

Achieving a sustainable future for Australia's savannas: lessons from a decade of cooperative research

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Introduction

Achieving the sustainable use of landscapes requires a robust design to plan and manage natural and cultural resources. An important component of this design is collaboration where research providers and users cooperate to learn how to utilize resources in a landscape while sustaining its long-term health. For the landscapes of north Australia, a Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre (TS-CRC) was established in 1995 to foster collaborative research. The TS-CRC is a joint venture of major organizations involved in research and land management.

This paper is an overview of some key lessons learned over the last twelve or more years about how to effectively foster cooperation and integration to achieve practices leading towards the sustainable management of savanna landscapes in northern Australia. These lessons are based on the combined experiences of TS-CRC Chief Executive Officers (Duff, Garnett), a Communication Coordinator (Jacklyn) and Research Theme Leaders (Landsberg, Ludwig, Morrison, Novelly, Whitehead).

Lesson One

We learned that collaboration (working in combination), not necessarily integration (combining parts into a whole), must be the main goal. While integration might seem a worthy ideal, diverse stakeholder values and aspirations seldom lend themselves to integrated solutions. Integration across culturally diverse perspectives can devalue the position of the less empowered participants. In contrast, we found that positive outcomes were achieved by embracing and respecting differences within a cooperative framework, where different stakeholders work together to gather new information (via collaborative research projects) and develop new tools (information and mapping websites) to achieve land management goals, such as how to effectively use and control fire across vast savanna regions (Fig. 1).

Lesson Two

A lesson learned was that trust and respect amongst the participants was critical. A collaborative research organization must value the trust of its stakeholders above all else.



Figure 1. Andrew Edwards, Dean Yibarbuk and Otto Campion use maps sourced from the TS-CRC to plan strategic burns in Arnhem Land, northern Australia.

Lesson Three

A cooperative venture must be able to act as an honest broker by resisting advocacy of one view over another.

Table 1. A few key publications by the Tropical Savannas Cooperative Research Centre. A complete list is provided in Tools and Information for Savanna Country: Product Guide 2006, available on the TS-CRC website www.savanna.cdu.edu.au.

Publication title	Year
Defining and measuring the health of savanna landscapes	2000
Savanna burning	2001
Slower than the eye can see	2002
Healthy rangelands	2004

Lesson Four

A cooperative venture must invest in communication and networking so that people can learn from one another's experiences, understand each other's challenges, and respect each other's choices. To foster networking and information exchanges, the TS-CRC actively publishes its research (Table 1) and produces a full-colour, widely distributed newsletter (*Savanna Links*) twice a year. It also maintains an award winning website, www.savanna.cdu.edu.au, with links to other websites on natural resource management.

References

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