

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

The Central Australian Grazing Strategies project
Working Paper Series

A steer paddock system
in central Australia:
Umbearra Station, NT

D. Walsh

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53

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The Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre is an unincorporated joint venture with 28 partners whose mission is to develop and disseminate an understanding of sustainable living in remote desert environments, deliver enduring regional economies and livelihoods based on Desert Knowledge, and create the networks to market this knowledge in other desert lands.

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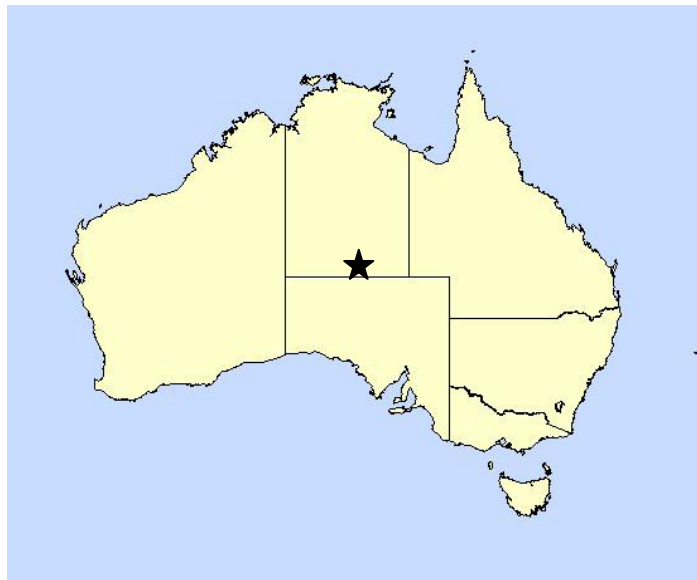
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A steer paddock system in central Australia

Umbearra Station, NT



Key points	The McKay family have owned Umbearra station, 300 km south of Alice Springs since 1964. Umbearra is 3,600 square kilometres in size and is mainly undulating stony plains with open mulga. The dominant trees and shrubs include mulga and witchetty bush with oat grass, mulga grass and kerosene grass in the understorey.
3,600 square kilometre property, conservatively stocked	The average annual rainfall at Umbearra is about 175 mm and is slightly summer-dominant. Summer rains lead to good grass growth whilst winter rains favour broad-leaf herbage species. The McKays produce 12–18 month old Red Angus for the feedlot markets in SA, Victoria and NSW. Cull cows are sold to other pastoral properties. Cattle are mustered by trapping into holding paddocks.
Quieter cattle in better condition	The grazing strategy
Increased live-weight gains	Between 10% and 15% of the entire property is spelled at any given time. The steer paddock system is made up of four paddocks ranging in size from 40 to 120 square kilometres. Three of these paddocks share a central water, with the fourth larger paddock having three water points. Fences are four barb with steel pickets. The steer paddocks are situated on the most productive country and have been gradually implemented over the past ten years.
More income per head	Decision making for stocking rates, timing and spelling Stocking rates vary based on seasonal influences, feed levels, the number of cattle on hand and the time of the year. This approach is fairly typical of management in the region as a whole. The time that cattle remain in paddocks also varies depending on these factors. Decisions to move cattle are based on the level of ground cover, time of the year and when stock will be sold. Ground cover is a key indicator, along with visual assessments of how far cattle need to travel to get feed. The McKays use flexible cut-off dates to plan ahead (i.e. “if it doesn’t rain by this date, we will do X”). Wild fires are not an issue for Umbearra and fire is not used as a tool for managing vegetation. Objectives of the grazing system The reasons for adopting the steer paddock system at Umbearra include: • to improve production • to increase the stability of production and income • to improve land condition and prevent degradation.

Results

Livestock

The McKays have been benchmarking their financial and production performance since about 2000. Over time, they have been able to demonstrate consistent cattle sales, better cattle condition, improvements in liveweight gains and higher return per head. They have also seen improvements in herd management due to more frequent handling. The cattle are quieter than they used to be and there are more opportunities to identify both below- and above-average performers in the herd.

Financials – costs and profits

The development of the infrastructure has occurred over the past 20 years, so annual investment has been relatively small. However, an additional 180km of fencing has been needed for the steer paddocks at \$500/km in materials costs. This outlay was recouped within one season. Although the increased infrastructure has led to higher maintenance costs, there has been a reduction in labour costs.

The decision to run conservative numbers over the long-term has meant that the McKays have sometimes “missed out” on increasing their income during good seasons through increasing stocking rates. However, they have not regretted the decision at all.

Land condition

Umbearra is recognised locally as a property in “good heart”. The McKays feel that the pasture composition has remained quite constant over time but there is more bulk and it “comes back better” after dry times. They have noticed that the soils are less prone to wind and water erosion, an observation that is backed up by photos dating back to the 1960s. The reduction in rabbit numbers as a result of calicivirus has seen an increase in the density of “woody weeds” such as mulga and witchetty bush.



Umbearra is recognised locally as a property in “good heart” and the McKays feel that the pasture composition has remained quite constant over time with soils less prone to wind and water erosion. Image courtesy of Centralian Land Management Association

People

The McKays approached the development of their grazing system by applying their own experience and talking to other people. They have done some courses, but feel that most of what they do is based on “common sense”. Umbearra has been involved in the Southern Beef Producers benchmarking group since the 1990s and this has confirmed the wisdom of their grazing strategy. Although the use of rotational grazing and steer paddocks has created more work, the number of staff required to do this work has declined.

Drought and pest animal management

During drought conditions, the McKays take early action to reduce their stock numbers. They feel that the rotational steer system copes well during one-off dry years, however changes have had to be made in the recent extended drought. Rather than rotating the steers throughout the steer paddocks, the McKays reduced their numbers, then spread the remaining cattle across all paddocks on the property.

The main pest animal impacting on Umbearra is feral camels and these are shot to control their numbers.



The McKays produce 12–18 month old Red Angus for the feedlot markets in South Australia, Victoria and NSW and have been able to demonstrate consistent cattle sales reinforcing their regime of running conservative herd numbers.

Image courtesy of Dionne Walsh

Advantages of the system

The McKays nominate the following advantages of their grazing system:

- cattle are handled more often and are therefore quieter
- better pasture quantity and quality
- better management – you know what feed is there.

Disadvantages of the system

The only disadvantage of the system has been the increased level of infrastructure maintenance.

Recommendations to others who want to try it

- you can start small
- determine which strategy suits your operation best
- just do it!

Plans for the future

The McKays intend to make some of their paddocks smaller to increase their options. Eight or nine smaller paddocks would provide more opportunities to rotate stock and rest country.

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