

**VICTORIA RIVER DISTRICT CONSERVATION ASSOCIATION
(NORTHERN TERRITORY).**

Changing attitudes to conservation and cattle

Northern Territory:

Region: Northern Territory

Affiliated Regional NRM Group: Northern Territory (under discussion)

Background

The Victoria River District Conservation Association (VRDCA) is a voluntary conservation group formed in 1987, initially as a pastoralists' lobby group on environmental issues.

It's membership covers a prime grazing region of 140,000 km² of the Northern Territory and includes extensive cattle operations, National Parks, Interested Individuals, and Aboriginal Land Managers. The Defense Department is an associated member. The VRDCA recently appointed a full time co-ordinator.

Achievements to Date:

The Association currently runs a large devolved grants scheme to encourage pastoralists to incorporate conservation into their cattle operations. Projects funded include::

- funding 2 PhD students; studying the Purple Crowned Fairy Wren as an indicator species of rangeland condition and the effectiveness of riparian fencing in biodiversity conservation.
- fencing of riparian zones to improve management of river corridors and critical areas;
- subsidised purchase of radio tracking collars on donkeys and pigs to improve feral animal control and eradication;
- control of imported and invasive weed species (ie. the Neem Tree (*azadirachta indica*) in river corridors);
- effects of various grazing management regimes on biodiversity;
- Rangeland Management Courses for Station employees.
- Erosion control measures



Other activities have included:

- ❖ an educational video on road & track maintenance;
- ❖ conservation work around RAMSAR listed Birindoodoo Lakes and Wetlands, including fencing, exclusion of stock, regeneration of Bluebush and eradication of *parkinsonia*.
- ❖ native grass revegetation activities and an identification CD in cooperation with Greening Australia;

Controlled grazing is now firmly established as a practice that leads to better management and spelling of the country.

Information Used:

National data sets:

- ❖ Accessed through Bushcare Support Officers
- ❖ Accessed via the Internet

Territory data sets:

- ❖ Accessed through the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Environment
- ❖ Accessed through the Department of Business, Industry and Resource Development

Regional data sets:

- ❖ Accessed through Tropical Savannas CRC
- ❖ Accessed through partners such as Greening Australia (NT)
- ❖ Pastoral manager's knowledge



Market and Non-Market Mechanisms for Biodiversity Conservation:

Economic instruments (financial mechanisms):

- ❖ Devolved grants scheme.
- ❖ Development of cost sharing partnerships with research institutions and corporate organisations.

Community measures (motivational mechanisms):

- ❖ Local champions.
- ❖ Access to external information – especially from scientific agencies.
- ❖ Access to planning support, technical advice and skills development.
- ❖ Use of RAMSAR listing mechanisms.
- ❖ Focal species used as an indicators.
- ❖ Education and awareness.
- ❖ Use of links to Aboriginal capacity building programs

Critical Success Factors:

- ❖ Integration of conservation activities into the core of cattle operations, through an effective devolved grants scheme.
- ❖ Biodiversity seen as complementary to good management of country and cattle operations.
- ❖ Devolved grants scheme is an effective capacity-building mechanism because:
 - It calls for applications from all of the members;
 - the Association has been harder and more conscious of its public group role; it has understood the responsibility of having money devolved to the group and has come to terms with the notion of public good;
 - reports and recommendations are put up on each application;
 - decisions are made by a panel of experienced pastoral managers.
- ❖ Growth in social and group capacity as a result of teaching themselves how to run a large devolved grant scheme.
- ❖ Successful in forming partnerships to get support and assistance to implement actions, eg: DIPE, Greening Australia (NT), individual pastoral companies.
- ❖ Innovative research alliances formed, eg: Tropical Savannas CRC (science input) and Heytesbury Pastoral Company (land and funding for fencing) to investigate grazing / biodiversity options and systems.
- ❖ Significant attitude changes by members, over the life of the Association.
- ❖ Growth in awareness of social responsibility, notions of public good and biodiversity ethics that have evolved from within the group rather than as a result of external guidelines or frameworks.
- ❖ Desire to be proactive and to get their own subregional planning in place.
- ❖ Encouragement for Aboriginal owned and managed pastoral operations, National Park areas and the Timber Creek community.
- ❖ Conceptual awareness of social responsibilities that are broader than cattle operations.
- ❖ Ready and waiting for any regional approach.

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Quote:

"Years ago, we made a lot of mistakes in this country. Now days, we never make a single decision on our property without considering the environment".

Pastoralist, at a recent VDRCA meeting.