



EcoRange – Perspectives on environmental concerns with the grazing of Australia's rangelands

Product labels that claim some sort of environmentally-friendly credential have proliferated in the consumer marketplace. Familiar labels are found on food and household products such as “dolphin safe” tuna, “phosphate-free” laundry detergents and “organic” cereals and grains. Less well known labels exist for products from sustainable fisheries and the production of cotton and timber such as the Marine Stewardship and Forest Stewardship Councils and the European Community Eco-label. Such labelling schemes provide an avenue for producers to target the ‘green’ share of the consumer market. They may also seek to access ‘green’ markets overseas, and labelling may be a way to comply with laws insisting on the demonstration of sustainable production prior to importation.

What do you, as an informed consumer, want when it comes to eco-labels? How critical or sceptical are you of the environmental care claims on the labels of products you purchase? A recent article by Mick Kerr (see *Habitat*, volume 31, issue 2) on the merits of ‘*ecoSelect*’ timber exemplifies the issue: labelling that does not have a credible basis in environmental care could be more damaging in the long term than it is beneficial in the short term.

Research by the CSIRO and Queensland Primary Industries was undertaken recently to get a better understanding of consumers’ expectations of products that might be produced under an environment-friendly label, specifically from the grazing industries of Australia’s rangelands (beef, lamb, mutton, game or wool).

The ‘EcoRange’ project aimed to identify criteria that are most valued by consumers and thus provide this information to help focus the rangeland grazing industry and further research in this area. To achieve this goal, the project team asked consumers (in a random household telephone survey) about their interest in ‘environment-friendly’ rangeland food and fibre, to gauge the overall potential size of the market. They also surveyed members of environment groups about the range of criteria they would need to see addressed and their attitude to buying products with these credentials. Members of environment groups were explicitly targeted because they represented the more informed and critical consumer in regard to eco-labelling. If an environmental-care label is to succeed it must stand up to the scrutiny of the very consumers that are most likely to support it.



A questionnaire was distributed to the readers of *Habitat* magazine, *Environment SA*, and other conservation council newsletters nationwide to reach representatives of various environmental groups around the country. There were 1106 responses to the questionnaire, yielding the following results.

The survey asked members to openly state which environmental issues they associate most with grazing the rangeland areas of inland Australia. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of responses. The main issues identified were the direct clearing of native vegetation to provide pasture, and the degrading of habitat quality causing soil erosion. The poor flexibility in managing cattle and sheep stocking rates, in response to the variable climate, was seen to lead to widespread overgrazing of natural resources. These responses confirmed that there was a strong awareness of environmental problems and the views of the respondents were fairly well aligned with national issues already identified in, for example, the National Land and Water Resources Audit and the State of the Environment Report.

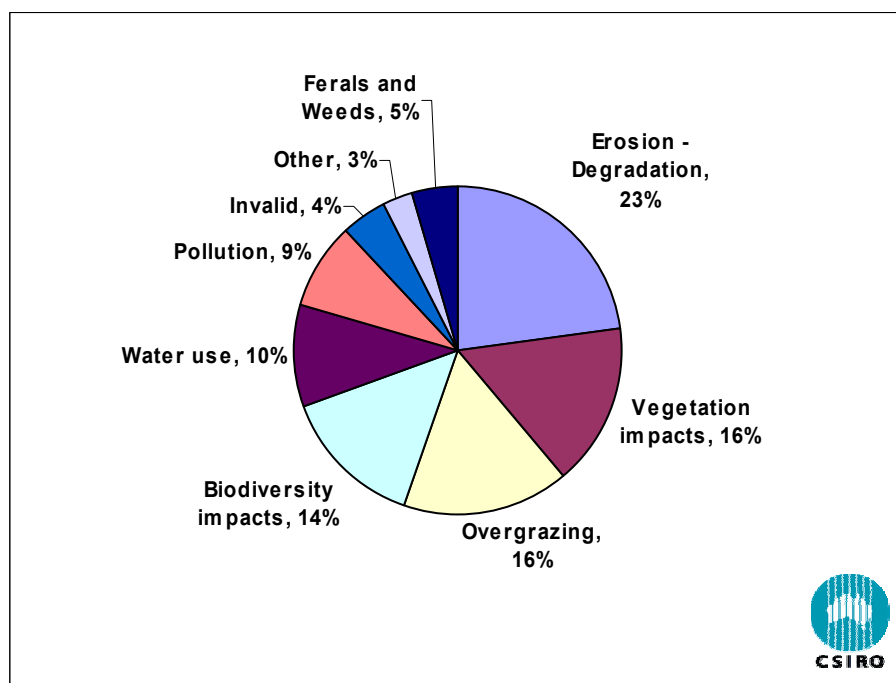


Figure 1. The major environmental issues associated with grazing Australian rangelands identified by members of various environment groups.

When asked what they expected of 'environment-friendly' grazing industries, respondents related directly to the main issues outlined above. Figure 2 shows the expectations of 'environment-friendly' grazing practice. Expectations were the abatement of land-clearing, protecting existing native

vegetation for habitats, and managing stocking levels within a reduced and sustainable regime, according to local climate and landscape. Other expectations included more sustainable use of water resources, the control of feral animals and weed plants, and active prevention and control of erosion-prone areas. Only 9% rated highly the issues of chemicals and pesticides in 'environment-friendly' rangeland grazing produce, indicating that the industry is currently considered more "clean" than "green".

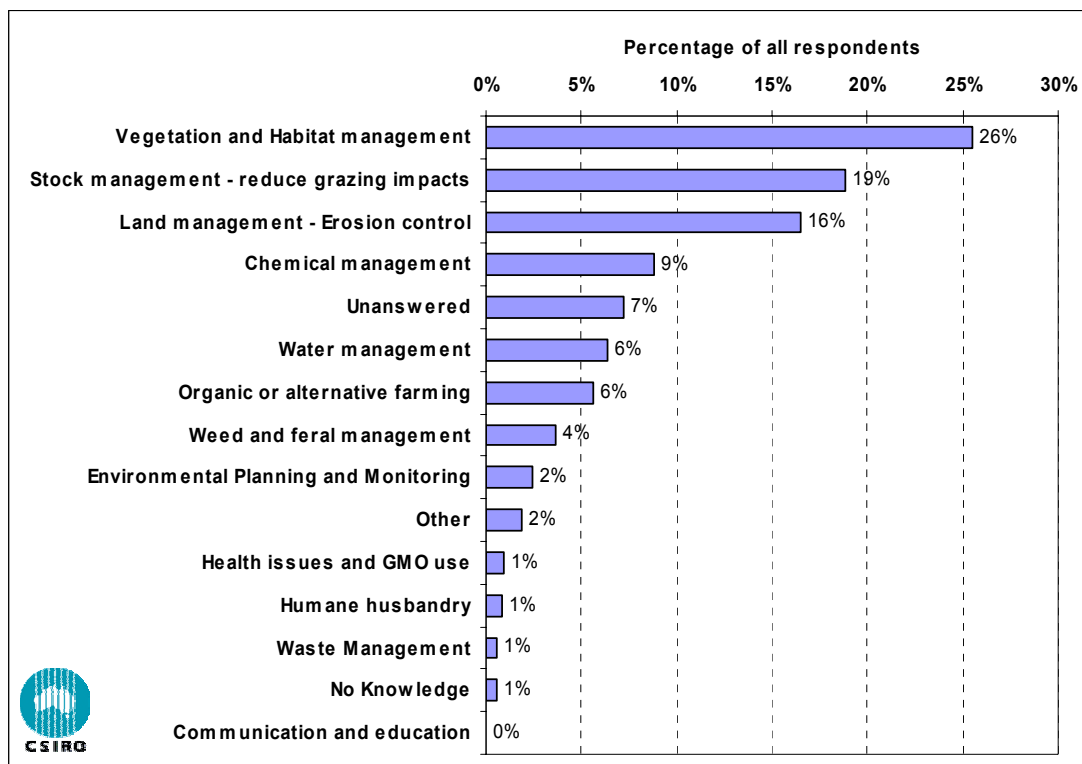


Figure 2. The expectations of 'environment-friendly' grazing practice by members of various environment groups.

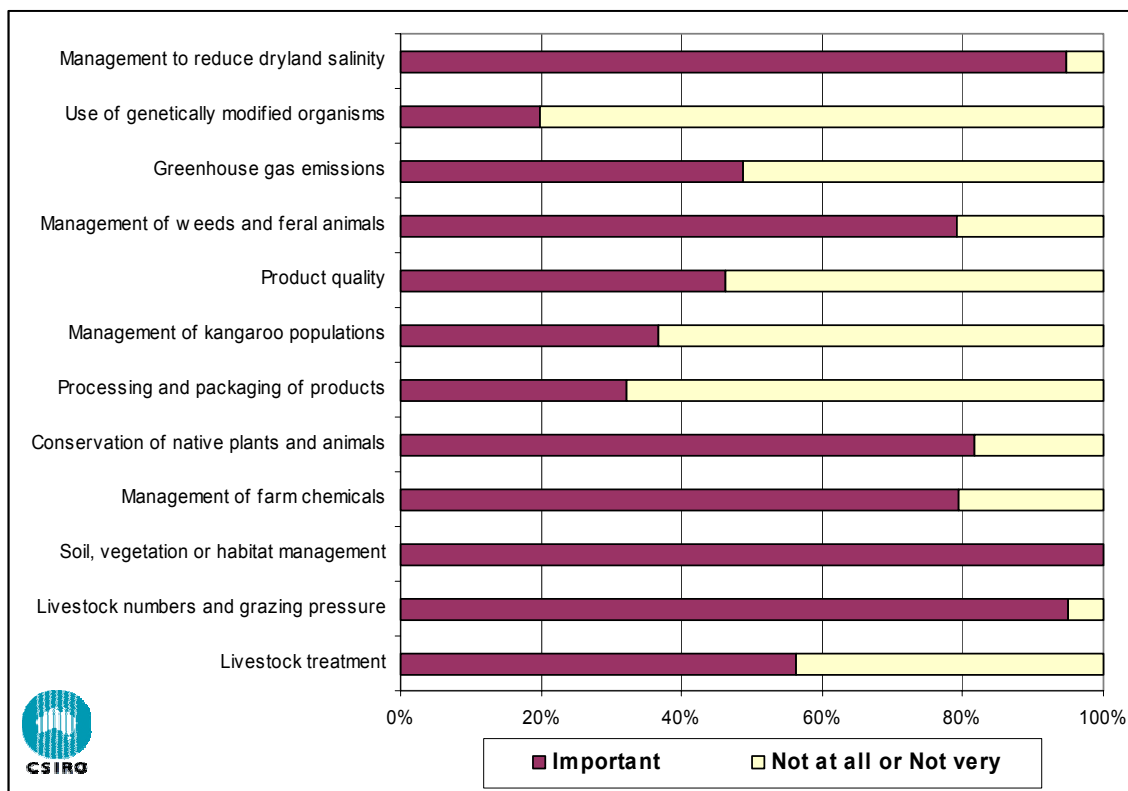


Figure 3. The importance of issues to be addressed through an assurance scheme for 'environment-friendly' grazing, as reported by members of environment groups.

When presented with a range of issues (see Figure 3) that could be incorporated in an assurance program, respondents indicated the total environmental footprint of the production process should be addressed and a scheme should be inclusive of many issues. The most important issues were managing to protect soil, vegetation and habitats, managing livestock grazing pressure, preventing salinity problems and incorporating conservation targets in management planning.

The EcoRange project also wanted to establish the issues that go into making a successful assurance scheme, one that is trusted and supported by environmentally concerned consumers. Questions were asked about:

- What issues should a scheme incorporate?
- Who should develop a scheme?
- Who should audit or regulate a scheme?

When asked about who should *develop* an environmental accreditation scheme for rangelands, 83% wanted substantial involvement of the producers themselves, with a range of other interest groups also highly involved. In contrast, when considering which groups should be involved in *auditing* or *reporting* on environmental management, there was a strong call for the separation of producers from the auditors' role in the process.

There was strong support and trust for an environmental assurance scheme that is based on meeting standards of environmental care, with 67% saying they would trust such a scheme 'very much'. This may be achieved either by implementing a plan of continuous improvement (along the guidelines of a certified Environmental Management System (or EMS)) or meeting benchmarks of agreed environmental outcomes. The message is that a formal process of recognition is required for a scheme to provide genuine assurance to consumers. Endorsement of a scheme by a reputable organisation was also seen as a way to convey assurance.

The project also sought to capture the attitudes of those surveyed towards the concept of 'environment-friendly' labelled produce; it may be overused, undervalued or not trusted in the current marketplace. The responses indicated that environmental attributes of products are much sought after by those concerned with the environment; over 80% suggested they value these criteria more than other attributes. There also existed a strong level of scepticism about unsubstantiated labels and a need for close scrutiny and considerable information about a product or its production method before trust is assured.

EcoRange researched widely the domestic and international market demand for "green" produce, and also surveyed graziers for their views on the issues. The full range of reports will be available at <<http://www.rirdc.gov.au>>; the website of the Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation. A further overview of the project is also presented in the April 2003 issue of *Australian Farm Journal*.