would spend only a few days grazing this area. The paddock would then have long periods of rest. I often remarked on the health of the paddock - better grasses, healthier trees and creeping saltbushes were on the move. Stock always did well.

There was evidence that this paddock was travelling in a different direction to the rest of the property. The same applied when we looked over the fence at the stock route. Healthy and a good variety of perennial grasses.

Rangeland consultant and former Western Lands Commissioner Dick Condon answered a lot of our grazing dilemmas. He encouraged us to run big mobs and spell country on a planned basis. Dick Condon taught us how to graze the native and introduced saltbush for plant efficiency. Long rest periods followed by short, intense grazing. Applying this principal to our overall management was our next challenge. Early signs were encouraging.

We commenced during the drought of 1994/95, tentatively boxing 2,500 stud ewes. Immediately we noticed a change in their behaviour - sheep pads started to grass over as the sheep grazed more as a mob, grazing the whole paddock and not as selective towards species and areas. Encouraged by their "well being" we boxed 2,700 ewe weaners and moved them around 16 paddocks. Each paddock had a rest period of up to 100 days. Our grazing density varied between 78 sheep to the hectare to 0.75 sheep to the hectare. It should be remembered that this is traditional one sheep per hectare country.

It was an extremely dry year and we were feeding all of our stock with imported lupins from Western Australia except the ewe weaners in the grazing plan. They received only a mineral lick -no grain. We classed them 10 months later in October at 18 months of age and were amazed at the evenness in body size. The ewe weaners were only drenched once in 15 months. Their half brothers were drenched 3 times in the same period and received $21 per head of lupins.

With Dick's experience we started to assess paddocks by identifying particular grass species and carrying capacities. It was Dick who introduced us to the philosophies of Allan Savory and Holistic Resource Management.

## What is holistic resource management (HRM) and how is it working at Pooginook ?

HRM is a decision making process that is a complete new management approach to helping people, families, business and whole communities. The aim is to improve the quality of life and generate real wealth while simultaneously restoring the environment and enhance bio diversity.

Our business is an active participant of the HRM theories. I believe the decision making process will help our business to make better decisions to move towards our goal. Every question is tested against guidelines that are designed to give final decisions which are ecologically, economically and sociologically sound. These decisions are put into practice by: planning (assume you are wrong), monitoring, control and re-plan. We were looking for change when Allan Savoury came to Australia in December 1994. We weighed up all the odds and from our former experience we decided to go with it and "Just Do It".

Encouraged by HRM and the ewe weaner experience and healthy perennial grasses, we commenced fencing at Pooginook. In three months from October to December we erected approximately 87 km of 3 wire electric fence. The cost of this was $535 per kilometre. We subdivided 590 to 790 hectare paddocks into approximately 100 to 120 hectare units. The sheep and particularly the cattle quickly got used to the new fences and to the new routine. I feel that if we are sub-dividing more, then two wires would be adequate. Given my traditional background I had a huge "log jam" regarding electric fencing on the Riverina Plains. My mind would nag me "It won't work, the emus and the roo's will see to that!"

Our experience telling us that a good distance for sheep to walk to water is about 1,600 metres - anymore and the outer country may not get the animal impact, therefore grass becomes rank, oxidises and lose production.

Some of our new sub-divisions consisted of a wagon wheel design with the water in the middle.

Handling of the bigger mobs works well. After a while the stock know the system and anticipate the next move. The stock appear to quieten and do better. The carrying capacity at Pooginook is based on past experience. An example, say for 3,000 ewe weaners, require 2,750 hectares. We then sub-divided this area by approximately 20 paddocks.

Allan Savory shows that once paddocks number more than 20 in a cell, your stock performance is better. The chance of overgrazing the grasses are less likely because the stock are moving quicker - every 5/6 days on a 120 day rest period. An important point is that we only graze 30 to 40 % of available feed, before the mob is moved on. Given planned rest the bio-diversity improves, then our carrying capacity will certainly increase. The little showers or storms we often get will have the maximum effect - with no run off due to the improved litter on the ground. We will in effect be doubling our rainfall.

By managing for our perennial grasses we are finding the lower successional weeds do not like the competition and are controlled. Bathurst burr does not like competition and we are confident of limiting growth to firebreaks and road sides.

Our team is fully involved - wives and families included. We have formed a goal of how we would like our business to look and perform, now and for the long term future. Our goal is continually being checked. Our priorities change and so do projects pass and fail our seven testing questions from year to year. Putting in that swimming pool or an overseas trip may fail in the early years, but lifestyle is in our goal so in time the pool or overseas trip will pass our seven questions.

We have since modified our plan of how we would like our property to look in the future. We are not comfortable with the 550 hectares of irrigation in the sustainable long term. So we are experimenting with several varieties of perennial grasses to replace our sub-clover. They are Pioneer, Top Cut Rhodes grass, purple pidgeon grass, Bambasti panic, Premier digit, Bisset creeping blue grass, Consul love grass, wallaby grass and cotton panic. If successful we will have a low maintenance pasture that need only be watered during severe drought. It will require no super or spray and will have an active bio-diversity. All fitting with our goal.

## Changing the management priciples

### *Livestock*

One of our problems being a stud was the number of small mobs we run as families and different types. I agonised over boxing these sheep to get the "animal impact" of a large mob of sheep moving around. But we now rely on coloured ear tags that make the big draft up prior to joining and lambing possible. Our situation is further complicated by having two joinings and therefore two lambings. This is proving to be a big headache for planning purposes and so we are moving towards having one joining. One of the benefits will be increased fertility pressure on the flock.

Cattle have a roll in our operation because being a larger animal it walks the old feed down and provides the litter to aid the water cycle. Being a bigger turner of feed it provides the mineral cycle for healthy grass re-growth. The hooves will crack the capped areas and allow the bio-diversity to commence new life. Ideally we would like to move larger mobs of cattle through at certain times of the year for the benefit of our own natural resource - perennial grass.

### *"Elite wools"*

Another big decision made in recent years was to change from a traditional Riverina Merino stud to produce performance based sheep in line with our goal of moving away from the glitter and razzamatazz. During the Reserve Price Scheme for wool the quality of the nations flock deteriorated. There was little incentive to breed better wool as we were receiving a guaranteed price.

Listening to our clients and watching the fashion industry it was evident to us that if we did not move away from the pack, and breed a more sophisticated fibre, then we would join the crowd who have the opinion that "wool is wool". This involved a major shift in our thinking - away from the traditional stud breeding practices of housing and feeding high levels of supplements to rams and competing in shows and sales around the country. A new direction was needed. To make this change it was going to be hard to serve two masters.

Despite having made our minds up we consulted with our clients as to how they would feel not to see our stud competeing at the National Shows. It was a very clear message to us - supply us with the best

sheep possible. We employed Dr. Jim Watts as our breeding consultant. Jim's knowledge on the correct skins to grow the elite wools was in the beginning a very humbling experience - after all we were the experts who had generations of "in house" knowledge and "he" was only a bloody scientist.

Making that decision to move outside our comfort zone and accept that we could do it better is really paying off now. Wool processors are ringing us for elite wool supplies -quite a turn around in very difficult times. The information that we are receiving is that there is very little of this wool about. We have a big opportunity of taking wool to new levels of sophistication and demand for us and our clients.

## Conclusions

There is ample evidence that set grazing or conventional grazing practices are not sustainable. If we could go "back in time" and see how our country was before 1850 we would see abundant perennial grasses, healthy trees, Old Man saltbush *etc*. The ground would be very pliable that took little rain to produce lush green grass. The lagoons were clear and able to support a large variety of game.

In short, the bio-diversity was in balance. My goal is to reverse the present trend and leave future generations with a sustainable asset. Like the aborigines I see myself as a care-taker of the land.