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The XXI International Grassland Congress / VIII International Rangeland Congress took place in Hohhot, China from June 29 through July 5, 2008.

Proceedings edited by Organizing Committee of 2008 IGC/IRC Conference

Published by Guangdong People's Publishing House

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Enterprise based conservation—a rangeland conservation concept for Australia

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Key words : conservation enterprise , financial equity , rangeland biodiversity

Introduction More than 75% of Australia is broadly defined as rangelands (Harrington et al. 1984). Commercial grazing enterprises on native pastures occur on 57% of these rangelands (National Land and Water Resources Audit, 2001). Most of the remaining area is traditional Aboriginal land and/or used for non pastoral purposes. In this paper we will be concentrating on the opportunities available for Enterprise Based Conservation on the pastoral lands.

The pastoral lands have been settled since around the 1850s, mostly under pastoral leasehold tenure. Grazing has had significant impacts on the natural values of these lands and has been well documented by McKeon et al. (2004) and Condon (2002). Despite the impacts of this grazing the landscapes retain much of their natural values and are often targeted for the protection of biodiversity. In 2001 the Brewarrina Regional Vegetation Committee proposed a concept termed Enterprise Based Conservation (EBC) that would produce biodiversity conservation outcomes but would not adversely affect the financial equity of pastoralists (Fessey 2003). *WEST2000 Plus*, a structural adjustment program for the Western Division of NSW, implemented a pilot program for Enterprise Based Conservation in 2003. This pilot is proving to be an outstanding success (Shepherd 2006).

Methods Enterprise Based Conservation (EBC) requires the current landholder (leaseholder) to enter into an agreement to manage part or all of the property as a Conservation Enterprise. As most of Australia's rangelands are held as grazing leases the landholder simply sells the grazing right and is granted a conservation right for the same land. The sale of the grazing right will be at current market value for the grazing land. This right is purchased by the organisation and/or Government that wishes to invest in the rangeland conservation enterprise. The major difference from similar stewardship programs is that the purchase is made in units held in an EBC Trust Fund. This fund is managed as a commercial investment vehicle designed to produce a return that will provide dividends to the landholder for the conservation enterprise. Funding for the establishment of the EBC Trust Fund will initially come from Government; however there are strong opportunities for investment to be provided from community levies, ethical businesses and/or philanthropic organisations. The landholder enters into a long-term agreement with the EBC Trust Fund to manage the land to an agreed conservation management level (IUCN Category IV). Failure to achieve the agreed level of management will result in withholding of some of the EBC Trust Fund dividends-in line with the monetary penalties of any poorly managed enterprise.

Discussion The Pilot program has resulted in a very successful acceptance of the concept by landholders. The Western Catchment Management Authority (WCMA), has since signed fifteen year EBC contracts with six landholders to manage almost 50,000 ha of land for conservation. The establishment of the EBC Trust Fund has not been achieved at this stage due to legal issues and Treasury rules regarding the funding utilised for the conservation protection. The WCMA are currently seeking a way through the difficulties relating to the establishment of the EBC Trust Fund. The WCMA is also negotiating with the Federal Government's Natural Reserve System (Natural Resources Ministerial Council, 2004) officers to incorporate the EBC concept into rangeland conservation in NSW and possibly Australia wide, to promote their Protected Areas on Private Lands program.

Conclusions Communities and the Governments that represent them are demanding protection of the biodiversity and natural values of our rangelands. For this to occur on a large enough scale to make a difference the development of private conservation as a viable enterprise is essential. Governments are wary of long term liabilities, a solution is for policy changes to occur to allow for self funding programs such as Enterprise Based Conservation to achieve suitable levels of Comprehensive, Adequate and Representative protection of biodiversity in Australia's rangelands.

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