

# **THE REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT PROGRAM OF THE GASCOYNE-MURCHISON STRATEGY**

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## **OVERVIEW**

Much progress has been made in the Regional Environmental Management Program (REMP) of the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy (GMS). When the program commenced in 1998, we were faced with a significant challenge; to improve the management and condition of historically degraded rangeland environments with some of the least representative reserve systems in Australia.

Progress made by the REMP has been most notable on two fronts. First, cooperative management of the program has fostered a relationship of mutual trust and respect among key rangeland stakeholders, including pastoralists, government departments and conservation organisations. The program's management committee is chaired by a pastoralist and comprises pastoral, conservation and government representatives. Whilst previously the relationship between these stakeholders had been one of wariness and antagonism, the process of negotiating and progressing common goals has engendered an effective working partnership that will have enduring benefits for resource management in the rangelands. The cooperative approach developed by those managing the Program is reflected in increasingly cooperative delivery of individual projects within the Program.

Second, REMP has sought and developed relationships within the broader pastoral community. These relationships have helped in developing and delivering core projects. REMP has helped to bridge the gap between the ever evolving and expanding resource management jargon, legislation and policy, and the people on the land who have to respond to these winds of change. By working in partnership with the pastoral community REMP has translated the complexity of resource management responsibilities into objectives and actions at an enterprise level, and paved the way for progressive pastoralists to treat change as an opportunity, rather than as a threat.

## **THE SIX MAJOR COMPONENTS OF REMP IN DELIVERING OUR PROGRAM**

The key components of REMP are:

### **1: SUPPORTING ON-GROUND ACTION WITH TARGETED INFORMATION**

REMP project staff from the Departments of Agriculture (DAWA) and Conservation and Land Management (DCLM) have developed and/or collated an enormous amount of biophysical information to support the work of REMP. The entire region (larger than New South Wales) has photo-interpreted for areas of particularly high habitat and landscape diversity. Vegetation maps from surveys in the 1970s by John Beard have been reviewed and developed into a GIS database. Preliminary spatial modelling of GIS databases has helped to identify areas where environmental issues converge.

### **2: STRATEGIC ACQUISITION OF PASTORAL LEASES FOR INCLUSION IN THE NATIONAL RESERVE SYSTEM**

Outstanding progress has made in building the representativeness of the reserve system (as required through the Cabinet Action Plan for the G-MS), ostensibly by purchasing pastoral leases on the open market. While the reserve lands are still inadequate by normal standards, they can now realistically be viewed as part of a "reserve system. As at mid-July

2202, \$6.9M had been spent acquiring 3.2M hectares, which together with 1.1M hectares before the acquisition project, brings the area under reservation to approximately 7.3% of the Strategy area (below international and national standards of 10-15%).

Efforts have been made to achieve multiple outcomes in the acquisition process, by facilitating those parts of acquired stations not critical to the reserve system to be transferred to adjoining stations. The administrative process to facilitate these multiple, flexible outcomes needs major streamlining in the administration process if patterns of land use are to be allowed to evolve.

### 3: OFF-RESERVE CONSERVATION OF SPECIFIC BIODIVERSITY VALUES

Much of this activity was conducted through the EMU Exercise (see this volume; Tinley and Pringle). While most pastoralists indicated a strong interest in biodiversity on their stations, it was only through formal questioning by EMU ecologists that they grasped how many biodiversity values occurred on their land, and that they could manage most of them without fencing them off, if they were aware of threats and their management. The focus has been more on building awareness than fences, so this activity has few “lock it up for protection” outcomes. However, a positive attitude has been fostered towards managing biodiversity and the threats to it, rather than an attitude that implies that biodiversity and conservation need to be separated by physical and psychological fences. Indeed, the field excursions with pastoralists demonstrated that flora, fauna and habitat variety and overall landscape functioning supports the viability of individual enterprises and local communities.

### 4: ECOLOGICALLY SUSTAINABLE PASTORAL MANAGEMENT

The “EMU Exercise” is a partnership between ecologists and pastoralists aimed at demystifying the statutory jargon and providing pastoralists with a clear idea of how to be “ecologically sustainable”. Ecologists have formed partnerships with a range of Best Practice groups, Land Conservation Districts and the Central Agricultural and Pastoral Aboriginal Corporation. Together pastoralists and ecologists focus on developing an ongoing learning system to improve general landscape and habitat condition for stock and other biodiversity, as well as developing specific plans for areas of particular environmental values such as swamps or rare flora. As at mid-July 2002, 36 pastoral leases had participated, amounting to almost nine million hectares of rangelands. At least as much interest is yet to be met within the GMS, and requests have come from other parts of the State and beyond.

### 5: ACCREDITATION TOWARDS CERTIFIED PRODUCTS AND PRODUCTION

Participants in the EMU Exercise can formalise their environmental planning into an Environmental Management System (EMS), thanks to the program’s accreditation project. The project has involved working with pastoralists to develop EMS for rangeland properties. Pilot studies were conducted on stations running sheep, cattle and domesticated goats. The project has linked EMS to product safety and quality, enabling pastoralists to legitimately promote “clean and green” produce. Challa station has verified the quality and safety of their merino wool, sheep meat and goats through certification to the internationally recognised SQF 1000<sup>CM</sup> (Safe Quality Food/Fibre) quality assurance code. The scope of this certification includes an EMS developed by the station managers to formalise their commitment to responsible rangeland management.

### 6: INSTITUTIONAL ARRANGEMENTS TOWARDS CAPACITY BUILDING

State Cabinet gave the GMS a pivotal role for the rangelands as a beacon project in reviewing rangeland administration in Western Australia within the context of the imminent Natural Resources Management Council. REMP’s functional Whole-of-Government approach and systematic attention to causes as much as symptoms, may offer a promising, operational framework for sustainable rangeland habitation (see Pringle et al, this volume). Equally, the cooperation that has been developed in the REMP management subcommittee

represents fertile ground for exploring progressive institutional arrangements more likely to produce the outcomes desired from local to national level; from paddock to parliament.

In conclusion, the REMP has developed momentum in terms of enthusiastic industry participation in projects and in industry/community-based and Whole-of-Government regional natural resources management. While there have been considerable measurable outcomes, there have been equally profound achievements in terms of the cooperative relationships that have been built through the Program and upon which future progress can be pursued.