



Station hands... seeing the land anew



Think station hand – think hard riding and mustering cattle. Or that's what you'd expect.

But Northern Territory station hands are being encouraged to take a whole new spin on life by recording wildlife and looking at how their work affects biodiversity.

Outback pastoral workers are in the bush every day. What they see and how they help in managing the land can be critical for sustainability. Their observational and practical skills and experience are now being tapped as part of a rangelands management course that comes to their workplace.

Based in the Territory section of the Barkly Tableland east of Tennant Creek, the Barkly Rangeland Management Course provides training in a variety of land management situations including biodiversity issues. Incorporating biodiversity into this course shows the growing recognition of how important long term sustainability and environmental protection are to managing outback properties.

Pastoral lands and biodiversity

Many Australian plant and animal species are only found on pastoral lands. These areas are therefore vital for conservation.

Of the Barkly Tableland's 26 different vegetation types only six are included in the region's national parks. Only 0.6 per cent of the Tableland is represented in national parks and reserves, which is fairly typical of agricultural landscapes across Australia. For the Northern Territory as a whole, only four per cent is dedicated to national parks, while about 45 per cent is pastoral land.

Pastoral managers and staff therefore have a major role to play in biodiversity conservation.



Biodiversity training for pastoral workers

The Barkly Rangelands Management Course was designed by the Northern Territory Department of Primary Industries. Dr Alaric Fisher of the Northern Territory's Department of Natural Resources, Environment and the Arts developed the biodiversity section, with the active involvement of the Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association based at Tennant Creek.

The course highlights the need for sustainable land management. As part of this, trained staff help participants observe and record species on their own stations. An added benefit of this approach is that cattle stations will gain a species list that can help property managers and government agencies monitor the number and distribution of animal and plant species on pastoral lands.

Facilitators from Tennant Creek come to stations in the region to present the two-day course. This enables staff from neighbouring stations to gather at one property and undertake the face-to-face part of the course as a group. The course can also be made part of a staff induction program, or training associated with other station activities.



Studying biodiversity issues has been integrated into the field-based course which also enables pastoral workers to learn about pasture species, dynamics and management, weed management and poisonous plants, fire management and aspects of animal production including nutrition.

The biodiversity part of the rangeland management course was first held at 'Austral Downs' station in August 2004. The 11 participants came from 'Austral Downs' and the neighbouring 'Headingly Station' just across the border in Queensland.

Practical sessions and field work form a major element of the course. The main thrust of the biodiversity component is to educate people working on cattle stations about the rich biodiversity of the Barkly Tableland and how it can be managed by the pastoralists who hold its future in their hands. Course notes and field activities have been built on local research and experience.

Topics in the biodiversity segment are wide-ranging. They include examination of just what biodiversity is; discussion of the role of pastoral lands in conservation; study of what makes the Barkly Tableland special, including numbers of native species, together with common and threatened animals; types of habitats on the Tableland, including special places and species such as the Australian Bustard, the Australian Painted Snipe, the Masked Owl and the Bilby. Binoculars and books were supplied to participants in the first course and used in a bird watching exercise.



Threats to biodiversity are also examined, together with factors that can increase, or decrease it. Participants learn about how to manage pastoral lands to conserve biodiversity and how and where to learn more about biodiversity.

A total of \$13,986 was provided in December 2002 for the course through the Australian Government Envirofund. Other partners in the exercise are the Northern Territory Government, the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre and the Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association.

A number of lessons have been learnt from the first couple of courses held on the Barkly Tableland containing a biodiversity component.

Lessons learnt

- Developing and presenting a rangeland management course that includes biodiversity conservation specially designed for station staff is a creative and positive way of dealing with conservation issues in the pastoral industry.
- The fact that participants attended the courses as part of their training program and were paid wages while attending, showed the importance managers placed on educating staff about biodiversity.
- Presenting courses on the stations, in the environment in which people are working makes all aspects of the course highly relevant to the working context.



Biodiversity encompasses the variety of all living things. Conserving biological diversity gives us the best chance of adapting to our rapidly changing world.

This leaflet is one of a series showing how farmers, Indigenous communities, local government and community groups have either initiated special biodiversity projects, or have successfully incorporated biodiversity protection into their work and daily lives.

We hope these success stories provide useful information and inspiration to others in similar situations.

For more information: www.nrm.gov.au; or freecall 1800 552 008;

email: ciu@deh.gov.au

Photo Credits

Front: Course participants;
Bird watching; both Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association
Barkly Tableland vista; Jenny Purdie

Back: Cattle grazing in the Barkly Tableland; Jenny Purdie
Cattle; Jenny Purdie

Course participants; Barkly Landcare and Conservation Association.