

## Outback or at home? : environment, social change and pastoralism in Central Australia

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**OUTBACK OR AT HOME?  
ENVIRONMENT, SOCIAL CHANGE AND PASTORALISM IN  
CENTRAL AUSTRALIA**

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A thesis submitted in fulfillment of the  
requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Geography and Oceanography, University of New South Wales,  
Australian Defence Force Academy, Canberra  
January 2000



## **Declaration**

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and to the best of my knowledge it contains no material previously published or written by another person, nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at UNSW or any other educational institution, except where due acknowledgement is made in the thesis. Any contribution made to the research by colleagues, with whom I have worked at UNSW or elsewhere, during my candidature, is fully acknowledged.

I also declare that the intellectual content of this thesis is the product of my own work, except to the extent that assistance from others in the project's design and conception or in style, presentation and linguistic expression is acknowledged.

.....*Michael J. Kelly*.....

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines the responses of non-indigenous pastoralists in Central Australian rangelands to two social movements that profoundly challenge their occupancy, use and management of land. Contemporary environmentalism and Aboriginal land rights have both challenged the status of pastoralists as valued primary producers and bearers of a worthy pioneer heritage. Instead, pastoralists have become associated with land degradation, biodiversity loss, and Aboriginal dispossession. Such pressure has intensified in the 1990s in the wake of the Native Title debate, and various conservation campaigns in the arid and semi-arid rangelands.

The pressures on pastoralists occur in the context of wider reassessments of the social and economic values of rangelands in which pastoralism is seen as having declined in value compared to 'post-production' land uses. Reassessments of rangelands in turn are part of global changes in the status of rural areas, and of the growing flexibility in the very meaning of 'rural'.

Through ethnographic fieldwork among largely non-indigenous pastoralists in Central Australia, this thesis investigates the nature and foundations of pastoralists' responses to these changes and critiques. Through memory, history, labour and experience of land, non-indigenous pastoralists construct a narrative of land, themselves and others in which the presence of pastoralism in Central Australia is naturalised, and Central Australia is narrated as an inherently pastoral landscape. Particular types of environmental knowledge and experience, based in actual environmental events and processes form the foundation for a discourse of pastoral property rights. Pastoralists accommodate environmental concerns, through advocating environmental stewardship. They do this in such a way that Central Australia is maintained as a singularly pastoral landscape, and one in which a European, or 'white', frame of reference continues to dominate. In this way the domesticated pastoral landscapes of colonialism and nationalism are reproduced.

The thesis also examines Aboriginal pastoralism as a distinctive form of pastoralism, which fulfills distinctly Aboriginal land use and cultural aspirations, and undermines the conventional meaning of 'pastoralism' itself.

The thesis ends by suggesting that improved dialogue over rangelands futures depends on greater understanding of the details and complexities of local relationships between groups of people, and between people and land.



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## **Acronyms**

AANT – Australia Archives Northern Territory (Darwin office)

AB – Agriculture Branch

ACF – Australian Conservation Foundation

AIB – Animal Industry Branch

AIM – Australian Inland Mission

ALC – Arid Lands Coalition

ALEC – Arid Lands Environment Centre (Alice Springs)

APPU - Australian Primary Producers' Union

CLC – Central Land Council

CLMA – Centralian Land Management Association

CPA - Centralian Pastoralists' Association

CSIRO – Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation

ECNT – Environment Centre Northern Territory (Darwin)

DPIF – Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries

NRMWG – National Rangelands Management Working Group

NSRM – National Strategy for Rangelands Management

NT – Northern Territory

NTCA – Northern Territory Cattlemens' Association

NTRS – Northern Territory Record Series



## **Chapter 1 Introduction: Pastoral Settlement in Central Australia and Changing Perceptions of the 'Outback'**

He was popular with the Fleet Street boys with his demonstrations of Aboriginal sign language and how to make fires in Hampstead with sticks. Miss Teasdale kindly arranged the photographic sessions and afterwards they went off to the Dorchester to discuss the desert (From 'The Last Explorer' in Drewe 1984).

A fourth generation Territorian, Troy knows just about everybody in the Outback, and will introduce viewers to the sights and sounds of the Australian 'red heart' few have seen before (Dann n.d).

### **1.1 Introduction and Main Aim**

This thesis is about the Australian outback. It is not, however, about the outback as conventionally depicted. The outback can be many things, but is often represented as wilderness heartland, as home of somewhat mysterious Aboriginal cultures, or as the site of an evocative, heroic, and heritage-rich pastoral industry. In the academic sphere, there is no shortage of studies which show how outback spaces are home to Aboriginal people, these spaces intimately known and criss-crossed with features, tracks and meaning (for example see Young 1992b; Myers 1986). Another formulation is the outback as frontier, as 'year zero', a liminal time/space in which the moment and conditions of settlement are preserved, in which the hopes of settlers are never quite realised, and where an emptiness persists (Rose 1997). Less often, the outback is represented in everyday terms as a site of belonging and livelihood for non-indigenous rural Australians. Where such outback stories are told, they tend to be both celebratory, and modern versions of pioneer stories, writ in terms of struggle, stoicism, and faith in

the land and future (for example see 'Kidman Kings' or 'Women in the Wilderness', *The Advertiser Weekend Magazine*, 1/4/95 and 23/12/95).

Recently, there have been more scholarly engagements by researchers with non-indigenous identity and its relationships to land and environment in peripheral rural regions. Strang's (1997) ethnography of Cape York Aborigines and non-indigenous pastoralists, uncovers and compares non-indigenous pastoralist and Aboriginal relationships to land. In south-eastern Australia, Read (1996) examines the feelings and attachments of pastoralists forced to leave their properties to make way for national parks. Such studies are few, however, and, while they offer important contributions to a neglected field, they too require further elaboration as to the wider political contexts of non-indigenous relationships with land. Moreover, the contrasts between the cultures described by Read (1996) and Strang (1997) point to wide variations within Australian rural society, and together suggest the value of further local and regional studies.

In this study, I examine a group of pastoralists in the southern Northern Territory (NT), an area commonly referred to as Central Australia (Figure 1.1). My main aim is to examine, document, and interrogate the responses of non-indigenous pastoralists to indigenous land rights and environmentalism, both of which are posing questions as to the future of pastoralism in arid areas. I do this by examining their conceptions of nature and environment, their relationships to land, and the development of such relationships. I place these within wider contemporary struggles over land and its meanings. In this situation, the struggles are occurring at both the local/regional scale and nationally.



Within geography, the basis for ranging across local and national scales, derives from developments in thinking about place and localities, and from its use in cultural geography. From the 1970s humanistic geographers had a great interest in the concept of place as a means of articulating affective links between people and locales, and, more generally, in 'exploring and explicating the subjectivity of human action and its base in meanings (both individual and shared)' (Johnston 1987, p.165). Such an approach was later criticised, however, for its lack of attention to social structure and power. The construction of place is now theorised as not only a locus for individual and group subjectivity, but also as a 'fundamental moment in the struggle to acquire or resist political power' (Harvey 1996, p.321). There is a politics to place building which ranges 'dialectically across material, representational, and symbolic activities which find their hallmark in the way individuals invest in places and thereby empower themselves collectively' (Harvey 1996, p.323).

In light of the politics of place, I rely, not only on detailed local investigations and fieldwork, but also on an historical perspective, and contemporary national debates over pastoral land in semi-arid and arid Australia pastoral lands, to frame the Central Australian case study. Through such struggles I seek to show how the local settings inform such national debates. In addition to showing that the local is inherent in national debates over land, and that national issues inform local struggles, I wish to illustrate how these realms interact, and constitute and interpenetrate each other (Howitt 1993; Howitt 1998b). Thus, I think of Central Australia as locality, and rangelands/Australia as national, not as two distinct spheres or spatialities but as dialectically related 'geographical totalities' (Howitt 1998b). Dialectical scale informs debates and conflicts over land use. Not recognising how local contexts inform debate beyond the local, and

how extra-local, often historical contexts constitute the local, precludes meaningful dialogue. At the same time, localities and their complexities can show globalising or stereotyping perspectives to be fatally flawed. One possible outcome of the failure to appreciate these entanglements of scale can be entrenched positionings that foreclose the potential for envisioning new outcomes for Australia's rangelands. Indeed, the rigidity of the recent debates over Native Title highlights precisely the limitations of a non-relational approach to scale.

## **1.2 Aims**

The central aim (Figure 1.2) of this thesis is, with a focus on land and environmental matters, to investigate the nature and foundations of non-indigenous pastoralists' responses to contemporary social change that questions their cultural status, and occupancy and use of land. This aim is most substantively addressed in Chapters Five, Six and Seven and arises from a number of issues. First, beyond literary and 'cultural' studies, there is a dearth of empirical, fieldwork-based research that investigates rural settler cultures and their relationships to land. Second, in response to environmentalism, land rights and recent acute struggles over Native Title, non-indigenous pastoralists have asserted conservationist and indigenous identities. Such claims are significant, because they provide pastoralists with potentially authoritative claims with which to disarm their critics, and thereby frustrate social and ecological change. In these assertions, settler pastoralists are claiming indigeneity and a point of ecological adaptation to the Australian environment. These are not innocent, nor idle claims on the part of a group who have traditionally wielded considerable cultural and political power in Australia:

cultures of power and domination never fully realise themselves, they are always anxiously regrouping, reinventing, and reinscribing their authority against the challenge of anticolonial formation (Jacobs 1996, p.14).

The scope of such claims requires they be examined for their foundations and ‘tenacious and adaptive power’ (Jacobs 1996, p.14). Two other aims are subsidiary to this main aim.

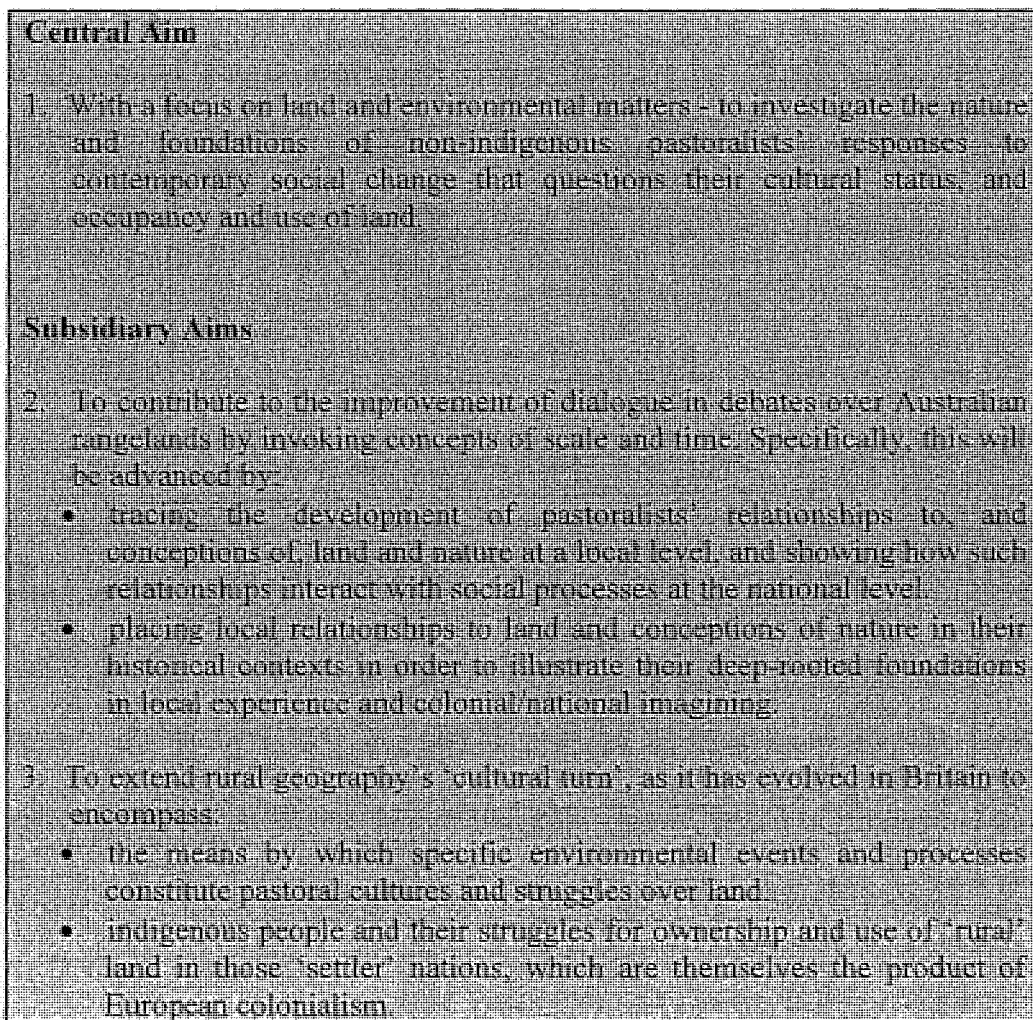


Figure 1.2: Research aims

The second aim of this research is to contribute to debates over rangelands in Australia, and specifically, to improve dialogue between parties to such debates. Using concepts of time and scale, the thesis relates pastoralist relationships to, and conceptions of, land and nature to historical and political processes beyond the local or regional level. Pastoralist claims to indigeneity and conservationist identity do indeed develop in specific local circumstances, but they do not simply remain at, or only draw source material from, this level. Instead such claims have entered, and are constituted by, wider political realms and debates over land. The 1996-97 debate over Native Title is a good example of this (for example see 'Spirit of the land touches graziers', *Weekend Australian*, 1-2/2/97). Conversely, national concerns and imperatives exist within local social institutions, relationships and geographies, the neglect of which by urban-based communities has frustrated discussion over land in the outback. The historical element to the analysis illustrates that pastoralists' relationships to land do not emerge 'pre-formed'. They are not 'natural', but are selectively created over time through social processes, and that, again, local and national events and processes are mutually involved in such construction.

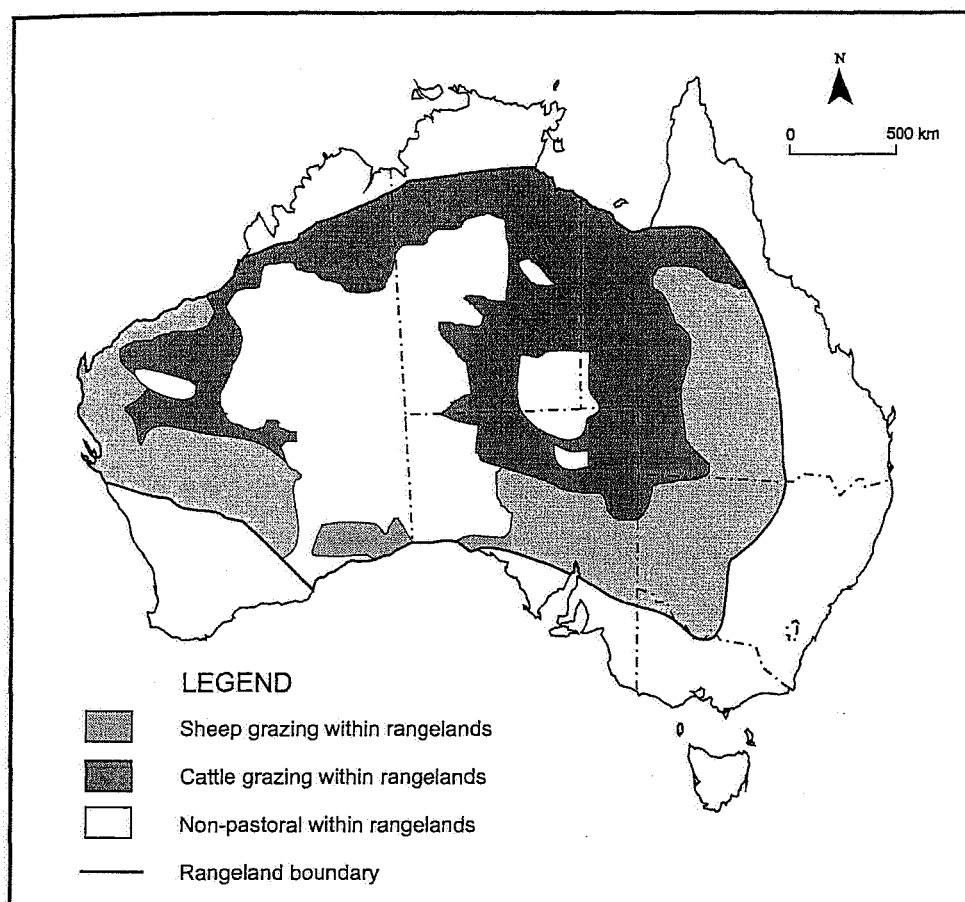
The third aim is to extend the largely British 'cultural turn' in rural geography. Specifically, it seeks to do this by examining the role of particular environmental events and processes in constituting cultures, and the struggles of indigenous people for land in 'rural' areas in former colonies. In rural geography, 'environment' and 'nature' figure prominently as flexible terms and concepts, 'although they remain as somewhat abstract concepts or signifiers (for example see Whatmore and Boucher 1993). Ways in which the meanings of 'environment' or 'conservation' might be constituted from specific and local environmental events and processes are, for example, neglected. This thesis will

show how pastoral culture in Central Australia draws on experiences of the land to create particular versions of nature and environment that inform their culture, and underpin pastoralist hierarchies of people and nature. Further, the thesis aims to expand cultural rural geography beyond the 'source' spaces of European colonialism, to examine some of the consequences of colonial visions of land, land use, and rural society in a period in which these visions are challenged by indigenous people in the colonised lands. While this cultural rural geography has considered how the countryside might be 'white' (for example see Agyeman and Spooner 1997), the analysis has not been extended into (post)colonial nations.

### ***1.3 Struggles over Rangelands: Challenges to Pastoral Landscapes***

One theme of rural research in recent years has been the impact of social change in areas that were previously unambiguously 'rural'. 'Rural' has typically referred to areas characterised by extensive land uses such as agriculture or forestry, which have not only dominated land use, but have heavily influenced social organisation in such areas. This certainty appears to have evaporated for many rural regions in western nations. There are a number of factors influencing this, and they vary between and within countries. One interpretation of this loss of certainty and clarity in Europe has been in terms of the shift from a productionist to a post-productionist era (Commins 1990). In this shift there is a trend towards the relative decline in the production values of rural areas and a relative rise in post-productionist, or 'amenity' values associated with, for example, conservation, lifestyle, and tourism (Holmes 1996).





**Figure 1.3: Australian rangelands and generalised grazing divisions**

Source: (Stafford-Smith and Morton 1990)

Value of cattle sold	\$643 million (1993-94)
Value of sheep sold	\$42 million (1993-94)
Value of wool sold	\$262 million (1993-94)
Value of tourism	\$1.7 billion (1992-93)
Value of mining	\$12 billion (1993-94)
Employment in pastoralism declined by 23.5% from 1986-1991	
In 1991 pastoralism employed 7 000 people	
In 1991-92 tourism employed an estimated 40 000 people	

**Figure 1.4: Selected rangelands statistics**

Source: (NRMWG 1996)



pastoralism are also declining in cultural value. The historically largely positive image of pastoralists as pioneers and producers is being replaced by images of pastoralists as environmental vandals (Kimber 1994) and, as the contentious Native Title debate in 1997-98 showed, as emblematic of both Aboriginal dispossession and as obstacles on a road to national settler/indigenous reconciliation.

The Australian inland or 'outback' has always been perceived in multiple and shifting ways, yet the last two decades have seen two further shifts associated with the status of pastoralism and growing community interest in rangelands (Heathcote 1994b). The shift to the amenity-based assessments as described by Holmes (1994a; 1996) has particularly included valuations of rangelands for their biodiversity, 'nature, and conservation values, and as spaces of Aboriginal culture and landownership.

Conservation interest largely revolves around historical and ongoing concerns about land degradation and biodiversity conservation, and is part of a long history of Australian arid lands as a 'problem' for settlement and rural land use (Heathcote 1987a; Heathcote 1987b) (see Chapter Four). Nationally, concerns about land degradation have tended to be driven by national scientific surveys, such as one in 1975 that found fifty-five percent of Australia's rangelands required some form of treatment due to land degradation. Of this, forty-two percent was reported as being moderately degraded and thirteen percent was severely degraded (Woods 1984). More recently, biodiversity conservation has become an issue shaping perceptions of rangelands, where the impacts of European settlement, including grazing, have been particularly severe on native biota (James, Landsberg et al. 1995). Conservationists have intensified their rangelands campaigns since the early 1980s, and particularly in the 1990s. For example, in 1993, a

national coalition of environment groups, the Arid Lands Coalition (ALC), formed specifically to campaign on rangelands issues. Conservationist campaigns have called for the reform of the pastoral industry and its removal or scaling back in some areas.

Over much of the rangelands, particularly those areas in the far inland and north, Aboriginal customs and relationships to land have survived relatively intact. Since the 1970s in particular, the significant Aboriginal populations in these areas have been asserting their interests in land, and undertaking 'traditional'<sup>2</sup> and contemporary land uses. Such assertions, the terms on which they are made, and a strong Aboriginal presence unsettle the place of pastoralists in the Australian 'outback'. Aboriginal claims to land undermine the idea that a one way and transformative process of settlement has occurred, and challenge the pastoralists' sense of ownership of land, and their sense of belonging and home. Aboriginal assertions of interest in land challenge the long held primacy and naturalness of the pastoral landscape (see Chapters Two and Five). In addition, Aboriginal land ownership has been growing in some areas of the rangelands, confronting pastoralists with the material attrition of the pastoral landscape.

In the 1990s, pressure from the conservation and land rights movements, and official realisation that rangelands use required reassessment, led the federal Labour government to launch the National Strategy for Rangelands Management (NSRM). This strategy, commenced in 1993, was based upon the premise that existing legislative and

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<sup>2</sup> In this thesis I use the terms 'traditional' or 'customary' to refer to the 'customs, practices, and technologies of Aboriginal people that predate the arrival of non-indigenous people and remain substantially unchanged' (Davies 1995, p.xxiv). As Davies (1995) notes, 'traditional' is a 'vexed' term in the context of dynamic Aboriginal cultures. It is however, useful to distinguish such 'tradition' from those post-1788 land uses, behaviours, and relationships to land that may have their basis in 'tradition' but are constantly developing, evolving and changing.

policy arrangements, institutions, and knowledge were inadequate to manage the social, economic and environmental issues facing the rangelands. The strategy had both an investigative and reforming agenda, and was seized upon by all interest groups as a vehicle to advance their respective causes. Amongst pastoralists it was seen largely as a threat.

The 1990s has therefore seen some profound challenges to pastoralists. By canvassing the possibility of alternative rangelands landscapes and downgrading the status of pastoralism, these two movements, land rights and environmentalism, in conjunction with the NSRM, have challenged the legitimacy of pastoralists' occupation, rights, and relationships to land. By challenge I do not necessarily mean the pastoral industry has been threatened with the real possibility of wide-reaching reform. The economic and political constraints to such reform are significant. The sudden demise of the NSRM upon the 1996 election of a conservative federal government is one indication of this. The challenge posed to pastoralists has thus far been more one of values and critiques, in the face of which pastoralists have largely maintained their dominance over land use and ownership in the pastoral rangelands. Nonetheless, the responses of pastoralists to environmentalist campaigns, land rights and the NSRM indicate that, real threat or not, they have felt threatened.

These challenges to pastoralism resonate not only in the rangelands. The rangelands, as 'outback', and rural space, are significant to the very character of the Australian nation, which, mythologically, is founded in the 'bush' and in the colonial and pioneering encounter with the environment (White 1981; Schaffer 1988). As a focus for two movements that question the success and teleology of these origins and national

histories, the rangelands provide fertile ground for investigating the relationships between the symbolic and material (for example land use and ownership) dimensions of national rural mythology. For example, it is in the rangelands that wider questions of settler-indigenous reconciliation or accommodation are being most acutely live out and grappled with. To a large extent this is a process of confronting history and unsettling conventional historical accounts that have, until recently, shored up the concept of a nation derived from doughty pioneering struggle. This confrontation has been a process that has caused conflict and anxiety at both a local level in the rangelands, and at a national level, as the words of the Liberal Prime Minister in 1996 indicate:

[The] 'black arm band' view of our past reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination.

I take a very different view. I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed (Prime Minister, John Howard, 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture).

This thesis sets out to show that such sentiments are not merely isolated rhetoric, but exist across the spheres of government, and pastoralist cultures, and influence the way in which land is occupied, owned, and used.

#### **1.4 Central Australia – Industry Background**

The Central Australian cattle industry occupies land that is amongst the most recently settled pastoral areas in Australia (Figure 1.6) Although pastoral settlement commenced in Central Australia in the early 1870s (Duncan 1967), large areas were still being taken up as pastoral leases up to, and even after, World War II. Until the war, and despite an



Since the 1890s, when company and larger pastoralists were forced to abandon their holdings due to drought, the Central Australian pastoral industry has been dominated by family ownership as opposed to corporate ownership (see Chapter Six), which is concentrated in more productive areas closer to markets. In 1997 there were seventy-three pastoral stations in Central Australia, compared to ninety-one identified in 1978 by Petty et al (1979). Most families own one station, although one family owns five, one owns four, and a small number own two stations. Generally, such multiple ownership is to provide for children in the family. Most stations are managed by the owners rather than by employed managers. Direct employment in the cattle industry is relatively small. Petty et al (1979) found an average of three permanent employees per station, a figure that from my observations holds in the 1990s. Very often today these are family members employed in various positions.

The stations are all on perpetual leasehold land and range in size from eight hundred square kilometres to almost eleven thousand square kilometres. Most are between two thousand and five thousand square kilometres, and the average herd size is around four thousand one hundred head of cattle (Wilcox and Cunningham 1994). These figures reflect the low stocking rates in the pastures of Central Australia, which have carrying capacities ranging from one to four head per square kilometre (Wilcox and Cunningham 1994). The average capital investment in stations in Central Australia in 1991-92 was around \$1.5 million and debt levels were high relative to other cattle producing regions (Wilcox and Cunningham 1994).

Although the cattle industry dominates land use, particularly in more productive areas, and is a highly visible and prominent industry, its economic contribution to the Central



Australian and NT economy is relatively small. Central Australia accounted for 18% of Northern Territory cattle production in 1994-95 (Department of Asian Relations Trade and Industry 1997), and the NT cattle industry as a whole is worth around 45% of the value of non-mining primary industry in the NT (Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 1996). As a proportion of the NT gross domestic product in 1994-95, non-mining primary production was worth 3.7%. In contrast mining was worth 16.5% (Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 1996). The value of horticultural production on small areas of land in Central Australia is worth as much as one third of the value of cattle production and is growing fast (Department of Asian Relations Trade and Industry 1997).

Commercial tourism has grown from its 1940s beginnings at Uluru (Ayers Rock) to provide far greater earnings than the pastoral industry. In 1996/97, tourism expenditure in the Alice Springs district was \$281 million (NT Tourism Commission, pers.comm. 10/2/97). By comparison, the value of cattle produced in the district annually is approximately \$30 million (Department of Asian Relations Trade and Industry 1997). For the NT as a whole, tourism expenditure totalled \$715.9 million in 1996/97 (NT Tourism Commission, pers. comm. 10/2/97) while the value of cattle production in 1995/96 was \$134 million (Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 1996). The value of the Aboriginal economy to Central Australia, based on data from 1987-88 by Crough et al (1989), is estimated to have contributed \$184 million to the Central Australian regional economy, at the time about one third of its total size.

As this thesis details, the cattle industry in Central Australia has been criticised on environmental grounds over many decades. It also shows that the structure and nature of

the industry up to the 1960s facilitated the maintenance of Aboriginal relationships to land, and that Aboriginal aspirations for land ownership in Australia have been most realised in the NT. The relatively marginal economic nature of the cattle industry, its dominance in land use, nagging questions as to its environmental impact, and Aboriginal assertions of interests in land have all contributed to suggestions that pastoralism is no longer the highest value land use in Central Australia, and that reform is required. This is the Central Australian starting point for this thesis.

### **1.5 Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is divided into nine chapters. This current chapter has served to introduce the aims and background to the thesis. This section will summarise the role of each chapter.

*Chapter Two* provides a point of departure for analysing the pastoralist responses. In this chapter, I place the thesis within a disciplinary context, drawing on recent work in rural geography in particular. This cultural brand of rural research offers a framework for thinking about conceptions of rural life and the meanings contained in ideas of the countryside. I examine agrarian ideology and its relationship to classical and modern conceptions of city and country, agriculture and wilderness, and nature and culture, and relate these themes to colonial settlement in Australia. I then argue that the Australian bush or outback can be seen as, among other things, an example of agrarianism, and that the outback, while often perceived as empty and vast, can also be interpreted as domesticated and as home for rural non-indigenous Australians. I suggest in this chapter that such non-indigenous relationships to land are a neglected field and they exist within a politics of identity, locality and nation, not least of which is their colonial lineage, the

establishment of the Garden in the Wilderness, and the role of this in 'nation-building' in the past and in the present.

*Chapter Three* is a methodology chapter where I trace the origins of this project and discuss the approach taken and the rationale behind adoption of this approach. I outline the fieldwork and documentary research stages, and discuss some of the social and cultural factors that influenced and constrained fieldwork.

The background to Aboriginal land rights and environmentalism as challenges to pastoralism both nationally, and in Central Australia, are the subjects of *Chapter Four*. This chapter outlines the often violent impact of European settlement on Aboriginal people in Central Australia and the terms under which many Aboriginal people came to be involved in the pastoral industry. From the settlers' point of view this was a process by which Aboriginality was bounded and controlled. The chapter goes on to describe the development of land rights, Aboriginal land purchases, and the recent conflicts between pastoralists and Aboriginal people over Native Title. The chapter also documents the decades-long development and persistence of conservationist and scientific concerns about the environmental impact of pastoralism. This concern is traced at both a national level, and, through specific events, at a local level in Central Australia. For both land rights and environmentalism, I discuss how these movements articulate a vision of the rangelands and of the nation quite different from that vision in which pastoralism has occupied a central position.

In *Chapter Five* I begin the analysis of pastoralists' responses to social change. In this chapter I apply the concepts of 'remembering' and 'memory' as social processes

occurring in the social and political contexts of the present. I primarily use published pastoral texts as the main sources, supplemented by analysis and use of interviews conducted in 1996-97. The chapter sets out the historical roots of pastoralists' concepts of land and nature, and their perceived place within nature, as evident in pastoral remembering. Such conceptions are crucial to understanding contemporary responses to environmentalism and land rights. The key theme in this chapter is the 'pastoral true story'. This is the idea that pastoralist accounts of land, events, people, and history, are the 'true' accounts of Central Australia, underpinning its creation and interpretation as a pastoral landscape. The pastoral 'true story' is a generalisation of pastoralist accounts, yet collectively and publicly, and despite persistent challenges, it is the story that still matters most in the dominant 'whitefella' culture and politics of the NT.

*Chapter Six* is a key chapter in this thesis and extends the idea of the 'true story' into contemporary cultural politics of pastoral land. It sets out much of the information and analysis from fieldwork with pastoralists. In particular, it examines pastoralists' understandings of environmental events and biophysical landscape processes, and shows how these are given meaning within pastoral culture. It also shows how such meanings provide the basis for pastoral identity, constructions of territory, and for claims of the inherent 'good' of cattle in the landscape. From this I discuss pastoralist notions of stewardship of land in relation to cattle grazing, and the ways in which local and national themes are woven into their discourses. Finally, I show how such pastoralist representations of their relationships to land and of their inherent good use of it, relate to the politics of land in the NT, and nationalist Anglo-Celtic sentiments concerning the 'man on the land' and agrarian outback ideology (as identified in Chapter Two).

*Chapter Seven* extends some of the themes of Chapter Six into an analysis of pastoral Landcare in Central Australia. Landcare is a federal government funded rural movement founded to tackle rural land degradation in Australia through participatory farmer involvement. I show Landcare to be somewhat ambiguous as it is simultaneously a potential source of improved pastoral land management, and a means by which pastoralists seek to retain control of their land. More importantly, the activities of pastoral Landcare are shown to be extensions of the beliefs and practices discussed in Chapter Six. Thus Landcare can be seen as an continuation of the pastoral 'true story', and a means by which pastoralists are shaping it to suit contemporary political circumstances. On the other hand, I show that the operation of Landcare has the potential to disrupt the true story, but that this disruption is limited by aspects of pastoral culture which constrain the activities of the pastoralist who lead Landcare. To the outside world, pastoralists continue to assert the certainty of the economic and environmental benefits of their industry.

*Chapter Eight*, extends the discussion of land rights in Chapter Four, by showing how Aboriginal land ownership subverts the non-indigenous pastoralist assertion that Central Australia is naturally a pastoral landscape. This chapter, however, goes further than this. I analyse Aboriginal pastoral businesses on Aboriginal land. On the surface such involvement in pastoralism suggests that indigenous land rights does not challenge the pastoral landscape to the extent that Chapter Four suggests, and that pastoralism is indeed inherent to Central Australia. However, while pastoralism is embraced by some Aboriginal people, I show the reasons for running pastoral businesses have more to do

with Aboriginal concerns of land, culture and identity, than with the productionist concerns of the industry as a whole.

The final chapter, *Chapter Nine*, concludes the thesis. This chapter uses the findings of previous chapters to outline non-indigenous pastoralists' geographies of nature and culture in Central Australia. The first aim is addressed by summarising the responses of pastoralists to land rights and environmentalism. The idea of a pastoral foundational narrative, introduced in Chapter Two is revisited. Its incorporation of environmental themes as a means to maintain pastoral authority and geographies of Central Australia is emphasised. The potential for this analysis to improve dialogue over rangelands is explored, as is its contribution to rural geography.

The next chapter reviews literature relevant to this thesis. This chapter shows how mythical landscapes of Wilderness, Garden, and City, and agrarian ideology have influenced pastoral settlement in the past, and continue to underlie certain powerful conceptions of the outback today. As well, it illustrates how rural people in many nations have fallen in cultural status, as their landscapes are redefined in conservation, amenity and indigenous terms, and as their relationships to land are glossed by their 'urbane' critics as merely being ones of property rights and economics.

## Chapter 2 Mythical Geographies, Settlement and Contemporary Social Change in Rural Areas

No mattock will molest the soil, no pruning knife the vine; and then the sturdy ploughman will free his oxen from the yoke. Wool will be taught no more to cheat the eye with this tint or that, but the ram himself in his own meadow will change the colour of his fleece, now to the soft glow of a purple dye, now to a saffron yellow. Lambs at their pastures will find themselves in scarlet cloaks.

The fates have spoken, in concord with the unalterable decree of destiny. 'Run, spindles' they have said. 'This is the pattern of the age to come.' (Virgil, *The Golden Age*, 39B.C.)

His mother thought this was the Outback - the Never-Never - but he knew that, despite its 700 miles from the city, the Outback did not start here (Woodberry and Tetlow 1974, p.55; cited in Ramson 1997, p.452).

### 2.1 Introduction

Rural people around the globe are facing changes that are altering the nature of economic and social activity beyond cities, bringing new land uses to non-urban areas, and challenging the rural identities. That people are feeling this pressure is seen in protests by farmers, in various European countries about agricultural reform in the European Community, in the activities of champions of 'wise use' in the United States (for example see McCarthy 1998), in farmers' rallies protesting at the neglect of the bush at Parliament House in Canberra, and in the bitter resistance of pastoralists to Native Title in Australia in 1997 and 1998. In many of these protests and movements it has been clear that the meaning of 'rural' extends beyond the materiality of primary production and residence in non-urban spaces and communities. In these struggles 'rural' people draw on diverse resources which 'join the work ethic, patriotism, the small community resource sector and a pro-development perspective', and associate this

with a series of spatial and social oppositions including 'rural/urban' and 'intellectual labour/manual labour' (Dunk 1994, p.29).

Rural spaces and activities occupy a central place in national identities, mythologies, and histories. The study, however, of the changing status and struggles over the meanings of rural in particular places and nations, particularly in relation to environmentalism and indigenous land rights movement, is a somewhat neglected area of research. As Little (1999) has recently argued, such studies need to transcend analysis rooted in traditional conceptions of the countryside, such as the rural 'idyll' and focus on the:

sociocultural practices and beliefs that underpin (and are part of) dominant representations of the rural...and how such practices and beliefs vary between individuals and places and how they are contested and challenged (Little 1999, p.440).

In addition, Little urges that studies of rural identity pay closer attention, not only to the power relations which serve to create and reinforce marginalisation, but also to the complexity of rural identities (Little 1999, p.438).

This thesis addresses both of the points raised by Little. In the context of a particular type of Australian rurality, that associated with the outback, this thesis documents and analyses the responses of pastoralists as they seek to reassert the value of their rural identity through various discursive and material strategies. In these strategies pastoralists are asserting identities and a flexible form of outback rurality that marks them not only as primary producers, but also as environmental stewards and indigenes.



This thesis traces some of the practices, histories and beliefs that underlie these representations, and places them in a political context.

Attention to rural societies, rural identity, and rural cultural processes has been relatively rare in settler nations (Dominy 1995; Creed and Ching 1997; Ellemor 1998), and certainly in Australia. In contrast, literary, media and artistic studies of the Australian bush or outback abound (for example Haynes 1998; Schaffer 1988; White 1981; Bishop 1996), and there are many studies of rural demography, sustainability, and economy (for example see Argent 1999; Epps 1995; Smailes 1997). While humanistic studies such as Heathcote (1965) and Powell (1976; 1988) have provided insights into rural resource perception, use and management, rural society itself remains something of a blackbox in such studies; perceptions somehow issue forth from rural society to interact with official viewpoints and policies. One recent study of the discursive aspects of struggles over mining development in New South Wales (McGregor 1998) is a step towards a more ethnographically engaged account of rural cultures. Yet McGregor's analysis remains at the level of the media and so does not investigate the specific histories, contingencies, and processes behind the articulations of local and national rurality marshalled in support of mining. Such cultural analysis of rural identities tends to take an 'urban' perspective as the point of reference in framing questions, concepts and methods (Creed and Ching 1997). The development of the so-called 'new cultural' geography has offered new pathways to explore the concerns of rural geographers and to make contributions to the agenda put forward by Little (1999).

## **2.2 *Reconceptualising the Rural***

Two reviews of rural geography in the 1990s note a resurgence in rural geography, at least in Britain (Whatmore 1993; Cloke 1997). Both attribute this revitalisation to the convergence of the 'cultural turn' in social science, and changes in rural areas and the release of rurality from its geographical and social anchors. Rurality refers to those meanings and images that together constitute what is commonly taken to be rural. This convergence has 'recast the terms on which the social and economic relations of land use in the countryside articulate with the cultural politics and environmental resources of rurality' (Whatmore 1993 p.539; see also Liepens 1998). This resurgence is taking rural geography and related sub-disciplines out of a backwater in which Cloke (1997) suggests it has been languishing since the 1950s, when the rural as a focus of study gave way not only to urban studies, but also to more applied and systematic approaches. Such systematic studies included agri-industrial studies of food production, which rendered rural areas mere links in a production chain. So residual did the rural become that Whatmore (1993) argues a research orthodoxy developed that held the 'designation rural was of no analytical significance [and that] in the late 20th century "rural" constitutes no more than a category of imagination without substance in the "material" organisation of socioeconomic processes and relations' (Whatmore 1993, p.538).

Somewhat ironically, it is precisely because the rural is a category of imagination that there has been a resurgence of interest in rural research and the nature of rurality. The 'cultural turn' in geography and social science in general has opened up means by which to refocus on the rural as a category of meaning and action. Rather than basing definitions of the rural and rurality on territorial space, or on the basis of land use, there is now an emphasis on the social production of meanings of the rural and the

relationship of these meanings with themes such as the politics of rural life and society, land use, and national identity (Cloke 1997; Marsden, Lowe et al. 1990; Murdoch and Pratt 1993). Although much of the work in this vein is of British origin, (but see also McCarthy 1998; Dominy 1993) and the precise nature of change in the British countryside differs from that in Australia, its premises of social change and contested rural meanings and landscapes bear directly on debates over Australia's pastoral rangelands.

Cloke (1997) outlines three foci of study in which cultural and rural studies have met and where cultural geography's concern with the relationship of meanings and materiality, including landscapes, can be pursued. First, cultural geography's interest in landscape and environmental relations has been furthered by the recognition that rural mythologies are often key elements of nationalist ideologies and identities. Second, the rural context has provided a 'rich tapestry of myth and symbolism capable of hiding or excluding othered identities' (Cloke 1997, p.369). Third, the city/country dualism provides fertile ground for the exploration of constructions of nature, particularly in a post-productivist era.

These three foci contain diverse themes, but one that is perhaps common across them is that the symbols and images of rurality are increasingly freed from their 'referential moorings' in space (Halfacree 1993 p.34) and are pervading wider social fora and spaces. Simultaneously, as multiple social spaces are overlaid onto 'traditional' rural spaces of primary production, they are declining in importance and distinctiveness. The decline in the economic importance of agricultural production and in the distinctiveness of rural localities and regions has not, however, diminished the importance of the rural.

In some ways it has, in fact, increased its importance. Perhaps more than ever, it is a vessel for the containment of cultural capital, available most abundantly to those able to dominate its contents and deployment to suit a variety of interests and purposes.

Much of the potency of various forms of rurality derives from their association with the multiple and flexible guises of nature. Contemporary analyses of nature as a social artefact emphasise the construction and production of nature within social, cultural, and economic frameworks, and within the inequalities which cut across and constitute these frameworks (for example see Castree and Braun 1998; Smith 1996; Anderson 1995; Katz and Kirby 1991). The considerable authority of 'nature as a social norm' when invoked by groups including conservationists, politicians, farmers and corporations 'derives from its assumed externality to human interference, the givenness and unalterability of natural events and processes that are not subject to social manipulation' (Smith 1996, p.41). Applying such a perspective on nature to rural geography, Whatmore (1993) considers the 'environmental (re)construction of rural space...and the cultural politics of the contested meaning and significance of rurality' (p.544). She concludes that rurality is a:

complex and multi-dimensional sign which is deployed as cultural capital in a range of political and economic projects beyond the boundaries of any narrowly defined rural space, but with important repercussions for the environmental and social fabric of the countryside (Whatmore 1993, p.544).

For example, the environmental movement has sharpened the focus on nature as endangered ecosystem/wildlife/wilderness as the (re)new(ed) iconography of rurality at the expense of agriculture (Whatmore 1993). Here rural labour is both destructive of wild nature, yet through reformation can provide the non-urban spaces in which new,

ecologically-based relationships between society and nature can be forged. In various guises, nature has been worked into competing, and often contradictory, versions of rurality, used by environmental activists on the one hand, and rural industry lobby groups and landholders on the other (Adams 1996; Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996). Despite such flexibility, traditional markers of rurality retain strength, not least from the persistent ideological and social importance of farming. Farming itself retains considerable power, which it derives from its politically and culturally entrenched position, and from its control over land (Marsden, Lowe et al. 1990) It is on points such as these, that symbolic and material domains meet and a cultural politics of rurality takes shape, as groups struggle over meanings and the power to translate them into practice (Anderson 1999).

### **2.3 *Agrarianism as Rurality***

Generalised and contradictory images of the country and the city have been persistent and important features of western culture since classical times (Williams 1973). The city has been associated with education, light, commerce and progress, and at the same time, with noise, greed, ambition, pollution, and loneliness. The country has been alternately associated with a natural way of life, peace, community, and simple virtues, and with backwardness, ignorance, and limitation. Williams (1973) finds these archetypes to hold, but by themselves to be insufficient in understanding the potency and persistence of the ideas of the country and the city. At any given time these ideas and images of city and country mean subtly different things, as varying values and political and social issues frame the precise meanings of the generalised outlines of 'country' and 'city'.

This flexibility in the meaning of the countryside within broad parameters has been observed, for example, in the varying philosophies brought to bear upon countryside conservation in England (Matless 1990), and in the varying political alliances associated with agriculture in the United States (Buttel and Flinn 1975). Cutting across many of these perspectives has been agrarianism, an important and persistent expression of the values associated with the countryside and rural labour. In its general form, agrarianism is an expression of the positive views of the country outlined above. As an ideology it has been enormously influential over centuries and across nations, influencing historical settlement schemes in Australia and the United States (Heathcote 1965; Powell 1977), and agricultural and land use policy in Europe and the United States up to the present (Griswold 1952; Olwig 1984; Swanson 1993). Its basic form has proven flexible in accommodating agrarian ideals ranging from those of the commercially-oriented French physiocrats to the nation-building ideals of Thomas Jefferson in the United States (Griswold 1952; Powell 1977).

The basic attributes of agrarianism as stated in the United States context, but generally applicable in western cultures<sup>5</sup>, are threefold:

- The farmer is independent, and in partnership with God, and farming is a gestalt activity, irreducible to means-end analysis.
- Agriculture is the basic industry, upon which all others and the good of the nation depend (agricultural fundamentalism).
- Agricultural life is natural and good, and agriculture is a sanctified calling, whereas the city is unnatural and saps virtue and morality (Rohrer and Douglas 1969).

Together with these attributes are others that have come to be linked with rural life. These include the association of agriculture and the virtuous family farm, of agriculture

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<sup>5</sup> See Griswold (1952), Montmarquet (1989), Powell (1977) for discussions of the variations in agrarianism across time and between nations.

with wise and careful use of the soil, and the association of smallholder agriculture with equality, democracy and freedom, based upon the sanctity of private property ownership (Rohrer and Douglas 1969; Swanson 1993). Such attributes are commonly associated with Thomas Jefferson and his ideals for the American nation. Yet the roots of these agrarian ideals lie at least as far back as ancient Greece (Cosgrove 1993; Olwig 1984). Given national variations, they have influenced conceptions of rural life and nationhood, and emphasised the countryside as the locus of national origins, authenticity, values, and aspirations (for a study of Denmark see Olwig 1984; for Britain see Williams 1973; for the United States see Merchant 1996).

Agrarianism has had a strong influence in Australian land settlement and land use history. The yeoman ideal and settlement intensification schemes are an example of this. Agrarianism in Australia has its roots in European, particularly British, ideals regarding the high status of the cultivator and of freeholding resident smallholders (yeoman farmers), popular at the time of British arrival in Australia (Powell 1977). The agrarian ideal of the yeoman farmer came to be articulated in various 'land acts' across the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century which sought to break up the large pastoral leasehold properties of the so-called squatters, and replace them with family-owned, freehold, smallholdings, usually for cultivation (Meinig 1988; Powell 1976). In some areas of the arid and semi-arid inland such intensification was also carried out by carving smaller pastoral leases, designated for resident family holdings, from large stations (Heathcote 1965)<sup>6</sup>. Behind such schemes was the view that

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<sup>6</sup> To this day, limits on landholdings exist in most states and territories where pastoral land is held under leasehold title (Ledgar 1994).

pastoralism, at least in its extensive form, was merely a temporary stage on the way to developing rural landscapes of intensive use and population as in Europe.

As European settlement proceeded, the possibility and expectation of such intensive use over much of inland and northern Australia faded. The rainfall was insufficient, the soils were too infertile. Nevertheless a strong agrarian sentiment developed in Australia which, despite the ideals of closer settlement and their failure over much of Australia, has, by the late twentieth century, come to encompass inland and northern pastoral areas. As this thesis will show, while the ideals of closer settlement have not been realised in the form of settlement in the inland, the meanings and values of such agrarian ideals have become attached to extensive pastoralism, at least among certain groups.

One characterisation of Australian agrarian sentiment is that of 'countrymindedness', a set of values articulated by the Australian National Party and its predecessors the Australian and National Country parties:

- Australia depends on its primary producers for its high standard of living, for only those who produce a physical good add to a country's wealth.
- Therefore all Australians, from city and country alike, should in their own interest support policies aimed at improving the position of the primary industries.
- Farming and grazing and rural pursuits generally, are virtuous, ennobling, and co-operative: they bring out the best in people.
- In contrast city life is competitive and nasty as well as parasitical.
- The characteristic Australian is a countryman, and the core elements of national character come from the struggle of country people to tame their environment and make it productive. City people are the same the world over (Aitken 1985; in Duncan and Epps 1992).



This summary clearly shows the relationship with agrarianism more generally, and highlights, in particular, elements of relevance to Australian national mythology and this thesis. Countrymindedness contains the idea that the country is both a locus for national unity, and the source of an allegedly unique national identity. In countrymindedness, the country is the wellspring of the nation both mythologically and spatially.

The association of nationalism and rural spaces is, of course, not unique to Australia. This does not, however, diminish the importance of this association. Instead, it opens up questions as to how this association is maintained as Australian society changes, and different issues begin to compete for a role in defining national identity and legitimacy within a changing nation. These questions are not simply one of identity and symbolism. As Buttel and Flinn (1975) and Swanson (1993) have noted, agrarian mythology has provided powerful 'framing assumptions' (Swanson 1993, p.101) in shaping agricultural policies and practices. As we saw above, agrarianism has historically influenced land use and settlement in Australia. How agrarianism features in contemporary debates and struggles over rural land use has received less attention, however, as has the flexible use of Australian versions of agrarianism for political and cultural purposes and interests.

#### **2.4 *Agrarianism as Colonialism***

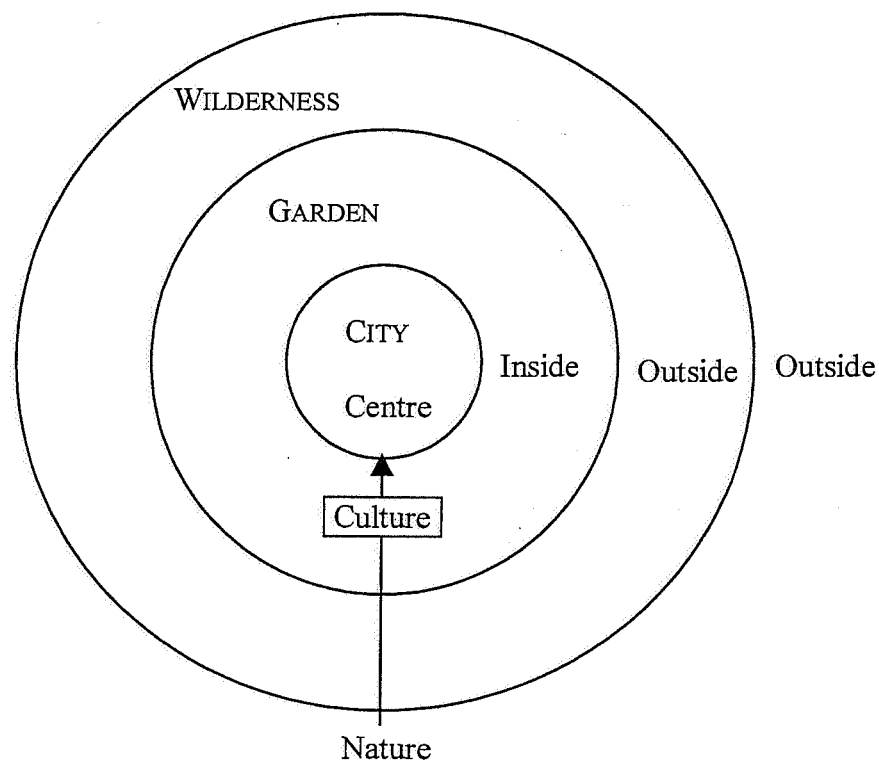
The association of the country and nation also leads to the conclusion that agrarianism is not simply a moral code for the present. Rather, agrarian fundamentalism, such as that expressed in countrymindedness, lies at the heart of the history and mode of creating

and narrating the nation. By this I mean those ideas, landscapes, beliefs, and material processes of settlement that constituted European settlement, colonies, and ultimately nationhood. Occupying and using land for rural production constituted a central part of this process. Yet it was, of course, also a process of destruction, of the dispossession and often killing of indigenous Australians. That Aboriginal people did not practise agriculture was one of the planks upon which British occupation and use of land in Australia was based (Ryan 1996; Anderson 1998). New spaces, constituted through British concepts of mapping, naming, owning and using, were created. These spaces comprehensively, if imperfectly (as Aboriginal land rights in the rangelands today shows) overwhelmed Aboriginal landscapes, in a process of the 'fragmentation [of Aboriginal space] into farms' (Carter 1987, p.345). These European spaces did not 'precede the traveller', European rural landscapes in Australia were the reenactment of 'intention that brought the country into focus in the first place' (Carter 1987, p.349).

What were these 'intentions' that British immigrants brought to Australia? What were the idealised geographies of culture/nature and agriculture/wilderness that they mapped onto this new continent, its indigenous occupants and natural resources? The British brought with them the ideal of improvement, the view that nature in its wild state could be, and should be, improved through human use and domestication, specifically through agricultural use. Domestication in this sense is a 'key material basis' for the exercise of domineering and hierarchical conceptions of nature/culture, human/non-human, and savage/civilised (Anderson 1996, p.475). It encompasses ideas of:

perfectibility under selection practices, of improvement towards the goal of cultivating the wild, of mitigating backwardness, of reigning in and 'fixing' wildness to a settled point (Anderson 1996, p.475).

This ideal and teleology was mapped not only onto space but also onto the indigenous people of the colonised lands, who were held to be savages, of nature, below human (Anderson 1996), and therefore unable to use land as it 'should' be used. Consequently, they needed to be removed in order to facilitate improvement or, through containment and education, relieved of their savagery and so be domesticated as the land was (Anderson 1996). Although in times of European empire building and colonisation such ideas 'functioned as ideology and legitimation for settlement of the New World' (Merchant 1996, p.137), their origins are deeply embedded in western classical, biblical and enlightenment thought, all of which contributed to the ideals and imperatives underlying colonial expansion in Australia and elsewhere.



**Figure 2.1: Mythical geographies of nature/culture and landscape in classical tradition**

Source: After Cosgrove (1993).

The origins of these ideals of progress and their strong association with agriculture lie in the mythical geographies of nature/culture and landscape outlined by Cosgrove (1993; 1995). These geographies of Wilderness, Garden and City lie at the heart of the creation of the modern world (Cosgrove 1995; see also Merchant 1996), so deeply embedded they are scarcely acknowledged (Cosgrove 1993). They are strongly hierarchical and contain a predestined movement from Wilderness to City, which traces human and social development, brings culture out of nature, and through which increasingly reciprocal and moral relationships are developed with the land (Cosgrove 1993; Olwig 1984). Such temporal and spatial narratives trace the origins and development of modern nations. As European empires expanded and the continent was 'reshaped into competing nation states', Wilderness, Garden and City came to be 'mapped into the imaginative geography' of nations (Cosgrove 1995, p.31; for this process in Denmark see Olwig 1984). By the late nineteenth century, as colonial societies developed 'growing national self-awareness', the geographies of Wilderness, Garden and City came to be mapped in nationalist terms onto European colonies (Cosgrove 1995; for the United States experience see Merchant 1996; for the development of Australina nationalism and the 'bush' see Schaffer 1988; White 1981).

In the classical formulation depicted in Figure 2.1, the basic characteristics of these mythical landscapes are as follows. The Wilderness is savage, unformed, inhabited by beasts, untouched by civilisation, but also innocent. The Garden is a step towards order and social life, and is where the productive potential of nature begins to be realised. It begins with a pastoral age, where the earth provides for wants and needs without human intervention. Flocks flourish and peace reigns. The Pastoral stage is where and when nations emerge, as order is created from the chaos of Wilderness (Olwig 1984). The

second stage of the Garden is the move towards cultivation and the active transformation of the earth. Despite their relative hierarchical positions, both stages of this middle landscape share certain characteristics:

These are landscapes of domestic economy, of the loving family and the private life of citizens. They are landscapes of labour, to be sure, but of labour that honours and complements natural processes, at one with the hours and the seasons...more than wilderness and city, the middle landscape is the locus for a yearning nostalgia, a place of fleeting youthful wonder balanced between childhood innocence and cynical age (Cosgrove 1993, p.296-297).

The middle landscape is often one of nostalgia, for it is inevitably superseded in the hierarchy by the City. The City is the epitome of culture, the pinnacle of human society, yet it is also the site of commerce, greed, political intrigue, and war. In the classical tradition, the City contains the seeds of its own destruction, and the cycle returns to the Wilderness landscape. These various landscapes have been associated with a range of categories: nature and the Garden as female, the City as male; the Garden and City as sites of humanity, the Wilderness as a site of savagery. In colonising periods, these categories were mapped as: Europe as the Garden and City and therefore culture; the colonies as Wilderness and thus wild and requiring domestication; Europeans as civilised and human, and the indigenous inhabitants of colonised lands as savages, sub-human, lacking civilisation, and consequently not deserving of the consideration due to humans.

We see here some clear bases for agrarianism in Australia and elsewhere; the virtuous, foundational nature of rural land use, life and industry and the evils of the city. We also see the dual characteristics of the country and the city described by Williams (Williams 1973). The city is both a high point of culture, yet degenerate, and the country is noble,

but backward, a waypoint on the road to further social sophistication. Yet with its eternal cyclical progression from Wilderness to City and back again, this classical conception does not account adequately for the ways in which these mythical landscapes were applied within a colonial frame of linear progression. For this we need the developments of the seventeenth century when linearity and faith in the powers of science and the market were mingled with the classical hierarchy of landscapes and with Christian beliefs in the recovery of the Garden after the Fall (Merchant 1996; Anderson 1996). Under enlightenment thought, progress was to recover the Garden from the Fall into 'inchoate nature' (Merchant 1996, p.137), regaining control over nature and extending human dominion over nature in order to fulfill divine and mercantile destinies. In this formulation of the mythic landscapes there was no cycle of destruction, rebirth and creation, only a path to establishing and maintaining the Garden and the City. These were the endpoints of colonialism and were to be achieved through the domestication of land and indigene, largely through rural land uses.

## **2.5 The Outback as Agrarianism – Foundational but Unstable**

Australian versions of agrarianism have largely followed the lines sketched above. As Lawrence has argued:

the rural is simultaneously a site of vestigial wildness and the forward edge of a civilising force, or again simultaneously a zone of historical recidivism but also of rustic retreat (Lawrence 1997, p.2).

So it has been in Australian history and continues to be so today. As in most European colonies, rural land uses were the main means by which European settlement advanced: they were the 'civilising forward edge' (Lawrence 1997, p.2). In general in Australia,

cattle, often followed by sheep, were the 'shock troops' of colonialism (Milton 1997, p.200). The Australian experience closely echoes Jordan's description of the American case:

Cattle ranching provided an innovative land-use strategy that facilitated the advance of the Euroamerican settlement frontier at the expense of the native people (Jordan 1993, p.7).

Cattle were hardy, required relatively little attention and capital input, and were readily available<sup>7</sup> to facilitate expansion within a few decades of European settlement (Perkins and Thompson 1998; Perkins and Thompson 1992; Gill 1999b). In Australia, as in the Americas, they proved suitable for opening up land and making it productive in a manner consistent with European economic and cultural ideals. Cattle followed hard on the heels of explorers, sometimes even preceding them, and pastoral expansion rapidly moved beyond the ability of colonial governments to control it (Roberts 1964; Heathcote 1987b). The role of cattle in dominating the land and Aboriginal people is illustrated vividly in Durack's (1988) famous account of her family when they brought their cattle to a waterhole in western Queensland<sup>8</sup> at which they eventually establish their homestead:

The Boontamurra people...gazed on the fantastic spectacle of moving cattle, horses and mounted men...There could be only hiding and watching...watching the thirsty stock move in to drink, churning the clear waters into mud, urgent, clumsy hoofs trampling the fishing nets into the sand, scattering the stone fish traps, while birds in their thousands wheeled and screamed (Durack 1988, p.114).

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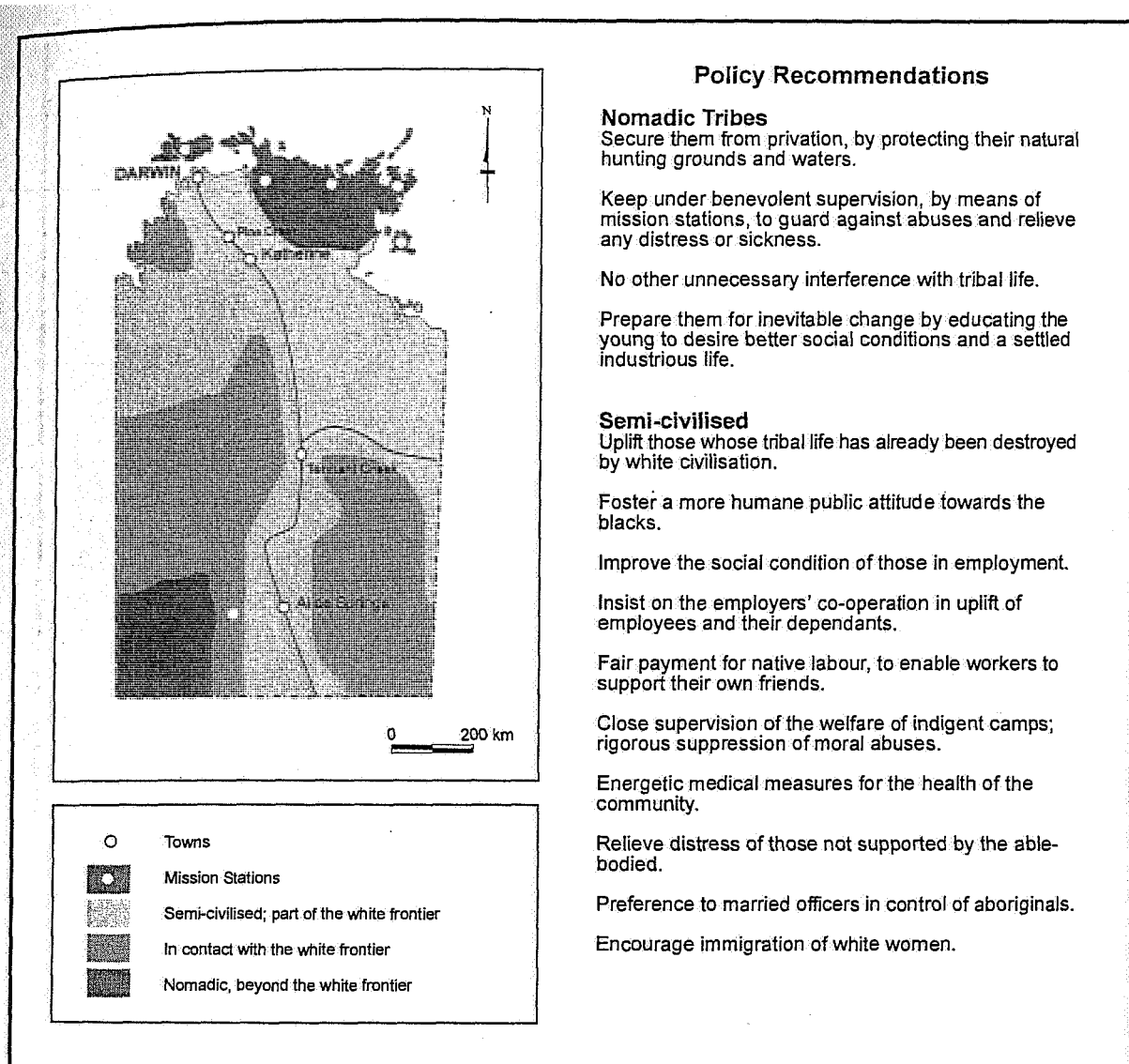
<sup>7</sup> Perkins and Thompson (1998) suggest that cattle were the main form of capital in early colonial decades. Furthermore, they contend, the nucleus of a herd could be readily stolen and taken inland into unsurveyed country.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of varying accounts of the settlement of this area see Watson (1998).

The control of such water sources in the arid inland was instrumental to settler control of the land, a control often backed up by the gun (for example see McGrath 1987). While Durack ultimately paints a benign pastoral presence and peaceful mutual interdependence with Aboriginal people, she also illustrates that her family ignored Aboriginal requests they not remain in this country. Intent on their purpose of gaining land, the Duracks and Costellos, returned and took possession of the land. By necessity they recognised the physical presence of Aborigines, but acted as if they were absent. Such was the feat of perception based upon those poles of human/non-human and culture/nature discussed above, which the Duracks, and many like them, were mapping onto the country, bringing, as they saw it, culture and humanity to a wilderness in which there was no human presence. In terms of the mythic hierarchies of landscapes and society, this was not only desirable but inevitable.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, geographies of (potential) settlement/civilisation and nature/Aboriginal were delineated as part of these processes by which European landscapes were imposed over Aboriginal landscapes, and residual Aboriginality was bounded and domesticated (Morphy 1993; Robinson 1999a). Simultaneously, those areas deemed of settlement potential were marked off from spaces of irredeemable nature and savagery. Figure 2.2 and Figure 2.3 show two such mapping exercises for the NT, where the NT was mapped in racialised terms of spaces of settler potential and spaces which were to remain 'unoccupied' or as Aboriginal reserves. Such spatial practices which bound Aboriginal landscapes persist in Australia (for example see Gelder and Jacobs 1995; Gelder and Jacobs 1998). They are particularly evident in the inland and north, where Aboriginal cultural persistence most

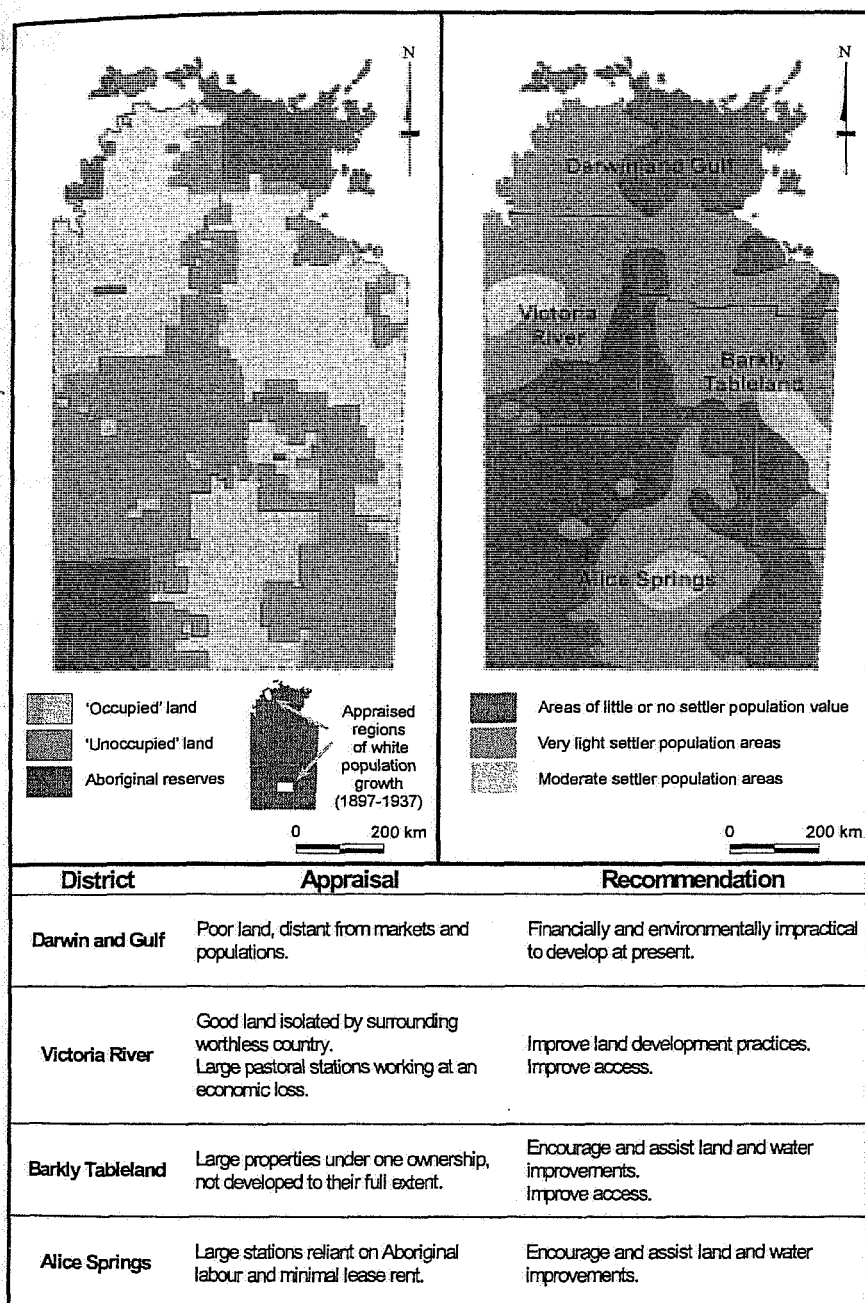




**Figure 2.2: Bleakley's 1928 implicit racialised geography of the NT<sup>9</sup>**

Source: Robinson (1999a, p.78)

<sup>9</sup> J. W. Bleakley was Chief Protector of Aborigines in Queensland. In 1929 he published a report for the Commonwealth – *The Aborigines and Half-Castes of Central Australia and North Australia*.



**Figure 2.3: Settler and indigenous geographies of the NT from the 1937 Payne-Fletcher Report<sup>10</sup>**

Source: Robinson (1999a, p.87-88)

<sup>10</sup> The Payne-Fletcher Report (Payne and Fletcher 1937) was an inquiry into the pastoral industry, its problems, potential; and requirements.

strongly challenges non-indigenous landscapes and spatial structures such as planning systems (Jackson 1996; though for such fixing in Australian cities see Jacobs 1996).

This role of pastoralism in early settlement laid the basis for those distinct but related mythologies of Australian national origins, the 'outback' and the 'bush', both of which have significant agrarian components. On the other hand, the outback, for all its celebrated association with the pastoral industry, also has a history of being perceived as an emptiness, a void of nature not amenable to domestication (Haynes 1998), and as the home of rural people who would destroy the national heartland for private gain (Pick 1942). As we shall see below and in Chapter Four, these opposing views of the outback are central to contemporary struggles over rangelands. The outback is not singularly pastoral, nor do the concepts of outback as settled pastoral land and as emptiness or frontier, sit easily together.

Pastoral settlement was the forward edge of civilisation in Australia. Through pastoralism the recreation of Garden was to begin. Pastoralism in the 'bush' and 'outback' was the means by which a foothold was established in the wilderness. In this way pastoralism represented an important beginning for the Australian nation. By the late nineteenth century, the 'bush' and 'outback' mythology, and rural life in general, was well established as the site of national origins and national character (White 1981). Central to this mythology was the encounter with the Australian environment. This encounter was to produce a 'new type' of individual and national character, distinct from its British origins, forged from this experience, and unique to it (White 1981). From the trials of settlement arose the 'pioneer legend', encompassing a noble figure who has sacrificed and laboured to make a productive home in the wilderness (Hirst

1978). This figure is typically masculine, a 'countryman', or a 'man on the land', subduing a feminised landscape (Rose 1992b; Schaffer 1988). Thus, in the mythology of national origins, unity, joint interests and equality that developed around the encounter with the land and rural industry, labour which resulted in private gain became selfless labour for the whole (Hirst 1978; McGrath 1991). These sentiments, linked to rural activity provide an agrarian base to bush and outback mythologies, and thus to national identity. As what has become the 'customary vision' of Australia, these mythologies remain important in shaping normative social action (Smith 1993, p.57).

As we saw above, pastoralism was originally seen as a temporary land use on the road to more intensive agriculture. The limitations of the Australian environment, however, meant that pastoralism remained as the dominant land use over much of inland and northern Australia. This endpoint has not been read as 'failure' in Australian culture. Instead, the ability of pastoralists to endure the harsh conditions and to successfully adapt has become a celebrated aspect of outback mythology and is seen as a means by which the 'authentic' Australian has developed from the land. Pastoralism, although not cultivation, has historically proven to be the means by which the 'productive' potential of the land in many remote areas can be tapped within the frameworks of landscapes and progress brought to Australia by British settlers. Pastoralism has come to stand for the establishment of the Garden in the Australian wilderness, and provides those reciprocal moral relationships between society and land conventionally derived from cultivation in the European tradition (Olwig 1984). Within a critical framework of domestication that locates 'cultivation' with a history and politics of meanings surrounding civilisation (Anderson 1996; Anderson 2000) this is not surprising. While the ideal domesticated landscape is cultivated, the key to domestication is control.

Moreover, as noted above (page 37), the Garden is characterised by labour that 'honours and complements natural processes' (Cosgrove 1993, p.296). In pastoral outback mythology, such accommodation has been reached through the struggle and adaptation to the inland environment. As this thesis will show, acceptance and accommodation of environmental limits is an essential part of Central Australian pastoral culture. Domestication has been achieved, mythologically at least, through pastoralism. In Australia, the agricultural stage of development has not always and everywhere been required for domestication to be achieved, at least in pastoral culture, and it might be argued, in many political circles such as those associated with the NT government.

To a large extent this last point contradicts many of the dominant visions of the outback; drought, flood, uncontrollable nature, vastness and capriciousness. Pastoralism is frequently caught up in such visions through images of the drought-stricken property and the family forced to leave the land, broken by its intransigence. Yet we might consider whose images of the pastoral outback these are. Fergie (1998) notes that despite the popular representation of the outback as vast and empty, 'for the most part, outback life is everyday, not expeditionary, it is 'intensely social', modern day 'explorers [including the media] bring their metropolitan imaginings with them to the outback' (p.186 & 194).

This point highlights the flexibility of outback mythology. Although pastoral imagery is a common outback motif, the outback can mean many things. McGrath (1991) notes that if asked, Australians are vague as to exactly what the outback is:

People are often enthusiastic, vaguely evoking the land and a sense of place. Most people define the 'outback' as 'the remote inland districts', with images of desert, dramatic landscape features, aridity, vastness, mystery, with little human habitation. It is also seen as a land of another culture: that of Aborigines (p. 114).

As a mythology there is no fixity in its concepts, they are historical, and can be suppressed, altered or erased (McGrath 1991, p.114; see also Haynes 1998). In outback mythology:

Emphasis has shifted at various times from physical geography, the land's fauna, its 'strange' black people, to the great white bushman. Since the 1970s there has been a gradual shift back to land itself (McGrath 1995, p.114).

The theme of emptiness lies across these and other conceptions of the outback (Fergie 1998; McGrath 1995). The colonial view of the land as empty and available has persisted, although in ways that now question the settlement outcomes of colonialism. The outback remains open to redefinition, to rewriting, and potentially to reoccupation. This is the ultimate source of challenges to pastoral occupation of the land. Even as outback pastoralism has been feted (Anon. 1993; Mahood and Berge 1988; Coupe 1989) over many years and is glorified in the Stockman's Hall of Fame at Longreach, the theme of emptiness has pervaded perceptions of the outback and coloured assessments of pastoralism and its place and future on the land. Even those depictions of the outback as desolate, fickle and lonely, which made non-indigenous settlers into heroes, battlers and authentic Australians, rely on the motif of emptiness (Fergie 1998). In such depictions of isolation pastoralists occupy a vast, untameable, and unknowable land.

Contemporary critiques of pastoralism, arising from recent conflicts over land and property rights in the rangelands, also rely heavily on the notion of outback pastoral lands as empty. Pastoral settlement is seen as having no roots in the land, as being merely a sparse and opportunistic industry, based on 'temporary' forms of land tenure<sup>11</sup> that are taken to imply impermanence and lack of commitment. For example, at the height of debate over Native Title in 1997, Jack Waterford, editor of the *Canberra Times*, wrote of pastoralists:

The landholdings are enormous, running into hundreds, and sometimes thousands of square kilometres. The major landholders are among Australia's richest companies and Australia's richest men and women. In much of this country non-Aboriginal land use has been desultory at best, often typified by non-owner occupation...They have been tenants, allowed to live on the land subject to the payment of small rents and to use it for limited purposes. The history of that land use, leaving aside issues of their treatment of Aborigines or any continuing interests Aborigines may have – has been an unhappy one: it is, often, a story of poor land management, overstocking...and the creation...of a vast environmental disaster (Jack Waterford in Bachelard 1997, p.x & xi).

Other recent examples of such depictions of pastoralists include the views of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF). The ACF has argued that:

pastoral lease is a lease to graze animals with a hard hooves on public land - nothing more, nothing less. The certainty that pastoralists are entitled to enjoy is limited to the duration and terms of their current leases (The Great Pastoral Divide, *Canberra Times*, 4/4/97 & Horstmann 1997).

Academics have also engaged in such depictions of pastoralists. For example, in 1997 staff from Southern Cross University circulated a letter around Australian universities which collected several thousand signatories (see also Gelder and Jacobs 1998). Some points which this letter included are:

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<sup>11</sup> Most pastoral land in the rangelands is held under various forms of leasehold title.

this transfer [of leasehold land to freehold title] offers an unprecedented windfall to leaseholders, many of whom are multinational corporations and among the richest people in the world.

Such a concern was a major property rights issue, but the important point here lies in the representation of pastoralists and of their relationships to land. Pastoralists are depicted as having tenuous links with the land, they are characterised as absentee owners, and such links as they have are reduced to ones of economics and legal property rights. More importantly, and in parallel to allegations of land degradation, pastoral land use is seen as scarcely touching the land, it is 'desultory at best', pastoralists are represented as not having developed the land. There is an extraordinary irony here, in that supporters of Aboriginal land rights and environmentally-based reforms of land use and management, turned to the very colonial concepts of progress that drove pastoral settlement in the first place to advance their criticism of pastoralism. What these critics are doing is rendering the outback as frontier once again, as space available for new articulations of nationhood and for new ways of expressing this in land use. For example, the environmental vision sees the outback as 'redemptive wilderness heartlands' (Fergie 1998, p. 190), homogenising outback space as ecosystem and scenery, describing the outback as:

The vast savannahs of Cape York Peninsula, the braided rivers of the Channel Country, the ancient plateaux of the Kimberley, the arid dunefields of the red deserts, the Mulga and the Gulf country the Mitchell grasslands and the Nullarbor Plain (The Great Pastoral Divide, *Canberra Times*, 4/4/97 & Horstmann 1997).

Conservationists and other criticisms of pastoralists will be expanded upon in Chapter Four. These critiques of pastoralism can be seen in the context of the perennial and



contradictory ideas of the country outlined earlier (page 29). One set of oppositions was that of the backward Country and the progressive, cultured City. A recent reformulation of this opposition in the context of the late twentieth century's 'hegemonic urbanity' (Creed and Ching 1997, p.5) uses the term 'urbane' to refer to identities and cultures based in the City. This term carries with it the suggestion of sophistication, a superiority of being and good taste. For 'rural', Creed and Ching (1997) suggest the term rustic, to stand for the perceived backwardness, lack of sophistication and coarseness associated with rural identities and cultures. They use these terms to highlight the cultural hierarchies in which the City and urbane culture is marked as 'high', and the rural as 'low'.

In the above critiques, pastoralists and the pastoral vision of the outback are marked as low in this hierarchy. Pastoralists are no longer the 'forward edge of a civilising force' but constitute a 'zone of historical recidivism' (Lawrence 1997, p.2). In the environmental context, the 'cultural meaning [of the outback] as 'high' has shifted from pastoral frontier, a site for rural identities, to remote wilderness, a site for urban-based identities located in ecological [and aesthetic] paradigms' (Dominy 1997, p.237; see also Vandergeest and DuPuis 1996). Table 2.1 shows a series of binary oppositions of the different landscapes and forms of nature contained within urban and rural visions of outback space that are competing in this shift.

<i>Australian Urban/High Vision</i>	<i>Rural/Low Vision</i>
Called 'bush'	Called 'country'
Remote wilderness	Inhabited frontier
Natural resources/values	Cultural resources values
Unmanaged	Managed (fire and grazing)
Conservationist	Extractive/productive
Preserved/static	Sustainable/evolving
Uncommodified/nonproductive	Material commodification/productive
Vegetative/wildlife focus	Domestic stock focus
Botanist/ecologist	Cattleman
Walking tracks	Bridle tracks/stock routes
Bushwalker/tourist	Horseman/resident
Aesthetic/visual scenery	Activity-based/associative resource
Natural beauty	Living culture
National park	Family farm lease
Public values	Mateship
Aboriginal landscape	European landscape
Urban-based	Rural-based (in practice)
	Urban-based (in legend)
Pre/post imperial	Imperial (formative nationalism)
Global/biocentric	Local/rurocentric/anthropocentric
Metaphors of sight	Metaphors of stock
Reifies nature	Praises heritage/sites

Notes: In this formulation 'bush' is used a little differently from in this thesis. In this table it is used to refer to an undifferentiated non-urban space that is designated nature, in comparison to the rural concept of socialised 'country'. Dominy developed these oppositions in an analysis of the high country (alpine) of southeastern Australia. They largely hold, however, for the outback in general, a space in which she includes the high country for its remoteness, historical, and although reduced, contemporary, land uses (transhumant cattle grazing) and mythological/literary associations – for example 'The Man from Snowy River' by A.B. 'Banjo' Patterson, 1890.

**Table 2.1: Binary oppositions of urban/high, (alpine) rural/low landscapes**

Source: Modified from Dominy (1997, p.255)

To this ecologically-based shift, we should add the view of the outback as Aboriginal homelands, a site not only in a material sense in terms of land rights, land acquisition and the assertion of traditional ownership, but also in terms of urban or commodified images of exotic natives or original conservationists (for example see Sackett 1991). The above critiques locate pastoralism in the nation's past, as destructive of now sanctified wild nature and Aboriginal culture, both of which have become markers of

the future, and of an eco-nation based on ecological principles and settler-indigenous reconciliation (see Chapter Four). As in the classical conception, the middle landscape of the Garden is proving to be unstable, despite colonial hopes for its permanence. The current 'fragmentation' and 'reconstitution' of the Australian nation (Dixson 1999) is being played out as much through, and in, symbolic and material landscapes as in the realm of political and social discourse. This 'reconstitution' is being resisted as the core Anglo-Celtic and white culture (Dixson 1999; Hage 1998) seeks to maintain those landscapes that provide national coherence and unity (Anderson forthcoming).

## **2.6 Rural Responses: Mythic Landscapes and the Cultural Politics of Land**

When reading and watching media and other depictions of the northern South Australian regions where she has lived among pastoralists and others, Fergie (1998) finds it hard to recognise or identify the places under view. The landscapes of isolation, loneliness and emptiness depicted on stations that she knows, do not match the locals' landscape that is 'brimful' of 'differentiation and meaning' – tanks, tracks, people, events, and relationships (Fergie 1998, p.186). She notes that the empty landscape is easily found for those looking for it. She illustrates the outback visions that these writers and other bring to the inland with a photographic metaphor:

Best accomplished with a substantial depth of field and a wide-angled lens held low and pointing up to the subject, this technique produces images of individuals or small groups appearing to stand in the midst of a vast nothingness (Fergie 1998, p.190).

Following my fieldwork with pastoralists in Central Australia, the pages of magazines such as *Australian Geographic*, comments in the letters pages of major Australian daily

newspapers, and the myriad television programs on the inland<sup>12</sup>, have evoked the same dissonance in myself. In such representations of the outback the same visions of vastness, fickleness, battlers, emptiness and wilderness are applied time and again to people and landscape – everyday lives are consistently erased.

Batteau (1990), in his analysis of the ‘invention’ of Appalachia in American culture argues that moving beyond such stereotyping requires exploration of the mythical images and historical realities together with the “‘hard facts” of economics and politics...not as competing views of reality but as different faces of common, underlying processes’ (Batteau 1990, p.199; see also Dominy 1997, p.257). From this Dominy urges:

We must continue to ask: How do rural peoples respond to the increasing peripheralisation of rural culture as others appropriate their most significant political symbols of identity, in the cases of the New Zealand and Australian Alps, the landscapes they inhabit? How do the views of competing constituencies with an interest in land management change over time, and how are they expressed and codified in social institutions, cultural practices and political movements?...Our next comparative step should be to engage in carefully systematic ethnographic studies of parallel kinds of cultural hierarchies (Dominy 1997, p.257).

This study contributes to this call for research into the responses of rural people to social change. It seeks to do this not simply to give voice to rural ‘victims’, to bolster the pastoralists’ claims of marginality, and of conservationist and indigenous identities, with academic credibility (for a discussion of such advocacy on behalf of rural non-

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<sup>12</sup> Troy Dann’s *Outback Adventures* (Seven Network) is a good example of this. Dann, a young Central Australian pastoralist, moves across inland and northern Australia, providing a thoroughly homogenised and delocalised view of the outback while simultaneously claiming intimacy wherever he goes. Moreover, Dann, in demonstrating his prowess at standard station skills such as trail bike riding, truck driving, horse-riding and cattle handling, presents them as heroic and out of the ordinary, rather than as everyday.

indigenous people see Dominy 1990; Various 1990). Rather, I take the view that 'cultural elaborations of the distinction between Countryside and City...contribute in complex ways to ecological and economic [and racial] crises' (Dominy 1997, p.257): such struggles exist within political contexts, and have material landscape outcomes. In Australia in the 1990s, debates over rangelands, environment, and the place of indigenous people in the nation, have highlighted the cultural and political significance of distinctions between the Country and the City. I seek to take the pastoralists' responses seriously, as contemporary articulations of rurality, and as deserving of their own analytical consideration. I will examine their basis in mythology, history and practice, and consider not only the theme of change, but also continuities and persistence of categories of space, thought and action amongst pastoralists (Smith 1993).

Existing studies on (post)colonial rural landscapes show that rural non-indigenous people occupy landscapes quite different from those represented as empty and scarcely used. While nationalistic and mythological themes, such as pioneering, are evident among such rural people, themes such as home, attachment, accretion, experience, place, and family history also feature as significant. We have already seen something of this from Fergie (1998) and Dominy (1997). Both of these, and others have illustrated the relationships of rural people with land, and how differing conceptions of nature are woven into these relationships and those sought by others, such as conservationists and 'urbane' people (Read 1994; Read 1996; Dominy 1995; Dominy 1993; Gill 1999a; Gill 1994). For example, Read (1994) notes that 'farming is not inconsistent with love of the

bush. Because a farmer not only respects the land but uses it...cleared land<sup>13</sup> is in the natural order of rural life' (p.58). In rural activity, labour nurtures nature, brings forth its productivity and is important in forging links to land and place (see also McEachern 1992). Through active use of land a 'belonging' is created which is 'much more than contemplation' (Read 1994, p.67). This stands in stark contrast to views such as those expressed above (from page 47) that rural activities destroy wild nature and wilderness landscapes.

Both Read (1996) and Dominy (1993) show how peripheral rural regions, in their cases high pastoral country near Canberra and on the South Island of New Zealand respectively, can become 'home' to those pastoralists that inhabit them as surely as any suburb or more densely populated agricultural area. Home for these people is created through family history, knowing the land intimately, personal and family meanings in the landscape, and experiential contact with the land through labour and travel. While these landscapes of home, identity and belonging have not previously required articulation, the marginalisation of these rural people has forced them to do so:

As they...have moved to the economic and political margins of their culture, they have continued to elaborate the symbolic dimension of their lives as part of their engagement in a process of contestation...over whose rights to land prevail. Theirs is a contest for habitation, a localised version of identity construction in the nation state context (Dominy 1993, p.580; see also Hodges 1993).

In Australia and New Zealand such responses have been couched in these terms of home, but also in terms of pastoral environmental stewardship and settler indigenous identity (Hodges 1993; Read 1996; Dominy 1995). At such points the cultural politics

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<sup>13</sup> For the farmer.

of nature, land and postcolonial identities are thrown into stark relief (Jacobs 1997). Yet configurations of pastoral culture which emphasise 'home', cannot be assumed in studies of rural cultures. Pastoral Australia is differentiated spatially in terms of ownership structures, quality of land, and histories. In two northern areas of pastoral Australia, Rose (1997) and Strang (1997) have observed pastoral cultures with more tenuous roots in the land, related, for example, to relatively high rates of absentee ownership. Such differences and variations highlight the relative paucity of research-based knowledge of pastoral societies and cultures, and caution against assuming their form in a given place.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

In a number of settler countries, including Australia, New Zealand and Canada, it is rural people in peripheral regions who are bearing the brunt of the social changes sketched in this chapter. These are the areas where nature, now assessed as valued wilderness/ecosystem/biodiversity has survived relatively 'intact'. Thus pressure for conservation through, for example national park declaration, is concentrated on these areas. They are also areas where indigenous cultures and land rights have survived most intact, and under leasehold land tenure systems which have proven most amenable to various sorts of land claims. This is where the mythical landscapes and ideas of progress discussed in this chapter assume a great relevance. From the viewpoint of urban people these areas have never been developed nor occupied fully by settlers. They are seen as residual and empty areas, areas in which colonial society is seen to have failed, either by not progressing beyond pastoral land use, or due to land degradation caused by the persistence of inappropriate land uses in marginal lands. Such areas are thus seen as

available for mapping new visions of society, and new relationships to nature and indigenous people. For indigenous people, such lands are where they have had the greatest chance and success of gaining land and recognition of their property rights. Arguably, this is because such lands are socially and economically peripheral, and thus, to a limited extent, the state has been willing to cede them. However, for the rural people who inhabit these areas, these 'peripheral' lands have become home and have been domesticated in a way that overturns the apparent failure of landscape progression in Australia. This thesis examines this process of domestication and settling, and its contemporary political context for the pastoral land around Alice Springs in the NT.

Pursuing the changing status of rural society, and the responses of rural people to the appropriation of what they see as 'their' landscapes, it is critical not simply for the further exploration of little studied rural cultures. Values, experiences, and ideas associated with themes such as 'outback', 'home', 'Wilderness', 'Garden', 'conservation' and 'indigenous' inform contemporary debates over Australian rangelands. The presence of these concepts is, however, usually obscured, or the basis or origins of their use buried under the language of public and political encounters. It is my hope that elaborating some of the origins of pastoralists' responses to social change can contribute to improving dialogue about the future of rangelands. In relation to the literature discussed in this chapter, I see this potentially occurring through greater understanding of the positions and knowledge of pastoralists, and also through examining pastoralists' responses for their links and continuities with the past. This final point is critical, for just, equitable, and sustainable rangelands futures require a path that treads between understanding the role and importance of local configurations



of land, people, and history on the one hand, and not reproducing hierarchies of land uses and peoples on the other.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

Questionnaires are ticklish things at the best of times: the answers depend on the mood you're in at the time, and/or what political, economic, or emotional or ulterior motive you might have (Marie Mahood, pastoralist, in Mahood 1995, p. 140).

### **3.1 Introduction and Background**

The aim of this chapter is to outline how this research was conceived, how it was conducted and to place it in a methodological framework consistent with cultural geography. The origins of the project lie in my experiences working for a conservation non-government organisation in the early 1990s.

From 1991 to 1993 I was working for The Wilderness Society (TWS), a national conservation organisation, in Adelaide (South Australia). The Adelaide branch of TWS campaigned mainly on arid zones issues and had strong links with the South Australian Conservation Council, which was campaigning for World Heritage nomination of parts of the Lake Eyre Basin. My experiences in this work brought me into contact with pastoralists and, in conjunction with research for an honours thesis on national park management in a rural setting (Gill 1992; Gill 1994), I become more aware of environmentalism as a 'situated ideology' (Dominy 1997, p.259) that I, and my peers, for the most part accepted uncritically. Ingredients of this ideology include: generally negative views of rural people and primary production; emphasis on particular constructions of nature as wild; uncritical acceptance and use of ecological science; and unreflective images of the inland as 'nature's outback'. I began to observe more

rigorously the claims and narratives of pastoralists and, sensing they held potentially rich accounts of land, history, and stewardship, I conceived this PhD project. Such accounts, it seemed to me, were critical to debates over conservation in the inland, yet were not understood outside pastoralist society. This period coincided with calls from within academia for social science research in the rangelands.

### **3.2 Directions in Rangelands Research**

In response to changing valuations of rangelands away from a primary focus on rural production, particularly pastoralism (Chapter One), John Holmes<sup>14</sup> edited a special edition of *The Rangeland Journal* in 1994 (Volume 16, No. 2). Holmes invited contributors to focus, not on issues and strategies for rangelands management, but on 'providing a better understanding of the value orientations [of rangelands users and interest groups] and their consequences' (Holmes 1994b, p.149). Holmes saw the special issue as a 'modest step' towards 'understanding of the expectations and perceptions of the general public and the various interest groups' and redressing the relatively low level of social science research in rangelands (Holmes 1994b, p.149; see also Morton and Price 1994). In Australia such social and cultural research is a relatively untouched field.

Holmes (1994b) further notes that, in the rangelands, pastoralists in particular have been the focus of little social research and that where there has been such attention, it has usually been incidental to other research objectives, or has focussed on land and

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<sup>14</sup> Emeritus Professor of Geography at the University of Queensland. Holmes has a long history of research in the rangelands. For example see Holmes (1985; 1990; 1993; 1994a; 1995).

business management rather than values, perceptions and culture (for example Holmes 1986; Crouch and Payne 1983; Buxton and Stafford-Smith 1996; Chamala and Riethmuller 1977). This situation has recently begun to be addressed, for example by Holmes himself (1995), in the ethnographic work of Fergie in northern South Australia (1998), of Rose (1997) and Strang (1997) in northern Australia, and in the historical socio-environmental research in western New South Wales by Quinn (1996). Such research is, however, of limited extent compared to the vast amount of scientific and Aboriginal-oriented anthropological research in the rangelands.

One paper in particular provides some guidance on future social science research in the rangelands, especially research concerning pastoralists. Shulman and Penman (1994) are critical of social research aimed at pastoralists, including two papers in the special issue, on three main grounds. First, they argue such research has often assumed objectivity through method, such as survey questionnaires, on the false assumption these provide a rigour that will remove subjectivity from the research process. Second, such surveys keep pastoralists out of any potential dialogue with researchers. Third, they argue this approach is context-insensitive and consequently, is inflexible and unable to respond to the concepts of those being questioned, if they do not match those used by the researchers. In fact, they argue, such surveys are unlikely to even discover whether or not the terms used within them, such as 'sustainability', are useful in eliciting meaningful responses from respondents.

Research itself is a social process and those from whom researchers are attempting to obtain information are likely to be searching for clues from the researcher as to the

meaning of any given question, and as to the meaning and context of the very presence of the researcher:

as social scientists, we often fail to recognise that our interventions (our presence and the questions we ask) are invitations for participants to figure out what we are on about (Shulman and Penman 1994 p.266).

This results in research that is impoverished, as dialogue does not occur, and its chances of making any meaningful engaged contribution to rangeland use, management and habitation, are diminished. Shulman and Penman (1994) thus call for research that involves a dialogue between researchers and respondents, and encompasses the possibility of negotiating meanings. Like Holmes (1994b), they call for a more responsive, self-critical approach by rangeland researchers. To a significant extent this means researchers will need to step outside the security and ease of conventional social science methodologies and methods, opening themselves up to the more complex and messy terrain traversed when engaging people on their own terms and on their own ground.

One of my aims in this research was to make a contribution to the general social science gap in research identified by Holmes (1994b). I also aimed to conduct the research in a responsive, self-critical manner as called for by Holmes (1994b) and Shulman and Penman (1994). Accordingly, I adopted methods that were consistent with this reflexive approach. The following sections outline the steps taken to achieve this end over two years of research in Central Australia, specifically in the Alice Springs pastoral district in the southern NT (see Figure 3.1).



### 3.3 *Why Central Australia?*

In choosing a pastoral region on which to focus, there were a number of considerations. First, as I was interested in how pastoralists were coping with social change, I wanted an area where environmentalism and Aboriginal land rights were very much in evidence<sup>15</sup>. Second, as part of the context of this thesis is the declining relative economic importance of pastoralism, an area where other industries were increasingly important was required. Third, I wanted an area in which there was no acute political conflict, such as existed in northern South Australia at the time. Such conflict would hinder fieldwork and potentially skew responses from pastoralists.

Central Australia in the Northern Territory (NT) is a suitable choice in relation to these issues. Not only is it more accessible from south-eastern Australia, as compared to, for example, Cape York or the Kimberleys, it is an area where economic and social change are very much influencing both pastoralists and perceptions of the Central Australian rangelands. Central Australia seemed likely to be a place where issues and conflicts related to the more general re-evaluation of Australian rangelands would be cast in particularly sharp relief.

There are of a number of more specific reasons for choosing Central Australia. As mentioned in Chapters One and Two, the region is important in Australian mythology and national identity. Moreover, Central Australia is an area in which many of the processes of settlement, dispossession and formation of relationships with Aboriginal

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<sup>15</sup> The choice of study area was made before the High Court Wik judgement in late 1996 and the subsequent debate over Native Title that made Aboriginal land rights an important issue across the pastoral rangelands.

people have occurred relatively recently (Rowse 1998). It is a place where time has collapsed quickly as local, frontier and rural relations with both Aboriginal people and nature have met national, local and global indigenous movements and environmentalism. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter Four, Aboriginal society and culture have remained strong in Central Australia compared to many other areas of Australia. In concert with the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, this cultural vitality has meant that pastoralists in Central Australia are directly and materially confronted with Aboriginal land rights and relationships with land.

Central Australia is also of particular interest with respect to contemporary environmentalism and concerns about the environmental impacts of pastoralism in rangelands. For example, Alice Springs contains an active non-government environment centre, the Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC), which not only runs local campaigns but is pivotal in rangelands campaigns at a national level (see Chapter Four). In addition, Alice Springs is the location of one of the laboratories of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation's (CSIRO) Division of Wildlife and Ecology. In its various guises over the years, this division has been extremely influential in rangelands ecological research, and in debates over rangelands management, use, and policy. The global concerns of environmentalism and scientific ecology are very much in evidence in what is commonly perceived as a remote locale.

One of the issues underlying this thesis is that the debate over the futures of rangelands is not merely a question of improving the management of current land uses or of diversification of land use by existing landowners. More fundamental issues revolving around questions of how rangelands are to be used, by whom and for whom, are at



stake. In this context Central Australia is a most effective case study as it highlights processes of adjustment and response by pastoralists to these profound changes. For example, not only are Aboriginal interests in land being asserted, but Central Australia is increasingly perceived as a tourism landscape written largely in terms of indigenous cultures and 'wild' natures.

### **3.4 A Case Study Approach**

This research focuses on one pastoral region, rather than surveying several, and is best seen as a case study. Defining case study research has posed problems for researchers who wish to use it (for example see Ragin 1992; Platt 1992). Generally, however, a case study is characterised along the following lines:

An in-depth, multifaceted investigation, using qualitative research<sup>16</sup> methods, of a single social phenomenon. The study is conducted in great detail and often relies on the use of several data sources (Orum, Feagin et al. 1991, p.2).

Case study research is generally compared to survey research and is regarded as most useful where the research is interpretive or the researcher is investigating issues about which there exists little knowledge or few frames of reference (Sjoberg, Williams et al. 1991; Hamilton 1980; Harper 1992).

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<sup>16</sup> Not all researchers would agree that case study research is necessarily qualitative (Orum, Feagin et al. 1991).

Further to this, there are a number of specific reasons for adopting a case study approach:

- It permits the grounding of observations and concepts about social action and social structures in natural settings studied at close hand.
- It provides information from a number of sources and over a period of time, thus making a more holistic study of complex social networks and of complexes of social action and social meanings.
- It can furnish the dimensions of time and history to the study of social life, thereby enabling the investigator to examine continuity and change in lifeworld patterns.
- It encourages and facilitates, in practice, theoretical innovation and generalisation (Orum, Feagin et al. 1991, p.7-6).

Thus, given the interpretive nature of this thesis and the context of rangelands research outlined above (page 59), the case study approach is appropriate for this thesis. Moreover, as will be discussed below, the constraints imposed by distance, resources, and the nature of pastoral culture limited what could be achieved in even one area with the resources that were available to a sole researcher.

An alleged inability to generalise is the main basis for criticism of case study research (Yin 1994). In one sense this is irrelevant, as the strengths and rationale of case study research do not lie in generalisation (Firestone 1993). Nonetheless, a form of generalisation known as 'analytic generalisation', or 'generalisation to theory', can be derived from case studies (Alasuutari 1996; Yin 1994). In this situation, theory does not refer to general laws, but frameworks and bodies of knowledge and ideas relevant to the case under consideration and to the general class of such cases. Generalisations from case studies derive from the context within which the researcher sets the case. By specifying the theories and body of knowledge within which the case exists, and by

providing rich information, the researcher enhances the generalisability of their findings (Jackson 1985). Cases are selected for their potential to illuminate issues with which the researcher is concerned. The researcher should choose particular cases that have characteristics likely to further the research goals (Firestone 1993; Stake 1994; Yin 1994).

There are several recent examples from geographical research that have used case studies to fruitfully address issues of wider significance in rural and rangelands research. For example, Ewing (1997) draws on the concept of place in geographic research to argue that the case study is appropriate in evaluating Landcare (refer Chapter Eight) at a local level, and has a role in improving evaluation at the state and national level (for the use of a case study in discussing some general rangelands issues see Head 1994). As outlined above (page 63), Central Australia is a suitable place through which to address the goals of this thesis. The two following sections discuss some aspects of non-indigenous and indigenous cultures that influenced fieldwork and imposed contexts that were not so much constraints, as cultural realities which contributed to the decisions to a) focus on one region and b) use a small sample of pastoralists.

### ***3.5 Coming into Country I – Settler Pastoralists***

There is a long history of research in Central Australia, and part of the process of conducting further study there was coming to grips with the status of researchers themselves. The attitudes of Central Australian Aboriginal people and communities towards researchers, and the sorts of steps researchers should take to undertake research

with Aboriginal people have been well documented (Howitt, Crough et al. 1990). There is, perhaps, less appreciation of the potential cultural complexities of research in regard to non-Aboriginal people (Shulman and Penman 1994). The dominant social science research model tends to assume that the act of meeting and questioning is a straightforward and direct process, and that an accurate picture and understanding can be readily obtained through communication that is presumed to be transparent in its form and content. I found, however, considerable suspicion of my identity and purpose among non-indigenous pastoralists - a suspicion that contributed to confounding the model of questioning as a straightforward process.

This suspicion arose partly because of the political sensitivity of the topics I was covering in my discussions with the pastoralists. However, I found this antipathy also stemmed from past experience with researchers and a perception that they are flooded with requests for information from academic researchers and government agencies. In the two-year period I was visiting Central Australia, I became aware of five surveys that demanded the attention of pastoralists. I saw faxes ignored and ridiculed, mail surveys briefly read and thrown aside, and heard general complaints about the constant and time consuming nature of these requests. My observation of pastoralists' reaction to some of these surveys confirmed my view that talking to them face-to-face, and in as much depth as possible, even if this meant having a small sample, was an effective, if not the only way, of gathering useful information.

Marie Mahood, one of the few pastoralists in Central Australia to have written about their life, takes a satirical look at social surveys of pastoral families. Her comments parallel those views I observed and heard. She states:

the burgeoning Survey Industry has now burst out of the city and the suburbs, and is panting hot on the trail of yet another "unique" group, i.e. remote grazing families, whose quality of life is to be examined in a survey to be launched after a trial survey to see if there is anything worth surveying (Mahood 1995, p.140).

In addition, Mahood highlights the pastoralists' suspicion of academics and researchers. Pastoralists view the urban intelligentsia as complicit in creating and perpetuating negative images of pastoralists and their industry. Mahood writes of a Melbourne party she once attended:

Airways personnel, elderly aunties, old biddies on buses, patronising professors, and even, no, mostly, earnest student offspring of the friends of my youth; they all invariably hit me at some stage early in the conversation with the modern version of 'Wot about the workers?' This, of course, implies that I am not a worker, which tends to irritate me slightly. It usually devolves that the generally accepted view is that no pastoralist is considered a worker. Among the more rabid university types the commonly held picture seemed to be a cross between a brutal giant in a wide hat applying a whip over the backs of a group of cowering Aborigines, a straw-chewing halfwit, and a corpulent cattle-baron dropping rocks on sacred sites from his second-best Cessna (Mahood 1995, p.50).

The suspicion of researchers seemed to stem mainly from experience with anthropologists and ecologists, two groups who deal with sensitive issues of land. Such views ensure that the process of questioning and discussion is not straightforward. A researcher starts on the back foot whether they realise it or not. I had to convince pastoralists that I deserved some of their time, and some considered responses. This was time consuming, and meant that I did not manage to talk to as many pastoralists as I originally hoped, nor in as much depth with all of them as I had intended. Nonetheless, I did talk to most of the pastoralists in the study focus area that I defined (Figure 3.2). The brief telephone conversations I had with pastoralists who refused to see me, were

also ultimately informative. The reasons provided for not seeing me helped to interpret and confirm information from other pastoralists.

In some respects, writing of 'talking' to pastoralists, or 'interviewing' them does not adequately describe the research process I undertook in order to manage the difficulties of communicating with pastoralists. My 'interviews' with pastoralists took many forms and 'immersed' me in pastoral culture and society in a manner a survey approach, or for that matter the ethnographer's participation strategy alone, would not. This immersion ranged from relatively formal and brief discussions around the lunch table, to working on stations for several days, to attending social functions in Alice Springs and on stations. This thesis relies on non-interview information derived from observations and participation, gathered from such 'immersion', as much as from interview data. This approach facilitated greater insight and flexibility to my observations, questioning, and discussions with pastoralists, than a more formal approach would have yielded. For example, this approach enabled me to explore pastoral beliefs about landscape while travelling on stations with pastoral owners, and to discuss particular areas of land and what had transpired there.

### **3.6 *Coming into Country II - Aboriginal Pastoralists***

In general, much of the above also applies to Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people and communities deal with a constant stream of non-indigenous visitors. Such visitors include employees in Aboriginal communities and organisations, academic researchers, service and funding providers from public and private sectors, and a variety of consultants. As with non-indigenous pastoralists, the researcher must compete with

other demands on time, and establish relationships that will enable the research to occur. In addition, however, the researcher also faces a host of cross-cultural barriers. These issues include the nature of relationships and modes of communication, and they make the process of ethnographic research, difficult and messy in a researcher's own culture (Agar 1996), even more complex.

Information in Aboriginal society is not a free and easily acquired good (Eades 1985). Any communication or transferral of knowledge occurs within a defined socio-cultural context. This context includes obligations to kin, wisdom and power attributed to older people, the physical nature of much interaction (gestures, expressions etc.), links to land and ritual knowledge, and notions of time and orientation to the present and past rather than the future (Eades 1991). These parameters control who has access to knowledge and who has the right to pass on particular knowledge. A consequence of this is that a person must have an appropriate relationship with a holder of knowledge to be eligible to receive it. Therefore, good research depends upon establishing relationships in which the researcher is deemed suitable to receive knowledge and information. Moreover, in receiving knowledge, the researcher enters into a reciprocal relationship where they may be required, in turn, to provide information or knowledge, or expected to provide services such as transport. In some cases this may lead to the researcher entering into relationships which extend beyond the research period.

For example, Richard Baker (1999) writes of the significance of meeting and establishing a strong relationship with one old man critical to his fieldwork in Borroloola in the Northern Territory. Not only was this man himself able to provide much information and knowledge, but Baker's association with him opened up many

possibilities for interaction with, and learning from, Aboriginal people in the area. His association with this man led him to meet others, to attend meetings and ceremonies, and meant that he became known in the area. In exchange for assistance with research, Baker found himself providing transport to the man. Baker's research also coincided with the interest of many Aboriginal people in the Borroloola area in recording their past. This congruence of interests further facilitated his research, but his experience also highlights the nature of chance in successful ethnographic fieldwork. For such chances to occur, however, the researcher may have to invest considerable resources without any assurances that such opportunities will arise.

A further potential source of difficulty for a non-indigenous researcher is the modes of communication used in Aboriginal society. Both Walsh (1997) and Baker (1999) discuss the embarrassment they experienced during some of their early fieldwork with Aboriginal people in northern Australia. Listening to some of my own early (and not so early!) interviews with Aboriginal people I feel similar embarrassment as I relive my struggles with unfamiliar forms of communication.

Perhaps the most important difference between Aboriginal and non-indigenous ways of communicating is that of directness. Whereas non-indigenous people tend to communicate by directly talking to a particular individual, and with direct questioning, Aboriginal people tend to communicate indirectly. They talk around issues and with a style characterised by Walsh (1997) as 'broadcast' rather than directed. Moreover, different modes of communication may be appropriate in different situations. For example, Eades (1991) distinguishes between orientation and substantial information. Orientation information is background information about an individual, place or



incident. Direct questioning may be appropriate for obtaining orientation information. Substantial information is more important information such as motives and meanings. To obtain substantial information indirect questioning is needed and conventional survey techniques are inappropriate. The person seeking information is 'obliged to wait for the knowledgeable person to give the information in his (sic) own time (if indeed he (sic) gives it at all)' (Eades 1985, p.101). With the virtual redundancy of 'why' questions, researchers must elicit statements that are accumulated and interpreted to provide reasons. The responsibility for interpretation of comments rests with the hearer and consequently conversations over time may be needed for the researcher to gain the answers to their questions. Such was my experience with Aboriginal pastoralists (and with non-indigenous pastoralists to a lesser extent). In one case, a central principle of some weeks of fieldwork, carried out over a period of almost eighteen months, with one elderly Aboriginal pastoralist only became clear to me in the last half hour of my last visit through one short statement that he made. Relationships, time, positioning, reciprocity and chance were all factors in fieldwork with both indigenous and non-indigenous pastoralists.

### ***3.7 Fieldwork with Non-Indigenous Pastoralists***

This section details fieldwork in the NT with non-indigenous pastoralists. It also details discussions with non-pastoralists such as government staff and CSIRO scientists. These non-pastoralist informants were important in providing information on past events, past and present pastoral land administration in the NT, ecological processes, ecological research, and sometimes, on specific stations or individuals. In many cases such

informants helped in my interpretation of information from pastoralists and led to further avenues of inquiry.

	Pastoralists (stations)	Ret. Pastoralists	Pastoral Rep.	Aboriginal Pastoralists (stations)	Govt.	Cons.	CSIRO	Ret. Govt. or CSIRO
Dec 1994 (Alice Springs)	5M 4F (6) CLMA meeting	1M	2 (NTCA and CLMA)		4	2	3	
May/Apr 1996 (Alice Springs)	Landcare Council meeting		2 (CLC)		1			
June 1996 (Alice Springs And Darwin)	8M 5F (7)		1 (NTCA)	3M (2)	4			
Oct/Nov 1996 (Alice Springs)		2M 2F						1
April 1997 (Alice Springs)			1 (CLC)	2M 3F (1) Mistake Creek Director's meeting				
June/July 1997 (Darwin)		1M 1F		12 M 2F (1)	6			
Sept-Dec 1997 (Alice Springs)	15M 11F (12)	2F	2 (CLMA)	9M 6F (3)	5	2	2	1
Other Times							1	1
Total	16 stations; seven visited at least twice 34 individuals	5 individuals	5 individ- uals	4 pastoral enterprises; 3 visited at least once 33 individuals	15 indiv- iduals	4 indiv- iduals	6 indivi- duals	2 individ- uals

Notes: Ret. = retired; Rep. = representative; Govt. = government; Cons. = conservationist; M = Male; F = female; NTCA = Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association; CLMA = Centralian Land Management Association; CSIRO = Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation; CLC = Central Land Council

**Table 3.1: Schedule of fieldwork and interviews**

Fieldwork began in December 1994 with a week-long exploratory visit to Alice Springs. The purpose of this visit was to ascertain the suitability of Central Australia as a study area and to gain an understanding of the players and issues in the area. Conversations were held with representatives of non-government conservation organisations, government staff from the Northern Territory Departments of Lands and Primary Industries, representatives of pastoralist organisations and with CSIRO scientists. Attempts were made to talk with pastoralists but these efforts did not result in any meetings. In retrospect, this was a sign of difficulties to come.

This visit confirmed the suitability of Central Australia as an area in which to explore the questions posed in this thesis. In particular, Central Australia emerged as a site where the late 20th century social movements of indigenous land rights and environmentalism were directly confronting land uses and values set in place in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and which remain dominant.

More substantive fieldwork began in March and April of 1996 and continued over 1997 (see Table 3.1 and Appendix Five). The main aim of the first trip in 1996 was to begin interviewing and talking with pastoralists, and to determine a strategy for gaining informants. This was accomplished by visiting six stations across the Alice Springs region, talking with pastoralists at these stations, discussing my research with the co-ordinator of the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), and by attending a meeting of the CLMA, at which I outlined my research to the pastoralists present. The stations visited were the result of recommendations made by the CLMA co-ordinator, a staff member at the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, and by pastoralists themselves. Contact was made by a phone call in which I explained the nature of my

research and asked if I could visit them to talk further. The discussions with pastoralists I had on this trip were guided by a number of questions determined prior to the visit and refined thereafter (see Appendix One). These questions served as a guide to conversations and a checklist for myself. Although the information gained from this initial trip forms part of my study, the main value of this trip was an introduction to pastoralists and pastoralism in the area.

Difficulties associated with fieldwork in Central Australia also became quickly apparent. First, it was often difficult not only to contact pastoralists, who are frequently away from their homesteads engaged in work on the stations, but even if contact was made, there were problems of arranging a time to visit. Pastoralists work six to seven days a week and were often unsure as to how a researcher might be accommodated within their schedule. It was up to me to convince them I was happy to accompany them in their work and participate if necessary. Second, the distances involved in Central Australia are large. There may be up to several hundred kilometres between stations. By mid-1997 I had driven thirty thousand kilometres and travelled many thousands more as a passenger in the company of Central Land Council<sup>17</sup> (CLC) employees when meeting and visiting Aboriginal pastoralists. These circumstances, combined with the difficulties of contacting pastoralists and arranging a time to meet, meant that my station visits were often at very short notice and required travel over huge distances in very little time. Third, the nature of station management means that pastoralists' plans can change

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<sup>17</sup> The Aboriginal Land Councils of the NT are statutory bodies set up under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976. They represent and assist Aboriginal people on matters such as land acquisition, land claims, land ownership disputes, land use on Aboriginal land (eg. mining and tourism), and land management. There are two mainland land councils, the Central and Northern Land Councils.



including four Aboriginal pastoral enterprises. It was chosen on the basis of a purposeful sampling strategy known as 'maximum variation sampling strategy' (Patton 1990). That is, I believed this area would capture the 'central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of...variation' (Patton 1990, p.172). Additional reasons for selecting this area at the time were that it contained pastoralists across the spectrum of management styles (as characterised by pastoralists and others such as government staff) and encompassed a number of both commercial and non-commercial Aboriginal pastoral enterprises. I focussed on this area after early 1996, with three exceptions. The first exception was an Aboriginal pastoral enterprise further north (see section 3.8). The other two exceptions were non-indigenous pastoralists. One was a family who had significant involvement in the pastoralists' Landcare group, the CLMA. The second was a family who afforded me the opportunity to explore some conservation themes from the 1958-65 drought, which is relevant to this thesis. For example, a member of the family gave evidence at the 1964 Land Board inquiry into the drought.

In June of 1996 I attended a meeting of the Landcare Council of the Northern Territory. The meeting was held at the Erldunda Roadhouse, south of Alice Springs. It was an opportunity to consolidate the relationships established with pastoralists during the previous visit, to meet government and non-government people involved in Northern Territory Landcare, and to observe the interaction of pastoralists and conservationists present at the meeting.

The same visit to Alice Springs also provided an opportunity to interview the Executive Director of the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA). I later followed-up this meeting in Darwin and gained access to Landcare-related documents held by the

NTCA. The visit to Darwin also enabled discussions with government staff involved in pastoral land administration and management, who provided information and knowledge concerning the recent history of relevant legislation and policy. It had also become clear from fieldwork to this point that a historical perspective on issues such as land degradation was required to properly interpret the contemporary material I was collecting. As Jacobs (Jacobs 1999, p.15) recently wrote, 'socially constituted meanings do not simply pop up overnight...it is often the duration of time that helps to naturalise certain ways of seeing'. Thus, from the Northern Territory Archives Service (NTAS) and the Darwin office of the Australian Archives (AANT), I obtained material relevant to historical issues in pastoral land administration. These issues included the drought from 1958 to 1965 and past official concerns about land degradation. In addition, relevant oral history interviews held by the NTAS were examined (see Appendix Two for archival and other documentary sources).

In October and November 1996, I made a further trip to Central Australia. This visit focussed on the defined study area to the north-east of Alice Springs and I visited a total of seven non-indigenous stations. In addition, I interviewed four retired pastoralists in Alice Springs, and a long term Alice Springs resident who was a former Government and CSIRO employee.

In June and July 1997 I made a second trip to Darwin during which I had further discussions with government employees involved in pastoral land administration and Landcare. This visit was also used to gather additional materials relating to past land management issues in Central Australia and to examine further oral history interviews. I was also granted access to files on pastoral issues at the Environment Centre of the

Northern Territory, where I collected information on conflicts over Central Australian pastoral land management as well as material relating to the activities of conservationists.

In the second half of 1997 I spent three months in Central Australia. As it was the final field trip, I concentrated on gathering material from Alice Springs conservationists and ALEC, and as much information as possible about the role of the CLMA. I also sought to talk to as many pastoralists as possible, within the region defined as a focus for fieldwork, as well as following-up previous station visits. By the end of this trip I had visited twelve of the twenty-one pastoral enterprises in this area. In addition, I attended two meetings relevant to the Native Title debate. These were the visit to Alice Springs by the President of the National Farmers' Federation and the Alice Springs hearing of the Joint Parliamentary Committee inquiring into Native Title. Both these meetings were opportunities to observe the actions and views of the various parties to the debate, and were particularly useful in gauging the pastoralists' response to Native Title beyond my discussions with them, which had proven unforthcoming<sup>18</sup>.

During this visit I sought to address an imbalance in the quality of interviews I had with women, compared to those with men. Although Table 3.1 indicates I talked with comparable numbers of women and men, the interviews with women were characterised by their relative lack of depth, information, and openness. There are, however, some notable exceptions to this where women were equal if not better informants than the

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<sup>18</sup> Given the profile and passion of the Native Title debate in 1997, this is perhaps surprising. I believe that Central Australian pastoralists' had adopted a 'wait and see attitude' to Native Title, and were unwilling to discuss it. In addition, NT pastoralists have long lived with reservations that enable Aboriginal access to pastoral leases for customary practices and hunting. It is possible, therefore, that they were relatively accustomed to such rights, compared to pastoralists in some other areas.



men. Throughout my fieldwork I had found men were often not at home and the women I spoke to were reluctant about me visiting the station without their husband's approval. This was whether I suggested I could visit and only talk to them, or if I suggested that I could visit when they expected their husbands to be back at the homesteads. This continued to be the case during the last visit, causing the overall imbalance in quality to remain. It is unclear to me whether the women were uncomfortable with having a strange man coming to the house in the absence of their husbands, or whether they felt themselves unable to speak for the station in a way that their husbands would. The reluctance of women to talk may be explained by the division of labour on stations and the fact that women often 'marry in' to pastoral families, and therefore often do not have the associations with a property or the region that the husbands have. Chapter Six discusses the importance of such associations in pastoral culture. Another possible factor is rural women's internalisation of their subordination to men in rural societies, where the labour 'on the land' has been a masculine domain (Beilin 1997; Alston 1995).

### **3.8 *Fieldwork with Aboriginal Pastoralists***

Whereas I approached non-indigenous pastoralists individually and requested their involvement, approaching Aboriginal pastoralists posed some rather different issues for the research process. As Howitt et al (1990) argue, research with Aboriginal people occurs within a broader framework of unequal and racially differentiated power relations:

In Central Australia, where alienation, oppression and powerlessness of Aboriginal interests dominate social relations, social analysts face significant ethical, methodological and political dilemmas (Howitt, Crough et al. 1990, p.2).

Consequently, both researchers and Aboriginal people and organisations have developed guidelines for research with Aboriginal people. For example, Howitt et al (1990) cite those put forward by the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress in 1982.

These include:

- Research should be conducted substantially for and by Aboriginal people and not on Aboriginal people.
- Proposed research programs should develop from the perceived needs by or of Aboriginal people.
- The results of the research should secure immediate short-term or long-term benefits for Aboriginal research.
- Research should be conducted and approved by the relevant Aboriginal bodies.

Thus, I first approached the CLC regarding my interest in Aboriginal pastoralism. Discussions with staff of their Rural Enterprises Unit resulted in a proposal to assess non-monetary benefits from commercial and non-commercial Aboriginal pastoral enterprises (see Appendix Three for correspondence related to this proposal). This project served both the CLC's interests and mine, and by improving understanding of the benefits from Aboriginal pastoralism, offered potential long term advantages to Aboriginal pastoralists. Some of the outcomes of this work are presented in Chapter Eight. Due to a lack of response from CLC management, a formal agreement regarding this research was never made. Although the project did not eventuate as initially envisaged, my research encompassed many of the CLC's questions regarding Aboriginal pastoralism. I also supplied the CLC with information derived from my research that was used as part of their submission to the 1997/98 Reeves review (1998) of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976.

Once it became clear a formal agreement with the CLC was unlikely to eventuate, Paul Mitchell of the CLC Rural Enterprises Unit began to introduce me to a number of

Aboriginal pastoralists. I accompanied him on his own visits to various places where Aboriginal pastoralists were running pastoral enterprises. Paul personally introduced me to the Aboriginal pastoralists and explained what it was I was doing and the benefits he hoped it would bring to them. If a willingness to participate was expressed I followed up that initial visit myself. I was not successful in every case. Despite the original interest, and for reasons I do not know, some people did not want to participate as I had hoped. Although I obtained useful information from them for myself and the CLC, and have used it in this thesis, the richest information in this part of fieldwork was obtained from a relatively small number of pastoralists. In particular, those at Atitie (Utopia/Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust) and at Nguyarmini (McLaren Creek/Mungkarta Aboriginal Land Trust), as detailed in Chapter Eight.

Aboriginal pastoralists at Mistake Creek station in the Victoria River District also provided relatively rich information. This station lies outside Central Australia but in the CLC region<sup>19</sup>. It was included in this study as it was a commercial enterprise, whereas enterprises at Utopia and Mungkarta were not. I wanted some variation among enterprises but was having difficulty establishing myself with commercial Aboriginal pastoralists in Central Australia. Aboriginal people at Mistake Creek were happy to discuss pastoralism with me, and, at the end of visit, one elderly man suggested I return again for a longer visit. By that stage of the project, however, I was unable to follow up on this offer. As with non-indigenous pastoralists, a flexible interview guide was developed for Aboriginal pastoralists (see Appendix Four).

At the non-commercial enterprises I was able to participate in aspects of the pastoral enterprise itself. For example, at Atite I became involved in building a new stockyard. It was at Nguyarmini, however, that fieldwork was most successful. I made two extended visits to Nguyarmini and travelled over much of the area with Murphy Japanangka (see Chapter Eight). In addition, when Murphy and his family visited Alice Springs, I became involved in their activities. This was the result of a convergence of interests on my part and on the part of Murphy. I was able to drive Murphy over areas of land he had not been able to visit easily of late, and, as Chapter Eight illustrates, became a 'witness' to his pastoral knowledge of the country. For my part, I received much information from Murphy about his pastoral knowledge and views of the landscape. I hope to continue the relationships and research begun with Murphy by expanding upon the work of 1996-97 in future fieldwork. Principally, this will trace (literally and historically) Murphy's pastoral work history at two different scales, on the Murraji stockroute, and at home in the area south-east of Tennant Creek, where he spent most of his working life.

### **3.9 *Managing and Analysing Information***

Information from a range of sources was collected over the fieldwork period. This included notes from interviews, fieldnotes (including observations, ideas, events and analysis), newspaper articles, reports, transcripts of hearings, speeches, published books (see Chapter Five), archival material, oral history material, photos, and documents from government and non-government organisations. Almost all of my interviews were

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<sup>19</sup> The region is the area of the NT for which the CLC has responsibility under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1976) NT. It is roughly bounded by Tennant Creek to the north, the southern Victoria River District to the north-west, and the Territory borders to the west, south and east.

recorded by note taking. Non-indigenous pastoralists, except for some retired pastoralists, did not wish to be recorded and so I quickly abandoned this approach. In keeping with their concerns I have adapted a general policy of not citing names and stations, except where necessary. Aboriginal pastoralists were more amenable to tape recording and much of that fieldwork is recorded on tape and in notebooks. At one point, when I was concerned my tape was worrying Murphy Japanangka, I suggested I turn it off. He insisted that I kept it running in order to capture his words and 'cattle' story about the land over which we were travelling.

In order to make sense of this disparate information I used methods of coding to break the information down. This essentially involved an iterative process of classifying the information according to categories derived both from the research aims and from the information itself (Miles and Huberman 1984; Patton 1990). For example, the statements, concepts or ideas about land expressed by non-indigenous pastoralists were captured in a range of categories. These included:

- Stewardship – where pastoralists expressed views about pastoralism as conservation, or mentioned practices conducive to conservation/preservation.
- Outsiders – insider/outsider status insofar as it relates to knowledge of land and the right to speak of land.
- Attachment to land – where pastoralists expressed the bases for their attachment to land.
- Beliefs (re: landscape processes and role of cattle) – where pastoralists expressed their view of ecological and geomorphological processes.

The category that encompassed 'beliefs', for example, derived from a) my aim to explore the basis for pastoralists responses to conservationists and b) the emphasis pastoralists placed on such conservation themes in interviews, as well as the role these themes clearly played in underpinning pastoralist responses to conservationists.

As is frequently the case with qualitative research (Minichiello, Aroni et al. 1990), such categories evolved over the fieldwork period and subsequent to it. There was no clearly defined point at which fieldwork ended and analysis began. The categories developed in a non-linear fashion as themes and ideas emerged, and were developed or discarded throughout both the fieldwork and analysis stages. Their co-development entailed adjustments and focussing of interviews and information gathering. As I worked through the material I gathered, analysis became progressively more focussed as the categories developed and took greater shape and meaning, and as my familiarity with the material and its content and meaning improved. Such a flexible and reflective approach to data analysis and collection is consistent with the approach outlined in the context of rangelands research (page 59). It allows the building of 'thick description', where the various sources of information are used to:

Combine...issues of meaning and symbolic expression with an analysis of the political and economic contexts within which such expressions are manifested [and] to furnish contemporary expressions of meaning with historical lineage, to look back and contextualise the ideas and views of the present in terms of the past (Jacobs 1999, p.23).

Such an approach facilitated the process of closely reading and interpreting interviews, texts, words, photos and actions in order to detect the 'substrata of meaning and significance' (Jacobs 1999, p.23) in pastoralists' responses to social change, and then relate this to material struggles over land.

### **3.10 Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the process of fieldwork and summarised the method of analysing the information. The approach adopted was one consistent with the

interpretive aims of thesis, trends in rangelands research, and methodology in cultural geography. Fieldwork presented particular logistical and cultural challenges, and the methodology was adapted to cope with these without compromising the overall project. The trajectory of information collection and analysis was ongoing, facilitating responsiveness to the issues, sensitivities, themes and categories that emerged during the fieldwork period. Subsequent analysis relied on coding techniques to assist in ordering, cross-referencing and interpreting material.

This chapter began with my experiences in the conservation movement and changes in perceptions of the rangelands. In the next chapter I expand upon the challenges that the Aboriginal land rights and conservation movement present to pastoralists in the rangelands in general, and in Central Australia in particular.

## **Chapter 4 Competing Visions of Central Australia – Aboriginal Land Rights and Environmentalism**

I find it impossible to imagine the Australia I love, without a strong and vibrant farming sector.

(Prime Minister John Howard, 30/11/97)

In that social order, Aboriginal interests had come to be routinely subordinated to competing economic interests and to policies of control by the State. The validation of this state of affairs was its self-evidence – what was essential to it went fairly much without saying, because without dissenting voices, it came without saying. That is no longer the case (Edmunds 1995, p.7)

### **4.1 Introduction**

As Chapter Two showed, the origin sites of nations have commonly been located in rural industries, societies and areas. In Australia, bush and outback mythologies have played a significant role in informing national identity and in shaping and guiding land use and land tenure. As Figure 4.1, shows Australian farmers continue to see themselves as central to the Australian nation, indeed, in this case, no less than constitutive of the nation.

Inland and northern, or 'outback', pastoralism has occupied a central place in the rural-based mythologies of Australian nationhood. This centrality is reflected in pastoralism's dominance of productive land in the inland and north. Yet, as I suggested in Chapter One, this symbolic and material dominance is under great pressure from the Aboriginal land rights movements and the contemporary environmental movement.





of land. Similarly, in asserting traditional land ownership and their own perspectives on pastoral settlement, Aboriginal people undermine the confident assertions of a land made anew through pastoralism, and question the morality upon which the Australian nation is founded.

This chapter outlines these two challenges to pastoralism. An historical perspective will be taken for both, as this will show that both have deep historical roots. Challenges to pastoralism are not simply the result of recent upsurges in sentiment; they have been present over the duration of pastoral settlement in Central Australia. It has, however, taken wider changes in Australian society for these challenges to become more effective and more prominent. Land rights will be discussed first, then the environmental movement. There will be greater emphasis on the development of conservation concerns and interests as this area has not been documented to the same extent as the development of land rights in the rangelands.

## ***4.2 Aboriginal Land Rights and their Challenge to Pastoralists***

### **4.2.1 Land Rights and NT Politics**

The NT is distinctive in Australia for its relatively large Aboriginal population, Aboriginal land ownership, and the prominence of race-based politics. For example, in 1997 the NT government could run a successful election campaign partly based upon the slogan that Aboriginal land rights threaten the 'Territory lifestyle'. This lifestyle is evoked in such terms as outdoor life, fishing, and recreation, and the freedom to pursue economic activity. The government not only supports, but promotes the view that current and potential Aboriginal land ownership threatens economic development, that

it is 'dampening' investment in the pastoral industry, and that Aboriginal landholders should be involved in 'productive' pastoralism (Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 1994). Struggle over land between Aboriginal people and the Aboriginal land councils on the one hand, and the NT government and various industry groups on the other hand, represent a staple of political life in the NT. At times, as in the case of mining in Kakadu National Park over the period 1997-99, NT land and race issues spill over into the national arena. Major issues in relation to pastoralism include alleged erosion of the pastoral estate due to Aboriginal land ownership, conflict over Aboriginal Community Living Areas (CLA) on pastoral leases<sup>21</sup> (see Figure 4.3) and Aboriginal land claims over the old stock routes, which often pass through pastoral leases but which remain crown land.

#### **4.2.2 Aboriginal Population and Land Ownership**

In part, the challenge to settler landscapes is evident in the large Aboriginal population of the NT and in Aboriginal land ownership in the NT. As a proportion of population, the NT Aboriginal population is the highest for any state or territory at twenty-eight and a half percent in 1996 (McLennan 1998). For Australia as whole, Aboriginal people

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<sup>21</sup> CLA's are provided for under the NT Pastoral Land Act 1992. They are usually small, up to a few square kilometres in size. They are not always disputed by pastoralists. However, the inclusion and terms of such provisions in pastoral legislation has been hotly debated in the past, and at times individual applications are subject to vigorous objections from pastoralists. For example, the legislation does not acknowledge traditional ownership of land as a basis for CLA application. Instead it relies on factors such as Aboriginal pastoral work histories and residence on the pastoral land in question. This denies standing to traditional owners of the land in question who may never have actually lived on the land for reasons such as past employment practices of pastoral lease owners, forced removal, or the trajectory of individual work histories. These points and others relating to CLA's were bitterly contested in the mid-1980s by the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA), pastoralists, the NT government and the Aboriginal land councils (see Chapter Three) (for example see 'Gloves are off in land battle' *Centralian Advocate* 28/9/84). In turn, the Central Land Council (CLC) is accused by pastoralists of often being obstructionist and insensitive to pastoralists needs. In 1996-97 I met a number of pastoralists who were negotiating over such living areas and who did not object to the living area per se, but were concerned with proposed locations, which they saw as problematic for their cattle operations.

made up two point one percent of the total population in 1996 (McLennan 1998). In the southern NT, in an area<sup>22</sup> corresponding to the Alice Springs Pastoral District, the 1996 Aboriginal population outside the Alice Springs area was 7 500 compared to a non-indigenous population of only 3 900 (McLennan 1997).

Aboriginal land ownership in Australia is concentrated in the NT, and in the inland and north in general. The more populated and fertile areas of Australia have relatively small areas of land under Aboriginal ownership (see Figure 4.2). For Australia in total, fourteen and a quarter percent of the land area is under indigenous ownership (AUSLIG 1999). Of this indigenous-owned area, 536 000 square kilometres, or forty-nine percent of the total area of indigenous-owned land in Australia is in the NT (AUSLIG 1999). Within the NT, forty percent of the land area is under indigenous ownership. As Figure 4.2 shows, much of this land is in the west and far north of the NT, areas that non-indigenous Australians have historically found of little value (see also Crough 1992). For example, the large areas in the west of the NT are generally referred to as desert country and have proven to be of no pastoral value, except in isolated pockets. Prior to Aboriginal ownership these areas had remained largely as vacant crown land, for all intents and purposes unused by non-indigenous Australians.

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<sup>22</sup> This area was the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Aputula region. The Commission is a government body set up to provide services to indigenous people and largely replaces former departments such as Aboriginal Affairs. Its commissioners are Aboriginal people elected from various defined regions.



There has also been an increase in Aboriginal outstations (see page 105) across the NT as Aboriginal people have moved back to their traditional lands (Taylor 1993). Some of the land now owned by Aboriginal people is former pastoral lease land, or is still under pastoral lease title, but is Aboriginal-owned and under land claim for conversion to Aboriginal freehold under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976 (see Figure 4.3). Table 4.1 lists former or existing pastoral leases in the Central Land Council's (CLC) region now under Aboriginal ownership.

<i>Property</i>	<i>Date of Purchase</i>	<i>Status of Land</i>	<i>Status of Pastoral Activity**</i>
<b>Willowra</b>	1973	ALT	Fully operating
<b>Ti Tree</b>	1975	ALT	Fully operating
<b>Daguragu*</b>	1975	ALT	Non-operational
<b>Utopia</b>	1976	ALT	Small pastoral operation
<b>Mt Allan</b>	1976	ALT	Operating
<b>Chilla Well</b>	1978	ALT	Not operating
<b>McLaren Creek*</b>	1985	ALT	Small pastoral operation
<b>Tanami Downs</b>	1989	ALT	Fully operating
<b>Atula</b>	1989	ALT	Fully operating
<b>Mistake Creek*</b>	1991	ALT	Fully operating
<b>Loves Creek</b>	1992	PPL – under claim	Fully operating
<b>Tempe Downs</b>	1993	ALT	Not operating
<b>Alcoota</b>	1993	PPL – under claim	Fully operating
<b>Angas Downs</b>	1994	PPL	Operating
<b>Central Mt. Wedge</b>	1995	PPL – under claim	Not operating

Notes: PPL = Perpetual Pastoral Lease (main form of pastoral lease tenure in NT)

ALT = Aboriginal Land Trust (land owning bodies under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976). This land is inalienable (cannot be traded) freehold title.

Under claim = Land is subject to a land claim by traditional owners under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976

\* These properties are not in the Alice Springs Pastoral District. The CLC region stretches into the Victoria River District to the north, where Mistake Creek and Daguragu are located. McLaren Creek lies just north of the Alice Springs pastoral district but falls into the fieldwork area (see Chapter Three).

\*\* This status is sourced from Central Land Council (1994). It can and does, however, alter, and, furthermore, is best seen as a spectrum from fully operating, commercial businesses to subsistence-oriented, small operations rather than as discrete categories (see Chapter Eight).

**Table 4.1: Aboriginal pastoral properties in the Central Land Council region**

Source: Central Land Council (1994), NT Registrar General, fieldwork, CLC Rural Unit (pers. comm. 8/12/99).

In 1997 there were a total of seventy-three pastoral leases in the Alice Springs Pastoral District. Of these the traditional Aboriginal owners owned four. At that time another seven former pastoral leases had been converted to Aboriginal freehold land under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976. As Table 4.1 shows, the extent of pastoral operations on Aboriginal land is variable, although most properties are attempting to run fully commercial operations.

#### **4.2.3 Aboriginal Land Rights and Cultural Persistence in Australia**

This tangible Aboriginal presence is an important sign of great social change, and conflict, in both the NT and in Australia. These changes do not simply relate to the transfer of land. They represent struggles over group and national histories and identities. Pastoral settlement and national identity has, until recently, been founded in notions of orderly, peaceful settlement, and the pioneering of an apparently vast and unowned land. Reassertions of Aboriginal land ownership in recent decades and the emergence of Aboriginal histories of settlement, have profoundly unsettled conventional understandings of Australian history, non-indigenous land tenure regimes, and understandings of land and land ownership in Australia. Thus, the historical and cultural processes that have led to the present situation in the NT, and which continue to underpin it, are of great significance to any study of pastoralism in Central Australia. For example, the success of the land rights movement in the NT is underpinned by great persistence of traditional Aboriginal culture relative to many other areas of Australia. Examination of these processes will illustrate the fundamental challenge contemporary Aboriginal presence, as expressed through population and land ownership, presents to pastoralists and to the settler nation – both its narrative history and its reality - as whole.

Frontier mythology and narratives of colonial settlement in Australia and elsewhere are characterised by a process of emptying the lands in question of their indigenous inhabitants. In frontier origin stories, such emptied spaces are those where settlers are remade in a new country and nations are forged (Rose 1997). The 'absence' of indigenous people is not only symbolic – it must be both imagined and made real (Rose 1997). In much of Australian historiography the means by which indigenous people were made absent were left out as historians wrote of exploration, the spread of settlement, the struggle to come to terms with the land and struggles between different groups of Europeans over land (Reynolds 1987). Such accounts were premised on three assumptions: 'at the time of settlement Australia was an unchanged wilderness; if Aboriginal people ever owned the land they lost it in 1788; violence was a minor feature of colonisation' (Reynolds 1987, p.188). In these histories, settlement of the land, the process of shaping it and coming to terms with it are the 'central experience of the nation' (Reynolds 1987, p194).

These processes are the basis of the bush and outback mythologies, the origin stories of the Australian nation, and the basis for popular understandings of Australian history. For this reason the reinsertion of Aboriginal people into history by non-indigenous and indigenous historians and writers, and the growing influence and currency of such histories, have sparked spirited debates and conflict over national identity and national origins (for an overview see Curthoys and Moore 1995). The appellation 'black armband history' has been coined to denigrate such history and to depict it as the outpourings of an urbanised, educated elite which derives guilt, not pride, from Australian history. The current Australian Prime Minister, John Howard, is among those to use this term (for example, in his 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture). This so-called



‘Aboriginal history’ has emphasised the violence and brutality of European settlement in Australia, and that such violence was not aberrant and occasional, but pervasive and ubiquitous. Another branch of this form of history has sought to give voice to Aboriginal people themselves, emerging in the form of oral history where Aboriginal people’s versions of history are recorded and published. Examples from the NT include Read and Read (1991), and Vaarzon-Morel and Nungarrayi (1995).

The NT has been the subject of such ‘new’ histories, histories that have flourished, and both arisen from and driven aspects of the land rights movement. The life histories and geographies of Aboriginal people, and their relationships to the pastoral industry have assumed some significance in land claim processes, applications for CLAs, and more recently Native Title claims. Such histories cast a questioning light on narratives of NT pastoral settlement as one of an encounter with the land and pioneering efforts to establish a home (see Chapter Five). This ‘Aboriginal history’ shows Aboriginal people have always contested and accommodated European settlement according to circumstance, but have never wholly accepted it.

As elsewhere, pastoral settlement in the NT was based upon the premise that the land was available for occupation by Europeans. Aboriginal people were certainly present but were seen as savages and as nomads who did not own land and who had no rightful claim to it. In the late nineteenth century as pastoral settlement developed in the southern NT, this occupation of land led to frequent and violent encounters between Aboriginal people and pastoralists, who often called in police to assist. Aboriginal people speared cattle and at times attacked Europeans (Hartwig 1965; Reid 1990). The precise motives for many attacks are not known, but included rape of Aboriginal

women, and resentment at the impact of cattle and the monopolisation of precious water sources by Europeans, especially in times of drought (Kimber 1991).

Attacks on Europeans often provoked punitive expeditions, comprised of settlers and police, in which numbers of Aboriginal people would be killed, often with little regard as to whether those killed were the actual perpetrators of the offence in question. Cattle spearing could also provoke such expeditions, and other offences by Aboriginal people such as petty theft or even perceived 'cheekiness' could bring harsh responses such as whipping from pastoralists. While violence in the form of punitive raids and killings largely ended by the end of the nineteenth century in Central Australia (with the significant exception of the 1928 Coniston and associated massacres, see Elder 1988), violence such as beatings, rape, and whipping continued on some stations well into the twentieth century. The total death toll of Aboriginal people killed before 1900 is difficult to estimate. Kimber (1997), estimates that between 1860 and 1895, 650-850 Aboriginal people were killed during punitive expeditions by Europeans. For example, in one area to the north of Alice Springs, it is likely that reprisals for an attack on Anna's Reservoir station led to one group, the Anmatyerre, being virtually wiped out (Kimber 1991). Including deaths from disease, Kimber (1997) calculates that forty-three percent of the Aboriginal population in the Alice Springs region died from causes attributable to the presence of Europeans between 1860 and 1895.

While such violence was commonplace on frontiers across Australia (for example see Elder 1988) and persisted in various forms in the inland and north into the twentieth century (for example see Rose 1991), circumstances in the inland and north, and certainly in Central Australia, left Europeans with an Aboriginal presence they could

not ignore entirely. In areas such as NSW, an era of mutual, if unequal, accommodation of pastoralists and Aborigines, ended in the period 1850-1880 as land use intensified, and large pastoral stations were broken up for small settlers (Goodall 1996). In Central Australia, and elsewhere in the inland and north, this transition to more intensive settlement and land use did not occur. European occupation of land remained extremely sparse, even absent in large areas, and European populations remained small.

While Europeans had the strength to enforce their settlement and control of pastoral land, they were not able to totally remove Aboriginal people from the landscape. Nor did all pastoralists seek to do so. From the 1890s some pastoralists had realised the advantages of accommodating Aboriginal interests, of using their knowledge of water and land for pastoral purposes<sup>23</sup>, and of preventing cattle spearing through reasonable treatment of Aboriginal people (Kimber 1991). The provision of rations to Aboriginal people by pastoralists, missionaries and government began to replace violence 'as a way of rendering cross-cultural relationships peaceful and predictable (Rowse 1998).

Since the turn of the century, a wide range of institutions, including legislative and policy institutions were developed to control Aboriginal people in the NT and support non-indigenous settlement (for a nationwide summary see McGrath 1995). These included the further development of missions, the declaration of Aboriginal reserves (see Figure 4.4), the creation of rationing depots, provision of rations to Aboriginal

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<sup>23</sup> One aspect of recent histories of exploring and settlement in Australia is the foregrounding of the dependence of explorers and pastoralists upon Aboriginal people as for water, guidance and labour, exploding the myth of the lone white pioneer (for example see McLaren 1996; Ryan 1996; Watson 1998).



and brought up as non-indigenous Australians. This regime of the removal of children peaked in the 1950s (Read 1999). These removals occurred all over Australia and were part of the process of attempting to render Aboriginal people absent, and in the NT of preventing the white population being swamped (Read 1995). In Central Australia children removed from their parents were commonly sent to the 'Bungalow', an institution first located in Alice Springs, and subsequently to Jay Creek, west of town.

Such removals were carried out under ordinances that gave the state power over the lives of Aboriginal people. Such ordinances meant that relevant government employees such the Protector of Aborigines, and later, the Director of the NT Welfare Branch and staff such as reserve superintendents, had extraordinary powers to control the lives of Aboriginal people. Such control manifested itself in forcing Aboriginal people to live in reserves, removals and relocations of Aboriginal people, control over personal property, exclusion from towns, control over liquor consumption, and controls over marriages and movement. The Welfare Ordinance of 1953 designated Aboriginal people as 'wards' and the names of almost 16 000 Aboriginal people were entered in the 'Register of Wards', known as the 'stud book' (Read 1995). The 1953 Ordinance reflected the policy of assimilation, under which Aboriginal people were to be ultimately reformed according to the model of a white citizen, with the same culture, affiliation, aspirations, and chances as any white citizen of Australia. Their Aboriginal identities were to be left behind.

Many Central Australian pastoralists were instrumental in these institutions of control, and their role became relatively formalised after World War II. By the inter-war period Aboriginal people were becoming increasingly integrated into the pastoral economy.

Pastoralism remained a marginal economic activity and many pastoralists depended on Aboriginal labour as stock and domestic workers which could be bought cheaply for rations and goods, and upon Aboriginal tolerance for settlers and their cattle (Rowse 1998). Given the violence that Europeans had shown themselves to be capable of, coming to terms with the settler presence was also in the interests of Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people accepted European food and goods, the exchange of which became a critical foundation for settler and Aboriginal interactions (Rowse 1998). Moreover, as has now been demonstrated (for example see Baker 1999; McGrath 1987; Bell 1978), the acquisition of horse and stock skills gave experienced Aboriginal employees status in this new world. In addition, their importance to the pastoral economy and their continuing residence on pastoral land allowed Aboriginal people to remain in 'de facto possession of their homelands' (Rowse 1998, p.123-124) and to maintain traditional affiliations with land.

From 1947, following agreement between the NT administration and pastoralists, the rationing arrangements on pastoral stations became part of the state apparatus of assimilation. Pastoralists agreed to pay a low wage to Aboriginal stockworkers and to provide rations for the workers and their first wife and first child. Remaining dependents were to be given rations by the pastoralists on behalf of the administration<sup>24</sup>. In 1965-66, about three-quarters of stations had resident Aboriginal populations at least sufficient in size to make up a stock camp. Typically such resident groups would reside in a camp a short distance from the station homestead<sup>25</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Such arrangements led to allegations of 'nigger farming', wherein pastoralists were accused of seeking reimbursement from the government in excess of what they had expended in rationing station-dwelling Aboriginal people (Stevens 1974).

<sup>25</sup> Accommodation conditions for Aboriginal people on stations was a source of constant criticism of pastoralists from government patrol officers and elsewhere (for example see Stevens 1974).

Under these conditions, pastoralists were able to acknowledge Aboriginal relationships and affiliations to land in such a way that did not conflict with their ownership and use of it under NT law. Acknowledgement of traditional Aboriginal land ownership was on the premise that non-indigenous occupation of land was of primary significance. The continued Aboriginal presence was thus accommodated, but marginalised, and the primacy of non-indigenous occupancy and the institutions of control over Aboriginal people, made their absence always a concrete possibility.

From the rationing and labour relationships between pastoralists and Aborigines, pastoralists constructed 'moral and sociable relationships' with Aboriginal people. These were based upon the 'mutual pleasures of work and moral onus to employ traditional landowners (Rowse 1998, p.126). In Central Australia today, pastoralists still look back to this period to assist in representing their present day relationships with Aboriginal people as based on strong personal relationships and equality. To be sure, many pastoralists of middle age and older grew up with Aboriginal people, spoke (and some still speak) Aboriginal languages, and retain relationships with childhood friends. Yet, when the white child was sent away to boarding school, the Aboriginal child remained. Upon the white child's return as a young adult, to ultimately take over the station, the differences between white and Aborigine became stark.

From the perspective of pastoralists and the state, this postwar pastoral landscape was one in which Aboriginal presence had been domesticated (Anderson 1996). Aboriginality had apparently been controlled and harnessed to allow the non-indigenous settlement to proceed and persist, without difficult questions as to how this had been, and was being, achieved. As Anderson (1996) points out, control and affinity, proximity

and distance, and companionship and service are not mutually exclusive in relations between those domesticated and those who domesticate (for a discussion of Aboriginal-pastoral distance and proximity in the northern NT see Riddett 1988). From the pastoral perspective, or at least in pastoral representations, there had been a 'cultural convergence' (Rowse 1998) of pastoralists and Aboriginal people, based upon mutual acceptance, a complementarity of interests, and joint occupancy of land. For Aboriginal people, however, the rationing arrangement, far from providing for cultural convergence, actually provided the basis for the persistence of Aboriginal solidarity, culture, and affiliations to land (Rowse 1998). When Aboriginal stockworkers became eligible for the full award wage in 1968, pastoralists shed workers and, as part of events and changes elsewhere in Australia and the NT, Aboriginal people began to exercise their increased independence. Among other things they began to work for the return of their land, which in their eyes, they had never given up.

Amid a changing social climate in Australia, Aboriginal campaigns for the return of land gained momentum and prominence at this time. In 1966 Aboriginal stockmen and their families walked off Vestey's<sup>26</sup> Wave Hill station, calling for the return of their land. This was not the first such strike or assertion of traditional land ownership, either in the NT, or elsewhere in pastoral Australia. It was the one, however, that captured public and political attention and is commonly traced as the beginning of the land rights movement (Riddett 1997).

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<sup>26</sup> Vestey's is a British-based multinational pastoralist company. In the past they have had extensive holdings in northern Australia. Their management methods were often controversial as they were perceived to not develop pastoral country, but simply harvest cattle in large open range operations (for example see Kelly 1949; Kelly 1966; Kelly 1971).



The 1970s saw rapid movement on land rights (Young 1992a). The Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1967 was passed, and large areas in the west and north of the NT were granted to Aboriginal people. The so-called 'outstation movement' began. This involved Aboriginal people moving back onto their traditional lands, and setting up small settlements (Young 1995). Purchases of pastoral leases on behalf of Aboriginal people started in earnest (see Table 4.1), and the NT Aboriginal land councils were formally created. These provided institutional support through which Aboriginal land aspirations could be pursued, and created new political forces in the NT. By 1981 thirty percent of the NT area was held by Aboriginal people under the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act (Read 1995). Aboriginal people were now independent citizens. They had access to welfare payments, government funds for community development, were increasingly living on land and CLA's amongst settler pastoralists, and were travelling and hunting on pastoral lands by virtue of the reservations in the Pastoral Land Act 1992. The pastoral landscape and the progress and 'improvement' it represented was under great challenge. The process of colonisation and domestication of Aboriginal people and Aboriginality had proven to be incomplete, and the very nature of NT pastoralism paradoxically had had a role in bringing this about.

Events in the 1990s have intensified pressure on non-indigenous Australians to recognise the past and ongoing dispossession of indigenous people, and to acknowledge and address the severe social and economic deprivation that indigenous Australians experience. Suggestions as to how this recognition might occur include a treaty, compensation for the 'stolen generation', and an apology from the current Prime Minister, John Howard (which he has steadfastly refused to give). Aside from the 'stolen generations' issue, the most contentious indigenous debate has been that of

Native Title. This was arguably the most prominent political issue over 1997 and 1998 and brought the question of national reconciliation and the place of Aboriginal people in the nation squarely to bear upon pastoralists, including those in the NT.

The Native Title issue arose from the 1996 Wik<sup>27</sup> decision of the High Court of Australia. In 1992, the High Court's Mabo<sup>28</sup> judgement found that a form of Native Title to land existed in 1788 and may still exist, if it had not been extinguished by acts of government, and if Aboriginal customs had been maintained. This was a critical judgement for the Australian nation for it overturned the doctrine of terra nullius that formed the legal basis for the view that Australia was unowned in 1788<sup>29</sup>. This 1992 decision, however, left open the question of whether Native Title survived on pastoral leases. The Wik decision in December 1996 found that Native Title could survive on pastoral leases and could co-exist with pastoral title. Pastoral title was to take precedence where any conflict might occur.

The resultant furore was enormous and stretched over 1997 and much of 1998. It highlighted rural/urban divisions in Australia, and illustrated the relative decline in status of the pastoralists and the pastoral industry, and the relative rise in support for Aboriginal aspirations. On the one hand, pastoralists and rural lobby groups urged the government to extinguish Native Title on pastoral leases. On the other hand popular, largely urban-based groups such as Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation,

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<sup>27</sup> The Wik Peoples v The State of Queensland & Ors - Matter No B8 of 1996 ; The Thayorre People v The State of Queensland & Ors - Matter No B9 of 1996.

<sup>28</sup> Mabo v Queensland [No 2] (1992) 175 CLR 1

<sup>29</sup> In 1971 terra nullius had been reaffirmed in Milirripum v Nabalco (1971) 17 FLR 141.



property rights to pastoralists, and pastoralists tended to feel ongoing uncertainty in relation to Native Title.

Pastoralists face a reasserted Aboriginal presence that challenges their place on the land. The Native Title issue highlighted that the challenges operate not only regionally, but also at a national level. Urban supporters<sup>30</sup> of Native Title articulated a vision of the nation based upon 'reconciliation', 'co-existence', and recognition of Aboriginal dispossession. It was not only that this removed pastoralists from their pivotal role in Australian history and national mythology; it was part of a process of rewriting that history and mythology. In the revised version, pastoralists have been cast in a far more negative light, as inheritors of land obtained through violence and greed. On the other hand, pastoralists perceive that they are being asked to assume the guilt of the nation as a result of a quirk of land tenure history that preserved Native Title on their land and virtually nowhere else in the country. Thus, the land rights movement presents a challenge not only in terms of Aboriginal land ownership, but also in terms of cultural reassessments of the status of pastoralists, particularly with regards to their role in national identity.

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<sup>30</sup> A small number of pastoralists from western and northern Queensland sought to deal with Native Title through negotiated local agreements rather than by extinguishment as the National Farmer's Federation urged.

### **4.3 *Soil Conservation to Ecology: The Environmental Critique of Pastoralism***

#### **4.3.1 The Encounter with the Inland: Early Lessons Learnt and Forgotten**

In Australian culture, outback pastoral mythology has a timeless air about it. However, while expansion into arid lands began in the 1840s, it took until the 1860s and 1870s for pastoralism to expand across the continent and into the inland areas (Figure 1.6). Its history, far from being lost in mythological mists is relatively recent (especially in Central Australia, see Figure 1.6), and is marked by an often controversial presence in the public and political life of the nation, and of the states and territories. This visibility has been a consequence of the variable environmental conditions in which inland pastoralism has existed. These conditions have always imposed challenges for the mode of settled pastoralism employed in Australia, at times precipitating acute economic, social, and environmental problems. As a consequence, the history of inland pastoralism has been characterised over the twentieth century by constant inquiries, criticism and contestation (for example see Heathcote 1987a). Much of this interrogation of what is popularly imagined as a fundamental mode of land use and occupation in Australian nationhood has consisted of persistent questioning as to whether pastoralism should even exist in inland Australia, and if so, where, and in what form. Despite this ongoing interrogation, pastoralism has survived more or less in an unmodified form, and to a spatial extent that was largely fixed by the early twentieth century (Figure 1.5).

Probably the most significant early interrogation of inland pastoralism was the 1900-01 Royal Commission into the financial, social and environmental disaster in western NSW in the 1890s. The drought of 1890s exposed the flaws in pastoral settlement in the arid

and semi-arid areas of NSW and other Australian colonies, particularly the gross overestimation of stock carrying capacity which caused severe land degradation and long-term reductions in the carrying capacity of land (Heathcote 1987a; Friedel, Foran et al. 1990). The Commission recommended many changes to land administration and there was general commitment to acknowledge the limits of the inland and to not repeat the mistakes of the late nineteenth century (Quinn 1997; Noble 1997)<sup>31</sup>.

Not only was this drought period a crisis for land administration and management, it was a cultural crisis as well. This was the period leading to federation. The values and themes that were seen to be shaping Australian identity such as independence, individualism, stoicism, cultural and physical adaptation to the Australian environment were strongly associated with the 'bush' (White 1981; Davison 1978; Powell 1976). In addition, by the 1890s these values were already associated with the nation's interior (Haynes 1998). The inland, with its apparently limitless land resources, was the area in which future closer settlement and agricultural development were anticipated. The inland was seen to be where the future prosperity and success of the colony, and of the soon to be created nation, lay. These expectations had been dealt a severe blow by the situation in the west of NSW (Quinn 1997).

After World War I, optimism as to the potential of the inland swept aside the experience of the 1890s in grand visions for the future development and population of the inland (and the north) (Powell 1984). In so-called 'booster' claims, Central Australia and the

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<sup>31</sup> Such commitment, however, waned. In 1931 and 1983 there were further inquiries into pastoralism in the west of NSW. Their findings of overstocking, plant and animal pests, high debt and inappropriately small landholdings echoed those of 1901 (Quinn 1997).

NT were drawn into broader debates on national needs and priorities, and the pastoral industry featured prominently in visions of the future. For example, the Minister for Home Affairs, Mr. C.L.A. Abbott, held up Central Australia, and the north, as a focus for the hopes of Australians for national development and economic prosperity:

I refuse to look upon North and Central Australia as the dead heart of Australia. The mind of the people of Australia is turning to North Australia, and is wondering what is going to happen there. We hope for great things there, and we hope it will be the solution of the great pastoral problems of Australia...Australia must look very tenderly towards the pastoral industry, because on it depends her ultimate prosperity (*Northern Territory Times* 29/3/29).

Closer pastoral development, largely based on sheep raising, was commonly seen as the basis for a sound economic future. In the 1920s and 1930s there were estimates of potential Central Australian sheep flocks ranging from fourteen million from the federal member of the NT (*Northern Territory Times* 13/9/29), to a more modest but still optimistic 300 000 (Payne and Fletcher 1937). The desired form of pastoral settlement was one of relatively intense and controlled use in which the stations were fenced and well supplied with bores. Drought was played down or even seen as a positive event, as 'Nature's fallow for the land' (Day 1924, p.12)<sup>32</sup>.

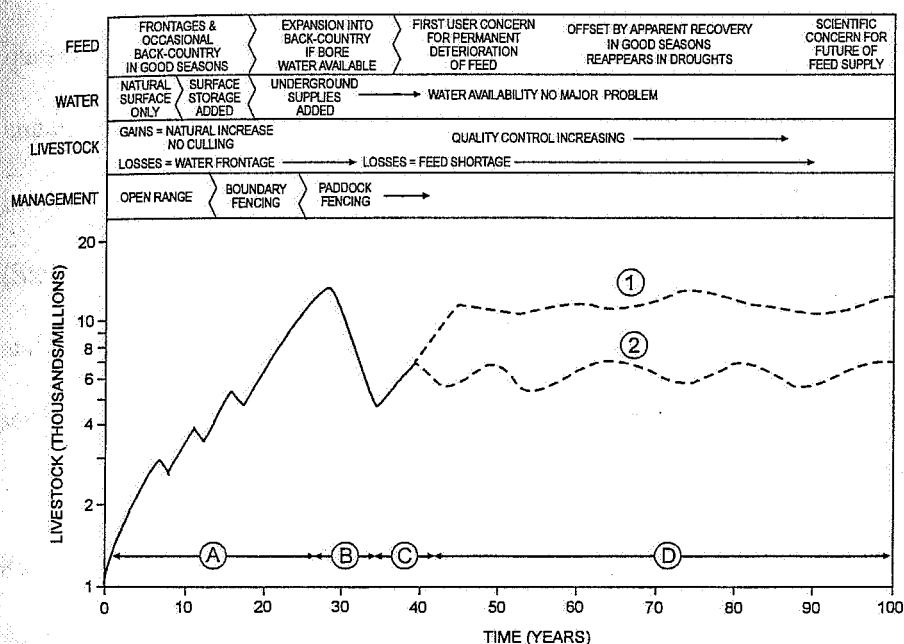
Pastoralism was well entrenched by the 1920s and 1930s, and consolidation and expansion of this position was expected. Yet in these decades there were already critiques of this 'booster' vision of Australia's inland and north. The next section outlines these (and later) critiques.

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<sup>32</sup> Day was the Surveyor-General of South Australia.

### 4.3.2 The Inland as Contested Space, 1920s-1990s

There is a long, largely marginal, but persistent history of pastoralism being questioned in Australia. This can be represented in general terms in a model of the sequence of pastoral occupation, development, pasture depletion and popular and scientific concern (Figure 4.6).



- Notes:
- A Rapid increase of numbers with uncontrolled breeding and invasion of new grazing areas
  - B Catastrophic collapse of numbers associated with major 2-3 year drought
  - C Post-drought build-up of numbers in good seasons
  - D Subsequent oscillation of livestock numbers either 1 - reaching prior peak occasionally or 2 remaining approximately half the peak numbers. Associated characteristics of feed, water, livestock and management are suggested for the sequence

**Figure 4.6: A model of trends over a 100 year sequence (from time of pastoral settlement) of pastoral grazing in any given region of the Australian arid zone, illustrating the general shift from optimism and growth to crises and land management problems.**

Source: Heathcote (1983, p.9)



Four general threads of reflection and debates over land use in the inland can be discerned in the twentieth century.

- the views of geographer Griffith Taylor in the 1920s;
- the work of biologist Francis Ratcliffe in the 1930s,
- the development and role of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) arid zone scientists from the late 1960s;
- the arid zone campaigns of the modern conservation movement.

The work of both Griffith Taylor (for example Taylor 1915) and Francis Ratcliffe questioned the potential and nature of pastoral settlement in inland Australia. Taylor engaged in vigorous and public debate with the 'boosters' (Powell 1980; Powell 1984), including those who saw potential for agriculture and orchards in Central Australia (Steffanson 1924). Taylor believed that environmental constraints imposed by climate and soil would limit agricultural settlement, and, in the 1920s, argued that existing settlement already approximated what was possible (Powell 1980; Powell 1984).

Ratcliffe came to Australia in 1935, to assess soil erosion in semi-arid and arid areas of South Australia<sup>33</sup>. This was the era of the great 'Dust Bowl' in the United States, and Australia also had significant soil erosion problems (Mercer 1991; Bradsen 1988). Ratcliffe travelled extensively and his influential<sup>34</sup> conclusions were published by the

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<sup>33</sup> Ratcliffe first came to Australia from Britain in 1929 to study the impact of flying foxes on agriculture (Ratcliffe 1947).

<sup>34</sup> Ratcliffe's work found a receptive audience. His reports influenced soil conservation regimes in Australia (Robin 1997), and his book was very popular and was used as a textbook in schools in the 1950s (Robin 1998; Coman 1998). Perhaps Australia was ready to look at the inland in such terms by this period. This was partly because soil erosion had been acknowledged as a serious problem in the 1930s and 1940s. The 1930s also saw a 'spectacular' change in attitudes to the desert expressed in art and literature (Haynes 1998 p.148). The idea of the dead centre began to be replaced by works more engaged with the colours, aesthetics, moods, people and complexities of the inland. Writers such as Ion Idriess and Ernestine Hill produced accounts that, while still celebratory of the settlers, also presented the inland as a 'living' heart, capricious and overwhelming maybe, but vital and present, rather than as a threatening blank in national consciousness, either denied or played down. It was a period in which the 'dead centre' imagery began to be replaced by the idea of the 'red centre' (Haynes 1998).

Council for Scientific and Industrial Research<sup>35</sup> in 1936 and 1937 (Ratcliffe 1936; Ratcliffe 1937) and in a popular book, *Flying Fox and Drifting Sand* (Ratcliffe 1947), published in Britain in 1938 and in Australia in 1947 (Coman 1998)<sup>36</sup>.

Like Taylor, Ratcliffe came to the conclusion that the inland was overvalued 'in the national mind' (Ratcliffe 1936 p.2), and that not only was intensification of land use unlikely, but that *existing* pastoral settlement required reevaluation. Ratcliffe consistently refuted the popular idea that science would be able to come up with miracle solutions to facilitate more intensive rural land use in the inland (Ratcliffe 1947). Echoing Taylor, Ratcliffe thought the best role for science was:

a serious attempt...to determine what portions of the arid belt can be expected to support pastoral settlement without suffering progressive deterioration, and then to devise a policy of land tenure and management that will put settlement in those areas on a sound basis (Ratcliffe 1937 p.27).

Following this work, Ratcliffe stayed in Australia and was one of the founders of the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) in 1965 (see Coman 1998), an organisation that has campaigned for reform of pastoral land use for many years.

The development of arid zone ecology since Ratcliffe's time has continued to influence debates over arid zone land use. Concerned about the potential for declining land productivity in the inland, Perry (1966)<sup>37</sup>, in his 1966 presidential address to the Ecological Society of Australia, noted that:

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<sup>35</sup> The predecessor to CSIRO.

<sup>36</sup> This book was reprinted in 1948, 1951, 1953, 1963 and 1970 (Coman 1998).

<sup>37</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Alec Costin for bringing this reference to my attention.

knowledge of arid and semi-arid Australia is broad and general, and research depth is needed to enable us to understand processes and formulate principles. The literature is considerable but is scattered and fragmented, and mainly descriptive, with little quantitative and experimental work. It mostly results from individuals working on particular problems, in particular areas, and in particular seasons. There are no examples of co-ordinated research by multi-disciplinary teams of scientists with the overall objective of understanding the ecosystem, and the processes operating within it (p.1).

Within two years of Perry's address, CSIRO had set up a Rangelands Research Unit (CSIRO Division of Wildlife and Ecology 1999). This unit and its successors, such as today's Division of Wildlife and Ecology, have pursued Perry's agenda. The research conducted by these various units of CSIRO has been wide ranging in its scope and disciplinary input.

Based upon their theoretical and applied ecological research (for example see Harrington, Wilson et al. 1984; Stafford-Smith and Morton 1990; Ludwig, Tongway et al. 1997), CSIRO scientists have been significant contributors to debates over the future of pastoralism in inland Australia. For example in 1990, a group of arid zone ecologists published *A Policy for the Future of Australia's Rangelands* (Foran, Friedel et al. 1990). This document caused controversy at the time (interview B. Foran 21/3/97) because it argued for sweeping reforms to land use in Australian rangelands, including management for nature conservation on pastoral lands.

Similarly, in their research publications CSIRO scientists have consistently tackled issues related to what they see as deficiencies in pastoral land management and land tenure and use systems. For example, in contrast to the existing system of unitary land use tenures, Morton et al (1995) proposed land tenure regimes based upon mosaics of

land use 'units'. These units would be derived from biophysical attributes and the varying ability of the land to support given land uses.

At times, the work of CSIRO scientists has caused controversy with pastoralists, including in Central Australia. For example, a study by Landsberg et al (1997) which investigated the effects of watering points on biodiversity. This study concluded that stock grazing continued to pose threats to the conservation of flora and fauna. The authors called for, among other things, consideration of closing strategically chosen watering points on pastoral lands. This caused some consternation amongst pastoralists in the Alice Springs district and pressure on local CSIRO staff. In general, many pastoralists and the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA) in Central Australia, while occasionally acknowledging the expertise and contribution of some CSIRO staff, regard the organisation as hostile to their interests.

Calls and campaigns for conservation reserve systems in the arid zone have occurred at least since the 1940s (Heathcote 1987a) and 1960s (Costin and Moseley 1969; Bonython 1984). However, it took until the 1970s for popular environmental concern for arid lands to develop (Heathcote 1987a). This was the era in which the contemporary conservation movement developed. This growth reflected, and was part of, wider changes in Australian society from the 1970s which saw the emergence of a modern environmental consciousness and movement (Frawley 1992; Mercer 1991). This consciousness is characterised by a focus on non-material benefits such as quality of life, intrinsic valuation of the environment, and living within ecological parameters. Its values are generally contrasted with the traditional values of industrial societies

associated with materialism, economic growth, instrumental valuation of resources and the domination of nature (Frawley 1992).

This modern environmental consciousness was translated into a political movement that saw the membership of conservation organisations grow to 250 000 by 1980 (Frawley 1992). Organisations such as The Wilderness Society, the ACF and Greenpeace became adept at mobilising public support for campaigns on environmental issues and actively participated in the political and electoral process. A number of key campaigns such as the Tasmanian Lake Pedder and Gordon-below-Franklin dam campaigns, the protection of areas of rainforest in NSW and Queensland, and the bitter disputes over forests elsewhere marked the growth and influence of the environmental movement in Australia. In concert with the growth of this movement, specific arid zone conservation campaigns emerged.

By 1982, ongoing concern about pastoral land management, the continued lack of an arid zone reserve system, and the increasing popularity of inland Australia with tourists (Mercer 1991) prompted the ACF to hold a 'National Arid Lands Conference' (Messer and Mosley 1983). One of the outcomes of the conference was a strategy for the conservation of arid lands which became ACF policy in 1983 (Messer and Mosley 1983). This strategy included:

- a review, with public participation of regions to determine their land use capability, possibly leading to withdrawal of grazing from some areas
- improved monitoring of range condition and enforcement of lease conditions relating to land management
- an ecologically representative system of reserves and conservation measures on pastoral land (Messer and Mosley 1983, p.200-203).

Conservation organisations pursued these lines of campaign over the 1980s, campaigning for the reform of arid zone land use and of pastoral land management (for example see Donovan 1995).

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw a number of events that brought these simmering arid lands issues onto the national stage, and provoked strong reactions from pastoralists across Australia (Reid 1994). Prominent among these was the National Strategy for Rangeland Management (NSRM)<sup>38</sup>. As part of his environment statement prior to the 1993 election, the then Prime Minister Paul Keating announced 'Rangelands Rescue':

Australia's arid and semi-arid rangelands are a neglected national asset occupying over half of the continent. The continuing degradation of our rangelands is an urgent national problem requiring a national response.

The Commonwealth will work co-operatively with State and Territory Governments, traditional owners, industry, the farming community and conservation groups to develop a National Strategy for Rangeland Management. The strategy will include an action plan to reform land management in the arid and semi-arid regions. The Labor Government will initially allocate \$1 million over two years to this project, to be known as Rangelands Rescue (Paul Keating 9/3/93 in NRMWG 1996, p.47).

The NSRM represents the closest Australia has come to reevaluating arid and semi-arid lands since they were initially settled by Europeans. It is also the closest Australia has come to carrying out the long called-for regional assessments of land use capability in the inland.

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<sup>38</sup> Other sources of controversy in the inland that became national issues included the management problems of the Willandra Lakes World Heritage area in western NSW. The World Heritage area includes pastoral land and the pastoralists perceived that their interests were being marginalised. Another issue was the World Heritage proposal for areas in South Australia in the Lake Eyre Basin by the Conservation Council of South Australia and the Australian Conservation Foundation. This nomination included areas in the northeast of South Australia, such as mound springs and floodplains of Coopers Creek (Reid 1994).

The 1994 discussion paper produced by the National Rangeland Management Working Group (NRMWG)<sup>39</sup> (NRMWG 1994) reflected the changed perception of arid and semi-arid lands in Australia, and the concern that current land uses do not allow changed valuations to be adequately realised. In the discussion paper, pastoralism is only one of a number of land uses and issues considered. The overarching theme of the paper is a concern with ecological sustainability and the development of best systems of land use and management regimes to achieve this goal. The paper canvasses alternative land uses, and the sensitive issue of pastoral viability and retreat is addressed. The paper raises the possibility of land being removed from the pastoral estate and alternative uses, such as Aboriginal habitation, developing on these areas. Such topics and presentation of the issues reinforced the belief among pastoralists that the conservationist agenda was to drive them 'out of the country'.

The NSRM became a significant public issue in the rangelands. Some indication of this is given by pastoral attendance at the Alice Springs public NSRM workshop in 1994. The workshop attracted the relatively high number of thirty-seven pastoralists. In 1996 and 1997 this turnout was still seen as unusual and significant by pastoralists, and was generally believed by them to have given the conservationists a 'shock'. The NSRM was quietly shelved when the Liberal/National coalition government came to power in 1996.

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The pastoral industry was one of the main targets of the conservationists, who saw cattle grazing as a major threat to the ecological values of the nominated areas (Puckridge 1992 p.21).

<sup>39</sup> The NRMWG was the group appointed by the government to prepare the NSRM. It comprised state and federal government representatives, and representatives from the Arid Lands Coalition, the National Farmers' Federation, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

Within the conservation movement itself, a significant development was the formation of the Arid Lands Coalition (ALC) in 1993. The ALC was formed during an Alice Springs meeting of representatives of various conservation organisations<sup>40</sup>. The ALC formed to provide a coherent national voice for the conservation movement on arid lands issues and had an official role in the NSRM. Their presence on the NRMWG caused concern amongst pastoralists. Ken Warriner, in his 1993 presidential address to the NTCA said that the presence of this 'gaggle of Greenies' meant that they had to take the NSRM seriously. The Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) in Alice Springs was a central player in the ALC.

It can be seen that pastoralism has not enjoyed the unquestioned status bestowed upon it by outback mythology. Since late last century, pastoralism has been investigated and reforms attempted. More than this, the very basis for arid zone settlement has been consistently questioned. Despite changed social and economic conditions and values, and the sound basis of much of these critiques in the putatively authoritative discourse of science, arid zone pastoralism has survived largely unmodified in its spatial extent and cultural dominance. Pastoralism still dominates in the areas it had largely occupied by the beginning of the twentieth century. This extraordinary resilience and continued dominance speaks of a cultural and political strength to the industry. It is deeply entrenched in Australian culture and in views of what constitutes 'proper' land use. If the NSRM, with unprecedented potential to effect change, can be so readily

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<sup>40</sup> ALC membership includes the Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC, Alice Springs), the Conservation Councils of Queensland, SA and WA, the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Northern Territory Environment Centre (ECNT, Darwin), the Nature Conservation Council of NSW, the Cairns and Far North Environment Centre, Friends of the Earth. The ACF, the Wilderness Society and the National Threatened Species Network supported it (ALC 1995).



marginalised it seems unlikely we have seen the last cycle of questioning the pastoralists in the 'red centre'.

#### **4.4 *Pastoralism and Conservation in the Southern NT***

Whereas the previous section largely examined environmental concerns about the inland from a national perspective, this section examines how national concerns have played out in Central Australia, and, conversely how the inland and Central Australia feature in a reconfigured ecological nationalism. This regional/local focus leads into Chapters Five and Six, in which I chart the locally and historically specific bases to pastoralists responses to challenges to their place on the land. Also, in this section I will sketch the emergence of official concern about land degradation. Following this, I will focus on the 1958-65 drought and associated events that resonate in Central Australia today. Finally, I will examine the activities of conservationists in Central Australia.

##### **4.4.1 Early Concern about Land Degradation in Central Australia**

Concern about land degradation in the Alice Springs district is not only a feature of the 'environmental era' of the last three decades. It is almost as old as Central Australian pastoralism itself and efforts to address it are at least forty years old. Hartwig (1965) cites official concern about stock-induced soil erosion in Central Australia in the late nineteenth century. The Payne-Fletcher report in 1937 reported that the country around watering points was 'grossly overstocked and serious and lasting damage [was] being done to the pastures' (Payne and Fletcher 1937 p.40). In the late 1940s a soil conservation ordinance was drawn up but never implemented (AANT F1 59/1062, Director of Agriculture to R.G. Downs 6/9/59).

In order to address land degradation, the NT administration had begun trials of potential pasture species by 1952-53<sup>41</sup>. By the early 1960s there were sixteen such trials on stations and in Alice Springs. These trials were conducted in conjunction with CSIRO and pastoralists, who had been lobbying the administration for research on pasture 'improvement'. Government and pastoralists hoped to develop techniques not only to rehabilitate land, but also to increase the carrying capacity of the country through pasture 'improvement'<sup>42</sup>.

The 1962 appointment of a full-time soil conservation officer, saw further development of soil rehabilitation trials associated with the trials of pasture species. This work included furrowing and seeding claypans and scalded areas, trials of contour banks to slow water movement and facilitate rehabilitation, and various other water spreading and revegetation projects with native and introduced species. Some of this early soil conservation work is the forerunner to government conservation and extension programs of today.

The period leading up to the 1960s was also an era of hope for pasture 'improvement' as part of industry 'modernisation'. This hope illustrates that by the 1950s pastoralists saw the Central Australian landscape as very much a settled and largely controlled

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<sup>41</sup> In 1954, Federal cabinet agreed to the establishment of a soil conservation service in the NT. This did not eventuate but plans were made in 1955 to appoint a soil conservation officer to the NT administration.

<sup>42</sup> Pastoralists were themselves attempting to establish buffel grass more widely, apparently with limited success (NTRS 1462/RS Agricultural Officer to Dir. of Lands 1/1/54). Pastoralists hoped that the replacement of spinifex by buffel grass or other more palatable species would increase the carrying capacity of spinifex country by up to six-fold. For example, in 1959, Milton Willock, one of the lessees of the land on which the buffel and 'desert block' trials were occurring, told ABC radio (AANT F1 59/107 The Land and its People: Southbound cattle - a cattle story from Central Australia) they hoped to 'improve the carrying capacity, and use it for breeding and also for [drought] relief country'. They hoped that cattle would 'trample down the spinifex and...eat what they can of it', preparing the way for more palatable pasture species.

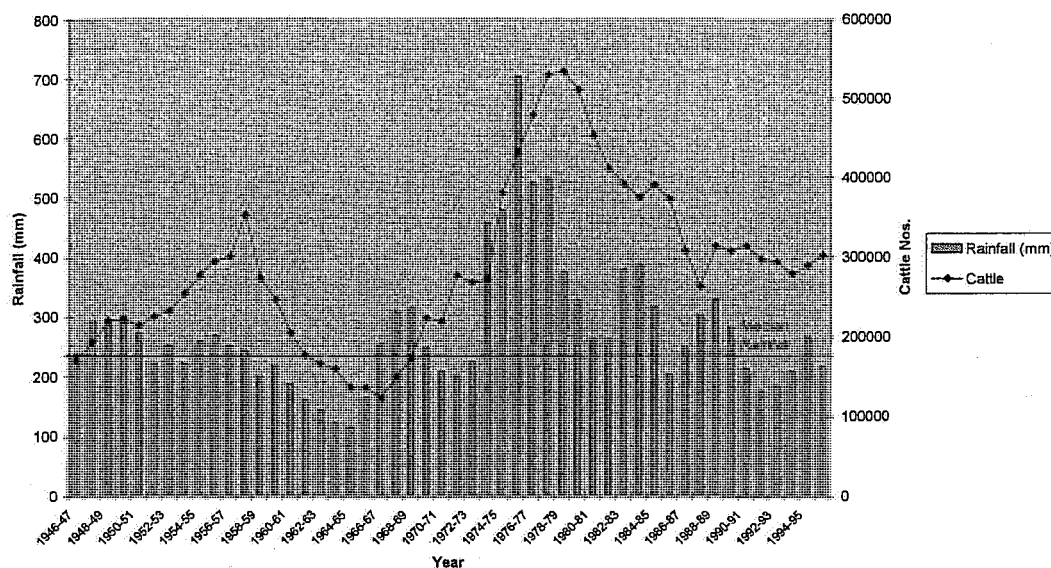
landscape, one in which they felt sufficiently established and comfortable to attempt such transformation at its productive margins. By the mid-1960s, however, an extended and severe dry period had forced a reevaluation of many of these hopes and expectations. Hopes for land clearance and pasture improvement were dashed. This dry period, generally seen as lasting from 1958-65 (Figure 4.7), intensified concern about land degradation and has become a defining point in Central Australian pastoral history and culture. This period will be discussed below in association with the development of Central Australian botany and grazing ecology up to the late 1960s. This botanical work and associated criticism of pastoral land management is significant in contemporary debates over land use and management, because pastoralists see it as a key point when their faith in the productivity of the land and its suitability for pastoralism was vindicated.

#### **4.4.2 Grazing Ecology, the 1958-65 Drought and Criticism of Pastoralists**

Although the NT administration wished to improve land management, there was a dearth of information and knowledge as to the nature of the problem they faced. For example, in the 1950s Central Australian botany was still in a relatively infant state, the ecology of cattle grazing had yet to be examined, and there had been no detailed studies of the carrying capacity of pastoral land.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Even in 1996, Morton and Foran (1996) wrote that, although it had come a long way, ecological understanding of Central Australia was still in its infancy.



**Figure 4.7: Cattle numbers and rainfall (three year running average; Alice Springs) 1946/47-1994/95, Alice Springs Pastoral District. Median rainfall = 242 mm.**

Source: NT Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries Statistics 1979/80-1994/95, Animal Industry Branch Annual Reports 1946/47- 1964/65, NT Statistical Summaries 1962-1972 and Clewett *et al* (1999).

In 1954 George Chippendale, a systematic botanist was appointed to the Animal Industry Branch (AIB). He was a key early figure in the development of Central Australian ecology, particularly in relation to cattle grazing. Chippendale established a range of increasingly systematic studies of cattle dietary preferences, and of the impact of grazing in pasture species<sup>44</sup>.

In 1958 a seven-year dry period set in (Figure 4.7). This dry period had a great impact upon the district. Stock numbers crashed from 353 000 in 1957-58 to 136 000 in 1964-65. The period also highlighted problems with pastoral land management, especially

through the use of information that had been collected by Chippendale in the years leading up to and into the drought. The 1960-61 AIB Annual Report noted that:

botanical observations indicate the drought experienced in Central Australia caused much overgrazing of pasture lands and many valuable pasture species were damaged whilst in a vulnerable condition. In particular, the mitchell grass plains adjacent to the MacDonnell Ranges are showing unmistakable signs of grazing damage which is apparent on examination of botanical content. Other areas, too, which appear green after the rains show an increase in annual and unpalatable species at the expense of more valuable ones (p.9).

The cause of this was possibly long-term poor management and high stock numbers, the effects of which were accentuated by a three year lag before cattle numbers began to decline in 1958 in response to low rainfall from 1955 (Chippendale 1965b).

Chippendale urged a range of extension and research measures including further detailed quantitative research on the impact of grazing on vegetation, determination of the carrying capacity of different types of country, research into the most appropriate station development strategies, and the dissemination of conservation ideas amongst pastoralists (Chippendale 1965b).

By the mid-1960s Chippendale was publicly criticising pastoral land management. He pursued this through publications (Chippendale 1965b; Chippendale 1965a; Chippendale 1963) and in his evidence to the NT Land Board's inquiry<sup>45</sup> into the

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<sup>44</sup> Chippendale's notebooks and data remain in Alice Springs at the Arid Zone Research Institute (DPIF). They have been kept, and are still used, by Chippendale's former assistant, Des Nelson. They would constitute valuable source material for an environmental history of the area.

<sup>45</sup> Pastoral Land Boards are boards appointed to oversee the administration of pastoral land. Their compositions have varied over time and by jurisdiction. The NT Land Board in 1964 comprised two government employees and a pastoralist representative. This 1964 inquiry was held due to the severe impact of the drought on the pastoral industry and official concerns about land degradation.

drought in 1964<sup>46</sup>. Chippendale attacked the pastoralist belief that the 'country always comes back' after rain (Chippendale 1963). He also criticised heavy stocking practices which have led to pasture deterioration and the practice of allowing grazing on the first flush of growth after rain, preventing seeding (Chippendale 1963; Chippendale 1965b).

Today pastoralists remember the 1960s as a period in which they attracted significant criticism. Chippendale's views were only one element in a range of comments and debate directed at Central Australian pastoralism at this time. Conditions in Central Australia were attracting attention around the country. For example, criticism came from conservationists and others from interstate. They urged destocking for up to twenty years to allow recovery of degraded land and resumption of pastoral land for conservation purposes<sup>47</sup>. Although this criticism was from a wide variety of sources including scientists, conservationists, and the southern media, Chippendale has become emblematic of this criticism. It is Chippendale who is remembered as saying the country was so damaged that it should not be used for pastoralism, indeed that it could not be so used. Chippendale was a scientist with credentials and twelve years experience in Central Australia, an expert on the ecology of grazing if ever there was one at the time. Yet, for pastoralists who remember this period, the industry has survived despite the criticism. Chippendale, as the 'expert' who stands for this wave of criticism is thus seen as having been incorrect. Pastoralists see Chippendale as having left the country 'in

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<sup>46</sup> A full transcript of evidence given by Chippendale, pastoralists and others is held in the DPIF library at the Arid Zone Research Institute in Alice Springs – item RO27.

<sup>47</sup> For example, Dewar Goode of the Australian Primary Producers Union (APPU) urged destocking for ten to twenty years, fearing widespread desertification due to the loss of perennial plants (*NT News* 21/10/64). In the same report Warren Bonython, a longtime conservationist from Adelaide, also called for the removal of stock for some years. See also AANT F1 1964/3193, APPU Report by D.W. Goode on Alice Springs Area of Central Australia; reported in *NT News* 26/10/64. The APPU was a predecessor to the National Farmers' Federation.

shame'<sup>48</sup>, once his alleged predictions were proven wrong by the drought-breaking rains in January and February in 1966, following which the country 'came back' or 'greened up'<sup>49</sup>. Chippendale, as the symbolic expert, is of lasting significance. On him is hung more general attitudes regarding the fallibility and ephemerality of 'experts' who comment on the impacts of grazing. As time passes and pastoral managers change, Chippendale the individual will become increasingly anonymous as he is absorbed into widely held memories, stories and beliefs about 'experts' and outsiders.

This section has discussed one of the major periods of scientific and conservation criticism of pastoralists in Central Australia. This period is significant in Central Australia and pastoralists refer to it today as part of their response to contemporary criticism. This contemporary response will be examined in following chapters and forms the major focus of primary data for this thesis. The next section moves ahead in time to the NT conservation movement's criticism of the pastoralists in the 1980s and 1990s.

#### **4.4.3 Environmentalism and Pastoralism in the 1980s and 1990s**

The late 1960s and 1970s saw a consolidation of many of the land management measures begun earlier. However, the high rainfall of this period, especially in the mid-

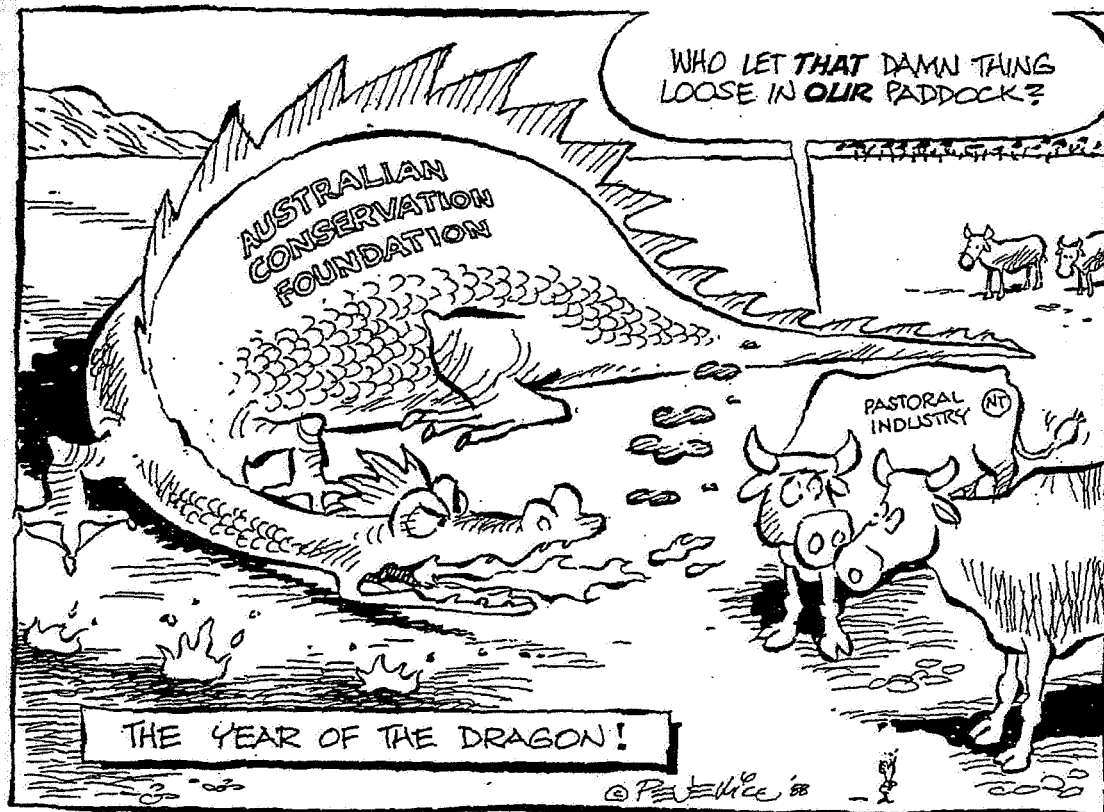
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<sup>48</sup> Chippendale says he left in 1966 for a variety of family reasons such as education which needed addressing by this time (G. Chippendale, interview 13/5/97).

<sup>49</sup> The 1966/67 Annual Report on the Northern Territory of Australia (Department of the Interior 1968) is somewhat qualified concerning this recovery. The report noted good recovery on sandy soils and floodouts but poor recovery on clay soils. Annual species 'dominated the new growth', while perennials were 'well represented in places' (p.22). The domination by annuals is a possible indicator of pasture deterioration.

1970s (Figure 4.7) saw conservation issues recede somewhat as a public and political issue. This situation changed in the 1980s as the conservation movement gained strength and again turned its attention to arid lands.

By the mid-1980s, what are now known as the Arid Lands Environment Centre (ALEC) in Alice Springs, and the Environment Centre of the NT (ECNT) in Darwin, were campaigning on pastoral land issues. Their activities did not escape the attention of NT pastoralists and the NTCA (see Figure 4.8).



**Figure 4.8: 'The Year of the Dragon'**

Source: NTCA Cattleman's Yearbook 1987/88



In the 1980s and 1990s there have been controversies over resumption of pastoral land for national park declaration. The case of national park declarations near Alice Springs is an example of where pastoralists were forced to confront significant spatial expressions of new values and economics in Central Australia. Such declarations and the surrounding debates illustrate that pastoralists were realising they faced social changes that would ultimately demand responses from them. This is not entirely a consequence of the rise of the conservation movement but is also associated with broader social and economic change that has brought about the reassessment of rangelands and the growth of the service economy, especially the tourism industry. For example, the NT government saw the then proposed West MacDonnell Ranges national park as one of six 'zones of opportunity' for tourism in the NT (*Centralian Advocate* 15/10/91)<sup>50</sup>. Nonetheless, the debate over park declaration shows that the pastoralists and park supporters clearly saw park declaration in light of conservation and the relative merits and problems of tourism and pastoralism.

For park supporters, pastoralism represented the past, it was a static and relatively low value industry that had 'reached its full potential' (for example see, K. Leary, Letters to the Editor, *Centralian Advocate*, 6/8/91) and had caused environmental damage along the way. Tourism based on natural and scenic attractions, on the other hand was where future prosperity lay for the region. Alice Springs was 'no longer a frontier town...it [was now] a national and international tourist attraction' (K. Leary, Letters to the Editor, *Centralian Advocate*, 3/9/91). Moreover, according to the Conservation Council of

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<sup>50</sup> The selective nature of the country included in the park further suggests that ecological conservation was not the prime motivation behind the park declaration. The park is essentially restricted to the MacDonnell Ranges and does not include more productive pastoral country flanking them.

Central Australia, the ranges were 'one of the most important and unique biological areas' in Central Australia (*Centralian Advocate*, 9/5/91). Pastoralists' responses show that for them the declaration of national parks was strongly associated with the conservation movement's critique of pastoralism. For example Pam Waudby of Central Mt Wedge station and the NTCA wrote that land is 'better left in the care of pastoralists' and that, in contrast to the 'fickle' tourism industry, the pastoral industry provides an 'important and consistent cash flow into the community' (*Centralian Advocate*, Letter to the Editor, 6/6/91).

The issues raised by conservationists in the NT generally parallel those outlined at a national level. There have been consistent calls from NT conservationists over this period for greater emphasis on biodiversity conservation on both pastoral land and within an enhanced reserve system. They have called for improved monitoring of soils and vegetation on pastoral leases and greater enforcement of lease conditions and requirements relating to land management and stocking practices.

The conservationist critique of pastoralism is also founded on a claim for public interest in pastoral lands. Conservationists argue that not only are pastoral lands<sup>51</sup> owned by the state, but that the costs of land degradation are borne by society as a whole, not only the pastoralists, providing a legitimate basis for 'community' (i.e. non-pastoralist) involvement in pastoral land administration. For example, ALEC, in its response to the draft NSRM, incorporated this sort of thinking into its proposals for improved land use and management in the rangelands (ALEC 1996). Arguing for regional rangelands

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<sup>51</sup> Pastoral land in the NT held under leasehold title.

planning processes and accommodation of 'community' interests, ALEC called for involving 'people with particular skills and the ability to represent the broader national interest in regional planning processes' (ALEC 1996, p.6).

From at least the mid-1980s, conservationists in the NT have called for an assessment of the viability of pastoralism across the NT with a view to establishing those areas where pastoralism should be phased out and those where it could be retained. This call is underpinned by a view that pastoralism has a limited life expectancy in the NT due to the long-term degradation of soil and pasture resources. Conservationists argue that land assessments are needed before pastoralism so damages the land that both pastoralism and other land uses and values are precluded. For example, in the ECNT submission to a 1986 inquiry into the pastoral industry, Ledger argues that the pastoral industry is a 'nutrient mining industry' in an environment where soil formation is negligible, undermining both its own long term future and that of alternative land uses (Ledgar 1986, p.19).

Calls to reassess land use and reevaluate rangelands have continued in the 1990s. In 1995 the ALC outlined its vision for the future of Australian rangelands:

That the unique ecological and associated sustainable cultural values of Australia's rangelands are recognised, cherished, protected and enhanced in perpetuity (ALC 1995, p.7).

The ALC vision for rangeland management begins with the identification, protection and enhancement of these values and goes on to say that management must occur within the limits of ecological resources (ALC 1995). Two of the essential elements of the vision are 'conservation of biodiversity and protection of ecological integrity' and

'maintenance and/or enhancement of natural resources including biological diversity, fresh water, productive soils etc' (ALC 1995, p.7). In general, the ALC does not prescribe specific land uses. It argues the need to take a step back and undertake a broad reassessment of rangelands. The organisation allows that pastoralism may well be a suitable land use, but does not assume that this is so.

In the 1980s, conservationists identified the national interest with conservation of soil, and other environmental and ecological resources. In the 1990s this is still the case although the manner and scope of presentation of such extra-local and extra-regional perspectives has both changed and broadened. First, conservationists have positioned Australian rangelands within global conservation perspectives and agendas. For example, in its NSRM position paper ALC (1995) took a global perspective. As an 'overarching precondition' to its position the ALC argued that:

**Social, economic and ecological systems are inextricably interwoven. To maintain biological diversity and ecological systems in perpetuity, people must choose economic and social activities which are designed to sustain the biological processes which support life. Unfortunately to date the majority of human activities around the globe continue to be ecologically unsustainable. The ALC believes that it is still possible to turn this situation around (emphases in original) (ALC 1995, p.4-5).**

ALEC has used the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (NCCD)<sup>52</sup> as a 'lever' to bring global issues into its campaigns. ALEC places what it sees as the desertification threat in Australia in a global perspective arguing that, globally, arid lands are the source of many grains and fodder crops, and that desertification poses a threat to international biodiversity and food supplies (*Centralian Advocate*, 18/6/96).

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<sup>52</sup> Australia signed the convention in 1994 but in 1999 has yet to ratify it (<http://www.unccd.ch/>) (access date 16/11/99).

In the ALC's vision, Australia's rangelands, through reformed land use and management, have a role to play in addressing these global issues and in turning the 'situation' around. In conservationist discourse, globalism is brought to bear upon Central Australia with intent to refashion the landscape and modes of occupancy.

As well as appeals to a global sensibility, conservationists have enlisted outback mythology to their cause, placing their own particular interpretations on it. In Australian culture, the outback has been, and is, the site where national identity and belonging have been forged (McGrath 1991). The mythology of the outback has acted to erase difference and promote unity among Australians, and has proven highly flexible in adapting to changing social circumstances and demands (Hirst 1978; McGrath 1991). Conservationists have participated in such flexible practices in their campaigns on rangelands. In a play on words from earlier perceptions of the inland, Ledger and Stafford-Smith (1996) ask Australians to choose between a 'dead centre' and a 'living heart'.

In the early decades of the century in particular, the idea of the 'dead heart' or 'dead centre' referred to the barrenness and inhospitable nature of the inland, and marked a burden and problem for the nation (Haynes 1998; Heathcote 1987a). It referred, however, to a condition of 'unimproved nature'. Earlier in the twentieth century, it was envisioned that this 'dead heart' was to be transformed to a 'living heart' which would pulsate with settlement and agriculture (for example see Brady 1918). In contrast, the 'dead centre' of Ledger and Stafford-Smith (1996) is the landscape of the status quo. As with Pick's 'dying heart' (1942), theirs is a death caused by pastoralism and other

neglect and abuse. In contrast, their 'living heart' will be one of a 'diverse range of ecosystems' (Ledgar and Stafford-Smith 1996, p.17).

Conservationists have also used heartland imagery elsewhere to assist in identifying the lands they refer to and to elicit support from their target audience. Thus the NSRM is about restoring the 'heartland of our nation' (ALEC in *Centralian Advocate*, 10/9/96).

In a 1995 ALC pamphlet the ALC outlines some features of the arid lands:

These lands comprise some 70% of Australia and cover the majority of Australia's rangelands. These lands are the habitat of a unique variety of plants and animal species found nowhere else in the world. This is the outback of Australia, the basis of legends and dreams.

The ALC, is however, presenting a reworked outback 'dream'. For the ALC, the same landscapes and mythology that have sustained Australian nationhood with their stories of origins and pioneering heritage, and which also provide darker chapters of Aboriginal dispossession and damaging land exploitation, are now to provide a site of national ecological redemption. Moreover, this redemption is to draw on and sustain a reformulated outback mythology. This reformulated mythology continues to tap into aspects of conventional outback symbolism sufficient to evoke familiar outlines, but seeks to build unity around new themes. In the ALC vision, rangelands are a prime site for the fostering and growth of new models of social, cultural and economic development and formations. The ALC sees the rangelands as landscapes that present a wide range of opportunities for the expression of post-industrial economic activity, lifestyles and values. Outback Australia is now easily accessible and is 'safe, predator free and spacious' (ALC 1995, p.31). As such, according to ALEC is it a prime destination for tourism and ecotourism. The outback is also seen as the area in which

indigenous ties to land are likely to find their fullest expression and is now an 'ever broadening frontier for scientific and ecological research' (ALC 1995, p.37). Through such research, conservationists believe that 'Australia's unique natural resources will come into their own' (ALC 1995, p.37).

Aboriginal land use and ownership are closely associated with conservationist goals for an ecologically-based future for the inland. Although the recent history of relationships between the conservation movement and Aboriginal people and organisations has been difficult at times (for example see Langton 1996; Sackett 1991), in debates over rangelands, conservationists have been broadly supportive of Aboriginal interests in land. This is not to say that criticisms levelled at conservationists in the past for their naïve and partial use of Aboriginality have been entirely resolved by conservationists. It is to say that support for Aboriginal land ownership and management has been part of conservationist campaigns for the reform of land use and tenure in the rangelands. For example, in order to achieve 'ecologically sustainable development of Australia's rangelands' the ALC lists four key goals, one of which is:

Appropriate resourcing and support to be provided to facilitate the realisation of the aspirations of traditional owners, especially for ecologically sustainable land management (ALC 1995, p.5).

An enhanced Aboriginal presence and greater acknowledgement of Aboriginal knowledge of land and rights to land, form part of the conservationist vision for the future of rangelands. This gets to the heart of the idea of the rangelands as a site for a reformed Australian society, one in which not only is the land is to assessed ecologically, but one in which Aboriginal people are included more fully and their marginalisation, often through pastoral settlement, addressed. In this way the ecological

critique of pastoralism, melds with alternative models of the nation built upon 'reconciliation' between Aboriginal people and non-indigenous Australians. Such 'reconciliation' models have been controversial, as debates around them have emphasised the historical and ongoing nature of Aboriginal dispossession through pastoral settlement.

The nature of the rangelands economy envisioned by the ALC gives a clear indication of the future conservationists see, and of the contrast with the past and current emphasis on pastoral land use. The ALC's vision of an ecologically sustainable rangelands economy sees pastoralism as the principle land use only in areas where it can be shown to be ecologically sustainable (ALC 1995). Otherwise the ALC sees the development of economies based in land reclamation and restoration, conservation, the mapping, monitoring and evaluation of land condition, training and extension work in a range of community and business areas, research and development of sustainable energy systems, revegetation, waste technologies, and eco and cultural tourism. This is an economy fundamentally different to the current economy dominated by pastoral land use. The ALC vision is characterised by reevaluation of rangelands environments in light of contemporary social and economic conditions, and developing economic activities to suit, rather than starting with the activity and finding the space in which to practise it, as occurred with pastoralism. In the ALC vision, pastoralism is at best a diminished presence, and at worst simply a leftover from history, to be swept aside by new ecologically-based models of national development. For conservationists the rangelands, which have historically given us much of the basis for national identity, offer new ways of being Australian and of being in Australia, offer new versions of outback mythology. Older versions of outback mythology are cast aside as new ones are



formulated. Nevertheless, outback mythology proves its resilience through flexibility. In conservationist perspectives the outback remains the nation's heart, perhaps cautioning us to look also for continuities in this modified outback mythology as much as for what is different.

In the conservationist critique of pastoralism, and rangelands use and management in general, the rangelands are a canvas for a new type of society and economy. The conservationist rhetoric is one of community, involvement and locality. In conservationist visions, however, the rangelands are but one space to be remoulded in light of issues and concerns they frame nationally and globally. This abstraction on the part of conservationists is critical to understanding the responses of the pastoralists we shall meet in the next three chapters. Somewhat similarly to debates about the countryside in Britain (Adams 1996; see also Adams 1997), conservationists' invocation of a national landscape of ecological nature, of an abstract 'environment', come up against a rural sense of 'country' as space that is deeply socialised, inhabited, and cared for. The national significance of pastoral landscapes has placed pastoralists centrally in the nation, a status that is now being challenged, albeit through languages detached from place and local attachment.

#### **4.5 Conclusion: The Futility of Endpoints**

In Central Australia, pastoralism has become an endpoint. It was the land use that the settlers had found they could practice within the limits set by the Central Australian environment. As discussed in Chapter Two, pastoralism as an endpoint became associated with the realisation of agrarianism, and of the Garden in the inland Wilderness. Such a determination of endpoints was, however, derived from a certain

type of society that did not see past pastoralism once the environmental realities of the inland were realised. Today the society that is evaluating the rangelands has changed and there are now visions beyond pastoralism.

The Australian society which today looks to the rangelands does so informed by radically different values compared to those brought to bear earlier. Under this gaze the dominance of pastoralism becomes the leftover of a different era, an historical anachronism, held in place more by force of habit, inertia, and remnant, but still strong, networks of power. In contemporary Australian society, long simmering concerns about the environmental impacts of pastoralism, and tenaciously preserved Aboriginal traditions and property rights have found expression, to some extent now supported in law and policy. That pastoralism retains significant cultural and political strength is seen in the demise of the NSRM and the continued dominance of pastoralism over more fertile areas in the rangelands. The pastoral estate, is however, under challenge, especially as the industry faces tight economic times. Pastoralists feel this and have been vigorous in their defence of their industry, their land ownership, and the legitimacy of their occupation of the land. Subsequent chapters explore how pastoralists in Central Australia have made their defence.

## Chapter 5 'True Stories' – The Development of the Pastoral Landscape in Pastoral Narratives

They don't own the country-we are the true owners. They only brought in the cattle and horses and drilled bores on our land...they can't tell you the 'true story' because they don't own the country. We are the real owners of this country - they only manage it.

Harry Campbell, Alyawarra Man, Lake Nash, NT (Lyon and Parsons 1989 p.1-2)

It used to be a dry country out there in years gone by, but bores have changed all of it to a white man's land, carrying many sheep.

*Western Champion* (Barcaldine - Western Qld.), 31 August 1897

'They haven't got a genuine grab on the country.'

Central Australia pastoralist in 1997 on the alleged absence of Aboriginal people before the coming of bores and station water.

### 5.1 'Occupying the Telling' - History and Politics in the Northern Territory

When does the history of Central Australia begin? This is a key question that underlies much of the politics of race and land in the NT. Claiming original presence *and* persistent presence is a key point in claiming the right to occupy land, to speak of the past, of the present, and of connections to land. In the dominant 'whitefella'<sup>53</sup> culture of the NT, pastoral settlement is commonly held to mark the point at which time begins, and society and the formation of space is made possible (Rose 1997). Such spatial-temporal delineation is evident generally in Australian national mythology where the outback, along with Gallipoli, is a generative site for the nation, a site of beginnings.

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<sup>53</sup> 'Whitefella' is Aboriginal English for a non-indigenous person of European descent. The term is now commonly used in northern and inland Australia. It is at once a physical description and a cultural reference.

This chapter draws on pastoralist memories in order to trace how pastoralists are remembering the past and the process of settlement, and how their memories form a basis for their responses to critiques of their place on the land.

Given the recent pastoral settlement of much of Central Australia, times of beginning, times of arriving on undeveloped land, living in bough sheds, encounters with Aboriginal people unfamiliar with Europeans, digging wells by hand, and months without town visits lie within living memory or, at the very least, are not far removed from the present in individual, family and collective memories. While many Central Australian pastoralists talk of working for their childrens' futures, retrospect is a significant part of Central Australian pastoral culture.

The NT is a region where, amidst a relatively transitory non-indigenous population, long residence for particular groups, particularly pastoralists, conveys a considerable amount of power in the control of information, in the filtering of knowledge and in the building of history (Riddett 1995). This means that knowledge and memory of past events, of people, and of land comes to be held by those who remain for longer periods *and* who are thus able to speak with a culturally authoritative voice not available to others. This is critical to the debate over land in Central Australia.

Hill (1994) encountered this authority during his time in Central Australia and his experiences with its histories. Land and landscape inform much of these histories, as the histories themselves create landscapes, and establish presence or absence, *and* the right to presence. He discerned quickly the great power of the pastoral narratives in defining and filling the landscape and its inhabitants. Through these narratives he distills the

concept of the pastoral 'true story' (Hill 1994, p.52). This refers to both the conception of the Central Australian landscape as a pastoral landscape first, foremost and naturally, and to the knowledge and narratives of long-term white residents, principally pastoralists. In the dominant culture of the NT it is pastoralists who possess the 'true' story of Central Australia. In NT culture, this possession arises through pastoral modes of habitation and associated claims for direct and unmediated observation of people and land over time.

Hill writes of an offer of champagne from a tour guide who had just sidestepped, in deference to the wishes of the pastoral landowner, an inquiry into the Aboriginal significance of their location on a station:

What would we toast out here, I wondered. The callousness of such tour-guide reasoning? The pastoral possession of the "true story"? It is hard to think of a better example of a golden rule in Northern Territory society; if you own the place you own the narrative. Occupying the telling is more than half the law (Hill 1994, p.50).

Hill's invocation of a pastoral 'true story' speaks to the themes of this thesis; the processes of landscape and identity creation, the conflict between different landscapes, the politics of history and memory, and the nexus between habitation, knowledge, property rights and settler identity. Much of the pastoralists' response to the social movements they face is couched in terms of landscape as home, as known and lived, and as history, their history. Pastoral historical memory enters contemporary struggles over land, landscape and identity – it 'transcends nostalgia' (Lowenthal 1985 p.36).

The 'true story' is, of course not entirely monolithic. Pastoralists subscribe to it in varying degrees, although more often divergences are matters of relative detail (see

Chapter Eight). This thesis is founded on the premise that a number of counter-hegemonic stories about Central Australia are challenging the pastoral 'true story'. Yet, the pastoral 'true story' is significant because, despite some divergences amongst pastoralists, and because of its links with dominant national and NT mythologies, with productionist values, and with sites of political power, it is a story that matters materially in the NT.

The prominence of invocations of the past and the emphasis placed by pastoralists on long-term presence in contemporary debates and in interviews, prompted me to search for accounts of southern NT history produced by pastoralists. This chapter examines such accounts of the past. I rely largely on a growing body of local histories that cogently illustrates the nature of pastoral historical memory and of contemporary remembering in pastoral culture. As 'old timers' pass away, such histories become key members in a range of 'important and authoritative domains of public history' (Furniss 1999, p.54) in Central Australia. Analysis of the written sources of pastoral history confirmed my insights into the role and character of pastoral historical memory gained from other sources, such as fieldwork, interviews and the media.

This chapter examines these accounts of arrival and settling in Central Australia as instances of social memory. It also examines how pastoralists remember the settlement process and what features of settlement are emphasised. Through remembering a certain type of past, pastoralists structure a Central Australia in which their presence is primary, and in which a morally deserving and upright pastoral community comes to exist. This past and the elements, especially presence, that structure it are brought to bear by pastoralists when interpreting and confronting the present. Through this analysis, the

basis of contemporary pastoral claims for a universal perspective and a naturalised pastoral landscape, as explored in subsequent chapters, can be better understood.

## **5.2 *Memory and History in Central Australia***

### **5.2.1 Active Memory – The Past in the Present and the Present in the Past**

Due to the subjectivities involved in oral history, biography and autobiography (Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994; Brewer 1986) it is no longer assumed that the truth of such accounts simply resides in their 'facts' and that these facts are transparent in their meaning (Murphy 1986; Samuel 1994; Thelen 1990). Instead of being seen as a passive process of storage and retrieval, memory is now more usefully seen as an 'active process whereby meanings and interpretations are produced in the present' (Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994 p.202). Moreover, memory is a process which produces a record of a past of 'stability, continuity and consistency' and a present of 'security, authority, legitimacy and.... identity' (Thelen 1990 p. xi & xvi). There are two critical points here. One is the production of memory, its active constitution. This is an outcome of the need for individuals to make sense of their life, to find meaning and coherency in the past, and to generate a structure or script that is purposeful and palatable to oneself and one's peers (Brewer 1986; Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994; Bruner 1991; Thelen 1990). In essence, the past is remembered by telling stories. Various events are selected and shaped in terms of a plot, or meta-narrative that contains them (Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994; Bruner 1991). These accounts are added to over time and are subject to revision in light of contemporary circumstances. In this process even relatively mundane lives or events can be endowed with 'privileged status' (Bruner 1991 p.18).

The memories produced by remembering have been shown to not necessarily be accurate in detail but to produce accounts that are broadly true, at least from the perspective of those remembering (Thelen 1990). The issue of truth is critical. In this context, 'truth' does not mean accuracy in the sense of complete and universal recall of all that happened. Truth refers more to the degree of consistency between a memory and the generalised narrative created by individuals or groups. The extent to which accounts of the past are 'true' has more to do with their consistency with the dominant 'historical epistemology' which is 'a way of knowing history that provides a certain set of rules and assumptions that guide how "truths" about the past, and by extension the present, are to be created, understood and conveyed' (Furniss 1999, p.17). Detailed memories of particular events are not necessarily required for memory. Events become blurred and condensed into general memories that stand for the myriad happenings and experiences that constitute them.

The second key point about memory is that it is present-centred. The narratives that are brought to bear in the process of remembering are derived from the past but are necessarily located in, and are in contact with, the present (Terdiman 1993). Consistent with the idea that memory is actively constituted, not pre-given and waiting for retrieval, is the idea that memory actually begins when something in the present starts the process (Thelen 1990; Lowenthal 1985). Each act of remembering produces a memory that is a new and active construction. Thus, when evaluating a narrative, historians now often focus on the 'person's motives or biases or mood or audience...when the person constructed the memory – rather than...proximity to the event being recalled' (Thelen 1990, p.xi). In other words, the researcher interested in historical memory is concerned with the meaning of a past event in the present



(Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994). Accounts produced through memory not only provide us with historical information which may or may not be accurate but also with the informant's or writer's beliefs about what they now think was happening, their feelings, their explanations and ideas about what happened. In concert with other sources of information it may also be possible to see what they have left out, distorted or forgotten.

It is clear from the above that memory is central to concepts of self and thus is a critical element to identity. If identity is a fusion of one's past and one's present circumstances, then memory as a key element in building the past and interpreting the present is a constituent of identity. Being present-centred and flexible, memory can be altered according to the contingencies of the moment to ensure an identity appropriate to changed circumstances, yet one which maintains a core consistency (Samuel 1994). The centrality of memory to identity, individual and collective, means that it can be difficult, if not painful, to admit that one's memories cannot be trusted to provide a stable and continuous past (Lowenthal 1985). Memory is therefore likely to be asserted with certainty and a belief in its accuracy.

### **5.2.2 Collective Memory: Culture, Past/Present and Social Change**

In remembering, individuals are not islands (Rosenzweig and Thelen 1998), but are participating in the building of a group's collective historical memory. Accounts produced from memory can be read as encompassing both the individual, the universal and the relationships between the two (Connerton 1996; Murphy 1986).

The process of building a collective memory can take place in everyday life, through written texts or through public events (Connerton 1996). It is, as Riddett (1995) has

illustrated in the NT and Pred has in Sweden (Pred 1998), an intentional but largely unconscious process. There are motives driving the representation of histories, but detailed building of the histories is so much part of a group's everyday life and outlook as to be unnoticeable to the group. Lowenthal emphasises this unconscious intentionality:

we fail to recognise not only *why* we alter history but often that we do. Thus we tend to misconceive the past as a fixed verity from which others have strayed, but to which we can and should remain unswervingly faithful (Lowenthal 1985 p.326).

Interaction is the key to the process by which memories are introduced into a group, and their meanings negotiated and absorbed into the group's collective consciousness (Thelen 1990). In the process, collective memories and shared identities and meanings are built as group memories are identified, explored and agreed upon (Thelen 1990). There is a mutually constitutive relationship between individual and collective memory, and in time the two are indistinguishable (Lowenthal 1985; Boyarin 1994). As individuals look to others to help them confirm their recollections they may find differing accounts which require them to reassess their memory in concert with the other. Thus memories are shaped and reshaped within groups as circumstances change, thereby producing memories that are authentic in, and functional to, the moment (Thelen 1990).

Memory is one of the 'raw materials' which cultural processes shape into symbolic and material landscapes (Anderson 1999). The development and maintenance of collective memory is part of the process of culture and of the development of group identity (Anderson 1999). By developing and tracing a shared past and by collectively

identifying material and symbolic signposts and landscapes that delineate that past, a group develops a sense of continuity, stability and legitimacy into the present (Edensor 1997; Lowenthal 1985). As memory, like any human activity, is located within class, gender and race relations that 'determine what is remembered (or forgotten), by whom and for what end' (Gillis 1994 p.3), when challenged it is not mere nostalgia being confronted but structures at the heart of authority and social order.

### **5.2.3 Embodied Memory – Bodily Practice and Landscape Accretion**

Connerton (1996) discusses the role of ceremonies and rituals in transferring memory within societies. Landscape is pivotal to this process, as a group or nation is defined largely by its command of space, which itself depends upon the establishment of authority over that space and the shaping of the space to conform to the norms of the group. Collective mapping of history onto territory is a prime means by which authority is gained (Edensor 1997; Boyarin 1994). As Edensor (1997) has shown, the mapping of Scottish 'history' onto space has been more an exercise in collective memory than an attempt at faithfully portraying actual events and the foibles and motivations of historical figures. This has produced commemorative practices and landscapes that owe much to how Scots would like to imagine their history and their national heroes. Similarly, the ANZAC legend<sup>54</sup> in Australia, pivotal in building national identity and evidenced in memorials across the nation, is significant more for what it purports to say about Australian nationhood, values and identity than about the actual events at Gallipoli (Kapferer 1988). Such remembering and memorials create a 'moral

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<sup>54</sup> The ANZAC legend refers to the nationalist mythology generated by the battles fought by the Australian and New Zealand Army Corps (ANZAC) at Gallipoli in Turkey in 1915.

geography' of the nation through sites and centres, which are a 'repository of common memories, myths and traditions' (Edensor 1997 p.175).

Memorials and sites of commemoration not only build a moral geography of the nation, they build a biographical geography of the nation. Biographical geographies of landmarks and performative sites trace the events that are seen as giving rise to the nation and its identity. From such a landscape the nation finds continuity, a link with the past that legitimates the nation in the present. Memory and activity in a landscape at the individual and group level operate in a similar way. Continuity of individual and collective bodily presence and transformative activity is evidenced in the landscape that has been created through effort and experience. The material objects in landscape illustrate the cumulative work of generations, groups, families and individuals, providing what Lowenthal calls accretion (Lowenthal 1985). For the insider the landscape is biographical and personal (Cosgrove 1985) and takes on a cultural and symbolic existence, as much as a material one. In his assessment of the landscape idea, Cosgrove argues that the insider sees in their land 'a record of pioneering effort and a symbol of his [sic] family's and the nation's future. The place [is] invested with a personal and social meaning' (1985 p.19). In this way local and national landscapes interpenetrate.

Memory is bodily as well as narrative, and bodily practices are closely tied to particular places, and to particular forms of material and symbolic landscapes. In addition, where bodily practices and experiences are a significant content of narratives they appeal to

present day 'organic experience and commonsense dimensionality'<sup>55</sup> (Boyarin 1994 p.25) within a group, and thereby receive acceptance and cultural absorption. Pastoral historical narratives are consistent with this form, content and process. They are not stories of abstract historical processes but of activities either undertaken by the storytellers themselves and their predecessors, or which form the foundation of the pastoral landscape seen and experienced today by pastoralists. This landscape is a settler landscape, a landscape in which the settlers' 'whitefella' values and spaces dominate. As this chapter will show, embodied memory, acquired through labour on the land, is a source of individual and collective pastoral identities.

### **5.3 'Whitefella' Commonsense**

#### **5.3.1 The Imperative to Remember and the Pastoral 'true story'**

Memory is both a material from which geographies are fashioned and a critical locus for the transmission and creation of culture. In the NT, with its recent frontier past, political polarisation and sparse population, history has a high profile. A sense of nostalgia and loss pervades writing about the NT throughout almost all of its European history (Dewar 1997). In the case of Central Australian pastoralists, the preservation of their memories and histories has assumed fresh importance in recent years. This stage is driven by significant social change, disruption of a world they portray as timeless and authentic, the passing of older generations, and a concern that their history and world is

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<sup>55</sup> By this I take Boyarin to mean the spatial dimension of memory whereby memory plays a role in constituting particular types of space by imbuing places and landscapes with meaning.

being lost without anybody noticing. For example, in their history of the Price family, Powell<sup>56</sup> and McRae (1996) write in the preface:

Most of the people written about in this book are deceased. Our objective in writing about them is to bring their pioneering spirit back to life in the hope that they will be remembered for what they did for Central Australia (no page number).

Moreover, pastoralists see this potential loss not simply as a passive process but one driven by the alternative histories of pastoralism, race relations and Central Australian landscapes that have arisen with the rise of the land rights movement, the development of Aboriginal history, and the modern conservation movement (see Chapter Four). These perspectives challenge that of the pastoral 'true story'. As one local historian from a pastoral family told me 'we don't want to be pushed out of our history'.

The pastoral 'true story' is singularly partial. It sees and builds history and the landscape only from the pastoralist point of view. Alternative perspectives are pushed aside as a fabrication of fashionable social concerns. Those who embody and transmit the pastoral 'true story' cannot acknowledge that it is itself such a creation, founded in and on the values of previous times, and created and recreated through a selective process of remembering and forgetting that either explicitly or implicitly counters the present. To do so would be to undermine their own identity and assertive certainty, and erode the power with which they avert the 'true story' over Central Australia.

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<sup>56</sup> Pearl Powell was born Pearl Price. McRae is her daughter. The book is essentially an account of how their family came to Central Australia and developed a number of stations, including Indiana, which is still owned by her family (see Figure 1.1).

In relation to Aboriginal presence, Deborah Bird Rose relates the partiality of vision of the pastoral 'true story' to the strength and persistence of dualistic thinking in Western thought and its obsession with the notion of the bounded individual (Rose 1999; see also Howitt 1998a). In contrast to the 'intersubjective mutuality' (Rose 1999, p.2) she finds in Aboriginal culture, Rose finds "whitefella" culture in northern Australia to be characterised by 'extreme modernist...conceptions of self, power, otherness and utility' (1999 p.3). In this culture the white self is active and present while the indigenous other is passive and/or absent. The pastoral 'true story' exists within, and is imbued with, this framework of polarity.

Such polarities and self-centredness do not remain at the level of the individual, they pervade political, social and institutional life in northern Australia, facilitating an ongoing process of 'deep colonisation' (Rose 1999). In particular, Rose (1999) singles out the pastoral industry and its complete and virtually unnoticed (taken for granted) dominance of the landscape and landscape processes, as emblematic of this 'deep colonisation' and its marginalisation of alternative landscapes. However, as Howitt (1998a) points out, the spaces constructed through this single vision by pastoralists are 'spaces that one could understand - spaces that provided certainty; spaces that provided identity; spaces that provided security and restricted change to change that benefited the chosen ones' (p.6). These are the spaces of historical and autobiographical writing from pastoral Central Australia that this chapter charts.

### 5.3.2 Pastoral Historical Narratives – History/Memory and Commonsense

The historical narratives of Central Australian pastoralists and their biographers are an important component of collective remembering, and the maintenance of the selective 'whitefella' perspective described above. Historical narratives are taken to include written texts produced by pastoralists themselves, written texts produced by non-pastoralist authors, stories in NT newspapers, and interviews with pastoralists where they reflect substantially on the past. Within these narratives may be found the elements that structure pastoralists' perspectives on past and present Central Australian landscapes and society. In the following sections a number of pastoral historical narratives will be analysed for their view of the past and of pastoralists' place in Central Australia. To the extent that historical understanding requires a 're-enactment' of past experience, these texts open windows that make that task possible. Three biographical texts produced by non-pastoralist authors are included<sup>57</sup>. These are Ford's (1978) account of the Chalmers and Kerr families and two texts by Bucknall and Guthrie<sup>58</sup> (1996; n.d.-a).

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<sup>57</sup> My use of texts by non-pastoralists is valid for three reasons. First, on this point there is considerable structural and thematic similarity between these accounts and those produced by pastoralists. Second, there is evidence that the texts were accepted by the pastoralist informants (M. Ford, pers. comm. 8/7/99). Third, and complementing the previous point, Ford's account, at least, appears to have gone beyond simple acceptance to have become itself part of the pastoralists' memory process. I was directed to this book by a number of pastoralists, and in my interview with Rose Chalmers (16/11/96), one of the subjects of the book, she made reference to the book and stories contained within it. The intent of her reference appeared to be that if I had read the book, which I had, she did not need to elaborate on some points, the book was telling the story to her satisfaction.

<sup>58</sup> Graeme Bucknall was the Uniting Church Patrol Padre in Central Australia between 1975 and 1979. In this role he visited stations offering spiritual and practical guidance and support. Robert Guthrie was a sociologist at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. Bucknall died in 1995 and Guthrie now lives in Scotland. The manuscript of an earlier draft of the *Conquest of Distance* is held by Bucknall's family. In the manuscript the authors are far more extensive in their use of quotes from pastoralists and in their discussion and assessment of cattle station life than in the published version. Unfortunately the whereabouts of the tapes of their extensive conversations with pastoralists are unknown.



These narratives provide pastoralist perspectives on Central Australian history. They are perhaps best characterised as pastoralist historical memory because they contain, or are based directly upon, the recollections of the past by pastoralists, or because they are accepted by pastoralists as accurate accounts. The three forms of narrative utilised here, oral history, autobiography and biography, all share a number of features. They are all reflections on the past from the vantage point of the present, they are all intentional in the sense that they are acts of persuasion and interpretation, they are all based upon contemporary memory more than on a past that exists in records, and they are all teleological in structure as events and people are recalled with pattern and order (Murphy 1986; Attwood, Burrage et al. 1994).

In analysing struggles over land and landscapes in Central Australia, however, the factual truth or otherwise of particular accounts is not of primary significance (see page 144). Those who generated these accounts would no doubt disagree vigorously, placing great value upon the legitimacy of accounts of those 'who were there', indeed that is part of the rationale for generating such accounts. Judith Robinson<sup>59</sup> who was brought up on Ooratippra station, in a 1987 discussion with Ted Fogarty, of Lucy Creek station, makes this argument in a criticism of the oral history program of the NT Archives Service (NTAS):

They're not getting very far because they don't know the old-timers and the old-timers don't want to talk to strangers and they just don't really know what it's all about. They're not the sort of people who can sit down and say 'what happened' and know anything about it, and, I mean, you talk about Dave and his leg. Well for us there is the knowledge, right, he went to Perth. But it's not like going to Perth today. We know how many days and weeks and the pain he was in, the

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<sup>59</sup> Judith Robinson was born Judith Hall. Her parents owned Ooratippra Station, and her grandparents and Uncle developed others. Judith Robinson is a descendant of the Nicker family. Her book (Robinson 1999b) focuses upon one of her uncles, Ben, who was six when his parents took up Glen Maggie in 1914.

whole background of what happened in just making that statement, they went to Perth (NTAS TP 858/1).

Of more relevance to this thesis than the accuracy of these narratives is the structure and content of the accounts and their relationship to contemporary struggles over landscapes.

## **5.4 History Begins - The Arrival as Homecoming**

### **5.4.1 A New Start but a Harsh Land**

In pastoral narratives the arrival by pastoralists in Central Australia constitutes a key moment in delineating a past that is gone and a present that is both immediate and to come. The story of a land without history, a *tabula rasa* upon which the settlers could begin to create not only a new nation, but also new lives and fresh starts for themselves in a youthful landscape unwearied by humanity, is an important thread in Australian historiography (Hamilton 1994). One of the characteristics of this 'new' land was its availability. Aboriginal ownership was presumed not to exist, facilitating pastoral occupation of the land. Aboriginal people feature in the accounts of Powell and the others, but in specific roles that either neutralise their presence and, through apparent Aboriginal acceptance, even welcome, of pastoral settlement, actually help to legitimise pastoral settlement.

The journey to the Centre features significantly in pastoral narratives, particularly in the written form. The biographical accounts by Powell (1996), Robinson (1999b) and Ford (1978) contain stories of the journeys made by the Price, Nicker and Chalmers families to Central Australia to establish stations to the north of Alice Springs.

All three families are portrayed as coming to Central Australia in order to move on from unhappy or less than successful pasts. Robinson's grandparents, Sam and Liz Nicker were both moving on from past marriages, betrayal, the death of a child, and economic hardships. They embarked on a journey, which lasted many years, towards ownership of a pastoral property in order 'to leave behind their former lives and start again beyond the boundaries of what they had individually experienced' (Robinson 1999b p.6). Similarly when Charles Chalmers, a schoolteacher approaching fifty left NSW in 1921 with his wife, Cora, and four young children 'the past was gone, and from now on his eyes were firmly towards the future...and a better place for their children (Ford 1978 p. 8 & 19).

In Robinson (1999b) and Ford (1978), the land and the environment feature in some ways that explicitly speak to contemporary social issues and conflicts. For the Nicker family their initial journey from the south to Arltunga is portrayed as relatively straightforward, although not simple. The landscape tested them and at times made them uncomfortable. Steep creek banks blocked their way and the Depot Sandhills north of Finke sorely tested them, requiring frequent unloading and reloading of their buggy, digging and corduroying to cross. To the north 'worse awaited them' (Robinson 1999b p.8), where mountain ranges 'seemed impenetrable, a barrier to the future they sought' (Robinson 1999b p.8). The ranges were an obstacle they needed to navigate in order to arrive at Arltunga, just north of the eastern MacDonnell Ranges. The family was 'glad to see the last of this country' (Robinson 1999b p.9) and move closer to their destination, where, upon arrival 'they were welcomed' (Robinson 1999b p.9).

The Chalmers followed a route that took them through country that was relatively unknown to Europeans even in the 1920s. It was a gamble that ultimately paid off, but which at times on the journey appeared to have been a grave mistake. The dry country seemed to stretch on, ridge after ridge, 'repeated in all its sameness' (Ford 1978 p.42).

The fact that *family* settlement is depicted in the accounts is itself significant. Representations of Central Australia's origins are characterised by small-scale, family pastoralism, as opposed to corporate pastoralism (see also Chapter Six). This lends the settlement process legitimacy within Australian rural and outback mythology, where small, family settlers are celebrated as most desirable, and corporate pastoralism, which occupies a more ambiguous position, is simultaneously reviled and praised.

As the accounts make clear, the Central Australian landscape tested them from the beginning, marking a clear break from the areas they had left, where Europeans were already well established and pioneering days fading. The land itself has an active presence, and frustrates, even appears to discourage, the families' efforts. They are forced to engage with the land, mentally and physically to get through to their destinations and the possibilities of settlement that, harshness of the landscape notwithstanding, they still envisaged. Already at this early stage the quality of endurance and patience in the face of the land's enormity and implacability are highlighted. This quality, to become a key element in pastoral relationships to the land, is seen not only in the families' continued faith in what lay ahead, but also in their dogged acceptance of the physical trials imposed by lack of water, and difficult and interminable terrain. This acceptance is a point of departure for the pastoral 'true story'. These stories of arrival are the beginning, not only of the pastoralists' presence, but also of their encounter with the land. It is the beginning, as pastoralists would see it, of their

acceptance of its character (an acceptance that, for pastoralists, implies moral virtue), and the beginning of a process whereby the land enfolds them and their stock. In this process pastoralists use and extract from the land. They are however, ultimately unable to transform it completely as the temporal and spatial enormity of the land engulfs them, yet at the same time shapes and sustains them, rewarding their persistence. In pastoral culture this persistence is significant in setting them apart from others, and in claiming a legitimate presence. That the land rewards faith and persistence is illustrated by the landscapes depicted when the pastoralists arrive at the places that become their homes.

#### **5.4.2 The Land Softens**

The counterpoint to these stories of 'land and struggle' is 'land and welcome', or 'land as potential', merely awaiting labour to transform it from unformed but pastoral<sup>60</sup> landscapes, to home. As the Chalmers struggled eastwards and came into the region now known as Central Australia, they experienced moments in which the 'strange...loveliness' (Ford 1978 p.44) of the region began to make an impression upon them:

To have looked upon the Centre for the first time is an experience of the spirit rather than the sensations. The colour, the depth, the grandeur of formation, the unlimited distance are all part of it, but they are only the notes from which the music is composed, the elements from which the creation arises. It is an old, old country breathing prehistory and beyond, and the sensitive person gazing upon its virginity at sunrise, sees a new world unfolding. In the battling days of uncertainty and setback that were to follow, Cora and Charles Chalmers clung tightly to the memory of such moments as these. For just as this wierdly magnificent country had the ability to take you back to the beginning of time, so it could just as forcibly develop a conviction in your heart that its real

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<sup>60</sup> I use the term 'pastoral' here in its classical meaning of bucolic or pertaining to honest but idyllic rural labour and life.

strength lay not not in its past, but in the untapped nature of its future (Ford 1978 p.44).

This quote illustrates the process which pastoralists today describe as 'the country getting into their blood'<sup>61</sup>. The above passage marks a key moment in pastoral settlement. They are not mere aesthetic moments, it is points such as these when the potential of the landscape as home and future is made clear in these biographical accounts.

Robinson's (1999b) account of the Nicker family similarly narrates a homecoming as much as an arrival. After eleven years of saving, the Nickers purchased the Ryan's Well pastoral lease and headed north to take it up. The site of Ryan's Well and the future Glen Maggie<sup>62</sup> homestead lies just north of the Hann Range. The well and homestead stand only as ruins now, historical pitstops on the Stuart Highway. In 1914, however, this place had far more significance to the Nickers and their young son, Ben:

Yesterday they had trailed across a spinifex plain, relieved by sparse grey shubbery and this morning everything had changed. They'd wound across a creek-bed in a gap in the Hann Ranges where pine trees sprinkled the hillsides and gums nodded in the early morning breeze. Bloodwoods harboured flights of brilliantly-green budgerigars and cockatoos prattled raucously as they wheeled and dipped.

Past the gap, they came into a wide, shallow valley where shadows dappled their road and softer grasses and herbage grew more abundantly. The fierce spinifex lay behind them was restrained from entering or infringing by the stolid demarcation of the Hann Hills. Ben loved the excitement of the bush...(Robinson 1999b p.23).

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<sup>61</sup> Some seventy years later a grandson of Charles and Cora Chalmers told me 'the country's in your blood', implying that a permeability had led to body/family melding with the land. In 1923 the Chalmers may have had a dream about their potential place in this land but it is hard to envisage that at that point it would be in their blood in the same manner as claimed over seventy years later. I am arguing that Ford's book (1978) describes this process for the first two generations of the Chalmers family.

<sup>62</sup> The Nickers purchased the Ryan's Well lease and renamed it Glen Maggie.

From the Nicker's first camp at the future site of their homestead, Robinson paints a picture of a family at home and at peace in this bucolic landscape: 'there weren't any walls to surround them but they were home' (Robinson 1999b p.25). This arrival is also represented as a new beginning, of activity and life not known by this landscape:

An owl 'whoo-d enquiringly at all the unaccustomed activity and who could doubt his question because rarely had there been such movement, so many people, animal and sounds within his knowledge. He settled himself on a branch of a mulga tree and absorbed these new sights, swivelling his head now and then towards a new sound.

The fire's glow mesmerised him. It was beyond his ken (Robinson 1999b p.22).

The new day that was dawning involved transforming this welcoming but 'untouched' landscape into a home. The welcoming nature of the places which were to become homestead sites and centres of family life stands in stark contrast to stories of struggle, sacrifice and loss that also pervade pastoral narratives. The apparent poles of bucolicism and struggle are not, however, incompatible in the pastoral 'true story'. Both are important constituents of it and together tell a story of a land that, in pastoral culture, is harsh and often fickle, but which is fundamentally productive and which rewards faith in its capacity to support those who stay and learn its ways.

The fundamental story being told in these accounts of arrival is of the *discovery* of a pastoral landscape. The landscape of the 'true story' does not have to be created, it already exists. It exists in an unformed state, and requires only labour to bring out its full potential and to make it a place for family life. In effect, the 'arrival tales' in these pastoralist accounts begin the pastoral story of a process that went on for many years, and which through labour revealed the envisaged stations much as a sculptor reveals the sculpture within the stone. It is also a landscape that is largely empty of Aboriginal

people. Those who are present are generally those who become 'trusted companions' and childminders. They are, except in Ford's (1978) account, presented as isolated figures, rather than as coherent groups of land -owning people.

## **5.5 *Settling In – Station Development and the 'Knowable Community'***

### **5.5.1 Rural Memory and the 'Knowable Community'**

As we saw in Chapter Two, in Raymond Williams' (1973) elaboration of the nature of rural retrospect, a pivotal characteristic of rural iconography and lament throughout the ages is the existence and subsequent erosion of a 'knowable community'. In conceptions of rural life over centuries, the 'knowable community' is endlessly recreated and destroyed as external influences, ignorant newcomers and avarice come to hold sway over rural locales. In the process the 'knowable community', an imagined local, united, equitable, caring, personal and harmonious community is broken down. According to the narrative, newcomers arrive who know nothing of local ways but who have influence bestowed upon them by outside institutions such as the courts or banks. It has been endlessly claimed over the centuries that disembodied forces such as the law or the market begin to mediate social relationships rather than personal bonds forged in communal circumstances and rooted in long-standing, apparently permanent, arrangements. However, as Williams (1973) somewhat sardonically notes, such 'knowable communities' appear always to be just beyond the last hill, a recent but passing or past phenomenon in the minds and memories of those who invoke them. Moreover, one of Williams' (1973) central points is that such harmonious rememberings not only disguise economic and social inequality in the past, but also in



the present. In remembering a past, the rural locale is portrayed as a social island where harmony prevails but for the depredations of outsiders.

The 'knowable community' is, however, more than this idea of an actual face-to-face and immediate rural community. A 'knowable community' is also a 'strategy in discourse' (O'Connor 1989, p.68). For Williams the 'knowable community' is an important concept in exploring 'social struggle and the bases for communal action' (Longhurst 1991, p.233). Williams' derivation of the concept of 'knowable communities' lies in novels, such as those of George Eliot and Jane Austen, which concern themselves with English rural society, and delineate which groups matter, which do not, on which terms they are included in the narratives, or in which terms they are known. The problem for those constructing narratives is that they are constrained by their own subject position in narrating others, even where they might wish to include them in the narrative:

what is knowable is not only a function of objects – of what there is to be known. It is also a function of subjects, of observers – of what is desired and what needs to be known...And then what we have to see, as throughout, in the country writing, is not only the reality of the rural community; it is the observer's position in and towards it; a position which is part of the community being known (Williams 1973, p.163).

The 'knowable community' is thus a 'selected society in a selected point of view' (Williams 1973, p.179) and its features are the outcome of social position. They are part of the exercise of power gained through narrating particular versions of history in association with the power to enforce these as dominant histories.

The depiction of the development of station and family life, and of the 'knowable community' is a significant part of pastoral historical narratives. It parallels the development of stations and is part of the teleology of the creation and reification of Central Australia as pastoral country. The development and subsequent erosion of the 'knowable community' is critical to the pastoral 'true story' and elements of it feature in contemporary debates over social change and land use. Recollection and narration of it is therefore not simply nostalgia but one of the bricks by which the power of the pastoralists is built, maintained and defended.

In pastoral historical narratives the 'knowable community' began on the stations where the development of family and station life kept isolation at bay. In this regard Powell notes that 'our family may have been pretty isolated, but we were never really lonely as we had each other' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.95). She and her brother would sometimes shepherd sheep away from the homestead affording them 'some very happy weeks on these three-day excursions, enjoying each other's company and working happily together' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.95). The stations were, however, also part of a growing community of pastoralists, and others, in Central Australia who became neighbours and who came together at community events or in times of crisis. In addition, many were frequently visited by virtue of lying on stock routes or tracks, or variously by postmen, travellers or itinerant workers who came and went. This section traces these various aspects of the development of a 'knowable community', particularly as a means by which pastoralists portray their role in what they depict as the very creation of Central Australia.

### 5.5.2 From Bough Sheds to Houses: Anchoring the Pastoralists

When Mac and Rose Chalmers of MacDonald Downs station first married they lived in a bough shed and tent while Mac built a house. Rose recalled this period as a good time, if a little primitive, cooking with a stove built in the open and into an antbed:

talk about happy days, watching your house go up...But I remember cooking at the stove. The rain falling into the custard as I stirred it on the stove, and thinking how brown the custard looked because it was the dirt in the rain [laughs] coming down after a dust storm. Yes, well that all, of course, seems so long ago now (interview 16/11/1996).

The end of this period saw the beginning of another phase of their life and another step in the settlement of the area by the Chalmers – the next generation, themselves born in Central Australia.

Mac took a whole year to build the house. At the end of the year I had to go into Alice Springs to wait for a baby, and I was away three months. When I came back the floors were in and the roof was on the house, so I was able to bring a new baby into a - put it under a roof instead of in the bough shed (interview 16/11/1996).

Today the now middle-aged third generation and, to an extent the fourth generation, is managing the various family stations. For Rose Chalmers this period in which the house was completed and their first child arrived was a significant break from a more primitive existence. It signalled the beginning of their family and the creation of a base for both a working and a family life.

Construction of the homestead is generally a significant part of pioneering accounts. Most pastoralists first built bough sheds as houses. They were built of readily available materials, with walls of logs and roofs of tarpaulins or thatched mulga branches. The

Chalmers lived in their initial bough shed for ten years (Ford 1978) before moving to a stone house. According to Ford, Cora, although leaving a home, was not entirely displeased to leave behind the discomforts of the bough shed which included 'swirling dust, biting drift sand and a million flies' (Ford 1978 p.150). Pearl Powell similarly has memories about the discomforts of the bough shed. As the roof leaked in their first house at Woola Downs they 'consoled themselves....that rain made the grass grow – feed for our precious sheep' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.78). These accounts describe a primitive past that is gone, yet which provides a yardstick against which to measure the progress of pastoral settlement to the comfortable homesteads and well developed stations of today.

Robinson (1999b), who herself has mustered hill country by packhorse and lived in stockcamps, similarly illustrates the challenges facing outback women earlier this century in her account of the Nicker family. However, her subjects managed to get their home at Glen Maggie started relatively quickly, and she rapidly develops a narrative of domesticity and contentment centred around the house. The constructed house affords a deepening of the sense of well-being and security that she describes upon their arrival at the site. Liz Nicker liked to sew on the verandah of the house. From there:

she could see the well and watch stock coming in to water. She could view a wide arc of grey-green mulga trees and beyond them the hills cradling their little valley. Scuds of dust foretold the return of one of her family from track-riding, or fencing or perhaps from water or wood collecting. Swoops of budgerigars and zebra finches would chitter in low waves across her vision and crows gossiped and complained of their intrusion...From her vantage point she was able to keep an eye out for any raiding goanna for word had spread quickly among that species that she had hens...(Robinson 1999b p.33).

Her world at once takes in her family and the land. It is a non-threatening panorama that she sees. According to Robinson's (1999b) account of her grandmother's view from the verandah, all is familiar and reassuring, the animals themselves behaving in readily understood ways, the European stock as much a part of the view as native animals. The homestead is a centre for the family, for the landscape and all that occurs within it. It is a (romanticised) domestic space where childhoods are played out, educations undertaken, and a household is efficiently but lovingly run.

### **5.5.3 Domestic Landscapes – The Presence of Women and Families in Pastoral and Official Narratives of Central Australia**

Describing a 1920s childhood visit to the Bloomfield's Loves Creek station to obtain horses, Powell also weaves European stock into the landscape. They visited Atnarpa waterhole country where horses came into water. There was 'lush and plentiful grass. We saw kangaroos everywhere...there were quite a few joeys...we also saw a flock of seven emus and several wedge tail eagles' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.54-55). At this place there were yards and the horses there 'were all such beautiful animals' that it was hard to make a selection (Powell and McRae 1996 p.55). As the unwanted horses were released and galloped off 'they made a fine sight' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.55). The visit not only secured horses but also began a friendship with the Bloomfield children 'which was to last all our lives' (Powell and McRae 1996 p.55)<sup>63</sup>. This childhood account evokes a richness and productivity from the landscape, an appreciation of both the native flora and fauna, and of the European world of yards, knowledgeable horsemen and fine horses. Such childhood memories describe a blooming Central

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<sup>63</sup> In 1997 Jean Hayes (nee Bloomfield) and Pearl Powell were both still living in Alice Springs.

Australia, not a barren desolate landscape, but a productive one in which settlers' animals are thriving, as much at home as native animals. More than fifty years later, Bucknall's description of an elderly man's feelings about the same place bring to mind Powell's observations in the 1920s. In 1976 Bucknall visited Atnarpa where there was a 'simple but attractive cottage (Bucknall and Guthrie 1996 p.27). At that time an elderly couple lived there: Harry Bloomfield, a child (though absent) at the time of Powell's visit, and his wife Mary, of the Hayes family of neighbouring Undoolya station. Harry talked about his cattle, saying 'I love living here where I can walk down to the Hale [river] in the evening and talk to my cattle as they come in for their evening drink' (Bucknall and Guthrie 1996 p.27).

In the above passages Powell, Robinson and Bucknall describe thoroughly domesticated landscapes centred around secure homes and based on positive memories of childhood or on a long association with a settled landscape. Such landscape depictions largely became possible on the frontier through the presence of white women (Schaffer 1988). In outback mythology it has been the united presence of white bushmen with white women that provides for civilisation in a land of milk and honey (Rose 1992b). The nature of settlement achievable through frontier masculinity was limited without the presence of white women. Aboriginal women and frontier country were seen to bear upon white men, eroding their morals, characters and race (Rose 1992b). Further to this mythology is the idea that the degradation of the white men and the lethargy that is induced, further mitigates against the proper development of stations and full and productive use of the land. In Central Australia there was significant official concern about the consequences of sexual relationships between white men and Aboriginal women for both the Europeans and Aboriginal people (Rowse 1998). According to

Rowse (1998), not only were whites seen as being at risk, but Aboriginal people were seen as being in peril of further cultural and racial degeneration as they mixed with a lower strata of European society, producing a society and offspring that threatened social order and the authority of the state. Concern about such matters, and the associated desirability of family settlement, is evident in a variety of official forms.

There was in pre-World War II, and immediate post-war, Central Australia a form of pastoralism that was subsistence, low in capital input, and domestic rather than commercial in orientation. It was such 'feral' pastoralists (Rowse 1998), as opposed to the families portrayed in the accounts discussed above, that gave the Government most concern. For example, the Native Affairs Branch<sup>64</sup> saw such individuals as 'unlikely to exert what the...Branch considered to be a progressive influence on Indigenous people' (Rowse 1998 p.120). They cohabited [with Aboriginal women], they did not enforce rigid social and management hierarchies and were, in the words of one Branch officer, 'content to live as a blackfellow' (Rowse 1998 p.120)<sup>65</sup>. Along with this social lethargy and non-family status went poor station development. Native Affairs Branch officers frequently commented in their reports upon the lack of station development, the poor condition of fences and buildings and the lack of effort on the part of the lessee to achieve a better standard of living (Rowse 1998).

Support for the family on the land, as opposed to companies or the single male, was evident in other official forms. The benefits of enticing families to Central Australia,

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<sup>64</sup> The Native Affairs Branch of the NT Administration was responsible for the welfare and advancement of Aboriginal people, including those living on pastoral stations.

<sup>65</sup> From L. Penhall's 1951 report on Bryan Bowman of Glen Helen and Coniston stations to the Acting District Superintendent, 8 October 1951, AA NT CRS F1 52/606.

and the NT in general, have long been voiced by NT officials and politicians. In 1927 the Government Resident in the short-lived Territory of Central Australia equated successful settlement with pastoral settlement by families. He argued that 'to make a success of settlement in Central Australia, or rather to induce men and their families to settle there, the government must be prepared to offer more inducement' (Government Resident 1927, p.4). The 1932 Report of the Administrator of the NT wrote after a visit to Central Australia that he was 'very much impressed by the type of settler [he] met....there is a greater number of comparatively small landowners than elsewhere in the Territory' (Administrator of the Northern Territory 1938, p.1). He went on to note approvingly of Charles Chalmers who:

placed his wife and his possessions on a horse-drawn dray and journeyed overland until he finally took up his present holding. After some very strenuous years he owns herds of both cattle and sheep, and has built a substantial stone homestead for himself and his family, has educated his sons and daughters well and can face the future with equanimity (Administrator of the Northern Territory 1938).

Hinting perhaps at difficulty in attracting and keeping women in the Centre, the 1945 Administrator's report notes with delight that good prices for Central Australian cattle have caused pastoralists to invest in their properties, spending money on fences, stud bulls and waters, but 'best of all on amenities for their womenfolk' (Administrator of the Northern Territory 1945, p.5).

Legislative change also reflected a preoccupation with 'family' settlement and development. In 1953 the Crown Lands Ordinance was amended to provide for 'Pastoral Homestead Leases'. These were a new form of lease and were designed to encourage family settlement on pastoral leases. It was believed that family residential



properties would 'encourage development by improvement'<sup>66</sup>....and [would] bring about a transition to homestead settlement' (1966 Confidential Study Group on Land Tenure Report, AA NT CRS F1 66/1285 p.7). The main alternative to such development was company ownership that was thought to be less desirable for both social and economic reasons. Large pastoral companies in the NT had a history of controlling extensive areas and investing very little in them. This was seen to retard economic and social development (Kelly 1966; Kelly 1949; Kelly 1971).

Clearly white women were needed to facilitate the mode of pastoral development seen as desirable in official circles. So too is the presence of women taken as progress in the historical narratives of pastoralists. The arrival of women in the outback is commonly taken as a key moment in the transformation of masculine frontier space into settled outback space which retains much of its masculine flavour but gains a feminine aspect and influence. As Mary Durack writes of the arrival of her grandmother in the Kimberleys in the late 19th century:

everything was different for the boys with a woman in the House. Mattresses and clean linen appeared on bare bunks in place of the rough greenhides and coarse blankets. Clothes were carefully laundered, meals daintily served. The water bags were never allowed to be drained and left to dry...The black women, respectably clothed in loose, ankle-length dresses of turkey twill or calico with coloured borders, moved quietly about the place, working cheerfully under the gentle and expert direction of 'the missus' (Durack 1988 p.327).

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<sup>66</sup> Improvement in this context means investment in station capital such as yards, fences and waters and in herd improvement through breeding programs. Land clearance and improved pastures have generally not been a feature of Central Australian pastoralism. Land clearance is neither economic nor desirable, the areas involved are too large and the land insufficiently productive. Some unsuccessful attempts at introducing improved pastures are described in the following chapter.

When the Nicker family arrived at Arltunga in 1903 the presence of a 'white woman and children were astonishing' to the miners working there (Robinson 1999b p. 11). The arrival of such families is taken as providing the basis for elements of a more civilised life, similar to that left behind in more settled districts. Liz Nicker started a garden, which Robinson's text intimates was a novelty at Arltunga, supplying the miners with vegetables. When the Nickers' second child was born the men of Arltunga made gifts of gold, so delighted were they at the birth of a white child in the district. Within a few years of the Nicker's arrival, Liz's daughter, Anne-Jane, married Ted Hayes of Mt. Burrell station. This was apparently the first marriage in Alice Springs, then known as Stuart, and 'in time the couple became scions of the district and Jane a recipient of the Order of the British Empire for service to the community' (Robinson 1999b p.18). An orderly and sociable society founded on white, family pastoral settlement was being created.

#### **5.5.4 The 'Knowable Community' as a basis for the Pastoral 'True Story'**

According to the pastoral narratives reviewed here, as the population grew, a social life emerged in tandem with a bush community:

The odd bush race meeting turned into a definite annual event and while ladies sewed by hurricane lamps and ordered multi-coloured veiling for their hats from southern emporiums, the menfolk polished up their buggies and readied their horses. A square of canvas was pegged in preparation for dancing under the stars and children slept tucked up in swags beyond the fringe of adult activities. Musical instruments were produced from out of saddlebags...(Robinson 1999bp p.19).

Such gatherings are one marker for the beginning of a 'knowable' rural community in Central Australia and it is the pastoralists who are instrumental in creating this community.

Robinson contrasts the pastoral community with the miners. Whereas the miners are portrayed as wanderers and drifters who never settled and 'grew old searching' (Robinson 1999b p.14), the pastoralists reached the end of their search and stayed. Moreover, according to Robinson, it was 'the married folk who settled the outback and took up pastoral properties; who "invented" the outback' (Robinson 1999b p.14). Implied in this is a morality, a moral virtue and strength that is ascribed to the family and to people who stayed and put down roots. Through their persistence they created places for their children and community to flourish. They also established themselves in relation to others who come and go. In contrast to the miners who only take from the land, the pastoralists are shown as giving themselves to the land and thereby establishing what they present as reciprocal relationships embodying mutual faith. In these relationships, they will keep faith with the land, remaining and using it wisely, if the land keeps faith with them, providing for them and fulfilling their expectations that it will sustain family and community life. By looking to the past and writing of a landscape of families, stayers, and stability, those who have created these pastoral narratives bring this ordered and domesticated landscape into the present. In contemporary Central Australia the order of the past provides a contrast to what pastoralists today see as disorder, entropy and a betrayal of past labours and hopes.

Such accounts are not limited to the settlements as such. The 'knowable community' is also represented as existing in networks across the outback, and a sense of it is evoked

even on the road to Central Australia. Stops at the telegraph stations and stations along the way provided oases of comfort and company for both the travellers and the residents. Regular travellers such as Australian Inland Mission (AIM) Patrol Padres<sup>67</sup> and mailmen, provided links between the stations and kept pastoral families informed of events and people elsewhere in the inland. Of the mailman, Sam Irvine, Robinson (Robinson 1999b) writes:

From one end of the outback to the other, the Inlanders held Sam Irvine in high regard. He knew everybody and kept them all in touch with each other and it can truly be said that he was very much part of the great outback family (p.53).

In the era before the development of affordable high frequency radios such people were 'a connection with friends along the track' (Robinson 1999b p.19). The accounts of Robinson and Powell tell us of a world in which everybody was known to each other, by reputation if not personally. The track from Oodnadatta to Stuart went from station to station and the homesteads could be relied upon for assistance, if not accommodation and food. A form of solidarity in isolation is portrayed as existing amongst the white community. For example, the Nickers left the door of their homestead unlocked when absent in case a traveller happened by and needed shelter or access to medical supplies.

From 1928 affordable high frequency radios began to appear throughout the outback. They were the dominant means of communication between stations until the expansion

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<sup>67</sup> The AIM was formed in 1912 by the Presbyterian Church at the urging of one of their ministers, John Flynn (see histories by McPheat 1963; Griffiths 1993). Flynn was born in Victoria in 1860 and had been concerned about the medical and health problems of people living in remote areas since 1910 when he was at Beltana in South Australia. His position at the mission there caused him to travel in northern South Australia where he became acutely aware of the isolation and lack of services to inland people. In 1912 the Presbyterian Church appointed him to assess the situation in the inland and comment upon the potential role of the Church. Flynn's proposal formed the basis of the AIM, which came to run hospitals throughout inland and remote Australia, and employed Patrol Padres who travelled throughout the outback visiting remote communities and stations. Patrol Padres still visit stations and isolated communities today.

of the telephone network in the 1980s. They played a key role in building a sense of community in Central Australia, a community that Bucknall and Guthrie (1996) describe as 'felt, though rarely seen' (p.50). The importance of the radio is evident in the words of one station woman who said: 'I dread the day the radio telephone takes over from the radio transceiver and I no longer hear my neighbours each day' (Bucknall and Guthrie n.d.-b p.44). The transceivers would remain on all day and so news of what was happening elsewhere in the district spread rapidly. In the 1950s and 1960s radios facilitated the operation of the Country Women's Association (CWA) Air Branch One in Central Australia. This provided a forum for women to conduct CWA meetings on air where they would discuss their concerns, issues of the day or simply swap recipes (Bucknall and Guthrie n.d.-b)<sup>68</sup>.

The sense of a 'knowable community' is directly related to the strength and power of the pastoral 'true story' in Central Australian and in the NT generally. The pastoral claim to a universal and true knowledge of land and people outlined earlier, can be explained along two lines. First, the NT has always had a relatively small white population, and an even smaller permanent one. The conjunction of mutual dependence among the white population, the marginalisation of Aboriginal people, and the networks of the so-called 'bush telegraph', made it easy for the white population to mistake

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<sup>68</sup> Today the radios continue to operate primarily to facilitate School of the Air classes. Fieldwork and interviews afforded observation of the role of the School of the Air as a focus for social interaction. School friends from neighbouring stations visit and stay with each other much as city children do. Occasionally, school social gatherings will be held in particular areas of the region, as are 'playgroups' for younger children. School of the Air newsletters show that station women form the bulk of those who are involved in School of the Air committees and events, and who meet regularly in Alice Springs on school business. In between meetings there is constant communication between stations via phone and fax concerning school business.

knowledge of their own activities and personalities and their observations of Aboriginal people, as the full extent of what was knowable, rather than as a product of a partial perspective constrained by the limits of the individual and culture. Marie Mahood, who came to own Mongrel Downs in Central Australia, writing of the NT in the 1950s, illustrates this aspect of NT society:

Discounting Darwin, the white population was so sparse that if you hadn't actually met everyone at some time or other, you had at least heard their names or nicknames and some exploit, real or exaggerated, in which they had taken part. There were few secrets in a land where communication was by means of the transceiver and all telegraphic traffic was public (Mahood 1995 p.9).

To those at the centre of NT economic activity and development aspirations, such apparent transparency contributed to the development of the 'knowable community' narrated in pastoral historical accounts, and to the illusion of complete knowledge.

Second, the 'true story' derives power from its narrative of persistence. Through persistence, pastoralists claim a commitment to Central Australia morally superior to that of others who do not stay in the country. In pastoral culture, long-term individual or family presence bestows status and authority on *white* people. It gives white people the right to speak for land and for the past and present. In these pastoralist narratives, Aboriginal people are marginal to the main events, that of creating a pastoral home. They may participate in its creation, but it is not their home, not their landscape, that is being created. In pastoral narratives and culture, it is the settlers that occupy centre stage and thus have the best view.

Today, the 'knowable community' of Central Australia is portrayed by pastoralists as passing or past, destroyed by changes brought from outside. It is represented as small,

folksy, primitive but welcoming, and as having a strong sense of community, bred by isolation and mutual dependence. Robinson (1999b) illustrates this view by describing how the town dealt with the so-called 'half caste problem'. She lays this 'problem' at the feet of miners rather than at those of the pastoralists, despite the fact that white pastoralists are well known to have fathered children with Aboriginal women. She describes how the townspeople of Alice Springs banded together to construct a large twin dwelling for children of mixed unions. In time this institution became known as the 'Bungalow'. Furthermore the townspeople provided the Aboriginal mothers of the children with employment, and pastoralists got into the 'habit of dropping off beef' (Robinson 1999b p.14). This pastoralist recollection of the Bungalow as a site of community solidarity and racial benevolence is sharply at odds with some recent analyses. For example, Rowse (1998) sees the Bungalow as part of the apparatus of settlement and control of the indigenous population. It was, he writes, the 'government's most determined act of social engineering by segregation' of white children from 'half-caste', and 'half-caste' from 'full-bloods' (Rowse 1998, p.69).

Talking to pastoralists today, one gets a fleeting glimpse of a town and community in which they still retain a foothold through their collective memory. I was referred time and time again to a small number of elderly pastoralists, mainly women, now residing in Alice Springs. This occurred irrespective of the issue I may have been discussing. There appeared to be a sense in these suggestions that, in talking to these elderly people, I would receive an account of the past that was one of the authentic Alice Springs, now buried under the current town. Moreover it was implied, though sometimes stated explicitly, such people would provide a true account of the story by virtue of having

been there when history happened. Particular individuals and families<sup>69</sup> who loom large in Central Australian historiography pepper these various accounts of the past and are brought into discussions of the present, frequently mentioned in the telling of oft-repeated stories that have entered the collective memory. Such individuals and stories stand not only as standard markers in delineating the outlines of Central Australian history as pastoralists see it, but also define those who constituted the 'knowable community' and undertook those actions that have become significant elements of this history.

In contrast to the well ordered and relatively small town and pastoral community that is remembered by pastoralists, contemporary Central Australia appears chaotic and anonymous. Alice Springs is no longer the slow and friendly place conjured up by pastoralist memory, but is a modern regional centre, oriented towards the tourist market and is a place of drunkenness, violence and racial tension. Bryan Bowman, former owner of a number of stations, recalls his 1988 return to Alice Spring as 'bewildering' and the town 'unrecognisable' to someone who had known it in the 1930s (Bowman n.d. p.76 & 77). He remembers a town distinctive for its architecture, its leisurely way of life, its casual encounters, and its old bush store, which carried everything country people were likely to need. According to his account, he finds a town just like any other, devoid of any particular character, full of busy people and those markers of faceless communities, shopping plazas and supermarkets. As Bowman sees it, the City and its attendant values and institutions (see Chapter Two) have come to the country. The

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<sup>69</sup> This include individuals such as pastoralists Bob Buck, Eddie Connellan, Bryan Bowman, Jean Hayes, Peter Severin and Bill Waudby, and long term pastoral families such as the Hayes, Webbs and Bloomfields. Other individuals such as Colonel Lionel Rose, the post-war head of the Animal Industry Branch also feature significantly in accounts of the Central Australia of the past.



friendly cattle town is gone and in Alice Springs and 'throughout the country....you hardly see and hear anything of cattle activities, its tourists, tourists and more tourists' (Bowman n.d. p.84). For Bowman, Alice Springs has lost the individuality it gained through its pastoral identity and isolation.

Similarly, the City and its avarice, anonymity, misguided liberalism and regulations are seen by these pastoral writers as causing the demise of the 'knowable community' amongst the stations in Central Australia. For Mahood, the end of the frontier with the development of roads and communications and therefore the end of Central Australia's isolation, brought an end to a world of trust and safety founded on personal relationships and mutual dependence (Mahood 1995). She finds the Central Australia of the 1960s a more dangerous place than ever before, placing particular blame on Aboriginal access to alcohol which she sees as a 'catalyst which triggered distrust and fear between black and white to an unprecedented extent' (Mahood 1995 p103.). The breakdown in the social fabric that underpinned the frontier world of the pastoralists was mirrored in the bounding of land in new ways that began to constrain the open frontier landscapes of the pastoralists. Both Mahood (1995) and Bowman (n.d.) comment on the development of nature reserves/national parks and Aboriginal land, and the limitations on access to these areas. These boundaries in the landscape challenge the pastoral 'true story'. The boundaries speak of interests, values and concerns in the land, other than those of the pastoralists. For Bowman, restrictions on access and camping in national parks meant that one 'couldn't camp just where you fancied any longer' (Bowman n.d. p.84). Land that he travelled in decades past was now Aboriginal land and couldn't be entered without permission. The 'knowable community' and its geographies were slipping away.

### **5.5.5 Pastoralists and Land – Histories and Geographies**

The emphasis of this chapter so far has been to identify some of the ways in which pastoral historical narratives establish a general legitimating pastoral presence in Central Australia. History is thought to begin with the pastoralists, communities are created, and the pastoral landscape is both realised and created. That the creation of the pastoral community was predicated upon the damaging domination of an already existing Aboriginal 'knowable community' is absent from these accounts. Beyond these general processes pastoralists also had to engage at very close quarters with the land. They had to learn how to use it for their stock, they had to physically endure it, and they had to build up their stations through their labour. So far the discussion has focussed on how a pastoral presence in the land was established and normalised. This section will extend this discussion to consider how the land itself is brought into the 'knowable community' as pastoralists learnt to survive, even prosper, and develop identities in which presence and knowledge of land were, and are, central. In this process the bodily aspects of memory are heightened by virtue of physical presence and through labour on the land, whereby the body is inscribed in the land and the land reciprocally permeates the body. The blurring of boundaries between land and body is itself, we shall see, part of the process by which a pastoral presence in Central Australia is naturalised.

In general, the pastoral narratives do not focus on the details of pastoral observations and knowledge of the land. Comments concerning the effects of stock on soil and vegetation are limited. The development of knowledge of the land, the location of pasture resources and water sources is implied in descriptions of stockwork and other activities that take the pastoralists across their land. Upon arrival the families, in the narratives of Robinson (1999b), Powell (1996) and Ford (1978), have much to learn of

the Central Australian environment and of the particular areas of land they have taken up.

A good knowledge of one's country is essential in semi-arid and arid Australia, perhaps more so than in higher rainfall areas. The Australian arid zone is characterised by extreme spatial and temporal variability of rainfall, plant production and soil fertility (Friedel, Foran et al. 1990; Stafford-Smith and Morton 1990). Surface water is limited in extent, and is usually confined to rockholes in ranges, small springs, or waterholes and soaks in rivers and creeks. The pastoralists were, and are, faced with a landscape that is highly variable in its ability to support stock (see Chapter Six).

Knowledge of natural water sources, in conjunction with their position relative to pasture resources was, and is, an important part of a pastoral operation. This was particularly so in drier periods when the open range system of cattle grazing practised in the past could break down. Instead of being able to allow cattle to wander freely, finding their own feed and water, pastoralists would have to move them to locations where these remained available. Moreover, in the free range era (which was passing by World War II) pastoralists maintained control of their herds by 'track' or 'boundary riding', following their cattle as they wandered in search of food and water and returning them to their land or to where the pastoralist wanted them. This required knowledge of land to both determine where cattle were likely to be and to enable the track rider to find water and to return home. Such track riding could take days and take the rider far from their homestead and into a variety of country. While Aboriginal people often undertook such work, this was not always and everywhere the case and many settler pastoralists also did this sort of work.

in pastoralist historical narratives the process of gaining knowledge comes about in two related ways. First is knowledge of land through work on the station, and knowledge derived from travel over the station. Second is knowledge derived from close, often, not specifically work-related, observation. In practice the two blend into each other as part of everyday life and work, but they appear as somewhat distinct processes in the narratives. These processes lead to two related but somewhat distinct pathways through which pastoralists articulate relationships to land.

The Chalmers, Price and Nicker families all had sheep. Whereas cattle can be largely left to their own devices for much of the time, sheep needed constant shepherding in early nineteenth century Central Australia. They needed to be taken to pasture and water, and watched or yarded at night<sup>70</sup>. Shepherding sheep forced the Chalmers to engage in some desperate searches for water and at one stage almost cost some family members their life when caught out in the heat with no water. New to Central Australia and to pastoralism in the arid zone, both the Chalmers and Alex Kerr were reassured by rainfall records that indicated regular summer rainfall, and by assurances from 'old timers in the district, that in at least twenty years of history there had never failed to be a rain before Christmas' (Ford 1978 p.95). In this assurance they took faith, not realising that twenty years of rainfall records was relatively few in terms of Central Australian rainfall patterns. They did not know that in fact they were about to experience what is now seen as one of the major periods of drought in Central Australian pastoral history. According to Ford (1978), before the drought broke in their area north-east of Alice

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<sup>70</sup> Although some individuals did well from sheep (Ford 1978), they were never a widespread success in Central Australia. According to official figures, sheep numbers peaked at almost 34 000 in 1952-53 and indicate that by the mid-1960s sheep were no longer grazed in Central Australia.

Springs in 1926, they had been forced to their limits by the country and its aridity. They had almost died of dehydration, lost many sheep, had driven their sheep over large areas in search of water, and endured mental and physical suffering

When it rained, in March 1926, over ten inches fell in five days (Ford 1978), flooding the country and bringing forth an 'unbelievable carpet of vitality and fertility' where previously stock had been dying in their thousands (Ford 1978 p.118). Their sheep flourished and the region had 'indeed become a land flowing with milk and honey, and the pastoral scene breathed serenity, prosperity and contentment' as 'once again the remarkable recuperative powers of the country had been proved' (Ford 1978 p.118 & 119).

This experience provided the Chalmers with a steep and rapid learning curve about the nature of Central Australia and the challenges it presented to pastoralism. It had another effect as well. As noted above, Ford (1978) is told that the country can recuperate and bloom when, from all that can be observed, it is barren and destroyed, and the pastoralists' labour and commitment destroyed with it. From this perspective, for those who are there to see it, the country shows its true nature, its true productivity. This productivity is felt or known for those who have seen the cycles and seen their stations turn around, it is there to see for those who wait, for those who persist and place their faith in the land. In pastoral historical memory, experiences such as the Chalmers act to etch the families into the land. They carve out a place for themselves through their suffering and, in turn, the memory of the event is carried within them and by them. In pastoral culture those who endure such events in the Central Australian landscape embody the events and carry them within their person. Indeed, among pastoralists, the

shared embodiment of these environmental experiences is an important element of collective identity and memory, marking them off from others, whom they assume to have no understanding of the Central Australian environment due to their lack of presence. While living at Finke, south of Alice Springs, in the late 1950s Mahood observed this collective faith amongst pastoralists who were then experiencing the early years of a long dry period:

They were resolutely cheerful throughout the long drought, remembering the good times when the sandhills blazed with wildflowers and the country was rich with green grass to the horizon and their cattle brought top prices in the Adelaide market (Mahood 1995 p.63-64).

The good times and productivity of the landscape also run through Robinson's account of the Nicker family, seemingly neglecting the impact of the 1920s drought (see Chapter Six). Her story of station establishment and family development is predicated on a productive land. The land itself is absent in much of her story but where mentioned is portrayed in a productive and pleasant light, such as Liz Nicker's observations of stock and family from her verandah (on page 164).

The labour on a station creates a geography that is an amalgam of the land and its resources and the input of those who labour, a landscape of work that is particular to those who see themselves creating it. Familiarity with the country is generated in the course of working a station and this is portrayed in the pastoral historical narratives. Mahood (1995) writes of establishing Mongrel Downs in the Tanami Desert in the 1960s. Joe Mahood continuously travelled over the 1620 square kilometres that make up Mongrel Downs. In setting up the station he needed to determine the best sites for bores, yards and other facilities. Successfully locating such infrastructure requires close

observation of pastures and waters, and their relationship to landforms and routes around the station. In concert with this close level of observation, is a sense of how the station is to function as a whole. The station is the outcome of the merging of the physical makeup of the land and the pastoral ideals and plans, which are both imposed on the land and shaped by the encounter with it. In the process the land is marked by the pastoralists' efforts and, while in pastoralist culture the land retains its strength, enormity and separateness from the human realm, it is nonetheless altered sufficiently materially and imaginatively to be a pastoral and a personalised landscape. Mongrel Downs became home for the Mahoods 'as no other place had ever been because the challenges and the responsibilities were so much greater' (Mahood 1995 p.122). It became home in a deeper sense than previous places in which they had lived, acquiring this meaning for them because of the physical work and mental effort that it had demanded from them.

Similarly, the other families in these historical narratives work and create their stations, track riding across the station and into neighbouring stations in pursuit of wandering stock, moving stock between waters. But the acquisition of knowledge of the stations through work, is not the only process by which knowledge of the land is gained, nor is this the only form of knowledge developed by pastoralists and presented in the historical narratives. The pastoral families are also presented as having and developing an affinity for the bush, an interest in flora and fauna, and an ability to read signs that heralded changes in the weather. Pastoralists' children are brought up by Aboriginal people, and play with Aboriginal children. In the process they are taught how to find food in the bush, how to track all manner of wildlife through intimate knowledge of their habits, and how to interpret weather patterns. As a stock inspector, Joe Mahood

travelled over much of the country south of Alice Springs and 'developed an affinity for the desert country which was never to leave him.....the desert thrummed with life and Joe became as adept as any Aborigine at tracking the many small creatures that inhabited it' (Mahood 1995 p.60). Ben Nicker meanwhile 'prowled the perimeters of Glen Maggie with his camel and came to know everything there was to know about that part of the world' (Robinson 1999b p.45).

The relationship of the pastoral families with the land does not only arise from them inscribing themselves and their meaning onto the land. In the pastoral narratives the land also works its way into the pastoralists, shaping their bodies, actions, and ways of thinking. Pastoralists are seen as giving of themselves to the land. Joe Mahood gave 'eight years of his life to establishing Mongrel Downs' (Mahood 1995 p.122) and Coppock (1993), in a collection of poetry which recalls her days on a station west of Alice Springs, writes of how they 'used up muscle, sweat and tears' (p.87) as they established their station. People such as Rosemary Coppock, Joe Mahood, Sam Nicker and his sons and daughter are represented as 'bushmen' or 'bush people', people indelibly influenced by the environment in which they grew up and distinguished from others, principally urban dwellers, by virtue of this life or upbringing. Molly Clarke in Bucknall and Guthrie (1996) makes this point when she argues that because of their isolated upbringing and testing environment, station children are mature beyond their years and when away at boarding school in the city may be 'in many ways as mature as the teacher' (p.47). Robinson suggests an influence of the country in promoting an acute sensitivity to the country within pastoralists:



the deeply spiritual nature and isolation of the country in which they lived...honed their perceptions, for premonitions and dreams seemed to play a role in the lives of many outback folk (Robinson 1999b p.67).

The outback environment is also said to have shaped their characters. Robinson describes her uncle, Ben Nicker as having an 'openness' due to being 'born and brought up in the bush' (Robinson 1999b p.56). The permeability of land and people that underlies much of these pastoral accounts is a central part of the pastoral relationship to land. This relationship is founded on establishing presence in the landscape through work or experience, a presence defined as much by the presence of the land within the pastoralist as the presence of the pastoralist in the land. This presence is articulated through remembering, such that memory is at once histories and geographies of self, family and pastoral community. Memory and landscape constitute each other and the remembered self is present at all times, indeed without the remembered self, or the presence of those pastoralists who have succeeded and built upon previous labours, there is no meaning in the land.

The emphasis on embodied presence causes pastoralists to assume that outsiders cannot, by dint of their absence, understand pastoralist relationships to the land. The late Ted Hayes of Undoolya station told Bucknall and Guthrie (1996) that:

we become very attached to the land we've been bred on and have worked all our lives. We've got an attachment for the land, that few outsiders can understand what we're talking about (p.23).

Furthermore, this statement by Ted Hayes is an important one for it explicitly articulates a process of *becoming* attached to land, even for one whose family has held stations continuously in Central Australia since the 1890s, longer than any other pastoral family

in the district. This is consistent with the theme developed above of affective relationships to land. These relationships arise from experience of the land, work on the land, and a presence that facilitates observation of the land, and further an embodied knowledge of the land. A process of 'becoming' also provides a starting point to critically examine pastoralist relationships to land.

That one *becomes* attached to land by dint of presence implies two things. First, it implies that one begins without a personal relationship with the land, one has to acquire it and develop it. One does not begin with an embodied link with the land. The process of developing relationships with land is the substance of the above discussion. Second, if an affective relationship to land can be acquired through presence it follows that affective relationships to land can be developed on any area of land, given time and labour. This presents an obvious comparison with Aboriginal relationships to land, against which the pastoralists' relationships appear relatively transitory, and perhaps also relates to a preference for rural and outback lifestyles and what they offer, rather than necessarily to any one area of land.

In the case of the Mahoods, this process is perhaps most obvious among the historical narratives I have considered here. Over some time while in various jobs the Mahoods attempted to obtain land in Queensland as stations blocks were balloted off, a 'piece of dirt of [their] own was still [their] ambition' (Mahood 1995 p.62). Over this time Joe developed his 'affinity for the desert country' (Mahood 1995 p.60) which was part of his makeup as 'bushman', one only at home in the outback and someone whom the outback had worked its way into. Through a sequence of events the Mahoods end up on Mongrel Downs station, which they establish. As mentioned earlier, Mahood (1995)

writes that this place became their home like no others as they worked to establish the station and raise their family. Ultimately, however, they had to leave Mongrel Downs. They then finally obtained land in Queensland where they started again, developing a cattle station almost from scratch. Again they put down roots and eventually gained freehold title to their pastoral lease, an occasion remembered in the following way:

Thirty-eight years from two quid, a swag and a dream to a cattle station in our own names!.....It wasn't so much the fact of owning a station that made us so happy; it was having security for our way of life that counted. With freehold title we couldn't be forced off our land as easily as might happen with leasehold titles. Joe's affinity with the bush and its creatures was so strong that he didn't fit comfortably in any other environment (Mahood 1995 p.208).

The Mahood's affinity is with the bush in general, the more remote the better, but not necessarily with any particular area of bush. Such a place-specific relationship can, however, be developed. Cameron Chalmers, a grandson of Charles and Cora Chalmers, at the time owner of Atula station, east-north-east of Alice Springs and some distance from the family's original holdings, expressed his strong feelings for his land to Bucknall and Guthrie when he said ' Its mine, as far as the eye can see. I can go where I want, when I want' (Bucknall and Guthrie 1996 p.29). Bucknall and Guthrie (1996) associate this statement and the feelings that lie behind it, not with legal ownership per se, but with the station work that pastoralists in their account had been undertaking. They suggest that while this work made the pastoralists tough, it also engendered a solidarity with one's companions and a capacity for deep and shared feeling for the land (Bucknall and Guthrie 1996). Like Claude Nicker and Joe Mahood, Cameron Chalmer's feelings developed for land with which his family did not have a long-term relationship, and had owned for only ten years.

## 5.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored the character of pastoral historical memory, arguing that it is best seen as a product of the present rather than as an accurate rendition of the past. As memory is present-centred these pastoral historical narratives can be seen as a response to present concerns as much as an attempt to retain the past. The role of pastoral retrospect in responding to contemporary challenges to pastoralism will be part of the discussion in the following chapters, particularly Chapters Six and Eight.

These pastoral accounts are a means by which the writers entrench and normalise the pastoral landscape of Central Australia, and present a view that all that has come since is built on the labour of those in their accounts. They portray an unequivocally pastoral landscape, one in which both a general pastoral history can be discerned as well as the personal pastoral histories of their families and themselves. This is the basis for a claim of persistence, of deserving occupation of land, and worthy relationships to land. The histories of individual, families and the pastoral collective merge to form a history that is assertively represented by pastoralists as Central Australian history. In this telling, Central Australia becomes a quasi-subject in history (Diner 1995), its status is not merely as a creation of pastoralists, but it exists as a proto-pastoral landscape before the pastoralists arrived, and takes on its full form in conjunction with pastoral settlement and labour. This version of Central Australia is the version of the pastoral 'true story'. Central Australia was a land awaiting the improvement of pastoral development, which fulfills its destiny, and which makes it possible for it to be a subject in history. All that remains then, in the view of the pastoral (auto)biographers, is to document the teleological development of the pastoral landscape and the lives and activities of those who matter within it, the pastoralists.

This view of Central Australian history, as frontier and pastoral landscape, is increasingly less tenable, and is under great pressure as alternative histories and landscapes are asserted, revealing the partiality of the pastoralist versions of the past. We can today think about histories of Central Australia which are more contingent, open, and characterised by differences and multiple perspectives. Central Australia is not monolithic in character, it is variously constituted and its histories constantly meet, diverge, complement, contradict and confirm. The flaw in pastoral narratives of the past, and their claimed 'truth' status, is that they 'create a reality they appear to describe' (Schaffer 1988, p.171). Their power lies in their creation within a society and a polity in which this 'reality' is asserted with authority.

This chapter has laid out a crucial starting point from which to assess the pastoralists' responses to alternative histories of Central Australia. The following chapters will build on the pastoral version of Central Australian history by examining the pastoralists' responses to social change, focussing particularly on the means by which pastoral conceptions of land and nature inform claims for the right to occupy and use land for pastoral purposes.

## Chapter 6 The 'Good' of Central Australia – Knowing the Country in Cattle Culture.

I met many wonderful characters out east of Alice Springs...on...modest little stations...tending their flocks and rearing their children, children of resource and bushmanship, who will carry on their epic work in a country that fights them every step of the way, but keeps their love and faith (Hill 1991 (first published 1940), p.322)

You must run your farm to the betterment of the land.  
Ted Hayes, Undoolya Station (Johnston 1988, p.93)

### 6.1 *Naturally Good*

The previous chapter examined the conservationist version of nature as invoked in Central Australia and the rangelands. This version is simultaneously objectivist, romantic and bound up with a particular vision of what the nation might ideally be. This chapter takes the pastoralist story of nature in Central Australia and continues the narrative of the normalisation of pastoralism, in fact the conflation of nature and pastoralism in stories about cattle and environmental processes, and the role of this in the pastoral 'true story'.

If conservationist nature is, in part, one of objects and ecosystems and landscape ecology, pastoral nature is derived from specific temporal and spatial experiences of landscape. Place is important in the construction of pastoral nature. From their place-specific, and personal and collective experiences of the land, pastoralists build a landscape in which pastoralism is naturalised, taken for granted, and synonymous with nature. However, 'references to the normal, the natural, the obvious are coercive, and

about fundamental issues regarding the structure of our lives' (Quigley 1999, p. 198). References to nature and taken for granted ideas 'are deceptive in that they try to seduce without argument' (Quigley 1999, p.198). In the pastoral context we can see this in terms such as 'improvement', the 'good' (see below), 'gardening', 'family', and 'pioneer'. The meanings ascribed to such terms by pastoralists are sourced in particular local historical and contemporary processes and events, and are integral to the vision of Central Australia as pastoral. This chapter examines the actual events and the meanings in pastoral culture that underlie such terms, showing their social and historical origins in Central Australia (see aim two, Chapter One). Departing from the themes of agrarianism discussed in Chapter Two, it also shows their relationships with broader and influential politics and ideas about rural land use and nationhood.

A meeting at the Elrunda Roadhouse, some two hours drive south of Alice Springs, at the junction of the Stuart Highway and the road to Uluru (Ayers Rock), provides an opportune starting point for this chapter. In mid-1996, at a meeting of the NT Landcare Council, Bernie Kilgariff, owner of Elrunda station<sup>71</sup>, got to his feet and said to the assembled group of public servants, pastoralists and conservationists, and a lone postgraduate student, 'we know the good of Central Australia'. This is a statement that is alluding to significant elements of the pastoral 'true story'. It encompasses the past, and the processes of co-development of the pastoral community, society and land as discussed in Chapter Five. It speaks to the present by setting social boundaries based upon an environmentally benign and reciprocal relationship between the land and pastoralists. It reaches into the future by suggesting that the 'good' of the land is evident

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<sup>71</sup> Elrunda Roadhouse lies within Elrunda station. As far as I know there are no business links between the two.

to, and nurturing of, those who stay. Those who stay, the 'we' of the statement, are of course the pastoralists. Those who are not 'we' include the others present, people such as conservationists, public servants, scientists and academic researchers who happen by. Such people are presumed not to stay for long. They are characterised as 'blow-ins' or 'do-gooders' from down south. 'We' is generally narrowly defined to include only pastoralists, although certain types of Aboriginal people, such as the 'fine old blackfellas' who are 'true gentlemen', are included where white tolerance and conceptions of authentic Aboriginality allow it (Hage 1998).

Delineating just what the pastoral 'good' comprises, is to a significant degree, the task of this chapter. We saw the genesis of what is made to stand as 'good' in Chapter Five. Pastoralists settled Central Australia and survived to make a home, to experience the variability of the environment, and to have their faith in the productivity of the land rewarded. Essentially, the 'good' refers to the reciprocal relations developed between pastoralists and the land in pastoral culture. In the pastoral view, these are relationships of mutual nurturing - the land nurtures them if they have faith in, and nurture, it. In this sense, the development of the 'good' is analogous to the process of domesticating the Wilderness, in this case the outback, to form the Garden, where such reciprocal relationships exist (see Chapter Two). Moreover, that which is 'good' has connotations beyond the local.

The 'good' also implies an occupation and use of land based upon the understanding that pastoralists use land in a manner that contribute to national well-being. This thesis is based upon the premise that in Australia today this is not so simply the case. There are now other 'goods' being articulated in relation to the place of rangelands in the



nation, and in relation to Central Australia, its place in nationhood and its local constitution. This was shown, for example, in Chapter Four, where an ecological vision of Central Australia was outlined. From the perspective of this vision, and, to a significant extent<sup>72</sup>, from that of Aboriginal people in Central Australia, the 'good' of pastoralism is a destructive force that rides roughshod over other landscapes and people.

The pastoral 'good' is inherent to the pastoral 'true story'. The 'good' arises from pastoral settlement and the process of positing and maintaining the pastoral 'good' is part of the means by which the 'true story' is perpetuated and made relevant to changing social, political and economic circumstances.

Statements such as Bernie Kilgariff's mentioned earlier, offer a shorthand or summary version of pastoral culture. Although more commonly, public shorthand statements by pastoralists are in terms of conservationist identity, stewardship or long-term relationships to the land, Kilgariff's statement is akin to those that originally prompted this research. Such statements offer tantalizing glimpses into pastoral culture but by themselves do not provide a great deal of information with which to understand their bases or origins. What histories, beliefs, events or meanings underlie statements such as Kilgariff's or pastoralists' claims for conservationist identity?

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<sup>72</sup> I qualify this statement here as pastoralism has also been integrated into Aboriginal culture, land use and lifestyles in some significant ways that are valued by many Aboriginal people (for example see Baker 1999; McGrath 1987; Young 1995). See also Chapter Eight. There is no doubt, however, that pastoralism and the broader process of settlement of which it was part had a severe impact on Aboriginal people and culture across the NT (see Chapter Four). For example Kimber (1997) estimates that 650-850 Aboriginal people were killed by punitive patrols between 1860 and 1895. See also Rowse (1998) and Reid (1990) for accounts of race relations in the NT and the deleterious effects of European settlement upon Aboriginal people.

In discussing the 'good' of Central Australia, this chapter aims to examine the context of these sorts of claims and in so doing to provide some insights into the workings of pastoral culture and its location in local and national spheres. In this chapter, the main strategy for pursuing these themes is a number of beliefs held by pastoralists about the role of cattle in the landscape.

## **6.2 *An Overview of Pastoralist Responses***

As discussed in the Chapter Four, the conservationist and scientific critique of pastoralists largely consists of allegations of overgrazing and land degradation. Associated with these issues are concerns about a lack of regulatory enforcement, or other incentives for pastoralists to stock conservatively, and a view that pastoralism should be removed from some areas. The response of pastoralists to these concerns is varied. This following section provides an overview of three sets of responses from Central Australia prior to a more detailed examination of each. The sources of this information are non-indigenous pastoralists interviewed (see Chapter Three), as well as a variety of documentary sources.

First, there is a perception that conservationists, and 'policy makers', want pastoralists out of the rangelands. One pastoralist interviewed said they want to 'close up the country'. This is viewed by pastoralists as a problem not only from an economic standpoint, but also from an environmental perspective. For example, in 1993, the Arid Lands Coalition (ALC) at its formative meeting in Alice Springs, called for a system of conservation reserves in the rangelands. In response, the Deputy Director of the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA) in Alice Springs echoed the views

of pastoralists, saying the NT already had more than enough parks and that 'we can't look after the parks we already have. They are full of feral animals and weeds' (*Centralian Advocate* 23/4/93). This is also seen as a problem for the nation, as pastoralists view agricultural land use such as theirs, and rural people such as themselves, as foundation stones, if not the foundation, of the Australian nation.

Second, pastoralists claim that there is little or no land degradation on Central Australian pastoral lands. In the early days of the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA) one of its main founders, Bob Barber of Mt. Skinner station, told the *Centralian Advocate* (3/5/89) that there were no significant land degradation problems in Central Australia. Mr. Barber said 'we are fortunate [in Central Australia] in that we have the opportunity to nip major problems in the bud'. The Central Australian situation was contrasted with agricultural areas: 'in the south they have stripped the country of trees which creates huge problems in dry spells and floods. We don't have that problem here' (*Centralian Advocate*, 3/5/89). Associated with this view are a number of others that relate to the environmental impact of grazing. Pastoralists claim that 'heavily stocked property [can] come back better than ever' (*Centralian Advocate*, 3/5/89). In his evidence in 1994 to the Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs inquiry into Landcare, the president of the CLMA, Robert Waudby stated that feral animals such as rabbits and horses are seen as the main land degradation issue (Committee Hansard, 15/8/94, p.1473), whereas cattle are potentially 'good' for country. This view is significant in Central Australian pastoral culture but has generally not been disclosed publicly, although it did receive some limited public airing in the letters pages of the *Centralian Advocate* (14/10/97 and 3/1/97).

Third, pastoralists respond in various ways that speak to the themes of persistence, virtue, and long-term perspectives on land and history in Central Australia. For example, Jo-Anne Bloomfield of Andado station wrote in response to allegations of land degradation that 'it is in the pastoralists' best interests to maintain their properties' vegetation to sustain the environment and thus their own economic futures' (*Centralian Advocate*, 7/6/96). Somewhat similarly, Ian Morton of Glen Helen station placed a stewardship value on the presence of pastoralism in his response to resumption plans for a national park. He said he was a fourth generation grazier and had bought the property for the livelihood of his children (*Centralian Advocate*, 17/10/91). In 1988, the late Ted Hayes, of Undoolya station, responded to the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) statements on land degradation. Hayes wrote that he had 'spent [his] whole life in the Alice Springs district and had seen vast changes' and that he, and others like him, had 'heard all their statements before' (*Centralian Advocate*, 25/3/88).

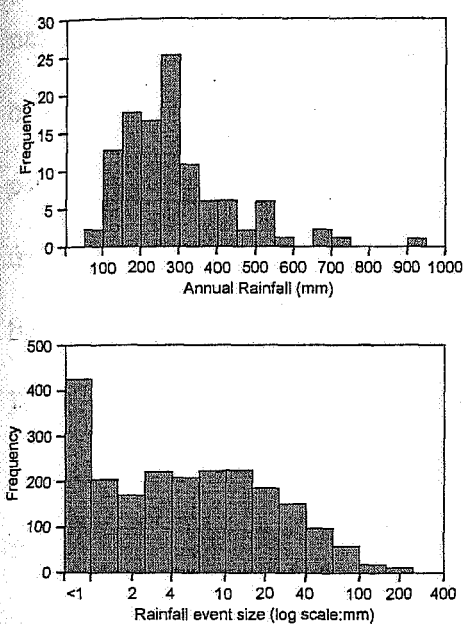
These views constitute the outline of pastoral responses to criticism from conservationists and associated groups. As indicated above, these responses are of a summary nature and do not reveal much about the beliefs that underpin them. The following sections examine the internal logic of pastoral responses.

### **6.3 Making Country Good: Pastoral Presence and Imprint on the Land**

#### **6.3.1 Environmental Variability in Central Australia**

The Central Australian environment is extremely variable. This variability is both spatial and temporal. It applies to vegetation, soils, landforms and rainfall. It is

significant in pastoral culture and in shaping pastoralists' beliefs about land and cattle, and their relationship to the land. Consequently, environmental variability is important in determining their response to criticism. An outline of some features of landscape processes in the inland, from a scientific perspective, will help provide some context for pastoralist responses.



Notes: Rainfall patterns at Alice Springs (113 years of records): top –frequency distribution of annual totals on a linear scale, and; bottom – frequency distribution of the size of individual rainfall ‘events’ (defined as periods without a day with no rain) on a logarithmic scale. Note the skewed form of both distributions, with occasional very large events, and a median below the mean.

### Figure 6.1: Rainfall variability

Source: (Stafford-Smith and Morton 1990, p.259)

Australian arid and semi-arid landscapes are highly heterogeneous and plant production is ‘highly patchy in time and space’ (Ludwig, Tongway et al. 1997, p.29). Clementsian<sup>73</sup> notions of an orderly succession to a climax vegetation community are not appropriate

<sup>73</sup> At the turn of the nineteenth/twentieth centuries, American ecologist F.E. Clements proposed the idea of ‘climax vegetation’, a characteristic vegetation type controlled by the climate and towards which vegetation developed in orderly succession.

for inland arid and semi-arid landscapes (Westoby, Walker et al. 1989; Ludwig, Tongway et al. 1997). Large episodic events such as a major flood, an extended dry period, or heavy grazing can shift patches or landscapes to dramatically different vegetative (Friedel 1991) or geomorphic states (Bourke and Pickup 1999).

Spatial variation is evident in great differentiation between landscape 'patches'. In the parlance of ecologists, patches are areas of the landscape differentiated from each other by biophysical features such as vegetation composition or soil characteristics. These patches can vary in size from square metres to square kilometres, varying, for example, from a mound of soil and plants around a fallen log, to a grove of mulga trees, to the floodplains of large inland rivers (Morton, Stafford-Smith et al. 1995; Ludwig, Tongway et al. 1997; James, Landsberg et al. 1995). This landscape of patches is 'richly patterned' (van Oosterzee and Morrison 1991, p.13) and extremely well-sorted in terms of soils and nutrients (Stafford-Smith and Morton 1990). This is a landscape with greatly varying productivity and greatly varying responses to rain. Rainfall itself is highly variable in time (Figure 6.1) and also in space. Annual rainfall is skewed to low totals with occasional years of high rainfall. The rainfall regime is characterised by mostly small events with occasional very large falls. Plant growth is geared towards larger, more occasional falls, which produce pulses of growth. The magnitude of rainfall events and their timing influence plant growth, both in terms of the specific species which germinate, and whether perennial or annual species germinate (Friedel 1991). The following passage provides an insight into the complexities of vegetation assemblages in arid lands:

Complex weather sequences provide a variety of opportunities for germination, growth and death of plants, resulting in shifting patterns of dominance among a variety of plant life-histories. Some weather sequences may favour widespread germination of perennial shrubs, others may promote their death. The ground layer in any one area may be variously dominated by forbs, or sub-shrubs that are perennial, annual or short-lived, with germination peaks that may be highly seasonal or completely aseasonal (James, Landsberg et al. 1995, p.128).

An ungrazed site on a station south of Alice Springs provides some idea of the variation possible. At this site an elevenfold seasonally-based difference in standing biomass has been recorded and vegetation composition has varied enormously, with grasses ranging from twenty-seven percent to eighty-seven percent of vegetation composition between 1974 and 1976 (Shaw and Bastin n.d.).

To the 'variety of plant histories' we can also add the variety of land use and management histories on any given area of land. This is a factor that can considerably influence the relative presence or absence of particular species. For example, in Central Australia, a sequence of high rainfall years in the 1970s led to the massive establishment of shrubs that has influenced the landscape to this day (Friedel 1991). However, a similar event in the 1920s, with the then relatively low grazing pressure, and followed by extensive wildfires, did not lead to such massive shrub establishment (Griffin and Friedel 1985). Separating the influences of cattle grazing, and land management factors such as imposed fire regimes, from the myriad non-grazing variables that influence plant (and soil) assemblages in Central Australia is a complicating feature of arid zone ecology, and as we shall see, of debates over cattle grazing. Such variation is central to pastoralist interpretation of landscape change and the construction of the pastoral story of Central Australia.

I have outlined landscape processes in Central Australia within an ecological paradigm not because I am seeking to privilege scientific views of land, but rather to outline biophysical processes in arid and semi-arid landscapes with a view to contextualising pastoralist attitudes towards the land and outsiders. By describing the biophysical environment as I have, I also aim to convey some impression of what is physically seen and experienced by pastoralists living in Central Australia and the difficulties associated with interpreting what might be viewed at any given moment or place. My intent in this chapter is to illustrate the agency of environment in pastoralist responses to conservation criticism and in the development of pastoral culture. I wish to show how nature is both material and actual as well as a cultural product of social processes. Nature is not a mere background on a social stage, it enters and constitutes, at various scales, the social stage itself, in ways that are historically specific, and subject to both local and extra-local influences.

Distinguishing between nature as agent and nature as background is not productive, and merely reproduces the distinctions between nature and society (Demeritt 1998). Demeritt urges instead a focus on the 'powerful and productive practices by which the truth of representation is realized and produced' (Demeritt 1998, p.189). In the case of pastoral culture in Central Australia, nature features heavily in practices of representation as pastoralists inhabit the landscape, shaping it as it shapes them, their identity and their social boundaries. Applying Watts' (Watts 1998) argument in his analysis of oil politics in Nigeria, it is not simply that the conflicts over rangelands are taking place on the contested ecological and social landscapes of late twentieth century Australia, it is that pastoral identities are 'channeled through nature' (p.246). Pastoral identities and nature are built from and through each other and do not purely stand apart



as separate entities in the struggles to realise 'truths'. What appear as debates over 'environment' are thus inadequately characterised as merely this. What appear as environmental struggles are simultaneously struggles over identity, citizenship, nationalism and culture. In his analysis, Watts examines the nature and origins of the 'objects, networks and identities' (Watts 1998, p.246) that enter into environmental struggles. Similarly, pastoral identities and pastoral natures are created and brought into being in struggles over land.

### **6.3.2 Knowledge, Experience and the Idea of Country**

Central Australian pastoral culture has developed within and through environmental variability. In the course of occupying land, pastoralists experience this variability on both a daily basis, over years or lifetimes, and through family and collective memories. On a daily basis, pastoralists travel across their stations, both on tracks and cross-country. The spatial variability is encountered as one moves between different land systems. Vegetation, landforms and soils change constantly over relatively short distances. In the course of this work, pastoralists can gain detailed and intimate knowledge of their land. Over time, pastoralists observe the variations in vegetation, soil and landforms as rains, droughts and floods come and go, endlessly reshaping the land. This process builds up knowledges and histories of land in terms of events and changes at particular sites, and develops a perspective on landscape that emphasises change. In pastoral culture, these histories are seen as personal; they exist only in relation to an individual and their presence on the land, and as collective, because in pastoral culture there is a shared sense of this particularity and experience of land over time. Over longer periods this variation enters family and collective memories in the

form of both a generalised set of beliefs about landscape processes, and in the form of certain anecdotal stories that gain currency in families and in the pastoral community.

The concept of 'country' in pastoral culture needs to be elaborated. In the above discussion, and in previous chapters, the term 'land' is used in association with pastoral experience of it. In this context, land is an impoverished term and will become more obviously so in this chapter as the association of pastoralists with land is explored. Whereas land potentially carries an implication of an object separate from those who occupy it, the term and idea of country refers to socialised land. Country is used to refer to land to which individuals, families or groups have some meaningful relationship. In Australia the term is generally associated with Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal English. However, in inland and northern Australia it is also used in settler culture, including by pastoralists. In Aboriginal culture it refers to the allegiance to a particular place held by a person or group (Arthur 1996). This allegiance arises from association, language, personal and family history (largely through inheritance and other social relationships such as those derived from kinship systems) and spiritual knowledge. In Aboriginal terms, it encompasses interaction not only between human beings who share an affiliation with country, but also between humans and non-human beings. Such relationships bestow rights of ownership, and responsibilities for sustaining the physical and spiritual life of the land.

In pastoral culture the term 'country' has a similar meaning in that it refers to land that is socialised and to which individuals, families or groups have affective relationships of some sort. The term might be used in relation to an individual and their family, for example in a statement such as 'my family's been in this country for a long time', or 'I

know this country like the back of my hand'. The term is also used collectively where a pastoralist might say 'we know this country', or 'it's our country'. Country can also be used to refer to the state of the land as it relates to its pastoral value or the productivity that pastoralists perceive. Thus, after a dry period rainfall might cause the 'country to be in good heart' again, or land not suited for cattle might be referred to as 'rubbish country'.

In terms of country, Chapter Five, which discussed pastoralists' perspectives on the settlement and 'making' of Central Australia, was concerned with some aspects of making 'country' out of 'land'. This section is about a range of other aspects of creating country: environmental knowledge, presence and experience/observation, and landscape processes and the place of pastoralism within them. As this chapter will show, pastoral 'country' is closely associated with pastoralists' sense of property rights.

### **6.3.3 Environmental Change in Geological and Historical Time Scales**

Pastoral views on landscape processes and the role of pastoralism and cattle will be broken into two sections. This first section will focus on landscape change and processes on broader scales. These scales are geological time and historical time. Discussion of historical time will largely focus on the period from the 1950s to the present day. The following section will focus on processes, such as vegetation change and erosion. In these sections I will show the environmental and historical basis for pastoralist beliefs about their position and role within the landscape locally, and begin to illustrate how long-held beliefs about land and pastoralism are accommodating critiques that question pastoralists' occupancy and use of land. From this retrospective I move to

the present day showing how past and present landscape events and changes intersect in pastoralist conceptions of land and self, and in their responses to criticism.

In discussions with pastoralists, environmental variability was a significant and recurring theme throughout what they said about the land and themselves. Indeed, very often this was a point that was forcefully impressed upon me. My questions were apparently taken as evidence that I had not a clue about Central Australia and what it was 'really like'. Many pastoralists evidently had a need and reason to clearly explain and emphasise variability in Central Australia. They didn't want me leaving with simply a 'snapshot' view of Central Australia. In the pastoralists' views, perspectives on Central Australia gained over short periods lie at the heart of criticism that is directed at them.

In pastoral culture the emphasis on variability is not limited to seasonal and annual variations. Reference was also made to erosion and landscape change in geological time. Geologically, Central Australia is one of the oldest landscapes on earth and is deeply weathered and eroded. Rivers such as the Finke have been following the same general courses for about 100 million years (Thompson 1991). Like many other rivers in Central Australia, the path of the Finke is marked by numbers of palaeochannels<sup>74</sup>, evidence of changing hydrological landscapes (Bourke and Pickup 1999). The MacDonnell Ranges (Figure 6.2), uplifted some 310-340 million years ago (Thompson 1991) and once the stature of the Canadian Rockies (van Oosterzee and Morrison 1991)

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<sup>74</sup> Channels and stream meanders dating from earlier periods of geological time, which no longer form the main channel of a river. In Central Australia such palaeochannels may carry water in large floods, often acting as river 'floodouts'.



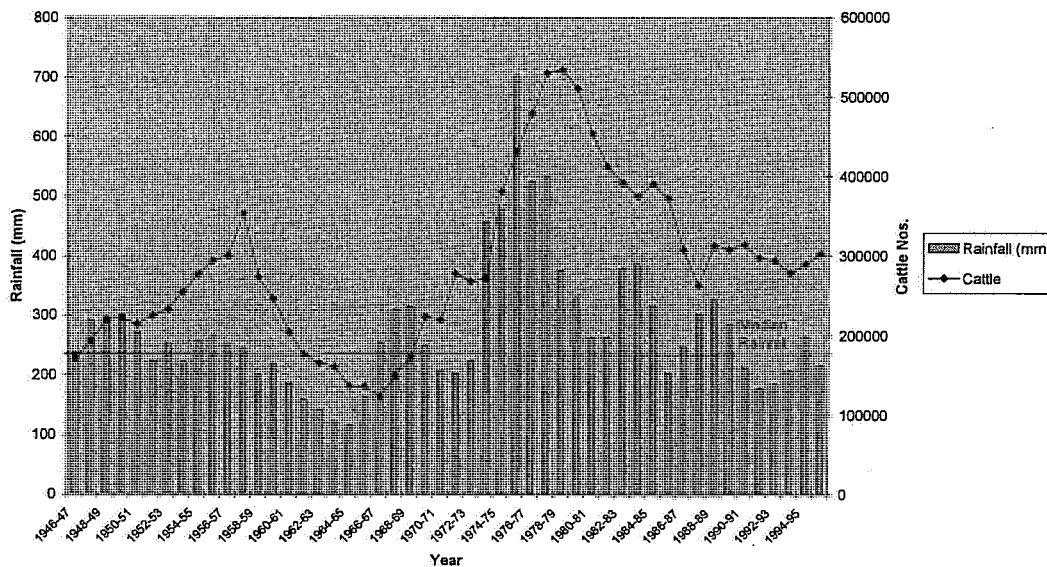
On one station I was referred to Table Hill, a land system of elevated relief and comprising tertiary<sup>75</sup> sediments laid down in freshwater environments tens of millions of years ago. This area is now significantly eroded and covers only a relatively small area. I was told by a member of the pastoral family who hold the lease over this land, that this area was once a lake bed which has been, and is being, eroded and could now be found as sand in the Simpson desert to the southeast. The pastoralist's source of this information was a government employee with significant responsibilities for extension services to pastoralists, particularly in the areas of soil conservation and land system mapping for pastoral management purposes. It is likely that the conclusion drawn by the pastoralist from this information is not that intended by this government officer. The conclusion drawn in this instance and by other pastoralists, is that in terms of geological time, their presence is of modest significance. It follows that landscape change is so profound, and on such a large scale, that the agency of cattle in the landscape is relatively inconsequential. Moreover, another point being made is that if erosion has been occurring over millions of years, then it is clearly a natural process. Thus, my fieldwork indicated that pastoralists generally see erosion caused by cattle as not only of little consequence, but as entirely in keeping with natural processes.

The historical time scale has a similar place in pastoral culture. Certain observations and events lead pastoralists to perceive of a landscape that functions on a grand scale, and in which human activities constitute a marginal element. In addition, pastoralists see their place in this landscape in ways that contrast significantly with the place of non-pastoralists, specifically those identified as their critics. For example, the 1958-65

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<sup>75</sup> A period lasting from 65 million ago to 2 million years ago

drought (Figure 6.4) and associated debates over pastoral land use (Chapter Four), and subsequent changes in the landscape are both important in shaping pastoral responses to criticism today. These examples will be used in this chapter to explore aspects of pastoral culture and its relationship to land.



**Figure 6.4: Cattle numbers and rainfall (three year running average; Alice Springs) 1946/47-1994/95, Alice Springs Pastoral District. Median rainfall = 242 mm.**

Source: NT Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries statistics 1979/80-1994/95, Animal Industry Branch Annual Reports 1946/47- 1964/65, NT Statistical Summaries 1962-1972 and Clewett *et al* (1999).

In Chapter Five I discussed how the Chalmers family weathered the drought in the 1920s and survived to see rain revive the land, transforming it from bare earth to apparently verdant pastures on which their stock thrived. I suggested that this experience of the country in all its variation is a key moment in shaping pastoralist beliefs about land. I argued that this experience rewards faith in the productivity of the land. This cycle of faith and reward sets up reciprocal relationships between pastoralist

and land. Amongst pastoralists, such relationships serve to distinguish them from others who do not have this experience of the land.

The 1958-65 drought and surrounding events have similar resonances in pastoral culture today and, to some extent, build upon memories of the 1920s drought, or more specifically upon generalised memories of such events within pastoral culture. As we saw in Chapter Four, the 1958-65 drought was an occasion of great criticism of pastoralism in Central Australia and I alluded to pastoralists looking back to this period when addressing criticism of the industry in the 1990s.

An article in the December 1966 edition of the *Inland Review*<sup>76</sup> entitled 'Who Said the Centre was Dead?' provides some evidence of how pastoralists saw the apparent 'recovery' of Central Australia after the rains in early 1966. The article emphasises that critics of the industry had claimed that the land in the Centre was so damaged that it would not produce pasture again. In contrast there were now 'tens of thousands of square miles of...a colourful canvas where cattle [were] rolling fat' and one 'jubilant' pastoralist was quoted as saying the cattle were 'just eating their bloody heads off' (Anon. 1966, p.26).

Tony Greateorex, former manager of Palmer Valley station and Secretary of the Centralian Pastoralists' Association (CPA), wrote on behalf of pastoralists. He argued that once the rains came, 'the country made its usual and expected recovery' (Anon.

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<sup>76</sup> The *Inland Review* was a short-lived Alice Springs publication. It had close links with the pastoral industry.



1966, p.27). Of the critics of the pastoral industry he wrote 'few...have been in the country long enough to appreciate' this resilience of the land (Anon. 1966, p.27).

These views were echoed in pastoralist verbal submissions to the NT Land Board's 1964 inquiry into the drought<sup>77</sup>. This inquiry provides clear information as to pastoralists' beliefs about land that continue to resonate today and to inform their sense of a place on the land and their rights to occupy it. For example, William Brown of Annitowa told the Land Board:

After the 1928 drought it rained in 1929, in March 1929 it rained and from then on they were getting fat cattle off here. After they stocked up I came down here and they were stocking up then and right up to 1956 the seasons were fair to good and the herds increased...and now it has gone back again. It's a cycle, in my opinion, it's a cycle that comes every 25 to 30 years (William Brown, evidence to NT Land Board July 1964).

Not only is the country resilient and able to recover from severe dry periods and produce fat cattle, but, as Brown implies, and as other pastoralists state, long term residence in Central Australia and close experience of the land is required to develop knowledge of its 'true' nature and resilience.

In addition, evidence of pastoralists to the Land Board in 1964 invokes a feeling of faith in the land. Previous cycles of drought and recovery are described by many who gave evidence. Collectively, they argued that they saw an inherent productivity, a sometimes hidden potential, only seen by virtue of experience of decline and recovery. At the time,

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<sup>77</sup> In July 1964 the NT Land Board received verbal submissions from pastoralists and others from Alice Springs and surrounding areas. A transcript is held at the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries library in Alice Springs, item RO27.

Greatorex spelt out this faith in the land in a call for critics to assist in restoring faith in the land and in the pastoralists:

After all, the pastoralists have toiled to get a living out of the country – and not one of them walked off even when the experts were claiming that the Centre was finished, the pastoralists' position hopeless, and advocating the closing down and de-stocking of the whole of the Northern Territory south of Alice Springs. They had sufficient faith to struggle on because they and their wives believe in the country and its ability to recover (Anon. 1966, p.27).

Greatorex linked faith in Central Australia with the national interest, claiming that trust in the pastoral industry and the country would 'repay the Northern Territory and the Commonwealth' (Anon. 1966, p.27).

The rains of 1966 and subsequent high rainfalls from 1973-1978 (Griffin and Friedel 1985) (Figure 6.4) brought changes in the vegetation that, in pastoralists' perspectives, vindicated their faith in the land. In their view the country 'came back'. This refers to a belief in the resilience of country and its ability to once more produce 'feed' even after an extended dry period or heavy stocking. Speaking of the recovery after the rains in 1966 Rose Chalmers said of the country:

But you don't know, you get the right rain and there it all is! Even that beautiful button grass which is the best grass of all. And that was just miles of it (interview 16/11/96).

In this view, the country is reborn over and over again, it just needs the right combination of rainfall and timing to realise its inherent potential (Figure 6.5).



These past events inform pastoralists' responses to contemporary challenges to their place on the land. As pastoralists now look back on the decades following the breaking of the drought in 1966, they see a wholesale change in the landscape of Central Australia. The rains of the 1970s (Figure 6.4) triggered wide-scale establishment of shrubs in the Alice Springs pastoral district (Griffin and Friedel 1985). Rose Chalmers described this period as one in which the 'hills of Alice Springs oozed water' (interview 16/11/96). In certain types of land to the north of Alice Springs, densities of mulga were recorded at up to three thousand individuals per hectare (Griffin and Friedel 1985). In the course of fieldwork, the changed nature of the landscape from one that is remembered as relatively open up to the 1970s to one that is dominated in many areas by shrubs and trees was a consistent and emphatically made point. For example, as I drove into MacDonald Downs homestead, my vision was limited by thick stands of mulga that crowd the track. The then residents of MacDonald Downs, Rose and Mac Chalmers said that in the past this area was open and one could see 'for miles' (interview 16/11/96).

Very often pastoralists made this point by bringing out photos to show the changes in vegetation. For example, at a station on the Finke River I was told that the now tree and shrub-blocked view to the river was once open and clear. I did not see a photo of this view but I was shown another site near the homestead and a past photo of this site. This contrast is illustrated in Figure 6.6. By making the comparison between the relatively open view in the top photo and the relatively wooded present day scene the pastoralist was making the point of the inevitability of landscape change on a great scale, and the unpredictability and variability of this change.



There was some evidence from interviews that a small number of pastoralists perceived this shrub growth as a management problem. These pastoralists were those who might be characterised as more progressive in their overall management. The dominant attitude, however, was that this shrub growth was merely evidence of the cyclical change that pastoralists expect. Scientists see the shrub increase as a land management problem resulting from fire suppression and selective grazing as much as from rainfall (C. James, interview 7/11/97 and Griffin and Friedel 1985). In contrast, pastoralists see the increase in shrubs as an 'improvement' in the country and as evidence that the criticism they have received since the 1960s (Chapter Four) is ill-informed.

It might be argued that pastoralists see the shrub increase as an improvement simply because the shrubs are a useful pasture resource, especially in dry periods when other pasture species are depleted. The changes in the country are, however, perceived more broadly than this by pastoralists. The increase in shrubs, and to an extent trees such as river red gums and coolibahs, is also taken as an aesthetic and environmental improvement. One pastoralist said 'we remember a much more arid landscape than we have now' and went on to talk of the thousands of river red gums that now line rivers near Alice Springs. This comment alludes to perhaps a more significant meaning in pastoral culture of the growth of shrubs and trees. In this statement there is an implication of moving from a less desirable state (more arid) to a more desirable state (less arid). This might be interpreted simply as a restatement of improvement and to an extent it is. It is however, also a reference to the potential of the Central Australian landscape, its improvement, not degradation, and of the dangers of taking 'snapshot' views of the Central Australian landscape, as pastoralists believe their critics do.

The growth of trees and shrubs after a period such as 1958-65 is taken as evidence of the resilience and productivity of the country. In pastoralist views, if the country was as damaged as their critics claimed, then such growth would not be possible and the pastoral industry would be finished. This is the view that underlies contemporary responses to critics. The late Ted Hayes, as someone who had 'spent his whole life in the Alice Springs district and [had] seen vast changes' took this up in a posthumously published letter that has become a reference point for pastoralists:

We were led to believe following the drought of the 1960s that if the country ever recovered it would take at least 10 years to do so. The agronomist of the period was proved to be very wrong in his assessment and, like many scientists and experts quietly left the district. In 20 years time the present degradation theory will be proved as wrong and the people making all these statements will have long left the Northern Territory...If only they knew the history of the area: the industry has been in existence here for over 100 years (*Centralian Advocate*, 25/3/88).

Hayes' recollections of George Chippendale (Chapter Four) and his likening of Chippendale to present day conservationist critics is paralleled by comments in 1996 and 1997 by other pastoralists. For example Bill Prior, the former manager of Hamilton Downs station said in response to recent criticism from Alice Springs conservationists (Chapter Four) that the country 'came back better than ever' after the 1958-65 drought. While he went on to say that anyone who denied there had been overgrazing would be a fool and that the idea of woody weeds might have some merit, he came back to the concept of variability and the view that shrub growth is part of cyclical change:

I remember a place like Hamilton Downs used to have this broom bush - it'd grow very, very thick. But then a certain year it will die, nobody could tell you why, but it seems to have a life, and it'll die off. Then over the years it gradually builds up again (Interview, 11/10/96).

‘Boof’ Smith of New Crown station also expressed the idea that tree and shrub growth represents an improvement in the country. In a letter to the *Centralian Advocate*, an Alice Springs conservationist made allegations of overgrazing in the area of New Crown where ‘kilometre after kilometre of dead stumps [attested] the enormous impact overgrazing has had on what were once productive mulga woodlands’ (*Centralian Advocate*, 31/5/96). Smith responded defensively:

The dead stumps have been there since at least the early thirties, as attested to by my father who travelled through that region extensively. And if examined closely enough it is evident that they died as a result of bushfires...There are more trees in the country now than in the forties, and we have the photos to prove it (*Centralian Advocate*, 4/6/96).

In the above views, the current ‘generation of experts’ are comparable to those of the 1960s, and Smith wonders if they will be around when ‘the rains fall again as they must, and the country is once again in good heart’ (*Centralian Advocate*, 4/6/96). In pastoralists’ views, this cycle of renewal and destruction in a variable landscape and the presence of dead trees in any given place, is of little fixed meaning independent of certain historical events and processes, the knowledge of which they claim to possess.

In summary, pastoralists’ see that the industry has survived extended dry periods previously and has done so in spite of periodic bouts of criticism about land degradation and long term resource depletion. Industry survival is taken to demonstrate two things to pastoralists. First, it shows the ‘normality’ of climatic fluctuations and cycles, and that these fluctuations pose no threat to the pastoral industry. Second, given the industry has survived stressful periods, sometimes in spite of scientific and conservationist criticism, pastoralists have not seen the demise of their industry. On the contrary, they have seen what they believe to be tremendous recovery from dire situations. In other words, from



the pastoralists' point of view there has been *no vindication* of the criticism leveled at them. The country has continually renewed itself and shown that it can support the presence of pastoralism. There is little room for land degradation in these geological and historical perspectives on landscape. Land degradation implies linearity in the landscape. Amidst a largely teleological view of pastoral settlement, pastoralists see cycles of destruction and renewal over decades and over geological epochs. These cycles dwarf their presence and that of their cattle. In these historical and geological perspectives of landscape, the pastoral industry and their cattle exist within natural cycles and the presence of pastoralism is thus naturalised. The pastoral frame of domestication is able to accommodate the scale of environmental fluctuation in Central Australia

#### **6.3.4 Living with Chaos and Gardening the Centre**

Pastoralists also naturalise cattle at shorter time scales and at smaller spatial scales. At these scales cattle not only exist within natural processes but they also enhance them, 'improving' the landscape in ways that pastoralists see as 'natural'.

In a landscape largely influenced by episodic rainfall events, observable erosion events from scales of metres to kilometres are not uncommon. In their work across stations pastoralists see these changes. Such changes range from soil deposition over a few metres, to large changes in river or creek morphology. Small movements of soil were often pointed out to me by pastoralists, who made comments to the effect that erosion has been present since before Europeans arrived and that erosion happens all the time. Boof Smith's letter canvasses this point:

The accelerated erosion and the shifting of dunes attributed to the pastoralist was happening long before the white man ever discovered this area. If this weren't the case there would have been no desert for the explorers to name (*Centralian Advocate*, 4/6/96).

Debates over 'scalds', or 'scour' zones in Central Australia have reinforced pastoralist ideas about erosion being natural. In the recent past, conservationists have taken such landforms as evidence of soil erosion due to cattle grazing. However, geomorphological research on erosion and floods in Central Australia has shown that these features can have origins independent of cattle grazing. Such zones are production/source zones for sediment transfer and may appear in a variety of forms from largely intact areas shedding topsoil to substantially eroded areas comprising bare subsoil (Pickup 1985). Their formation is caused by rainfall events of sufficient magnitude or occurrence to surpass erosion thresholds (Pickup 1985). By reducing vegetation cover and breaking down soil surface aggregates, cattle grazing can enhance existing erosion processes or initiate new sites of erosion (Pickup 1985). The scours can be relatively small areas that only exist between small floods, or can be sections of bare eroded floodplain several kilometres in length which result from large and rare flood events of greater than 1-in-100 year magnitude (Pickup 1988; Bourke and Pickup 1999).

The work of Pickup, as cited above, and particularly that of the NT government, which identified stable scour zones on aerial photography dating back to the 1940s (D. Torlach, pers. comm 1/12/94) has strengthened pastoralists' beliefs that erosion is a natural process that occurs independently of cattle grazing. In particular, the identification of scours dating back to the 1940s is consistent with pastoral memories that such scours were always present, including in areas before they were grazed. Such

historical recollections are also consistent with present day experiences relating to eroded areas and cattle. For example, a pastoralist told me of a scalded area, the boundary of which is on a fenceline. According to the pastoralist the scald predated the fence, which they had built. The pastoralist told me that a scientist, who is generally held in high regard by pastoralists, saw this apparent fenceline comparison and concluded that the scald was due to higher grazing pressure on the eroded side.

By itself such an anecdote might not mean a great deal. In the context of debates over such scalds and land degradation generally, however, pastoralists' readings of such an event becomes significant in perpetuating pastoral beliefs about erosion and about the limits of criticism of the industry. Anecdotal stories of scientists and conservationists getting 'it wrong', by ignoring localised, sometimes site-specific, histories, abound within pastoral narratives. Taken together these stories contribute to individual and collective senses of the value of pastoral knowledge of country derived from long-term presence and observation.

As outlined above, vegetation variability over relatively short periods such as season to season, and over small areas, is also a feature of the Central Australian landscape. Pastoralist observations of vegetation change, as in the case of small movements of soil, in the course of their work and travelling around the stations, create a sense of known or intimate landscapes. Intimacy comes from close observation of the state of pastures, from observing groups of young trees and shrubs appearing and slowly growing, from observing the changes in vegetation on any given area or site, or from taking a favoured route home at sunset to see dune country at its sunset-reddened best. Bill Waudby,

formerly of Mt. Wedge station spoke of his observation of his station, invoking the continuous engagement that engenders an intimate knowledge of the land:

N.G.: So what did looking after your cattle involve?

B. W.: Well it became a matter of once you came through the boundary gate you were back on the job again, you had to look after your waters, you had to look after your stock. You had to maintain this, that: yards, fences, and the waters. All this had to be taken into account. It was a twenty-four hour job, three hundred and sixty-five days of the year.

N.G.: So how did you keep an eye on how the pastures were going around the property?

B. W.: Well you'd be going around all the time, looking here, there. You know, you'd never really let up, you just had to - you know, you had to be very observant and on the ball (interview 10/10/96).

Waudby talks of 'going around all the time'. This refers to the extensive travelling pastoralists engage in around the stations. Much of this occurs in the course of 'bore runs', a weekly task involving checking watering points on a station. In the course of such work pastoralists drive hundreds of kilometres. This travel provides regular opportunities to see large areas of stations under a wide range of conditions. It engenders a view amongst pastoralists that they know the country better than anyone else. As one pastoralist told me, he has seen the country in 'all its moods' and thus knows it better than anyone. As we drove around his station, this pastoralist made clear to me that varying vegetation cover represents one of the 'moods' of the country.

In the variability of vegetation, pastoralists largely see chaos. Vegetation is seen to change abruptly and often without apparent cause. For example, groups of young trees were pointed out as having arisen from a particular period of rainfall on the area of country in question. More commonly, pastoralists would point out areas or sites clothed in vegetation and would make comments as to their recent vegetation history. Such sites

included ones that had been bare of vegetation as long as they could remember, and which had recently and unexpectedly gained vegetation. Other examples included sites where the composition of vegetation was seen to be unpredictable, varying from season to season and between 'desirable' and 'less desirable' pasture species.

In pastoralists' views, their observations of the consequences of cattle grazing can confirm landscape unpredictability. Pastoralists generally, but not always, stop short of saying one cannot overstock the country. Those who do say you cannot overstock are placing great emphasis on the resilience of the country, believing, in the words of one pastoralist, that 'the country will kill you before you kill it'. This sounds extreme, but, as a restatement of the belief in the enormity of the landscape, it is actually not far removed from more moderate views on stocking practices. More generally, pastoralists speak of country without cattle as being 'worse' or in the 'same' condition as country with cattle. In dry periods unstocked country is seen to become as bare as country that is stocked. Robert Waudby stated these views in 1994:

We have got to be careful when we talk of land degradation because I can lock up a paddock...and not have animals in there for four years and I can tell you there is not a blade of grass in that area. The white ants have got it, it is lignified<sup>78</sup>, it is blown away (evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs 15 August 1994, p.1473).

In this view cattle tread lightly on the land, but again there is apparently chaotic variation and a range of other environmental factors that override the consequences of the presence or absence of cattle (Figure 6.7).

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<sup>78</sup> I understand Waudby to be using 'lignified' to refer to grass that has dried up and become 'woody' in that it has lost its suppleness and moisture. This is the only instance of the use of this term by pastoralists that I have come across.



of pastoral knowledge in relation to others, they act to strengthen them. In the face of variability and the inevitability of change, pastoralists will often say they do not understand a lot of what they see around them. They also say you need to be in one spot for a long time to begin to gain insight into what the country is doing, to even begin to appreciate the dynamic nature of the landscape. Sometimes this view was expressed in terms of individual lifetimes. One pastoralist in his early thirties often camps out on his station in order to observe and experience the country instead of returning daily to the homestead. He said he has seen a range of short to medium-term cycles in his lifetime, is still learning, and does not see his thirty years as sufficient to grasp what is happening in the landscape. On other occasions this view was put in terms of the Central Australian pastoral industry. One older pastoralist said to me 'who can say if you are doing the right thing, the country's too young to know'. This is saying the industry itself has not been in Central Australia long enough to really know what is happening in the landscape and with the climate. While this view appears to contradict the geological and cyclical perspectives discussed earlier, it actually arises from them. If the country changes profoundly in geological time, and also changes cyclically, the relative youth of the pastoral industry means that it is hard to locate the point in the cycle which the country currently occupies. Moreover, pastoralists ask what are the durations of the cycle: is it a one hundred-year cycle, or a fifty year cycle? Although pastoralists emphasise a long-term residence on their part, in terms of landscape change they acknowledge that the industry is relatively inexperienced of extreme fluctuations such as the 1958-65 drought and the subsequent high rainfall 1970s. They ask; if we don't fully understand what is going on, with our closeness to the country, how can anybody else?

The view that cattle are, at worst, neutral in their impact on country, is paralleled by a view of cattle as gardeners. This is what is meant when pastoralists say cattle 'are good for country', or cattle 'improve country'. It was a view widely asserted by pastoralists during fieldwork, including both those who are adopting 'sound' and 'progressive' management practices, and those who are not. This view was expressed to me by pastoralists, as both a general statement, and with reference to certain types of country. It was generally qualified with reference to the need to not overstock.

Cattle are held to improve country by tilling or turning over the soil, manuring it, breaking up hard surfaces, providing hoof marks for seed and water, and facilitating seed and moisture penetration of the soil. Pastoralists make reference to observations of seeds and seedlings in hoof prints, revegetation on bare areas following stocking, and cattle 'opening up' scrub and allowing the sun in. One pastoralist said 'a lot of country in Central Australia is no good until its stocked...its just like ploughing the land'. Another said the 'country likes to be eaten out', 'rank' grass needs to be removed. Such views were found across age groups, from pastoralists in their early twenties to those in their sixties. A teleology of developing an 'improved' landscape of home from the Wilderness appears to remain in place among pastoralists.

Apart from the instances listed above, one of the main bodies of contemporary evidence for informing this view amongst pastoralists lies in a number of grazing exclosures (i.e. cattle are excluded from the site) set up by various government bodies and CSIRO between 1965 and 1989. There are twelve of these exclosures on nine stations and they were originally set up for a variety of purposes. In the 1990s, the Department of Primary Industries (DPIF) has brought them together as one project. Pastoralists refer to these



sites, noting that vegetation outside the exclosure can be 'better' than, or at least the 'same' as, the vegetation inside the exclosure. Such a view did not necessarily come only from pastoralists who had exclosures on their stations. These observations appeared to circulate within the pastoralist community. Moreover, twice in 1997, Bob Lee, the Director of the NTCA, drew on DPIF results from these sites, to argue in letters to the *Centralian Advocate* (3/2/97 & 14/10/97), that cattle may be beneficial to native flora:

The available scientific evidence...is indicating that cattle grazing in Central Australia may be beneficial to the growth of native flora, although it is still too early to draw definite conclusions (*Centralian Advocate*, 14/10/97).

Results from one exclosure, Spinifex Bore on Mt Riddock station, indicated an 'improvement' in vegetation in that there was a greater increase in two moderately palatable perennial grasses inside the exclosure relative to outside. Overall, however, results from the exclosures were generally 'inconsistent' and it was difficult to make conclusive statements as to the effect of grazing on pasture yield and composition (DPIF unpublished data 1997 and 1999, A. White, pers. comm. 15/10/97).

Pastoralists' observations and circulating anecdotes as to the variation across these sites, in concert with this 'scientific' information, concur with pastoral beliefs about variability in the landscape and the place of pastoralism within it. The instances where country is more vegetated or in better condition from a pastoral perspective outside the exclosures, demonstrate to pastoralists that cattle can be 'good for country'.

This belief is not, however, simply an outcome of their observation of the exclosures and of other areas on their stations. The belief that cattle 'improve' the land implies that

cattle change the landscape for the better, and, further, they actually play a role in creating it. By ploughing the soil, pastoralists see a role for cattle in realising and enhancing the productive potential of the landscape. In Central Australia, pastoralists see the pastoral presence not only in social networks, homesteads, bores and fences, but also everywhere written on the face of the land itself.

That this belief system is not simply related to contemporary observation is also borne out by considering the persistence of the idea of cattle as gardeners. In some respects the characterisation of this idea as simply a 'belief' is to trivialise it and risks also misunderstanding pastoral knowledge systems and their roots in colonial and modern ideas and landscapes of 'productivity' and 'improvement'. The transformation of country by cattle is better understood as an integral part of pastoral culture with historical origins and significant powers of persistence. This persistence occurs despite and because of environmental variability and government pasture research and extension interventions, the results of which pastoral knowledge systems are able to accommodate and incorporate without being fundamentally challenged.

Evidence by pastoralists to the 1964 Land Board hearing in Alice Springs and the views of the late Ted Hayes illustrate the ingrained nature of these beliefs in pastoral culture and their deep historical roots. Hayes claimed that the country in the Todd River valley on Undoolya was transformed from 'bulldust' to some of the best stands of grass and top feed in the district following stocking by his father (Ted Hayes in Anon. 1987, p.26-27). According to Hayes, the 'cattle created a different sort of topsoil texture which

allowed moisture to penetrate and seed to set and germinate' (Ted Hayes in Anon. 1987, p.26-27)<sup>79</sup>.

A revealing example of the improvement of country in pastoral historical memory is found in Robinson's account of the Nicker family (Robinson 1999b) which was discussed in Chapter Five. This example is important because it is an account of 'improvement' that can be pinpointed to a particular rainfall pattern. It also illustrates how the memory of such events is carried within pastoral families. In Robinson's account of her grandmother's observations, the country improves with cattle grazing:

The country around them grew better with every wet. From the homestead vantage point Liz noticed an improvement in grasses and a slow but steady greening and developing density of shrubbery. Because she was a gardener at heart, she believed the cattle were responsible. Their hooves broke up the topsoil and their bodily waste nourished the soil. Where they foraged on low bush branches, the canopy grew taller and shaded more grasses and infant trees. Moving away from their watering places, they distributed grass and herbage which better anchored what already grew. Every hoof indent left a cradle for new seeds to develop, protected from wind on the open plains and held little pockets of water when it rained (Robinson 1999b p.43).

The very fact that this is stated uncritically in permanent, written form is important for the maintenance of pastoral historical memory. In Central Australia, as elsewhere in Australia, historical records of environmental change in conjunction with settlement are

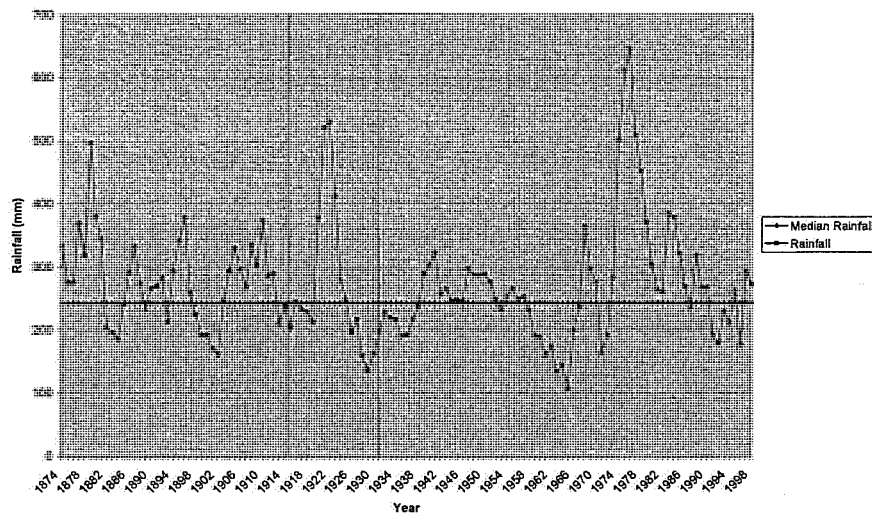
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<sup>79</sup> The changes observed at Spinifex Bore on Mt Riddock and along the Todd River by Ted Hayes, have both taken place in what might be termed 'resilient' land systems. This use of this term presents difficulties in Central Australia as it implies that land is able to cope with grazing pressure and remain stable. Further, it is consistent with the pastoral view that 'country always comes back' and can thus justify the idea that grazing has no impact. Resilience is better seen as an ability of land to cope with grazing without suffering excessive erosion and without losing plant production potential. This perspective does not preclude sudden changes in vegetation composition which are not susceptible to simple categories such as 'improvement', 'degradation', or 'good' or 'bad', but which simply represent change and indicate resilience. Amid rather inconclusive evidence from the various exclosures, pastoralists have focussed on two isolated sites, which just happen to be types of country where 'improvement' in a pastoral sense is relatively likely. Other conflicting evidence is ignored to varying degrees, because the evidence of 'improvement' is consistent with their knowledge system and positive cultural valuations of pastoralism's presence (Vanclay 1997).

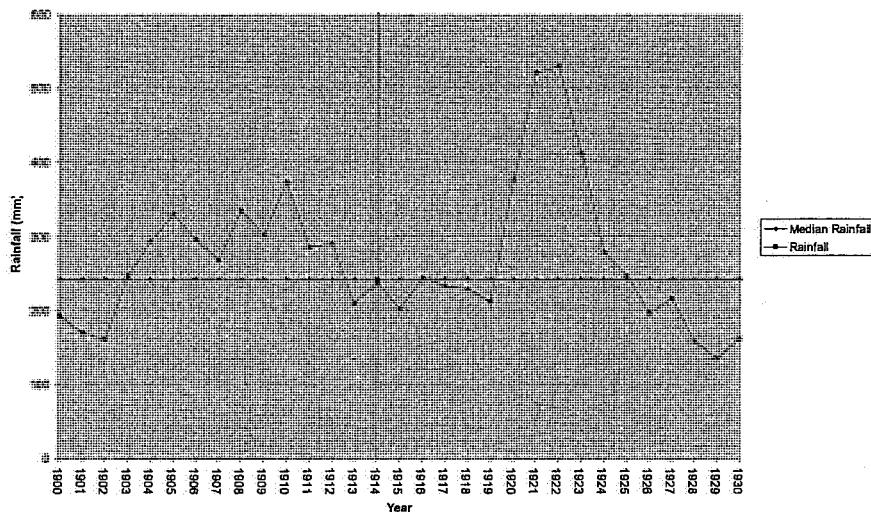
elusive and fragmented (M. Friedel, pers. comm 11/8/97 and Powell 1994). This means that pieces of knowledge or memory, such as that recounted by Robinson, can, and do, potentially enter pastoral narratives of country. This story of Liz Nicker's observations has been preserved within the family to this day. Robinson grew up hearing this story from her grandmother. In conjunction with observations of increases in tree and shrub cover, the belief that cattle are good for country has persisted in the family over much of the twentieth century (J. Robinson, pers. comm. 8/99).

The importance of particular events in Central Australia can be also be discerned from the Nicker/Robinson account of environmental change. From Robinson's book we can date Liz Nicker's observations to the period 1914-1930 (Robinson 1999b). The time of the Nicker family's arrival happened to coincide with a period of below median rainfall (Figure 6.8). The two vertical lines delineate the Nicker's period at Glen Maggie. It can be seen that rainfall was low for the first five years of their time at Glen Maggie. This was followed, from 1920, by four years of *exceptionally* heavy rainfall.

Figure 6.9, where the Nickers' arrival in 1914 is marked by a vertical line, shows this in more detail. Such rainfall peaks are associated with large-scale regeneration and growth of vegetation (Griffin and Friedel 1985). It appears from this rainfall evidence that the Nicker/Robinson family memory of cattle improving the country is associated in time with a period in which large-scale vegetation growth would be expected due to rainfall.



**Figure 6.8: Rainfall (three year running average) at Alice Springs<sup>80</sup> 1874-1998 and the Nicker Family period at Glen Maggie 1914-1930**



**Figure 6.9: Detail of Nicker family period at Glen Maggie, 1914-1930 with Alice Springs rainfall data (three year running average)**

Source (6.8 & 6.9): Clewett (1999) and Robinson (1999b).

<sup>80</sup> I have used Alice Springs data in this analysis. Use of such spatially specific data is potentially problematic due to spatial and temporal variation in rainfall. In this analysis the nearest rainfall station to Glen Maggie, Aileron was used as a proxy for Glen Maggie. The two sites are only thirteen kilometres apart and are at a similar height above sea level. Aileron rainfall data, however, only exists from 1949 to 1998. Aileron data was correlated with data for this period from Alice Springs to the south and Barrow Creek to the north. For Alice Springs and Aileron,  $r=0.90$  ( $r^2=0.82$ ). For Barrow Creek and Aileron,  $r=0.90$  ( $r^2=0.81$ ). Using the Pearson correlation coefficient the significance of the statistical result is above 99.9%. The rainfall data from Alice Springs was therefore used to stand for rainfall trends at Glen Maggie. Appendix Six visually shows the relationship in rainfall trends for Aileron, Alice Springs and Barrow Creek from 1949-1998.

This association between a specific rainfall period, a particular conclusion drawn at the time (cattle are 'good for country'), and the subsequent persistence and influence of this observation over decades, point to the role of actual events at a local or regional level in the construction of knowledge systems and of pastoral culture. The narrative of 'improvement' is widespread and persistent, and has shown itself to be resilient in the face of contradictory information presented over decades by government and other scientists.

Again, in pastoral narratives, cattle are modifying the landscape and the landscape is responding to the presence of pastoralism and blooming as a result. Cattle (re)create the landscape, they make it what it has become today. In their 'gardening', cattle mimic and enhance natural processes. While the land, its soils and plants, have the appearance of being nature separate from society, in pastoral culture this separation is blurred. Alongside the view of nature as uncontrollable and as something which must endure, is the view of nature as malleable. Through altering the land in ways presented as akin to natural processes, cattle imprint pastoralism into the very fabric of the land; pastoralism and the presence of cattle are part of the land and thereby 'nature' and 'natural'. 'Improvement' itself is a natural process.

Through the work of their cattle in the landscape, pastoralists see themselves, their presence, and their history as evidence of their *stewardship* of Central Australia. In pastoral culture, cattle are not simply beneficial for country, they make country 'good'<sup>81</sup>. Pastoral management is the maintenance of infrastructure and 'care' of

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<sup>81</sup> I am indebted to Dr. John Cook, then anthropologist with the Central Land Council, for discussions and ideas around this point.

country that pastoralists undertake to keep stations functioning. This includes fence maintenance, bore maintenance, grading and maintaining tracks, feral animal control and movement of cattle from areas requiring a 'spell'. In pastoral culture, without the pastoral presence to maintain the station and the land, and to maintain those things that make up the accreted landscape, the land loses its meaning.

Country without pastoralism becomes something altogether different in the pastoral imagination. At the very least in pastoral culture, country removed from pastoral use, through for example Aboriginal purchase or resumption for conservation reserves, becomes 'unproductive'. It is, however, not simply a sideways transition for pastoralists. Pastoralists see such changes in land tenure as a backward step. The history of landscape accretion, of development, family life and death, labour and transformation of land is a forward trajectory in pastoral culture. Country that leaves the pastoral estate, is seen by pastoralists to revert to a 'wild' or 'virgin' state. This is usually spoken of in terms such as weed growth, uncontrolled feral animal population, and in the case of Aboriginal land, rubbish, unhygienic living conditions, infrastructure deterioration and uncontrolled cattle. In contrast, in pastoral culture, pastoral land is controlled and domesticated (Anderson 1996), its destiny and bounty has been realised and it has been made 'productive'.

For pastoralists, the stewardship inherent in pastoralism is twofold. First, they are using land productively and realising its inherent potential. They manage it, maintain the stations, and use the land productively. In so doing they fulfill the colonial/modern imperative to use land, and to not allow it to go to waste. In this schema, national parks and Aboriginal land represent a faultline across the destiny of the land. Second, in

Central Australia, pastoralists have transferred this 'wise use' theme to encompass environmentalism. In so doing, they have not abandoned their ideals of using the land, because, for them, pastoralism is natural, existing within and complementing natural processes and landscapes. Thus the continuation of pastoralism is synonymous and with conserving nature<sup>82</sup>. In addition, they see that because pastoralists actively manage land, watch over it, and have a self-interest in not degrading it, they 'care' for it in ways that advance conservation goals. Thus, in contrast to weed and feral-infested Aboriginal lands, pastoral lands are presented as actively managed in a way that will prevent such degradation. In this way pastoralists can argue that pastoralism is a land use compatible with an 'ecological nation', while not abandoning their traditions – the 'true story' is a flexible story. For pastoralists there is no contradiction between what is 'natural' and what is 'improved', nor is there one between 'conservation' and 'stewardship'.

Paradoxically, the pastoral story of authenticity has gained in strength, or has at least demonstrated its resilience, as a result of the environmentalist critique. As shown above, the pastoralists' accommodate environmental concerns within their conception of stewardship. They are able to absorb environmental and land management concerns and information from scientists and conservationists alike into their systems of knowledge about Central Australian landscapes. They do this in a manner that is entirely consistent with their sense of history, pastoral settlement and views about 'productive' land use.

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<sup>82</sup> For example, as cattle 'tread lightly' on the land in pastoral views, pastoralists do not see grazing as being in conflict with biodiversity preservation goals. In fact, some pastoralists expressed the hope that improved station and herd management practices they were introducing would enable native flora and fauna protection and, in some cases, fauna reintroductions. Others also said their stocking practices in some areas took the presence of rare native animals into account.



pastoral culture, as with such 'local' rural cultures elsewhere facing external pressures, is able to:

reach into their cultural and symbolic reserves to create and assert an updated sense of distinctiveness, of difference from the other side. They contrive new meanings for apparently old forms. They use the very symbolic devices in virtue of which they imagine themselves to be regarded as anachronistic, parochial, and peripheral; and, by their use, neutralise these perceived implications...the capacity to so respond revitalises the boundary as perceived from inside and thereby signals the renewal of the community (Cohen 1985).

The power of the 'true story' lies partly in its adaptability to changed circumstances. The 'good' allows this pastoral foundational narrative to be rewritten as a story not only of settlement, but stewardship through settlement, and, today, stewardship through continued pastoral land use. Amongst pastoralists, stewardship itself has expanded to include not only wise and productive use of resources through grazing, but has, to some extent, also come to include themes of flora and fauna preservation. This is not to suggest that similar concerns have not been evident amongst pastoralists in the past, but that preservationist concerns are assuming a greater role within pastoral notions of stewardship. Pastoral Landcare in Central Australia is among, other things, a good example of such flexibility and accommodation in both conscious and unconscious ways. Pastoral Landcare focuses on production issues but receives legitimacy as an 'environmental' practice from its association with the Landcare movement which is generally seen as a 'good thing' and beyond reproach (Lockie 1997). An examination of Landcare in Chapter Seven will provide an example of the integration of production and the beliefs discussed in the chapter with contemporary environmental concerns into pastoral notions of stewardship.

### 6.3.5 Stewardship for Family and Nation

On whose behalf is this stewardship undertaken? Stewardship does not exist in a social vacuum. The term implies that the land is being stewarded for someone or something. It implies that one group, in this case pastoralists, are acting on behalf of others. Who are these others on whose behalf the pastoralists are acting?

First, pastoralists claim to be acting on behalf of their children. They describe their labour and sacrifices as being for their children, in order to be able to pass something on to them. This is an element of looking forward in pastoral culture that stands alongside the retrospective traces we saw engaged earlier. The emphasis on not working for themselves but for their children shows pastoralists as selfless. They see and portray themselves as making sacrifices on behalf of others. Environmental stewardship and stewardship on behalf of family merge in pastoral culture. This is evident through statements to the effect that because they are there for their children, it is in their interest to manage the land carefully and maintain its productivity. As one pastoralist colourfully put it in relation to aspirations for his childrens' future on the station 'why would you all your life shit in your own nest?' With such statements pastoralists ask others to take it on trust that such self-interest will ensure responsible land management. 'Family' interests are presented by pastoralists as self-evident proof that responsible management will occur. Pastoralists are appealing to what they see as shared beliefs and assumptions as to the virtues and motivations of family farming in Australia. The values they are appealing to are essentially those of agrarianism and 'countrymindedness' (see Chapter Two). They include non-economic motivations for involvement in farming: family farming is inherently desirable and morally deserving; and family farming is an authentic site of productive and nurturing relationships with nature.

That the dominance of family ownership of stations in Central Australia is culturally significant is seen in the emphasis that is placed on this ownership structure by pastoralists and others. Family ownership refers to ownership and management of a station by a family who reside on the station. It generally stands in contrast to absentee ownership, in which case the owner of the station, whether an individual or a company, resides elsewhere<sup>83</sup>. Alongside environmental variability, family ownership is a key component of Central Australian pastoral discourse. It is a point emphatically made by pastoralists (and some government employees). Compared to other pastoral districts, Central Australia certainly does have a high rate of family ownership (see Table 6.1).

NT Pastoral District	Owner Operators (family)	ABSENTEE	LEASEHOLDERS	
		NT	Interstate	Overseas
Alice Springs	66 (89%)	1 (1%)	7 (10%)	-
Darwin	4 (18%)	7 (32%)	8 (36%)	3 (14%)
Elsey/Gulf	42 (79%)	2 (4%)	9 (17%)	-
Victoria River District	17 (23%)	1 (4%)	11 (37%)	11 (37%)
Barkly Tablelands	11 (25%)	2 (5%)	31 (70%)	-
<b>NT Total</b>	<b>140 (60%)</b>	<b>13 (6%)</b>	<b>66 (28%)</b>	<b>14 (6%)</b>

Note: The figures in parentheses refer to the percentage in each ownership category by district and for the NT as a whole

**Table 6.1: Pastoral lease ownership structure by NT Pastoral District 1992.**

Source: Campbell (1992)

Central Australian pastoralists' distinguish themselves as 'family pastoralism' in order to distance themselves from pastoral areas characterised by greater corporate and absentee ownership. In the NT absentee and corporate ownership has been a source of

<sup>83</sup> The division between resident family owners and absentee owners can be blurred. For example, families who own stations may reside in Alice Springs or elsewhere for family, age or health reasons, and employ a manager on the station. Amongst pastoralists such a station would be seen as a family-owned station.

considerable controversy in the past (for example see Kelly 1966). Critics of the pastoral industry have at times used representations of pastoralists as economically motivated, corporate and profit-driven to support their campaigns<sup>84</sup>.

The second claim to stewardship centres on the value of pastoralism to the nation. Pastoralists see themselves as stewards and users of the land, not just for their own families, but also for a greater good. Pastoralists perceive that they produce much needed export income that benefits the nation and which provides economic benefits throughout Central Australia. As we saw in Chapter One, the economic benefits of Central Australian pastoralism are actually relatively minor compared to tourism and mining. That critics of the pastoralists make comparisons with such industries, however, highlights, for them, the cultural significance of their claim for the national importance of pastoralism. For example, in 1991, retired pastoralist Bryan Bowman said tourism is a 'luxury industry that produces nothing' but snapshots for trophy-gathering tourists, in contrast to pastoralism that produces 'export income for the country [and] many tonnes of valuable protein for a hungry world' (*Centralian Advocate*, 27/8/91). Pastoralists see mining, while a primary industry, as opportunistic and fleeting, in that it does not contain the long-term commitment to country on which pastoralists pride themselves.

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<sup>84</sup> The debates over Native Title in Australia in 1997 and 1998 illustrated this form of representation clearly. The Wik High Court decision in 1996 found that Aboriginal native title could exist on pastoral leases. The Australia federal government moved to legislatively protect pastoral interests. Critics of the pastoralists and the government routinely defined pastoralists as greedy, wealthy, corporate and foreign. The letters pages of major Australian newspapers were replete with examples of this. Such representation ignores the variation of ownership within the pastoral industry. By the same token, pastoralists and their representatives emphasised the family nature of pastoralism and corporate pastoralists were notably absent from the public debate. For example, corporate pastoralists did not provide evidence to the Joint Parliamentary Committee that conducted an inquiry into the government's Native Title Amendment Bill 1997.

Amongst pastoralists, pastoral land use is fundamental in a further sense. It is the locus of true value, it is the locus of authentic relationships with the land, and it produces the necessities of life (food) without which, it is assumed, urban Australia would grind to a halt. Pastoral land use (and rural land use in general) is seen by pastoralists as fundamental to Australian nationhood. One pastoralist told me in an interview, 'people on the land are the foundation of Australia'. In contrast, urban life and urban people are seen by pastoralists as alienated from nature, as ignorant of the land and production systems that provide their food, and as parasites on those who actually produce primary products.

In pastoralists' view, Australian national identity and character arises somehow organically from rural society, and the personal and social relationships to land that rural land use is seen to entail. By not seeing this and campaigning against pastoralism (as pastoralists see it), pastoralists see urban conservationists as contributing to Australia losing its way (to paraphrase a pastoralist's comment). Pastoralists' believe that urban people are threatening the basis of Australian national identity by removing the structures (i.e. the land uses and their social purpose) that have facilitated the relationships to land, and which are thought to have shaped Australian character nationally and individually.

#### **6.4 The Power of the 'good'**

Pastoral views of their temporal and spatial place in the landscape lie behind their status as a 'cohesive reference group with a strongly developed, tightly shared value-orientation, founded on a clear sense of identity and self-worth' (Holmes and Day 1995,

p.211). They distinguish themselves from conservationists and other critics whom they see as working with landscapes that are not inhabited but disembodied, geometric, distanced and abstract: ecosystems, representative reserves, regional planning zones, and bioregions. This division is built largely on the pastoralist system of environmental knowledge that relates to Central Australia in general, and upon individual or family knowledge that relates to particular stations. For pastoralists, the contrast marks out those who have the right to speak about land and those who don't. In claiming an authentic knowledge born of presence, work, observation and persistence, pastoralists believe they hold the foundational and genuine narrative of Central Australia.

The power of pastoralist ideas about pastoral knowledge and the pastoral bounty of Central Australia do not lie only at the level of Central Australian pastoral culture, pastoral relations to land, and pastoral environmental knowledge systems. Jacob notes that 'such attachments rarely stay simply at the scale of the individual, they circulate more broadly than that' (Jacobs 1997, p.503). Similarly, Central Australian pastoralist relationships to land do not circulate solely within pastoral circles. Nor do they simply reside within Central Australia as locally interesting tales, devoid of political meaning and relationships to extra-local social, political and economic formations.

There are a number of ways in which we can consider the wider significance of the pastoral 'good' of Central Australia. One is through the strong relationship of the pastoral industry with the NT government, and in particular its relationship with the conservative Country-Liberal party, which has been in power in the NT since self-government in 1978. The NT government has been consistently supportive of the pastoral industry. This has been evident in the centrality ascribed by NT government

ministers to the pastoral industry in the NT economy and identity. For example at the NTCA 1992 annual general meeting, the Minister for Lands and Housing, Max Ortmann, said:

You know people often try and tell me that other industries like mining and tourism are really the backbone of the Territory. Ladies and gentlemen, I don't believe that and neither do you. Despite the vagaries of our unrelenting climate, the fickleness of the marketplace and the well-intentioned assistance provided by some bureaucrats, the pastoral industry has not only survived but survived well. Your industry, this pastoral industry, is the true backbone of the Northern Territory. It put the Territory on the map and, over the years, has made it a force to be reckoned with (NTCA Yearbook, 1991/92, p.29).

Such promotion continued in 1999 when the NT government claimed that:

The \$108 million Northern Territory pastoral industry is fundamentally important to the region's economic growth, employment opportunities and export income (Northern Territory Government 1999).

More subtle, but perhaps more telling, is the politicians' acceptance of pastoral beliefs and outlook. In 1988 the Chief Minister, Marshall Perron, addressed the 1988 NTCA annual general meeting. He attacked those who criticised pastoralists over land degradation, citing a range of ideas that should by now be familiar to the reader. Referring to the 1958-1965 drought, he defended the pastoralists who, 'in a history going back over a century...had seen it all before, and doubtless will see it again' (NTCA 1987/88 Yearbook, p. 35). Perron went on to quote from Ted Hayes' posthumously published letter discussed above (page 215), noting that 'Ted was a wise man. He knew experience beat theory hands down' (NTCA 1987/88 Yearbook, p. 35). He then discussed the recuperative powers of the land:

You, and in many cases, your families before you, have utilised the resource for over a hundred years, and it is capable of running more cattle now than ever before...it is clear many critics fail to differentiate between real degradation

and the inevitable decline in ground cover and species diversity which occurs quite naturally during drought. Although the country looks quite bare to inexperienced observers after a number of years of below average rainfall, you and I know the landscape will change dramatically when more favourable conditions return. [Drought] is nature's method of conservation. Yet experts continue to voice their doubts about the land's ability to regenerate every time severe drought hits the Territory...yet every time it has happened before the break of the drought and a return to average and above average rainfall has seen the land recover [sic] (NTCA 1987/88 Yearbook, p. 35).

Such sentiments transcend mere rhetoric to inform policy and practice. In one estimate, the NT government spends almost \$52 000 per pastoral lease on administration, monitoring, extension and other services (Wilcox and Cunningham 1994). In addition, with the passage of the Pastoral Land Act 1992, the NT government upgraded many fixed term pastoral leases to perpetual leases without requiring investigation of the state of the land and infrastructure, as was previously needed. Another example of the NT government's commitment to the pastoral industry and the idea of Central Australian as pastoral space, has been its legal battles over Aboriginal land rights claims under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976. Claiming erosion of the pastoral estate and negative economic consequences, the NT government has developed a 'form of institutionalised opposition to land claims' (Fletcher 1998, p.2). This has led to undisclosed sums running into millions of dollars being expended by the NT government in opposing land claims (Fletcher 1998).

Sentiments similar to those expressed by NT politicians have also played a role at the national level in protecting pastoralists' interests. In the 1997/98 Native Title debate, the Prime Minister of Australia, John Howard, had the following to say about pastoralists, whom he called 'farmers':



Australia's farmers, of course, have always occupied a very special place in our heart. They often endure the heart-break of drought, the disappointment of bad international prices after a hard worked season and quite frankly I find it impossible to imagine the Australia, I love without a strong and vibrant farming sector (Prime Minister's Address to the Nation, ABC TV, 30/11/97).

The Prime Minister's words show that pastoralism is not only economically important, but is also important to conceptions of national culture and identity at the highest political decision-making level in the country. The use of the term 'farmers' by the Prime Minister and by the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) in its campaign against Native Title (for example see the NFF's 'Dear John' letter in the Canberra Times 24/3/97) is significant. It illustrates the wider context of Central Australian pastoralists' continued assertions about the family structure of their industry and the moral virtue of this. These remote landowners do not state this in isolation, they are part of broader relationships where such claims are used as an element in the exercise of power. In this case such exercise of power involves maintaining a vision and geography of Central Australia that is founded on 'whiteness' (Hage 1998), and the sole legitimacy of settler and 'productive' land uses.

The power of the pastoral notion of what is 'good' also lies in the way it taps into two very strong currents in Australian history and culture. On the one hand it draws from outback mythology and the ideas of struggling pioneers, of egalitarianism and the small or family settler, of coming to grips with the Australian environment, and of forging national identity through the allegedly unique encounter with the Australian environment (for example see White 1981). On the other hand it uses the ideology of agrarianism that underlies outback and bush mythology in Australian society, as discussed in Chapter Two.

The pastoralists' ideas of the inherent productivity and benefits of pastoralism bring outback mythology closer to agrarianism. They provide a more pronounced 'rural' inflexion to outback mythology which has come to be a most flexible signifier in the late twentieth century (McGrath 1991), and for which rurality is one among a number of themes (Chapter Two). The 'good' relates to outback mythology through its origins in pioneering settlement, struggles with the aridity of inland Australia, and an eventual and profitable coming to terms with the arid environment. In pastoral culture these processes have shaped pastoralist bodies and identities and, in pastoralists' view, position them at the centre of a nation in which rural land use and rural people are key defining elements.

The 'good' relates to agrarianism in that it has a vision of rural land use as a fundamental land use and as the ideal method to use and conserve the land for the benefit of Australia and Australians as a whole. The 'good' is also the source for a pastoral discourse of property rights in which independence and individualism is stressed and held up as the best means by which stewardship for economic and environmental goals may be achieved. In this formulation of stewardship, private and societal interests are represented as one and the same, and pastoralists are able to satisfy economic as well as environmental interests.

Central Australian pastoralist views of the benefits of pastoralism also relate to Australian agrarianism and a vision of Central Australian pastoralism that harks back to the idea of the yeoman settlers so influential in Australian settlement history and policy (Chapter Two). The yeoman ideal, of independent, hard working family farmers on freehold land, was brought to Australia from Britain and was central to colonial and imperial visions of how the settlement of Australia might proceed (Powell 1972). This

yeoman ideal was based on deeply held and ancient beliefs, popular in Europe from the time of Australian settlement. As Chapter Two outlined, these beliefs included the idea that a society based upon such principles of land tenure and land use was not only desirable but also a state consistent with a natural life. Such a society, moreover, existed in a natural state of being, based upon working the soil and living with the seasons far from the industrialising cities.

The yeoman ideal has generally been associated with freehold tenure and agriculture. In Australia, however, it has also extended its influence into semi-arid, leasehold areas in the inland of eastern Australia (Heathcote 1965). In Chapter Five we also saw pastoral and official approval of the family nature of pastoral settlement in Central Australia. As this chapter has shown, pastoral culture in Central Australia has continued to place value on family ownership of stations and on close associations with land and commitment to land.

The aridity of inland Australia certainly placed great pressure on the yeoman ideal. Due to environmental constraints and the reluctance of governments to foreclose future land use possibilities entirely, leasehold tenure has dominated and, over time, relatively large land holdings have proven necessary for economic and environmental viability. As discussed above, however, this has not prevented the persistence of elements of the ideal, perhaps demonstrating the extent to which agrarianism, independent of particular historical formulations, is ingrained in Australian culture. Classically:

pastoralists and their environment were identified with collective social values stemming from the nation's birth, [and] farmers and cultivated fields were associated with the values of increased reciprocity between people in society and between society and its environment (Olwig 1984, p.95).

From the pastoralists' point of view, pastoralism in Central Australia has assumed this role traditionally assigned to cultivation. The variable and infertile environment, the importance of pastoralism in the foundational story of Australia, and the outback myth, have all conspired to block the teleological progression from pastoralism to agriculture. While the land use progression has been obstructed, within pastoral society and amongst associated groups, the values associated with the agriculture phase have been transferred to pastoralism. Pastoralists see they have achieved what is possible in terms of rural land use in Central Australia and in so doing have fulfilled the expectations of settlement. They have created a desirable rural community and, as they see it, have realised the productive potential of the land on behalf of family and national interests. Neither that of hero, nor the identity of farmer, sits well with the pastoralists. They prefer to see themselves as outback yeomans, a blend of outback and traditional agrarian identity, both of which can be drawn upon to articulate and defend their place on the land.

This is significant for contemporary debates over rangelands, which indicate that Australia has now perhaps reached a point where culturally and economically 'higher' values might be realised in the rangelands. One of the intents behind the leasehold system in inland Australia was to retain the power of the state to vary land tenure and use systems on the assumption that pastoralism would give way to more intensive or valuable land uses (Meinig 1988; Heathcote 1965; Heathcote 1987b). Originally such future possibilities were conceived of in terms of agriculture, with pastoralism being a temporary land use, prior to more intensive settlement. Today such potential land uses encompass tourism, conservation, Aboriginal ownership and bush foods. Pastoralism has, however, in Central Australia captured the 'agricultural high moral ground'. This

makes it difficult in a society where agrarianism retains significant cultural power, not least by virtue of its relationship to dominant political forces and utilitarian or production-oriented views of nature, to realise alternative futures for Central Australia that carry equivalent moral weight to that of the industrious citizen, the outback yeoman.

## **6.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how pastoralists view environmental processes in Central Australia and how they construct a place for themselves in relation to these processes. In the building and rebuilding of pastoral culture, pastoralists draw on memory, experience, persistence, observation, and ideals of family rural settlement. Nature is a common thread running through all these elements, and they are brought together in pastoral culture to conceive of a closeness and deep embeddedness in nature amongst pastoralists. This closeness gives rise to what they see as authentic knowledge and the right to occupy and speak for land.

In pastoral culture, nature and the pastoral landscape are one and the same. Pastoralism is seen as the 'natural' state of affairs. While nature is potentially unruly if allowed to fall from pastoral care, pastoral nature is seen as equally natural, in fact as a more desirable 'natural' state. Pastoralists represent the pastoral landscape as the natural benchmark against which other landscapes must be measured. In pastoral culture:

Human values no longer arise from a process of development in social and environmental relations, rather they seem posited by physical nature alone (Olwig 1984, p.95-96).

For example, cattle are natural because they 'till' the soil, enhancing natural processes and, as in traditional agrarianism, family rural ownership of land is a 'natural' state of humankind.

By positing the pastoral landscape as a natural landscape, as a given, pastoralists mask the social and political origins of landscape formation. But even as they do this, the pioneer history of Central Australia is celebrated and made visible, and, as we saw in Chapter Five, remembering is significant in contemporary pastoral culture. The pastoralist representation of the pioneer past, of settlement, and of pastoralist stoicism and endurance is one of a natural and evolutionary process. What else, they might ask could be done with the land? It was waiting, and its potential just needed effort to be realised. In pastoral culture, pastoralism hasn't been imposed 'unnaturally' on the land, pastoralism has fitted into a landscape within which there was space already existing for it. So, within pastoral culture the social origins of the pastoral landscape are themselves 'natural' and inevitable. In these ways the pastoral foundational narrative of Central Australia (the 'true story') comes also to encompass nature itself.

The concepts of scale and time have also been shown to be significant in realising the power of the pastoral 'good' in Central Australia. Pastoralists' conceptions of the value of the pastoral industry are also visible within centres of political power at both the NT and national levels. In addition, the role of pastoralism in realising the bounty of the land taps into, and is informed by, still influential agrarian ideology in Australia, which posits the establishment and maintenance of the Garden in rural areas, including the pastoral rangelands. Pastoralism is seen to be not only meeting the private economic and stewardship needs of the pastoralists, but is also represented as fulfilling national

imperatives of land use, production and environmental care. Pastoral occupation of this agrarian niche also arises from deep-rooted foundations in both local experience and colonial/national imagining. This niche has been both created and filled through local experiences of land and labour, and through the construction of colonial, then national, idealised geographies of settlement and rural society. Present-day agrarian representations of Central Australian pastoralism have deep roots in historical processes of occupation of land at both local and national levels.

The chapter also discussed how the nexus of pastoral culture and nature is flexible. I showed how pastoral culture has been able to accommodate environmentally-based criticisms by adjusting pastoralists' idea of stewardship. A traditional agrarian ideal of stewardship as wise, careful and productive for the social good, has been expanded to include contemporary environmental concerns. This has occurred without disruption to pastoral beliefs about the effects of cattle grazing, and has also proven accommodating of scientific information that scientists would see as, at best, equivocal, in what it might say about the impact of cattle.

The next chapter will expand upon this stewardship theme, insofar as it works to perpetuate the pastoral story of Central Australia. This will be examined through the quintessential contemporary vehicle for the expression of agrarian stewardship, Landcare. Examination of Landcare will also facilitate discussion of some cracks in the pastoral 'true story'. These cracks do not necessarily diminish the power of the 'true story', for many of them are only visible from within the pastoral world, while the unqualified 'true story' remains the one visible to the outside world. Nevertheless, they

illustrate that pastoral culture is not entirely monolithic, and shed further light on some important aspects of pastoralist culture often missed by its critics.



## **Chapter 7 Maintaining and Remaking Pastoralism in Hostile Times – Landcare and Pastoral Stewardship**

Many of the pastoralists blame the rabbit for damage for which they themselves are responsible, through their stock (Ratcliffe 1947, p.218).

The CLMA is indeed a model for large landcare groups that have a regional focus. The importance of having an organisation that is producer controlled and driven cannot be understated when it comes to the effectiveness of extension programs generally (Gardiner and Associates 1997, p.2).

### **7.1 Introduction**

The previous two chapters have discussed the origins and development of the pastoral landscape, and the nature of pastoral stewardship. These issues were discussed in light of contemporary debates over the rangelands. The discussion highlighted aspects of pastoral memory, beliefs about landscape processes, and the role of both environmental/land knowledge, and of history in staking a claim to land. This chapter extends this discussion by illustrating how pastoral Landcare (see footnote 86) has become an important means through which pastoral stewardship is asserted and moulded in the light of criticisms of pastoralism and the currency of the languages of ecology and sustainability. Through Landcare, pastoralists construct a model and language of 'management', which appears to meet environmental concerns, but which exists within the parameters of Central Australia as an intrinsically and naturally pastoral region, as discussed in Chapters Five and Six. I will also show how Landcare, while fundamentally concerned with the maintenance of pastoralism, also allows examination of tensions and change amongst pastoralists, tensions that permit us to glimpse some cracks within the somewhat monolithic nature of the pastoral 'true story'

as I have presented it so far. Chapter Eight will identify some further tensions presented by Aboriginal pastoralism, as evidence of the entanglement of pastoral and Aboriginal landscapes and histories, which further destabilise settler pastoralist claims about the fixity and universality of their story of Central Australia. This current chapter is based on observations at Landcare events and meetings and discussions with pastoralists and with Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA) staff. I use information from various documentary sources to analyse and illustrate results from these observation and interviews.

## **7.2 Landcare in Australia: A Brief History**

Landcare is arguably one of Australia's greatest environmental and rural success stories of the last ten years. The Landcare 'movement' arose in the 1980s as a result of a number of factors. These include the limited success of government soil conservation programs and the increasing costs of land degradation after decades of land clearance, grazing and capital-intensive agriculture. There was also a realisation amongst policy-makers that traditional extension methods<sup>85</sup> did not adequately address social and cultural aspects of farming and grazing societies.

The Landcare movement originated in Victoria and Western Australia, where governments worked with farmers to create landholder-run voluntary groups with the aim of tackling land management problems in their districts (Campbell 1994). In 1989

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<sup>85</sup> In the agricultural context 'extension' is communication and information dissemination aimed at rural producers. It is generally a transfer of information from 'experts' such as scientists or government staff, on matters including land management, breeding, herd economic, or soils. Ideally Landcare does not operate in the 'top-down' manner.

such schemes expanded to a federally funded, decade-long national program. This was largely the result of a proposal to the Federal government from the unlikely partnership of the Australian Conservation Foundation and the National Farmer's Federation.

Landcare is based on the premise that extension programs must involve producers from the beginning of land management and rehabilitation projects. Involvement is entirely voluntary, and the success of the program in involving landholders is reflected in participation rates of around thirty percent of all rural properties (Baker 1997). The participation rates of Landcare are commonly taken in their own right as signs of success (Lockie 1997). There are however, a range of criticisms that have been directed at Landcare. These include the 'wishful thinking of attempting to deal with the huge problem of land degradation through small, voluntary and inadequately resourced groups (Baker 1997). They also include exclusion of people along lines such as gender and race (Lockie 1997), and require examination of the limitations of relying on individualism, voluntarism, farmers' environmental knowledge, and readiness to adopt new practices (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995).

One of the problems associated with Landcare is in defining exactly just what it is. Definitions range from those emphasising community groups working towards sustainable land management (Baker 1997), to those in which Landcare is little more than a banner signifier for existing government rural extension programs (Lockie 1997). In addition, conservation groups have criticised Landcare for its emphasis on maintaining rural productivity rather than encompassing matters such as biodiversity conservation on rural land. This is a particularly pertinent issue in regard to Landcare in the rangelands, where debates are concerned with the very presence of pastoralism, as

much as reforming pastoral land management. The Arid Lands Coalition (ALC) has called for a reform of rangelands Landcare, including the use of such monies to assist in the process of reforming land use in the rangelands (ALC 1996).

Struggles over the meaning of Landcare, and the fact that Landcare groups function within rural cultures with their attendant histories, internal divisions, economic problems, and belief/knowledge systems, mean that Landcare cannot be taken at face value. Lockie and Vanclay (Lockie and Vanclay 1997) argue that 'there is an unambiguous need to locate Landcare more broadly within the social dynamics of rural society' (Lockie and Vanclay 1997, p.vii). This chapter takes this argument as its starting point for an analysis of pastoral Landcare in Central Australia in order to illustrate the role of Landcare and how it relates to debates over rangelands, to pastoral culture, and maintenance of the pastoral narrative as the foundational story of Central Australia.

### ***7.3 The Origins of Pastoral Landcare in Central Australia***

As we saw in Chapters Four and Six, in the late 1980s, NT pastoralists were becoming concerned about the increasing interest of conservationists in rangelands and pastoralism. In September 1987, pastoralists in the Victoria River District (VRD) in the north of the NT (Figure 3.1) formed the VRD Conservation Association. In 1988, following a field day on Mt Skinner station sponsored by the Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association (NTCA), pastoralists met in Alice Springs and formed the

Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), a now well established group that is the pastoral Landcare group in Central Australia<sup>86</sup>.

The formation of the CLMA was motivated both by politics, and a desire on the part of some pastoralists to see improved pastoral land management in Central Australia. In political terms pastoralists were concerned about the profile of conservation organisations. Expressing this concern in his 1987 report, presented at the 1986/87 NTCA Annual General Meeting, the Executive Director of the NTCA, Cliff Emerson (a former pastoralist himself), said:

As a result of drought conditions and an 'awakened' group of environmentalists a great deal of attention to rangeland management was generated by a somewhat overzealous and generally poorly informed media. The Association responded in a responsible manner in various forms: greater involvement of members will occur in the future. The Association has already commenced setting the agenda for debate on this important issue (NTCA Yearbook, 1986/87, p.27).

The NTCA President's report from Centralian pastoralist, Grant Heaslip also expressed this concern, calling for a 'small working group to be set up immediately to recommend action that needs to be taken' (NTCA Yearbook, 1986/87, p.16) to deflect conservationist criticism of the industry. He suggested that one task the industry and government should undertake was the compilation of 'industry supportive data', such as the aerial photographs of scalds referred to in Chapter Six, which show 'no advanced

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<sup>86</sup> Since its inception Landcare has come to encompass non-rural land management. Other Central Australian groups that receive Landcare money include non-government organisations such as Greening Australia, and Aboriginal organisations such as Tangentyere Council. Such groups undertake a wide variety of land management projects. For example, Greening Australia undertakes 'urban Landcare' projects such as saltbush swamp rehabilitation in Alice Springs. Tangentyere, assists remote Aboriginal settlements with problems such as dust through landscaping, design and tree planting. When not specifically referring to the CLMA, I use the term 'pastoral Landcare' to make it clear that am referring to Landcare as it relates to pastoralism, not to other forms of Landcare in Central Australia.

degradation' since they were taken 'over 45 years ago' (NTCA Yearbook, 1986/87, p.15).

Emerson was also in contact with Central Australian pastoralists urging that they strategically express support for documents such as the National Conservation Strategy (C. Emerson to F. Bird 6/10/88, NTCA file 366-B). He also advised that they support the National Farmers' Federation/Australian Conservation Foundation National Land Management proposal<sup>87</sup> (C. Emerson to B. Barber 19/4/89, NTCA file 366-B). Interviews conducted as part of this thesis in 1996 and 1997 with pastoralists, some of whom had been involved in these early meetings, confirmed that political motivations were a key reason behind the formation of the CLMA. They were worried that conservationists would gain greater influence over pastoral land management. To prevent this occurring they said they had to be seen to be doing something about addressing conservationists' criticism. They had to demonstrate that not only were they addressing problems inherited from the past but that they were good land managers, and thus could be trusted to manage their land without undue outside interference. Pastoralists realised they needed to assert their version of Central Australian pastoralism in ways that were congruent with conservation concerns so they could maintain their vision of pastoral settlement, and Central Australia as a pastoral landscape.

The same 1996/97 interviews showed that political motivations still constituted an important reason for pastoralist membership of the CLMA. The extent to which this reason was important varied from being the sole factor to one among others. These

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<sup>87</sup> This proposal was an important factor in Landcare becoming a national program (Campbell 1994)

other reasons included opportunities to learn new management techniques, a desire to see reform in the industry, or simply that they found the CLMA to provide a forum in which pastoralists could talk comfortably about land management problems. In relation to political motivations, pastoralists spoke of the CLMA being to 'keep the greenies happy', or to 'keep the greenies off our back'. Such sentiments came from managers acknowledged as leaders in reforming pastoral management as much as from those seen by their peers and others as 'heavy on the land'. Stark divisions among pastoralists on matters of attitudes and practices can sometimes be hard to sustain. For example, one pastoralist often held up by peers, government and conservationists as an example of an environmentally 'progressive' manager was one of those interviewed who most strongly articulated views such as cattle being 'good for country' and erosion being relatively inconsequential from a geological perspective.

The CLMA also had its origins in concerns that pastoral land management in Central Australia could be improved. One pastoral couple whom I interviewed, who were heavily involved in CLMA in its early years said they believed that around half of pastoralists thought pastoral land management could be improved and that this could be facilitated through some sort of group. The commencement of the Federal Decade of Landcare in 1990 and the funding for Landcare groups that has flowed from this was fortuitous for the fledgling CLMA. Emerson of the NTCA appears to have anticipated the rise of Landcare in Australia, and saw it as an opportunity to address land management problems in Central Australia. Emerson's communication with some of the pastoralists involved in the youthful CLMA indicates that there was something of a shared agenda between Emerson and certain pastoralists to change pastoral attitudes and

practices. In a letter to the late Fred Bird of Indiana station, Emerson suggests the group direct its energy to:

Sound rangeland management practices designed to ensure the future sustainable use of the rangeland which includes measures to reclaim part of the rangeland previously degraded by "whatever" means (C. Emerson to F. Bird 6/10/88, NTCA file 366-B).

Emerson's reference to degradation caused by 'whatever means' is significant as it refers to a reluctance among pastoralists to admit the reality of land degradation, a reluctance Emerson evidently saw as a problem. In a letter to Bob Barber and other pastoralists, Emerson argued that they needed to admit that degradation had occurred in order to deal with it:

It *has*, either naturally or by man's action to *one degree or another*, so lets get on with: i) identifying its forms, ii) quantifying its extent, and iii) implementing corrective action (C. Emerson to B. Barber 19/4/89, NTCA file 366-B).

Emerson listed changes in pasture composition, increases in woody weeds and soil changes/loss through overgrazing as forms of land degradation they needed to address.

There are a number of key points to draw from the above. First, the origins of the CLMA are both politically motivated *and* motivated by a desire to improve pastoral land management. This twin purpose is highlighted in the initial proposed aims of the CLMA which were:

- A self-help organisation to help manage the land better
- An unbiased documented history of Centralian pastoral properties (Minutes, CLMA meeting 22/7/88)



Second, the NTCA correspondence indicates that by the late 1980s the topic of land degradation and the issue of *how* pastoralists should handle it in a political and public sense was a point of discussion, if not contention, among pastoralists. Third, there is a sense from this documentary evidence, and from interviews with pastoralists, that the CLMA had, at its inception, an agenda of promoting changes in pastoral land management. The CLMA has necessarily adopted a strategic approach to achieve this from within pastoralist ranks, without alienating those pastoralists the CLMA leadership hoped to influence.

There are a number of issues these three points raise in relation to the pastoral 'true story'. First of all, the formation of the CLMA itself can be seen as a response to challenges to pastoralists' place on the land. Thus, the CLMA can be seen as part of the process by which pastoralists are seeking to maintain the primacy of the pastoral landscape. In this case by marking themselves as conservationists through association with the Landcare movement, a movement with wide currency as a signifier for rural stewardship and socially desirable environmental attitudes. Second, the formation of a Landcare group and the agenda to strategically seek to alter pastoral land management, indicates that there are contradictions and inconsistencies to the pastoral 'true story' inside the pastoral community itself. Finally, despite these internal inconsistencies, the power of the 'true story' is ultimately not significantly challenged by Landcare. As the remainder of this chapter will show, the nature of pastoral culture forces those pastoralists seeking change to disguise their practices and participate in the promotion of those CLMA activities that complement and reinforce the pastoral 'true story'. Thus, the pastoral 'true story' is told anew as Landcare stewardship, and thereby revitalised and reinforced. In addition, although the CLMA seeks to alter aspects of pastoral culture

and practices, it does so to ensure a future for pastoralism in Central Australia. The remainder of this chapter documents CLMA activities and, focussing on particular projects as examples, seeks to show the links between pastoral Landcare, the pastoral beliefs discussed in Chapter Six, and pastoralists' narrative of a singularly pastoral Central Australia.

## **7.4 *Pastoral Landcare and the CLMA***

### **7.4.1 CLMA: Its Profile and Role in Rangelands Politics**

The CLMA is an independent, pastoralist-run organisation. Unlike many Landcare groups it employs a full-time co-ordinator, and other staff, in its own right rather than relying on government staff for co-ordination and facilitation. This is significant as it means that pastoralists retain a high level of control over pastoral Landcare, and are relatively less open to scrutiny and direction from elsewhere. The Association is run by a committee of pastoralists who meet regularly, and by the co-ordinator who administers the Association, applies for grants, and oversees events and projects.

The CLMA has a considerable profile among pastoralists, government staff and politicians, scientists and others with an interest in land in Central Australia. It has won NT and national Landcare awards. In 1995/6 it boasted a membership rate of fifty-one percent of Central Australian pastoralists, which is high by national standards (Baker 1997). Its activities, roles, and ideas are an integral part of discussions and debates over land use and management in Central Australia. Along with the NTCA, the CLMA has become one of the 'voices' of the pastoralists, and is a visible and active ambassador for pastoral stewardship in Central Australia. For example, its field days often attract media

attention and CLMA activities are promoted at the Alice Springs Show and at schools. The CLMA is an integral part of the politics of land in Central Australia. Thus, its success and the nature of its activities must be considered in this thesis for their role in struggles over rangelands in Central Australia. CLMA projects and expenditure patterns, and their relationship to pastoralist views of Landcare and stewardship, arise from the beliefs about landscape and cattle discussed in Chapter Six.

	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Rabbit control projects								
Weed control								
Demonstration day soil cons./rehabilitation								
Workshop – ponding banks								
Operator and equipment – soil conservation								
Resurvey of range condition (Condon Report sites)								
Native plant revegetation/rehabilitation								
Native plant seed collection								
Sustainable resource management – Finke L.S.								
Sust. Resource management – Chandlers L.S.								
Workshop – land use planning								
Demonstration day monitoring, fire, decision-making								
Representative veg. sites								
Workshops – soil cons and track, fenceline, firebreaks								
Co-ordination								

Notes: Shaded cells indicate a project was funded in that year. In most cases projects were carried out in the year they were funded. At times, workload and prioritising meant projects might be funded but implementation by CLMA postponed.

Blanks in the 1996/97 column do not necessarily indicate that projects did not continue, but reflect the state of project funding extant in late 1996/early 1997. Rabbit projects and co-ordination are prime examples of continuing projects.

I have modified some project titles to more readily convey their nature. The 'Rabbit control projects' category collapses various rabbit programs.

**Table 7.1: Summary of CLMA projects 1989/90 to 1996/97.**

Source: After Gardiner and Associates (1997)

In the internal processes of the CLMA can, however, be found some cracks in aspects of the pastoral 'true story'. These do not by themselves overturn the pastoral narrative; the aim of those making the 'cracks' remains to ultimately ensure the continued presence of pastoralism. The 'cracks' do, however, illustrate differences amongst the pastoralists and the potential of the CLMA to effect cultural change amongst pastoralists. The CLMA has also been successful in attracting national Landcare funds. Data from the NT Department of Lands, Planning and Environment shows that between 1989/90 and 1996/97, the CLMA attracted \$840 280 in Landcare funds. Total grants to the CLMA between 1989/90 and 1995/96 were \$1 038 273 (Gardiner and Associates 1997). From 1989/90 to 1995/96, according to CLMA estimates, members had made identifiable and quantifiable contributions of some \$97 000 (Gardiner and Associates 1997). This money has been spent on an expanding range of projects as summarised in Table 7.1.

#### **7.4.2 The CLMA and Promotion of the Pastoral Landscape**

There are a number of ways in which CLMA activities can be seen to promote the pastoral 'true story'. For example, in the view of CLMA, '80% of gully erosion is the result of vehicular activity' past and present (CLMA 1997, p.21). This view was also common amongst pastoralists whom I interviewed. It reflects the belief that cattle are not a major cause of land degradation, and is consistent with CLMA regularly organising workshops on soil erosion resulting from poor placement of roads, fencelines and firebreaks (Table 7.1).

Further, rehabilitation efforts focus on land degradation inherited from the past. Again this is consistent with the pastoralist view that cattle in 'reasonable' numbers do not

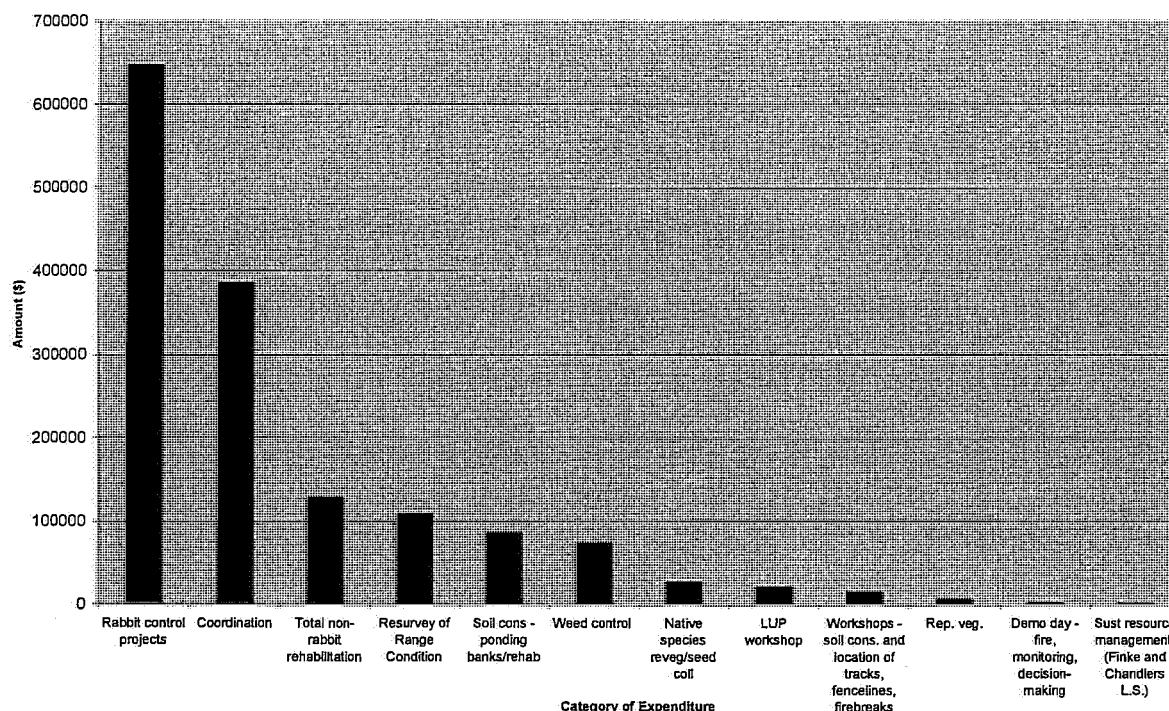
damage country. In interviews it was clear that pastoralists see land degradation of the type CLMA is dealing with as the result of past carelessness, lack of knowledge, and limited fencing or watering points. Rather than acknowledging suggestions of more subtle and on-going changes such as those detected by Bastin et al (1993), pastoralists mark off a benign, informed and knowledgeable present from a more damaging past. That the past was damaging in some respects does not, for the pastoralists, conflict with their story of historical stewardship. This is because pastoralists associate damage from the past with either ignorance, past lack of control over cattle as mentioned above, or with aberrant behaviour or individuals. Thus, the stewardship story remains intact with pastoralists of the past portrayed or scripted as not having knowingly or deliberately caused land degradation.

It is CLMA rabbit activities, however, that most clearly and deeply show the links between pastoralists' beliefs about land and cattle and pastoral Landcare. Rabbit projects are a good example of how pastoral Landcare reflects and promotes a pastoralist-defined version of stewardship that includes both production and environmental concerns. Table 7.1 shows that rabbit control projects and workshops on erosion caused by tracks, fencelines and firebreaks have been consistently run projects over the life of the CLMA. Expenditure patterns in Figure 7.1 confirm the prominence of rabbit projects. These patterns also highlight the expenditure on non-rabbit rehabilitation projects and on the re-survey of sites used in the Condon Report on the 1958-1965 drought<sup>88</sup>. This expenditure and the organisation of workshops on track

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<sup>88</sup> They also highlight the expenditure on employing a co-ordinator. This cost has brought the CLMA under the scrutiny of both NT and Federal Landcare funding agencies. This scrutiny, in part, lay behind the Gardiner and Associates (1997) report on the CLMA. The resurvey of the sites used in 1966 by the Condon report into the 1958-65 drought (Condon, Newman et al, 1969b; Condon, Newman et al. 1969d;

erosion are consistent with pastoralist views that cattle, in reasonable numbers, do not have a negative effect on the land and are not an important cause of soil erosion.



Notes: total non-rabbit rehabilitation = soil conservation, ponding banks/rehabilitation + native species revegetation/seed collection + workshops, soil conservation and location of tracks, fencelines, firebreaks. LUP = land use planning. Co-ordination = costs (largely salary) associated with employing a co-ordinator. See footnote for further expansion of categories.

**Figure 7.1: Summary of CLMA expenditure (total) 1989/90-1996/7<sup>89</sup>.**

Source: After Gardiner and Associates (1997).

Condon, Newman et al. 1969c; Condon, Newman et al. 1969a) was a project in which the condition of soils and vegetation at these sites were reassessed in 1993 and 1995 (Cunningham 1995).

<sup>89</sup> Landcare project nos./sources within these categories are as follows: rabbit control – 930 798, 932 137; weed control – drought Landcare; soil Conservation - ponding banks/rehabilitation – 932 140, 942 034, Farmers Up Front; resurvey of range condition – 931 408; native species revegetation/seed collection – 932 138, 956 012; sustainable resource management (Finke and Chandlers land systems) – 956 015, 966 004; Land use planning workshop – 930 811; Demonstration day – fire monitoring, decision-making –

The CLMA's rabbit control projects account for the largest proportion of CLMA expenditure, and are some of their highest profile projects. For example, in 1997 the CLMA based an entry to the Landcare Awards on their rabbit projects. Rabbit control trials have been set up on stations to both the south and north of Alice Springs. Upon formation of the CLMA, 'the impact of feral animals on the landscape was immediately identified by members as the most important issue' (CLMA 1997, p.6). Pastoralists' main concern in relation to rabbits is the increase in grazing pressure on their land, an increase they cannot control and cannot readily reduce when necessary. These trials essentially consisted of destroying warrens by deep-ripping<sup>90</sup> and subsequent intensive monitoring of rabbit numbers, plant recovery, and native fauna and predator (such as foxes and dingoes) numbers. The success of these trials in reducing rabbit numbers has led to the CLMA and landholders elsewhere ripping further warrens. This complements ongoing independent ripping by some pastoralists, who have expended considerable resources in this area<sup>91</sup>.

For pastoralists, rabbit control is primarily a means by which to improve the productivity of their land. For example, the pastoral interviewees who have been involved in rabbit reduction indicated they did not intend to increase stock numbers as a result of rabbit decline. They intended to use the reduction in total grazing pressure to allow pasture recovery and to allow production of better quality stock. However, rabbit

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Farmers Up Front; Workshops – soil conservation and location of tracks, fenceline, firebreaks – 956 013; Co-ordination – 930 786, 932 139; Representative vegetation – STB 00295.

<sup>90</sup> Ripping involves destroying warrens using bulldozers equipped with tines (prongs) which 'plough' up the warrens.

<sup>91</sup> One family estimated they had spent \$300 000 on rabbit control, and another said they had destroyed expensive equipment such as tractors in this heavy work.

control has also allowed pastoralists to represent themselves as stewards of native flora and fauna. The rabbit control projects monitored the numbers of native animals in the vicinity of ripped warrens, and also predation patterns to determine if rabbit removal led to increased predation on native animals. The results of this monitoring have been publicised, for example by pastoralist Bernie Kilgarriff on the Australian Broadcasting Commission's NT Country Hour (Radio 8DDD, 24/3/97), who said there was an increase in native animal numbers on Erldunda as a result of warren ripping. Another example of this is found in the CLMA biennial report (CLMA 1997). The section on rabbit control lists five environmental impacts of rabbits:

- Competition with native animals (militates against reintroductions).
- Loss of trees and shrubs;
- Threat to rare plants;
- Poor quality species composition;
- Erosion due to denudation;

Such a list of impacts cannot be argued with, and rabbit control is certainly an important environmental and production issue. What is of interest here is that these impacts, to varying degrees, can also be attributed to cattle (and sheep) grazing. Is this simply a strategy of drawing on a deep Australian antipathy to feral<sup>92</sup> animals (Morton and Smith 1999) to divert attention from more fundamental land use and management questions? The answer to this, in the wider context of the background and rationale to the CLMA is, to a significant extent, yes. This simple answer is, however, complicated by other elements of the CLMA, such as its links with pastoral stewardship and beliefs about landscape. It is also perhaps contradicted by the ways in which CLMA operations are

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<sup>92</sup> i.e. non-domesticated, non-native animals. In Central Australia it particularly includes rabbits, foxes, and wild cats.





This naturalisation was emphasised by discussions at the Erldunda Landcare meeting in 1996 (Figure 7.2). Cattle, their numbers and management, were notably absent from discussions at this meeting. I found this remarkable for a number of reasons. First, the way cattle are managed on a station, their numbers, their location, their removal or presence depending on seasonal conditions, constitute a key aspect of debates over rangelands. Conservationists and the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) scientists generally promote low stocking strategies for environmental and economic reasons<sup>94</sup>. Second, given this centrality and the presence of conservationist representatives at the meeting, it seemed an opportune moment to discuss such issues and to demonstrate what pastoralists are already doing. This was particularly so, as Erldunda station itself and a neighbouring station, Lyndavale, are good examples of stations where, in an effort to improve the condition of the land and turn off<sup>95</sup> better quality stock, the owners are running drastically lower numbers than in the past<sup>96</sup>. Many other pastoralists that I interviewed were also running far lower

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<sup>94</sup> The issue of determining biologically and economically 'optimal' stocking rates has been a key question for rangelands scientists both in Australia and elsewhere (for example see Heitschmidt and Walker 1996). It has been shown many times that animal production and economic returns begin to decline once stock numbers reach certain levels. Risk also increases with increasing stock numbers. Thus, higher profits, income stability, and 'positive' environmental outcomes can be realised with relatively low stock numbers. Just how to determine what these optimal stock number might be for a given property is a major question for pastoralists wishing to run low stock numbers, including pastoralists I interviewed in Central Australia. Many wished to run lower numbers but felt there was little practical assistance and knowledge available to help them do so. This was identified by some as lacking in the CLMA as much as in government extension services. Some of those who were running lower stock numbers also indicated they were, to an extent, experimenting. Such 'experiments' with their businesses potentially expose such pastoralists to economic loss. For example, one couple committed to low stocking had sold heavily to reduce numbers as a dry period stretched on. They then found themselves short of breeders and marketable stock once rain did return. One pastoralist who has made the transition to lower stock numbers indicated that it took his family about twenty years and that costs were incurred along the way.

<sup>95</sup> Refers to cattle sold or otherwise taken off the station.

<sup>96</sup> John Stanes, who now owns Lyndavale with his wife Anne, told me that when the Stanes family owned Erldunda and Lyndavale they thought they had 12-15 000 cattle. When they destocked in the Brucellosis and Tuberculosis Eradication Campaign in the 1980s, they trucked off 30 000 cattle (this lack of control in the past is one of the distinctions between past practices and the more intensively managed present). When I was in Central Australia, Lyndavale and Erldunda, which are now owned by Bernie and Aileen Kilgariff (Anne Stanes is their daughter), ran a total of around 7 000 cattle.



This silence reflects the naturalisation of cattle in the landscape. It also reflects delineation between what pastoralists consider feral, and wild, and what they consider natural, and domesticated. As previous chapters have shown, pastoral nature incorporates cattle and pastoral activity, history and labour. Nature, in this frame is domesticated, even if not fully controllable. In fact, the great variability of Central Australian nature is itself domesticated for pastoralists through their acceptance, experience, and knowledge of it. This stands in opposition to a dominant theme of outback and pioneer mythology in Australian settler culture: that the power and variability of outback nature mean it has not been domesticated like the better-watered and more fertile areas of Australia have been (for an example of this view see Morton and Smith 1999), and consequently, the outback remains a frontier. This model of domestication is based on the conventional idea of 'improvement' being transformation of the landscape through vegetation clearance and subsequent development for agriculture. Central Australia has not been subject to land clearance in this way. In Central Australia transformation has occurred to some extent in material ways, for example, through cattle 'gardening', but more symbolic transformations through memory, knowledge systems, presence and social networks also matter as domesticating processes. It is a transformation not necessarily accessible or visible to non-pastoralists.

Rabbits stand outside domestication. They remain wild because they are unmanageable and threaten the pastoral version of the 'natural' landscape. The rabbits' 'uncontrollability' is however, different from the 'uncontrollability' of the Central Australian floods and droughts. As indicated above (and shown in Chapters Five and Six) the extremely variable Central Australian environment has proven amenable to pastoral domestication. The rabbit is not controllable in this way; it cannot be brought

within pastoral nature as cattle, equally introduced, can be. Rabbits are in fact antithetical to pastoral nature; they threaten to destroy it. Thus they remain simultaneously wild nature and 'unnatural', as feral, in relation to pastoral (socialised) nature. For pastoralists, cattle belong to an authentic nature, they are part of an essential Central Australian nature, that which was proto-pastoral and which is now fully pastoral. Although introduced as part of settlement and attempts to recreate Australia in Europe's image, rabbits have become non-authentic. They are a 'civilising' agent that has gone feral (Clark 1999), introducing uncertainties not amenable to the domesticating systems of knowledge and occupation of pastoral culture. Moreover, as a threat to the order of settlement in the outback, rabbits threaten not only Central Australian pastoral nature, but also a 'national' nature. According to the Administrator of the CLMA 'rabbits are national problem, no matter from whose angle you look' (Millington 1992, p.183). For pastoralists, dealing with rabbits is not simply a matter of managing their properties; it is a national problem, that all Australians are seen to share.

Conservationists, on the other hand, draw a very different line around what is natural and what is feral. This comes from their very different conception of an original Central Australian nature, which is pre-colonial and pre-pastoral. For conservationists pre-pastoral nature is the authentic Central Australian nature, and the impact of settlement and of pastoralism has led to this nature being threatened, and, in their view, requiring protection and/or restoration. Consequently, conservationists' line between culture and nature places cattle as part of culture, and as something that must be curbed in order to protect pre-pastoral nature. Cattle and rabbits, while not equally undesirable in conservationist views, are together located as unnatural. Both threaten the pre-pastoral

nature they hope will come to largely form the basis of an ecological nationalism and an ecologically based future for the rangelands.

That both conservationists and pastoralists see the rabbit as an undesirable and uncontrollable element is what provides CLMA rabbit projects with their potency. There is a potency in projecting a story of pastoral stewardship that is rooted in deeply held pastoral beliefs and the pastoral landscape, but which also has wider currency in an 'ecological' nation. In fact, it is not so much that conservationists also see rabbits as a problem, but that in Australian history and society nature has stood in as a source of national origins and identity in the absence of a long term settler presence (Lowenthal 1985; Morton and Smith 1999). Such a 'national' nature can be both found in the form of ecological nature as Chapter Four suggested in the discussion of conservationist rangelands campaigns, or in the various forms of outback nature (McGrath 1991), of which pastoral nature is an important form.

On this point, pastoral nature and ecological nature converge in certain aspects. Both are made to evince a distinctly Australian nature, one of which Australians can be proud, and one that can allegedly unite Australians. Both appeal to the idea of Australian nature as unique and as giving rise to, or potentially giving rise to in the case of an ecological vision, a uniquely Australian people and society, living within the ecological parameters set by the distinct Australian landscapes. For example, we saw in Chapter Four that conservationists appeal to outback imagery in their campaigns for economies that arise from the distinct qualities of inland environments. This is echoed in the words of Alan Newsome, a scientist with CSIRO's Division of Wildlife and Ecology:

If we wish to have a land that is truly Australian restore we must; for we have custody of an extraordinary assemblage of plants and animals. The converse is that otherwise, as nation, we will be left to identify with a land that is one giant sheep-walk, cattle ranch, mining quarry, farm or tree-felling operation. Such a land can be had anywhere in the world (quoted in Morton and Smith 1999, p.160).

While this clearly challenges a claim that outback pastoralism might be distinctively Australian<sup>97</sup>, empathy with nature as a basis for national identity is not limited to the conservationists' ecological perspective. In fact, as Heathcote has suggested (Heathcote 1994a; Heathcote 1972) feelings of pride in Australian landscapes, and native flora and fauna, have existed in visions of the nation since the nineteenth century. Such pride in Australian nature has not always been cleanly separated from production and development-oriented national visions. In this vein, pastoralists, for all their commitment to productionist landscapes, proclaim significant affective and non-economic feelings for the landscape in which they live, and for native plants and animals. Many pastoralists interviewed indicated an interest in native animals and desire to protect or reintroduce them. Some had fenced areas of land off from cattle to protect waterholes, or particular types of vegetation. In some cases the CLMA was involved in such projects. One pastoralist indicated he wanted to keep a fenced area 'the way it was'.

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<sup>97</sup> Although probably originally influenced by British cattle raising techniques (Perkins and Thompson 1992), in terms of techniques and material culture Australian outback pastoralism has historically shared many characteristics with the open range systems of Spain, Mexico and the southern U.S. (Gill 1999b; Jordan 1993). With exceptions (for example see Lewis 1999) such origins, however, remain largely underresearched. This is perhaps surprising given the cultural significance of outback pastoralism. On the other hand maybe silences around such topics are consistent with the story of a nation arising from environmental encounters on the frontier. Interestingly, as occurred in the U.S., where the more intensive British-derived cattle complexes came to dominate as open range systems failed (Jordan 1993), Australian outback pastoralism is becoming increasingly intensive (relatively speaking) in response to market and environmental factors.

The presentation of rabbit control and of Landcare as an inherently good undertaking obscures the economic, social and political processes and ideas that drive pastoral Landcare in Central Australia. This is not unique to Central Australia. Lockie (1997), notes that debates over just what Landcare is, are a defining feature of the discussions and evaluation attempts surrounding Landcare<sup>98</sup>. Lockie argues that the 'discourse of participation', that 'Landcare is for everybody' (1997, p.32) masks relations of power in the way Landcare operates. The warm haze of apparent consensus over Landcare obscures inclusions and exclusions along lines such as class, race, and gender. Lockie (1997) suggests that by 'riding the groundswell of environmental concern' (p.33) Landcare, as a signifier of environmental benefits and concern, and of unity around shared environmental issues, is used as a discursive tool to pursue the interests of particular groups' (p.32).

It can be seen now that Landcare should not be taken at face value. The words of a former CLMA president are a good example of how pastoral Landcare in Central Australia employs the discursive strategies of participation and shared environmental meanings:

This is one of the pluses that Landcare has achieved, the fact that it has everyone up and out and does not discriminate on culture, creed or barrier and we are focussing on a single point, which is environment (R. Waudby, evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs 15 August 1994, p.1469).

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<sup>98</sup> The glaring weakness of the Gardiner (1997) report on the CLMA is that it does not engage with these debates and problems at all. Instead the report simply evaluates CLMA activities at face value and draws conclusions without any rigorous attempts at information collection and analysis. For example, the selection of pastoralists interviewed by the evaluation team is biased towards managers with significant involvement in the CLMA, pastoralists who are or have been leaders, and/or pastoralists who are generally acknowledged as progressive managers.



Waudby also implied in his evidence that the rural recession was a national disaster and that, by association, Landcare, because it deals with rural problems, is unambiguously and nationally beneficial. Waudby denies any contested meanings of 'environment' and posits it as a point around which various groups can readily come together and act in concert. However, as is clear from the preceding discussion, Waudby is not talking about 'environment' but socialised 'country', and specifically, pastoral country. Whereas 'environment' conjures images of 'things' without spatial moorings, Landcare is employed by pastoralists as a further means to assert pastoralism's nature and geographies. Pastoral Landcare is not for 'everybody', it is thoroughly implicated in maintaining Central Australia within a pastoral and white frame of reference, and maintaining the pastoral story of land, people, history and destiny.

Again, the example of rabbits can illustrate the racial specificity of 'environment' as conjured in pastoral Landcare. Certainly rabbits are destructive to pastoral nature. In this sense they are a problem for the 'environment'. For a free-floating unambiguous 'environment' as posited by Waudby above this would be true. However, the issue of rabbits and their control highlights some points of conflict between pastoralists and many Aboriginal people, for whom the rabbit has become an important food source in some areas of Central Australia. This became a particular issue in 1996 when the lethal rabbit calicivirus<sup>99</sup> escaped from quarantine in South Australia and reached the NT in June. Pastoralists agitated for deliberate releases to further the spread of the virus (for example see 'Let's have the rabbit virus now!', *Centralian Advocate*, 4/6/96).

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<sup>99</sup> The calicivirus is the latest agent in the long search for a biological control for feral rabbits in Australia.

In his survey of Aboriginal people's attitudes towards land management issues, Rose (1995) found that not only was the rabbit an important food source but that many Aboriginal people saw the rabbit as now 'belonging' to country, in a way similar to native animals. Most Aboriginal people interviewed did not perceive that the rabbit caused damage to land, one respondent saying if the rabbit was to be eradicated on the grounds it was not native and caused land degradation, then cattle, with 'bigger mouths than rabbits' (Rose 1995, p.116) should also be removed. Pastoralists and the NT government have largely ignored such concerns. In an effort to spread the virus further, the CLMA and the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries injected the virus into rabbits at seven non-infected sites (CLMA 1997).

When questioned on this matter in 1994 by a Senate committee, Waudby went even further, suggesting that Aboriginal people themselves can see that, despite their concerns, it is right that production be prioritised:

The Aboriginal people see that as a need for food, but they can also see that, down there, there is a greater need to get rid of the rabbits so as to be more productive...they are starting to understand it (R. Waudby, Pres. CLMA, evidence to Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs 15 August 1994, p.1468).

Like Barry Coman (Coman 1999), Waudby appeals to a greater and long-term interest, and to a 'shared responsibility' of Australians to 'conserve indigenous flora and fauna' (Coman 1999, p.220). With such a long term perspective, it is claimed, all interests can be satisfied in the end: pastoralists get rid of rabbits, and, *one day*, Aboriginal people will have land to which 'pre-European productivity' and attendant native fauna will have been restored (Coman 1999, p.223).

That the landscape delineated by the pastoral stewardship is white is further demonstrated by pastoralist attitudes towards Aboriginal hunting. Many pastoralists I interviewed expressed concern about hunting by Aboriginal people in Central Australia<sup>100</sup>. Such concerns were usually expressed in terms of growing Aboriginal populations, and the use of guns and vehicles, both of which it was alleged are causing localised declines of native animals<sup>101</sup>. Some pastoralists saw this as a major land management issue that was not being addressed by government, conservationists, or the Central Land Council<sup>102</sup>. They perceived this as evidence of bias in those who claim to be conservationists and who target pastoralism in their campaigns. Pastoralists were well aware of that mythology which casts Aboriginal people as Australia's original conservationists, and assumed that this belief informed conservationist campaigns. Citing hunting, erosion caused by careless driving, and constant littering by Aboriginal people, all of which are inconsistent with their perception of conservationists' views of conservation, pastoralists then define themselves as conservationists in relation to Aboriginal people. They do this on the basis that they don't overhunt native animals, they seek to prevent erosion, and they don't litter. In short, relative to Aboriginal people, pastoralists claim to have a non-production stewardship role that conforms to concerns of the conservation movement. Thus, through stewardship, pastoralists insist on the right to occupy land with a legitimacy born of 'environment', that, in their eyes, defuses both conservationist and Aboriginal claims on land.

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<sup>100</sup> Under the NT's Pastoral Land Act (1992) Aboriginal people are allowed access to pastoral lease lands for hunting and other traditional activities. This reservation of rights does not entitle Aboriginal people to live on pastoral land.

<sup>101</sup> At the time of fieldwork there had been no systematic research concerning the impacts of Aboriginal hunting.

<sup>102</sup> One pastoralist did, however, note that he appreciated this was a difficult issue for the Central Land Council.

This section has addressed the manner in which pastoral Landcare in Central Australia seeks to maintain the pastoral landscape in Central Australia. This is done by using Landcare, a widely understood signifier of positive environmental meanings, to promote pastoralists as stewards of the land. This model of stewardship not only corresponds to traditional modes of pastoral stewardship and to production concerns, it also seeks to address nature conservation concerns, and to strategically place pastoralists as 'better', or more deserving, conservationists than Aboriginal people. Thus pastoral Landcare has a role in defining the pastoral landscape in white terms. The improved management that the CLMA promotes can thus be seen as culturally defined and specific. Pastoral land management exists within the parameters of a Central Australia defined as a cattle landscape, and cannot be separated out as a purely 'environmental' matter.

#### **7.4.3 The Ambiguous CLMA**

This thesis does not aim to provide an evaluation of pastoral Landcare in Central Australia. The significance of pastoral Landcare and the CLMA for this research lie in their position within debates over rangelands and their roles in pastoralists' attempts to preserve the dominance of the landscape they have come to shape and define. It is, however, useful to examine how the CLMA's activities might be challenging the pastoral 'true story', even if only at the margins, by altering aspects of pastoral culture and behaviour. Such fractures show that, although the pastoral 'true story' is the dominant story and the pastoral story that matters most in the cultural politics of land in the NT (for example, see Chapter Six), pastoralists are not necessarily united on issues such as land management and degradation, and Landcare. The solidarity presented by pastoralists to the outside world generally obscures internal divisions, and pastoralists

seeking to effect change have to work within the confines of pastoralist solidarity. Despite these internal differences, the main aim of the CLMA is to preserve the pastoral industry, and it should not simply be seen as an organisation that seeks to improve land management. It should be seen as one of a range of strategies that pastoralists are engaged in, to improve the efficiency and chances of survival of their businesses in difficult economic times for rural producers across Australia.

So far, discussion of pastoralists' beliefs about land have emphasised pastoralists' faith in the land and in its suitability for cattle. There are, and have always been, however, pastoralists who have expressed concern about land degradation and the management practices of their peers. In the 1958-1965 drought, Pat Davis, the owner of Hamilton Downs station north-east of Alice Springs, called for destocking a large area around Alice Springs for three to five years<sup>103</sup>. He described the proposed area as a 'dustbowl which no amount of rain will recover (sic) until the stock are taken out' (*Hoofs and Horns*, Feb 1965, p.9). Despite retaining a strong faith in the productivity in the land, Rose Chalmers indicated in 1996 that at the time their faith was shaken:

But no, that time, through that drought - eight years - we just wondered really what would come back after that time (R. Chalmers, interview 16/11/96).

Rose Chalmers, and her husband Mac, also indicated that they thought some of their peers were carrying too many stock. They and their son, who flies a plane, said that those stations where conservative management is in place stood out from the air. Those stations carrying too many stock were equally obvious. Similar comments came from

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<sup>103</sup> Davis' station fell within the proposed area.

many pastoralists whom I interviewed. Generally, the same individuals were consistently named as those who overstocked as a matter of course in their management. Most of the pastoralists who expressed this view also said they would be happy to see the government take action against these individuals. They also indicated they would like to see pastoralists themselves take action, but saw such a course of action as near impossible for fear of ostracism. Some also feared retribution, as one of the individuals often named as someone who consistently overstocks, is perceived by pastoralists as politically influential.

This fear of ostracism bespeaks an important characteristic of pastoral culture that limits what is possible to do and say in public. A strong code of public solidarity influences pastoralists and they are also constrained by a convention that censures public comment. As shown in Chapter Six, pastoralists' sense of origins and the nature of personal and family relationships to land, inspires a strong sense of insiders and outsiders. This division can come to apply to pastoralists themselves. The sense of ownership of land that pastoralists derive from their labour and knowledge of their land has led to a situation in which to speak of someone else's land is to cross personal, as well as property boundaries: it is to speak out of place. Pastoralists thus run the risk of being ostracised by others, and becoming outsiders themselves. For example, in 1965, Pat Davis was criticised for his views, partly on the basis that as he no longer lived on Hamilton Downs, he was not spending enough 'time in the country' to know the 'true position' (*Hoofs and Horns*, Feb 1965, p.9). Bob Purvis, well known for his rehabilitation work and very low stocking strategy (Purvis 1986; Purvis 1988), is perceived by pastoralists as being very critical of the management practices of his peers, and is known for making such views public. As a consequence he has been isolated to

an extent within the pastoral community<sup>104</sup>. During my period of fieldwork I was told that one of the pastoralists associated with the CLMA had been publicly critical of pastoralists' management practices. I was not told who this person was, nor exactly what was said; only that as a result of what they said, they were now ostracised by some other pastoralists.

The CLMA, and the pastoralists who run it, operate within this social environment. Conservationist calls for the CLMA to take action to 'address negligent management' (Letters to the Editor, *Centralian Advocate*, 31/5/96) fail to recognise this. Those pastoralists within the CLMA who wish to bring about change are limited by the fact that they must operate within the constraints of solidarity and exclusion outlined above, to have any chance of achieving their long-term goals.

The long-term goal of the CLMA by 1997 was quite different from those proposed in 1988 (page 256). By 1997 the CLMA's objective was to 'foster management practices' that will achieve 'regional social, ecologic (sic) and economic security for today's and future generations' through 'sustainable productivity' (CLMA and the Future, pamphlet, October 1997 and CLMA 1997, p.1). This is a far broader vision than simply improving land management practices as originally proposed. As will be discussed below, it also incorporates the very maintenance and survival of the pastoral industry.

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<sup>104</sup> Although there were signs this was breaking down in 1996 and 1997. Some of the younger pastoralists I spoke to indicated they were influenced by Purvis' practices, and the use of ponding banks in Central Australia is generally attributed to Purvis.

According to leaders, senior officials and pastoralist members of the CLMA whom I interviewed, achieving this goal means wide ranging reform of the way pastoralists manage their properties and interact. To a significant extent modifying the stock management practices, particularly stock numbers, of pastoralists is a key plank in the strategy of the reformers. Stock numbers, however, constitute a very sensitive issue in Central Australia. It is likely that this is not only a result of controversy over conservation issues. In the inland pastoral zone of Australia, stock represent an average of forty percent of the capital value of stations (ABARE 1999). Pastoralists are sensitive as to the commercial nature of such information. Moreover, stocking practices reveal much about the nature of the pastoralist, their attitudes and beliefs, and infringe upon a culture of individualism, in which what is done on a station is seen as nobody else's business. In addition, to modify stocking practices, reforming pastoralists must change what Vanclay and Lawrence (Vanclay and Lawrence 1995) would call the 'dominant farming subculture' of Central Australian pastoralists. The attitudes and beliefs that members are 'supposed' to subscribe to, and the practices they are 'supposed' to follow, in part constitute such subcultures. Stocking practices and stock management are central to pastoralism and the promotion of lower stock numbers and more intensive or careful management of stock and pastures, represent substantially different ways of not only managing, but of actually being a pastoralist. The promotion of alternative practices also carries the risk of being taken as implying that one's peers are managing poorly, and of being seen to cross that personal and spatial boundary of land and knowledge.

For these reasons, CLMA leaders must work carefully within the boundaries set by pastoral culture in order to foster the changes they believe are required. The issue of stocking rates must be tackled carefully, and pastoralists who advocate redefinition of





As employed by French theorist Bourdieu, capital refers to resources or attributes held by a person that are 'exchangeable for goods, services or esteem' (Phillips and Gray 1995, p.129). Capital can take many forms including economic, cultural and symbolic. It has been applied to studies of rural land management and extension by Phillips and Gray (Phillips and Gray 1995; see also Vanclay and Lawrence 1995). They (1995) found that farmers tend not to stratify one another on the basis of wealth, but do so on the basis of factors such as farming ability, farming style, family standing, length of time spent farming and community participation. In relation to farming ability and farming practice, farmers gain cultural and symbolic capital for farming in certain approved ways (Phillips and Gray 1995). They found the struggle to acquire such capital was a constant process amongst farmers. (Phillips and Gray 1995). The possession of such capital is required to define 'good' farming practice.

The struggle of the CLMA reformers with individuals and practices they perceive as ambivalent, if not hostile, to their agenda concords with this perspective on rural society. CLMA reformers must engage in strategies to acquire cultural capital in the eyes of other pastoralists in order that their ideas and practices gain standing and credence. These struggles are not necessarily with individuals. Such struggles would be relatively straightforward. The problem faced by CLMA reformers is that they are engaging with practices and beliefs deeply embedded in pastoral history and identity, as shown in Chapters Five and Six. From this perspective CLMA reformers are not simply trying to change what pastoralists do, they are, in specific ways, trying to change what pastoralists are. They are not just trying to change what pastoralists think, but the very values, ideas, tools and memories they think with.

Conservationist criticism that there is not enough evidence for 'on-the-ground' results from rangelands Landcare (ALEC internal notes and ALC 1996), does not sufficiently acknowledge the cultural complexity of pastoral and rural society, and the struggles that occur amongst pastoralists. In part, the CLMA's proud and assertive emphasis that it is about 'action' and practical on-the-ground work (for example see Millington 1992) has perhaps worked against it. However, for the CLMA to boldly proclaim that they seek to alter pastoral attitudes and encourage pastoralists to significantly change their management practices would be untenable.

Accordingly, the CLMA has focussed on projects that are likely to be non-threatening to pastoralists, which are likely to appeal to pastoralists' sense of what is important, and which are likely to draw pastoralists within CLMA's influence. In large part this has involved field days, ponding bank work, promotion of the woody weeds problem, and rabbit projects. In addition the CLMA has organised more broadly oriented activities such as land use planning, and has promoted the concept of property management planning as a means of improving business and land management. In promoting land use planning, for example, the CLMA has facilitated 'safe' discussion of stocking levels. According to CLMA leaders they hope to be able to address stocking issues more substantively in the future.

There was some evidence from interviews with pastoralists that CLMA activities were having some of the effects desired by CLMA leaders. Pastoralists indicated the CLMA provided a forum in which ideas could be exchanged between pastoralists, in which potentially sensitive issues such as land degradation could be discussed, and in which the practices of others could be seen and described by the pastoralists involved.

Pastoralists whom I interviewed valued the fact that events such as field days were organised by pastoralists, rather than outside 'experts'. In general, pastoralists noted that the CLMA provided a space for interaction on land management issues that had not existed previously.

By 1995/96 and 1996/97 two small projects were instituted that illustrate a broadening of the CLMA agenda beyond rehabilitation to include improvement of station management as a whole. These are the 'sustainable resource management' projects on the Finke and Chandlers land systems<sup>106</sup>. These two projects expand upon the 1993/94 project on the Hamilton land system. These are relatively productive land systems and have been subject to relatively high grazing pressure. The aim of these projects is to establish the best management strategies by which to regain and maintain the productivity of such land systems, and for on-going pastoral management to be based on 'sustainable land-use principles' (CLMA 1997). While these are still somewhat vague formulations, and the projects remain small at this stage, these schemes have the potential to develop the specific, practical, and ecologically based management guidelines, that pastoralists arguably require to improve their management in the long-term.

Another way in which CLMA leaders have sought to influence their peers is through existing social networks. This has particularly operated through networks of women. Women active in the CLMA have influenced other women in such a way that pastoral

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<sup>106</sup> There are eighty-eight land systems in Central Australia as defined by Perry et al (1962). They defined land systems as 'recurring patterns of land units which have characteristic topography, soil and vegetation' (Perry 1962, p.14)

families have become active CLMA members, for example by hosting field days. Such networks were also used to strategically lend equipment<sup>107</sup> to other pastoralists in order that they could try out CLMA-promoted techniques. These are relatively subtle strategies to facilitate change, and in the examples I am aware of, the subjects of these strategies have been targeted because they represent significant families, landholdings, or because they run large numbers of stock.

Reforming pastoralists have also sought to facilitate change by acting as examples of alternative management regimes. Many pastoralists prominent in the CLMA are running low stock numbers, certainly lower than those run by their parents or by previous owners of their stations. One example of lower stock numbers has been provided (page 266), but many pastoralists I interviewed indicated that they had also made reductions in stock numbers of up to fifty per cent of numbers previously carried on their stations. I cannot attribute this directly to CLMA leadership. These changes in stocking regimes do, however, seem to be part of a wider change in Central Australian pastoralism, and a strong interest on the part of many pastoralists to move to lower stocking strategies. Some pastoralists I interviewed also expressed interest in such a change but required some examples as to how it might be done and were critical of the CLMA for not focussing enough on stock management. This sort of comment was particularly revealing as Bob Purvis of Atartinga station has been practicing low stocking regimes for many years (Purvis 1986). Why isn't Purvis seen as an example? As discussed earlier (page 279) Purvis has been outspoken in his criticism of other pastoralists, and

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<sup>107</sup> Given the cost of the sort of earth-moving equipment being offered, the lenders bank on such offers being too good to refuse.

other pastoralists have not only ostracised him to an extent, but also view his lifestyle as impoverished due to low income. Thus for many years, Purvis has not provided an example that other pastoralists wished to emulate. In interviews, however, two young pastoralists indicated that Purvis had influenced them. In addition, there are now other stations running relatively low numbers but whose owners, in comparison to Purvis, live more conventional lifestyles. Such pastoralists are more likely to have an influence on redefining what constitutes 'good' pastoralism. In general, such changes and the CLMA appear to be creating room for conservative stocking strategies to be at least considered by other pastoralists.

The influence of economics makes it yet more difficult to tease out the influences on stocking strategies. Those pastoralists I interviewed who had adopted more conservative stocking practices indicated that they had done so for economic reasons. In times when prices and margins are low, and competition is high in the beef industry, (ABARE 1999; Wilcox and Cunningham 1994), marketing a distinctive and quality product is increasingly important. Pastoralists see lower stock numbers as a means of generating greater returns through *consistently* being able to turn off stock in good condition and meet buyer expectations. Central Australian pastoralists see improved land management as one way to improve the productivity and efficiency of their businesses (for Queensland see ABARE 1999)<sup>108</sup>. The potential increases in productivity through lower stock numbers and adoption of CLMA-promoted activities are seen as offering

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<sup>108</sup> Research in progress at the North Australian Research Unit in Darwin has found that NT cattle producers will have to lift productivity by twenty percent to remain financially viable (ABC Radio 8DDD, NT Country Hour, 23/7/99)

increased chances of financial survival and profitability through improved land condition and resilience. Environmental management is becoming a key component of economic performance. Thus management changes by pastoralists are strongly associated with economic factors. This is one reason why management practices can change for putatively environmental reasons while beliefs about the impacts and role of cattle in the landscape can remain stable. To see the CLMA as purely an 'environmental' or 'land management' organisation is simplistic. The Gardiner report into the CLMA quotes Marilyn Karger of Orange Creek station on its cover page:

The CLMA is the only way that we can ensure that this country is here for our children (Gardiner and Associates 1997).

Such sentiment parallels the views of many pastoralists in interviews, and illustrates how the CLMA is a vehicle for pursuing the survival of pastoralism, the stability of pastoral families and their ongoing ability to remain on the land.

In this context, the CLMA must be seen as one of range of strategies taken by pastoralists to ensure their financial survival. These strategies include running stores to serve local Aboriginal populations, dealing in Aboriginal art<sup>109</sup>, running roadhouses, trialling date palms on stations, involvement in the tourism industry, and adoption of

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<sup>109</sup> Where there are concentrations of Aboriginal populations such stores can be profitable businesses. At the time of fieldwork, one young pastoral couple had recently opened a small store in an effort to compensate for low cattle prices. They indicated they were making more money from the store than from cattle at that time. It was even said to me on occasion that some stations were valued as much as for their stores as for their potential cattle production. The contribution of such stores to the pastoral economy is unknown. Research on this topic would be difficult, as these stores, sometime called 'blackfella stores' amongst pastoralists, are a sensitive issue in Central Australia. The attempts I made to discuss them or observe them were clearly not welcome. A few pastoralists have become involved in the booming Aboriginal art trade, buying art from Aboriginal people who live in their area, and then selling it dealers and other buyers. As far as I could observe, this seems to be particularly the case to the north of Alice Springs, for example around Utopia to the east and Napperby to the west.

cattle and beef quality assurance schemes. In 1996-97 a consortium of pastoralists attempted to establish direct marketing overseas for Central Australian beef. This scheme was not a success at the time but more recently such marketing schemes have been revisited with the CLMA's promotion of marketing Central Australia beef as 'clean and green' (8DDD ABC Radio, NT Country Hour 29/9/99). Other recent schemes include the formation of the Central Australian Producer Action Group, which among other objectives, aims to assist pastoralists in developing new businesses, and a pastoralist group buying scheme.

## **7.5 Conclusion**

As elsewhere, Landcare in Central Australia has been criticised by conservationists for allegedly avoiding fundamental land use and management questions, and for not producing readily measurable improvements in land condition. Such criticism has an element of truth in it, but misses the social and cultural difficulties faced in bringing about changes in rural land use practices.

This chapter has related some of the ways in which pastoral Landcare operates in Central Australia and its relationship with the bases of pastoral culture. The nature of pastoral culture means that bringing about changes in pastoral land management, even for insiders, is difficult. As the collective and individual identities of pastoralists are strongly associated with their beliefs about land and their sense of the evolution of the pastoral landscape, they are not amenable to ready change. Beliefs about landscape are not abstract, nor disembodied; they are strongly based in personal experience, memory, and an agrarian fundamentalism in which rural land use is seen as inherently good.



Within the parameters set by a pastoral vision of Central Australia and given these factors, the CLMA is achieving as much as could be expected in the relatively short time it has existed. The CLMA remains steadfastly rural because pastoralists see Central Australia as a rural place. Although Central Australia can be seen as a frontier in some respects, those elements of outback and frontier mythology which script Central Australia as a place of unrealised possibilities, and where realisation of land use and development aspirations is always imminent, no longer belong to pastoralists. Such visions of the inland are those of urban Australians, conservationists, tourists, and four-wheel driving adventurers. Pastoralists see that they have made a home, and that they have realised the potential of the land. That pastoralists inhabit a landscape of rurality which urban adventurers and conservationists see as frontier is at the heart of struggles over rangelands. Aboriginal visions of Central Australia as a very different sort of home, however, mean that such struggles cannot be solely cast in terms of uncomprehending external forces acting upon a fixed and bounded rural community. Challenges to pastoral landscapes also arise from within Central Australia itself. Chapter Eight pursues this issue in more detail through an analysis of Aboriginal pastoralism.

Pastoral Landcare is one of various means by which pastoralists are seeking to survive in Central Australia. This is so in political terms, where pastoralists are using Landcare to project a stewardship identity. It is also true in that Landcare is as much economic and social as environmental. In fact, in Landcare, the blurring of the boundaries between these categories is clearly seen. The work of the CLMA therefore, is aimed at protecting and strengthening the pastoral landscape, and at projecting an image of pastoralism that remains rooted in, and appeals to, pastoralists' extant identities but which

simultaneously taps more recent environmental narratives and concerns, including ecologically sustainable development and fauna preservation. Science and scientific knowledge, in the form of vegetation surveys, rabbit and wildlife monitoring, and planning plays an important role in the representation of CLMA activities and pastoralism as environmental stewardship.

Yet, pastoral Landcare does more than seek to present pastoralism in the new light of stewardship. Landcare has a strong role in the pastoralists' struggle to retain control of their story of land and history in Central Australia. The growth in concern about rural land degradation has brought with it greater examination of rural land use from a variety of quarters, including from governments. Thus, pastoralists were potentially faced with the prospect of increased scrutiny of their land and activities. Landcare itself potentially furthers such openness, as proposed Landcare projects and expenditure are closely monitored by both the Federal government funding agencies, and the NT Landcare Council, which contains conservation group representatives. Such scrutiny is inconsistent with pastoralists' sense of boundaries, and of the primacy of pastoral environmental and historical knowledge of country discussed in this chapter and in Chapters Five and Six. By creating and fiercely guarding the autonomy of the CLMA, with its own administrator/co-ordinator and staff, the pastoralists are able to tightly control the form of, and access to, information about pastoral Landcare and pastoral land management activities. In an era where public interest in land use and management threatens rural views of private property, pastoral Landcare in Central Australia is a vehicle for articulating protection of the public good, while maintaining the pastoralists' ability to authoritatively tell their story of Central Australia. Landcare is a further

vehicle by which pastoralists are seeking to maintain Central Australia as pastoral space symbolically and in actuality.

One theme in this chapter is the (limited) role that pastoral Landcare has in challenging aspects of the pastoral 'true story' of Central Australia. The following chapter expands on this theme through a case study of Aboriginal pastoralism, which offers a critique of the pastoralist picture of Central Australia as pastoral within a settler frame of reference. While Aboriginal pastoralism might appear to confirm the perspectives of non-indigenous pastoralists, it in fact acts to confound them.

## **Chapter 8 Aboriginal Pastoralism: Cattle as a Means to Cultural Continuity**

If I don't paint this story some white man might come and steal my country. (Johnny Warangkula Jupurrula when asked why he painted 'Yarla – Wild Potato Dreaming' (1983), National Gallery of Australia).

You gotta look after him cattle. You gotta look after him rockhole (Murphy Kennedy Japanangka, 11/4/97).

Aboriginal groups have made land claims on the basis of tribal tradition, not on the basis of a nation (Marshall Perron, NT Chief Minister, 1/5/1990).

### **8.1 Introduction**

In this thesis I have argued that environmentalism and Aboriginal land rights have fundamentally challenged the pastoral landscape of Central Australia and the foundational 'pastoral' narrative of the region. Much of my examination of the pastoralists' responses has focussed on environmental and land issues rather than directly on racial issues. I have, however, endeavoured to show how pastoralists draw on particular uses and versions of 'environment' to maintain Central Australia in a non-indigenous frame of reference. In general, this chapter serves two purposes. First, it extends the role of land rights as a challenge to pastoralism. Second, it does this by examining Aboriginal pastoralism in Central Australia. As Chapter Four showed, pastoralism is carried out on some of the former pastoral stations now owned by Aboriginal people.

At first glance, the very existence of Aboriginal pastoralism might seem to negate the argument that land rights presents a challenge to pastoralism. This chapter shows that this is not so simply the case. I examine one aspect of Aboriginal pastoralism, showing that Aboriginal pastoralism can, in fact, undermine the view of non-indigenous pastoralists that Central Australia is inherently pastoral. The focus will be on the perceptions of Aboriginal pastoralists of the role of pastoralism. As I will show, 'pastoralism' takes on a far more flexible range of meanings, unmoored not only from outback mythology, but also from notions of production, the national interest, economic development, and employment generation. Instead, it becomes related to very localised concerns, rooted in cultural traditions that long predate the arrival of pastoralism in Central Australia. The chapter draws on primary information collected at Atite (Utopia, Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trust), Nguyarmini (MacLaren Creek, Mungkarta Aboriginal Land Trust), Mistake Creek station, and Love's Creek Station (Atnarpa) (see location map, Figure 1.1).

As was seen in Chapter Four, Aboriginal people in Central Australia were able to adapt to the pastoral industry in such a way that they could often maintain contact with their land. In this way they were able to protect their culture and ensure its continuity to an extent not possible over much of Australia where dispossession was far more extensive. Aboriginal involvement in the pastoral industry produced people who gained status from their skills and who were acculturated into cattle culture<sup>110</sup>. To this day identification with the pastoral industry remains a source of pride for many Aboriginal people. Even if contemporary connection with the industry is tenuous, clothing in a

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<sup>110</sup> By this I mean the complex of ideas, identity, associations, and activities that surround the cattle industry.

‘cowboy’ style (big hats, boots, and flashy shirts) may be affected. For example, in the western Victoria River District, north west of Alice Springs, it is not uncommon to see Aboriginal people associated with Aboriginal-owned Mistake Creek station, wearing caps and shirts embroidered with the station badge.

For many older men and women, such associations remain born of past employment in the industry and continue to be part of their identity and persona – they were ‘born in the cattle’ (McGrath 1987; Baker 1999). As Don Cameron, a director of the Bluegloss pastoral company on Mistake Creek said, ‘I was born longa the station. Station was here before I bin born...We think cattle is good’ (interview 29/5/97). This is most obviously the case with men, whose associations with the industry have the most prominence today, although Aboriginal women also did stock work as well as domestic labour (McGrath 1987), and participate in contemporary pastoral enterprises in the NT.

Men generally dominate present day Aboriginal involvement in pastoralism in Central Australia, at least in relation to positions such as cattle company directors and as those who drive Aboriginal cattle projects<sup>111</sup>. In the course of my fieldwork I was able to talk with women about cattle, but not to the same extent as with men. As this chapter will show, these discussions revealed some aspects of women’s views of pastoral enterprises, however, gender issues in relation to such enterprises remain largely underresearched<sup>112</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> An exception is the Jayrook pastoral company at Love’s Creek station (Atnarpa), where the Board of Directors had a majority of woman over the five years from 1994 (P. Mitchell, pers. comm 22/12/99).

<sup>112</sup> In 1997, Paul Mitchell, then the Central Land Council’s (CLC) Rural Enterprises Unit manager, expressed concern over this matter. He said that, excepting those women on the pastoral company boards, he almost dealt solely with men. Since this time Mitchell and the CLC have moved to remedy this situation by seeking and recording Aboriginal women’s views on pastoral enterprises (P. Mitchell, pers. comm 22/12/99).

## **8.2 *Aboriginal Pastoralism and the Cultural Politics of Land in the NT***

Aboriginal pastoralism has been a prominent Aboriginal land use and economic development issue in Central Australia. While there have been Aboriginal pastoral enterprises that have succeeded economically, there have been a number that have failed in commercial and 'whitefella' terms. Non-indigenous pastoralists and the NT government point to such failures as confirmation of their view of the wastefulness of Aboriginal land ownership, of the racially-based ineptitude of Aboriginal people, and of the need for pastoral land to remain as pastoral land, or if Aboriginal-owned, in the hands of a non-indigenous manager. In my fieldwork, a number of non-Aboriginal pastoralists spoke with approval of Aboriginal-owned pastoral enterprises that were running in a conventional commercial manner, often adding an expression of sympathy for the non-indigenous managers of such enterprises. These managers were presumed by non-indigenous pastoralists to be besieged by all manner of unreasonable demands by the Aboriginal landowners, to the detriment of the pastoral business.

In 1994 the NT government expressed the desire that Aboriginal involvement in 'productive' pastoralism expand (Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries 1994, p.11). The 'strategy speak' in which this statement was couched, concealed a deep-rooted opposition to Aboriginal land ownership on Aboriginal terms, which is common among the NT government and non-Aboriginal pastoralists. A clearer statement of position came from the NT Chief Minister in 1994:

In the Territory, where the infamous Land Rights Act still applies, pastoral land is not only being taken out of production in this way<sup>113</sup>, but is being placed under inalienable Aboriginal title where it can't be sold, traded or used as collateral for investing in improvements.

Now, I have no objections to Aboriginal ownership of pastoral properties if they are productive and managed properly, as a few are. This is a good thing and there should be more of it. But the fact is that many properties taken over by Aborigines have gone backwards for want of investment and expertise...

There is, of course, an important place for Aboriginal people in the pastoral industry. In many outback areas, it is the main, sometimes the only potential area of employment available. As opportunities increase with the growth of live cattle exports, Aborigines will have the chance to be significant participants (Marshall Perron, NT Chief Minister, Northern Australian Cattlemen's Association Conference, 8/4/1994).

Such a statement passes for commonsense in the dominant 'whitefella' culture of the NT. Yet it contains a number of important assumptions that show it to be a peculiarly 'whitefella' view of pastoralism, which assumes the primacy of pastoralism as a landscape form. First, Perron asserts that land is primarily an economic resource, available for trading in return for other benefits. Second, he assumes that Aborigines feel part of that allegedly united entity, the NT, such that they will be pleased to be 'significant participants' in NT economic development. Third, in conflating the alleged decline of properties and the potential of employment from pastoralism, he presumes that Aboriginal aspirations for land ownership and pastoralism focus on economic reward<sup>114</sup>. However, as Perron said elsewhere (see page 292 above), in making a different argument<sup>115</sup>, Aboriginal people have sought land on the basis of 'tribal tradition', not on the basis of being part of the NT's development.

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<sup>113</sup> The Central and Northern Land Councils contest this allegation. For example see the discussion of this matter in Reeves (1998).

<sup>114</sup> As Chapter Six touched on, this is not necessarily so even for non-indigenous pastoralists.

<sup>115</sup> Opposing the suggestion of a treaty between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.



It cannot be presumed, however, that Aboriginal people interpret the running of a pastoral enterprise on their land along the conventional lines of 'productive use', economic use, and economic development. Historically, the need to adapt to the presence of pastoralism, and the imperative to maintain culture and affiliations with land, led to cultural continuity through, often strategic, cultural change (Baker 1999). As Baker (1999) has argued more generally, Aboriginal culture under the conditions of colonialism in the NT has proven to be flexible and resistant to catastrophic destruction. My fieldwork with Aboriginal pastoralists revealed that pastoralism is one means by which Aboriginal people are seeking to ensure the continuation of Aboriginal knowledge, ceremonies and presence on the land. In this sense, Aboriginal pastoralism cannot be read as confirmation of the legitimacy or 'natural' quality of the pastoral landscape. Aboriginal pastoralism can in fact further illustrate the limits of colonialism and the ability of Aboriginal people to flexibly create the conditions for their survival using the very tools by which they were apparently colonised.

### **8.3 *A Brief Background to Aboriginal Pastoralism***

This section outlines problems and issues associated with Aboriginal pastoralism in the NT. It draws on material concerning Aboriginal pastoralism across the NT, particularly Central Australia. The section examines some of the social constraints on Aboriginal pastoral enterprises and discusses, in general, the motivations of Aboriginal people for running pastoral enterprises. The following section then focuses on these motivations and relates them to customary Aboriginal practices. The NT is littered with abandoned primary industry projects set up by non-indigenous people for Aboriginal people. Many of these date from the assimilation era in which the state sought to bring Aboriginal

people to a point where they could run such businesses and be part of mainstream Australian society. Across the NT these ventures include cattle projects, agricultural farms, fishing projects, tanneries and piggeries (for some descriptions see Egan 1997; Henson 1994). They were located on Aboriginal reserves, Welfare Branch settlements, and missions. Some, such as the pastoral business at Yuendumu, northwest of Alice Springs, still exist in various forms. Many others date from within the land rights era when land began to be purchased by the federal government on behalf of Aboriginal people.

As Table 4.1 showed, those pastoral businesses on land purchased from the 1970s exist today in assorted guises. Some are running as more or less commercial operations, while others exist today as smaller, subsistence-oriented operations. While Table 4.1 listed those operating on Aboriginal-owned former or current pastoral leases, there are other, mainly small, operations on lands such as the former missions at Hermannsburg and Santa Teresa. In 1997, the Central Land Council<sup>116</sup> (CLC) estimated that there were around eighteen Aboriginal pastoral operations in total in the Alice Springs district (P. Mitchell, pers. comm. 11/11/97).

Phillpot (Forthcoming) distinguishes between four different types of Aboriginal pastoral enterprises (cf. Mitchell 1996). These are summarised in Table 8.1, and should be seen as lying on a spectrum rather than as discrete types. For instance, non-commercial operations may at times sell cattle on the open market. Furthermore, such enterprises

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<sup>116</sup> The CLC is not involved in supporting all these operations. At the time of fieldwork, the CLC could not be sure of the status of all these operations. All the Aboriginal pastoral operations in this study were CLC supported operations.

can move between categories as social circumstances change. For example, the Yuelamu pastoral company at Mt Allan has had characteristics of both commercial and non-commercial, and subsidised and non-subsidised enterprises in recent years, roughly corresponding to periods of non-indigenous management and indigenous management, and to the need in the mid-1990s to service debt, now discharged.

Type of Enterprise	Characteristics
Commercial	Commercial orientation, covers all costs, in the market
Subsidised Commercial	Commercial orientation, in the market, external subsidies
Subsidised Non-commercial	Subsistence oriented. May be in the market, main aims are meat provision and employment (activity), external subsidies
Non-subsidised Non-commercial	Subsistence oriented. May be in the market, main aims are meat provision and employment (activity)

Notes: External subsidies includes grants from statutory bodies such as the Indigenous Land Corporation<sup>117</sup> and employment subsidies through welfare programs such as the Community Employment and Development Program, whereby Aboriginal people undertake some form of labour in return for welfare payments.  
Commercial herds number several thousand whereas non-commercial herds tend to number up to several hundred.

**Table 8.1: A typology of Aboriginal pastoral enterprises**

Source: Phillpot (Forthcoming)

The variability in the nature of such pastoral businesses is illustrated, for example, by the fact that six Aboriginal pastoral enterprises in Central Australia changed from more or less commercial operations to subsistence operations between 1984 and 1993 (Hanlon and Phillpot 1993b). Two places, Lajamanu (a former reserve), and

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<sup>117</sup> The Indigenous Land Corporation was created by the federal Labour government in 1995. It is funded through the Indigenous Land Fund and exists to purchase land for Aboriginal people and to assist in funding and supporting land management on Aboriginal land. The Indigenous Land Fund was set up to purchase land for Aboriginal people unable to regain ownership of land through Native Title processes, and for management of Aboriginal land.

Willowra/Mt Barkly (former pastoral leases), which had commercial herds in 1984, had ceased running cattle altogether by 1993 (Hanlon and Phillpot 1993b). Such changes across the NT are the basis for NT government and non-indigenous pastoralist criticism of Aboriginal land ownership. For example, critics of land rights point to these variations as 'failures'. David Barnett, writing in the *Australian Financial Review* claimed Aboriginal land ownership was reducing the 'nation's earning capacity...once productive leaseholds are becoming subsistence areas for hunters and gatherers' (11/9/97).

<b>Factors Common to North Australian Enterprise Development</b>	<b>Factors specifically affecting Aboriginal enterprise development</b>	
	<b>Factors relating to Aboriginal values</b>	<b>Factors stemming from historical and contemporary operations</b>
Physical isolation	Kinship networks	Historically seen as training schemes
Poverty of local resource base	Social structure	Historically assumed to be non-profit making
Small size of local population	Reciprocity <sup>118</sup>	Lack of management/training for Aboriginal people
High dispersion of local population	Lack of interest in competition and in entrepreneurial success	Employment of inefficient, inexperienced non-Aboriginal managers
High level of external involvement in ownership, marketing and management	Human/land responsibilities	Dependence on government finance
	Authority hierarchy	Undercapitalisation

**Table 8.2: Factors affecting the success of Aboriginal economic enterprises.**

Source: Young (1988b)

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<sup>118</sup> Paul Mitchell suggests that it is not so much reciprocity that is the issue. Reciprocity is present across cultures. Mitchell argues the problem for Aboriginal pastoral enterprises is the 'lack of understanding [among Aboriginal people] of western structures that mark out the rules of ownership and reciprocity' in corporate entities (P. Mitchell, pers. comm. 22/12/99, see also Tilmouth and Mitchell 1998).

The reasons proffered for these enterprise 'failures' by researchers examining the relationship between Aboriginal society and commercial businesses, are diverse<sup>119</sup>. They include factors common to all north Australian enterprises, factors arising from Aboriginal values, and factors stemming from historical and contemporary operation and management of pastoral enterprises (Young 1988b). Table 8.2 summarises these.

Those factors relating to Aboriginal values generally have significance insofar as Aboriginal social organisation relates to management of businesses that require efficient management and must meet legal and accounting standards set by the society at large. For example, in Central Australian Aboriginal societies, older people hold cultural knowledge and authority. Older people have thus tended to dominate pastoral enterprises. Such people may well have the most experience of stock work, such as mustering and working cattle, but are also less likely to possess the education and literacy and numeracy skills required for running a financially viable business. Another significant way in which Aboriginal social organisation has affected pastoral enterprises is through the networks of kinship, responsibility and reciprocity that characterise most Aboriginal societies. One consequence has been that those in positions of authority in pastoral enterprises have come under pressure to use the resources of the business (money, vehicles, materials etc.) to meet such obligations (P. Mitchell, pers. comm. 11/11/97).

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<sup>119</sup> As I simply summarise this research I direct the interested reader to the following sources: Allen (1995), Coombs (1989), Crough (1993), Dale (1992), Hanlon (1993b), Hanlon (1993a), Hanlon (1984), Lane (1995), Phillpot (1985), Phillpot (1986), Phillpot (Forthcoming), Thiele (1982), Walter (1980), Young (1981; 1985; 1988c; 1988b; 1988a; 1991; 1995).

The combination of Aboriginal land ownership and pastoral land use has also presented problems for pastoral enterprises. Commercial pastoralism generally requires that all land on a station be made available for pastoral use. On any given station, however, there may be a number of land-owning groups. Some groups may not wish pastoralism to be carried out on their country (Allen 1995), or they may demand payment for it (as was occurring at Mistake Creek during the fieldwork period). Conversely, Aboriginal company directors may be placed in difficult positions as they are likely to be associated with pastoral management decisions relating to country for which they do not possess such decision-making rights under Aboriginal land ownership systems. Similar problems have arisen when non-indigenous managers have been employed. At times Aboriginal people have perceived that, although they now own the land, there remains a 'whitefella' with considerable control over decisions relating to land use (for example see Thiele 1982; Tilmouth and Mitchell 1998). Aboriginal pastoralists at Atite indicated to me that this had been a problem in the late 1970s with the pastoral business at Utopia.

Many of these problems are related to the major reason Aboriginal people have sought legal ownership of traditional land. This is to re-establish Aboriginal relationships to land in terms of residence, control, and the fulfillment of traditional and enduring responsibilities to land (Coombs, McCann et al. 1989; Young 1981). Milly Nangala spoke of this in telling how the Walpiri people of Willowra station sought to gain and keep their land:

We talked hard to keep the old ways and the law, the things that belonged to our ancestors, the things that belong to those who brought us up: our mothers, our fathers, our grandparents. We keep and nurture what belongs to them. That is ours before the white man came, that is how we were. Therefore we cherish these things for ourselves (Vaarzon-Morel and Nungarrayi 1995, p.105-106).

Milly Nangala is speaking of the importance of maintaining connections with country and of ensuring that knowledge of country and of Aboriginal law is continued through teaching their children. In some places these priorities mean that pastoralism is rejected by Aboriginal people as inimical to their land use aspirations (Rose 1995).

Aboriginal pastoralism exists within this order of priorities. Pastoralism is secondary to the imperatives of owning and controlling country, and fulfilling one's obligations to country and kin. The objectives of Aboriginal pastoralism, as summarised by Hanlon and Philpott (1993a), compared to those of the pastoral industry as a whole, reflect this (see Table 8.3).

Industry Objectives	NT Pastoral Industry	Aboriginal Pastoral Industry
Primary	Cash flow/tax minimisation	Income producing
	Security	Employment maximisation
	Lifestyle	Traditional land ownership
Secondary	Land sustainability	Returns to Directors
	Maximisation of animal production	Food self-sufficiency
	Capital gain	Increased availability of communal assets
	Introduction of new technology	A 'yearning' for the 'old' ways

**Table 8.3: Comparison of objectives of the NT pastoral industry generally and Aboriginal pastoralism**

Source: (Hanlon and Phillpot 1993a)

Type of enterprise	Gender	Perceived benefits from pastoralism		
		Keeping culture/(young) people strong	Money	'Killers' <sup>120</sup> (meat)
Commercial	Men (n=12)	4.5	3.1	3.3 (n=7)
	Women (n=4)	2.75	3.75	3.5
	Average	4.1	3.25	3.4
Non-commercial	Men (n=3)	6.7	2.3	2.0 (n=1)
	Women (n=3)	5.0	2.0	3.0
	Average	5.8	2.2	2.75
Totals	Average all men	4.9	2.9	3.1
	Average all women	3.7	3.0	3.3
	<b>Total average</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>2.9</b>	<b>3.2</b>

Note: Ranking was carried out using the methods described in Maxwell (1995) and Waters-Bayer (1995). Following fieldwork and discussions through which general classes of benefits were identified, Aboriginal pastoralists were asked to rank these benefits using ten tokens, allocating tokens according to their ranking of a benefit.

The larger numbers associated with the commercial enterprises reflect the fact that these enterprises are often associated with larger communities and have Boards of Directors. Non-commercial enterprises tend to have relatively small numbers of people associated with them. They might, for example, be run mainly by one or two older men, as is the case in the enterprises featured here.

**Table 8.4: Aboriginal pastoralists' ranking of benefits derived from pastoral enterprises.**

This sense of priorities was mirrored in those of the Aboriginal pastoralists interviewed for this thesis. As shown in Table 8.4, for both commercial and non-commercial enterprises, Aboriginal pastoralists in this study ranked the cultural and social benefits of pastoralism above other perceived benefits. Specifically, pastoralism was to have a role in the maintenance of Aboriginal culture. Although women in the commercial enterprises ranked economic benefits above such cultural benefits (possibly due to the role of men in educating younger men in Aboriginal law and culture, see below), economic benefits in the form of money for wages or projects was ranked last overall. Most Aboriginal pastoralists perceived money as important only insofar as it enabled

<sup>120</sup> 'Killer' is the term used in the inland and north to describe a beast or herd kept primarily as a source of meat for consumption, not sale.



the pastoral enterprises to continue. Having the enterprise and maintaining it was seen as a desirable outcome in itself. For example, a study at Central Mt. Wedge into the feasibility of a cattle enterprise, found the Aboriginal landowners were indifferent as to whether they had five thousand or one hundred cattle; what mattered to them was having a cattle station (P. Mitchell, pers. comm. 15/11/97).

## **8.4 *Looking after Cattle, Looking after Country***

### **8.4.1 Holding Country – an Overview**

Aboriginal pastoralism, however, should not be seen as something simply incidental to the maintenance of culture. Aboriginal pastoralists whom I interviewed also saw pastoralism as a *means* by which to maintain Aboriginal culture. It was this view from which the category 'Keeping culture/(young) people strong' in emerged. While past studies of Aboriginal pastoralism point out that Aboriginal pastoralists carry out pastoralism for primarily social reasons, consistent with the information presented in Table 8.4 they generally do not elaborate as to the nature of these reasons. For example, Aboriginal pastoralists are known to value pastoralism for its employment of young men. Exactly why they value this activity, and its links with Aboriginal culture, have not been adequately explored. An exception to this is McGrath's (1987) work with Aboriginal veterans of the pastoral industry, in which she details the points at which Aboriginal and 'whitefella' cattle cultures merge. This work, however, is primarily historical, and its findings in relation to the merging of cultures has not significantly entered assessments of the role of contemporary Aboriginal pastoralism.

This section will illustrate some ways in which Aboriginal pastoralists interviewed for this study see pastoralism as a means of ensuring Aboriginal cultural continuity. The starting point for this discussion is the Aboriginal concept of 'country' as a part of matrix of people, society, land, their interrelationships, reciprocities and moral order. Country, and the relationships it embodies, is fundamental to Aboriginal society and social organisation. Aboriginal identity is derived from country, and a person has rights and responsibilities to country that must be fulfilled.

'Country' and Aboriginal social organisation are themselves founded on the 'Dreaming'. The 'Dreaming', for which there is no entirely appropriate word in English, is simultaneously the ontology, beliefs, stories, and logic that, in Aboriginal culture, constitute the cosmos, the land and society, and provide principles and laws by which to live (Myers 1986; Rose 1992a). The Dreaming is both a past time in which spirit ancestors (animal, human or monster) created the landscape, generating the features seen today, and the present, in which the actions and presence of these ancestors remain in the land and in people (Myers 1986). The actions and movements of these ancestors created a geography of sites and networks that constitute present day Aboriginal landscapes and structure Aboriginal lives. Aboriginal people also see themselves as belonging to the Dreaming, and through their origins, as incarnations of spirit ancestors. One's 'Dreaming' links that person with place and 'provides the basic source of his or her identity, an identity that pre-exists' (Myers 1986, p.50). Such relationships are the basis for Aboriginal land ownership and may be formed through a variety of social relationships such as conception site, birth site, or those of one's parents (Rose 1992a).

Customary Aboriginal ownership of country confers rights upon individuals and groups to control that country and to make decisions about it. Ownership also brings responsibility. The relationship with country is reciprocal: 'the person takes care of the country and the country takes care of the person' (Rose 1992a, p.107). Given their non-indigenous connotations, the word 'care' or the phrase 'caring for country' should be used cautiously. While there may be some overlap with non-Aboriginal concepts of land management and experiences of land, there are also substantial differences, including divergent frames of reference (Rose 1995). In the Aboriginal usage, 'looking after' or 'caring' for country carries the sense of 'holding' a country as one would carry a responsibility, and denotes an active and intimate relationship between the holder and what is held (Myers 1982). Holding a country also implies that one is fulfilling a role that transcends the present and the individual. The individual holds the country until the succeeding generation takes on the responsibility upon their death. The holder is part of a cosmological order, in which they play a relatively temporary role, fulfilling responsibilities for continuity defined in Aboriginal law and derived from the Dreaming. The imperative is to maintain the law; the Dreaming provides 'an order to which all are subordinated' (Myers 1986, p.52). Rose (1992a, p.106-107) summarises the responsibilities of 'holders' to country as follows:

- Keeping the country 'clean' i.e. burning it off properly.
- Using the country by hunting, gathering, fishing, and generally letting the country know that people are there.
- Protecting the country's integrity by not allowing other people to use the country or Dreamings (in ceremonial contexts)<sup>121</sup> without asking.
- Protecting the country, particularly Dreaming sites, from damage.
- Protecting the species related to that country.
- Protecting dangerous places so that harm does not come out of that country.
- Providing a new generation of owners to take over the responsibilities.
- Educating the new owners to the knowledge and responsibilities for that country.

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<sup>121</sup> For example, using totems and sacred knowledge, for which one has no rights to, in ceremonies.

- Learning and performing the ceremonies which keep country and people *punyu*<sup>122</sup>.

Clearly, a physical presence is required to properly maintain these responsibilities. People must visit country, use it, visit sites, carry out the required ceremonies, and teach young people about their country. Notwithstanding the role of the pastoral industry in facilitating the maintenance of these activities, at least to an extent, European settlement disrupted these activities considerably and saw Aboriginal people lose control of, if not necessarily access to, much land and many sites. Regaining land provides opportunities to pursue these obligations without hindrance.

#### **8.4.2 'Really proper way'<sup>123</sup>, that way' – Aboriginal Pastoralism and Cultural Continuity**

Some Aboriginal people, including those Aboriginal pastoralists whom I interviewed, perceive that, despite having gained land through the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, there remain future uncertainties in meeting obligations to country. Related to this, they worry that they are not fulfilling obligations to the young people whom they 'hold' in a similar way to country, and to whom they have obligations to 'look after' and 'grow up'. Concerns for young Aboriginal people and about the future of country are part of the desire to run cattle enterprises. All those interviewed were customary owners of land that had been returned under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NT) 1976, or of land which was Aboriginal-owned and under claim through the act. Three of these

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<sup>122</sup> Rose describes this Ngarinman language word as variously being translated as strong, healthy, happy, clean and safe, in the sense of both being within the law, and being cared for (Rose 1992a, p.65).

<sup>123</sup> In Aboriginal English 'way' refers to 'the manner in which one lives as an Aboriginal person, uses language, and performs social and personal activities' and also 'the beliefs and customs which provide meaning for this way of living' (Arthur 1996, p.243).

properties were located in the study focus area in Central Australia, and one was located in the Victoria River District to the north<sup>124</sup>. As outlined in Chapter Three, fieldwork was most effective at two non-commercial pastoral enterprises at Nguyarmini on the former McLaren Creek pastoral lease, and at Atite, or Mosquito Bore, on the former Utopia pastoral lease<sup>125</sup>. Both have small cattle herds by Central Australian standards, where the average herd size in 1991-92 was 4 100 head of cattle (Wilcox and Cunningham 1994). In 1997, the Atite pastoral company had around two hundred head, and Mungkarta pastoral company had about five hundred head. These two places provided the richest information regarding the relationship between pastoralism and Aboriginal culture. The following discussion thus draws heavily upon information gleaned from these two enterprises, in the knowledge that the commercial enterprises shared similar traits, more difficult though they were to research.

Paraphrasing Mark Twain, fears about the imminent demise of Aboriginal cultures may be premature. As I have discussed in Chapter Four, Aboriginal societies have survived a great deal so far. Nostalgia for the past is not confined to Aboriginal society. Yet the concerns of Aboriginal pastoralists about their young people are real and, as a factor in the desire to run pastoral enterprises, influence the use of land and financial resources. The concerns of these older Aboriginal pastoralists (aged from their fifties) are also rooted in severe health problems faced by many indigenous people in Central Australia. The mortality rates of indigenous people in the NT are three to four times higher than those for non-indigenous people in the NT (Territory Health Services 1998). Alcohol

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<sup>124</sup> The reasons for interviews in this area are outlined in Chapter Three.

<sup>125</sup> These former leases are now respectively known as the Mungkarta and Angarapa Aboriginal Land Trusts.

abuse is a factor in this mortality rate, particularly affecting indigenous men (McLennan and Madden 1999; Hanlon and Phillpot 1993b). Alcohol causes major disruption in indigenous society in the NT and is responsible for considerable violence amongst Aboriginal people (McLennan and Madden 1999), particularly domestic violence against women (Wright 1997). Alcohol consumption has also been associated with high rates of injury and death due to road accidents among indigenous people (McLennan and Madden 1999). This is despite the fact that indigenous people in general are less likely than non-indigenous people to drink regularly; the risks come with consumption at hazardous levels among those who do drink (McLennan and Madden 1999). As alcohol is forbidden on much indigenous land, the attractions of town and alcohol draw young (and older) indigenous people away from their home country into potentially destructive situations.

This potential for violence and loss clearly worried the Aboriginal people at Nguyarmini and Atite. Warumugu man Murphy Kennedy Japanangka, bearing responsibilities for both country and a number of younger people<sup>126</sup>, expressed his concern:

Some of them people, they, you know, run away all the time. That's another thing very hard for me. Well we can't look after anything like that. Son, son running away, and course, you got nothing. Only father and mother back, father and mother back whatisname<sup>127</sup>. Well that's very hard. Living very hard for old people like that. And young people. That's where some people disappear. Some people rip'em with a knife, it'll be dead people (Murphy Japanangka, interview 4/10/97).

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<sup>126</sup> In late 1997 this included one young boy whose parents were 'drunken' according to Murphy. He and his wife had brought him to Nguyarmini to 'grow him up' i.e. to look after him.

<sup>127</sup> Murphy uses 'whatisname' here to refer to 'home' or 'country'. In this case he is probably referring particularly to Nguyarmini outstation as their home base in their country. 'Whatisname' is being used in the same way Aboriginal people use the word 'thing' to refer to a 'substitute for an understood verb [noun] or for a verb [noun] which momentarily escape the speaker' (Arthur 1996, p.218).

Aranda and Alyawarra Aboriginal pastoralists at Love's Creek and Atite respectively expressed similar fears. Kumanjay<sup>128</sup> Pwerle at Atite said:

They end up somewhere maybe throat cut. Something like that. That'll be all the youngfellas gone. Might be two or three people. Killed somewhere. Might be roll a car (Kumanjay Pwerle, interview 20/4/97).

Such concern appeared to be directed mainly towards young men. The older men, aged from their late fifties to early seventies, did not appear to perceive the potential dangers of alcohol abuse among young women to be as great. In the case of young women in Murphy's family, the concern was more that they would be victims of violence from men if they remained in town. For these young women, however, the educational needs of their children caused them to spend much time in Tennant Creek.

The Aboriginal pastoralists were looking for ways to keep young people, especially the young men, on the country. They perceived there was little for the young people to do when at outstations or in settlements, and sought to find activities that would interest them and stop them getting 'wild' and 'on the grog' (Keith Williams, interview, 11/11/97). This view of life on outstations was confirmed by several of the young men (aged 18-22) at Atite who said they found life a little 'boring' on Utopia (interview 13/11/97).

The problem of young people going into town and getting 'on the grog' is not only related to concern about their well-being and about fulfilling responsibilities to 'look

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<sup>128</sup> Kumanjay Pwerle died in 1999. 'Kumanjay' is used to refer to a dead person, whose name is now 'kumanjay'. This means it can't be used for a prescribed period of time.

after' them. As outlined earlier, in order to fulfill their obligations to country, owners of country have responsibility for providing a new generation of knowledgeable owners to succeed them. That they are unable to ensure the presence of young people on country was therefore a source of concern to the Aboriginal pastoralists interviewed. The possibility that the young people would not learn from them in time caused them to worry that they would fail to 'hold' the country:

**Kumanjay Pwerle:** "You fellas got to take him on this one now. We pass away, you got to understand". We bin tell 'em like that, this fella now.

**Harold Nelson:** That's way old people bin doing, we got to do the same way

**Kumanjay Pwerle:** We got to give 'em our culture. You know. We can't lose this culture, otherwise we'll lose it. We gonna keep going with that one, keep him strong... we gotta keep going this way, the blackfella law, he can't change, that ceremony law he can't change. It's still longa that old law, from early days, before early days. Before early days, before early days, on and on, never change, still longa that law.

**Harold Nelson:** That law there and me, I die and that law be on and on. Young generation take over, same thing (Interview 20/4/97).

Murphy Japanangka also expressed this fear of 'losing' the law and the country if the youngfellas are drinking in town:

They don't look after it, they don't think about country, nothing...they lost the country, he might lost himself...he don't know anything about it, no ceremony business<sup>129</sup>, he don't know sacred sites, he lost himself altogether (Murphy Japanangka, interview 4/10/97).

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<sup>129</sup> In Aboriginal English, 'business' usually refers to Aboriginal ceremony and ritual (Arthur 1996). It may also be used to refer to practices, activities or processes in other aspects of Aboriginal life. For example, the myriad practices, skills, knowledge and purposes associated with pastoralism might be referred to summarily as 'cattle business'.



In this context 'lost' has a particular meaning. Losing can be thought of as 'forgetting', and losing or forgetting is a significant cultural loss (Arthur 1996). The Pintupi concept of *wantininpa*, which refers to 'losing' or 'leaving', and which can apply to people or country, conveys this sense of loss (Myers 1986). Myers (1986), however, indicates that, in relation to country, the concept carries the implication of handing that country on, of losing it on death, and leaving it for the next generation. These men quoted above appear to fear a more serious loss. It is a loss of identity for those young men who have 'lost' their country. They also fear a loss of knowledge that will not be easily filled, and which will lead to the loss of country through the loss of rights to 'own' that country in Aboriginal terms.

As discussed, the right to own or hold country comes from birth. These rights, however, must be maintained by visiting country and sites, learning about them, learning the stories and rituals, and keeping country and sites 'clean' (see page 307). Instruction in these matters by older men is a 'crucial component of the social reproduction of ownership and through it the production of adult men' (Myers 1986, p.151). One can lose the right to hold country if one does not undertake these tasks and does not have the requisite knowledge of country and sites. An important aspect of this is being able to demonstrate this knowledge to others. Holding country also comes from others agreeing to recognise one as a legitimate owner (Myers 1986) – people are 'witness for one another' (Murphy Japanangka, interview 4/10/97). If 'youngfellas' are away from their country, away from the elder men, and drinking in town, they are not in a position to learn as they should, and knowledge and ownership of country is seen to have the potential to be 'lost'.

During fieldwork, the basis for Murphy Japanangka's concerns emerged vividly. At the time of all my visits, most of his 'youngfellas' were elsewhere, usually in Tennant Creek. A large proportion of time during these fieldwork visits was spent driving to Tennant Creek in order to try and find them and to bring them back to Nguyarmini. This involved scouring the Aboriginal town camps, the drinking places in the bush around Tennant Creek, and searching pubs and bars. Sometimes we found the 'youngfellas', and sometimes not, but Murphy was never successful in getting them to Nguyarmini as a result of these searches. On two occasions at Atite, alcohol had been brought in from Alice Springs and was being consumed in large quantities.

At all four locations of the Aboriginal pastoral enterprises examined in this study, the Aboriginal pastoralists expressed concerns about keeping young people on country and about alcohol. Similarly, pastoralism, specifically cattle work, was seen as a means by which young men could be enticed to stay at home and be 'on the country' in the company of knowledgeable older men (Figure 8.1 and Figure 8.2). Although, overall, women ranked the cultural benefits of pastoralism somewhat lower than men (Table 8.4), the few women whom I was able to interview largely agreed that cattle enterprises were 'good' in that they potentially occupied the young men. Cattle can, however, potentially conflict with the concerns of women. For example, in November 1997, women at Atite were upset that cattle were able to wander freely around the outstation and were eating vegetation around the houses, including shade trees and vines the women had planted (see Figure 8.3). In addition, Rose (1995) reported that some of the Aboriginal women he talked to in Central Australia resented the funding that went to pastoral projects while other community needs languished. The dominance of pastoral projects by men and the impact of cattle on bush foods, were some of the women's





Such moments of gaining knowledge of country are evident in the recollections of cattle work among the Central Australian Aboriginal pastoralists at Atite and Mungkarta. When these men were working on stations, most of the work was done on horseback and there was greater reliance upon natural waters than today. Consequently, the station work they undertook involved time riding the country, and checking up on cattle and waters. This was fine-grained work, which was slow by today's standards, and afforded them time on country. Travelling and talking with Murphy Japanangka, for instance, revealed his intricate geography of travel routes, waterholes and sites in the region that he used for various aspects of his pastoral work. In moving across and around this country, his 'father's country', Murphy was able to gain Aboriginal and pastoral knowledge of it, and fulfill customary obligations. For example, there is an old packhorse route through the Murchison Ranges from stations to the east, where Murphy worked, that was used to travel to Tennant Creek, or to check on waters in the area:

You gotta look after him cattle. You gotta look after him rockholes. No bore. Before bore. Move the cattle around. Waterhole. Might be a couple of blokes go out and check him up waterhole. "Oh, waterhole getting dry" or "some cows perishing here. I think we'll have to take 'em up rockhole. Come on"...You gotta move them cattle. Right away, take 'em up to rockhole (Murphy Japanangka, interview 11/4/97).

Knowing which rockholes will have water at certain times of year demonstrates knowledge of, and familiarity with, country. Such familiarity indicates that one has spent time on the country and that one has maintained obligations:

My father's country. So I got to follow that. And all our sons. That got to be – looking after everything. People getting old and old. He's the one that got to come along, second, to look after country. We used to shift 'em cattle and bring horses. To give horses a drink. If we want 'em horses we got to fill a canteen. We come along with a packhorse. You got fill up your canteen. You got to fill him up. Good clean water...No bore, before. People used to go through with packhorse. And if you want water you got to come down to rockhole.

Traditional owner, people belonging to country, well he know all the rockholes...that where people got to be, that's why people worrying about – to look after place you know. Keep up with the country so long as young fellas stick to daddy you know (Murphy Japanangka, interview 11/4/97).

Such knowledge was invaluable to early pastoralists, who often relied on Aboriginal knowledge of land<sup>130</sup>. My fieldwork with Murphy Japanangka was as much an opportunity to demonstrate to me his knowledge of the land 'cattle way' and the pastoral history of the area, as it was an opportunity for him<sup>131</sup> to visit country and sites. This twin purpose became clear on my last day with Murphy when he indicated that he saw me as 'witness' for his knowledge and holding of country through the 'cattle way'.

Knowledge of country through cattle work has become a valued 'second way' (McGrath 1987) of knowing country, one that sits alongside the Aboriginal 'way', and which can contribute to the development of knowledge about country in the Aboriginal way. For these older men, cattle work became part of the process by which Aboriginal customary ownership was reproduced, and by which they were made into men. This was accomplished by proving themselves able to do cattle work 'proper way' and by spending time on country learning about it both 'cattle way' and 'Aboriginal way' (see McGrath 1987). They wish to reproduce in the present the means by which they learnt to be Aboriginal men and to hold country. 'Proper way' was a phrase commonly used by these Aboriginal pastoralists. It refers to 'qualities and discipline associated with adulthood' (McGrath 1987, p.167) and the mastery of cattle skills and the ability to use

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<sup>130</sup> Elsewhere in my conversations with Murphy Japanangka he discussed the dependence of non-indigenous pastoralists for whom he had worked on Aboriginal knowledge.

<sup>131</sup> At the time of fieldwork, Murphy did not have a four-wheel drive, which is required for vehicular cross-country travel through this area. My interest in pastoralism, his version of the country, my possession of a four-wheel drive, and Murphy's desires to visit country and talk of past and contemporary in the area coincided.

knowledge of country to facilitate cattle work. Through the process of instilling in their young men the ability to do cattle work 'proper way' they hope to secure the future of people and country:

You know if they stick on us fellas, that's it, you know, we should cut 'em from them youngfellas [the drunken ones] for work way and corroboree way, you know, Aboriginal ceremony. We got to teach when we make a young man, we got to teach 'em all that one, work way, cattle way and business way, corroboree. So they can understand two way (Kumanjay Pwerle, interview 20/4/97).

These Aboriginal pastoralists see that security of 'ownership' comes through mastering both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ways. The Aboriginal pastoralists acknowledge that they need some ability to operate in a world dominated by non-Aboriginal values and laws. They see pastoralism as a means by which this can be achieved and as an activity that can be blended with Aboriginal ritual life and land ownership.

A final point illustrates a further way in which these Aboriginal pastoralists, in this case those at Atite and Nguyarmini, see pastoral enterprises as way of holding onto land. After spending much of their lives without ownership of their land, these people have, in their eyes, finally regained what they see as theirs. From their perspective a change in government and a change in law caused land to be returned to them. They refer to a time when 'everything bin change' or, as elsewhere in the NT, to 'Whitlam times', referring to Gough Whitlam, the Labour Prime Minister who is seen by Aboriginal people to have introduced land rights (Baker 1999). In contrast to Aboriginal law, which is seen as unchanging, 'whitefella' laws such as those that have bestowed land ownership on these Aboriginal pastoralists are seen as fickle. In their discussion of the enduring nature

of Aboriginal law (see page 312), Kumanjay Pwerle and Harold Nelson contrasted it to non-indigenous law:

And this other law, this one here we doing him, cattle business. But that cattle business he's there, and government change, you know, new government come in, he's got different idea and he tell that mob he got to follow that law, that new government law. He's got to change every year. Something like that. (Kumanjay Pwerle, interview 20/4/97).

Given this perceived instability in non-indigenous law, they anxiously envisage their land being taken away just as it was given. They saw this threat as real and low prices for cattle as evidence of it. They perceived that the government had made the price low in order to exact revenge upon Aboriginal people for gaining ownership of 'too many' pastoral leases.

Aboriginal pastoralists at Atite and Nguyarmini saw pastoralism as a means of gaining recognition of their version of land 'ownership' under non-indigenous systems of land ownership. In this view, pastoralism is a means of establishing a reciprocal relationship with government in which they are fulfilling their side of a bargain by using and knowing land properly, that is, in ways that satisfy non-indigenous norms. In the eyes of these Aboriginal pastoralists, amid momentous social changes, pastoralism has been a constant in Central Australia, it has been one aspect of non-indigenous life that has persisted more or less as it has been for decades. It seems likely that from this, following Kumanjay Pwerle above, they take pastoralism to be a 'way of following non-indigenous law and fulfilling its, to them, somewhat ambiguous and opaque requirements, in the same way they fulfill Aboriginal law. In this way they hope to retain the right to hold their country under non-indigenous law whether it is Aboriginal or non-indigenous law that is determining ownership in legal terms.



This is perhaps a contemporary example of the lack of ‘mutual intelligibility’ which Rowse (1998) describes as a characteristic of the rationing relationships between Aboriginal and non-indigenous people in the past. The confusion arose here, as there was no mutual frame of reference with which to interpret the exchange of goods between rationed Aborigines and settlers up to the late 1960s. Therefore there was no way of reaching shared interpretations of what should follow in relation to each other. For example, as far as Aboriginal people were concerned it was reasonable for white people to provide them with rations, as they had occupied Aboriginal land and had taken and, at times, raped Aboriginal women (see Chapter Four). On the other hand, the settlers expected a range of outcomes in return for rationing; labour, obedience, and assimilation. The settlers did not perceive that Aboriginal people already saw that they had given and were continuing to do so. For the Aboriginal pastoralists at Atite and Nguyarmini, the processes in the non-indigenous domain that led to them regaining their land are not clear. Such social and political processes are shrouded in mystery to them, and they therefore interpret the return of land through Aboriginal concepts (for a discussion of ‘mystification’ and how it influences Aboriginal interactions with the non-indigenous domain, see Trudgen 1993).

The Aboriginal pastoralists at Atite and Nguyarmini now perceived that because the government had given them land, given them cattle and a brand<sup>132</sup>, they now needed to keep running cattle to fulfill their obligations and retain the land:

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<sup>132</sup> For identification purposes, cattle are branded with a hot branding iron. This process imprints the owner’s ‘brand’ or symbol into the skin of the cattle. It harks back to the open range era when there were few fences and little control over cattle movement. All brands are registered with the NT government.

Government bin given us the cattle and the country – same time. We got to worry for cattle. We got to worry for country. You watch them two lots of things. Your sacred sites and your cattle. Because government bin give it (Murphy Japanangka, interview 11/4/97).

Because of this sense of reciprocity these Aboriginal pastoralists ‘stick to the country and watch ‘em cattle longa this country (Murphy Japanangka, interview 11/4/97). If they don’t do this they worry that ‘Government will keep it eh’ (Murphy Japanangka, interview 11/4/97). At Atite, they worried about the young men not knowing how to do cattle work:

- Kumanjay Pwerle:** If they [the young fellas] can’t do anything government will pull ‘em off.  
**Harold Nelson:** They lose everything.  
**Kumanjay Pwerle:** You know that’s government law. People not doing right job, they take everything away.  
**Harold Nelson:** Everything away. (Interview 20/4/97).

Keeping the young men interested in, and doing cattle work, is part of a strategy to maintain the presence of cattle and maintain land ownership, and meet obligations arising from both Aboriginal and non-indigenous domains.

## **8.5 Conclusion**

This chapter has shown another side to pastoralism in Central Australia. The findings suggest a sense in which ‘pastoralism’, as a category of activity, becomes free-floating, unmoored from its conventional associations. Not only is the pastoralist story of Central Australia as an inherently pastoral landscape challenged, but the very meaning of ‘pastoral’ itself is not fixed. I have shown that pastoralism in Central Australia is not necessarily and only about economic activity and other non-indigenous norms. I have

also shown that pastoralism can be 'productive' in the sense of fulfilling land use norms that lie outside the non-indigenous pastoralists' sense of wise rural land use, and outside conventional senses of economically profitable rural production. Pastoralism can also be seen as 'productive' in an Aboriginal sense. Aboriginal pastoralists, drawing upon their own working histories and memories, perceive that pastoralism has a significant role in ensuring the continuity of Aboriginal culture and ways of inhabiting country.

This version of pastoralism radically challenges the idea of pastoralism contained in the stories of Central Australia offered by non-indigenous pastoralists. The pastoral landscape is no longer a domain over which they alone have the power of definition. Aboriginal land rights not only challenges their sense of Central Australia through land tenure changes and changes in the social order, it has allowed an Aboriginal pastoral landscape to emerge. In this landscape, pastoralism can come to serve localised Aboriginal cultural needs, not regional, state and national demands driven by the dictates of economy, trade, and views of the inland derived from a colonial past. Aboriginal people have frequently been constructed by non-indigenous Australians as emblems, and non-indigenous versions of Aboriginality have been 'appropriated to fuel images of national identity' (Rose 1992a, p.2). In adapting pastoralism for their own cultural purposes, these Aboriginal pastoralists elude the easy and popular one-dimensional images of both the Aboriginal stockmen and the exotic native, both of which have served non-indigenous visions of the outback.

In terms of the overall thesis, this chapter has shown that the theoretical oneway progression from wild to rural landscapes which continues to underlie non-indigenous pastoral visions of Central Australia has taken some divergent turns. Pastoralism, as

envisaged by non-indigenous pastoralists and governments from early settlement to the present day, has not proven to be an endpoint in settlement. Instead, a form of distinctively Aboriginal pastoralism has emerged from the past structure of the non-indigenous pastoral industry, and the persistence of Aboriginal cultures. In this context, concepts of the Wilderness and Garden are simplistic and clearly inappropriate. Nonetheless, their continued role in shaping perceptions and uses of the inland 'direct attention away from the land and people of the here and now' (Rose 1997, p.33) to idealised geographies derived from a past that remains stubbornly present.

## Chapter 9 Conclusion

'Ecology' and 'empire' also had a real relationship. They forged a historical partnership of great power (Griffiths 1997, p.1)

Cultures of power and domination are always...anxiously regrouping, reinventing and reinscribing their authority against the challenge of anticolonial formations (Jacobs 1996, p.14)

### **9.1 *Elements of a Foundational Narrative***

Central Australian rangelands have remained dominated by pastoralism on the more fertile land that has proven suitable for cattle grazing. This is despite several periods in which pastoralism has been interrogated as to its suitability in inland and northern Australia, including in Central Australia. In Central Australia, as elsewhere, pastoralism has been questioned about land degradation from shortly after the first arrival of stock. More recently, this line of contention has expanded and intensified to include issues such as biodiversity conservation. This critique of pastoralism has developed as ecological thinking has influenced perceptions of rangelands, and as the conservation movement has stepped up its rangelands campaigns. Paralleling this conservationist criticism of pastoralism has been the emergence of the Aboriginal land rights movement, particularly since the 1970s. The land rights movement confronts pastoralists by unsettling their 'settlement' and domestication of land (Anderson 1996). In the 1990s, continuing Aboriginal land acquisitions and the high profile issues of Native Title and reconciliation have intensified the scrutiny of pastoralists in the rangelands.

This thesis has examined Central Australian non-indigenous pastoralists' responses to these challenges to their place on the land. It has focussed on responses that revolve around environmental issues. In their responses to the perceived threats, Central Australian pastoralists draw on an environmental frame of reference in their attempt to defuse both conservationist and Aboriginal challenges. As Chapters Six and Seven showed, pastoralists represent themselves as productive *and* environmentally responsible stewards of the land, and thus as deserving occupants of land. For example, I showed that, in responses to allegations of land degradation, pastoralists publicly claim that not only is there no land degradation, but that pastoralism has 'improved' the country. In pastoral culture it is a short step from 'improvement', as pastoralists see it, to environmental responsibility in terms that pastoralists see as consistent with conservationist views of nature. In this way pastoralists seek to reestablish their 'high' status in Australian culture, in contrast to the 'low' or rustic position they are increasingly being pushed into as a result of the critiques of pastoralism. This thesis has sought to interrogate pastoralists' claims and elaborate their basis in Central Australian pastoral culture. I have shown how their claims of productive and environmentally benign land use are not simply a superficial reaction to criticism, but have deep roots and their own rationality within Central Australian pastoral culture.

These roots of the pastoralists' responses lie in a foundational narrative of Central Australia as an inherently, 'naturally' and singularly pastoral landscape. In Chapter Five, after Hill (1994), I characterised this narrative as the pastoral 'true story'. This story of Central Australia is asserted with great certainty by pastoralists, who, through it, claim to hold the 'truth' about the landscape, its history, and its inhabitants. In the NT, this narrative has great authority. Many in positions of power subscribe to it, and

the idea of Central Australia as a pastoral landscape is associated with the agrarian view of Australia as outlined in Chapter Two. This perspective locates the ‘countryside’ as the bedrock of Australian society, culture, and identity. Moreover, the countryside, in this case the rangelands, represents the mythical landscape of the Garden (Cosgrove 1993). The Garden is a progression from savagery and wilderness, a wellspring of virtuous and reciprocal relationships to land, and is clearly demarcated from the, in pastoral culture, immorality of the City (see also Williams 1973). As this thesis has shown, these mythical landscapes continue to inform pastoral visions of Central Australia, and to influence land settlement and use. The ‘true story’ refracts across pastoral culture in number of ways. It is simultaneously:

- Temporal – it is constructed in and through history and retrospect;
- Spatial – it delineates symbolic and material spaces that have influence locally, regionally and nationally;
- Knowledge – it has developed through experience, provides authority over space, and is tightly controlled by pastoralists;
- Presence – pastoralists have made Central Australia a home through labour and lives in place. Central Australia is not empty ‘outback’ space;
- Destiny – Central Australia is naturally a pastoral landscape. The land was awaiting realisation of its true nature and this is ongoing. Central Australia is fulfilling its destiny by remaining pastoral;
- Local – it is constructed through specific events and processes in Central Australia, whose meanings, have been, and are, also influenced by colonial and national imperatives of settlement;
- National – Central Australia is a rural locale, the likes of which have constituted the nation and national identity.

This foundational narrative is both the source of pastoralists’ responses to criticism, and the medium through which they respond. As Chapters Five and Six showed, it is a dynamic narrative, constructed from both past and present experiences and observations. Chapter Seven showed how it is being maintained and reworked through Landcare.

My analysis and delineation of pastoral narratives of Central Australia as inherently pastoral began in Chapter Five. I emphasised the active construction of the past in this chapter, showing that pastoral texts and other narratives are being produced in light of present circumstances. Pastoralists are trying to consolidate pastoral visions of Central Australia, and to counter and comment on what they see as present-day disorder in Central Australia. Yet these are not innocent reminiscences. They are part of that process by which Central Australia is constructed as a singularly pastoral landscape, which, upon arrival of the pastoralists was empty and awaiting development from its 'proto-pastoral' state. This is the beginning of the process by which the empty Central Australian Wilderness is converted to an agrarian Garden. This is particularly achieved in the accounts of pastoralists through the idea of what I have called the 'knowable community' (after Williams 1973). In pastoralist accounts, Central Australian society, up to the 1950s or 1960s, was a small tightknit community in which all were known and all had a place. It is however, a 'community' constructed from a selective point of view, placing 'white' settlers, particularly the family pastoralists, centre stage. Central Australia comes to be defined around the pastoralists, these so-called 'stayers' with commitment to the land.

In this chapter I also began discussion of the ways in which the land is brought into the pastoral foundational narrative, and becomes part of the 'knowable community', and subject to claims of pastoral authority over it. Land becomes 'known' to the pastoralists through their experience of it, and their labour on it. Not only do they experience the variability of the Central Australian environment (cycles of drought and floods, barrenness and plenty) but they come to accept this as part of a landscape they are making into a home and domesticating. Domestication of the land begins to occur in



spite of, and through, their experience of its unmanageability. The revitalisation of the land after rain demonstrates to pastoralists its inherent pastoral value and reaffirms their faith in it. Through such experience, and through labour on the land, they develop embodied relationships to the land, which, in their minds set them off from non-pastoralists who do not 'know' the land as they do. Pastoralist responses to the critiques they face derive significantly from embodied experience of land. This exposure informs the geographies and narratives of Central Australia they construct. It is such knowledge and its authority that is contested by alternative views of Central Australia.

I bring pastoral narratives of Central Australia more explicitly into present-day debates over land, environment and pastoralism in Chapter Six. The role of retrospect, established in Chapter Five, in contemporary pastoral responses is maintained by contextualising pastoralist views on land and cattle today within the history of environmental/scientific debates over pastoralism in Central Australia. This Chapter marks out much of the internal rationality that allows pastoralists to assert that there has been no land degradation and that environmental stewardship is not only possible under pastoralism, but also inherent to it. If 'country' can be made out of 'land' through settlement, then this section shows that 'country' is also created through ongoing experience and encounters with the land. The dynamism of the pastoral foundational narrative of Central Australia derives in part from such continuous encounters and their changing meanings within the context of critiques of pastoralism.

An important element of the pastoral foundational narrative is the idea that pastoralism is natural. This is not only to say that the landscape is naturally or inherently pastoral, but that cattle grazing is a 'natural' activity. In part, this harks back to the idea that the

Garden is a space of domesticated nature (Anderson 2000; Cosgrove 1993). In Central Australian pastoral culture, pastoralism realises the 'good' or the inherent bounty of Central Australia. In contrast, in pastoral culture, the 'parasitic' City benefits from pastoral labour, and produces nothing but ill-informed criticism of those in the countryside who produce the means of support for urban populations (food and agricultural export income).

The pastoral view that grazing is natural also arises from less lofty sources. In Central Australia it arises from views that cattle exist within, mimic, and even enhance 'natural' cycles. This includes the idea, for example, that cattle 'garden' the land, allowing soil and vegetation to 'improve'. These views arise among pastoralists in terms of geological and historical time, and, as the example of the Nicker's observations at Glen Maggie from 1914-1930 showed, have proven extraordinarily resilient to alternative perspectives. Associated with these views on the 'naturalness' of pastoralism is the view that cattle certainly do not harm the country, and that its inherent pastoral productivity and capacity to recover from stress negate the various waves of criticism of pastoralism, including that in the 1990s. Pastoralists place great store in their experience and observation of environmental variability, and draw such knowledge into an authoritative discourse of property rights and of distinctions between those who have the right to speak of country, and those who don't. These discourses do not remain as apolitical stories of local relationships to land. These narratives of pastoral presence, authenticity and authority find support and expression among the powerful at both the NT and national level, and influenced, for example, the 1997-98 debate over Native Title.

I also raise the concept of stewardship in Chapter Six, suggesting that these long-held views about the resilience of country, and the economic, social and environmental benefits of cattle grazing, are flexible ideas. Further, I argue that they are moulded by pastoralists to represent pastoralism as not only 'productive' and beneficial in an economic sense, but also in an environmental sense. Thus pastoralists are able to represent themselves as meeting traditional production imperatives and also environmental concerns. In this way they maintain links with their sense of history and of themselves as primary producers undertaking a valued economic activity for the nation, and attempt to gain recognition for themselves as conservationists, carefully managing land for their families and the national interest. As conservationists and active managers of land, they contrast their management to what they see as the degradation and decline, in conservation terms, of national parks and Aboriginal land. Pastoralists use environmental concerns not only to respond to conservationist critiques, but also to maintain the value of non-indigenous ownership and control of land.

The pastoral enactment of stewardship is explored further in Chapter Seven where the role of Landcare is examined in maintaining the strength of the pastoral foundational narrative of Central Australia as pastoral. The pastoral beliefs about land and cattle covered in Chapter Six are acted out through pastoral Landcare. Landcare is primarily a medium through which these pastoral beliefs can be articulated and demonstrated from within a framework of environmental stewardship. Landcare facilitates this in such a way that does not challenge pastoral beliefs. The dominant pastoral Landcare activities in fact, arise directly from pastoral beliefs about land and cattle grazing. Simultaneously, however, through Landcare, pastoralists present a narrative of change for the better in pastoral management, of a new era of pastoral environmental

responsibility, and of pastoralists as not only conservationists, but also as preservationists. Through Landcare, pastoralists seek to maintain the primacy of the pastoral landscape relative to both Aboriginal landscapes and needs, such as Aboriginal use of feral rabbits for food, and more radically reformist conservationist agendas.

Landcare however, does not only act to maintain the dominant pastoral story of Central Australia. While it is a means by which pastoralists have maintained control over scrutiny of their land use and management, and over attempts to reform it, the leaders of the Centralian Land Management Association (CLMA), the pastoral Landcare group, are seeking to bring about change in pastoral land management. This has much to do with improving industry productivity, but for the leaders of the CLMA, it also comes from a view that pastoral land management should be improved, and a desire to incorporate wildlife conservation into pastoral land management. In this sense, Landcare activities can be seen as both reflecting and creating small cracks within the pastoral 'true story'. Pastoral culture itself, however, restricts what Landcare can achieve. 'Reformer' pastoralists must acquire sufficient status or 'cultural capital' within pastoral culture for themselves and their approaches to management, in order for these approaches to become accepted as appropriate modes of pastoral management. Whether they can achieve this, or whether existing pastoral social organisation will suppress change, is a question for the future.

The idea that there might be some challenges to the pastoral 'true story' internal to pastoralism, prompts consideration of Aboriginal pastoralism. At first glance, Aboriginal pastoralism appears to negate the argument that Aboriginal land rights challenge pastoralism. Aboriginal pastoralism, in one sense, does indeed offer a radical

critique of pastoralism. In addition to posing a challenge to the certainty of the pastoral landscape, Aboriginal pastoralism unsettles the meaning of 'pastoralism' itself. While non-indigenous pastoralists see the pastoral landscape as threatened, they do not appear to perceive of the very category of 'pastoral' as one that is amenable to interrogation. Yet this is what the forms of Aboriginal pastoralism examined in this thesis achieve. Particularly in the case of the non-commercial Aboriginal pastoralists, pastoralism serves Aboriginal customary needs and fulfills Aboriginal land use norms rather than those of non-indigenous pastoralism. 'Pastoralism' becomes free-floating and is not a domain whose meaning can be taken for granted. Non-indigenous pastoralists do not have a monopoly on defining the meaning of the pastoral landscape. In addition, Aboriginal pastoralism breaks down the clear and teleological divisions between the Wilderness and the Garden, creating its own mythical landscapes, that bear little relation to the mythical landscapes of colonialism and nationalism.

## **9.2 *Improving Dialogue in the Rangelands***

The second aim of this thesis has been to contribute to the improvement of dialogue about the future of Australian rangelands by invoking concepts of scale and time. Debates over rangelands have been heated at times, and there has generally been little opportunity or evidence of constructive engagement between the various interests. The previous section has summarised historical and social bases of many of the pastoralists' responses to criticism. I have shown that pastoralists' responses arise from an internally logical interpretation and system of knowledge regarding the land, pastoralism, and criticism. At times, and on its own terms, this pastoral system of knowledge has also incorporated 'scientific' knowledge, such as that generated by the exclosures (Chapter

Six) in ways that are consistent with pastoral narratives. Enhanced understanding of pastoralist 'country' is a prerequisite for improved dialogue between conservationists and (often) scientists on the one hand, and pastoralists on the other. Those who criticise pastoralists or seek to influence their management behaviour, might productively temper their language of ecosystems, sustainability, and biodiversity, and find ways to talk of 'country' as terrain that is inhabited, known, and home.

This thesis has also shown that pastoralists are holding to a particularly partial view of Central Australia, its history, present, and potential futures. Pastoralists see Central Australia as inherently and naturally 'pastoral'. Not only has the thesis illustrated the contentions that surround this vision of Central Australia, but it has also shown that it is a vision of social, not natural origins. The pastoralists' vision of Central Australia as pastoral originates in the particular historical and social circumstances of the colonial period that fostered a mode of evaluating and settling land that led to pastoral land use. The land tenure and property rights of today's rangelands originate from this time. Subsequent to this, pastoralists have come to know and view the landscape in ways that are specific to them, and in which environmental processes and events, such as erosion events or the 1958-65 drought, enter and inform pastoral systems of knowledge and beliefs. Environmental processes and events are interpreted in terms of pastoral beliefs, and absorbed such that they support the pastoral vision of Central Australia. The 'environment' in pastoral narratives, though it is reified, is ineluctably social, as is the pastoral landscape, in whose narration it plays a major role. The reluctance, or perhaps the inability, of pastoralists to acknowledge the partiality of their story is a major obstacle to improved dialogue over the futures of rangelands. Central Australia, and the rangelands in general, are far more complex than this singular pastoral story allows.

As the above paragraph suggests, pastoral settlement was not just a case of a few intrepid pioneers venturing into the inland and carving out stations for their descendents. Pastoral settlement, development and persistence has occurred within colonial and subsequently national settlement and land use frameworks. These schema continue to validate 'rural' use of Central Australian rangelands for the NT or national interest, be it invoked in cultural or economic terms. Yet, clear distinctions between the local and the national are hard to sustain. Throughout this thesis apparently 'local' beliefs as to land and pastoralism appear at the NT or national level in more or less altered and abstracted forms. By the same token, putatively national imperatives are mapped onto Central Australian space by pastoralists and their supporters to justify the continuation of pastoralism. The two 'geographic totalities' are intertwined and inform each other. There is no national interest distinct from the local. Moreover, that the 'local' is a social construction, highlights that the national or extra-local interest, informed as it is by the local, is itself a product of historical, political and social processes.

It follows that, a key starting point for dialogue leading to just and sustainable rangelands futures might be to do away with invocations of local and national 'interest' predicated upon particular social landscapes. The Native Title debate in 1997-1998 is a good example of where the complex dialectical relationships between the national and the local were largely sidelined by both sides, but mainly by rural lobby groups and the federal government. In articulating 'national interests' in its campaign to extinguish Native Title in pastoral leases, the National Farmers' Federation, for example, ignored the possibilities for negotiated local agreements between non-indigenous pastoralists

and Aboriginal people. In so doing they highlighted the divide between Aborigines and pastoralists, missing the complexities of local social relations comprised of complex and intersecting divisions, common ground, agreements, feuds, and varying permutations of mutual distrust and respect. This thesis has not explored these dimensions of race relations in Central Australia in detail, but they would bear further, possibly regionally comparative, research.

### **9.3 *Extending Rural Geography***

This thesis has shown that specific environmental processes and events influence and inform pastoral culture in Central Australia. In this sense it represents a contribution to the 'cultural rural geography' that has developed, particularly in Britain. It also furthers the introduction of such cultural perspectives into Australian rural geography, which has generally not embraced this approach to date. And yet, while this brand of geography in Britain has encompassed 'environment' and 'nature', and struggles over land and development in rural settings, it has done so largely at the level of the meanings conveyed through these concepts. This thesis has extended such analysis by explicitly studying how actual environmental processes and events feed into the process of constructing the meanings of 'environment' and 'nature' and the subsequent deployment of these concepts in conflict over land. Local, even station-specific, events and processes, have profoundly informed pastoral culture and the responses of pastoralists to challenges to their occupancy of land. Such events and processes range from minor erosion events to extended occurrences such as the 1958-65 drought, and the subsequent rains and vegetation growth. Pastoralists' experience of these events, the relationship of the events to criticism of the industry, and the survival of the pastoral



industry, lie behind much of their response to criticism made on environmental grounds. This thesis suggests that for rural geography to contribute to debates over land use and management, and over Aboriginal/settler 'co-existence' in rural areas, attention should be given to the role of such fine-grained elements in conflict.

It is likely that such fine-grained analysis, attentive to locality and the complexities of social and human-land relationships will provide the basis for improved understanding of how rangelands are inhabited and used. Debates cast in terms of 'national interests', reconciliation, ecosystems, or the imperative of rural land use appear to offer little more than opportunities for misunderstanding and disagreement. Central Australia is an ecologically, socially and racially complex place. Its people, problems, and opportunities are not readily captured by stereotypes. Its social contingencies, blurred boundaries and histories, and highly variable landscapes, make it a place that is hard to pin down even when studying it closely. However, close study reveals potential commonalities between apparent antagonists. I think of the pastoral family and Aboriginal people who are neighbours, and who don't get on perfectly, but make an effort to share the space they jointly inhabit. Those pastoralists who talked of the native animals they see and wish to protect, also come to mind. These pastoralists could probably spend hours talking about animal tracks in the sand to the ecologists active in the Arid Lands Environment Centre in Alice Springs. Attention to locality will not remove politics and power from rangelands debates. Such attention is, however, a necessary, if not sufficient, ingredient for sustainable and equitable rangelands futures.

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## **Appendix 1 Non-indigenous Pastoralist Interview Guide**

### **Personal/Family**

Who lives here?  
What are your ages?  
How do you divide labour on the station?  
How long have you been managing the station?  
Who was the previous manager?  
How long has your family owned this station?  
To what extent is this important to you?  
What future do you see for your family on this place?  
To what extent is it important that your children taken it on?

### **Landcare**

To what extent are you involved in Landcare/CLMA  
Why are/aren't you involved in Landcare/a member of CLMA?  
What benefits if any have you derived from Landcare?  
To what extent has Landcare influenced management of your station?  
What is it that makes these actions/strategies Landcare?  
What caused you to make these changes/undertake this activity?  
What impact do you expect it to have on your land/business?  
What do you hope Landcare will achieve in Central Australia?  
What are you doing to help achieve this?

### **Station Management**

How would you characterise your approach to management?  
What are the sources of your ideas or general approach to management?  
To what extent were your parents important in influencing your management?  
To what extent does your approach differ from your parents/the previous owners?  
How were their ideas passed on to you?  
Are there any more recent influences?  
Are there any individuals who have influenced you?  
To what extent have you changed your approach in recent years?  
What were the reasons for this?  
What factors trigger management decisions?  
What are you looking for/watching as you move around the station?  
To what extent have you changed your herd management in recent years?  
What sort of effect do you think cattle have on land?  
Do you have any enclosures on your station?  
What sort of information are they providing?  
To what extent do you use the monitoring point system now run by the DLPE?  
How useful do you find it?

## **Environmentalism**

What are your reactions (general and precise) to conservationist criticisms (provide examples) of pastoralism?

What influences your view of conservationists?

If conservationists were to visit you, what would you tell them and show them?

What are your reactions to the suggestion that pastoralism be removed/scaled back in some regions?

What do pastoralists mean when they say they have always been conservationists?

Some pastoralists say that pastoral management has changed and is much improved from the past, and that therefore conservationist criticism is unwarranted. What are these changes?

To what extent have you made them?

To what extent would you be prepared to be involved in wildlife conservation on your station?

To what extent has/is environmental change occurred/occurring on your station?

## **Land Rights/Aboriginal People**

What is your first recollection of land rights?

To what extent has land rights affected your station?

What concerns you about land rights?

How would you describe your relationship with Aboriginal people around your station?

To what extent is this relationship improving/declining/remaining steady?

What is influencing this?

How would you describe your or your family's past relationships with Aboriginal people?

How do you perceive Aboriginal land?

To what extent does native title concern you?

## **Appendix 2 Documentary Sources**

### **NT Government**

Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (and predecessors) Annual Reports 1986-1997

Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries (and predecessors) Technical Annual Reports 1987-1995

Unpublished Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries data on enclosures, 1997 and 1999

Pastoral Land Board Annual Reports 1992-1996

Department of Lands, Planning and Environment (and predecessors) Annual Reports 1980-1996

NT Landcare Council Annual Reports 1992-1996

NT Pastoral Land Act, 1992

Unpublished Department of Lands, Planning and Environment data on Landcare funding

### **Media**

Newspaper clippings files, Alice Springs Collection, Alice Springs Town Library.

Newspaper clippings files, Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries Library Alice Springs.

Centralian Advocate (Alice Springs newspaper, twice weekly)

NT ABC Radio Country Hour.

Hoofs and Horns (monthly magazine, formerly devoted to inland pastoral and horse culture)

Inland Review (shortlived Alice Springs monthly in the 1960s)

### **Historical and Archival**

#### ***Northern Territory Archives Service***

NTAS Oral history interview, Bruce Farrands, 1986, TS527.

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AANT F1 1967/1233 Soil Conservation in the Alice Springs District, 1963-68.  
AANT F1 1969/802 Inventory by NSW Soil Conservation Service, 1965-1970.

### ***Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries Library, Alice Springs***

Transcript of Alice Springs hearing of the NT Land Board inquiry into the 1968-1965 drought, July 1964, item R027.  
NT Animal Industry Branch Reports, 1949-1965.  
Connellan, E.J. (1965) Drought Management and Pasture Protection in Central Australia, Centralian Pastoralists' Association, Alice Springs.

### **Centralian Land Management Association**

Minutes, CLMA Meeting 22 July, 1988.  
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### **Miscellaneous**

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Northern Territory Cattlemen's Association file 366B - Alice Springs Conservation Association.

Various files Arid Lands Environment Centre and Environment Centre of the NT.

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs Review of Landcare Policies and Programs in Australia, Hansard of Darwin hearing, 15 August, 1994.

Joint Parliamentary Committee on Native Title and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Land Fund inquiry into Native Title Amendment Bill 1997, Hansard of Alice Springs Hearing, 7 October, 1997.



### **Appendix 3 Selected Correspondence with Central Land Council**

Bruce Rose  
Central Land Council  
PO Box 3321  
Alice Springs  
NT 0870

12/2/96

Dear Bruce

I'm about to head up to Alice Springs in March to try and determine in which area(s) I can work for my PhD project. In doing this I would like to work in with what people in the region are interested in and want done, so that what I end up doing is not only driven by my own perceptions and needs.

To achieve this I am interested in working for the CLC on a land management project, either assisting on something already in progress, or taking on something that you would like done. I would not require a salary and would be available for up to a month. I am flexible as to timing, although sometime in the period March-May is preferable. I have also written to the NTCA with a similar proposal.

As well as further developing the aims of the research project, one outcome of working for the CLC that I would like is to find an Aboriginal community running a pastoral operation with whom I can work.

To give you an indication of where my project is heading at this stage I have attached a copy of a (successful) scholarship application to LWRRDC. It provides a summary of the project, if a somewhat restricted one, given space and LWRRDC's format. If you would like further information please give me a call.

If this proposal interests you, please let me know.

Yours Sincerely

Nicholas Gill

Paul Mitchell  
Central Land Council  
Pastoral unit  
Fax 089 529429

24/4/96

Dear Paul

I'm still working through your proposal and have been talking to a variety of people about it. From my point of view I see some good links with my overall PhD research and dealing with the issue of valuing alternative models of development in arid lands is exciting. Although I am still working on it, I thought I should let you know my thoughts at this stage.

My first reaction was concern about the time it would take to deal with the whole project you outline. My funding is for three years and I need at *least* a year for analysis and writing up the thesis. I am now three months into the first year, and I need to also interview/study white pastoralists, archival research, interview bureaucrats etc. This made me think that perhaps I should think about doing a part of your proposed project, if that would still help you.

In addition I have now talked to Elspeth and couple of resource/environmental economists who have worked extensively in valuing non-market goods and services. Basically their advice has been that this is a worthwhile project, but that it would be a big project, especially for my time constraints. The two economists also expressed concern as to the validity of trying to put numbers on the intangible benefits from small-scale enterprises. One of them was not sure that the available methods would work very well in such a cross-cultural situation, and suggested that this in itself was a PhD topic. A possible way forward that may be of interest to you and which interests me follows.

One of the economists, Jeff Bennett (here at Uni of NSW), suggested that simply indentifying, determining preferences for, and ranking, the various benefits of the two pastoral models would be a contribution. This would be done through identifying the quantifiable (\$) costs and benefits of the models, the unpriced costs and benefits (sense of well-being etc), and providing comparisons of the two models based upon preferences and both qualitative and quantitative data (qualitative data, preferences, etc derived from surveys of some sort with landowners). There are methods around to do this. Multi-criteria analysis was used by the Resource Assessment Commission in its forest inquiry to compare alternative forest use strategies. Participatory Rural Appraisal methods could be used to conduct the surveys.

What would this achieve? It would explicitly identify and rank benefits of various land use options as seen by the landowners (this would have to be done anyway under your proposal). It would then combine these sorts of criteria with quantified/dollar benefits in a methodology that permits this. We would then end up with a rational ranking of land use alternatives that would explicitly identify, and rank what landowners get out of each alternative. This does not go all the way of presenting a full economic analysis in the sense of dollars as you proposed. What it will do is provide a coherent analysis of benefits derived from various land use alternatives. This goes part way in addressing your concern about identifying and valuing public goods. This will be achieved through a methodology that has been widely used in assessing projects where not all costs and benefits are amenable to assignment of market values. This should take you a step closer to presenting information to your funding bodies in the sort of format that they require. In addition, although it does not go to the full extent of putting dollar values on all benefits, it will clearly identify the range of benefits, including public good, and thus may provide the basis for further work, which may attempt to put dollar

values in all benefits. Furthermore, the process of doing the research should in itself help in clarifying relevant issues for planning.

This proposal is essentially part of what would be need to be done anyway under your proposal, but stops short of actually trying to value in dollar terms all the costs and benefits. Instead it employs techniques that are able to deal with qualitative data and still provide rankings of alternatives. From my point of view this should lessen the complexity of the task and should be more easily accomplished in reasonable time frame. Can you let me know of your reaction to this idea, and the extent to which it would help you in getting along the road to comprehensive valuations of small scale pastoral operations for funding puroposes.

Yours Sincerely

Nicholas Gill

P.S. It just occurs to me that, to an extent, this project would be an Australian case study and an extension and deepening of what you have started in your table where you rank the various types of enterprises according to various criteria.

Paul Mitchell  
Pastoral Unit  
Central Land Council  
Alice Springs

13/5/96

Dear Paul

I am writing in reference to our conversation last Thursday about evaluating various 'models' of Aboriginal pastoral enterprises. This letter aims to set out my understanding of the background to your proposal, how the study will be approached and possible study areas.

The pastoral unit of the CLC is concerned about the criteria used in government funding for small-scale or non-commercial cattle operations and the consequent difficulties in obtaining infrastructure funds for such operations. The unit therefore wishes to demonstrate the range of benefits accruing to Aboriginal landowners from infrastructure investment from small-scale cattle operations. The aim of this study is to evaluate the outcomes of various 'models' of Aboriginal cattle operations in a manner that is consistent with the requirements of funding bodies. This project will not go to the full extent of monetary valuation of all costs and benefits (market and non-market), however, it is anticipated that it will go some way in laying the foundations for such work in the future, should it become necessary.

It is proposed to use a methodology that includes both Participatory Learning and Action (as currently used by the Land Assessment Unit) and multicriteria analysis. Multicriteria analysis is a methodology for comparing project or development options in which both quantitative (eg. value of cattle produced) and qualitative (eg. non-market social benefits) information can be incorporated. Multicriteria analysis standardises the data and facilitates ranking of alternative projects or development strategies. Moreover, weightings of the data can be altered to allow the consequences of various preferences and tradeoffs to be explored. Previous uses of multicriteria analysis (eg the Resource Assessment Commission's forest inquiry) have found this to be one of the most useful aspects of the method, as it helps to clarify the judgements that are being made in preferring one alternative over another. The result of such an analysis will be a transparent and rational comparison of various development alternatives for Aboriginal cattle operations, incorporating both monetary and non-monetary outcomes of these operations.

As we discussed there are various places that may be appropriate for this study. These include McLaren, Mt Allen, Mistake Creek and Attite and Munjirtinyi at Utopia. As you indicated these places contain a variety of cattle operation types. At this stage, based on your advice, I would suggest that we start with these places and seek out the interest of landowners.

I look forward to your response

Nicholas Gill

Tracker Tilmouth,  
Director,  
Central Land Council,

Dear Tracker,

Nicholas Gill, a PhD student in geography at the University of NSW, is conducting research on the changes in ideas about Central Australian pastoral rangelands and how rangelands dwellers, particularly those associated with pastoralism are responding. The aim of this PhD research is examine the processes by which future landscapes are being created, and to consider the extent to which culturally based assumptions and perceptions of the rangelands are influencing land use and management. In this study Nicholas is aiming to look at both Aboriginal and white pastoralists, as well as the actions and ideas of government decision makers and institutions such as Landcare. His basic question in his PhD research is how are pastoralists and associated bodies in Central Australia responding to changing social conditions and to what extent are their responses significant in terms of a shift to post-colonial, sustainable use and management of rangelands?

Nicholas approached Bruce Rose earlier this year outlining his research and proposing that he do some work in conjunction with the CLC that suited both his interests and those of the CLC and landowners. Since then we have developed a project concerned with evaluating the benefits derived from various 'models' of Aboriginal cattle operations. The aim of this study is to evaluate the economic (monetary and non-monetary) outcomes of large and small scale cattle enterprises in a manner that is likely to be appreciated by funding bodies. The study will not go to the full extent of a monetary valuation of costs and benefits but it may lay the foundation for such work in the future. The Aboriginal cattle enterprise project will be part of the final PhD thesis.

Nicholas has proposed the use of a technique known as multi-criteria analysis (MCA), a methodology for comparing project alternatives using both quantitative and qualitative outcomes. By standardising the data and through the use of weighting as a proxy for preferences, MCA facilitates the ranking of project alternatives and clarifies the judgements and tradeoffs that are being made when one course of action is favoured over another.

To determine outcomes and preferences, Nicholas will need to conduct fieldwork on some Aboriginal cattle operations. I have suggested McLaren, Mt Allen, Mistake Creek, Atite and Munjirtinyi as possibilities. Nicholas hopes to carry out this field work between now and November 1997. I suggest that in the next few weeks he obtain permits to meet with some of these people in my company to discuss his proposal with them. He can come back later to carry out his research with those groups who agree to his proposal. He will need to obtain permits to carry out all his fieldwork, but I am available to facilitate this process.

There is a need for an agreement between Nicholas and the CLC with regard to CLC comment on his work. Nicholas must agree to give CLC the opportunity to comment, to himself and his supervisors, on the final draft of his PhD thesis and any publications arising from this research on Aboriginal land.

I suggest that CLC legal section draft this agreement.

Yours Sincerely,

Paul Mitchell  
17/6/96.

## **Appendix 4 Interview Guide - Aboriginal Pastoralists**

### **Personal Details**

Name, age, traditional affiliations

Employment, past and present

Do you live on your country?

### **Employment Background**

Did you work in the pastoral industry?

Who did you work for?

What station(s) did you work on?

What job(s) did you have?

What did you learn about running cattle when you were doing this work?

What did you learn about looking after country when there are cattle on it?

### **Cattle Business**

Involvement in the cattle business

Why are you involved / not involved?

Why do you want to run cattle on your country?

What are the good things about having cattle?

What are the bad things about having cattle?

Does the cattle business affect other business or other activities on your land?

Have there been any problems with the cattle business?

Is the number of cattle you have the right number? Do you want more / less / the same number?

What other ways do you make some money? (why do cattle work?)

### **Cattle and Country**

What does looking after country mean?

What was the country like when you were young / working on stations?

Have there been changes in the country in your life? For better? For worse?

What has caused these changes?

What was the country like when you got it back?

Is it different now?

What caused any change?

Did you need to fix anything up when you got your country back?

Has the country changed since the cattle were taken off / since you put cattle on your country?

Do cattle belong on the country?

Do you use all your country to run cattle? Are there places you don't want cattle?

How do you think cattle affect country?

What do cattle do to country?

Are they good / bad for country?

Do they have no effect?

How do they affect plants / soil?

What are the effects of cattle on different types of country?

### **Looking After Country**

When you were working for stations did you still look after your country?

Were you able to look after it in the way that you wanted?

If not, what stopped you?

Did the cattle make it difficult to look after your country?

How do you look after your country now?

How do you look after country when you have cattle?

Do cattle make it difficult to look after your country?

### **Relationship with Non-indigenous Pastoralists**

Are the people you worked for / knew still here?

Do you see them?

Why do you see them?

Do they help you with cattle business?

Do you ask them to come or do they just come and visit you?

Do they help with other things or other business (i.e. not cattle business)?

Why do you maintain contact?

Did you provide information about the country etc. when you worked for the pastoralists?

### **Environmentalists**

What do you know about 'greenies'?

What do you think about some who are saying that cattle shouldn't be here?

Would this work?

Are you aware of the broader questioning of what future for rangelands?

To what extent are you aware of the conservation movement and its agenda for rangelands?

## **Appendix 5 Interviews and Fieldwork**

\* Denotes Aboriginal Pastoral Enterprise

\*\* Denotes taped interview deposited with the NT Archives Service

### **Summary**

There are twenty-one non-indigenous leaseholding families in defined study area.

- Six wouldn't talk to me
- In the case of three contact was could not be made, despite attempts to do so.
- Twelve were interviewed. Those interviewed ranged from the primary manager only to entire families.
- There was substantial contact and discussions with two leaseholding families outside the study area and lesser contact with two leaseholding families outside the study area.

There are four Aboriginal pastoral operations in study area.

- Three were included in the study.
- One Aboriginal station outside the study area was included.

### **Alice Springs - December 1994**

Geoff Harris, Co-ordinator, ALEC

Tony MacDonald, Co-ordinator, Greening Australia, Alice Springs

Ray Smith, Pastoral Inspector, Department of Lands and Housing

Paul Mitchell, Manager, Rural Unit, CLC

Bruce Rose, Manager, Land Management Section, CLC

Bob Lee, Deputy Director, NTCA

Jill DiNeilt, Landcare Branch, Conservation Commission of the NT

Dr. Gary Bastin, CSIRO

Dr. Geoff Pickup, CSIRO

Dr. Mark Stafford-Smith, CSIRO

David Torlach, Soil Conservation, Conservation Commission of the NT

Rik Dance, Manager, Rangeland Production, DPIF

Bob Millington, CLMA

### **March-April 1996 – Alice Springs**

Paul Mitchell and Julia Mitchell, Rural Unit, CLC

Charlie Carter, former CLC Land Management employee

Rik Dance, DPIF

Bill and Dawn Prior, formerly Hamilton Downs station

Fiona Walsh, Land Management Section, CLC

Bob Millington, CLMA

Robyn Cadzow, Mt. Riddock station

John and Anne Stanes, Lyndavale station

Ted Fogarty, Lucy Creek and other stations



Alan Fogarty, Lucy Creek station  
Bernie and Aileen Kilgariff, Erldunda station  
Colleen Costello, Lilla Creek station  
Charlie Chalmers, MacDonald Downs station  
Terry and Marilyn Karger, Orange Creek station

Attendance at CLMA meeting  
Introductions by Paul Mitchell (CLC) to Aboriginal pastoralists at Central Mt. Wedge and Tempe Downs\*

### **June-August 1996 – Alice Springs and Darwin**

Ted Egan, former superintendent, Yuendumu  
Ian Melville, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
John Seccombe, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
Les Slocombe, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
Phil Sheridan, Pastoral Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
Mike Back, Executive Director, NTCA  
David Alexander, former CLC Land Management section and Rural Unit  
Bob Millington, CLMA  
Attendance at NT Landcare Council Conference, Erldunda

Introductions by Paul Mitchell (CLC) to Aboriginal pastoralists at McLaren Creek (Mungkarta ALT) and Mosquito Bore (Angarapa ALT).\*

### **October-November 1996 – Alice Springs**

Bill Waudby, formerly Central Mt Wedge station\*\*  
David and Liz Bird, Indiana station  
Roy Anderson, Huckitta station  
Robyn Cadzow, Steven Cadzow, Dick Cadzow, Anne Cadzow, Mt. Riddock station  
Alan Fogarty and Jo Smith, Lucy Creek station  
Bill Prior, formerly Hamilton Downs station\*\*  
Judith Robinson, formerly Ooratippra station  
Donald Holt. Delmore Downs/Delny station  
Anne and John Stanes, Lyndavale station  
Des Nelson, retired CSIRO and government  
Rose and Mac Chalmers, MacDonald Downs station\*\*  
Bill McKell, Manager, Yuendumu pastoral company\*  
Harold Nelson and Kumanjay Pwerle, Mosquito Bore (Angarapa ALT)\*

Introductions by Paul Mitchell to Aboriginal pastoralists at Mistake Creek station.\*

### **January 1997– Canberra**

George Chippendale, formerly Animal Industry Branch, Alice Springs\*\*

### **January 1997– Canberra**

George Chippendale, formerly Animal Industry Branch, Alice Springs\*\*

### **March 1997 – Canberra**

Dr. Barney Foran - CSIRO

### **April 1997 – Alice Springs**

Alice Springs to Kimberleys trip to Kimberley Aboriginal-owned pastoral stations with Alice Springs region Aboriginal pastoralists\*

Murphy Japanangka, Mick Murphy, Margaret Murphy, Sharon Murphy, Jorna Murphy, McLaren Creek (Mungkarta ALT)\* \*\*

Harold Nelson and Kumanjay Pwerle, Mosquito Bore (Angarapa ALT)\* \*\*

### **May- June 1997 – Darwin and Victoria River District**

Ray Duncan, Victor Vincent, Jack Cook, Eric Clyden, John Friday, Jessie Cook, Wendy Chungalla, Jimmy Warren, Don Cameron, William Rosewood, Johnny Clyden, David Jerry, William Smiler, Mistake Creek station\*

### **June-July 1997 - Darwin**

Bob and Pam Waudby, formerly Central Mt. Wedge station

John Seccombe, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

Gary Swanson, adviser to the Minister of Lands, Planning and Environment

Tony Falston, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

Les Slocombe, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

Libby Benson, Landcare Branch, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

Juby Bartolo, secretary to Pastoral Board, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment

### **September – December 1997 – Alice Springs**

Jean Hayes, formerly Undoolya station

Dawn Prior, formerly Hamilton Downs station

Grant and Rhonda Barber, Mt Skinner station

Boof Smith, Karen Smith, Matthew Smith, Clinton Smith, Vanessa Smith, New Crown station

Bob Purvis, Atartinga station

Chris and Margo Nott, Alcoota station

Andrew and Jane Hayes, The Garden station

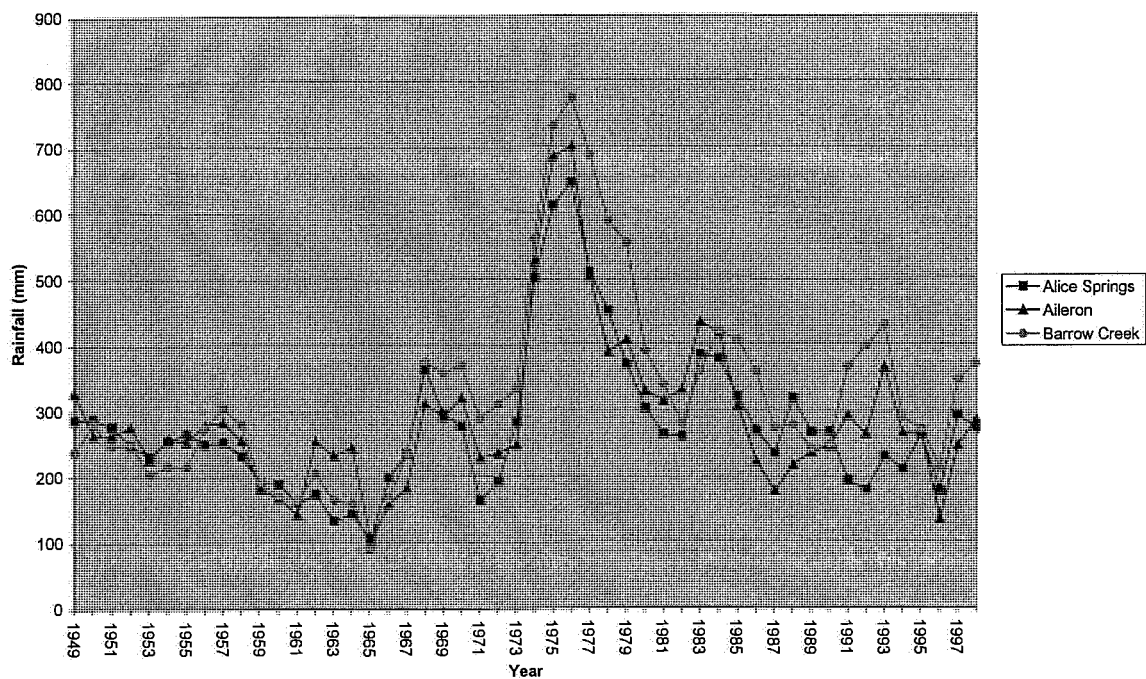
David Bailey, Stirling station and President, NTCA  
Tim and Natalie Edmunds, Ambalindum station  
Alan Fogarty and Jo Smith, Lucy Creek station  
Anne and John Stanes Lyndavale  
David and Liz Bird, Indiana station  
Charlie and Denise Chalmers, MacDonald Downs station  
Steven and Dick Cadzow, Mt. Riddock station

Murphy Japanangka, Sharon Murphy, Jorna Murphy, Elma Nelson, Mildred Nelson,  
Phyllis Nelson, McLaren Creek (Mungkarta ALT)\*  
Keith Williams and Louis Ryder, Myra Hayes, Loves Creek station\*  
Cowboy Pwerle, Roy Loy, Malcolm Loy, Anthony Loy, Jamie Loy, Ricky Price,  
Mosquito Bore (Angarapa ALT)\*

Will Dobbie, CLMA  
Ray Smith, Pastoral Inspector, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
Andrew Smith, DPIF  
Dave Torlach, Department of Lands, Planning and Environment  
Bob Millington, CLMA  
Des Nelson, retired CSIRO and government  
Dr. Craig James, CSIRO\*\*  
Dr. Marg Friedel, CSIRO  
Russell Grant, Department of Lands Planning and Environment  
Anne Grattidge, Department of Lands Planning and Environment  
Paul Mitchell, Manager Rural Unit, CLC  
Terry Mahney, ex-convenor, ALEC  
Melinda Hillery, convenor, ALEC

## Appendix 6

### Rainfall at Alice Springs, Aileron and Barrow Creek 1949-1998 (three year running average)



Source: Clewett et al (1999)