

A Submission to the Select Committee on the effectiveness of the Australian Government's Northern Australia agenda

- Dr Keith Noble¹, Rural Planner, Insideout Architects,

Introduction

Agriculture will continue to be an important component of North Australia's economy and identity; though its scale, ownership, and focus could develop in myriad and possibly unexpected ways. However, people often look for a safe (imagined) past where they knew the rules – because they don't know the rules of the future. This tendency should not constrain appropriate development.

That Northern Australia will not develop in the same historical manner as the more populated south is a reasonable assumption - it is different geographically, climatically and demographically, and further development will occur in today's globally connected and informed community; very different from the colonial development of Southern Australia. Nevertheless, it remains important to understand and always consider a region's history as a component of development planning, as past and present aspirations often combine with contemporary trends and influences to determine the future. This is necessary not to understand agriculture, but to understand the operational context and perspective of the **farmers** involved in Northern Australian agriculture.

That agriculture will continue to be a part of Northern landscapes is also a reasonable assumption – the area is vast and capable of accommodating intensive and extensive agriculture along with tourism and the *light*² touch of conservation management. Australian agriculture has a track record of speedy and successful innovation and technology adoption that will continue through genetics, remote sensing, and internet/device connectivity, while automation and customers' ability to trace food from farm-to-fork will continue to influence supply chains.

Our modern era also provides an unprecedented opportunity to consider and debate development options before their adoption, should Australians as a community choose to do so. Such a debate should be informed and guided by the lessons of history, along with the

¹ This submission draws on my recent book "Agriculture and Resilience in Australia's North: A Lived Experience" (2019) Noble K, Dennis T, Larkins S. Springer Nature, Singapore. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-13-8355-7

² The setting aside of areas for conservation management would be seen by many as a lower impact land use than agriculture, mining or urban development, that is, a *lighter* touch. In some instances though, setting aside areas for conservation management can exacerbate weed and feral animal problems, change fire regimes, or deliver unintended outcomes. All land requires management and commensurate resource allocation if anticipated outcomes are to be achieved.

contemporary wisdom and experience of others around the world, facilitated by communication technologies and social media enabling whole-of-community participation to collectively agree on a shared future. The big risk is that the voices of the few with direct experience and practical understanding of the reality of agriculture in the north could be lost, overwhelmed, or disregarded in the conversation. I propose that the Regional NRM bodies established and operating across Northern Australia are an underutilised vehicle capable of enabling this whole-of-community discussion.

Substantiation

Agriculture has proved itself a dynamic and innovative industry capable of adopting new technology and aligning itself with social trends, and society's fears around issues like robotisation of the workforce are viewed as real opportunities for some dispersed and labour-poor northern agricultural sectors, allowing farmers to perform jobs like extensive weed survey or resource monitoring which are currently either unaffordable, or onerous on the individual if done manually. While the ability to capitalise on such innovation is hampered by present NBN internet service delivery - a particular disservice when high-speed internet would improve planning and adaptation capacity, enable family connectedness, and facilitate increased situational awareness – innovations in IoT connectivity combined with edge-computing is enabling outcomes.

However, provision of a fast-universal broadband network to all Northern Australians would not be a panacea for all challenges faced by the region's farmers. The history of northern development illustrates the gradual but inexorable nature of development and the sometimes piece-meal and often politically influenced *official* approach to development and infrastructure provision, which is what needs to change. Retrospection indicates that narrow-based development manifestos are unlikely to achieve their envisioned success.

While the future of Northern Australia is rooted in this past, the future will manifest in the complex milieu of a global society, and the social complexity that accompanies a growing world population allows many possible and contested futures. Prospection³ is a ubiquitous feature of the human mind (Seligman *et al.*, 2013) and the ability of people to '*pre-experience ... the hedonic consequences of events they've never experienced by simulating those events in their mind*' (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007, p. 1351) is clearly at work in the imagined futures for Northern Australia, and "*these prospects can include not only possibilities that have occurred before but also possibilities that have never occurred — and these new possibilities often play a decisive role in the selection of action*' (Seligman *et al.*, 2013, p. 119). While no one group is likely to determine

³ The generation and evaluation of mental representations of possible futures.

Northern Australia's ultimate destiny, it is of paramount importance to consider and include the imaginings of those already living and working there.

It is important because of the fine-grained regional knowledge and understanding they hold, and it is important if Australia is to maintain its reputation as a fair and compassionate society. Communities already do this, as demonstrated by diverse sectors: Safe and social living and work environments are achieved through acknowledging and including local knowledge in architecture, and improved health service delivery to remote areas achieved via bottom-up changes developed with the practical experience of real-world practitioners living in and with the affected community.

This is also happening in agriculture, albeit at a small scale: Community-derived landscape management research methodologies, such as the Terrain NRM and NQ Dry Tropics **Major Integrated Projects** to improve Great Barrier Reef water quality, are enabling landholder knowledge and experience informed by science to directly influence policy decisions. Derived through a key conclusion in the 2016 Queensland Water Quality Science Taskforce report, these projects are also developing incentives and market mechanisms that complement and integrate with regulation, extension and education.

Such market-based approaches work effectively around the world in the provision of environmental services, for example, sequestration of carbon, reduction of sulphur oxides and creation of water quality credits; and the Reef Credit Scheme⁴ developed by Terrain NRM in association with GreenCollar⁵ adopts a similar approach in the Great Barrier Reef catchments, allowing landowners to generate and sell Reef Credits that result from activities that reduce sediment, pesticide and nutrient losses, and may be sold to a range of buyers such as government, corporate, industrial or philanthropic entities.

Through a combination of innovation and trusted partnerships, community based NRM organisations now occupy a unique position in Australia's landscape management, with established relationships and respected communication processes that span the productive, conservation and community sectors. Their ability to be the vehicle for exploring fairness as a contributor to regional policy development and delivery is worthy of support.

Another exciting opportunity is in further exploration of Gammage's (2011) postulate that pre-European Aboriginals were farmers without fences, who shaped the landscape in ways that facilitated plant and animal harvest adapted to the physical constraints of regional soil and climate;

⁴ www.reefcredit.org

⁵ GreenCollar is one of Australia's largest environmental markets investors and project developers, and committed to working with landholders to design appropriate, individual projects which complement existing operations while achieving positive commercial and environmental outcomes.

and it is possible such an approach might rediscover fundamentally different ways of farming Northern Australia that might help bridge the sectoral disconnect between aspirations for a productive landscape, and for the preservation of ecological values. Indigenous perspectives are already integrated into regional NRM plans, and strong working relations are in place.

The real risk for Northern Australia's farmers, and particularly for an agricultural expansion, are mostly beyond individual farmer's personal resilience processes and strategies. These are the global perspectives and influences of an urban population with diminishing connection to and understanding of agriculture, and particularly agriculture in a Northern Australian context. Farmers cannot hope to control these influences, but they can appeal to the broader community's sense of fairness to increase the likelihood of their endemic knowledge being valued and included, rather than over-looked.

Consideration of individual fairness is an indispensable component of the policy process, and the Regional NRM bodies operating across Northern Australia are a vehicle with demonstrated ability to enable community discussion and consensus, **and** (with adequate support) extend this understanding to Australia's urban majority.

An awareness of one's situation in life; the ability to plan accordingly, and then to be able to review and adapt that plan; and at appropriate times call on friends, family or the community for support - does assist farmers to cope with uncertainty and contributes to their life experience which, as the saying goes, makes them stronger. Whilst this is applicable to people everywhere, it does need to be remembered, particularly in situations where the voices of an informed few could easily go unheard.

References

- Gammage, B. (2011). *The biggest estate on earth: How Aborigines made Australia*. Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin.
- Gilbert, D. T., & Wilson, T. D. (2007). Prospection: Experiencing the Future. *Science*, 317(5843), 1351-1354.
- Seligman, M. E. P., Railton, P., Baumeister, R. F., & Sripada, C. (2013). Navigating Into the Future or Driven by the Past. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 8(2), 119-141.