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the STOCK ROUTES COALITION

PO Box 224 Crows Nest Qld 4355

CONSERVING THE NSW TRAVELLING STOCK ROUTES (TSRs) AND QLD STOCK ROUTE NETWORK (SRN)

INTRODUCTION

For the most part, stock routes were set aside from private ownership before the large scale phases of land clearing at the time of first land survey during the period 1840 – 1880. The network of stock routes was established to facilitate the movement of livestock by walking and grazing between properties and to markets. They were given sufficient width (much wider than a single purpose road reserve) to contain enough grazing to sustain walking stock and a paddock (Camp and Water Reserve) with water at about every 16 km of linear distance. Legislation and Regulation established management rules and management was divested by the States to regional authorities, currently, Rural Land Protection Boards (RLPB) in NSW and Local Government (LGC) in QLD. Traditionally, maintenance of the networks was self funded from fees charged to users; more recently, fees have been insufficient. Management has been effective.

The pattern of stock route use has been one of periodic grazing; relatively short, infrequent periods of intense grazing interspersed with long periods of light or no grazing. Stock could not walk the stock routes unless both pasture and water were present. Consequently, prolonged periods of overstocking have been avoided. One hundred and fifty years of these circumstances have favoured the native vegetation and today, the stock routes contain good examples of Australian vegetation and with their design as a continuous network they facilitate the maintenance and distribution of many native life forms. It follows that the stock routes today contain wildlife conservation values not originally envisaged. These conservation values are of national significance.

In recent years the community has become more aware of the threats from climate change to Australia's rural environment. Climate change is already disrupting the ecology of diverse groups of fauna and flora around the world and changing the seasonal breeding patterns of birds and insects for example. As the rate of climate change accelerates in future decades it will displace species from their current habitats and pressure them to move to track their climate preferences. Although Australia has a target of reserving 10% of each type of ecosystem, this policy needs to be supported by the provision of corridors of high quality vegetation to allow species to move across the fragmented and heavily cleared landscape. While rivers and forested mountain ranges provide corridors for some species, the stock routes provide a vast network across both NSW and Queensland. They also have the advantage of lying along environmental gradients in all directions. The stock routes provide a fortuitous opportunity to assist endemic species in the eastern states to adapt to climate change.

Modern transport and better roads have reduced the use of the stock routes for travelling stock which, in turn, has reduced the revenue stream forcing the responsible managing authorities to modify the pattern of use to increase revenue and to seek to rationalise the networks in order to reduce the area of their responsibility. Both the proposed changed pattern of use to continuous agistment of inactive sections of the SRN and reduction of the TSR are threatening the values so fortunately delivered from the past.

The Stock Routes Coalition is a group of organisations who have come together to have the NSW and Queensland Stock Routes declared 'Protected Corridors for Travelling Stock and Biodiversity', managed by the current managers and adequately resourced with supplements from public funds.

(For more information see www.basq.org.au/stockroutes/TSR.htm)

OVERALL OBJECTIVES:

To have the New South Wales and Queensland governments:-

1. Recognise and embed the conservation values of the existing stock route networks in policy and protect them in the day-to-day management of the stock routes,
2. Create by legislation, Protected Corridors *for Travelling Stock and Biodiversity* to encompass the entire TSRs and SRN of each state respectively and
3. both Governments to contribute the necessary ongoing financial support from environmental budgetary sources reflecting the public interest conservation component and for enhancement of the stock routes networks through the Regional Funding Component of the Australian Government's NRM Initiative.

SHORT TERM OBJECTIVE:

To have the New South Wales and Queensland governments put an immediate freeze on disposal or lease of any segments of the stock routes until they have taken account of their potential benefits for biodiversity under climate change.

THE VALUES:

To quote from *Queensland Stock Route Network Management Strategy 2006-09* (NRW 2007):-

The relevant roads and reserves that make up the stock route network represent a range of natural resources embodying cultural heritage, recreational, environmental, biodiversity and economic values (at page 4, par 2)they can be identified at different levels: (1) values associated with the land, and (2) values uniquely associated with the SRN and stock route activities. (at page 7 par 2).

Values associated with the land

- economic values associated with the high pastoral productivity of the land to meet the needs of travelling stock, as well as economic benefits to rural communities through having corridors of land to transport goods and services to and from these communities
- environmental values associated with rich biodiversity, riparian areas and aesthetics, as well as value as a corridor linking areas of natural vegetation which allows for wildlife movement across the landscape (including ecoservices to adjacent agriculture and grazing industry)
- cultural values associated with indigenous trade routes and sites of archaeological and cultural significance
- social values associated with use of the land for purposes other than stock route activities such as horse riding or recreational fishing, providing access corridors linking isolated areas of the state and benefiting rural communities with utilities and other services.

Values associated with the SRN and stock route activities

- cultural and historical values associated with SRN activities such as sites of stock route facilities; family and personal connections to certain stock routes for both indigenous and non-indigenous peoples; and intrinsic cultural values associated with the simple existence of the stock route network and its linkage to exploration and settlement
- economic values associated with providing employment to drovers and providing more economical alternatives for moving stock
- environmental values associated with the benefits to the environment from walking stock as opposed to trucking or transporting by rail (eg reduced emissions)
- social values associated with employment opportunities in the droving and pastoral industries as well as local governments. (at page 7) (NRW 2007)

Values enhanced by the historical pattern of use of the stock routes

- “The survey also found that the reserves contained a diversity of important flora species – and that some of the reserves were considerably more floristically diverse compared to adjacent farmland, especially in terms of the native grasses and forbs. There are three explanations for this. First TSRs have historically experienced periodic grazing with rest periods in between the sometimes intense grazing events (rather than the “set stocking” usually practiced on private land which allows no rest period and can deplete palatable species). Second, to the best of our knowledge there has been no fertilizer use on TSRs. And third, they have never been ploughed for crops.”(Davidson, Scammell et al. 2005)
- “TSRs are long transects covering many climates and soil types, a unique sample of our biodiversity. ... TSRs are often the nearest source of local provenance seed suited to a particular soil and climate.”(Metcalf 2004)
- “Many TSRs are structurally complex and support bird species that do not occupy extensively cleared and intensively grazed landscapes. All the TSRs are relatively large and support a wide range of birds that do not occupy small patches (less than 10 ha) of native vegetation. Many TSRs are long and likely provide important corridors for the movement of animals and plants. Most importantly, TSRs occur across a wide range of vegetation types on a wide range of soils and slopes. This combination of size, connectivity, structural complexity and vegetation diversity supports an extraordinary range of birds, including many that are rapidly disappearing from the agricultural zone of NSW.”(Freudenberger and Drew 2001)

Values enhanced by the pressures of climate change

- Stock routes are continuous and incorporate a variety of local landform and vegetation types, and watering points, whereas other types of reserves are discontinuous and tend to be targeted to a specific landform or vegetation. Stock routes often contain fertile soils and much greater biodiversity than adjoining private, grazed land.
- In the context of climate change, road and rail reserves and stock routes form an extraordinarily fortuitous, extensive network of potential corridors which could facilitate the movement of species in response to shifting climatic zones.
- A major value of the network is in its integrity and geographical extent. Without the entire network, the particular values of some of the parts can't be fully realised and this has importance in terms of climate change - the value of the whole network is greater than the sum of the value of the individual parts.
- The stock routes provide the Australian community with valuable opportunities to rejuvenate the inland by building environmental infrastructure, such as fencing to rehabilitate the vegetation; to encourage ecotourism; and in degraded sections to store carbon in order to mitigate climate change while supporting regional communities..

References:

- Davidson, I., A. Scammell, et al. (2005). "Travelling stock reserves: refuges for stock and biodiversity?" Ecological Management & Restoration Vol. 6 No. 1, April 2005 6(April 2005): 11.
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- Metcalf, P. (2004). "Conservation Value of Travelling Stock Routes." Cumberland Bird Observers Club Inc. Newsletter Vol. 25(No. 4): 4.
- NRW (2007). Queensland stock route network management strategy 2006-2009. N. R. a. Water, Department of Natural Resources and Water: 34.