

Why the “EMU” works: a case study in ethics and empowerment

Hugh Pringle, Manager, Regional Environmental Management Programme,
Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy, co/ Centre for Management of Arid Environments,
Department of Agriculture, Kalgoorlie.

Abstract

The “EMU process” was developed within the “Off-Reserve Conservation” project as a means to introduce management of biodiversity values on stations in the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy. From being a minor pilot study, it has become a focal project with plans for extension throughout the southern rangelands, probably the northern rangelands, and there have been expressions of interest from interstate.

The “EMU process” has never been formally advertised, and yet the demand for it has overwhelmed us; we are struggling to service interested groups of pastoralists. Their promoting of the process amongst their peers has driven most of the demand. Apparently, participants in the process are extremely glowing in praise of what we have developed. A challenge facing the Ecosystem Management Unit (“EMU”) is how to plan succession from a core of two to multiple teams that can capture the enthusiasm the process invariably develops.

Why does the process generate such enthusiasm and consequent demand? What is so different to the contemporary paradigm? This is a story of how an “outsider from yesteryear” initiated a paradigm shift that has taken hold in the southern rangelands.

The “EMU process”

The “EMU” is the Ecosystem Management Unit” of the Gascoyne-Murchison Strategy, and has Dr Ken Tinley (CALM) and me as its core members, as well as local CALM and Department of Agriculture staff, depending on the location of the work.

The “EMU process” involves helping groups of pastoralists capture their accumulated expert local knowledge on clear overlays on top of their land system maps. This is done in an inverted form of expert questioning, in which the “experts” (landscape ecologists) ask a series of loosely formatted questions about stations.

We encourage participants to involve all members of the family/management who have an interest in the stations participating. The perceptions are generally complementary, rather than contradictory within groups from individual stations and the exchanges often lead to better understanding of each other’s views and values.

Some of the issues raised are described in Table 1 (from Pringle and Tinley, Journal of Agriculture in press). In discussions with any group, additional issues invariably arise and are incorporated in the mapping process. The mapping is usually conducted in two sessions, separated by a local field trip to an area of interest to the hosting pastoralist or group. During the field visit, we start to identify and discuss issues that have been mapped. What emerges is a realisation of the inter-connectedness of many mapped issues and how they are often strongly influenced by a small number of critical factors, water flows being prominent in most scenarios.

Table 1.

Theme	Salient features/occurrence of
Pastoral factors	1. Best pastoral value country (for what and why)
	2. Worst pastoral value country (for what and why)
	3. Artificial watering points and pipelines
	4. Longest lasting natural surface waters (include dams)
	5. Least grazed areas (furthest from water)
Landscape linkages	1. Main drainage systems onto, through and out of station
	2. Main breakaway scarps and ridge-lines
	3. Unique or unusual features/scenic areas
	4. Areas where many landscape types come together
Degradation hazards and occurrence	1. Main areas of severe degradation and erosion
	2. Main areas of scrub encroachment
	3. Most fragile/sensitive landscapes
	4. Areas most favoured by feral animals or weeds

Once the mapping is completed, individual station groups discuss the salient features and identify issue-rich areas: areas where many of the features in Table 1 overlap. Each group is then invited to describe their station in terms of the features they have mapped. This is entirely voluntary, but no station has declined the invitation to date. The other participants may then ask a few brief questions, before we move on to the next station's presentation.

This interaction is an extremely enriching process because it brings many minds to bear on quite complex systems in an unthreatening environment. Finally, we invite participants to identify priority management issues and areas and to indicate where they might concentrate subsequent management effort and monitoring.

At the closing get together, we discuss how the process went, clarify any outstanding issues and negotiate what further support individuals and the group would like. We generally offer to return to each station within a couple of months of the workshop.

I have only skimmed over the EMU process here, but a more detailed account will soon be available in the Department of Agriculture's forthcoming annual Journal of Agriculture.

Why does the EMU process work?

I am involved intimately in the process, so I have strong biases, but this is what I understand to underpin the success and enthusiasm:

i) We establish openness and mutual respect at an introductory meeting

We avoid rushing into the EMU process on demand. We prefer to organise an informal chat where we can become acquainted and discuss terms of engagement. (The most recent meeting was with the Murchison Land Conservation District Committee in the river bed at the Meebirrie crossing.) On our part, we want to know what the pastoralists seek from the EMU process and what are their burning local issues. We offer our services on the basis that whatever is discussed, mapped or written stays with the participants when we leave unless they give us specific permission to take information away. Pastoralists understand that we are fundamentally there to help them come to grips with the complexities of station management, rather than to preach or inspect.

Thus we have established an equal, clearly articulated partnership from the outset and when we next meet for the two-day workshop we all know what we can expect from each other and what we have to do in return.

ii) We experts are "on tap, not on top"

When we meet at the workshops, we usually have to reorganise the tables so that we aren't in teachers/pupils mode, but in a circle or near offer. We initiate discussion by asking about objectives for the workshop and discussing how we should proceed through the next couple of days together. The next couple of days are best described as "*flexible, verging on chaos*".

The lack of rigidity (eg no set agenda) irks some pastoralists and Government people who are more used to a series of presentations to the audience. However, such approaches are susceptible to abuse by those who set the agenda and may "run" the event. That is a situation we find unethical in the EMU process.

iii) We aim to replace our relevance with their inter-dependence

However, I believe that the chaos breeds enthusiasm endogenously and ownership of the process increases as the workshops proceed. By the end of the workshops, it is common to see groups discussing their next moves, without seeking the EMU's input. In such cases, Ken Tinley and I simply wink at each other; it's working!

iv) We thrive on the transfer of power to groups

It is unusual for Government staff to actively seek their declining relevance and importance in dealing with groups. Yet we cannot achieve our goals of improved land management and increasingly cohesive local action if we try to lead from the front. The rangelands are so vast that only the managers of the land can make a difference and we see our fading from prominence to background technical support as a critical requirement of the self-empowerment and capacity building processes.

If our technical knowledge can then take pastoralists to successively higher plains of land management (and profitability), then we are rewarded even more. The relinquishing of power in the EMU process is a liberating and extremely rewarding process; we develop new positive relationships that may prove to make a real difference and we avoid the unrealistic burden of owning problems that we are not in a position to address directly. We also watch other positive relationships developing within groups from individual stations and within the LCD or Best Practice group etc.

v) We help set priorities in realistic time frames

Many pastoralists have few employees beyond the immediate family and perhaps 250, 000 hectares to manage. No wonder "it all seems too much" for many of them. However through the mapping process and consequent discussions, priorities become evident and the problems and opportunities can be categorised according to criteria such as importance, urgency and capacity to effect change. The process allows pastoralists to be both systematic and realistic about their management priorities, knowing that almost all issues have a place within the plan, but only a subset can be managed in the short term.

Most pastoralists have made significant changes to their management before we conduct the follow-up visits. They seem motivated by the process and the fact that their neighbours are also starting out on this ongoing learning process.

How did we develop this approach?

A collection of Government staff congregated at Thundelarra station, near Yalgoo. Tom Morrissey, the lessee, is the Chairman of the subcommittee that oversees the EMU process and several other projects, and he and his wife Roxanne invited us to test out the pilot project on their station. Dr Ken Tinley, a wildlife management specialist and landscape ecologist with over forty years experience in the big-game parks of southern Africa was something of an enigma to the Department of Agriculture folk at Thundelarra that week. He said little, asked many questions and recommended nothing as we travelled around the station with the Morrisseys. On the last day, we decided to capture what we had learnt on the clear overlays.

As project leader, I called on the local pastoral inspector to identify and describe the resource management issues on the station's land system map. I passed him the pens and he started to map and describe the issues. I then asked the Morrisseys for a response, which they gave. We thought we were travelling very well!

I then turned to the enigmatic Dr Tinley and respectfully requested he do the same for biodiversity and other non-pastoral values. I passed Dr Tinley the pens and awaited some output from him at last. We had been feeding him for a week!

He collected up the pens and passed them all to the Morrisseys. What followed was an intense interaction that left us all emotionally exhausted but exhilarated. Dr Tinley asked a series of questions about Thundelarra, Tom and Roxanne discussed them and then mapped them. The Thundelarra map came to life before us, we suddenly saw interactions instead of polygons on the map. Dr Tinley had helped the Morrisseys paint a vivid picture of their station as a dynamic, inter-connected system, as well as a mix of different pasture types. We were very quiet on the drive back to Perth, but we were all excited, the EMU process had begun.

Hopkins, Angas

From: Hopkins, Angas (SDRN)
Sent: Thursday, 14 April 2005 8:38 PM
To: 'gordonw@calm.wa.gov.au'
Cc: 'tonyb@calm.wa.gov.au'
Subject: Rangelands Off-reserve Conservation Program Proposal

Attachments: CALM Project Proposal Ver3_Draft.doc

Gordon

Please find attached the proposal that I have prepared for your consideration for an off-reserve conservation program for the rangelands.

I apologise for the delay in getting this to you. And hope that it is not too late to receive consideration in the budget cycle.

The proposal that I have prepared is modest insofar as it would only have two full time staff plus part-time administrative support at start-up and would only grow to 3 full-time staff in year 3, and comprehensive, covering all aspects that I would consider essential for such a program such as funding for infrastructure, incentive payments etc as well as for a small but specific communication strategy. You may wish to give specific attention to the issue of staffing, as the program will have a brief to work over almost 90% of the State.

I understand that Mr Tony Brandis is also preparing a proposal for your consideration (probably because of the delays in my getting this to you), and so I am copying this proposal to him so that he can be informed of my views.

Please feel free to contact me here in Rome if you need clarification of any of the matters in the proposal. And I would appreciate being kept informed of progress with this proposal and with any negotiations with the Executive Director.

Angas



CALM Project
proposal Ver3_Dra