

BACKGROUND PAPER

Management of former pastoral properties purchased for nature conservation in the southern rangelands



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Government of **Western Australia**
Department of **Parks and Wildlife**



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Introduction

The rangelands of Western Australia occupy 87 per cent of the State's landmass. The "southern rangelands" refers to the southern pastoral zone, being the geographical region outside the south-west agricultural zone but not including the arid interior. The area includes the Gascoyne, Murchison and Goldfields. It is a rich and diverse region that is vital to the state economically, socially and environmentally.

Since 1988, the Western Australian Government, with assistance from the Australian Government, has purchased over five million hectares of pastoral lease land in the southern rangelands. These lands are managed by the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW), formerly the Department of Environment and Conservation (DEC). In addition to facilitating a restructure of the pastoral industry to assist it in being more sustainable, the purchases were designed to improve Western Australia's ability to conserve the extraordinary natural diversity of the region for current and future generations through nature conservation focussed management.

Background

1. Which pastoral properties have been purchased by the Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW)?

A total of 48 individual properties and part properties in the southern rangelands were purchased by DPaW to be formally reserved for conservation. The properties are grouped into "blocks" for management purposes, there being 10 property blocks as shown in the map on the next page. There are also some previously purchased properties, which have already been added to the conservation reserve system and are managed by DPaW, on behalf of the people of Western Australia, for nature conservation.

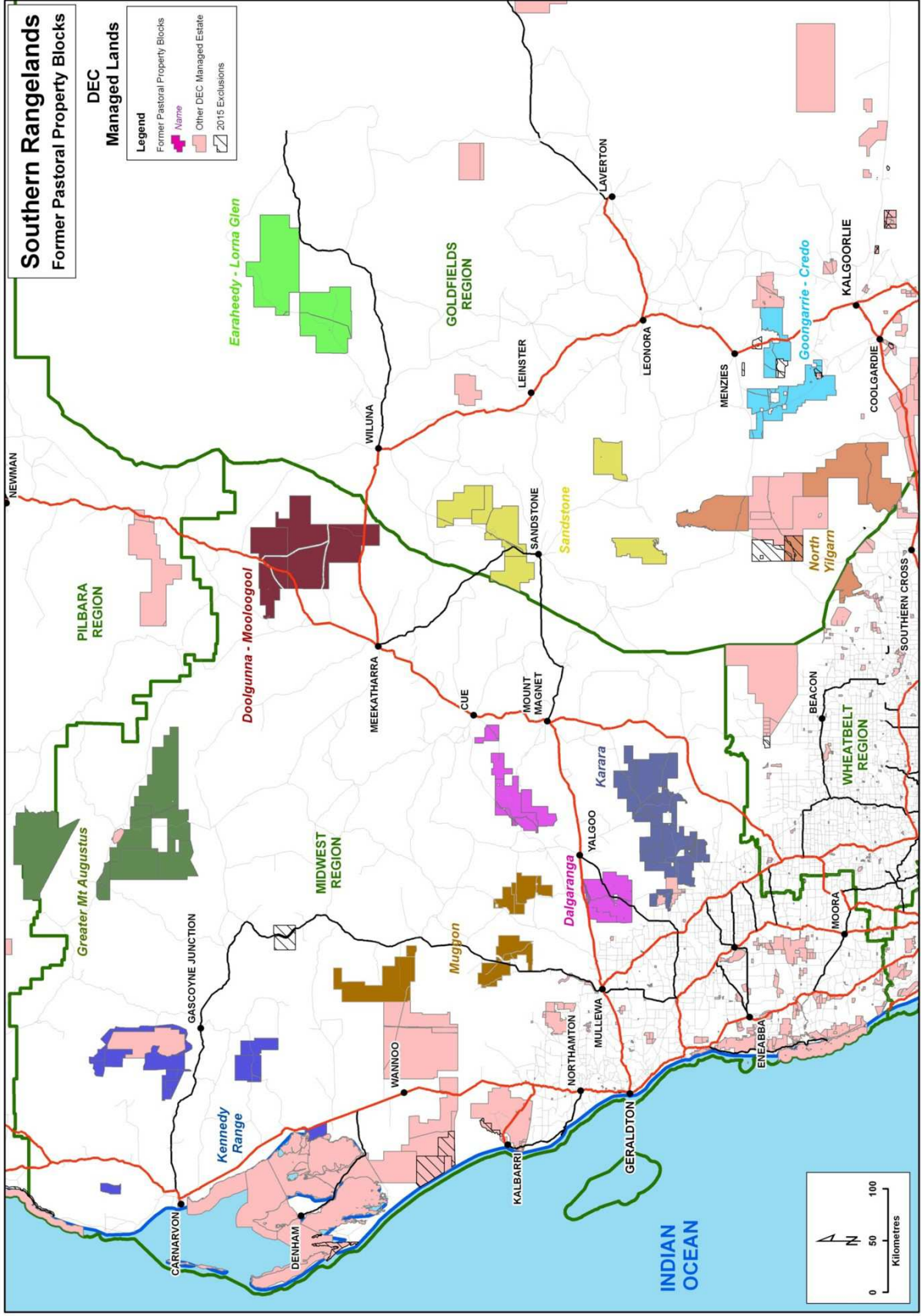
2. Why were these lands purchased?

Australia, and over 150 of the world's leading countries, recognise that in order to be sustainable and to provide adequately for both current and future generations, Western Australia needs to have a network of lands managed primarily for nature conservation. Internationally it is accepted that between 10% and 17% of all lands should be managed in this way. Prior to the purchase of pastoral land for conservation, Western Australia was well below such targets in pastoral areas with most having less than 5% represented in conservation reserves.

Over recent decades various reviews of the pastoral industry have concluded that reform is required, including diversification of land uses, rationalisation of pastoral leases, and establishment of conservation reserves. While pastoral activities have historically been low intensity, it is recognised that some areas can be far more intensively developed, including for tourism as well as for intensive agriculture and aquaculture. Representative examples of natural environments can also be better conserved through areas managed primarily for nature conservation, leaving remaining former pastoral areas open to more intensive development than has historically been the case.

A report by the Pastoral Wool Industry Taskforce in 1993 identified the poor state of the wool industry and the natural resources that support it in the pastoral regions. In response, the Gascoyne-Murchison Rangeland Strategy was developed and identified the regional goal of *"A socially and economically viable community involved in a diverse range of industries, based on the use of the rangelands in an environmentally sustainable way"*.

The strategy included a range of programs including the Regional Environmental Management Program, one of the key elements of which was the establishment of a conservation reserve system across the Gascoyne-Murchison rangelands. This task, involving purchasing of whole and part pastoral leases, was allocated to DPaW's predecessor organisation, the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM).



3. What makes an effective conservation reserve system?

An effective conservation reserve system is one that protects and conserves sustainable examples of a region's natural environment (the species, communities and habitats that can be found across the regional landscape) and which give the region its natural character.

In order to establish an effective system the reserves need to be large enough to provide for the continuation of natural processes and to be resilient to changes in rainfall or weather patterns, natural disasters, and external impacts. They also need to be spread across the landscape to provide connectivity for native species, and it is best if the habitats within reserves are replicated so that the loss of one example for any reason, does not lead to extinction of species.

4. Why were the leases surrendered after purchase?

Because the properties were no longer intended to be run as commercial pastoral operations by private individuals or corporations they were no longer able to comply with the pastoral lease provisions of the *Land Administration Act 1997*. Accordingly, the leases were surrendered at purchase, and the areas reverted to unallocated Crown land.

Following acquisition for conservation, former pastoral properties were generally destocked by the lessee as a condition of sale. Destocking typically took from one to three years based on stock numbers, size of property and prevailing weather conditions.

Pending their formal reservation under the Land Administration Act, the former pastoral properties are being managed under agreement between DPaW and the Department of Lands.

5. Will any of the lands be available for return to pastoral uses?

The former pastoral properties were purchased for addition to the conservation reserve system and now form important components of the network of conservation lands. It is not intended to return properties to pastoral uses.

Any formal reservation or other tenure change for the former leasehold areas will require compliance with the future act provisions of the *Native Title Act 1993*.

Management

6. How is DPaW managing these lands?

DPaW is responsible for management of the former pastoral properties including:

- neighbour liaison;
- closure of artificial waters (other than those required for pest animal control, fire management, or other strategic purposes);
- internal fencing and boundary fencing in partnership with neighbours;
- access control (for visitors and for management purposes);
- infrastructure maintenance (including homesteads);
- cultural heritage management;
- Aboriginal liaison;
- feral animal control;
- kangaroo control;
- weed control;
- condition monitoring; and
- research and biological survey.

The properties have been variously affected by past land uses and are being managed with a view to restoring natural habitats, re-establishing native species and protecting important local cultural, social and economic values.

7. Who carries out the management?

Many of the former pastoral properties have resident managers based at homesteads. These property managers are either DPaW staff or are contracted by the department to carry out on-ground activities. Staff from DPaW regions and districts based in Geraldton, Carnarvon and Kalgoorlie are also active in planning and management of the properties. They are supported by specialist staff based in Perth and other centres, who become involved as required.

Resources for management are provided through standard DPaW budgeting processes and are delivered through regional, district and specialist management programs, as well as from other sources, including the Commonwealth Government.

8. What is being done about dingoes and wild dogs?

Dingoes and wild dogs are known to prey on small stock and can seriously affect the viability of small stock-based pastoral enterprises. Control operations are routinely undertaken on former pastoral properties and adjacent lands as agreed with neighbours and Recognised Biosecurity Groups (RBGs), in accordance with the State Wild Dog Management Strategy and DPaW's *Good Neighbour Policy*.

DPaW is committed to continuing to work with neighbours and RBGs in coordinated control programs involving former pastoral properties now managed for conservation; unallocated Crown land; and established rangelands conservation reserves. Cooperative programs may include active wild dog control on DPaW-managed lands involving ground baiting and trapping, aerial baiting, and specialist baiting programs as buffer operations or over entire properties, depending on local circumstances.

DPaW continues to work in partnership with RBGs, the Department of Agriculture and Food, local government authorities, and leaseholders in the design and implementation of wild dog control programs.

9. How is pastoral and mining heritage being protected?

The southern rangelands are rich in pastoral and mining heritage, and the landscapes of the former pastoral properties contain numerous physical reminders of this history. Pastoral buildings, stock yards, dams, tanks, wells, grave sites, windmills, machinery and other relics of the long-standing pastoral use of these lands occur across the properties. Old mine workings, miner's shacks and equipment, and even abandoned railways and wagons also dot the landscape.

While the former pastoral properties were purchased for their potential contribution to the state's conservation reserve system, there is an ongoing commitment that DPaW will manage these areas to protect and conserve the rich cultural heritage they contain. There are also many excellent opportunities to help visitors understand and enjoy this heritage as well as the natural values of the proposed reserves.

DPaW will work with the Heritage Council of Western Australia, National Trust, local government authorities, historical societies, and other stakeholders in the assessment and management of non-Aboriginal heritage on the former pastoral properties. DPaW recognises that the variety of heritage values in the rangelands and the large number of heritage sites pose a challenge for management. It is widely recognised that the current knowledge, available resources and support for the management of cultural heritage, both on and off DPaW -managed public lands in the rangelands, is less than desirable. It will be necessary for DPaW to focus its finite resources in the protection of the most important heritage assets.

10. What is being done about fire management?

Rangeland ecosystems have evolved in the presence of fire, and Aboriginal people have used fire as a land management tool in the area for thousands of years. The advent of pastoralism and the movement of Aboriginal people to missions, reserves, and regional and urban centres brought significant changes to land management, including altered fire regimes and modification of vegetation by stock. The removal of stock from former pastoral leases is permitting increased vegetation growth; as a result fire management is becoming a more significant land management issue.

The priority for fire management is risk mitigation and the protection of life and surrounding property values. In line with the purpose of the pastoral lease purchases the management of fire needs to reflect a change of focus. The emphasis is now on biodiversity conservation, rather than pastoral production.

Fire preparedness and suppression activities on former pastoral properties are managed under DPaW's fire management policies and procedures. Programs need to be adaptable; seasonal factors can have a dramatic impact on the flammability of the country by influencing the growth of grass and other highly flammable vegetation types. Further research into the role of fire and monitoring of its impacts on rangeland ecosystems will underpin the refinement of fire management approaches.

11. Are prospecting and fossicking allowed on these lands?

Under the *Mining Act 1978* and *Mining Regulations 1981*, there are particular requirements for prospecting and fossicking, relating to the class of land involved. While the proposed conservation reserves remain unallocated Crown land, a Miner's Right holder has a right to access areas not covered by a granted mining tenement under the Mining Act.

Once the former pastoral properties become conservation reserves it would not be lawful to fossick or prospect on these lands without a mining tenement under the Mining Act. Accordingly DPaW, the Department of Mines and Petroleum, the Amalgamated Prospectors and Leaseholders Association, and the Association of Mining and Exploration Companies have begun discussing options to provide for access to some rangelands conservation reserves, once established, under a Mining Act Miner's Right, including development of a simple permit system under the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* (CALM Act). Such an approach, if adopted, would require amendments to the Mining Act and consequential amendments to the CALM Act.

Community involvement

12. How can neighbours have a say?

DPaW's purchase of former pastoral properties has significantly increased the department's presence and role in the southern rangelands. The transition from pastoral lease to conservation area has involved a change in focus on these lands, while still providing for the vast majority of pastoral areas to continue in pastoral enterprises or alternative uses. As with any change, this new focus has met with a broad spectrum of community reaction ranging from support, through to concern. DPaW is committed to working with local and regional communities to enhance the diversity of opportunity provided for employment and commercial enterprise as well as conservation outcomes.

DPaW's *Good Neighbour Policy* sets out the department's overall approach to neighbour relations and liaison on cross-boundary issues, and includes specific provisions for interactions in the pastoral rangelands. This policy is being reviewed.

DPaW is developing the concept of “neighbour groups” in the southern rangelands as one way to strengthen local relationships and provide an additional avenue for two-way communication regarding the management of former pastoral properties.

DPaW is committed to promoting business partnership opportunities by which neighbouring pastoral enterprises, Aboriginal groups and local government authorities can be engaged as contractors on projects, including fencing and machine work for construction and maintenance of roads and firebreaks, and in land rehabilitation.

DPaW continues to strive to improve and maintain working relationships with neighbours to the former pastoral properties. The department will keep working with individual neighbours, RBGs, and local government authorities to improve two-way communication and co-operation in on-ground management activities. DPaW staff and property managers welcome contact from neighbours to discuss management issues and opportunities for cooperative works.

13. Can other interested people get involved?

It is important that DPaW engages across the broad community of interests in the planning and management of former pastoral properties. In addition to pastoral neighbours and Aboriginal groups, conservation groups, the commercial tourism sector, local government, historical societies, recreational visitors and many others have perspectives that need to be recognised and considered in planning and managing these lands.

DPaW has already benefited from co-operation with numerous volunteer organisations and individuals. A number of groups have conducted projects as varied as homestead restoration to the mapping and capping of historic wells. Campground hosts and other volunteers have made significant contributions in many areas, and specialist organisations have conducted scientific surveys. Partnerships with educational and scientific bodies are also adding to our knowledge and understanding of the values of the properties. There are opportunities for further collaboration.

Partnerships are being forged with the resource sector as well. Through offsets to vegetation clearing, sponsorship, and other inputs the mining industry is contributing significantly to management programs on some former pastoral properties. There is a need to build on existing relationships and explore new opportunities as the resource sector continues to expand in the region.

DPaW staff and property managers are happy to hear from individuals and groups interested in learning more about the former pastoral properties and contributing ideas or volunteer time to assist in improving management outcomes.

14. What part do Aboriginal people play?

Aboriginal people have lived in the country now known as “the southern rangelands” for tens of thousands of years. In Aboriginal society, culture is inextricably bound to the land and the former pastoral properties purchased by DPaW are rich in Aboriginal significance. Connections to the land remain strong and Aboriginal people are eager to expand existing partnerships with DPaW in the management of these lands.

Recent amendments to the *Conservation and Land Management Act 1984* and the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* have been enacted to improve the ability of Aboriginal people to undertake customary activities on reserves and other land managed by DPaW, including former pastoral properties once formal reserves are created. These amendments have been enacted in recognition of Aboriginal people’s customary rights and intrinsic connection to the land. The amendments also enable joint management between DPaW and Aboriginal people of lands and waters. Once reserves are created, there will be a statutory management requirement to conserve and protect Aboriginal cultural and heritage values, and mechanisms for their protection.

Registered native title claims exist over much of the land of the former pastoral properties. The “Future Act” provisions of the *Native Title Act 1993* apply where native title has not been extinguished. This means that negotiation with registered claimants or native title holders may be required ahead of reservation and other significant management activities. The Western Australian Government will seek to preserve native title rights and interests over former pastoral properties proposed to be reserved for conservation. Native title representative bodies and registered native title claimants or holders will be consulted, and Indigenous Land Use Agreements pursued, prior to the formal creation of conservation reserves. The potential for joint management arrangements with traditional owners will be explored in the course of negotiations of Indigenous Land Use Agreements for the proposed reserves.

15. Are these lands available for recreation and tourism?

There is increasing interest in outback recreation and tourism, with visitors seeking a remote experience where they are able to explore landscapes to appreciate our natural environment and heritage. The purchase of pastoral lease properties for addition to the conservation reserve system has provided for improved accessibility across the rangelands for these experiences.

Visitors are being drawn to the former pastoral properties for four-wheel-drive touring; remote area camping; bushwalking; wildflower, bird and nature viewing; experiencing the uniqueness of the Great Western Woodlands; visiting pastoral homesteads; exploring the remains of old towns, buildings, wells, graves and mine sites and other relics of the pastoral, sandalwood and mining industries; as well as learning about Aboriginal culture.

Although presenting attractive destinations, remote locations and old infrastructure can pose hazards to visitors and these must be carefully managed. Visitor facilities on the former pastoral properties centre on the homestead complexes though standards vary greatly. On a number of properties, built accommodation and campgrounds are provided and there are cooking and ablution facilities. Camping and day-use sites are also provided on some properties as are facilities such as walk trails and lookouts. There are also several existing four-wheel-drive heritage trails that cross or pass close to the former pastoral properties.

There is considerable scope for the development of further recreation and tourism opportunities on the former pastoral properties. DPaW will be working with recreation groups, tourism operators, Aboriginal people, local government authorities, and neighbours to plan and implement recreation and tourism infrastructure improvements, and to provide high quality information and interpretation to enhance visitor experiences.

The future

Over the coming years DPaW will prepare strategic plans and more detailed management plans for former pastoral properties in the southern rangelands. Each planning process will involve consultation with Aboriginal people and key stakeholders. Everyone with an interest in these important additions to public conservation lands will be encouraged to have their say.

The future of the environmental, social and economic values of these lands will depend on effective consultation and collaboration between DPaW and stakeholders, as well as the development of strategic partnerships to ensure sustainable management in the long-term.

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