
GREEN PROFITS FROM ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Higher grazing profits and sustainable pastoral landscapes can go hand-in-hand, according to new research starting in the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre (CRC).

Rotational grazing systems offer significant scope to cut costs, increase livestock productivity, make better use of country and at the same time achieve better vegetation cover and environmental stewardship.

And it's all down to natural cattle and sheep behaviour, says Desert Knowledge CRC's Dr Ben Norton.

"This runs counter to most things science has been saying for the past quarter of a century: that there are no obvious advantages in rotational grazing over set stocking."

But the evidence of a handful of pastoralists who are turning loss-making operations into highly profitable ones and restoring the condition of degraded country at the same time is hard to ignore, he says.

"It appears to be a question of scale, especially in the pastoral zone, and of animal behaviour. A large mob of animals that is on the move behaves quite differently to a smaller mob that is in one large paddock all the time.

"Sheep and cattle are naturally migratory animals. They move, graze and water in large mobs. Their loyalty is to the herd or flock.

"But when you pen them in a paddock more-or-less permanently they become territorial – loyal to particular locations. This leads to higher grazing pressure in some areas and less effective use of the total grazing resource."

Dr Norton says that observations on properties in semi-arid Australia – both cattle and sheep – indicate there can be major advantages in moving to a rotational system in a planned fashion.

Animal behaviour and animal distribution occurring in paddocks on a commercial property have been irrelevant in grazing trials on research stations. This Desert Knowledge CRC research will test rotational grazing at a property scale, where effects on management can be studied along with changes to the production system.

"There could be huge cost savings, for one thing. Instead of dashing all over a big property seeing to watering points and fences, your focus is just on the current paddock the stock are in and the next one. This saves a lot of time and money in maintenance. The larger the property, the greater the savings.

“It also means your focus is more on your stock and less on your infrastructure, so you spot problems earlier and your husbandry improves. Also the animals get used to you and are easier to work with.”

Meanwhile other paddocks are being spelled and native pasture is recovering. How long this takes depends on the area, but the current trials are looking at 15-20 months between grazings, to increase the chances of at least one, possibly two, rainfall seasons to bring the country back.

Dr Norton says the advantages are striking:

- lower operating costs
- more time for the maintenance schedule
- more time to look at and take care of the stock
- spelling up to 90 per cent of the country at a time
- better overall use of the grazing resource
- potential to increase the carrying capacity
- better control of feral animals and weeds
- recovery of native vegetation and species.

“I’ve seen several cases where a heavily indebted property made it back to profitability by implementing a rotational system in a cautious and sensible way – and improved the country at the same time.

“I’ve also seen some striking examples where the recovery of native pastures led to control of weeds that were a real headache.”

For the problem of wild dogs, Dr Norton is experimenting with a secret weapon: llamas. Llamas loathe dogs and will chase them relentlessly, shrieking. There is good evidence from elsewhere that running a few with the mob may offer better protection for lambs and calves, he says.

“The average Australian pastoral operation is under a lot of stress – from costs, debts, drought, feral animals, a declining resource. Most are not thriving – and they desperately need a circuit breaker.

“I am confident that for many, a rotational grazing system offers that, provided it is introduced in the right way. It is an approach that can help pastoralists become satisfied, profitable stewards of a sustainable Australian landscape.”

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