

Submission on Agriculture and Land Sectoral Plan from The Australian Royal Societies

December 2023

Commentary on land and agriculture issues often emphasises that continuous research is needed to understand our landscapes and ecosystems and their relationship to agricultural production. Our natural capital stocks and agricultural practices are also affected by climate change and the other global changes – biodiversity decline, hydrology and landforms and the impacts of pollution and waste.

The Discussion Paper recognises the need for research, development and extension, citing contributions being made now by Rural Research and Development Corporations and by industries, governments and academics. Much of this research effort is understandably driven by immediate and short term needs, while much is plagued by inadequate investment and short term funding arrangements. There are gaps, for example, the Discussion Paper recognises the need for better local knowledge and the potential contribution of Aboriginal knowledge.

We need to accelerate and broaden action. We propose that the establishment of the Royal Societies of Australia's Land and Seascape Policy Hub could contribute substantial gains at modest cost.

Role of the Policy Hub

All economic activity is dependent on and exploits natural resources and environmental processes. Several bodies now collect and disseminate information, assessments and advice on economic matters – at the national level, the Reserve Bank, the Productivity Commission, ABARES, the Australian Bureau of Statistics and not for profit 'think tanks' do this. There is, however, no equivalent body undertaking a similar role for natural resources and environmental processes on a continuing basis. This is the gap we are proposing to fill.

Status of the Policy Hub

The Land and Seascape Policy Hub is proposed as an independent, not for profit organisation with charitable status hosted by Royal Societies of Australia, an umbrella organisation promoting and advocating for Australia's long-established Royal Societies, operating in all the States, which are pre-eminent learned societies whose members are the leaders in their fields.

Purpose of the Policy Hub

The Land and Seascape Policy Hub will contribute to the protection and restoration of Australia's land and seascapes by collecting, collating, analysing, synthesising and presenting information about Australia's landscapes and seascapes in easily

understandable open access forms, and through constant public outreach. It will also provide non-partisan, well researched advice to government and other public organisations on request, based on this work.

The problem to be addressed by the proposed Hub

Increasing generation of disparate knowledge by many sources, including universities, think tanks, learned societies, businesses, Commonwealth, State and local governments, professional bodies, industry bodies and related research bodies, catchment management and landcare bodies, environmental not for profit groups, legal groups and practitioners, finance industry, providers of land and sea services, maritime industry, land and sea managers and individuals, as well as similar bodies overseas, including international organisations, leads to confusion and opacity.

The collection, synthesis and communication of these knowledge gains is currently inadequate. This leads to slow or negligible application of new knowledge.

The potential value-add of the Hub

1. It will provide support for major public and private decision makers through the provision of expertly sourced and timely information about Australia's land and seascapes.
2. It allows for the airing of sometimes uncomfortable information in a non-threatening environment.
3. It will facilitate collaboration and cooperation between researchers, professional organisations, unions, mining, infrastructure and rural/food industries, indigenous bodies, government agencies, environmental bodies and emergency managers.
4. It will facilitate the general understanding by land and sea users of the implications of current research, and disseminate information on best practice to them.
5. It will accelerate the application of new knowledge for the betterment of Australia's landscapes and seascapes.
6. There will be increased opportunities for the commercial development of new knowledge which would benefit Australia's economy.
7. It will provide a one-stop-shop for inquirers, that is, it will have a clearing house function plus regular dissemination of summaries of all new relevant research that is discoverable.

Resourcing implications

The Hub will require sufficient funds for staff, premises and systems of the order of \$11 million dollars a year once fully operational (based on the public funds

component of Land & Water Australia budgets in the 1990s – it also attracted up to \$20 million from collaborators and other supporters).

A regional location for the Hub is proposed, but with dedicated linkages to the major research bodies in Australia.

The current need

The Royal Societies of Australia is seeking seed funding of \$1million to develop an operational plan of the project covering for establishing the Hub governance, partnerships, funding, personnel and infrastructure needs. There is more detail about the background to the proposal in the attached document.

Contacts

For further information or to discuss possible options, please contact the President, Mr John Hardie AM FRSN on 0418 204 528.



The Royal Societies of Australia

Supporting a National Culture of Creativity and Knowledge

Science, Medicine, Economics, Philosophy and the Arts

ACN: 126 868 586

Creating a Landscape and Seascape Policy Hub

Background

This initiative stemmed from a webinar series presented by the Royal Societies of Australia and Inspiring Australia (Victoria), with support from the CSIRO, in February and March 2021. The series involved an historic collaboration between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander experts, land and sea managers, pastoralists and policy makers, industry practitioners and researchers.

This collaboration ensured a broad range of perspectives on landscape and environmental management bridging Indigenous, agricultural, scientific, economic and social perspectives. The linking proposition was support for practical action and public good which incorporates the beginning of a road map for action. One outcome proposed is the establishment of a land and seascape policy hub.

It followed an earlier meeting between The Royal Society of Queensland, AgForce, representing broadacre rural industry, and National Resource Management Regions Queensland, representing the 12 regional NRM bodies, which brought together over 100 people with knowledge of rural and regional Queensland to craft a strategy that could lead the pastoral industry to a future that is sustainably profitable and environmentally sustainable. The output of the meeting was a '[Rangelands Declaration](#).'

The issues raised in both cases have relevance everywhere in Australia and have been well known since at least the 1980s, with some awareness going back at least to the 1960s. The document *National Landcare Program: Report on the Operations of the Land and Water Elements 1993-94* from the Department of Primary Industries and Energy provides some early thinking in this area.

The value proposition

We need to change our approaches to land and seascape stewardship to protect and restore them. We need this so we can recover from past degradation and prosper in the future.

It is clear that we need to base our relationship with nature on an ethic of custodianship of country drawn from Aboriginal experience. We can do this while recognising and building on our history – the Aboriginal foundation, our modern production systems and our laws and institutions. [cf Noel Pearson's ethic in his new book 'Mission'.]

We want to be practical. There are too many ideas with little practical follow up. Indeed, greater attention to Aboriginal knowledge and practices is one of them. A policy hub bringing diverse knowledges and expertise together to point the way forward is more important now than ever before.

The question

We have degraded our unique land and seascapes over the last 220-odd years. We are all in this together and we all depend on nature. We are well past the point where we can go on casually taking nature's resources as if they were indestructible gifts. Brian Walker, prominent thinker about resilience problems, poses the right question:

How can we transition to a different way of thinking that matches the reality of the biophysical world, and the reality that individual wellbeing is largely determined by the wellbeing of society?

Finding the answers

Our proposed land and seascape policy hub will help us find answers to this basic question. The conclusion reached at the webinar series was that we need to:

- apply a law of obligation and custodianship for country, and
- change culture and relationships in relation to land and seascapes and among people generally.

We recognised that meeting these needs requires a transition to restoration and protection of the environment and to achieving social, economic and financial wellbeing in rural communities and in all Australia's landscapes and seascapes. The task is too important to be left to market forces acting for their own benefit. Markets alone cannot prevent the overuse or irrational allocation of environmental public goods that are apparently available to all. Neither can we rely on a patchwork of individual initiatives, for example, think floodplains, weeds, bushfire vulnerability, koala protection, coastal erosion.

We cannot just vacate the land. We will need continuing intervention in land and sea processes. People totally dominate environmental impact and it is therefore up to us to manage things so that the environment can function more like it did two hundred years ago, but in a modern sustainable way with a larger population. We must learn to manage with global changes, not deny them or fight against them. The aim of our interventions should be to maximise both the natural systems and human wellbeing in the face of rapid environmental change. We argue for:

- acceptance of the principle of obligation for custodianship of country
- reform of our laws and institutions, and
- immediate action by government, business, educators, land and sea managers and carers, and all of us in our daily lives.

The outcome is to enable ecosystems to function effectively for their own sake and for human wellbeing. Our policy hub will facilitate this through the analysis and aggregation of current thinking, public awareness raising, and targeted advocacy.

The custodianship of country concept

Custodianship of country involves maintaining a respectful, nurturing relationship with land, place and community to guarantee wellbeing for future generations. Collaborative and cooperative relationships to support custodianship are necessary for success.

This custodianship approach has to be the foundation of our stewardship of country. This approach involves giving priority to support for country on ethical and pragmatic grounds.

Our identity needs to be defined by and embedded in our relationship to land and sea and by our relationship with other people.

We need to generate a sense of ‘country’ in the community so that ‘country’ is always the first consideration in our collective and individual decisions and acts. We need a desire to thrive as our paramount consideration, with a goal of increased and continuing abundance of natural resources.

Reforming our laws and institutions

Many of our existing laws, practices and institutions will hamper achieving these aspirations, so we must modify them. Our institutions and laws need to support:

- more direct citizen input into decision-making,
- effective rewards and incentives for improved caring for land and sea,
- more ground-level-based and community driven action,
- experiments with public input into government and business processes that address the key elements of democratic government —participation, openness and accountability.

The tests for all laws and their administration must be how they support caring for country and avoid or prevent environmental harm. We cannot continue with laws that override custodial obligations to care for our land and sea. We need support from the public for a transition to sustainable approaches. Government and business must become more accountable for the environmental impacts of their activities.

What we can do now

We do not need to wait until everyone has accepted and understood the obligation of custodianship or until all our laws and institutions are reformed. We can act now, collectively and individually. Every small change we make adds to all the others. When we can act collaboratively we immediately magnify the changes any one of us can make. We can all:

- constantly publicise good examples that prioritise caring for country
- foster collaboration and peer networks which support caring for country
- practise continuous learning and improvement, preferably using quality management systems
- adopt environmental charters for our households, farms and businesses
- become better waste managers
- practise energy efficiency.

We all have an obligation to act now. We need your help to achieve these aims through the establishment of the Royal Societies of Australia’s Land and Seascape Policy Hub.

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