

DESERT KNOWLEDGE CRC

The Central Australian Grazing Strategies project
Working Paper Series

Rotational grazing and
conservative stocking rates
in the northern savanna:
West Elsey, NT

D. Walsh

Working Paper

60

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Contributing author information

Dr Dionne Walsh is a rangeland ecologist with a background in herbivore grazing behaviour, rangeland monitoring and Environmental Management Systems. She is particularly interested in management of the interactions between livestock and natural systems to achieve sustainable production.

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For additional information please contact

Desert Knowledge CRC

Publications Officer

PO Box 3971

Alice Springs NT 0871

Australia

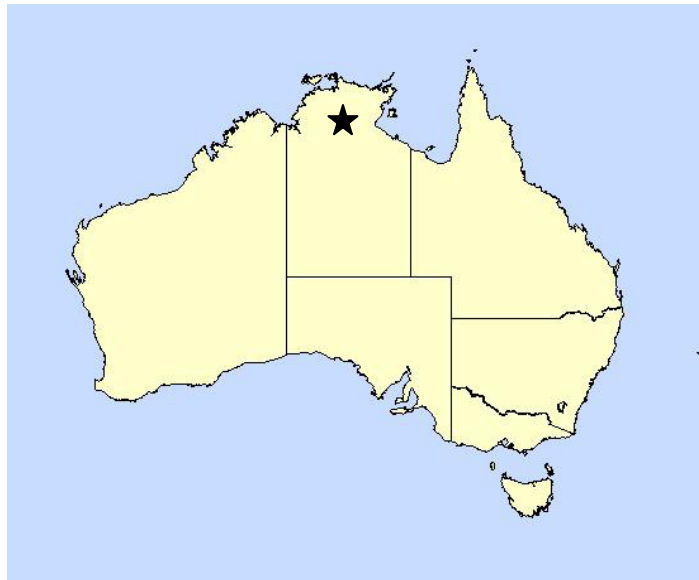
Telephone +61 8 8959 6000

Fax +61 8 8959 6048

www.desertknowledgecrc.com.au

Rotational grazing and conservative stocking rates in the northern savanna

West Elsey, Mataranka, NT



Key points 66,000 hectare property in northern Australia Rotational grazing system Conservative stocking rates by district standards	Tony and Julie Larsen have subleased West Elsey station near Mataranka in the Northern Territory since 1999. The station forms part of the Mangarrayi Aboriginal Land Trust and is situated 400 km south of Darwin. The property is 66,000 hectares and paddocks range in size from 230 square kilometres to small holding paddocks. Waters are placed five to six kilometres apart, with the number of waters in each paddock determined by paddock size. The larger paddocks have four waters and smaller paddocks have one or two each. The country is mostly flat and has two creek systems passing through it. Sixty percent of the property is red sandy country and about 15% has black soils. Vegetation is typical of the region, with thick tree and shrub cover with a mix of grasses in the understorey. The average rainfall is 750 mm and is received during the wet season, which runs from December through to about April. Rain during the dry season is rare. The Larsens run Droughtmaster X Brahman cattle for the live export trade into Asia. Mustering is done by turning off waters and trapping into holding paddocks. The grazing strategy Twenty percent of the entire property is spelled at any given time. The length of the spelling period is variable depending on seasonal conditions. Due to the relative reliability of the rainfall, stocking rates can usually be set at about five adult equivalents per square kilometre. Factors such as the amount of grass available and cattle prices influence how paddocks are actually stocked. The use of low stocking rates provides a buffer against later or drier wet seasons. The grazing system in place has been refined over time due to the influence of training courses such as Grazing for Profit. Decision making for stocking rates, timing and spelling Older cows are run together as a mob and the younger cows and heifers are run in a separate mob. Decisions about when to move stock are based on pasture remaining, ground cover, defoliation of palatable species, rainfall, time of the year and animal condition. These factors are assessed based on experience and observation. When Tony and Julie first got to West Elsey they built cattle numbers up to the accepted district average of seven adult equivalents per square kilometre. However, they have found that the cattle and the country actually perform better at five adult equivalents and they prefer to stock at this more conservative level. Paddocks are spelled for various lengths of time and this is determined largely by what the feed and cattle situation is in any given year. Paddocks spelled over the wet season are used to extend the feed supply over the dry season.
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Objectives of the grazing system

The reasons for adopting rotational grazing at West Elsey include:

- improving production
- increasing the stability of production and income
- improving land condition and preventing degradation
- improving drought management.



Older cows are run together as a mob and the younger cows and heifers are run in a separate mob.

Image courtesy of Tony Larsen

Results

Livestock

Tony and Julie implemented controlled mating from the start at West Elsey. They believe that controlled mating is a key to profitability in this country. Controlled mating gives them predictability in their calf drop and ensures that they have highly marketable weaners. Tony notes that calves born early in the wet season (i.e. November) are worth about \$200 a head more as weaners than those born in the late wet season because the earlier calves have benefited from the better feed conditions.

Financials – costs and profits

Tony notes that the system he is using is relatively simple and that minimal investments have been made in infrastructure. As sublessees, the Larsens do not own the property or the infrastructure, so they have been careful to keep set-up costs low. None of the setup costs are specific to the grazing strategy used – they would have been incurred regardless of the grazing system implemented. As the Larsens implemented this grazing strategy from the very start, they are not able to say whether the use of this system is financially better than another system.

Land condition

When the Larsens arrived at West Elsey nine years ago, the property had not been grazed to any significant extent. As a result, they have noticed that there has been some reduction in grass density since the introduction of stock. To ensure that the country recovers after grazing, they practise wet season spelling which allows the pasture to recover and set seed. A lack of fire has seen an increase in some tall shrubs and trees.

People

The grazing system implemented at West Elsey is such that all the cattle work can be done by the Larsens as a husband and wife team. This keeps labour costs very low.



Image courtesy of Tony Larsen

Drought and pest animal management

The rainfall is relatively reliable at West Elsey, so droughts are uncommon. However, the arrival of the wet season can be delayed at times. The use of very light stocking rates and wet season spelling are buffers against drier years and late wet seasons. Kangaroo numbers have increased on West Elsey. Tony thinks that this is probably due to the run of good wet seasons experienced in the Top End in the past 15 years and the permanent waterpoints provided for cattle. Their numbers are not causing any problems for the cattle business and there are no other feral animal problems on the property.

Advantages of the system

Tony nominates the following as three advantages of their grazing system:

- increased animal production
- maintenance of good land condition
- easier management.

Disadvantages of the system

The only disadvantage that Tony can see from adopting this grazing system has been that a bit more infrastructure maintenance is required. They tried electric fencing early on but have found it to be troublesome. The electric fences needed a lot more work to maintain so the Larsens have reverted back to using traditional barbed wire fences.

Plans for the future

The Larsens intend to continue using their current grazing system. They feel that at the nine-year mark they have reached a bit of a plateau in terms of expecting further big improvements. That's not to say that they won't fine-tune their activities. As Tony says "you're always learning and you need to be flexible in this business".

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