A Farmer's Perspective –Management of Remnant Vegetation

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the Jerramungup Shire, to my knowledge, the only research finding relevant to remnant conservation that has been implemented is the necessity to fence stock out. Certainly, on our farm this has been the case.

No doubt all or most of you would have read the book *Managing Your Bushland* by Penny Hussey and Ken Wallace (1993), who list fencing as virtually the first action in the first year of a program to conserve remnants.

However, if we look into paddocks when driving around the country, it is immediately evident that only a very small percentage — perhaps 5%, or even only 0.5% — of remnants are actually fenced. Does this suggest that the research finding is wrong, or is it irrelevant? And what do we mean or conjure up in our mind when we talk about remnants? Do we think of once pristine areas now slightly, or greatly, degraded?

To address the second question first, I believe the need to fence remnant vegetation applies equally to all remnants that are to be conserved, irrespective of their condition. But what of the first question? My opinion is that, generally speaking, fencing remnants from livestock works well. However, there are costs and difficulties simply because there is no such thing as a "free lunch".

COSTS AND DIFFICULTIES

For today's exercise, I have identified five costs and difficulties.

Costs of Erecting Fences

The first and obvious cost is dollars — $1 400/km for materials and $450/km for erection to complete conventional fencing, or $700/km plus $300/km for erection of electric fencing, not counting the energiser and other initial costs. Bank managers and farm consultants are usually interested in "the bottom line". Despite the long-term benefits that may arise from conserving remnants, there is no immediate benefit in terms of dollar returns from fencing them. Also, once the fence is there, it has to be monitored and maintained forever if the remnant is going to be successfully conserved. This adds an ongoing annual cost.

Costs of Damage to Fences

Damage to fences is an additional cost. This can happen in a few ways:

Pressure of stock (literally): Modern cropping techniques require the elimination of grasses before sowing cereals. Therefore, before sowing, pasture paddocks need to be heavily grazed during spring, summer and autumn. If remnants are within these paddocks, then fence damage is likely due to "the grass being greener on the other side of the fence". To reach green vegetation, sheep will push on fences, thus causing damage.

Flooding: If the remnant adjoins a waterway, heavy summer or autumn rainfall may result in fences being washed over or away.

Farm machinery: All farm fences are subject to damage by careless use of machinery or vehicles, especially during the cropping phase.

Wildlife: Kangaroos or emus caught in fences can break wires and cause considerable fence damage.

Fire: Apart from wildfires, deliberately lit fires are also a factor causing fence damage — for example, where stubble burning is being practised on the farm. This controversial practice has begun to reappear as farmers experience difficulty seeding legume crops into heavy cereal stubbles. Higher yielding crops, and their associated heavy stubbles, are occurring due to the rapid adoption of new technology.

Firebreaks

These are costly in many ways. In some shires during summer — Jerramungup, for example — firebreaks must be constructed and maintained around the boundaries of bush. Like all firebreaks, those around remnants suffer from water erosion, which may become costly.

Encroachment by Annual Pastures or Weeds

If remnants adjoin a waterway, it is virtually impossible to prevent pasture residues and seeds being washed into them. To prevent extra contamination with weeds, these patches would need to be sprayed annually with a herbicide.

Loss of Shelter for Stock

This applies particularly to protection of lambing ewes or freshly shorn sheep. Remnants, at least in the Jerramungup area, cannot be used as shelter for stock unless the farmer is prepared to eradicate native poison plants and accept the loss of the understorey through grazing. Grazing will, if it is intensive enough and over a sufficiently long period, result in the loss of a remnant due to ringbarking of trees and shrubs by stock. Some pristine or partly degraded remnants have been fenced to provide some protection to stock, but these are far fewer than those that are unfenced and partly degraded, and where stock can get right in among the bush.

SUMMARY

In summary, then, I wish to make just three points:

- Only one research finding has been generally implemented by farmers, and even that in a minute proportion, although the finding works well.
- Protecting remnants is expensive and very time-consuming and shows no immediately obvious annual return in terms of income.
- Perhaps future research needs to address the low adoption of a basic finding.

REFERENCE

Hussey, B.J.M, and Wallace, K.J., 1993. *Managing Your Bushland.* Department of Conservation and Land Management, Perth.