HOME ON THE RANGELANDS

Australia's rangelands are a confluence of grazing livestock, natural ecosystems and the cultural fabric of our heartland.

STORY **MANDY McKEESICK**

Evan Pensini on Cheela Plains Station. Photo by L.E's Photography.

Grasslands ecologist Dr Judi Earl with Punter and Lola on Glen Orton in northern NSW. Photo by Mandy McKeesisck.

Dr Judi Earl is in her happy place. Seated on a hillside, beneath centuries-old grasstrees, flanked by a kelpie named Punter and a maremma named Lola, she gazes down a white box woodland valley, where a liquorice allsorts collection of cows and five bullock camels are grazing. Calves cavort, their upright tails like periscopes through the thick swathes of grass.

Here, on Glen Orton, on the North West Slopes of NSW, all the animals have names. "Those ones over there," she says pointing to a couple of cows with long white blazes dripping down their faces, "were stirry when they arrived, always rushin' about the yards, so they have Russian names. Those girls by the belahs are named after the Matildas and those under the Port Jackson fig are named after female tennis players. The ones eating the dry lick have Indian names because of my travels and because to the Indians the cow is sacred. The camels – well they are named after cigarettes of course."

Domesticated animals aside, the land around Judi is moving. An eastern long-necked turtle lumbers between dams, eastern grey kangaroos and swamp wallabies graze alongside the stock, dung beetles roll dung. Back at the house, king parrots settle on the eaves, green tree frogs croak from the tank, striated pardalotes nest in the shed and skinks live under the fridge.

Judi is a grasslands ecologist with nearly 30 years of consultancy experience across Australia, the USA, India and Spain, but a long and slow road trip from Guyra in NSW to Darwin was the catalyst for her transition from teacher to student. "I stopped every 5km to take ecological photos and there was not one spot that didn't have some sort of issue – weeds, overgrazing, bare ground, erosion," she says. "I realised there is so much potential in raising the ecological production >

Maitie Webb at work on CPC's Carlton Hills in the Kimberley. Photo by Emma Moss.

of our land, and in 2011 I bought Glen Orton and put theory into practice. When I came here the place was overgrown with Coolatai grass and I could only find six native grasses. That's six plants, not six species."

Coolatai grass was introduced into this area from Africa in the 1890s as a pasture to control erosion, but it has become highly invasive, choking out native species and forming a low-protein, low-nutrient monoculture. The Russians, the tennis players and the smoking camels are Judi's tools in land regeneration. With high-density managed grazing, the Coolatai is opening up and letting other species through. "I've now found 65 grass species, including Queensland bluegrass, red grass, early spring grass, Parramatta grass, wallaby grass and native sorghum, among 289 total plant species," Judi says. "I've identified 87 bird species, 19 species of lizard and 12 types of snake, which is not nearly enough. I like seeing snakes and think they are terribly undervalued."

Returning from the paddock, Judi feeds her horses (Ted and Ollie) and two hungry poddies (Sha and Trixie) before heading 5km to the Wallaroo Hotel in the village of Coolatai (which is where the invasive grass derives its Australian name). She orders a steak and a rum, puts in her footy tips and discusses the weekend's campdraft with others who work on the land. Then she realises she has over-committed. "I will be holding a grazing workshop in Canberra in November. I'm going to miss the Melbourne Cup Calcutta for the first time in years," she laments with a grin.

On Kimberley rangelands at the opposite end of the country, far from the nearest pub, head stockman Maitie Webb is in the saddle behind a mob of unnamed Brahman cows, moving quietly beneath scattered scrub on CPC's Carlton Hill.

Maitie hails from the buffel grasslands around Comet in Central Queensland, and at 29 is an old hand across a range of grazing environments. She has worked, both for CPC and as a contractor, in the Channel Country of western Queensland, the tropical savannah of Cape York and the vast Mitchell grasslands of the NT.

She says it is a toss-up between north Queensland and the Kimberley as to which is her favourite. "I love the variety of landscapes here at Carlton Hill. You've got river frontage and big beautiful black soil flats, which grow amazing grass," she says. "Then there's the red country, which holds on for a bit longer, and then on days off you can just walk out the door and go fishing."

She talks of plains of Mitchell grass and native sorghum, with abundant watering points in the wet season and the changes in the dry season: cattle moving into the limestone ranges and supplementary feeding them as the waters retreat. "It is a challenge and management comes into it a fair bit here, but I think managed correctly it is incredible cattle country," Maitie says.

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Though from different walks of life and with different approaches to grazing, both Maitie and Judi personify pastoralism on the Australian rangelands, a lifestyle with its challenges in a landscape historically misunderstood, but a lifestyle ultimately rewarded by the beneficial confluence of grazing livestock, natural ecosystems and the strength of rural communities.

2026 has been designated the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). The International Rangeland Congress (IRC) defines a rangeland as: "usually dryland, with predominantly native grasses, forbs and shrubs, that is grazed or has the potential to be grazed by livestock and wildlife". The name takes various incarnations around the world – steppe, veld, prairie, chaparral – but in Australia, it is most synonymous with the outback.

Covering 75% of our land mass, rangelands have many faces, from the spinifex plains of the deserts to tropical savannas in the north, eucalypt woodlands and magnificent breakaway country. Though they are utilised in different ways – mining, conservation, Aboriginal land, tourism – in many cases rangelands are managed by people who derive a living from grazing animals. We call them graziers, pastoralists or producers, and they also hold varied titles across the world – bedouin, cowboy, buckaroo, paniolo.

Dr Dana Kelly is a social scientist and adjunct professor at the Centre for Applied Climate Science at the University of Southern Queensland. She is also the Australasian Chair of IYRP. "Our rangelands tend to be characterised by low or unreliable rainfall, which makes extensive grazing the primary economic activity in terms of agriculture," she says. "'Extensive' means livestock – whether sheep, cattle, goats or more unusual species such as camels – grazing freely in large paddocks, whereas examples of intensive industries in Australia are pork, poultry, dairy and feedlots."

'Transhumance' is pastoralism in which people move with livestock between seasonal pastures – such as the herds on the Mongolian steppes or a shepherd with his flock and dogs in the Balkan Mountains. Australian examples may be horizontal, such as when drovers move animals along stock routes, or vertical, such as cattle grazing summer pastures in the Snowy Mountains. Dana says transhumance also has a modern example. "Scientists working internationally consider rotational grazing fits within transhumance, because although it's not people wandering with the herds, it is humans consciously deciding to move animals based on the availability of pasture and water," she says. "And by doing this you can see they are caring for the environment." >

MANDY MCKEESICK

Dr Dana Kelly, Australasian chair of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists.

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PHOTOS: ROBERT LANG

Mustering sheep on Angepena station in the Flinders Ranges, SA.
OPPOSITE: Members of Angepena's Nicholls clan, siblings Emily, Luke and Sarah.

Agriculture in the rangelands is estimated to be worth $5.5 billion annually from meat and wool production. It offers ecosystem benefits when controlled grazing is implemented, and has the potential to protect natural capital, restore biodiversity and contribute to global issues such as battling climate change. Culturally, pastoralism on the rangelands underpins regional communities, and it is inextricably tied to our sense of heritage and belonging.

With the involvement of 376 organisations across 102 countries, IYRP represents the biggest alliance of rangeland groups ever formed. It aims to advocate for policy and legislation, foster ethical investment, shine a spotlight on pastoralists and, perhaps most importantly, celebrate the landscapes. "Although they may be semi-arid places, the key overarching message of IYRP is rangelands are anything but wastelands," Dana says.

Typical of rangeland pastoralists and their semi-arid landscapes are Tony and Lesley Nicholls of Angepena in the Flinders Ranges, SA, where the traditional stocking of sheep is supplemented by cattle and goats.

The rocky crags of the Flinders are good for sheep, and the Nicholls run 3,000 Merino ewes and lambs over 366sq km, meaning there are not a lot of hooves per hectare. "Sheep survive up in the hills," Lesley says. "Because we don't have a lot of prickles, we get really clean wool, and because we've got rocks and no sand, there is no abrasiveness in the wool. This area is renowned for wool quality."

In the flatter areas of Angepena, which in Flinders' terms means rolling hills, they run cattle, which at the moment number only 140, down from 400 when the extended drought bit with savagery. It makes for a hard way to earn a living, and Tony and Lesley operate a small earth-moving business for cash flow, because their respect for their rangeland is stronger than the need to overstock. "I love this ruggedness," Lesley says. "This country sorts you out, sorts your head out. It gets in your blood, and you want to look after it and protect it and make it a better place."

Australia's colonists brought with them the hooved herds, and the desire to find grass for sheep and cattle was a driving force behind early explorations. By 1848, the fledgling Swan River settlement had outgrown its known grazing reserves in the south-west of the country and brothers Augustus, Francis and Henry Gregory were sent north with instructions from the colonial secretary: "You will bear in mind that the primary object of this expedition is the examination of a new tract of unknown country for practical purposes, by practical men … in fact, the discovery of new land of

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an available kind for pasture has become a thing to be desired, of paramount importance, and an object in the attainment of which the interests and perhaps the fate of this colony depend."

In the following decade, the Gregorys roamed far and wide. Francis followed the Murchison and Gascoyne rivers and delved further north to the Pilbara, reporting that he found thousands of acres of fine pasture and, perhaps optimistically, land suitable for the growing of cotton or sugar around the Hamersley Range. Augustus became one of our most successful, but lesser known, explorers and bushmen. He traversed rangelands across southern WA, the Kimberley, the Gulf of Carpentaria, western Queensland (looking for the lost explorer Ludwig Leichhardt) and down to Adelaide, and his journals give great insight into his quest to discover grazing lands. In 1856, near the Gulf of Carpentaria he wrote: "passed through a fine grassy plain for two miles, and entered a level open box-flat, well grassed, the soil a brown loam; … camped at a fine waterhole fifty yards wide and 100 yards long, apparently deep and permanent water, with open grassy banks; this waterhole would render a great extent of the fine grassy country around available for pasturage."

When his exploring days were over, Augustus Gregory was appointed, in 1859, the first commissioner for crown lands and surveyor-general in Queensland, where he oversaw the allocation of land to pastoralists who followed in his footsteps.

Hot on the heels of the Gregorys was another brother act: Alexander and John Forrest, who explored inland WA. In 1879, Alexander led a nine-month exploration of the Kimberley area and his reports are believed to have inspired yet another pair of brothers: Patrick and Michael Durack, who drove more than 7,000 cattle 4,800km from Thylungra in western Queensland to establish stations in the Kimberley in 1883.

If the Gregorys and Forrests explored it all, Sidney Kidman owned it all. By the 1930s he controlled properties covering vast tracts of inland Australia, many of which remain icons of rangeland pastoralism: Maitie's Carlton Hill (WA), Victoria River Downs (NT), Bulloo Downs (QLD) and Anna Creek (SA) among them.

Back on Angepena it is hoofed feet of a different kind contributing to modern pastoralism. "Goats have been our saving grace," Lesley says. "We usually take off between 3,000 and 5,000 a year. We trap them on the bores and muster in the easier paddocks, bring them in and truck them off." Income from the goats has allowed them to fix fences and pay on-farm wages.

Angepena is too rough for feral camels and too dry for pigs and, although they have a few feral donkeys, there are no brumbies or wild cattle. However, once-domesticated dorpers, now turned wild, are causing problems. "These bloody dorpers are everywhere," Lesley says. "I think they got over 300 out of the national park the other day with a helicopter. They get into your sheep, >

Yarded up on Harvest Road's Jubilee Downs in the west Kimberley, WA. Photo by Mark Muller.

MANDY MCKEESICK

Goats are increasingly part of the pastoral landscape in the rangelands.

whereas a poor old goat doesn't even look at your sheep."

Feral animals contribute to grazing pressure across the breadth of Australia's rangelands. Although accurate numbers are hard to obtain, government departments estimate there are 150,000 buffalo, 300,000 camels, 400,000 brumbies, 2.6 million goats, 5 million donkeys and 24 million pigs. Though the Invasive Species Council is opposed to any form of commercialisation of these invaders, some, like goats, have successfully become part of the pastoral scene.

Donkeys, too, have been incorporated into pastoralism, as illustrated by Chris Henggeler of Kachana in the Kimberley, who uses them for land management in opposition to the WA government's declaration of feral donkeys as declared pests. Chris continues to fight for the right to use donkeys as a tool rather than destroy them.

Out near Winton in western Queensland, where Mitchell and Flinders grasses sway on the undulating downs, Ken Sorensen runs a mob of 250 camels on Teviot. In conjunction with his Santa Gertrudis stud cattle, the camels are used chiefly as a management tool for the control of prickly acacia, because a camel loves anything with a spike, from tree pear to bougainvillea.

"We can't afford to spray all the prickly acacia at once, hence the camels," Ken says. "They may not be the silver bullet, but they help and the income from the sale of young and bull camels allows us to reinvest money into chemical weed control. Plus, camels are good on the roly-poly, which can bank up against exclusion fences."

However, some feral animals will always be a burden on the outback. Rangeland scientist Dr Robyn Cowley works with the NT Department of Industry, Tourism and Trade and names the feral cat as "by far the biggest problem for faunal biodiversity in inland Australia".

Introduced plant species also represent threats to landscape, with the contentious introduced buffel both a blessing and a curse. "If you're using the landscape for conservation, buffel is an ecological disaster, but in the pastoral context, buffel is a grazing-adapted species and can dramatically increase carrying capacity for livestock," Robyn says.

Robyn has a deep appreciation for the contrasting landscapes of our rangelands. She spent her formative years in the mulga/poplar box woodlands around Bollon in Central Queensland. "There's something quite Hansel and Gretel about a mulga forest," she says. "It's like you're in a different world. You hear the birds, but don't always see them; they follow you and you feel like you've always got company. For my PhD, I'd walk the same transects twice a year and it would be the same red-capped fairy-wren accompanying me, 30m off to the side, each time."

Twenty-five years ago, with doctorate in hand and finding closed rainforest canopies to be oppressive, Robyn came >

to the Territory to challenge herself in a new ecological environment. She researches evidence-based ways to graze rangelands so they will last in perpetuity. Understanding rangelands means understanding their evolution. In places overseas, such as the Great Plains of North America, grasslands and grasses co-evolved with enormous herds of grazing animals, something that's missing from the Australian scene. "The macropods were there for a long time, but at low densities, so it wasn't something that could drive an adaption to grazing, and even our megafauna were mostly browsers," Robyn says. "This means our native species evolved to be tussock grasses, whereas grazing-tolerant species often grow along the ground." She cites areas around Charters Towers as an example where native tussock grasses have been replaced by Indian couch.

Despite the threats, rangelands are largely unmodified landscapes and, although impacted by grazing and at risk if grazing management is not done well, usually retain native plants and animals. "People talk about eating plants as if it's going to save the world, but crops aren't biodiverse," Robyn says. "Conservation organisations aren't buying cropping land to conserve, they're buying pastoral leases because everything's still there. That's why I love working in the rangelands, particularly in the NT, because I love native plants."

By definition, a rangeland can be grazed by livestock or wildlife. Thousands of years before hooves arrived, Indigenous people were managing the rangelands in their own way and were, in effect, pastoralists without fences. Using a variety of techniques, particularly firestick farming, they were able to manipulate the movement of native animals and the growth of vegetation.

The Federal Government's *Australia's Indigenous land and forest estate (2024)* dataset shows over half of the area considered rangeland is under Indigenous management. This includes freehold title, land managed by Indigenous communities, co-management with third parties (such as national parks) and land subject to native title determinations. Increasingly, this takes the form of livestock pastoralism.

Seventy kilometres north-west of Cooktown in Far North Queensland, on Balnggarrawarra country, where the open woodlands and tropical savannah lap at sandstone ranges, the Harrigan brothers are combining culture and cattle. Cliff, Vincent and Anselm Harrigan run Brahman and Brahman-cross cattle on the 31,000ha of Normanby station.

Normanby has officially been in their family since 1995, when it was acquired with the help of ATSIC, though connections run much deeper through time. "This place is my grandfather's country – old Jack Harrigan," Cliff says. "ATSIC was getting land back to Aboriginal people >

COURTESY ROBYN COWLEY

Robyn Cowley (centre) addresses pastoralists in the NT.

who could show evidence they were from country. My grandfather hadn't been on this place for about 50 odd years, and he walked straight to where his mother was buried in the bush here and the commissioners said, 'That's good enough for us'. We're not native title; we have the pastoral lease."

Normanby is a place of layers. Between the three of them, and help from cousin Lawrence Morgan and friend Brendan Seagren, the Harrigans run 1,000 head, employ feral animal control (namely wild cattle, pigs and cats), and manage fire and weeds. "I've noticed a difference in the country," Cliff says. "We hadn't seen emus for 30 years and they are back, so that tells me the country is in good health."

To meld the riches of traditional knowledge with modern pastoralism, the Harrigans have created multiple partnerships. They work alongside natural resource management (NRM) organisation South Cape York Catchments to access resources and funding for environmental projects. They engage cutting-edge technology with CSIRO's SpaceCows program, using artificial intelligence to combat feral cattle, and they enlist researchers from tertiary institutions. "Griffith University is documenting rock art and James Cook University has set up 20 sound recorders to identify animals across our property," Cliff says. "The recorders have an added advantage because they pick up [illegal] pig hunters talking."

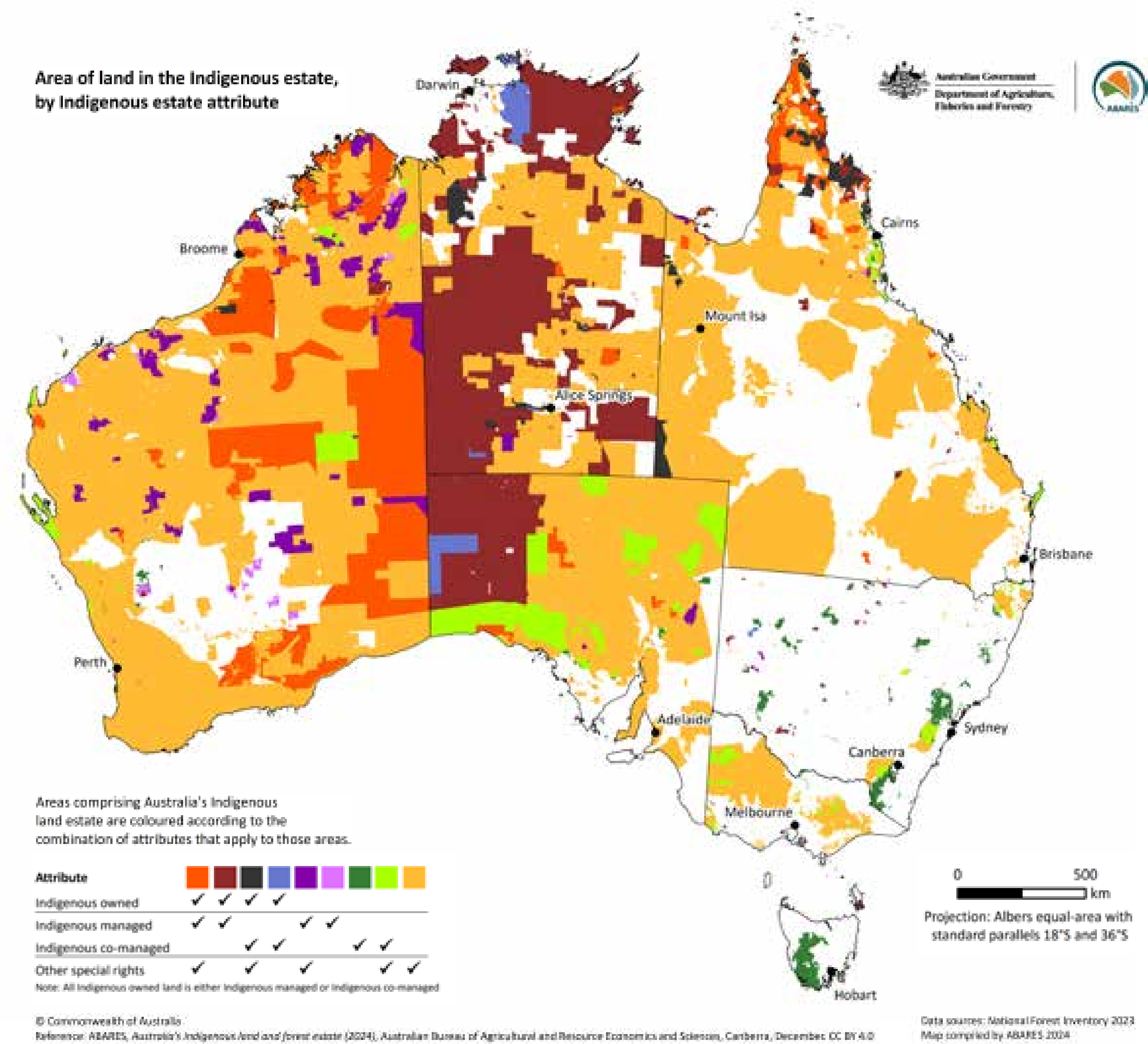
Tourism also plays a part at Normanby because, as Cliff says, "There's plenty of land for everyone, we just need to share." The brothers used to pick up visitors from Cooktown, but are now constructing a dedicated camping area, which will make it easier to facilitate tours to rock art and cultural sites. Some areas will remain off-limits. "Battle Camp Range is on the back of our property and there was a famous battle there. A lot of our people died," Cliff says with reverence. "This has been sad country for a long time, and a lot of people have abused it, but I think it is healing now."

Healing is also happening in western NSW. In his 1910 lyrical tome *On The Wool Track*, C.E.W. Bean (later to find fame as a World War I correspondent) describes the confluence of overstocking, introduced species and dry times on the rangelands of western NSW. "With the rabbits to help them [sheep], during the drought they have eaten out the roots of the grass and saltbush, and so trampled and trodden and powdered the face of the country that it has blown clean away and piled itself up behind tree clumps and over fences and over old stockyards …. and has left behind great piebald patches of shiny bare clay."

On Yalda Downs, 50km north of White Cliffs on the country Bean wrote about, Richard Wilson and his family are trying to reverse this damage. "The first pastoralists came from England, Scotland and Ireland, where you could run high stocking rates, and they thought this was great country," Richard says. "But they didn't know about nurturing the country and the length of time needed to regenerate pastures."

The Wilsons bought Yalda 12 years ago, attracted by the variability in grazing areas from floodout country through to rocky hills, but Richard admits there were problems. "I'd look at something and think it didn't look right, but I didn't know what caused it, and had no idea how to fix it," he says.

These observations drew him to NSW Local Land Services' EMU (ecosystem management understanding) program, which helped him recognise how he could rehydrate the landscape by slowing the flow of water across it. He and his family set to work building embankments and shallow ponds on claypans and leaky weirs in creek systems. "We're creating an environment to capture water and seed and give the native vegetation a chance to re-establish in those bare areas," he says. "It's been very, very successful. Most pastoralists have a grader and a loader and a lot of it can be done ourselves. It's getting the countryside back to where it was many years ago." >



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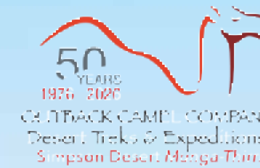

Great Desert Walks - April to September 2026

COURTESY WILSON FAMILY

Richard Wilson of Yalda Downs near White Cliffs, NSW, with his grandchildren: (l–r) Ava and Chloe (from Adelaide), and Jesse, Richard, Clancy, Indi and Charlie (from Yalda).

Rehydrating rangeland has provided unexpected benefits for Richard. "The drought was a bad time for a lot of people and this work was one thing that kept my spirits up. Seeing how effective this was made me feel I was achieving something with a better understanding of our land."

Richard regularly shares his experiences with environmental management and mental health (he is a driver of the wellbeing initiative We've Got Your Back), and in Adelaide last June, the Yalda Downs project was included in a presentation to 800 delegates from around the world at the International Rangeland Congress. "I was absolutely rapt with the passion of attendees," he says of the gathering. "Despite all this fighting going on in the world, all these people were sharing knowledge about rangeland management. The other thing that impressed me was the enthusiasm of young people, especially young women, determined to look after what we've got."

Jaidyn Eastaughffe is one of those young women. At 25, she represents the NT as the youngest councillor for the Australian Rangelands Society (ARS), an organisation that collates and disseminates knowledge in the internationally recognised *The Rangeland Journal*, the *Range Management Newsletter* and at biennial conferences. The ARS also provides member scholarships to support study tours and awards excellence in rangeland management. "The aim of ARS is to connect all of us who are working and living on, or just have a general passion for, the rangelands across Australia," Jaidyn says. "We meet and share ideas and information and talk about any concerns, and hopefully we make a difference."

Jaidyn grew up on the east coast in a family who enjoyed camping. Her concept of rangelands was formed among "open eucalypt woodlands, where the setting sun highlights a contrast between the red soils and the green of the grass and tree canopy". But, while studying environmental science at the University of Queensland, she was introduced to a different type of rangeland at the Victoria River Research Station in the NT.

Inspired, Jaidyn translocated in 2023 to begin her career as a rangeland research officer for the NT Government, based in Katherine, where she is part of a team including nine women in their 20s and early 30s. As part of her job, she studies the effects of seasonal variability, fire and grazing on rangelands to ensure the Territory can have both a productive and sustainable cattle industry, and she values learning from others. "The best part of my job is the amount of travel we do. In the dry season, we're pretty much out bush every week, visiting stations where I get to meet people who are living and working on our rangelands every day. And I am lucky to have Robyn [Cowley] as a mentor."

Realising not everyone working in the rangelands has the mentorship opportunities she has, Jaidyn is keen to build a group of early career professionals for communication and networking, and, showing true commitment to the

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NT rangelands research officer Jaidyn Eastaughffe.

Fiachra Kearney sets up camp on Forever Wild's Narndee-Boodanoo aggregation. Photo by Tobias Baumgaertner.

rangelands, she has put up her hand to organise the next ARS conference in Darwin in September 2026.

Maitie Webb on Carlton Hill also values the mentors who have guided her. "When I started with CPC on Wrotham Park [in Far North Queensland] 11 years ago, Sheridan Lillyman took me under her wing and taught me a lot," Maitie says. "She believed in me and showed me what could be done if you put your heart and head into the job; and I am now the person 18-year-old me dreamed of becoming. Hopefully, I can be a mentor for someone one day."

As head stockman on Carlton Hill, Maitie would, perhaps unknowingly, already be a role model. While some come to the expansive northern stations for a gap year of adventure, Maitie sees her future as a grazier, with a long career path potentially leading to the position of station manager. "It's adventurous, especially over here, and social," she says. "There are a lot of young people your own age doing the same thing. It's physical outdoors work, where you're learning practical skills and independence and responsibility. And it's exciting – everyone loves being on horses and helicopters and bikes."

The attraction and retention of young people in agriculture is one of the cultural advantages of pastoralism on the rangelands. Another advantage is the growing opportunity to invest in nature and, in the Murchison region of WA, the Forever Wild Initiative is leading this charge.

The Initiative's executive director Fiachra Kearney is enchanted by the rangelands of Narndee and Boodanoo stations. "It's truly a world apart," he says. "It's an extraordinary place ranging from red sand dunes and spinifex with vast skies to dense mulga woodland covering thousands of hectares. There are hundreds of lakes, many of them small, some quite large, a mix of fresh and saltwater. In between, you've got samphire and large saltbush plains interspersed with red rock breakaways, which are stark and striking. It's extraordinarily diverse and the more time you spend in it, the more you see this ecological diversity."

Valuing this ecological diversity, or 'natural capital' as is the on-trend term, by scaffolding it in new models of third-party finance is the aim of the Forever Wild Initiative. Fiachra talks of visiting cities where $1 billion buildings are being constructed and wonders why the same investment can't be made in nature and, in particular, in rangelands where intact ecological systems often remain.

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Carbon farming and tourism are well-known forms of monetising natural capital but "at the moment we've got a fairly limited suite of commodities we can model and financially benefit from, so we're trying to figure out how to grow that suite," Fiachra says. "If a landholder or community can find new ways to bring in revenue sources, it spreads the financial pressure. Investing in nature can be restorative for a landscape, and if done well, can support long-term economic, ecological and social needs."

On neighbouring Narndee and Boodanoo, owned by the Initiative since 2022, a new model is being tested. Here the financial structure, underpinned by the need to create a viable business, is linked to natural capital and livestock. In practice, this sees carbon projects integrated with the low impact grazing of up to 1,000 Santa Gertrudis breeders; cattle being the livestock of choice due to reduced labour costs.

Another project centres around a large breeding population of nationally threatened malleefowl and "developing finance structures and methodologies to leverage commercial investment as a revenue stream to protect the species," Fiachra says. "We need to value nature as part of the economic and social equation in a way where it's genuinely weighted and has a place at the decision-making tables where its interests are represented."

Further north, in the Pilbara, Evan and Robin Pensini have been awarded the title of Rangelands NRM 2025 Soil Champions. Evan and Robin own Cheela Plains, between the Hamersley Range and the coastal town of Onslow, where a prehistoric floodplain of heavy red cracking soil is flanked by the Hardey and Beasley rivers. "We are managing fragile and brittle soils that are up to 2.5 billion years old," Evan says. "Without healthy soil we don't have healthy grass, and without healthy grass we don't have healthy stock and without healthy stock we don't have healthy people."

Although the cotton and sugar plantations imagined in 1861 by Francis Gregory have never materialised, pastoralists and their sheep soon followed. At first, there were no fences or constructed water points and the stock were shepherded across the landscape, in another version of transhumance. "Then we put them behind fences and started overgrazing the rangelands," Evan says.

Pilbara stations were dominantly the realm of the sheep until the 1960s, when graziers began transitioning to cattle due to a variety of reasons, including wild dogs, high labour costs and poor wool yields. The wool crash of the 1980s sealed the deal. "Quite often sheep get blamed for overgrazing, but at the end of the day >

Robin and Evan Pensini on Cheela Plains Station. Photo by L.E's Photography.

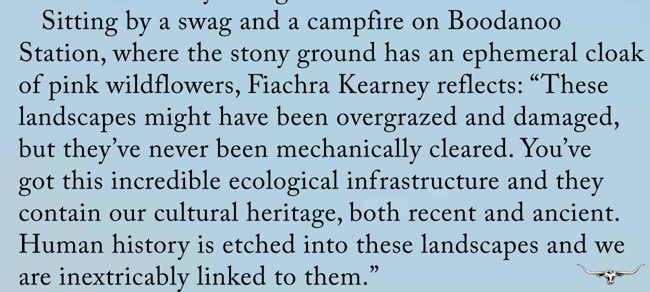
they're just a mouth and hooves on the ground. It's the management doing the overgrazing, not the animals," Evan says. "Cheela Plains was always a cattle property, so sheep can't be blamed for anything here."

Evan grew up on this land and, when he and Robin founded Cheela Plains (by splitting the Wyloo pastoral lease) in 2001, they set about implementing sustainable and renewable pastoral practices. The key to this was rotational grazing, which meant subdividing the original four large paddocks into smaller sizes of around 225ha to enable rest of pastures. They also began controlling water points to control feral mouths and worked with their ancient soils to turn bare ground into grasslands. As attested to by the recent award, Robin and Evan are now industry leaders.

But being an industry leader is more than being a grazier – it means managing the rangeland as a whole and diversifying income to build a profitable business, which in turn allows people to remain and reinvest in the natural world. Evan and Robin opportunistically use agistment cattle to easily change their stock numbers based on seasonal conditions, contract earthworks machinery services to various mining companies and operate the popular Cheela Plains station stay. Driving it all is a connection to landscape. "We know what this rangeland is capable of, and what it really needs is love to bring it back to full capacity," Evan says. "We can do better than what the land has been dealt in the past."

No-one will deny pastoralism on the Australian rangelands has been fraught, but when it is done properly, grazing animals and their pastoralists bring a wealth of benefits. Judi Earl sees the retreat of invasive plant species and the strength of small rural communities. Tony and Lesley Nicholls reimagine the role of feral goats as Ken Sorensen reimagines how we can use camels. Robyn Cowley leans into biodiversity. The Harrigan brothers combine cattle, culture and cutting-edge technology. Richard Wilson uses big machinery to rehydrate his landscape and refresh his soul. Maitie Webb and Jaidyn Eastaughffe follow examples set by progressive pastoralists like Robin and Evan Pensini and therefore encourage a new generation of rangeland stewards and ensure viability for regional Australia.

Sitting by a swag and a campfire on Boodanoo Station, where the stony ground has an ephemeral cloak of pink wildflowers, Fiachra Kearney reflects: "These landscapes might have been overgrazed and damaged, but they've never been mechanically cleared. You've got this incredible ecological infrastructure and they contain our cultural heritage, both recent and ancient. Human history is etched into these landscapes and we are inextricably linked to them."



Following the mob on Miranda Downs, Qld; an example of transhumance in action. Photo by Ken Eastwood.

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