

CONFERENCE PAPER

Environmental practice in rural Australia in 2030

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to speculate on the nature of environmental practice in rural Australia in 2030. Changes in environmental practices will depend primarily on changes in institutional arrangements. Currently these arrangements are based on agricultural productivist paradigms which do not take account of the diversity of environmentally related beliefs and values that exist in the community. Consequently change in environmental practice will be restricted unless conscious efforts are made to make institutional arrangements more responsive to different and more diverse sets of environmental beliefs and values. Well designed environmental management systems (EMSs) have a vital role to play in such efforts as they enable integrated expression of the beliefs and values of individual land managers operating at the same or different spatial levels. The role for EMSs will also be expanded by more attention being given to the environmental impacts of the activities of land managers as compared to that directed to the state of the natural resources per se. Nevertheless the overall impact of EMS will remain, as always, heavily dependent on how well their use is integrated with that of other practice instruments. EMSs used in conjunction with stewardship and ecoservice programs have the potential to limit the perverse effects that might be associated with such programs.

Key Words

Environmental practice, beliefs and values, institutions.

Introduction

I have been asked to speculate on the use of environmental management systems (EMS)¹ in rural Australia in about 20 years from now. 'Speculate' is my term for I make no claim to have applied sophisticated futuring or scenario development processes.

I have taken the substantial liberty of broadening the brief from EMS to environmental practice because it is important that the EMS Association continues to see EMS as one of a package of tools to enable better environmental outcomes. The effectiveness of EMS will depend on how well it fits on the broader canvass.

The determinants of environmental practice

Environmental management in 2030 will be determined, as it is today, by the structures, cultures and processes of our organisations, by our policies and programs and by our markets and laws; that is, by our institutional arrangements.

Institutional arrangements should reflect our beliefs, values and norms². These are the things that characterize a culture and they are expressed as attitudes which influence behaviour.

We strive for a close relationship between culture and institutional arrangements but the relationship is dynamic and a close relationship cannot be fully achieved for several reasons.

¹ An environmental management system (EMS) is a systematic continuous improvement process used by an organisation to improve its impact on the environment

² Beliefs are something accepted as true, a symbolic statement about reality. It is the collection of shared beliefs that help give definition to a culture and it is these beliefs that define group perspectives. Values are symbolic statements of what is right and important. Values are those qualities regarded by a person or group as important or desirable - a set of standards and principles. Values help define propriety within a culture. Norms are symbolic statements of expected behaviour. Within a culture, they define the limits of acceptable behaviour, especially for community members.

First there is a rigidity that results in lag times between cultural change and institutional reform. This rigidity reflects the realities of the time it takes to change institutions. These lag times are often prolonged by organisations and individuals who judge that they might be disadvantaged by change.

Second it is difficult to know culture and to accommodate its diversity.

Third the relationship between institutional arrangements and beliefs and values is not one way. Institutional arrangements themselves act to influence beliefs and values. Hence the relationship, at least theoretically, is in a constant state of flux. For instance Landcare began as a reflection of the beliefs and values of some concerned citizens, gradually became institutionalised and converted others towards a landcare mindset. It is this mutuality that enables evolution of social behaviour and institutions. The important ingredient was leadership from people with influence.

The point to recognise here is that the need for institutional renewal is forever present. It was there 20 years ago in the mid 1980s, it is here now and it will still be there in 2030.

Pressures for and obstacles to institutional change

“Only when the mindset of previous generations becomes extinct will real progress have been made.”³

Especially in an election year it seems that climatic and market conditions and the claims of lobby groups and political parties are the prime factors influencing environmental policy and hence, in due course, environmental practice. However unless they are based on recognition of the changing and diverse beliefs and values held by land managers these factors are unlikely to result in the institutional changes necessary for sustained improvement in environmental outcomes. In other words institutional change needs to proceed hand in glove with cultural change.

The beliefs and values held by land managers are changing and becoming more diverse. These changes are underpinned by a widespread landcare ethos, recognition of the multifunctionality of rural landscapes, increased roles of women and indigenous people in land management and by demographic factors with people of varied backgrounds, experiences and expertises entering farming communities, not only as farmers.

These changed beliefs and values are reflected for instance in land prices in many parts of rural Australia exceeding what could be justified on the basis of agricultural profitability, in the rise and rise of the importance of non-agricultural income for farm households, in increased agricultural diversification and in grass roots experimentation with fundamentally different production systems.

It is ironic however that at a time of considerable stress and apprehension in rural Australia that these changes are not reflected in the policies and activities of public and private sector organisations with responsibilities for land management. The forerunners of these organisations were established in the mid nineteenth century and their foundations have remained largely unchanged since that time. They are underpinned primarily by valuing the ‘development’ of our natural resources, in part for the sake of economic growth and in part by the desire to ‘tame’ our landscapes. Agricultural productivity, for which read increased production, is their god with s/he cloaked in the language, rather than the reality, of sustainability.

Institutional arrangements create winners and losers, the winners being those organizations and individuals that benefit from maintaining the status quo and the losers being those organizations and individuals whose beliefs and values are not taken into account when the arrangements are put in place. Hence there is rigidity in institutional arrangements, especially when they are based on a relatively narrow set of beliefs and values and when these beliefs and values are not explicit.

The opposition from existing organisations to institutional change in favour of improved environmental outcomes in rural Australia arises from the monochromatic nature of the beliefs and values upon which those organizations are founded. These beliefs and values elevate priced products to the exclusion of non-priced

³ Future Leaders Survey www.futureleaderssurvey.org.uk accessed 23rd April 2007

products, hold agriculture to be a superior form of economic activity and hold farmers to be 'owed' by the community because of the hardship they endure, because of their apparent superior economic productivity, because they feed the world and because they steward resources. It is important to note here the distinction between the beliefs and values governing these organizations and the more diverse sets of beliefs and values held many of the people employed by these organizations and by farmers themselves.

As stated earlier agricultural thinking has had a dominant impact on how we value and relate to land and on the design and operation of institutional arrangements for rural Australia. However, we have a gap between what we do and what we think we do in agriculture and this is driven largely by the institutional arrangements related to agriculture.

The economic importance of the agricultural production sector, the on-farm component, is overstated as is the economic performance of the sector. Politicians and community and industry leaders encourage farmers to believe in the special importance of their contribution to economic growth and exports. Farmers, their organisations and their public support agencies build on these cultural norms, closing their minds and those of the nation to other ways of conceiving of rural Australia.

When there is a gap between reality and an idea, between what we do and what we think or believe we do, it becomes difficult to move forward. When such gaps occur we need to enable new imaginings to emerge.

A fuller expression of a broader set of beliefs and values, including the relationship between land, spirit and wellbeing, than occurs now in institutional analyses will only be possible if individuals with new insights participate in those analyses; people with insights less constrained by the dominant paradigms of commodification and scientific determinism, and by sectional interests.

These new imaginings will best occur in safe places, in environments where participants are protected from institutionally driven adverse reactions to their deconstructions. However because of agri-political influences over funding arrangements and because too much reliance is placed on short-term, project-based competitive funding such safe places are becoming scarce.

The point to make here is that environment management will always be a catch-up game unless there is a genuine attempt to align institutional arrangements in both the private and public sectors with evolving beliefs and values; and to accommodate their diversity. Simply adding new policy instruments and programs (regulations, financial packages, market based mechanisms or whatever) to the existing institutional foundations will not work.

Improving environmental practice requires farm organisations and government departments to make space for new beliefs and values and to respond to them, to escape from traditional images of rural landscapes.

This is not rocket science.

All that needs be done is to listen and respond to the forces for change-from the youth, from urban as well as rural communities, from women, from indigenous communities, from both part-and full-time farmers, from innovators.

Environmental practice in rural Australia in 2030

We can be confident that environmental practice in rural Australia in 2030, just 23 years from now, will not be dramatically different to what it is today. However there will be changes and it is likely that, in the main, these will lead to improved environmental outcomes.

Improved environmental practice will encompass all of Australia, not just the two thirds occupied by farmers. Practices will be monitored and evaluated on the basis of their impacts on land, on the atmosphere and on marine environments.

The current focus on the state of the natural resources per se will be tempered by an increased focus on the realized and probable impacts of land managers. This increased attention on the causes of environmental

impacts, both positive and negative, will be accompanied by a greater recognition of the importance of ecological interdependencies, of a more holistic, less reductionist approach.

Environmental management systems will be a key tool in improving environmental outcomes, for both private and public sector operatives. They will be accepted as a skeleton upon which can be built stewardship programs targeted at particular issues without incurring the adverse effects of programs from being of too short a duration or from promoting fragmentation, duplication and excessive transaction costs.

The current piece-meal industry-by-industry approach to EMS will be replaced by whole-of-farm, catchment-linked and independently audited approaches.

Current concern that environment management systems are overly focused on process standards will be lessened through implementation of pragmatic yet technologically sophisticated environmental monitoring systems linked across landscapes.

The yet to be established Australian Centre for Land Management Certification will be celebrating its 20th year of operation.

The mission of the Centre is to improve environmental outcomes through the application of internationally recognised management systems.

The centre will be responsible for accreditation of EMS trainers and auditors and for maintaining a register of land holders implementing certified environment management systems.

The Centre will provide environment management system related training, audit and information services to catchment management, government and agribusiness organisations, as well as to landholders themselves.

The work of the Centre will highlight the difficulties and costs in complying with and maintaining the current complex regulatory framework. A more effective and efficient regulatory framework governing land management will evolve.

Conclusion

Sustained improvement in environmental practice requires that institutions are responsive to changing and diverse sets of beliefs and values. Farm organisations and government departments need to make space for new and more diverse sets of beliefs and values. These and other organisations need to provide support for people whose practices align to differing imaginings of rural landscapes. Additionally other organisations and individuals need to be brought into the conversation about rural landscapes, and hence about environmental practice in rural Australia.

Whole-of-farm environmental management systems that are not bolted onto existing industries and /or practices enable changing and diverse sets of beliefs and values to be institutionalised across various spatial levels and over time. Such systems should become landscape assets, like plant and machinery at the property scale and like other practice tools at the catchment scale.

Environmental management systems need to be integrated with other tools (such as regulation, research and development, training, financial support etc) to guide and assist environmental practice. How well this integration happens will be a principal determinant of their utility, and of the effectiveness of shorter term and issue specific interventions.

And finally a note of caution-as much for myself as for the Association.

It is easy to become frustrated by those we see as opposing change, by those who elect not to be engaged, by those who hold different beliefs and values. It is important however that we do not let an explosive mix of frustration and passion ignite a denigration of those who hold different views, of those who travel different pathways. The success of the Association will be much determined by the extent we can build bridges -we need to value and embrace diversity.

The ALMS group wishes to work with the Association in this endeavour and, in 2007/08 and beyond, the Group will be using our sponsorship from Elders and Landcare Australia to involve industry and catchment groups in how we go forward.