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International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) History, Process, Priority Themes and Way Forward

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Abstract

The road towards the declaration of an IYRP by the United Nations has been long and rocky, perhaps mirroring the relative lack of understanding by some governments of the importance of rangelands and pastoralists for a sustainable world, compared to the focus on other sectors such as forest or cropland sustainability. The idea was first discussed at the International Rangeland (IRC) and Grassland (IGC) Congress held in Hohhot, China in 2008. The creation of an International Support Group (ISG) in 2015 helped to provide a stronger rationale and the integration of social dimensions. This has led to a growing partnership of national, regional, and international organizations. Numerous events were conducted at international meetings between 2015 and 2021 to solicit support for an IYRP. In 2018, UN Environment published a Gap Analysis of knowledge about rangelands and pastoralism that helped to further highlight the significant neglect of these issues in both academic and development circles. Under the leadership of the Government of Mongolia, the proposal for designation of an IYRP was officially presented in 2019 to the Committee on Agricultural Secretariat of FAO. This historical background provides instructive lessons on how global perceptions can change through strong partnerships. In anticipation of obtaining this designation a comprehensive list of monthly themes has been developed by the ISG to guide countries on outreach and educational activities to take place prior to and during the IYRP. This guidance provides a vision of multi-disciplinary and multi-stakeholder approaches towards integrating the social, economic, environmental and political aspects of sustainability in rangelands and pastoralism. At this Congress resolutions will be submitted to the IRC and IGC for delegate support of this overall effort, including recommendations for Continuing Committee members of both the IRC and IGC along with the ISG to assist individual countries in developing IYRP-related programs.

Historical Context

The first discussions for an International Year of Rangelands were held informally at the Eighth International Rangeland Congress (IRC) in 2008 in Hohhot, Inner Mongolia, China and more formally at the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) of the UN although progress on next steps were not successful at that time. Then, at the Ninth IRC held in Rosario, Argentina in 2011 two related Resolutions were passed: a) calling for the UN General Assembly to launch an International Year of Rangelands, and b) requesting support for the concept of a Global Rangeland Assessment (IRC 2011).

In 2015 the current effort to gain an International Year of Rangelands began in earnest and became the worldwide initiative it is today. Drawing on the successful example of the 2015 International Year of Soils, members of the Rangelands Partnership (RP) and the leadership of the Society for Range Management (SRM) began exploring how such an International Year could be achieved and making contacts with colleagues around the world. Meetings held at the SRM annual meeting in 2016 resulted in expanding the visibility and number of organizations involved in the effort. At the same time, members of the IUCN and UNEP were cultivating a small group of like-minded people to begin working on a global overview of the "state of the world's rangelands". This "small group" quickly expanded and several critical discussions and actions took place as a result.

First, members of the group with strong pastoralist ties discovered there was also a movement for pursuing an International Year of Pastoralists. While there were differing opinions among the groups about the most important intersections of land and people issues, in the end, there was agreement that significant commonalities existed. After some discussion, the groups determined the two efforts would be stronger together. Thus, the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) initiative was born!

In 2016, in order to gain intellectual and financial support for both a global IYRP campaign and a global status report on rangelands, attention turned to the United National Environment Assembly (UNEA-2) where countries were debating how to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Several countries including Mongolia, Kenya, Ethiopia, and Sudan worked on a last-minute Resolution that was ultimately

approved in Nairobi, Kenya on May 26, 2016. Titled: “Combating desertification, land degradation, and drought and promoting pastoralism and rangelands”, the resolution gained high level support from more than 100 countries (UNEA-2 2016). While it did not include language about an IYRP, the resolution did call for:

- raising “global awareness of sustainable pastoralism and rangelands”
- strengthening “the science-policy interface on sustainable pastoralism and rangelands”
- conducting a worldwide gap analysis “to better understand the implications for sustainable livelihoods”

To begin implementing the UNEA-2 resolution, a meeting was later held at the International Rangelands Congress on July 19, 2016 in Saskatoon, Canada. More than 50 representatives from around the world discussed and committed to an action plan of next steps in the IYRP process, including:

- raising awareness at grassroots levels in both developed and developing countries
- continuing to work closely with countries willing to take forward a formal request to the United Nations General Assembly for an IYRP
- promoting an IYRP at future UN-related events as well as at other related conferences and meetings throughout the world.

By early 2017, a more formal “steering committee” for an IYRP had been organized including this paper’s authors as co-chairs as well as a secretariat that established a website for the effort:

<https://globalrangelands.org/international-year-rangelands-and-pastoralists-initiative>. The website now is maintained as the IYRP initiative’s archive for resolutions and documents, PR materials, and meeting minutes among other related resources.

United Nations Process for Gaining Approval for an International Year & Progress Made

Between the years 2016 to 2018, the IYRP Steering Committee promoted the IYRP in multiple fora, including national and regional meetings of pastoralists. For example, in December 2016, a special side event at the Conference of Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity in Cancun, Mexico acknowledged the importance of sustainable pastoralism and healthy rangelands for biodiversity conservation, and a formal Statement was signed by many pastoral representatives and NGOs calling for the designation of the IYRP. Other supporting statements and declarations quickly followed. At least 27 Resolutions have been passed at various international conferences and meetings over the past 15 years and most recently by gatherings of pastoralists such as by the Coalition of European Lobbies for Eastern African Pastoralism (CELEP), the Pastoralist Knowledge Hub (PKH/FAO), IUCN, and the Yolda Initiative (Turkey); each of these organizations have played critical roles in the success achieved to date.

During this period, GRID-Arendal, funded through UNEP, compiled a Gap Analysis as called for by UNEA-2 (Johnsen et.al. 2018), it indicates a lack of understanding of the critical issues faced by pastoralism and rangelands amidst the fast pace of change in today’s world. It recommends a globally coordinated assessment, including the development of common monitoring indicators, and an internationally recognized and accepted lexicon to harmonize the diversity of terms and definitions. It also highlights the lack of balanced, integrated approaches to understanding the complex facets of rangelands and pastoralism together: social, economic, environmental and political.

At the same time, the IYRP Steering Committee was also exploring several options for gaining a UN designation and tried to work through different UN processes, including a Kenyan Government draft resolution that was to be presented directly to the UN General Assembly in New York. However, by the end of 2018, it became clear that such a proposal would need to first be presented and approved by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Rome and that there were numerous steps to be taken before gaining FAO support.

To this end, at the UNEA-4 held in Nairobi, Kenya, in March 2019, the IYRP Steering Committee once more worked hard to build support for an IYRP. A special "Ministerial Breakfast" event was held on 12 March 2019 with significant support from the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and UNEP. This resulted in UNEA-4 adopting a major resolution submitted by the Africa Group that, for the first time, explicitly called for recognition and support of sustainable rangelands and pastoralism. It acknowledged the findings of the Gap Analysis and recommended countries to carry out regional assessments. It also

acknowledged the “ongoing global efforts to introduce a proposal for an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralism to FAO’s Committee on Agriculture” (UNEA-4 2019).

A key result of the Ministerial Breakfast at UNEA-4 was that the Minister of Environment of the Government of Mongolia committed to obtaining inter-ministerial support for Mongolia to take the lead on an IYRP proposal to FAO. In July 2019, the Ministry for Food, Agriculture and Light Industries in Mongolia presented its formal intention to FAO and by October 2019 a full proposal for the IYRP designation had been submitted to COAG. By early 2020, letters of support from four countries and 26 non-governmental organizations had also been submitted to COAG. To provide ongoing leadership to the process, a National Working Group was established in Mongolia, consisting of representatives of all relevant ministries, NGOs and pastoralists. The IYRP Steering Committee then voted to change its name and nature to the IYRP Support Group (ISG) so as to acknowledge this important step.

In August 2020, a final proposal and letters of support were presented to FAO’s Committee on Agriculture (COAG) for discussion and a vote at the October 2020 COAG meeting. To raise the visibility of the initiative to COAG members, a collaborative effort launched a social media campaign and created a new IYRP website to act as an “online booth” including videos, images, and testimonials representing ten regions of the world. These efforts created a groundswell of support from 50 countries and more than 150 organizations that the authors believe greatly contributed to COAG’s endorsement of the IYRP proposal. This was quickly followed by endorsements from the FAO Council (December 2020) and the FAO Conference (June 2021). Since then, the FAO Director-General submitted the request to the UN Secretary-General for deliberation and a final vote by the UN General Assembly which will be held toward the end of 2021. Upon proclamation by the UN, designated agency(ies), including in this case, FAO, UNEP, the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the U.N. Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), would be mandated to facilitate the implementation of the International Year in collaboration with member countries and other relevant stakeholders, including research institutes, academia, civil society and the private sector. Linkages are also being made with related international initiatives as the *International Decade of Family Farming* and the *International Decade of Ecological Restoration*.

Rationale, Expected Outcomes and Outreach Plans of the IYRP

The rationale for an IYRP is:

- To increase worldwide understanding of the importance of rangelands and pastoralists for global food security and environmental services
- To call attention to the need for sustainable management and enlightened policy to benefit current and future generations

Many outcomes are expected from the activities to be conducted prior to and during the IYRP. Most of these will be at the country and local levels and will be planned and implemented by national committees. Examples include: expos, awards, fairs, educational materials, national awareness days, social media campaigns and video documentaries, etc. Pastoralist gatherings could be sponsored by the World Initiative for Sustainable Pastoralism (WISP) and the FAO Pastoralist Knowledge Hub to share local knowledge and strategize practical solutions.

At the global level, the SDGs specifically mention “pastoralists” and, therefore, through the relevant UN agencies, countries, will be encouraged to put forward an Action Statement for the next decade to ensure a sustainable future for rangelands and pastoralists. This could include launching actions by partners and partnerships at global, regional and national levels to change policies and increase development resources and political commitments.

International organizations and other global partners could consider “hosting” a theme throughout the IYRP. Relevant international conferences held during that year would be asked to commit to including a focus on rangelands and pastoralism. A future Joint International Rangelands and International Grasslands Congress could consider focusing on the most recent knowledge on key issues concerning rangelands and pastoralists. A wide variety of publications and articles in the popular press such as National Geographic and Smithsonian would be encouraged to broaden understanding of rangelands and pastoralist contributions to a healthy planet and people.

Proposed 12 Monthly Themes for an IYRP

A draft plan for IYRP outreach activities was developed by the ISG and includes 12 monthly themes (ISG 2017) based on the following criteria:

- Expanding awareness on the diversity of rangeland ecosystems and pastoral cultures
- Highlighting new insights, such as: non-equilibrium (dynamic) nature of rangeland ecosystems; rangeland health as it relates to plant growth and use; the value of livestock mobility as it relates to rangeland health; and adaptation to climate change.
- Identifying priority issues of concern to pastoralists
- Balancing coverage of environmental, social, economic, and political issues

The ISG suggests that a period of wide consultation among all stakeholders should follow an IYRP designation to refine and finalize these themes. The advice of communications experts should be sought to fine-tune messaging for mass/social media. Because of the diversity of terminology (e.g. rancher vs herder), more work is needed to adapt the themes to successful forms of messaging including translation into international and local languages.



Figure 1: 12 monthly themes

Conclusions/Implications

With ever increasing challenges facing pastoralists and rangelands worldwide (including degradation and conversion to other uses, as well as lack of appreciation of the role of rangeland ecosystems as climate solutions or of sustainable pastoralism's contributions to production and conservation), it is vital that an IYRP be designated and that governments commit to making meaningful changes that benefit them. While the impetus for declaring such an International Year has come from the scientific, academic, and NGO communities, it has been gaining support from both pastoralists themselves and governmental agencies. Nevertheless, the role of the Continuing Committees of the IRC and IGC in helping to support the IYRP initiative remains vital for the next few years. With so many other topics in line for designation as International Years, it is important to understand that the value added of the IYRP is not just in raising awareness but in changing minds and, therefore, policies. For too long policies have been shaped by misunderstandings and misperceptions about rangelands (Are they just grazing lands? Are they just degraded forests?) and pastoralism (who?). It is time for substantive change!

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