

Day 12 Activity

Tales of the Todd Role Profiles

Role #4 Food Growers - Horticulture

You have a small table-grape orchard in the farm area which you bought ten years ago. Your water comes from a bore dug on your property. You employ seasonal workers and buy many of your supplies and equipment from local stores. You sell some of your produce locally and export the rest.

Background

The number of people growing things like fruit and vegetables and fresh flowers along the Todd River is very small. In the early days of settlement in Alice Springs, there were a few market gardeners and orchardists who sank wells along the river banks and pumped water out. These days there are still a few people growing small commercial crops such as grapes and dates, although some of their farms are some distance from the river itself.

Effects on the River system

Food growers need water to grow their crops, so although they don't have water available from the river itself, they rely on the underground water supply which is part of the catchment system. This could become a problem if there were too many growers but at present water use is monitored to prevent this from happening.

As well as taking water out of the ground, they also put water back - and the effects of this can be seen close to town where home gardeners have helped cause the town water table to rise and this is affecting the trees in the Todd as well as the amount of salt in the soil. The commercial growers are not likely to affect this at present.

In some places, chemicals from farms (such as fertilizer) wash into the river and cause problems, but it is unlikely for that to happen here. All gardeners need to be aware though that their garden chemicals have to go somewhere, and that excess may be carried by water through the soil and end up in low lying areas such as the river bed or a waterhole

Another problem that can arise from gardening is the 'escape' of plants from the garden into the river system. The popular lawn grass 'couch' is an example of this. It has now colonised long stretches or river bank in the Todd and other river systems in central Australia, and native grasses have been crowded out.

Concerns

At the moment there are only a few growers and no real problems. The main concern of growers is if the numbers grew to the extent that the underground water supply was reduced or contaminated. Restrictions or imposition of extra costs on water supplies would make it difficult for a fruit grower to survive. Other problems could be the spread of water borne diseases during flooding.



Drawing of
"Todd River"
By: Anthony
Age: 8



Role #5 Food Grower - Pastoralist

You are a fourth generation owner / manager of a cattle station. You are important because you provide food that people eat. You employ stockmen and station hands. You buy many of your supplies and equipment from local stores. This helps the economy.

Background

One of the main uses of land throughout the Todd River system is for cattle farming. The cows graze on the native vegetation and drink from waterholes as well as from man-made watering points where water is pumped from underground. Some irrigated pastures have been tried from time to time.

Effects on the river system

The cattle industry was one of the earliest to take hold after white settlement of central Australia. It took some time for cattlemen to understand the consequences of their management methods and some areas in the Todd catchment area have been affected by overgrazing. When the cattle eat too much vegetation there is nothing to hold the soil in place during heavy rain storms. Most cattlemen have worked out ways of overcoming this eg by moving the cattle on a regular basis and spelling the land, or fencing off areas to protect them.

Although the cattle don't rely on waterholes for water, in areas where they do have access they drink a lot and deprive native animals of their share. They also compact the ground around the waterhole with their hard hooves, destroy vegetation and contaminate the water with manure. One way to solve this is to fence off waterholes and build laneways between troughs and dams to direct cattle to these watering points.

Concerns

Healthy water supplies and catchment areas are vital for all food growers. If the land is degraded cattle won't flourish. Another issue that may have an effect is the spread of introduced plants down the river system during periods of heavy flooding, affecting the grazing quality of the land.

Large areas of station land are also accessible to the public. Places where the river bed runs through or where there are waterholes are popular for semi-permanent camps for local aboriginal people; weekend campers and off road drivers and bikers also make use of station land; tourist operators take busloads of people across station land. All of these people have the potential to cause problems for the landholder.

If too many station owners allow their properties to become degraded, legislators are tempted to make stricter rules and regulations for everyone, which then restricts individual choice and management style.



Role #6 Food Grower – Home Gardener

You have lived in Alice Springs for three years and will probably stay a couple more before going down south. You work in a government office and enjoy gardening on weekends. You have a lawn on the nature strip as well as in the front to make the yard look neat, there's more lawn at the back around your pool for the kids to play on, and you have a large vegetable garden with some fruit trees as well.

Background

Some people come to Alice Springs thinking that nothing will grow here. When they arrive to find that almost anything will grow so long as you give it enough water and fertiliser, they start planting! In the old days, it used to take a long time for fruit and vegetables to get here, so that was a good reason to grow your own. Nowadays, we have plenty of choice, but nothing beats the taste of home grown food.

A garden around the house also makes a welcome relief from the heat and is great for relaxation. There are no water restrictions and the cost of water is quite good compared with other places.

Effects on the river system

Some of the water that goes onto the garden is taken up directly by plants. However much of it drains down into the soil and get carried away to the lowest point. Much water from gardening ends up in the town basin, an underground water collecting area beneath the town. This basin has always been there and much of the original native vegetation survived because it could send its roots down to these supplies. Natural salts in the soil were dissolved in rainwater as it soaked in and spread evenly through the soil, or used by plants if needed.

However what has happened with more and more gardens is that the water going into the basin is greater than the water going out so the water table is rising. This is upsetting the balance of salts in the soil and the amount of water available too plants – too much can be as bad as not enough.

As well as water, other things that dissolve like fertilisers and other chemicals are being spread into areas where they were never meant to be and collecting in water supplies and contaminating them.

Home gardeners have been responsible for the 'escape' of some plants into the river system as well. For example couch grass and athel pine were both garden plants that have entered the river system and spread, using up the resources once used by native plants. It could have been by spread of seed or careless disposal of waste, but however it happened the river in flood is perfect vehicle for helping it travel. Plants and animals are suffering from the invasion of unwanted plants.

Concerns

Gardens need water and the cleaner and cheaper it is the better. As the town water supply is gradually reduced, there may be restrictions or higher prices put on water. Use of grey water is an option but as yet no-one knows what the effect of using recycled water will be so it is illegal. There may have to be restrictions put on other things like what kind of gardens people can grow or how much fertilizer they can use – which would mean that the quality of life valued by gardeners would be reduced.