

Tailoring salinity investment to the social needs of lifestyle landholders

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Introduction

Many parts of Australia that are affected by dryland salinity or contribute to causing it are undergoing rapid social change. These social changes are not consistent across the landscape. In some areas commercial imperatives are forcing farm amalgamation and making it hard for traditional small communities to retain their identity. Other areas with high landscape and social amenity are experiencing an influx of new residents and landowners whose reasons for owning land and intended use of their land make them very different from previous owners.

Past decisions about salinity investment generally involved the assumption that most landholders were commercially oriented and would respond to economic signals. The fact that the social landscape of salt-affected areas is so variable (particularly in the state of Victoria) means that future decisions about the best policy response to dryland salinity will need to involve consideration of social factors (Barr and Wilkinson 2005). Social factors are likely to be of greatest importance in the socially diverse landscapes that have a high proportion of lifestyle-oriented residents. This research therefore focuses on those kinds of areas. In this paper I report on qualitative research I conducted with a selection of landholders in two such catchments in two different Australian states about what might influence their adoption of plant-based management options for dryland salinity.

Method

I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with lifestyle and commercial landholders in central Victoria and the eastern south coast of Western Australia. These two areas are important for salinity and catchment planning and parts of them have a high proportion of lifestyle landholders. The research aimed to determine what would be required to achieve adoption by landholders of land management practices that would be beneficial from a salinity and catchment management perspective.

In Victoria, two case study catchments were chosen, Axe Creek and Wild Duck Creek, both south of Bendigo and toward the southern end of the North Central region. The two creeks are key assets, identified as high priority for salinity by both scientists and the community. They both carry high salt loads into the Campaspe River. Lifestyle landholders predominate in these two catchments.

In Western Australia, the Lake Warden catchment surrounding the isolated town of Esperance at the eastern end of the South Coast region was chosen as the case study area. The Lake Warden catchment is actually the catchment of a group of hydraulically connected lakes that together is known as the Lake Warden wetland system, which is listed as a wetland of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands. The lakes provide habitat to migratory wading birds.

I conducted 12 interviews in Axe Creek, 8 in Wild Duck Creek and 22 in Lake Warden. The Victorian interviews were conducted in September 2006 and the Lake Warden interviews during May 2007. I interviewed 29 lifestyle residents and, for comparison, 9 commercial landholders. Almost all were conducted at the interviewee's home. Full details of the study are contained in Wilkinson (2007).

Landholder motivations

Productive use

Most of the lifestyle landholders wanted to have or already had a small-scale commercial agricultural enterprise on their land. Some knew exactly what they wanted to do; others were still looking around for a suitable enterprise. Some talked of earning money to help pay for their property, other spoke of a

sense of duty to make productive use of good land. Agricultural production was only a sideline to their off-farm activity.

Lifestyle

Lifestyle motivations for owning rural land were acknowledged almost universally. The term 'lifestyle' covers a diverse range of aspects, including peace and quiet, freedom from restrictions, recreation, enjoyment, a good place to raise children, being able to impart values to your children, a place to recapture one's sanity, and not being tied to the property.

Healing the land

The motivations of some so-called 'lifestylers' went beyond merely lifestyle. Some wanted to heal the land. Looking after the land can give meaning to life that takes it beyond simply being a hobby. For some, ownership of land was seen as something that was almost distasteful, and building a relationship with the land was what was important.

Landscape goals

Having the property looking attractive was valued, particularly by lifestyle landholders, and trees were seen to make an important contribution to an attractive looking property. Having a biologically diverse rural landscape was important to several landholders. This took many forms. Native plants and animals were mentioned, as well as exotic species.

Personal identity

There was little evidence that lifestyle landholders had formed a personal identity as a farmer. The lifestylers recognised their lifestyle aims and did not describe any desires to be a farmer.

Adoption

Planting trees

Planting trees was being promoted by agencies in both catchments to increase water use and in Western Australia to reduce runoff. Almost all the landholders I interviewed were at least mildly enthusiastic about trees and had planted some trees on their properties. They had planted trees for various reasons, including a generalised obligation to the land (felt mainly by lifestyle landholders), environmental reasons such as waterway protection and salinity rehabilitation, windbreaks and shelter for stock, becoming carbon-credit neutral, and, for some of the landholders, simply because it made them feel good. Some just liked the aesthetics of trees.

No single reason for planting trees predominated. Natural regeneration, particularly of redgums, was observed by several Victorian landholders, and was almost a source of wonder for those who had noticed it, even the commercial landholders.

Pasture improvement

Deep-rooted perennial pastures were being promoted by agencies in both catchments to increase water use and in Western Australia to reduce runoff to the lake system. The main perennial species being promoted in Victoria were phalaris and lucerne, and in Western Australia they were kikuyu and lucerne. For Victorian landholders interested in pasture production (predominantly the commercial landholders), phalaris and lucerne had a mixed reception. Some landholders liked neither; some favoured one or the other; some said that each had its place and used different species in different situations. In Western Australia, perennial pastures received a favourable response by most landholders. Not all larger-scale landholders were willing to make the cascade of management changes needed to take advantage of the increased pasture production from perennial species.

The traditional wisdom is that lifestyle landholders are not interested in rotational grazing, as it is too complicated for them, or simply not a priority. This was true for most of the lifestyle interviewees. Landholders who just wanted to have a few animals had minimal knowledge and interest in pasture

species and management. The rest of the lifestyle landholders, who just wanted a place in the country, paid little attention to their pastures.

Native grasses were, for the most part, seen favourably in Victoria. From a production point of view they were seen as a useful feed source, often in conjunction with clover. Lifestyle landholders with a strong environmental interest were encouraging native grasses in conjunction with trees to create a woodland. Native grasses were not part of the extension effort in the Western Australian catchment and were not mentioned by the landholders there.

Use of Policy tools

Several policy options exist for encouraging landholders to plant deep-rooted species on their properties. These include incentives, practical assistance, skill training, and simple provision of information. In the case study areas financial assistance and advice are offered to landholders to encourage them to do things that will improve the condition of the catchments.

Almost all the tree planting that had been done by the Victorian landholders had benefited from some form of incentive or grant. In contrast, although most Western Australian landholders had planted some trees, few of the lifestyle landholders had made use of incentives. Sometimes this was because they did not know about the incentives. Some landholders had planted few or no trees.

Incentives are designed not to pay for the entire cost of the operation they are trying to encourage, but to give it a kick-start. For those who are keen to undertake the operation, incentives help to speed it up. For reluctant or wavering landholders, grants encourage them to attempt the operation, in the hope that they will see the benefits and do more on their own in future. For the most part, this seems to have been how the incentives worked in these case study areas.

When incentives were originally designed to apply to large scale landholders it was seen by agencies to be difficult to find a suitable way to apply them to the different needs of small landholders. Some lifestyle landholders did not have much money to spend on their property or did not see value in it. Finance was not always the problem for lifestyle landholders, sometimes it was logistics or lack of suitable equipment. Other times it was a lack of knowledge about trees and pastures.

Some landholders described how their situations and needs were different from those of other landholders, so that an incentive scheme needed to have some flexibility to cater for individual circumstances. Whilst landholders generally found grants attractive, there was a certain ambivalence evident. Accepting someone else's money was one thing, but accepting the conditions that came with it was something else. Several Western Australian landholders flatly refused to accept incentives, sometimes based on mistrust after previous dealings with government departments.

Discussion—discovering landholder motivations

The most striking feature of the interviews is the diversity of landholder motivations. This diversity occurred not only between lifestyle and commercial landholders but also within each type. Diversity among small lifestyle farmers has been described by Hollier and Reid (2006). There is also diversity among the individuals within a landholding family. Even within one individual there are often conflicting views that must be accommodated. This means that any one policy instrument is unlikely to be effective in influencing adoption by all or even most lifestyle landholders. (The same is likely true also for commercial landholders.)

Generally, the variation within the neighbouring Victorian catchments was greater than the differences between them. The Western Australian landholders differed from their Victorian counterparts in that they had much less understanding of how their own property fitted into and affected the condition of their catchment. Rural Victoria has experienced 20 years of a landcare movement that has emphasised a catchment-based approach to resource management. Along the south coast of Western Australia the landcare movement has not been in existence for so long. Aside from

this difference, the motivations of the Lake Warden landholders, and the range of motivations, seemed to be broadly congruent with those of their Victorian counterparts.

Lifestyle landholders fall into two major groups of interest to policymakers. The most environmentally conscious ones are motivated to look after the land and they mostly know how to do it. They need help with logistics and labour to achieve their revegetation goals. Incentives are not needed to convince them to revegetate, but would speed up their revegetation. This group of lifestyle landholders is small in number.

Most lifestyle landholders fall into the other group, those that look after the land because it makes for a nicer place to live. They favour revegetation that makes their property look good and that does not place great demands on their time or land management ability. Financial incentives alone are not enough to motivate them. They need advice and guidance, and ideally someone to organise their revegetation for them.

Commercial landholders sometimes need a financial incentive to convince them to try something about which they may be wavering, or might not even have considered. The incentive acts as a little push, and once they have tried the practice it is hoped that they will continue with it on their own. For the incentive to have this effect, the practice must be seen by the landholder to be beneficial.

Lifestyle landholders have different needs. Those for whom land management is something new and perhaps even a bit scary need a combination of awareness raising, information provision, technical support, and sometimes a financial incentive. They almost need the project to be organised for them. An incentive alone is not enough. Other lifestyle landholders (and some commercial landholders) are keen to do the project anyway, in which case incentives are not required to encourage adoption but may serve to speed it up.

Conclusion

In the increasingly socially diverse high-amenity landscapes that are important for the management of dryland salinity, lifestyle oriented landholders are becoming increasingly numerous. Policymakers and local extension staff can no longer afford to ignore lifestyle landholders if they want to achieve increased adoption of recommended salinity management practices. In high-amenity landscapes, social and lifestyle factors are at least as important as economics in influencing landholders' management practices. Lifestyle landholders fall into two main groups, those that are highly conscious of the environment and those that wish to look after the land to make it a nicer place to live. To adopt the recommended salinity management practices the former only need assistance with logistics and labour, whereas the latter need much more 'hand holding', such as awareness raising, information provision, technical support, and sometimes financial incentives.

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